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Rural Women and the Varieties of Black Politics in Bahia, Brazil

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Abstract

This article focuses on the Afro-Catholic Sisterhood of Our Lady of Good Death (*Boa Morte*) in the rural town of Cachoeira in the state of Bahia, Brazil. I examine the tensions between the sisters of Boa Morte and male religious and political actors from the city, including Catholic priests, elite politicians, and black movement activists. I examine how the women of Boa Morte make strategic use of the limited political resources available to them in their rural communities in order to insure that their sisterhood continues and thrives. Along the way, I emphasize the ways that gender conditions access to religious and political resources in rural Bahia.

This article focuses on the Afro-Catholic Sisterhood of Our Lady of Good Death (*Boa Morte*) in the town of Cachoeira in northeastern state of Bahia, Brazil. Cachoeira is located in the rural interior of the Bahian Recôncavo (“bay area”), where I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork since 1999. Cachoeira is widely considered a center of traditional Afro-Brazilian culture and has for almost two centuries been home to the Sisterhood of Boa Morte, a lay Catholic organization whose members are women of African descent initiated into Candomblé (an African-derived religion practiced in Brazil). In the following pages I explore connections and tensions between the sisters of Boa Morte and various religious and political agents, most of whom are men. In particular, I examine a conflict between the sisters and their supporters and the Catholic hierarchy in Bahia, emphasizing how the sisters resisted the Church’s efforts to in their control over a popular Catholic celebration. Along the way, I question the apparent contrast between the sisters’ often informal and conciliatory political practices on the one hand and the formal ideologies and confrontational stances that characterize urban

political actors on the other. While black activists sometimes lament that the sisters are not sufficiently engaged in political action, for example, the sisters are engaged with actors from across the political spectrum who seek to associate themselves with Boa Morte's perceived cultural authenticity. That is, although at first glance the sisters' politics appears divergent from that of many of their interlocutors from the city, I argue that the sisters blur the boundaries between different approaches to politics as they skillfully engage with a wide variety of political agents for their own purposes.

The politics of religious practice is a central focus of this article, and in the following pages I emphasize the powerful ways that gender conditions access to religious and political resources in Bahia. Studies of religion and gender have often emphasized that ways in which male domination shapes religious organization and practice. In many contexts, for example, the official and public aspects of religion are performed by men while the popular and private aspects are the responsibility of women (Carmody 1979; Sanday 1981). Furthermore, in pluralistic religious arenas, men are often in charge of dominant religious institutions while women hold positions of leadership in subaltern religions (King 1995; Sinclair 1986). Initially, the story of Boa Morte seems to conform to such gendered divisions between public and private, official and popular, dominant and subaltern. In the example that I describe below, for example, the sisters of Boa Morte, who are Candomblé practitioners, come into conflict with the predominantly male Catholic hierarchy. But as I show in the following pages, Boa Morte's legal victory over the Church illustrates the interpenetration of the official and the popular, the public and the private, and the urban and the rural.

My intention, then, is not to reinscribe these dichotomies such as public and private, rural and urban, the masculine sphere and the feminine sphere. To the contrary, I contend that a close look at Boa Morte challenges us to understand the ways in which these distinctions are negotiated and in effect blurred through everyday practice. Much of the recent anthropological literature on local politics has tended to focus on formal social movements and nongovernmental organizations, for example, which tends to crowd out consideration of other political modes. Conciliatory political strategies that draw upon networks of political patronage are pervasive in the rural areas. How do these strategies not only conflict but also interface with those of urban activists? Although I view the increasing popularity of urban anthropology and of the anthropology of social movements as a move in the right direction, this shift in focus should not lead us to neglect the study of rural

communities and their ever-increasing integration into wider cultural and political contexts.

Ethnographic Background

Bahia is one of the poorest states in Brazil and home to the highest proportion of people with African ancestry in the country. This essay focuses on the Bahian Recôncavo, a vital center of Afro-Brazilian culture in Brazil. This culturally vibrant yet economically impoverished region encompasses Salvador, the urban capital of Bahia, and rural Cachoeira, each renowned for its deeply rooted Afro-Brazilian traditions. Salvador is the third-largest city in Brazil, with a population of about 2.6 million people (IBGE 2005). In colonial times, coastal Salvador served as Brazil's major slave port. Although most major Afro-Brazilian political organizations and movements were founded in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the Afro-Brazilian community in Salvador has done much to define, culturally speaking, what it means to be Afro-Brazilian.

The town of Cachoeira, with a population of about 31,000 (IBGE 2005), is located about 110 kilometers inland from coastal Salvador and sits in a valley among rolling hills on the banks of the Paraguaçu River. With its cobblestone streets, donkey carts, and unhurried pace of life, Cachoeira remains decidedly rustic compared to modern Salvador. The local economy is largely geared toward agriculture, and many of the businesses in town provide farming products or equipment repairs to the residents of the surrounding rural areas. Recently, however, an Italian-owned leather factory opened nearby and several public works projects were initiated in Cachoeira, providing other sources of employment. In addition, the town supports a modest tourist traffic that focuses on its colonial architecture and Afro-Brazilian traditions, including Candomblé and the yearly festival of Boa Morte.

This article is based on roughly two years of fieldwork in the Recôncavo. My fieldwork involved participant observation, conducting interviews, and administering questionnaires among the members of different religious communities. Between 2000 and 2002, I taped thirty-one formal interviews and conducted an additional thirty less-formal interviews in Bahia. My interviews concerned how the ways in which people of African descent involved with different religious organizations viewed their ethnic identities and struggled against racism. I also administered questionnaires concerning demographic information, past and present patterns of religious practice, different views of Afro-Brazilian ethnic identity, and the ways in which people experience

racism. Most of my research activities took place in churches and temples, in people's homes, and at public religious events and festivals.

This article centers mainly on my work focusing on the Sisterhood of Boa Morte and its relationships with Catholic clergy and political actors in Bahia. During my extended fieldwork from 2000 to 2002, I conducted a series of interviews with the sisters of Boa Morte and others concerned in one way or another with the sisterhood, including social activists, government officials concerned with cultural heritage preservations, cultural tourists, and members of the Catholic hierarchy. I also returned to Cachoeira during the summers of 2004, 2005, 2007, and 2008 to attend the yearly festival of Boa Morte, which is celebrated every August, and to continue my ethnographic work with the sisters and others in Bahia.

Race, Gender and Politics in Rural Brazil

The discourse and practice of race and racism in Brazil are integral to the events and contexts that I discuss in this article. Brazilians have long imagined themselves as belonging to a mixed-race nation. In the 1930s, the Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre and other intellectuals argued that what is unique and laudable about Brazil is that African and European cultures alike are accommodated in its national identity (Freyre 1945, 1956, 1959). Subsequently, many Brazilians came to see a close affinity between Brazil's emerging national ideal of racial and cultural mixture (*mestiçagem*) and religious syncretism as seen in the synthesis of Candomblé and Catholicism in daily religious practice (Brown 1986; Butler 1998b; Fry 1982).

In turn, the emphasis on *mestiçagem* and syncretism reinforced Brazil's national image as a racial democracy, free of racism. After all, how can racism exist in a society where everyone is mixed, biologically and culturally? Although Brazilians commonly refer to one another using terms like black and white, these terms are fluid and ambiguous and refer to shades of color rather than fixed racial categories. Depending on the context, in fact, most Brazilians consider themselves neither black nor white, but brown (*moreno* or *pardo*) or mixed (*mulato* or *mestiço*).

Despite Brazil's image as a place where race and racism are foreign concepts, however, over the past few decades researchers have drawn attention to the fact that Brazilian nonwhites (those who identify as black and brown alike) share similar disadvantages compared with those who identify as white (Hasenbalg and Silva 1988; Lovell and Wood 1998; Teles 2004). At the same time, antiracist activists have been calling for people of African descent to recognize their com-

mon situation by identifying themselves as black instead of using mediating terms such as *moreno*, *mulato*, and *mestiço* (Nobles 1995). As I discuss below, however, such campaigns have not gained much popular appeal, at least in Bahia, and especially outside of the city in places like Cachoeira.

With respect to gender, Brazilian women suffer from considerably unequal access to power and resources compared to men. In this context, black women are subject to double discrimination on the basis of both race and gender (Goldstein 2003). This situation is tied up in the extremely rigid division of labor in Brazilian society. Along these lines, as Kia Caldwell (2007) points out, the dominant discourse of racial democracy has naturalized the image of Afro-Brazilian women as sex objects or domestic servants. Hegemonic notions about Brazilian identity deny the existence of racism as a structuring force in people's lives, thereby preempting questions about the division of labor along the lines of race or gender.

Income inequalities along the lines of race, class, and gender are striking in Brazil. Moreover, as in other places in Latin America and elsewhere, the face of poverty is largely female. Poor women in Brazil suffer in many ways, including as victims of domestic violence. In the past few decades, however, women's movements have emerged to confront domestic violence specifically and issues of women's equality more generally (Alvarez 1990; Hautzinger 2007). In fact, most of the literature has focused on such formal movements that are often led by middle-class women living in the city. Considerably less attention has been paid to the struggles of rural women, which differ in significant ways from the approaches and practices of urban activists.

Especially in rural Brazil, politics is commonly considered a male activity that is not appropriate for "decent" women (van der Shaaf 2001, 46). Indeed, when women participate in public politics and popular movements, their roles are often understood in terms of motherhood, not citizenship (Alvarez 1990, 50). This role is closely related to Catholic notions of femininity. As van der Shaaf explains, "the ideal image of the women is that of the Virgin Mary, who sacrifices for her husband and children, and who is responsible for tasks that are linked with biological and social reproduction" (2001, 62; translation mine). Although constraining, this image also allows for particular kinds of political interventions. That is, the value given to the woman who "defends and preserves family life against outside dangers allows her to enter into the political realm, normally reserved for the activity of men, and provides her a base of power" (van der Shaaf 2001, 63). This base of power is grounded in the image of the mother who cares for others and protects her community.

Particularly among poor women, political action is often focused on

practical aims, such as making necessities like clean water available in their communities or campaigning to end violence against women, rather than on more abstract goals such as gender equality (Alvarez, Dagino, and Escobar 1998; cf. Alvarez 1990; Stephen 1997). As Miguel Díaz-Barriga (1998) illustrates, for example, popular women's movements in Latin America do not necessarily challenge traditional gender roles in direct ways; some may even implicitly draw upon traditional images of womanhood in their campaigns. In this way, such movements may conflict with more ideologically driven feminist movements among urban, middle-class women. We will see similar divergence between the political strategies of the sisters of Boa Morte and black activists in the city.

In general, avenues of political participation are more restricted in the rural areas than in the city for both men and women. Especially outside of the city, political life tends to be dominated by traditional patron-client politics. The politics of patronage is deeply ingrained in the political culture of Bahia (Goldman 2001; Graham 1990; Greenfield 1968; Kenny 2002). It is equally embedded in the celebration of popular festivals, or *festas*, such as that of the Sisterhood of Boa Morte. As Louis Herns Marcelin points out, for example, the celebration of *festas* in Cachoeira centers on showing a group's "connections with classes or groups judged superior, always symbolized by whites" (1999, 49; translation mine). According to Marcelin, *festas* that do not include a white man, preferably a politician, are deemed unsatisfactory. Thus, the opposition to conservative elites that leftist intellectuals in the city largely take for granted is somewhat out of place in the rural areas, where elite patronage is often central to resource-mobilization strategies.

Religion in Afro-Brazil

Although women's participation in public politics is constrained, women have a certain prominence in the realm of religion. Again, although men predominate in administrative and clerical positions in religious organizations, women dominate in the realm of popular religiosity and are often assumed to be spiritually superior to men (van der Shaaf 2001, 63). As I explore in the following pages, this association with religion and spirituality provides another strategy of political intervention for women.

During African slaves' first three centuries in the New World, their religious life in Brazil revolved around the familial Catholicism of the sugar plantation (Bastide 1978). Slave owners in Brazil were required to do little more by way of religious training than baptize slaves and have them attend mass. Since the owners showed little interest in keeping up even these simple

obligations, the Church stepped in and encouraged the slaves to participate in irmandades devoted to Catholic saints. The local clergy tended to close their eyes to deficiencies in spiritual conformity as long as the slaves participated in the sacraments, and the practice of African religions continued in the context of the irmandades (Bastide 1978; McGregor 1966).

In the nineteenth century, irmandades served a variety of purposes, including purchasing slaves' freedom as well as paying for festivals and masses and providing funerals for their members (Braga 1987; Falcon 1997; Guareschi 1985; Kiddy 1998; Mulvey 1980, 1982; Nishida 1998). It was through these organizations that newly arrived Africans and people of African descent were integrated into Brazilian society, and those who were elected to officer positions held much prestige in black communities (Mulvey 1980, 1982). Starting at the end of the nineteenth century after the abolition of slavery, however, irmandades began to be displaced by Candomblé *terreiros* (temples) as the primary sites of Afro-Brazilian religious practice. This was especially true in the cities, where freed slaves were able to establish temples away from the oversight of the plantation owner (Bastide 1978). Nevertheless, irmandades continued to provide a sort of "social insurance" to the rural poor at the same time that many workers in the cities were increasingly relying upon Candomblé temples, political parties, and workers' unions for such support (cf. Butler 1998b; Graham 1999). And while irmandades are not nearly as important today as they were in the past, some organizations, like the Sisterhood of Boa Morte, continue to thrive.

Candomblé

Candomblé is a complex, hierarchical religion derived from a variety of practices that enslaved Africans brought to Brazil. The initiates are predominantly women, ranked by degree of initiation and ceremonial function. Candomblé practice revolves around the pantheon of African *orixás* and other spirits who possess their devotees in public ceremonies (*festas* or *toques*) and to whom offerings are made in both public and private rituals. Candomblé terreiros are found in cities throughout Brazil, yet the oldest and most famous of them were established in the Recôncavo region of Bahia, where I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork since 1999 in the rural town of Cachoeira and the capital city of Salvador. Although today Salvador is often cited as the "Rome of Afro-Brazilian religion," residents of Salvador look upon Cachoeira as the standard for traditional Candomblé practice (Brazeal 2007).

As in many societies, women's religious participation is higher than men's in Brazil in most religious contexts (Burdick 1993). Yet men tend to occupy the

positions of authority in religions throughout the world, even when women outnumber men as lay practitioners (Carmody 1979; Sanday 1981). Usually, however, women outnumber and outrank men in Candomblé hierarchies. Some have pointed out that it is common for women to be in charge of religions centering on spirit possession (Lewis 2003), and women tend to predominate in religions of the alienated and oppressed (King 1995; Sinclair 1986). In this view, there is a parallel between women's subordinate status and the status of subaltern religions. In Brazil, Candomblé has long been represented as a matriarchal religion; Ruth Landes's early ethnography about Candomblé in Bahia, for example, was titled "City of Women" ([1947] 2005). Some researchers have suggested that men are less legitimate as Candomblé leaders than women, but this is highly controversial (for an excellent discussion, see Matory 2005). In general, however, most of the revered houses in Bahia are headed by women.

The Sisterhood of Our Lady of Good Death (Boa Morte)

The present-day Sisterhood of Boa Morte was founded by freed slaves in Salvador sometime in the early 1800s and relocated to Cachoeira around 1835 (Butler 1998a; Lody 1981; Sansi 2005; Walker 1996; cf. Nascimento 1988). The sisterhood's yearly festival attracts crowds of visitors, including African Americans from the United States, who come to witness what many consider to be one of the most fascinating examples of cultural preservation in the African Diaspora. The celebration of the festival of Our Lady of Boa Morte is the sisterhood's primary *raison d'être*. This yearly event centers on the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, which occurs in mid-August. This celebration commemorates Mary's assumption, body and soul, directly into heaven (hence the title Boa Morte, or "Good Death"). The festival spans six days, the first three of which compose the "sacred" part of the festival during which daily masses and religious processions take place. This part of the festival ends with the celebration of the Assumption on the third day. The last three days compose what the sisters refer to as the "profane" part of the festival, when the focus turns to traditional Bahian music, dance, food, and drink.

On the first day of the festival, dressed in white, the sisters carry an image of Our Lady of Boa Morte through the winding streets of Cachoeira to the chapel of Boa Morte for a special mass. According to the sisters, this procession commemorates Mary's death and at the same time memorializes the members of Boa Morte who have passed away. Afterward, the sisters offer a public dinner (*santa ceia*, or holy supper) of wine, bread, and seafood. On the second day of the festival, an evening mass is held in the sisterhood's chapel,

followed by a procession that represents the burial of Our Lady of Boa Morte and of those sisters who have died. During the procession, the sisters wear a black velvet shawl lined with red satin over a white blouse. On the third and main day of the festival, the red part of the shawl, symbolizing life and happiness, is allowed to show. A morning mass is followed by a procession to commemorate Mary's assumption into heaven (represented by the image of Our Lady of Glory). A luncheon follows the procession, after which the "profane" part of the celebration begins. This lasts until the fifth day and includes plenty of traditional Bahian food, *cachaça* (sugarcane rum), and samba. On the sixth day, the festival officially ends as the sisters place offerings of flowers and food in the river according to Candomblé traditions.

The festival of Boa Morte is a syncretic festival that integrates various aspects of Candomblé practice into a formally Catholic celebration. The clothing that the sisters wear, for example, including the bead necklaces that they wear around their necks as they walk in procession through the streets of Cachoeira, would be familiar to those who have visited a Candomblé temple. In Salvador, however, some leaders of the Candomblé community have objected to the "mixing" of Candomblé and Catholicism in public festivals. When I asked some of the sisters of Boa Morte about this objection, they shrugged their shoulders and said, "we have full respect for the Candomblé practitioners in Salvador, but this is our tradition passed down from our ancestors." Again, residents of the city often refer to Cachoeira as haven of traditional Afro-Brazilian religious practice. At the same time, some view certain aspects of Afro-Brazilian religious practice in Cachoeira, such as the importance of syncretism, as a sign of a lack of critical consciousness among those in the rural areas. In the following pages, I hope to show that this assessment misses the mark and overlooks the complexity of the practical political strategies of rural women.

A Holy War

During my few months in Cachoeira, I was told that there had been an incident between Boa Morte and Padre Hélio, the local parish priest, but I had no concept of the nature and magnitude of it. As I settled more into life in Cachoeira, the story of Boa Morte started to unfold. A local researcher told me that the sisters of Boa Morte had taken Padre Hélio to court. Later, while I was living in Salvador, the researcher Antonio Morais helped me collect a stack of newspaper articles and other materials on the subject, and it was then I realized that what had occurred had been a major controversy.

The bitter legal battle that erupted in 1989 illustrates Boa Morte's complex relationship with the Catholic hierarchy in Bahia. Furthermore, the aftermath of the conflict highlights the convergences and divergences between the political approaches of traditional Afro-Brazilian organizations in the rural areas and progressive activist groups in the city. Dubbed a "holy war" by the press, the controversy revolved around Padre Hlio's refusal to allow the members of Boa Morte access to the sacred items used to celebrate the sisterhood's yearly festival. These included the images of Our Lady of Boa Morte and Our Lady of Glory used in the processions, as well as a large gold crown and other pieces of gold and silver jewelry that accompany the images.

Years earlier Padre Hlio had collected these items from the sisterhood and put them on display under glass in Cachoeira's main church. This restricted the sisterhood's access to religious goods that had previously been stored in members' own houses, requiring the sisters to "borrow" their own images and jewels for the yearly festival. When the sisters came to ask for the items to use in a festival in September 1989, Hlio refused to release them. He asserted that because the Boa Morte had never been registered as an official *irmandade*, the items belonged to the parish rather than to the sisterhood.

Some Cachoeirans with whom I spoke speculate that Hlio was motivated by jealousy over Boa Morte's recent acquisition of several adjoining buildings in the center of town, which was funded jointly by American patrons and the Bahian government. Furthermore, when Hlio first arrived in Cachoeira in the early 1980s, he disbanded several of the town's black *irmandades*, leading some to argue that the white priest's conflict with Boa Morte was a continuation of a racist campaign against Afro-Brazilian organizations in Cachoeira. When Hlio refused to turn over the images and jewels, a local lawyer representing Boa Morte, Me Celina, took him to court. The local judge decided in favor of Boa Morte and ordered everything returned to the sisters after Me Celina produced documentation dating from the nineteenth century that attests to the fact that the sisterhood owns the items.

Unsatisfied with the outcome, Padre Hlio complained to Cardinal Dom Lucas in Salvador, who appealed the decision of the municipal court. While the appeal was pending, Dom Lucas met with the sisters and threatened excommunication if the sisters did not concede to the Church. As Dona Nilta, a sister of Boa Morte recalls, "There was a meeting there and he [Dom Lucas] called us bastards . . . bastards who could not have the Church's images, *negras*, that kind of thing. We said we are not bastards because we all have parents and [God] the Father created us." The sisters refused to give in, and the appellate court ultimately decided in favor of Boa Morte. For almost ten

years after that victory, however, no priest was allowed to celebrate the mass of the festival of Boa Morte by order of the cardinal.

The first year after Boa Morte split with the Roman Church, then, the August celebration had to change its venue. The festival was celebrated at the Brazilian Catholic Church (ICB), which had separated from the Roman Catholic Church in 1945 and founded a number of churches around the country. The main issues that led to the separation included the ICB founders' rejection of the practices of priestly celibacy and mediated confession as well as their acceptance of remarriage after divorce. Most importantly for Boa Morte, the ICB places more emphasis than the Roman Church on tolerance of Afro-Brazilian religion and the integration of blacks. Yet the sisters left the ICB after a year and adopted the practice of hiring a non-Roman Catholic (sometimes Orthodox) priest to celebrate mass at their own chapel.

It was not until 1999, after Dom Lucas was called to serve at the Vatican and was replaced by the more progressive Dom Geraldo, that Boa Morte reconciled with the Catholic Church. Under Dom Geraldo's cardinalship, the antiracist *Pastoral Afro* (African Pastoral) was founded in Salvador. Staffed primarily by priests of African descent, the Pastoral Afro aims to raise black consciousness and self-esteem, to establish dialogue with the Candomblé community, and to reaffirm Afro-Brazilian identity.

Also in 1999, the newly appointed auxiliary bishop and head of the Pastoral Afro, Dom Gílio Felício, went to Cachoeira to celebrate the mass of the festival of Boa Morte with Padre Hélio. At this festival, Hélio publicly apologized for his involvement with the conflict, as Maria recounts:

If my memory does not fail me, [Padre Hélio] asked for our pardon in public in the chapel of Nossa Senhora da Boa Morte. He had said that we would not have that house [where the chapel is]. He had fought so that we would not have that house, you see? So when he really saw that, under God and Nossa Senhora, we, along with the African ancestors, won, then he came and asked pardon. To err is human and we forgave him. It is not us who pardon, he who pardons is God. We could excuse what he did and he embraced us all, kissed us all, and in fact cried and turned red as he is the same color as you [referring to the author]. He ended up looking like a shrimp. Even I felt sorry for him afterwards because those things happened.

The celebration of this mass normalized Boa Morte's relationship with the Church and brought a joyous end to a tumultuous chapter in the sisterhood's history. Yet the incident highlighted the power differences along a number of axes, including male-female, white-black, and Christianity-

Candomblé. At the same time, the story of this conflict also shows how these power-laden dichotomies can be challenged and resisted. With the help of the courts and against the backdrop of the changing of the guard in the Catholic hierarchy, for example, the sisters played a central role in humbling Padre Hélio to the point of tears. As I show in the following sections, others played a central role in overturning the uneven power relationship between the white priest and black laywomen, including a number of political actors from Salvador. In this way, the story of the Sisterhood of Boa Morte illustrates the ways in which poor women in the rural areas were able to engage with and capitalize on the support of influential and well-funded allies in the city.

Discourses about the Issues Involved in the Conflict

One of my first interviews after I arrived in Cachoeira was with Padre Hélio. Looking back, I understand why he seemed to look at me with such suspicion when I first asked him about Boa Morte. When I questioned Hélio about the shutting down of the black irmandades when he first arrived, he insisted:

If the irmandades really take part in the Church, constitute themselves in the Church, there is no reason to claim that it was their own Church that destroyed, that shut down these irmandades. On the contrary. Because any researcher will find that over the years, any human group wears out. . . . what happened over the years was exactly this, a wearing out such that these groups could barely stand up.

While Hélio claimed that many irmandades had simply “worn out” by the time he arrived in Cachoeira, the Sisterhood of Boa Morte was another issue. According to Hélio, the sisterhood wanted a civil agreement that granted it complete independence from the Church to administer its goods and activities. But Hélio pointed out that Boa Morte originated in the Church and has been there for close to two hundred years. He argued, “Catholic irmandades have to have a connection with the Catholic Church. How is it that [a Catholic entity] denies belonging to the Church . . . and uses the Church for its celebrations and for its worship? . . . This cannot be, this is the difficulty.”

Others with whom I spoke, however, told me that the problem was that Boa Morte had never been an officially documented Catholic organization. They explained that Hélio wanted Boa Morte to become a documented irmandade under the oversight of the Church. In fact, one of the sisters of Boa Morte with whom I spoke maintained that Hélio said he would not celebrate mass for Boa Morte until the sisters signed papers making the

irmandade an official institution within the Church. She claimed that the sisters refused, and thus the conflict ensued.

Antonio, who was Hélió's assistant at the time of the conflict, maintained that Hélió's goal was not to destroy Boa Morte. He argued that Hélió simply wanted to reorganize the sisterhood and to sort out what was Catholic from what was African. From Antonio's perspective, Hélió is not a racist but a victim of slander by various groups of anti-Roman Catholic intellectuals and foreigners who manipulated the sisters of Boa Morte. Others with whom I spoke in Cachoeira echoed this argument that the conflict between Hélió and the sisters had been fueled by factious third parties. Indeed, Antonio placed no trust in the sisters to administer their own organization: "The sisters of Boa Morte . . . are stupid old women and, uh, culturally limited. They are generally people who come from African origins."

I hesitate to associate blatantly sexist and racist views with Padre Hélió himself. As one Cachoeiran who has researched the conflict pointed out to me, Padre Hélió was acting on orders from above during the conflict with Boa Morte, and so to some extent he was caught in the crossfire between Afro-Catholic practitioners and those in the higher levels of the Church in Bahia. Today the sisters of Boa Morte show no animosity towards Hélió (at least publicly) and appear not to cast him as a villain. One sister with whom I spoke even excused him: "He [Padre Hélió] arrived here young and he did not know the significance and the depth of the irmandade."

Yet at the same time, ignorance is hardly a satisfactory excuse. Even if we were to attribute Hélió's actions to a lack of knowledge, this lack was certainly conditioned by Hélió's place in the white male hierarchy of the Catholic Church. In that context, legitimacy is established through established channels of authority, documentary authentication, and priestly privilege. In that realm, popular traditions and women's organizations are not sources of knowledge or legitimacy. It was in that light that Hélió attempted to establish himself as a paternal authority with control over the festival of Boa Morte. But he and the local hierarchy were confronted and ultimately defeated on something like their own turf—that of the bureaucratic and legal machinery of the court. Along the way, Boa Morte came to represent the struggle against patriarchy and racism for many Bahians in Salvador, and this symbolic status allowed the sisters to draw on the support of a variety of political actors in the city.

The Black Movement Intervenes

During the decade-long conflict between Boa Morte and the Catholic hierarchy, the sisters garnered support and sympathy from a variety of groups.

When I first arrived in Bahia and was considering working in Cachoeira, a number of middle-class intellectuals I met in Salvador referred to Boa Morte as an example of a grassroots women's movement. Furthermore, many activists and others came to see Boa Morte as "a symbol of cultural resistance in the Catholic Church" (Butler 1998a, 186), and the black movement publicly declared its support for the sisters during their fight with the Catholic hierarchy. The following excerpt, for example, is from a leaflet entitled "The Movimento Negro da Bahia is in Solidarity with the Sisterhood of Boa Morte" that was produced during the conflict:

Manifesto

The Sisterhood shows its appreciation [for the end of slavery] with a grand festival in the streets, squares, and Churches of Cachoeira, the last haven of the most authentic manifestation of black culture in the country.

A festival that not only captures the vibrant devotion of a society formed exclusively by black women—descendants of freed slaves—but reveals to scholars, researchers and others who take an interest a fantastic example of Afro-Catholic syncretism in Bahia.

The Sisterhood of Boa Morte continues to have full respect for the Catholic Church—it simply does not allow that its sacred religious acts be celebrated by Padre Hélio Leal Vilas Boas and Mons. José de Souza Neiva. This is because they abuse, injure, defame and discriminate racially.

BOA MORTE EXCOMMUNICATES RACISM AND REVOLTS AGAINST APARTHEID (Morais Ribeiro 2002; translation mine)

Today, many continue to associate Boa Morte with resistance for reasons that are historically deeper than the recent legal battle with the Church. Again, during the colonial period many irmandades, including Boa Morte, served the function of collecting funds to buy people out of slavery. In addition, the narrative of Boa Morte's origins emphasizes that the sisters who founded the irmandade in the early nineteenth century made a promise to Mary that they would celebrate the feast of her assumption every year if she ended slavery in Brazil. Thus, the festival of Boa Morte has often been interpreted as a commemoration of abolition (Morais Ribeiro 1990; Walker 1996). In fact, it is this image that is presented to African American tourists who come to see the festival of Boa Morte each year. Consider the following paragraph from a Web site advertising Brazilian cultural tours to English speakers:

The oldest surviving Black Sisterhood in the Americas, Irmandade da Boa Morte, has organized the Festival for the past 218 years. . . .

Just ask any of the friendly townspeople, "who exactly are these ladies?",

and they'll proudly inform you that they are the first association of Black women who united for a political cause: To end slavery. (Vaughn 1992)

Nevertheless, abolition and politics are not the first things that the sisters mention when they are discussing their practice. At least in public, they speak mostly about the Catholic side of the celebration (while at the same time Candomblé practitioners from Salvador who attend the festival often insist that it is a pure Candomblé ceremony masquerading as a Catholic feast): "It is the feast of Our Lady of Boa Morte. After [Our Lady of Boa Morte] comes [Our Lady of] Glória who represents the assumption of Mary. . . . She was raised to the heavens, body and soul . . . she was resurrected, the same things as Our Lord Jesus Christ, you see, except that she didn't suffer; she had a *good death*, understand?" This notion of a good death, grounded in ideas of dignity and community, is at the center of the sisters' discourse about their practice (cf. Nascimento 1988). The sisters seem happy to talk about Candomblé and their involvement with it, although they generally deny any direct connection between the Catholic festival of Boa Morte and Candomblé practice. They are also quick to agree that the commemoration of abolition is part of their celebration, but again, the sisters mostly discuss their practice in religious terms.

Indeed, the local representative of the black movement, Luis, laments that the sisters are not as politically engaged as their popular image in the media suggests. According to Luis:

On the issues of race, of discrimination, Boa Morte does not struggle much against this. They are more religious and have been for more than two hundred years. They do not attend much to issues of ethnicity, of their African descent, of their future and that of their descendants; they practically do not attend to this, you see. This is because they are people who are much more connected to religiosity than to the question of race.

Nevertheless, members of the black movement come to Cachoeira every year to attend the festival of Boa Morte. In recent years they have gathered in a community center near the headquarters of Boa Morte for informal meetings and lunches during the celebrations. During the festival in 2004, in fact, *Movimento Negro Unificado* (MNU; Unified Black Movement) representatives held a conference on the themes of exploitation and social justice in northeastern Brazil. It was revealing, however, that the conference took place in the town across the river from Cachoeira, and although images from past festivals of Boa Morte decorated the walls of the meeting hall, only two or three of the sisters actually appeared at the event.

The fact that the sisters keep the activists at arm's length has to do with many factors, including the reality that confrontational politics and the language of oppositional black identities do not play well in Bahia. That is, if Brazilian identity is grounded in discourses of mixture, then Bahian identity (*baianidade*) is even more so. The image of the sensual and amorous Bahian *mulata* (mixed-race woman), for example, looms large in the Brazilian imagination. Against this backdrop, calls for solidarity based on a categorically separate racial identity strikes a bad chord for many people—including many people of African descent in Brazil (Hanchard 1994; Reichmann 1999). Another problem, according to others, is that the movement's leadership is dominated by a small number of relatively light-skinned middle-class blacks from the city who are out of touch with the everyday lives of most Afro-Brazilians like the sisters of Boa Morte (Bacelar 2001; Burdick 1992; Nishida 2003).

Boa Morte and the Politics of Patronage

It is also important to mention Boa Morte's connections with powerful Bahian politicians, the most prominent of whom was Antônio Carlos Magalhães (who was often referred to using the shorthand "ACM"), a senator who passed away in 2007. Although very conservative and the enemy of leftists and black movement activists, ACM had broad populist appeal and provided significant material support for Afro-Brazilian groups (Collins 2004; Sansi 2005). It was under ACM, for example, that the yearly festival of Boa Morte came to be funded by the state of Bahia. ACM was a patron of Candomblé, and in the 1990s, he was considered the second-most powerful man in Brazil behind the president. As such, he was a much more powerful ally for the sisters than the black movement. ACM attended many of Boa Morte's festivals, where the sisters welcomed him warmly. Indeed, when I asked the sisters about their political party affiliation, they all answered in unison: "ACM!" ACM gained popular credibility through his support of Boa Morte, a fact that helps to illustrate Boa Morte's complex and seemingly contradictory political alliances.

We can recognize in ACM the white political patron that Marcelin reminded us is so essential to popular celebrations in places like Cachoeira. The anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1993) attempts to contextualize the persistence of these kinds of relations in the rural Brazilian northeast:

The history of the sugar plantations, slavery, peonage, paternalism, and *coronelismo* can weigh heavily on the demeanor and behavior of the rural workers, who throughout their lives put up with humiliating gestures and postures and with unequal exchanges that obligate them to people who would only take further advantage of them. . . . A good boss is a rescuer and a savior, one who

will swoop down at a precarious moment and snatch a dependent worker and his or her family from the clutches of disease, penury, death or other forms of destruction. For people who live their lives so close to the margins of survival, the idea of a benefactor is soothing. To admit the opposite, to entertain the idea that patronage is itself exploitative, is to admit that there is no structured safety net at all and that the poor are adrift within an amoral social and economic system that is utterly indifferent to their well-being and survival. (108)

Scheper-Hughes is certainly right to emphasize the exploitative nature of patronage relations and to point out that the image of the good patron, in the form of a savior in times of trouble, is often a mirage. On the other hand, the subaltern have often found ways to call their dominators to account for their public declarations of good will (cf. Genovese 1974). That is, even if we may agree with the political approaches and schooled ideologies of urban activists, we should recognize in the sisters' political practice a keen sense of situation and strategy.

Discussion

Afro-Brazilian women control the hierarchies of many Candomblé terreiros as well as that of the Sisterhood of Boa Morte, and clearly such leadership confers a certain influence in their communities and beyond. As Rosalyn Terborg-Penn points out, African feminist thought has largely understood these kinds of groups in terms of the development of "survival strategies" that encourage "self-reliance through female networks" (1996, 25). Certainly this description aptly characterizes the Sisterhood of Boa Morte. Some have referred to this ceremonial leadership in African and diaspora religions, however, as a form of "privilege without power" (Jules-Rosette 1996, 102). I have shown, however, that the arenas of Afro-Brazilian religion and public politics are not so separate in practice. Elite politicians and grassroots activists have drawn upon the image of Boa Morte, presumably to increase their popular appeal (Sansi 2005; Selka 2008). This practice is grounded in the idea that Candomblé is a potent source of power, even if this power is not specifically political in itself. It is also related to the authenticity attributed to Candomblé in Cachoeira, where Afro-Brazilian religious practice is imagined to be relatively unaffected by "modernization." In this way, Afro-Brazilian women have exerted some influence in the realm of formal politics through practices that are first and foremost religious.

Clearly, religion and politics have been closely associated in many times and places. We cannot understand European or African political history, for

example, without understanding the role of religion in relation to the institutions and practices of government. Scholars have paid much less attention, however, to the ways that subaltern religions are intertwined with politics. Indeed, African diasporic religion has long been a powerful presence in the political sphere in many contexts in Latin America and the Caribbean. Vodun played a pivotal role in the organization of the Haitian revolution, and later, Papa Doc Duvalier's secret police, the *Ton-Ton Macoute*, were reputed to use Vodun as a tool in their work (cf. Davis 1997). In Brazil, the intersection of Afro-Brazilian religion and national politics is highlighted in rumors about the tragic death of Tancredo de Almeida Neves, who died in April 1985 before he was able to take office as the first president of a newly democratized Brazil. Before his death, "a national furor took shape surrounding the widely held belief that the president-elect . . . had been fated to die by an intrusive object in his body that was introduced by a malevolent practitioner of an Afro-Brazilian religious cult" (Gossen 1997, 23). Clearly, the links between the sisters of *Boa Morte* and the various political actors I have discussed are not exceptional in Brazil.

What is distinctive about *Boa Morte*, however, is that it is an organization that limits its membership to women. In many contexts, women have often been referred to as culture bearers, especially of traditions carried on out of the public view or in the household (Terborg-Penn and Rushing 1996). Behind this generalization, of course, is the problematic notion that the public sphere is the domain of men and the private sphere is the domain of women (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). This public-private dichotomy has become especially problematic in recent decades, during which time Brazil as a nation appears to be placing greater emphasis on Afro-Brazilian traditions in popular culture and in its constructions of Brazilian national identity.

In the religious arena, for example, Candomblé has been used strategically "by the government to obscure issues of race and promote the image of racial democracy by using the religion's fusion of Catholic and African elements as a social metaphor" (Butler 1998b, 40). Interestingly, as public interest in Afro-Brazilian culture increases, then in some cases women who were previously invisible move to the center of the cultural stage. Thus, as Candomblé becomes Bahia's "trademark" (Telles 2005), Afro-Brazilian women who practice Candomblé have become more visible in the public sphere.

Yet, as we have seen, it is not only conservatives and cultural promoters who draw upon *Boa Morte* as a focal symbol. As one priest involved with the progressive Pastoral Afro told me, for example, he sees the black movement in Bahia as consisting of three important divisions: urban progressive

groups such as the MNU and the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers' Party); traditional Afro-Brazilian groups in the rural zones such as Boa Morte; and radical groups like Sem Terra (the landless workers' movement) that are working toward general economic equity and social justice. Indeed, progressive activists in the city are turning to traditional organizations in the rural areas for authenticity, while traditional organizations are leaning on progressive groups for support in a modernizing political system in which traditional patron-client politics are increasingly subject to criticism. In rural Bahia, however, where public discussion of racial discrimination is lacking, the black movement is commonly perceived as a form of "reverse racism." Here, organizations such as the Sisterhood of Boa Morte provide a model of ethnic pride and resistance expressed not in the militant language of the university-trained activist from the city but in the more familiar idioms of traditional rural life.

Indeed, Boa Morte complicates representations of rural Afro-Brazilian women in a number of ways. On a structural level, it is clear that the lives of Afro-Brazilian women, especially in the rural areas, are shaped by forces that have to do with power-laden distinctions between men and women, white and black, and the city and the countryside. Outside of the city, gender roles appear more clearly demarcated and formal feminist movements have gained little traction. Similarly, the political wing of the black movement, which has its origins in the city, has not gained popular appeal in small towns like Cachoeira. In the rural areas, it is more difficult to mobilize on the basis of one's gender or racial identity.

But a look at the case of Boa Morte reveals the outlines of the kinds of political engagements in which rural black women may be involved. First of all, with respect to religious practice, I have illustrated that leadership positions in Afro-Brazilian religious groups translate into tangible forms of influence and power. As much as the Catholic Church has attempted to stamp out African-derived religion (and of course it also has a long history of accommodating it for pragmatic purposes), it has been growing as a religion in recent decades (Chesnut 2003). Furthermore, it is clear that in some contexts the Catholic priest can be subordinated to the will of the Candomblé practitioner, which is partly due to the fact that the practice of Candomblé and Catholicism are so closely intertwined in Bahian life. For example, in many of the stories of one of Bahia's most famous authors, Jorge Amado, Catholic priests are often manipulated or controlled by Candomblé practitioners or Candomblé spirits; moreover, his characters from Salvador often consult with the powerful Candomblé practitioners of Cachoeira in

times of crisis. It is no coincidence that Amado threw his support behind Boa Morte during its battle with the Church.

Secondly, especially in Bahia, Candomblé is intertwined with public political culture, and most politicians (with the exception of evangelicals) try to establish good relationships with prominent terreiros. Presumably, this provides some level of participation for Candomblé practitioners in the political process. The credibility that a politician may gain from associating with powerful leaders in the Candomblé community, for example, can be exchanged for a certain degree of influence. This is especially true in a time when Bahia is investing more than ever before, both symbolically and economically, in its Afro-Brazilian heritage. Although many of the important sites of the performance of this heritage are found in the city, Bahia is increasingly looking to places outside of the city like Cachoeira to find what are imagined to be original and unblemished expressions of Afro-Brazilian traditions.

All of these developments widen the possibilities for effective agency for many Afro-Brazilian women. Unfortunately, they also contain the possibility of reproducing old inequalities when rural Afro-Brazilian women become the objects of a romanticizing gaze or commercializing projects that do not benefit them. On the other hand, the attention that Boa Morte has gained has opened up the possibility for increased dialogue with important political actors in the city. Accordingly, I have attempted to illustrate some of the ways in which the sisters of Boa Morte engage the various groups seeking to draw upon their image while making strategic use of the symbolic and political resources available to them to assert their influence and dignity.

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