

Religious Syncretism in Contemporary Brazilian Theatre

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The past twenty-five years have witnessed a revitalization of theatre in Brazil, which has been characterized by dramatic innovation and richness of content. One theme that has received growing attention by playwrights is religion, and more specifically, the employment of religious syncretism as a motif in Brazilian theatre. Since its initial appearance in Latin America, the Catholic Church has been the dominant spiritual and often, political, force in the New World.¹ From the time of Padre Anchieta to the present, the leaders of Catholicism have endeavored to convey their beliefs to the Latin American populace. Over the centuries, however, the Catholic Church has often been permissive in its tolerance of various pagan practices, which have included dramatic presentations, in the belief that it was possible to convert through the comparison and the absorption of non-Catholic tenets into the all-encompassing Catholic creed.² The result throughout Latin America has been first, a general misunderstanding of Catholicism, and secondly, a widespread syncretization of religious beliefs.

An excellent example of this process may be observed in the religious makeup of Brazil where, according to Francis A. Dutra, 94% or about 70,000,000 of the population are born Catholics, yet a rapidly increasing number simultaneously embrace the beliefs of *umbanda*, *candomblé* and other Afro-Brazilian cults. Dutra attributes the frequent misinterpretation of the "Catholicity" of Brazil to several factors, among which are the "inadequacy of religious instruction" and the ever-present affinity for combining African/Amerindian and Catholic beliefs.³

A recent document entitled "A Latin American Statement of Faith," published in 1977, takes a stronger stand regarding the present state of religion in all of Latin America:

Men and women in Latin America have for centuries paid little attention to God's revelation. Christian witness has been in most cases nearly

irrelevant, and has been disfigured by merely human tradition. At the same time a literalistic biblicism has grown up which lent itself to vain polemics more than to a genuine encounter with God. On the other hand, ancient animistic religions still flourish, never having been supplanted by the "Christianizing" of the continent. Secularism, agnosticism and atheism are prevalent.⁴

Critics and scholars like Nina Rodrigues, Roger Bastide, Edison Carneiro and Rene Ribeiro have dedicated considerable attention to the investigation of Afro-Brazilian cults.⁵ Bastide, for example, theorizes that the recent tendency toward Afro-Brazilian religions is the direct result of the combination of the permissiveness of pagan belief by the sixteenth-century Portuguese Catholic Church in the New World, and the confounding of medieval Catholic Church practices (e.g., chanting, masquerade dances and animal processions characteristic of local Catholic feasts) with similar practices of pagan origin. Bastide cites as a result the dual nature of Catholicism in Brazil, i.e., the existence of what might be termed "White Catholicism" and "Black Catholicism."⁶

An interesting pattern of religious syncretization which seems to parallel the evolution of syncretism in Brazilian society may be observed in contemporary Brazilian theatre. The first divergence from Catholicism is a modification of the Judeo-Christian god-figure to suit the personal needs of the individual. Despite adherence to other traditional Catholic beliefs, the individualization of the deity can produce personal or collective fanaticism, which often results in victimization, or, in exact juxtaposition, in an undisputed coexistence of pagan and Christian elements. The latter development is especially common in the case of Afro-Brazilian cults. The objective of this study is, therefore, to view several plays in which this syncretic phenomenon is represented.

The first phase of the syncretic pattern is best seen in *O Pagador de Promessas* (1960) and *O Santo Inquérito* (1966) by Alfredo Dias Gomes.⁷ *O Pagador* deals with a peasant, Zé-do-Burro, who is intent upon fulfilling a promise he has made to Saint Barbara. In exchange for the saint's having cured his injured donkey, Zé has pledged to make a twenty-six-mile pilgrimage, on foot, to the Church of Saint Barbara, where he intends to deliver a heavy cross. During the day, Zé encounters serious opposition from several factions of society. Despite his denials, he is accused of imitating Christ's Passion, and of misrepresenting himself as a Christ-figure. The situation reaches exaggerated proportions and Zé is ultimately shot down during a struggle with the police. His promise is fulfilled, however, when his friends carry the victim into the Church on his wooden cross.

Based on a legend of the eighteenth century, *O Santo Inquérito* has a similar plot. The protagonist is Branca Dias, a peasant girl who, because of her individualistic view of religion, is accused of sorcery and faces chastisement at the hands of the Inquisition. For her refusal to repent for something she does not consider to be morally wrong, Branca is condemned to death at the stake. Thus Branca, like Zé, becomes an innocent victim of her religious beliefs.

Zé-do-Burro and Branca Dias are of similar ilk. Of peasant stock, both may be regarded as unaffected, honest folk, each of whom holds a personal view of

religion. Zé makes no distinction between Catholicism and *candomblé*. Since he believes God and the saints to be universal, it is in good faith that Zé has made his vow to Saint Barbara at a *candomblé* worship of the pagan goddess Iansan. Unable to comprehend the violent reaction of the Catholic Church, Zé attempts to justify himself by adding that, in the event that the two saints are separate entities, they must surely have been in accord to have produced the miracle.

Branca's own brand of religion resembles Zé's in several respects. Encountering God in all of Nature, Branca firmly believes that people can find the Almighty through love and the joy of living. Even though she has no formal confessor and does not attend Mass regularly, Branca defends herself as a Christian: "E não pense que porque não vou diariamente à igreja não estou com Deus todos os dias" (p. 28). Like Zé, Branca readily voices her confusion at the hypocrisies of the Catholic Church and is incapable of understanding her alleged heresy against the Church, which has resulted from her rescue of a drowning priest.

Branca's fatal error is the inadvertent admission of her Jewish heritage. When she is informed that no Jews or Moslems can be eternally saved, Branca questions the Christian-ness of abhorring all those who are not of the Catholic faith. Branca is further perplexed by the inequitable treatment afforded "New Christians." As a result of hearing her remarks, the priest is compelled, by his strong indoctrination against heresy, to report Branca to the Inquisition. It is ironic then that the very person she has saved is in turn responsible for Branca's death. Condemned to die, Branca is ingenuous in her bewildered lament: "Nunca pensei senão em viver conforme a minha natureza e o meu entendimento amando Deus a minha maneira; nunca quis destruir nada, nem fazer mal algum a ninguém!" (p. 149).

Anticlericalism is an important factor in the two plays. Whereas Zé and Branca are depicted in a charitable, Christian light, the priests, those who are supposed to possess such attributes, are portrayed as false and hypocritical. The priests in both *O Pagador* and *O Santo Inquirido* are so caught up in theology that they fail to make provisions for the human element. In labeling Zé a heretic as a result of his association with the *candomblé*, and haughtily criticizing all human frailty, the Padre of *O Pagador* never realizes that he, too, is susceptible to the same flaw: "Do demo, sim. Você não soube distinguir o bem do mal. Todo homem é assim. Vive atrás do milagre em vez de viver atrás de Deus. E não sabe se caminha para o céu ou para o inferno" (p. 45). Both protagonists refuse to yield to a cold, artificial "harmony" created to a large extent by the beliefs of an altogether human society and not by God. The outcome, of course, can be only death for the "heretics." Consequently, *O Pagador* and *O Santo Inquirido* each end in violence: the death of the protagonist in *O Pagador* is the result of the rejection of intermingling Catholic and Afro-Brazilian belief; the condemnation in *O Santo Inquirido* is in part a negative reaction to Judaic influence.

Other examples of the synthesizing of Catholicism and Afro-Brazilian cults may be found in Brazilian theatre. A prime source is the frequent employment of the *bumba-meu-boi*, an *auto* form native to Northeastern Brazil, whose predominant feature is the *boi*, or ox, which dies and is usually brought back to

life by an herb-doctor. The dramatic form is used by Joaquim Cardozo in *O Coronel de Macambira* (1965) and *De uma Noite de Festa* (1971),⁸ for the purpose of promulgating the birth and resurrection of Christ. Alfredo Dias Gomes, on the other hand, employs the same form to depict the negative consequences of collective religious fanaticism, in his play *A Revolução dos Beatos* (1962).⁹ Since Dias Gomes' target seems to be the human weaknesses within the religious system, he never openly condemns Catholicism *per se*. Therefore, the resultant theme is similar to that of the Cardozo plays; it is the approach that is significantly different.

An interesting aspect of *A Revolução* is that the plot is based partially on historical fact.¹⁰ From religious and political standpoints, the alleged "Miracle of 1889" produced a widespread effect upon the entire region of Brazil.¹¹ The action of the drama centers on the problem of the popular belief in an alleged miracle worker and the opposing force of paganism. Several coincidences that occur in rapid succession cause the people of Juazeiro to transfer their ardent faith from Padre Cícero to his ox. Political overtones pointing to corruption in the Catholic Church are coupled with the indecisiveness of the priest, who is incapable of preventing the idolization of the ox. Following the eventual death of the animal at the hands of Bastião, the initial propagator of the cult, the pendulum of religious worship swings back to Christianity. The radical instability of religious belief in Juazeiro indicates the townspeople's susceptibility to potent external forces, while at the same time demonstrating the invalidity of either creed when interpreted in terms of the extreme.

Superstition is an essential ingredient of daily life in Juazeiro. At the outset of the play, references are made to numerous miracles which have been allegedly performed by Padre Cícero. Miraculous visions are a frequent occurrence, and prayers and religious relics honoring the priest are sold commonly on the streets. There is a general clamor for the Padre's special blessing, or to kiss his feet or touch the hem of his vestments. Both acts establish a clear association of the priest with Christ; moreover, the nature of their worship soundly illustrates that the followers are adoring the man instead of the religion he represents. Because he has also gained renown as the performer of medical cures through the use of herbs and roots, Padre Cícero may further be considered a type of "Christian herb-doctor," typical of those found in the *bumba-meu-boi*.

The new idol emerges at the beginning of the second act. It is the ox, stipulated by the playwright to be one of the *bumba-meu-boi* variety. At this point, verbatim comments and joyful utterances once directed to Padre Cícero are now addressed to the ox. Mateus is viewed selling parts of ox horns, urine and excrement as religious relics and panaceas for blindness and wounds. The significance of the sale of what is typical ware among Afro-Brazilian cults is heightened by the parallel the author makes with similar practices in Catholicism.

The only strong opponent of the new cult is the politician Dr. Floro, who, in his decision to kill the ox, assumes the reverse role of the herb-doctor in the traditional *bumba-meu-boi*. In addition to slaughtering the animal, the politician favors distributing bits of the carcass for consumption by the people of Juazeiro, an evident parody of the sacrament of the Eucharist (p. 330). Although Floro's

desire is extreme, it does demonstrate the extent to which religious syncretism exists in the play. The general reaction to Floro's decision is one of shock and indignation, as over a blatant act of heresy: "Negar a santidade do nosso boi! Hereges! Hereges! Vamos nos purificar dêsse pecado rastejando diante dêle . . ." (p. 302). In litany form, the flock commit themselves to a type of "holy war" against Floro, "O Anti-Cristo," and his followers. Dias Gomes' employment of the concept of the "Christian soldier" is effective in illustrating the same fervor possessed by the worshippers of a pagan cult. The process of total submersion through religious syncretization is exemplified in the prayer of the Beata to the Blessed Mother (Christian element):

Santa Mãe de Deus e Mãe Nossa, Mãe das Dores, pelo amor de Nosso Padrim Cirso (earthly element) e de seu Boi Santo (pagan element), nos livre e nos defenda de tudo quanto fôr perigo e miséria, nesta e na outra, onde queremos estar, ao lado de Nosso Padrim (earthly element) e de seu Boi Santo, amém! (pagan element, Christian ending.)¹¹

The Beata's prediction of the horrors that are to follow the slaying of the beast closely resembles the prophecy of the Old Testament.¹² At the moment Bastião kills the ox, the sky suddenly darkens, as at the moment of Jesus' death, a coincidence which gives free rein to superstition. The pilgrims perceive the dark cloud to be in the shape of an enormous ox, and fear of the end of the world fills the air. Even though Floro and Padre Cícero eventually manage to convince the crowd that the death of the ox was an act of God, the people of Juazeiro appear not to have learned their lesson. Instead they depart, mesmerized once again by the "miracle" which Padre Cícero has performed.

A Revolução deals with the conception and growth of a revolutionary cult that is based on idol worship. Superstition in both Christianity and paganism can be found, but what Dias Gomes opposes most strongly is the blindness of many religious followers who allow themselves to be prodded along without recourse to logic or thought. As his play suggests, acute ignorance in religion (and politics) has existed for years in Northeastern Brazil.¹³ Dias Gomes may well be suggesting that one must worship in an aware fashion, i.e., one must strive to comprehend the foundation and meaning of his religion.

In addition to the *bumba-meu-boi*, extensive treatment of cults is seen in several of the works of Zora Seljan. In *História de Oxalá* (1957), Seljan commemorates the "Festa do Bomfim," by citing this feast as the best contemporary example of the mingling of *candomblé* and Christianity.¹⁴ Based on the legend of Oxalá, this play is innovative in that the account of the Passion of Christ, a Christian belief, is combined with the African legend of the imprisonment of Oxalá. Several Biblical allusions are evident in the work: Xangô's sin of having unjustly incarcerated Oxalá for seven years is accompanied by a punishment of seven years of plague, seven years of drought and seven years of pestilence. Finally, a very real sense of Christian brotherhood is displayed when amends are ultimately made between the two gods at the close of the play.

The structure of *História de Oxalá* is noteworthy, since it provides an excellent example of the melding of Christian and pagan ritual. As in *O Pagador*, the action takes place outside on the steps of a church, a point upon which Seljan

insists, as a means of establishing a constant linkage of Christianity and the African legend. While the necessary preparations are being made for the feast, the origin of the Afro-Brazilian ritual is recounted in flashback form. At the end the scene reverts to the church steps, where the crippled, those who pray to Oxalá for solace, are entering.

A second play by Zora Seljan, *Três Mulheres de Xangô* (1958),¹⁵ also treats the gods of the *candomblé*. It consists of a trilogy of plays, each of which describes a legendary consort of Xangô, the god of thunder: Iemanjá, the mother of waters (often associated with maternity and the Virgin Mary), Iansan, goddess of lightning and the winds; and Oxum, ruler of lakes, fountains and beauty. *Candomblé* music and dance are essential elements of the trilogy, and include the dance style of the *bumba-meu-boi*, seen in the *Dança do Bicho*. Ritual abounds, and includes at one point a ceremonial bathing of Oxum which resembles the Christian sacrament of Baptism. In both of Seljan's plays one observes the harmonious coalescence of Christian and Afro-Brazilian religious elements.

Other examples of religious syncretism in contemporary Brazilian theatre might be mentioned: *Aruanda* (1947) by Joaquim Ribeiro, whose theme is the coexistence of humans and African gods on earth; *Filhos de Santo* (1949) by José de Moraes Pinho, which questions the validity of mysticism in Xangô ritual; *Além do Rio* (1957) by Agostinho Olavo; *O Castigo de Oxalá* (1961) by Romeu Crusoe; *Sortilégio* (1951) by Abdias do Nascimento, which deals with *macumba*; *Vereda da Salvação* (1964) by Jorge Andrade; *Orfeu Negro* by Ironides Rodrigues, and *O Processo do Cristo Negro* by Ariano Suassuna.

Although a complete investigation into the reasons for the marked recurrences of this theme transcends the scope of the present paper, the growing interest in the dramatic portrayal of religious syncretic elements may be said to include two important areas of concern: first, a protest against the inadequacies of the present-day Catholic Church in Brazil, and secondly, a renewed concern for the sociological plight of man. The Brazilian of today is a man in conflict. The lengthy period of political and religious European domination afforded him no opportunity, or need, to know himself. Having finally shed those external and psychological reins, the Brazilian of this century has been confronted with an urgency to establish a self-identity. (This is especially true for the Brazilian of African origin.) One route in his search lies in political struggle; another is religion: a religion which is designed to fulfill the needs of the individual. Aided by theatrical groups like Teatro Experimental do Negro and Teatro Popular Brasileiro, the appearance of religious syncretism in contemporary Brazilian theatre reflects such an endeavor. It is not merely a dissociated societal tangent; rather, its existence represents the very real striving on the part of thousands of Brazilians today toward a self-definition. Understanding the theme in dramatic terms could therefore provide a tool for a greater comprehension of this search.

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Notes

1. For a detailed description of the nature of Catholicism in Latin America, see Ivan Vallier, "Religious Elites: Differentiations and Developments in Roman Catholicism," in Seymour Martin Lipset and Aldo Solari, eds., *Elites in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 190-232.

2. "During the period of the Jesuit religious plays of the sixteenth century, the slaves, too, during the season between Christmas and the Epiphany, would present their own plays: the *Congada* or *Congo*, the *Quicumbre*, the *Quilombos*—of African origin—and the *Bumba-meu-boi*, whose origins are vague but which shows obvious adaptations by slaves with the inclusion of characters such as Mateus and Bastião, 'pet Negroes,' the germ of the picturesque little Negro boys of the future." Abdias do Nascimento, "The Negro Theater in Brazil," *African Forum*, II, no. 4 (Spring 1967), 38-39.

3. Francis A. Dutra, "The Theatre of Dias Gomes: Brazil's Social Conscience," *Cithara*, IV, no. 2 (May 1965), 11.

4. Latin American Biblical Seminary (San José, Costa Rica), "Latin American Statement of Faith (Document)," *Reformed World*, 34 (June 1977), 271.

5. Manuel Diégues Júnior, "The Negro in Brazil: A Bibliographic Essay," *African Forum*, II, no. 4 (Spring 1967), 103.

6. Roger Bastide, *Les Religions Africaines au Brésil* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960), p. 172.

7. Alfredo Dias Gomes, *O Pagador de Promessas*, 3rd ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Editôra Civilização Brasileira, S.A., 1967), and *O Santo Inquerito* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, S.A., 1966). From this point on, all references to these texts will appear in parentheses following the quotations cited.

8. Joaquim Cardozo, *O Coronel de Macambira* (Rio de Janeiro: Tecnoprint Gráfica, Editôra, 1970), and *De uma Noite de Festa* (São Paulo: Livraria Agir, 1971).

9. Alfredo Dias Gomes, "A Revolução dos Beatos," in *Teatro*, vol. I (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, S.A., 1972), pp. 237-345. From this point on, all references to this text will appear in parentheses following the quotations cited.

10. In 1889, Padre Cícero Romão Batista's housekeeper, Maria de Araujo, had just received Holy Communion, when she fell to the floor in a trance. The host turned scarlet, spilling forth blood which was reputed to be that of Christ. The miracle recurred and, witnessed by other clergymen, produced great controversy among the Catholic hierarchy.

11. *A Revolução*, p. 312. The parenthetical analyses are my own.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 322-324. "E falou: se matarem o Boi, virá uma sêca de sete anos, como nunca houve! E todos aqueles que tentarem fugir pra outras terras verão a agua virar sangue e a terra virar fogo! E os que puderem salvar seu povo e não fizerem, êsses serão duplamente castigados." Compare with Revelation 16: 3-5, 8-9.

13. One need only recall the bloody socio-religious heresy which was quelled in Canudos at about the same period to comprehend the fanaticism of the populace of Juazeiro. Ralph della Cava has observed that "The missionaries' emphasis on a wrathful God and man's imminent perdition due to sin tended to generate an array of superstitious beliefs. Not infrequently did the poor believe that the white European friars—thought to be racially and intellectually superior—were men of exceptional sanctity endowed with the gift of prophecy." Ralph della Cava, *Miracle at Joazeiro* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), p. 14. The author subsequently applies his theory to Padre Cícero, who apparently shared the same power over his followers.

14. Zora Seljan, *História de Oxalá: Festa do Bomfim* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições de Ouro, 1964), p. 11.

15. Zora Seljan, *Três Mulheres de Xangô* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições GRD, Livraria Clássica Brasileira, 1958).

16. Nascimento, pp. 46-50.

