

## **ENVIRONMENT AND RELIGION IN A DEVELOPING COUNTRY: THE ROLE OF SACRIFICE IN THE XANGÔ OF RECIFE (BRAZIL)**

**Roberto Motta**

*Universidade Estadual da Paraíba, Campina Grande, Brazil*

**Keywords:** AfroBrazilian, religion, sacrifice, food, reciprocity, informal economy

### **Contents**

1. Previous Literature
  2. The Xangô and the City
  3. Rituals and Victuals
  4. The Inputs of Reciprocity
  5. Final Remarks
- Glossary  
Bibliography  
Biographical Sketch

### **Summary**

The basic ritual act of the Xangô, a cult of African origin found in Northeastern Brazil, is the offering of animal sacrifice to its deities. But by far most of the meat that results from this practice is redirected to the faithful and thus the Xangô appears as good to eat. It is also good to employ, since priests and their assistants function as providers of some specialized services, rewarded by believers in money or in kind. The cult, therefore, in spite of its primarily religious meaning, appears as an adaptive strategy that attempts to respond to some of the challenges of its environment.

### **1. Previous Literature**

The literature on the practical, adaptive, economic, nutritional and similar aspects of the AfroBrazilian cults is not too extensive. Its first and up to this day perhaps best known item is Melville Herskovits's essay on "Some Economic Aspects of the AfroBahian Candomblé". Herskovits draws attention to the impressive business generated by its religious activities. The amount of cloth used in the elaborate, ample dresses worn mainly by women initiates affects the textile market. The demand for ritual drums is also a case in point. The import trade is also affected, for in the cults a high value is placed on certain commodities from West Africa. Every act of cult, including rituals of divination, healing and protection from evil are major sources of income for the cult head and the group as a whole. Indeed, although this does not exclude their specific, symbolic and religious meaning, terreiros no doubt are also economic ventures geared, rather than to profit, to obtaining, through donation and systems of exchange, the income needed by people who suffer from poverty and unemployment (or underemployment). It can be said with realism that the work of the supernatural beings is envisaged by the cultists in both symbolic and economic terms.

Combining fullness and accuracy of information, literary skill, and a lively sense of humor, Seth and Ruth Leacock, in *Spirits of the Deep*, deal with a variety a variety of Candomblé prevalent in the Northern Brazilian city of Belém, the Batuque. They establish a correlation between the cult and its extrareligious, urban environment of poverty. Like the Candomblé of Bahia, the Xangô of Recife, and similar cults elsewhere in Brazil, Batuque is a markedly instrumental religion, and in many respects almost perfectly designed to serve the needs of the people who participate in it. Living in a very difficult environment a medium finds in Batuque a religion that promises direct, immediate, day-to-day support, providing not only the resolution of financial, health, and family problems, but also an enhancement of status both within the religious group and with neighbors and friends. For some mediums, a reputation as an expert intermediary between the supernatural forces and men can be converted into economic and social rewards. The appeal of Batuque is not that it promises to change the world in which the members live, but that it helps them to survive in that world.

The study of the AfroBrazilian religions has been very much influenced by French-born Roger Bastide, who was one of the founders of the social sciences department of leading São Paulo University. He was primarily interested in the symbolic and metaphysical aspects of the cults and he transmitted this emphasis to later research, both in Brazil and abroad. In his main book, *The African Religions of Brazil* he also described some of the more practical aspects of AfroBrazilian religious life, which he viewed as guided by reciprocity and exchange, Candomblé houses being authentic associations of mutual aid and brotherly assistance, quite in agreement with their original African communal spirit.

## 2. The Xangô and the City

The Xangô cult of the Brazilian city of Recife is defined by three essential attributes: (1) worship of the orixás, originally West African (Yoruba) deities, syncretized with Roman Catholic saints, whose exact number varies from city to city and even from terreiro to terreiro. The following ones, however, are found throughout the whole of cultic domain of the Xangô of Recife and of the Candomblé of Bahia: Exu, Ogum, Obaluaê, Oxum, Iemanjá, Xangô, Iansan and Oxalá. (2) Ritual preeminence of animal sacrifices, accompanied by singing, dancing, and ecstatic trance. (3) Initiatory character of congregations, headed by pais-de-santo and mães-de-santo, or, in a more formal style, babalorixás and ialorixás, that is, fathers and mothers-in-sainthood. Although the hypotheses and conclusions of this paper are primarily meant to apply to Recife and its immediate vicinity, its general outline is certainly valid for other Brazilian centers with a tradition of Candomblé, such as Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, Porto Alegre, São Luís and Belém, where terreiros, with their structure of exchange and reciprocity, also play a basic adaptive role. Field data for the paper derive from the author's participant observation of the Xangô of Recife and, subsidiarily, of closely related cults elsewhere in Brazil, done mainly in the 70s and 80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, as a native resident of Recife, he has not, to this day, lost touch with the **terreiros** and has kept abreast of their recent developments.

According to the national census of 2000, there would be, in Recife, no more than 1,496 persons claiming Candomblé as their religion, that is, very nearly 0.1% of the whole

population. Yet, according to my own updated calculations, there are about 100,000 regular adepts of the Xangô in Recife and neighboring Olinda. The huge discrepancy between those who practice and those who, in the census, claim allegiance to, Candomblé is essentially due to the notion, prevalent among cultists, that there is no discontinuity between Catholic saints and African orixás and hence no exact boundary between Roman Catholicism, on one hand, and, on the other hand, Xangô, Candomblé, Batuque and similar cults. In other words, Xangô cultists do not want to break, and do not think they are in any way breaking, with the Catholic Church on account of their own forms of worship. Indeed they often claim they are but being Catholics by other means. Baptism in the Church and at least a minimum of Catholic practices are required from all *bona fide* filhos-de-santo. This situation has been tacitly and grudgingly accepted by the Catholic Church (in spite of occasional acts of intolerance) for as long as AfroBrazilian cultists present themselves as members not of a rival, but rather of a complementary form of religion. An indefinite number of other persons, who are no regular members of terreiros, may, nevertheless, occasionally engage in feasts and other rites, including the offering of sacrifices. The magic aspects of the Xangô and of its sacrifices are especially important to this fringe membership. .

According to the central hypothesis of this paper, the Xangô of Recife, although it is primarily a cultural phenomenon of a religious and symbolic kind, comprises some economic and nutritional strategies that increase the chances of survival and adaptation of cult members to their urban environment. Besides being good to think and to worship, it is good to eat and good to employ. Let us inspect some of the available data on income and income distribution in Recife In census year 2000 the population of the city of Recife amounted to 1,421,993 individuals, out of whom 648,965 constituted its "economically active population". That labor pool comprised 510,090 persons who actually were employed in the week the census was held. Thus, there were 138,875 openly unemployed persons in the same week, which amounts to 21.4% of the total workforce. such as defined by the census. The median monthly income of those who were actually employed attained, in 2000, just 250.00 *reais*. (In spite of ups and downs, the ratio of the Brazilian *real* to the US dollar may be considered as very approximately 0.5 to 1 so far in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. )

According to data from the same source (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* (from which all figures of this paper derive, unless otherwise stated.) relative to 2005, the mean monthly income of the population aged ten and plus, in the Recife area, amounted to 462 *reais* per month. The figures rose to 752 *reais* when only the income of those who did have some form of income was taken into account. Of those, 71% earned monthly incomes equal to, or less, than 300 *reais*. Indeed very nearly 26% of those who, nevertheless, are considered as belonging to the "economically active population" earn between 300 and 600 *reais* per month (between 1,800 and 3,600 US dollars per year).

Likewise, about 27 % of all gainfully employed persons in the area of Recife worked less than 40 hours a week. Of the latter 54% had monthly incomes equal to, or less, than 300 *reais* per month. In the district of Beberibe, where the greatest concentration of Xangô adherents and shrines is located, 34% of heads of household had a monthly income equal to, or less than, 300 *reais*, while 62% did not surpass 600 and 73% did not

go beyond 900 *reais*.

Although the presence of the Xangô in Recife (and of similar cults elsewhere in Brazil) is contingent upon a particular history and can in no way be deduced from the state of the environment and the economy, it nevertheless responds to environmental, economic and nutritional pressures, due primarily to the basic feature of its ritual, the offer of animal sacrifices to its deities and all the process of income redistribution they entail, not only in the sheer form of food, but also of fees paid to priests and other officers (like, among others, cooks with knowledge of ritual requirements) and other expenses.

-  
-  
-

TO ACCESS ALL THE 13 PAGES OF THIS CHAPTER,  
Visit: <http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx>

### Bibliography

Bastide, Roger (1978) *The African Religions of Brazil*, 315 pp.. Baltimore, MD, USA, The Johns Hopkins University Press. [A comprehensive sociological and historical description of the AfroBrazilian religions.]

Herskovits, Melville (1966) *The New World Negro: Selected Papers in Afroamerican Studies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 248-265. [A classic study on the economic consequences of AfroBrazilian cult life.]

Leacock, Seth & Ruth Leacock (1972) *Spirits of the Deep: A Study of an Afro-Brazilian Cult*. 404 pp.. Garden City: Doubleday Natural History Press. [A study on the adaptive role played by religion on both the symbolic and practical levels.]

Motta, Roberto (1988) Indian-Afro-European Syncretic Cults in Brazil: Their Economic and Social Roots. *Cahiers du Brésil Contemporain* (Paris, Maison des Sciences de L'Homme), no. 5, 27-48. [A general classification of African and other forms of popular religion in Brazil from the standpoint of their social and economic roles.]

Motta, Roberto (1988) *Meat and Feast: The Xangô Religion of Recife, Brazil*, 432 pp.. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Columbia University. [A description of the **Xangô** emphasizing the role played by sacrifice.]

Robertson-Smith, W. (1956 [or. 1989]) *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: The Fundamental Institution*. 507 pp. New York, Meridian Library. Jersey City: [Na outstanding study on the relationship between sacrifice, food and community.]

Wafer, Jim (1991) *The Taste of Blood: Spirit Possession in Brazilian Candomblé*. 219 pp.. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press. [A lively and unconventional description of sacrifice and trance in AfroBrazilian religion.]

### Biographical Sketch

**Roberto Motta**, born in Recife, Brazil, received his Bachelor's degree from the Federal University of city in 1962. He also has a Master's degree in Sociology from the Institute of Social Studies of The Hague, Netherlands (1964) and a Ph.D. in Anthropology from Columbia University in the City of New York (1988). He was for many years a Professor at the Federal University of Recife and a researcher at Fundação Joaquim Nabuco, also in Recife. He also served as a visiting professor and researcher at the

universities of Paris, Rome, Naples, Lyon, the Center for the Study of World Religions of Harvard University, and the University of California at Los Angeles. He is a member of several learned societies in Brazil and abroad. He has published extensively, in several countries and several languages, on his fields of interest (the Afro-Brazilian religions, religion in general, change, development, and social theory. In 1985 he was made a “Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres” by the French government. He is presently researcher at Conselho Nacional de Pesquisas (CNPQ, Brasília) and Professor at Universidade Estadual da Paraíba (Campina Grande, Brazil).

UNESCO – EOLSS  
SAMPLE CHAPTERS