

# RIGHT TO LAND AT THE CROSSROADS

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- *The povo de santo<sup>1</sup> and the fight for dignity* •

## ABSTRACT

*This text is a reflection on the struggle of the people of the African-derived religions in Brazil, for the right to land. The different notions of land in the dispute of civilisations and the need to include the struggle for the right to land in the agenda of the fight against religious intolerance are presented in the text. The denial of the right to land is analysed as a direct attack on the dignity of the people of African-derived religions and therefore acknowledgement of this right is, above all, acknowledgement of the dignity of these people.*

## KEYWORDS

Deterritorialisation | Right to land | Dignity | Religious intolerance | Crossroads

This text is a reflection on the importance of a discussion on the right to land for African-derived religions, with particular reference to candomblé. For this reflection, understanding of the different relationships with the land that emerge in the clash of civilisations is needed.<sup>2</sup> For a full analysis of what is involved in the struggle for land a brief background of the process of deterritorialisation and re-territorialisation of the African peoples who were torn from their homelands, is necessary. Then we can state the importance of understanding the fight against religious intolerance as part of the struggle for the right to land. The reflection on religious intolerance will be constructed based on the field of work of racism that affects the African-derived religions, which allows for a false conviviality, employing the liberal rhetoric of tolerance and religious freedom in official discourse, while in practice intolerance in its many forms is encouraged by silences<sup>3</sup> that defend an attitude of anti-negritude.<sup>4</sup>

It is only when we acknowledge the power of this system that we are able to understand that any struggle or demand by the people of African-derived religions is a struggle to stop this system in its tracks.<sup>5</sup>

Construction of this text will partly use my field work on the *Pombagiras* and the *Exus*, who are very often present at Umbanda meetings, and also at some Candomblé houses, and are part of the lineage of the *povo de rua* (people of the street). The *povo de rua* are spiritual entities strongly characterised and related to the desires of both the people who seek them out as well as their own. The *Exus* and *Pombagiras* are the spirits of *malandros* (rogues) and prostitutes, people who occupy the position of the socially marginalised. They are known for appearing when they feel like it and for having the capacity to make unexpected and frightening interventions. They are called upon to 'clear the path' and to resolve difficult problems.<sup>6</sup>

The *Pombagiras* and the *Exus* live at the 'crossroads' and establish communication between the invisible world (*orun*) and the visible one (*aiyé*).<sup>7</sup> It is at the crossroads that paths are opened and closed in a search for balance between the *orun* and the *aiyé*, and the *Pombagiras* and the *Exus* establish communication between these worlds.

The crossroads provides the possibility for divergences and is also a point of ambiguity in Afro-Brazilian religions as it is presented as both the beginning, the start of a flow, and an obstruction of the flow.<sup>8</sup> The crossroads works with 'and' not with 'or' and one does not cancel out the other, it can be a point of ambiguity. Accordingly, we introduce the notions of land of the civilisations that are in conflict at the crossroads, as this is a place to meet and to choose new paths and possibilities. It is important to comprehend that, despite the similarities in format with the Christian cross, the crossroads is conceptually and epistemologically different. Unlike in Christian thinking, good and evil walk side by side at the crossroads and they communicate. We will follow the path of the crossroads, substituting 'or' with 'and' and establishing communication between the notions of land and its uses with the intention of creating an intersection at which elements come together, but do not mix,<sup>9</sup> in order to consider the possibility of inventing a new path at this crossroads.

In inventing<sup>10</sup> a new path it is important that the different civilisations' notions of land be taken seriously. For example, Antônio Bispo dos Santos, more commonly known as Nego Bispo, had to learn to read when he was defending the quilombolas so he could understand what the laws were saying in order to establish an argument with a civilised narrative using what he believed to be universal understanding. He instituted a counter-colonialist narrative<sup>11</sup> and also had to establish communication between the civilised understanding of the Quilombo Saco-Curtume and the understanding of academia, reading and laws without negating any of them. Likewise it is important to take into consideration the notion of land in the African-derived religions, taking the construction of the concepts of adherents to these religions seriously and learning from this community. This is a process of researching and building a new path that talks to the 'law found on the street', this being the public space where new social norms are invented based on people's lived experiences.<sup>12</sup>

The construction of this text was inspired by the provocation of the crossroads between the advice of Dona Maria Mulambo, Dona Maria Padilha and Seu Tranca Ruas.<sup>13</sup> During one of the *giras*,<sup>14</sup> Dona Maria Mulambo started by explaining that I would leave Rio de Janeiro to study and work, but that I should not worry about by connection to the *terreiro*. She said that that piece of ground would still be there for me whenever I needed to take care of myself, because I belonged to it even if I went travelling. She said that this was what was wanted of me at that time.<sup>15</sup> She went on to say that belonging to a piece of land where balance can be sought in order to continue, is a necessity. Dona Maria Padilha asked me the following question: "How are you going to build a family travelling so much? You need firm ground to stand on, to live and to build your life. A girl likes firm ground." Seu Tranca Ruas, then went on to say that, indeed it was important to have a piece of land, because this is a form of dignity. The size of the place does not matter, however it is necessary to focus in order to have your land and this means belonging to it and staying in touch with the Orixás.<sup>16</sup>

## 1 • Land: divergences/convergences of civilisations

When we talk about the time of the great navigations and the colonisation of Portuguese America we must use the correct terms and not romanticise this crime against humanity, the principal element of which was to take away people's dignity, without acknowledging their humanity and treating them like merchandise. The process of colonisation was built on the capture of Africans who had been in their own land, in the bosom of their families when they were thrown onto slave ships to be taken away to other lands. From their capture until they arrived in the new land their story is one of violence, rape and stealing. These practices reflect the way in which European civilisation related to the land and to work.

Land was stolen by the Portuguese, because it could be conquered and taken over making them the owners. Based on Christian logic the Portuguese set sail again to conquer new territories, taking the word of God and starting a process of land grabbing and the

detritorialisation of the African people. There are a number of justifications for the enslavement of Africans, based on interpretations of the Bible, one example of which is the story of Noah, in which the curse of Ham<sup>17</sup> is compared with the curse of the black people.

*Racist theologians add that black people are descendants of Ham and are therefore condemned to permanent servitude and slavery. In 1869, Juan Bautista Casas, a Spanish clergyman, alleged that the black race suffered from the curse mentioned in the Pentateuch and that their inferiority would stretch over centuries.*<sup>18</sup>

Attacks on the dignity of the African people came in a number of forms in Portuguese America. The Portuguese arrived with their customs and the belief that their culture was universal and should be imposed on the rest of the world. So, they tore people from their land and from the families they belonged to. They tried to remove their gods and to deprive people of their dignity and their basic sociocultural values, attacking individual and collective identities, starting with an attempt to impose the Christian God.<sup>19</sup>

The Africans who were captured fought in their own land and continued to fight in the land onto which were thrown. The Africans went into the forests and reorganised themselves with the natives, rebuilding their way of life based on a relationship with common land, where everyone benefitted from what was produced.<sup>20</sup> Although the relationship with the land was different – it was perceived as divine – this did not mean that there were no differences. This relationship and the conflicts involved can be seen in the book *Things Fall Apart* by de Chinua Achebe,<sup>21</sup> in which the writer investigates internal issues in the Ibo nation in Nigeria before the arrival of the British. In spite of this, their relationship with the land was a point of unity.

Here, we seek to present the idea that for these communities land has a spiritual owner, land is its own god, while in Christian thought land is the product of God's work. For example, Mãe Detinha<sup>22</sup> explains this in terms of why the *caboclos* are worshipped in African-derived religions. Ialorixá explains that Africans acknowledge that the true owners of the land were the indigenous people and that in order to worship their gods it was necessary to convince them. In addition, Mãe Detinha states that the Africans did not understand the relationship between the plants here and the plants on the African continent.

Meanwhile, the Africans had a different relationship with the land, because they belonged to it, in the same way that Dona Maria Mulambo told me that we belong to the land and that land is the living *Orixá*. There were many forms of resistance, as a means of guaranteeing the continuation of their customs, as well as ways of fighting to win their dignity.

Towards the end of the slavery regime, the Brazilian elite struck a blow by passing Law 601 in September 1850, known as the *Land Law*, forbidding the use of unclaimed land unless it was bought. In the same territory where the Portuguese and the elite had been donated

land since the arrival of the Portuguese, black people were prevented from benefitting from the right to land. Although slavery had ended they did not even have work. At the end of the regime, black people were thrown out onto the streets with no possibility of having a piece of land and with no guarantee of their dignity.

## 2 • Dignity of the *povo de santo*: the right to land and religious intolerance

The struggle for dignity was a thread through the period of slavery. The repression of the worship of forbidden and persecuted African-derived religions was reported in newspapers at the end of the Monarchy and during the transition to the Republic. This religion was considered to be the practice of witchcraft. It was not protected by laws and was condemned by the dominant religion. During the period of slavery, masters reacted with violence to the religion and following the Lei Áurea (that ended slavery) it was subjected to an unregulated police force.<sup>23</sup> A number of *terreiros* were persecuted which led to a huge quantity of sacred objects. These are to be found in museum collections throughout Brazil.

It was only in 2010, with Law 12.288/10, that the Statute for Racial Equality included concern with the issue of land for the *terreiros*, in chapter IV, Section I, entitled *Do Acesso à Terra* (Access to Land). This law was the culmination of the struggle of social movements for the dignity of the black people. It represents progress, but land in this sense is associated with the notion of property and work for agricultural production. In this way, the notion of land defended by the social movements is based on a Marxist perspective that does not enter into dialogue with the understanding of land of the people it seeks to assist. It projects an idea of 'salvation', again demonstrating a colonial way of thinking. From this perspective, land is not seen with all the richness with which followers of candomblé see it. A river, for example, cannot be designated as being part of the land of the community. Land, as previously stated, is a deity in itself for these communities. People belong to the land and are the children of the Orixás, known by the people as the 'children of the saint'. So, dignity is also a question of being in touch with your Orixás: Omolu in the mud; Oxóssi in the forest; Oxum in the river, etc.

The fight for the right to land was and continues to be of enormous importance for the *povo de santo*. It was only on 20 November 2014 that a decree was published in the *Diário Oficial da União* in the Municipality of Salvador, recognising the same rights for the *terreiros* as conceded for other religious temples, such as churches, which already had the right to tax relief as well as tax exemption. The decree also allows the *terreiros* to organise themselves legally as a religious temple. This was a huge victory in the fight for the dignity of these people. However, it is important to note the efficiency of the anti-negritude system, that took until 2014 to make this decree a reality, in the city of Salvador. Here we see that the Christian civilisation's notion of land was placed at a crossroads alongside the *povo de santo's* notion of land, allowing convergence and a new path.

### 3 • Qualitative Africa: between de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation

Africans who were torn from their land had to undergo a process of re-territorialisation in Portuguese America.<sup>24</sup> This process involved the formation of the black family on the new continent based on its own customs. Due to deterritorialisation, the fight of the Africans and their descendants relied on the *terreiros*, the place of worship of African-derived religions, as an important territory in forming the black family.<sup>25</sup> This family can be seen through the denominations used, such as ‘family of saint’, ‘brother and sister of saint’, ‘child of saint’, ‘father and mother of saint’. Therefore, the candomblé *terreiro* became qualitative Africa in the new land.<sup>26</sup> The dignity of living in contact with one’s gods and one’s customs was not given, however, through a process of the struggle and creative capacity of the followers. Their gods were re-territorialised.<sup>27</sup>

We are talking about a process of re-territorialisation that took place at the crossroads. As the Portuguese customs and religion were imposed, the African customs had to be invented based on the opportunity provided by the crossroads. The dignity of these people was also invented at the crossroads, in the same way that other cultures are invented through cultural shock.<sup>28</sup>

### 4 • Re-territorialisation: to belong to the land is to invent dignity

In the *terreiro* of candomblé it is very important to have a *barracão* (a shed) where public festivals are held, so the gods can come to earth. It is also important to have plants in the *terreiro* and to build the Orixás house. If there is a river nearby Oxum herself is connected as part of the land. Given that the land is the gods themselves, the relationship that emerges is of bio-interaction, as the river is the best place to keep fish. Everything that is organic produce must return to the earth.<sup>29</sup> The land bestows food on the visible world and on the invisible world, so it too must be fed in both senses.

Land goes beyond that which is seen in the visible world. In this sense, dignity and the right to land must progress based on the notion of land and this relationship with it. Followers of candomblé belong to the land and this sense of belonging also means being part of an ancestral family, in which the father and mother are Orixás present in the earth. To understand this relationship with the land of these communities is to abandon a perspective which is only able to envisage property that is useful for production and capitalist development. These communities relate to land in terms of involvement, as they are part of the land, they belong to it and for this reason they are always re-connecting to their ancestors through organic wisdom, as stated by Nego Bispo,<sup>30</sup> and thus inventing a qualitative Africa.

To have dignity is also to belong to the land and to be in direct contact with the Orixá, with one’s father and mother. It means finding, in religion, a re-connection with the land from which one has been torn and living a life based on creative power with one’s own customs,

values and meanings in order for the violent experience of slavery to be lived through the invention of new worlds, springing from encounters at the crossroads.

Land is what makes the act of going between the invisible and visible worlds possible. It is on the land that worlds and destinies are invented. Destiny is what shows us that paths do not always lead to the same place. In this way, qualitative Africa was invented, with respect for different paths, including the Portuguese and indigenous cultures. Lack of respect for different paths and different cultures leads to the invention of ‘intolerance’, a euphemism for the religious racism in question. In the face of the new de-territorialisation processes that are happening with the *candomblé terreiros* – violence towards adherents, houses and *terreiros* that are being attacked and destroyed and communities that are being uprooted – the question arises: if these attacks were directed at Christian churches what would society’s reaction be? Would the response be silence? Would these violations of rights be taken more seriously? Could it be that social movements, who fail to take into consideration the notion of land of these communities and the notion of involvement instead of development, see themselves as the saviours of this new colonisation? Is the imposition of a universal notion of land the same as accepting the concept that this is the only path, the truth and the life that can guarantee salvation?

## 5 • Conclusion

For Seu Tranca Ruas a piece of land is necessary in order to have dignity. Land is of the utmost importance in the *candomblé* experience as it is the means to maintain contact between *orun* and the Orixás. Denial of the right to land is a direct attack on the dignity of the *povo de santo*. There is a failure to guarantee communication between the *povo de santo* and their gods which means to disrespect them. Even social movements regard the right to land to be a fight for property and for a means of production, in line with the capitalist viewpoint, with no interest in understanding what land represents for these communities. The intention here is not to negate this notion, but to highlight the need to instigate communication with the other notion, that of the *povo do santo*. It is a question of establishing communication with the concept of land of the civilisation that is rightfully fighting for its dignity, a work in progress that could be destabilised and transformed at both the symbolic and judicial levels, under the influence of social forces.<sup>31</sup>

The fight against religious intolerance must be understood as a fight for the right to land and as a fight for the dignity of *candomblé* believers. To make this possible the notions of land must be placed at the crossroads and communication for the dignity of this community must begin. In the same way that qualitative Africa was invented through political philosophy at the crossroads,<sup>32</sup> we can use this to bring notions of land together and to build a new path that truly respects the meaning of land for the *povo de santo* and the followers of *candomblé*. As in ethnography, it is important to listen closely to understand what people are saying and to their own concepts.

The fight against intolerance could be discussed taking into account the importance of the notions of the community itself. This community knows very well what it wants, what land represents, how to establish communication between *orun* and *aiyé* and the involvement needed in order to be worthy of belonging to the land. So, it is important to listen and learn with the *povo de santo* to allow for the invention of dignity of these people through another process of re-territorialisation. As an example, we can consider the fight for recognition of the rights of the *terreiros* – which had existed for a long time for churches and other religions – not as an end, but as a means, a process of construction, based on specific points that only the *povo de santo* can elucidate. The process of re-territorialisation could be forged within a dialogue between the fight for the right to land and the ‘law found on the street’ to enable a meeting at the crossroads capable of inventing the dignity of the *povo de santo*.

## NOTES

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- 1 • Adherents to Afro-Brazilian religions.
- 2 • Antônio Bispo dos Santos, *Colonização, Quilombos: Modos e Significações* (Brasília: INCT, 2015).
- 3 • Maurício Azevedo de Araújo, “Do Combate ao Racismo à Afirmação da Alteridade Negra: As Religiões de Matriz Africana e a Luta por Reconhecimento Jurídico – Repensando a Tolerância e a Liberdade Religiosa em Uma Sociedade Multicultural” (dissertação de Mestrado, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Direito da Universidade de Brasília, 2007).
- 4 • João Vargas, “Por uma Mudança de Paradigma: Anti-negritude e Antagonismo Estrutural,” *Revista de Ciências Sociais* 48, no. 2 (July/December, 2017): 83-105.
- 5 • *Ibid.*
- 6 • Vania Zikán Cardoso, “Narrar o Mundo: Estórias do ‘Povo da Rua’ e a Narração do Imprevisível,” *MANA* 13, no. 2 (2007): 317-345.
- 7 • The notions of *orun* and *aiyé* will be presented later in the text using the definitions of Dona Maria Mulambo. In addition to Dona Maria Mulambo, Dona Maria Padilha and Seu Tranca Ruas are entities who *come to earth*, and present themselves in the construction of this reflection.
- 8 • José Carlos Gomes dos Anjos, *Território da Linha Cruzada: A Cosmopolítica Afro-brasileira* (Porto Alegre: UFRGS, 2006).
- 9 • Santos, *Colonização, Quilombos*, 2015.
- 10 • The word invention is used in the sense that Wagner uses it, i.e. the act of creating something new and not an illusion; Roy Wagner, *A Invenção da Cultura*, trad. Marcela Coelho de Souza e Alexandre Morales (São Paulo: Ubu Editora, 2017).
- 11 • Santos, *Colonização, Quilombos*, 2015.
- 12 • Roberto Lyra Filho, *Para um Direito sem Dogmas* (Porto Alegre: Sérgio Fabris, 1980).
- 13 • Dona Maria Mulambo and Dona Maria Padilha are Pombagiras and Seu Tranca Ruas is an Exu.
- 14 • A whirling ritual when Pombagira and the Exus are called to come to earth.
- 15 • The way in which she refers to the Orixá.
- 16 • Deities of candomblé in the Yoruba language.
- 17 • Genesis – Chapter IX.
- 18 • Quincin Duncan, “Racismo, Igreja e Teologia.” in *Identidade Negra e Religião*, ASETT (Rio de Janeiro: CEDI, Liberdade, 1986): 69.
- 19 • Santos, *Colonização, Quilombos*, 2015.
- 20 • *Ibid.*



- 21 • Chinua Achebe, *O Mundo se Despedaça* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2009).
- 22 • Mãe Detinha is lalorixá and her *terreiro* is located in the town of Salinas da Margarida, in Bahia.
- 23 • Sergio Figueiredo Ferreti, "Nina Rodrigues e as Religiões Afro-brasileiras," *Cadernos de Pesquisa* 10, no. 1 (jan./jun., 1999): 19-28.
- 24 • Muniz Sodré, *O Terreiro e a Cidade: A Forma Social Negro-Brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Imago Ed.; Salvador: FUNCEB, 2002).
- 25 • Humberto Manoel de Santana Jr., "O Lúdico Dá o Prazer: Família Negra, os Valores Civilizatórios e a Festa Como Aprendizado" (Masters dissertation, Ethnic-Racial Relations Programme at the Celso Suckow da Fonseca Federal Technological Education Centre, 2017).
- 26 • Sodré, *O Terreiro e a Cidade*, 2002.
- 27 • Ordep Serra, *Águas do Rei* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1995).
- 28 • Wagner, *A Invenção da Cultura*, 2017.
- 29 • Santos, *Colonização, Quilombos*, 2015.
- 30 • Talk given by Nego Bispo at the Federal Institute of Brasília, on 4 September 2018, entitled: "As fronteiras entre os saberes orgânicos e os saberes sintéticos" (The frontiers between organic wisdom and man-made wisdom).
- 31 • Lyra Filho, *Para um Direito...*, 1980.
- 32 • José Carlos Gomes dos Anjos, "A Filosofia Política da Religiosidade Afro-brasileira Como Patrimônio Cultural Africano," *Debates do NER* 9, no. 13 (January/June 2008): 77-96.



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Received in May 2019.

Original in Portuguese. Translated by Jane do Carmo.



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