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A Socio-Historical Study of South-Amefrican Christianity: The Brazilian Case

1. The Category of Amefricanity

I propose this category of Amefricanity because it permits us to both demonstrate and refute the unconscious reproduction of the U.S. imperialist position which says that the U.S. is "The America." If this were true, what about South, Central, Insular or Caribbean America and other countries of North America such as Canada and Mexico? Indeed, why do we consider the Caribbean as separate when we know that "The America" historically began just there? How can we have a real consciousness about ourselves, as African descendants, if we continue to dwell in the "captivity of a racist language"?

The political and cultural category of *Amefricanity* is democratic. It allows us to go beyond territorial, linguistic and ideological limitations. It opens new perspectives in understanding this part of the world. There are diverse manifestations in "The America" as a whole, embracing South, Central, North, Insular or Caribbean. Beyond its geographical aspect, this category points out a whole historical process of an intense cultural dynamic. In this adjustment, resistance, re-interpretation, and creation of new forms, which are afrocentered, there are different African models: Jamaica and the dominant Akan model; Brazil and the Yoruba model; the Benin and the Fon model. In Amefricanity each model allows us to construct our inner identity. It would be unnecessary to add that the category of *Amefricanity*

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is also closely related with those of *Pan-Africanism*, *Negritude*, *Afrocentricity*, etc.

The methodological value, from my point of view, points out the possibility of regaining a *specific unity* historically forged within different societies which were formed in various regions of the world. In this way *Amefrica* is a creation of our ancestors and of ourselves in the hemisphere where we live and inspired in African models. Then the term *Amefricans* denotes the entire body of descendants of Africans who were brought by the slave trade and indeed those who came to America before Columbus. Yesterday as today, *Amefricans* from different countries have played crucial roles in the development of this *Amefricanity* which identifies, in the Diaspora, a common historical experience that must be carefully researched and elaborated upon. Although we belong to different societies in this hemisphere, we know very well that they have the same system of domination under *racism*. The cold oppression of the Eurocentric Aryan model manifests a presence that is constant in the varied levels of thinking and different institutions of these societies.

Establishing a racial and cultural hierarchy, racism presupposes the white western "superiority" over the Black African "inferiority." In this way, Africa is conceptualized as the "dark" continent without a history of its own (Hegel) and reason is white while emotion is black. Then, because of the myth of inferior "sub-human nature," it is "natural" to follow with social-economic exploitation of the *Amefricans* all over the hemisphere. There are two well known forms — overt (Anglo-Saxon, English, German or Dutch) and disguised (Latin) — racism trying to convince us that we are really "inferior." Nevertheless, thanks to the works of African and *Amefrican* scholars and thinkers — Cheik Anta Diop, Amilcar Cabral, Theophile Obenga, W.E.B. DuBois, Chancellor Williams, George G.M. James, Yosef A.A. Ben-Jochannan, Ivan Van Sertima, Walter Rodney and many others, we know how we have been stolen and oppressed by the violence of racism and racial discrimination. In our dignity and in our

history our contributions have been without parallel in the advancement of humankind through philosophical, scientific, artistic and religious culture. However, the history of African peoples suffered a brutal change with the European presence which began to underdevelop Africa (Rodney); and the slave trade brought millions of Africans to the New World...

From a historical and cultural perspective it is important to recognize that many of our experiences have been different from the experiences of the Africans on the continent, the Motherland. By calling ourselves Africans we can deny some aspects of our experience in the New World, but, unless we create the identity of *Amefrica*, we may not be recognized by our African sisters and brothers as really Africans. Unconsciously we forget our own history perhaps because it shows our deep suffering. We know how we have been humiliated, oppressed, exploited and assassinated; but at the same time we know how we have resisted and fought against oppression, exploitation, humiliation, and assassination. The *African heritage* has been the source of our strength in the measure that we are African descendants and *Amefricans* who have made distinctive and specific contributions to the Pan-African world. The assumption of our *Amefricanity* does two things: 1) it is the way which allows us to abandon an idealized or imaginary vision of Africa, our mother continent; 2) it opens our eyes to see and affirm all *Amefricans* of the hemisphere.

All language is *epistemic*. Our language provides us with an understanding of our reality. A revolutionary language must not befuddle. It cannot be allowed to confuse our reality, teaches Molefi Kete Asante, the creator of the Afrocentric perspective. In affirming ourselves as Africans the real identity gives way to an artificial identity. We become African-Americans, African-Puerto Ricans, African-Colombians, African-Brazilians and a limitation is established on our inclusive identity. *Not only a limitation but a kind of hierarchy*. In the first rank are the African-Americans and in the last, for example, the "Indians" from the Dominican Republic who still don't know that they are African-Dominicans. And what about the African-

Africans? I believe that it is much more politically democratic, culturally authentic, and logically coherent to assume our *Amefricanity* and name ourselves *Amefricans*: from the Dominican Republic, from Haiti, from Jamaica, from U.S., from Peru and from all countries of the hemisphere.

"An ideology of liberation must find its existence in ourselves, it cannot be external to us, and cannot be imposed by those other than ourselves; it must be derived from our particular historical and cultural experience" (Molefi Kete Asante, 1988:31). In this way we abandon the unconscious reproduction of the imperialist position of U.S. ("The America") and we re-affirm the particularity of our experience in America as a whole, but never losing consciousness of our deep debts and links of humanity and spirituality with Africa.

2. The Role of Black Catholic Brotherhoods in the Slavery Period

The violence of slavery was characterized not only by the rupture of the basic reference points of African society (customs and lineages), but also by the careful mixture of the different ethnic groups, measures for security, showing an incredible efficiency in the destruction of the African social structures. Except for the passage, we don't know the length of time that was taken between the capture and the arrival at the unknown society. But it was traumatic enough for serious protracted personal and cultural disruption.

Despite that, tenuous friendship links were developed during those terrible crossings. The term "malembos" or "malungos" means "the brothers from the first captivity hours." Whether they were located on a plantation or in a mine, the "malembos" developed deep solidarity and strong obligations for mutual aid. The famous *Chico Rei* is a case in point of an African king who delivered his wife and son and, one by one, his "malembos." This is not an isolated example of African solidarity. Chico Rei belonged to the Black Catholic Brotherhood of Saint Iphigenia.

But what about different Africans who later arrived in Brazil? They were not only uprooted from the old traditional life, they were obliged to establish

new social relations on two sides: on one side, the slaveholder and his dominant white mode of society; on the other side, the slave community inspired in modified African patterns. Both fronts were strange to them, despite their social differences. In the first place, the requirement for being a "good slave" was to demonstrate *obedience*, *humility* and *loyalty*. In the dialectical process of adjustment/maladjustment, or re-socialization/resistance the influence of the former slaves played a very important role. Under the mask of obedience they were able to recreate their destroyed world in a new universe with a different colorfulness (Mattoso, 1982). It was an elaboration of the nascent *Amefricanity*.

Obedience was a necessary tactic of resistance through which the Africans could gain or triple social skills: 1) the slaveholder's language (Portuguese), 2) the prayers to the Christian God and 3) the accomplishment of useful labor. Actually, only the domestic slaves became bilingual. Illiteracy, except to the Muslims was "natural" because education was totally prohibited. Because of their difficulty in speaking Portuguese, the "clumsy" Africans called "bocais" in opposition to the "ladinos," (i.e., the slaves born in Brazil or the African-Latin mixture), were considered savages by the slaveholders. The slave-holders ignored the importance of the African cultural inheritances. It was easy for the Africans to gain their emancipation before the "creoles." Thanks to the "bocais" the African heritage survived in the Brazilian land. They forged a "new culture as an original and living answer to the questions proposed by a hard adaptation to the new environment they were forced to live in" (Mattoso, 1982: 106). That was the beginning of *Amefrica*.

What about the slaveholders religion? Never forgetting the Portuguese as the Brazilian colonizers, it is important to emphasize how they marked the idea of Christianity with a peculiar definition: the "Padroado." We define it as a body of rights and privileges conceded by the Holy See to the Kings of Portugal. They had the right to nominate the bishops; to concede ecclesiastical benefices; to give or to refuse the "placet" for the

councils' edicts, the apostolic letters and all kind of ecclesiastical documents; to receive the tithe which belonged to the "ordem de Cristo." Through the "Padroado" institution we may understand how the faith had been conceived in a compulsory form, and was one of the basic elements of colonization. No acceptance of the faith meant to question the "status quo." Spontaneously or by coercion, as in the case of Jews and Moors, it was an obligation to be Catholic. This explains the mass baptisms of Africans and Amerindians. Uniformity, conformity and racial centrality reigned in the white-violent-patriarchal-slavist European model. These were the essential characteristics of the "Padroado" which directly influenced the evangelization in Brazil.

As a kind of state office, the Catholic Church became a servant of the secular power. Under the vigilant eyes of a government representative, all kinds of things were planned, ranging from the ecclesiastical salaries to the control of the worship. Any intervention in the spiritual life was prohibited to the Church; secular agents were responsible for the "good manners" and the "decency of holy worship." The regular clergy had been the main benefactors in this political manipulation. Their passivity before the temporal powers and their complicity with the oligarchies put the monasteries in the rank of the greater landlords in the colonial time. The major Catholic privilege was in the monopoly of a state religion which had full power to suppress the presence of other Christian confessions in Brazil.

In concrete terms Brazilian Catholicism was a formalistic and authoritarian religion. On the plantations, the patriarch slaveholders functioned as religious leaders. Their chaplains directly submitted to their wishes. The primary task for these chaplains was the education of the owners' children, worship and baptisms, marriages and funerals. They were not able to practice and to preach a liberation gospel. The same formalistic religious practices existed in the cities characterized by the distribution of sacraments and the procession-shows. The real evangelistic task was

in the hands of the laymen from the brotherhoods. These associations demonstrated the real force of the colonial religious "unity," and at the same time, they reflected the racial and socio-economic contradictions of the society. The religious segregation divided them in different classes with different church-temples: the richest ones were the white Brotherhood of the Holiest, the poorest were those of the Black people. The fight between the brotherhoods had been ongoing, even between the groups from the oppressed people — because the colonial government induced and stimulated the rivalry between the different African nations.

As I have previously indicated, in their process of dual adaptation to Brazilian society the slaves managed to create a new identity which, on one hand, involved tactical adjustment to the requirements of obedience and loyalty to the dominant model. On the other hand, they became involved in the new styles of life and thought that were to be worked out within their own community. Through this two-edged process of accommodation/resistance, they acted within the permitted limits and clandestinely sustained or recreated their cults and rites and their cultural values, under the innocent use of "Negro pranks," "revelries," "drum-beatings," etc. In this sense, the Black Catholic Brotherhoods played the important role of ideological mediator with the dominant model. After all, the legal freedom of association that such groups provided, allowed for the establishment of contacts which evolved into other forms of meetings (Gonzalez, 1987).

The first prayer learned by the slaves was: "By the sign of the Holy Cross deliver us, Our Lord, from our enemies." The mechanical repetition of these words, followed by the gestures symbolizing the cross, were enough for acceptance by the owners. The majority of the slaves were born and died just knowing the outward appearances of the religion without any contact with the Christian doctrine. In this sense, Black Brotherhoods were like a white attempt to "educate" Black people. "Sheltered" within these associations for receiving religious "information," they used them

for an underground through which they maintained the benefits and practices of the African heritage. In this way, they played the significant role of being a liberation instrument for those who were in captivity, by raising funds for the brotherhood to continue the struggle for the freedom and dignity of Black people. An example of its role in the struggle on behalf of the powerless is the fact that the Black Brotherhood denounced the invasions of poor Black women's houses by the representatives of the justice officials, who did so under the pretext of searching for stolen goods. The members of the same brotherhood also invested in a way of giving worthy funerals to their brothers.

The Brotherhood of the Rosary, the more famous where the Bantus concentrated, spread throughout the land. They were followed by others of St. Benedict, St. Iphigenia, both Black saints, of Our Lady of Mercies, of Our Lady of the Good Death, etc. It was in the urban brotherhoods that Black people could be together and manifest their religion. In the festivals promoted by such associations, virtually the entire scope of African religion was more or less remembered, depending on the region. "Congadas," "Cucumbis," lively "Congos," "Taieiras" Epiphany festivals, "Ticumbis", etc., were exhibited in different months of the year, following the sequence of the Catholic calendar.

Meanwhile, and on a different level, the very same participants in these festivals were forming the structure of their African religion. It was in no way based on any European model, or even on a single African model. The Blacks "took advantage of the outward appearances of the Catholic religion in order that their own cult could survive," declares Nunes Pereira in referring to the "mina-jejes," Dahomeans (Benin), of Maranhao Voodoo, practices engaged in by the Brotherhoods of Our Lady of the Rosary and St. Benedict. It is for this reason that we cannot accept the too common idea that syncretism characterizes the system of *Amefrican* beliefs in Brazil. To the extent that both Catholic and African religious systems are closed and parallel systems, neither making reference to the same values, there

was no contradiction in someone being a Christian and Candomblecist at the same time. The principles of reality, on which each of the systems is based, are absolutely distinct.

3. The Brotherhoods Today

The historical changes which took place during the 19th century have likewise been felt inside the Black community. The effects have been tremendous. First of all, and in spite of police repression, there was the appearance of the "nagos" (Yoruban) "terreiros," communities known as "Candombles" (Bakia), as "Xangos," "Pernambuco" or as "Batuques" (Rio Grande do Sul); those of the "mina-jejes" (Dahomean, Benin), known as "Casa das Minas," followed by those of the Bantu known as "Candomble de Angola," as "Candomble de Caboclo" or Xango de Caboclo, (Bahia, Pernambuco and Rio de Janeiro). The last and more popular Bantu creation is the "Umbanda" in Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo and all over the country. Abandoning gradually the clandestinity, these communities finally assumed their public and autonomous space. And what about the Black brotherhoods? They have entered into a period of crisis and consequent process of shrinking, mainly reflected in the festivals they sponsor. The dynamic interchange between these two facts has brought on a displacement of *Amefrican* celebrations. Those religions involved in African tradition became the sponsors of them, as one can readily see today: February 2, the *Ochum and Iemanja celebration*, in Salvador; the *Ogun's Bean' the Aira Bonfire*; the *Aluja of Obaluwaye*; the *Ibejis*; the *Iansan Celebration*; the *New Year festivities in honour of Iemanja* In Rio de Janeiro, etc., etc.

Having their more important period of actuation between 1750 and 1850, the Black Catholic Brotherhood exists until today. In Rio de Janeiro, for example, their churches became the temples of the ancestors' cult (*culto dos almas*); the Lampadosa Church and the Rosary Church, where there is the Slavery Museum, are the main sacred places where one can witness Catholic Masses and the special rites. These are always conducted in the outside area where people light a lot of candles in honour of them.

It is important to observe that Brazil is the greatest Catholic country in the world. Brazilian people, following the practices of the Black Catholic Brotherhood are active and faithful members in the ceremonies of the *Amefrican* religions of African traditions.

4. Conclusion

The presence of Protestantism in Brazil from the last century attracted a great number of *Amefricans* to the different denominations: Baptist, Congregational, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, Pentecostal, etc. But, in spite of the widespread affirmation of the democratic character of Protestantism, one may observe the main effects of its presence as:

a) the persecution of *Amefrican* religions of African traditions as the devil's manifestations, mainly by the Fundamentalists, who in their radio and TV programs combat them and even invade their temples, destroying sacred objects;

b) the denial of racism and racial discrimination within their own churches as if they are separated from the whole racist Brazilian society. Despite the major presence of *Amefricans* within Baptist and Pentecostal Churches, the Methodists are practically the unique exception in terms of its acceptance of the Black Movement as the way of struggle against racial domination and socio-economic exploitation;

c) The losing of *Amefrican* identity in the measure that the shame of being Black-African descendants means to be "inferior," "monkey", etc.; instead of being Black *Amefrican* (fetichist, animist, etc.) is better than being Christian.

On another side, there are the progressives, within the Catholic Church who advocate the Theology of Liberation, work based on the black Movement position (thanks to the internal action of *Amefrican* priests). The main effects of this new way are:

a) the introduction of *Amefrican* elements and categories inside the worship experience, i.e., the "missa dos Quilombos" (mass of the Maroon

societies), composed by a priest, Casaldaliga, and by the more inspired Black musician Milton Mascimento, is the best example.

2) through the Basic Ecclesial Communities, the creation of a Black Christian Movement called *Union and Black Consciousness* which attracts even the youth from some Protestant churches, mainly the Methodists, and which is widespread all over the country.

By recognizing racism and racial discrimination, not only as a source of the socio-economic inequalities in our society, the progressive Catholic church recognizes them inside itself, and is trying to abolish them in its doctrines and practices. Meanwhile Protestant churches, more worried about proselytism than evangelization, promote violence, obscurantism and alienation in the name of Jesus Christ and the Bible, as a repetition of the former Catholic Inquisition.

The *American* Catholic priest Lima Mira stated, "Theology is not a discourse about abstraction but about the concrete Other, under the faith light and within the context where he/she lives. The Other is the constant manifestation of the God's face. And here I call the Other the oppressed who in the bottoms of the slaveships claimed justice in the colonial times and today claim justice in the police stations and in the miserable shanties and slums. In this sense, we may and we must say that theology — if it wants to be true and loyal to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, must be committed to the cry of an oppressed people who claim first of all the right to life."