

Roger Bastide and Brazil: At the Crossroads Between Viewpoints

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The centrality of Brazil in the work of Roger Bastide (1898-1974) is unquestionable. Brazil is an exceptional example of the interpenetration of civilizations for the interpreter to observe and, at the same time, soil upon which distinct intellectual traditions cross paths. It is also a producer of original theories of which Bastide would take advantage not only to understand the specificities of the country, but also to forge his own particular point of view. In Brazil, at the crossroads between disparate viewpoints, the sociologist polished his analytical perspective. This essay deals with Bastide's discussions of Brazil.¹

When he arrived in Brazil in 1938, Roger Bastide brought with him an *aggregation* degree in philosophy, experience teaching in different French lyceums, some political experience, an interrupted literary project, two books, and a series of published articles.² In his earlier work, a number of persevering themes can be identified, including religion, the sacred, literature, mystic life, dreams, the imaginary, and memory. An intellectual attitude that would always be exercised and that implied a combination of different approaches—sociological, anthropological, psychological, and historical—can also be found in his work.

Although the contact between civilizations, which would become the thematic axis of all of Bastide's later work, had still not been explored at this point, it was not completely absent in his earlier work. In his 1935 text, *Éléments de Sociologie Religieuse*, in his discussion of religious systems and their transformation, Bastide refers to the mixtures that are produced between different systems and demonstrates that these intersections and

mixtures can give birth to the transformation of a religious system into a magical system, such as what occurred with Afro-Brazilians in Bahia.³

A series of questions posed during this formational period allow us to trace the threads between Bastide's earlier and later works, though the theoretical framework changes significantly over time. In order to understand Brazilian religious syncretism, one of the principal themes in his work from this point forward, Bastide would retrieve the primary theses of Durkheim-grounded French sociology. He had been critically debating them since his earliest work,⁴ and would incorporate Marcel Griaule's and Michel Leiris' formulations of French Africanism into his work during the 1950s. Another theoretical influence that was decisive in the elaboration of the notion of the interpenetration of civilizations was Georges Gurvitch, with whom he would intensify his relations toward the end of the 1940s.⁵ The dialogue established with North American sociology and anthropology (mainly with the work of M. Herskovits and with authors linked to the Chicago School), with which Bastide became familiar during his Brazilian period, was also central in the definition of the concept of syncretism.⁶

In Brazil, new theoretical affinities were established—redefinitions that were formulated through Bastide's fieldwork observations, through the (re)discoveries of French and North American traditions, and above all through his engagement with Brazilian literary and sociological production. During his sixteen years in Brazil as a sociology professor at the recently founded Universidade de São Paulo (1938-1954),⁷ Bastide elaborated a personal, essentially hybrid perspective, constructed by crossing different approaches.⁸

Bastide thought and wrote about Brazil as he grew more and more familiar with the country. In newspaper reviews,⁹ university classes, *candomblé* houses, art galleries, readings, discussions, and on trips, he continuously developed and reformulated analytical perspectives. His vast and varied work on Brazil grew out of his daily contact with others, through disagreements and debates. In his dialogue with national production, Bastide focused on Brazilian culture's broadest issue—its genesis and formation—not limiting himself to any exclusive aspect of cultural phenomena, which, with few exceptions, was the approach chosen by foreigners in the country.

Bastide took his first steps in Brazil with the help of critics and writers linked to Modernism. Following in the tracks of these intellectuals, he grew to know the country, its arts, literature, and folklore. He reviewed Mário de

Andrade's readings on the baroque and Aleijadinho,¹⁰ and fundamentally agreed with the Modernist leader's conceptualizations of the "authenticity" of Brazilian culture. It is also through these discussions about the "genuinely national" that Bastide questioned his own place as a foreign interpreter seeking to grasp authentic Brazilian culture.

The interpreter faced the issue of determining the origins of Brazilian culture and of syncretism in his dialogue with the literary tradition and in his education on Brazil and Africa.¹¹ Bastide, since his arrival in the country and as a reader of the modernists, was aware that the originality of Brazilian culture resided in its hybridity—in the unique mixture resulting from the intersection of distinct civilizations. As Mário de Andrade and the modernists showed him, this authenticity was not to be mistaken for purity.

Bastide claimed that the modernists were seeking Afro-Brazilian themes, "exoticism in the heart of an exotic land" (*Poetas* 49). In other words, they went in search of differences within their own country, capable of creating a sensation of *dépaysement*. This differentiated element within Brazil was precisely Africa (*Poetas* 50). The foreign sociologist, determined to overcome an artificial vision of the country, would have to address an even higher degree of exoticism, since for him Brazil was the quintessential synonym of exotic. In this sense, his position supposes a radicalization of the Modernist quest. For Bastide, the search for Africa in Brazil was in fact the search for "the exotic's exotic," or "the other's other."

In Bastide's case, an analytical perspective was elaborated with the aid of a sort of specular game, permanently dislocating the observing subject. The Frenchman viewed Africa from Brazil and, vice-versa, Brazil from Africa. Consequently, this is his field of Brazilian observation: the Africa, Europe and Brazil triangle, with the last country defined as the bargaining table between the African and European symbolic systems. The choice of effective methodological tools and adequate thematic refining allowed for an understanding of the successive arrangements that operate within the triangle.

Folklore, the baroque, and literature allow Bastide to view the country through a syncretic lens dominated by European tones. Religion too would offer the interpreter a new angle of observation. His analysis of Afro-Brazilian worship functioned as a key for illuminating the presence of African resistance in Brazil. In this way, it made the sifting of Africa through *mestiço* composition possible for the interpreter.

Research on African religions in Brazil obligated the analyst to re-configure the discussion of syncretism and also brought other speakers onto the national scene. The formation of Brazilian society and culture were on the agenda due to the debate over a specific sociological approach, namely that of Gilberto Freyre. This time, however, the African presence in Brazil's formation had attained prominence in the discussion. The *sui generis* profile of Bastide-Africanist emerged from this debate, simultaneously engaged with an ethnography of the African cultural islands within Brazil and with developing a sociology of cultural contact between Brazil and Africa.¹² But not only this. From Freyre's "amphibious and hybrid sociology" (Bastide, "Passeio"), Bastide learned about the links between micro and macro levels of analysis, about the combination of sociological and anthropological perspectives, and how to master sociological narrative with literary value.

Gilberto Freyre is present, both explicitly and implicitly, throughout the entire first volume of *As Religiões Africanas no Brasil* (1960). Bastide unfolded his explanation by way of a close reading of Freyre's *Casa-Grande & Senzala* (1933) and *Sobrados e Mucambos* (1936), generally endorsing the broad panorama of Brazilian society sketched by Freyre. According to Bastide, the distance between the two was due to the choice of different perspectives on the approach to cultural contact.¹³

It can be claimed that the idea of *formation* is present both in Freyre's above-mentioned works as well as in *As Religiões Africanas no Brasil*. In Freyre's case, it is the formation of the patriarchal family, while in Bastide's case, of African civilization. In both authors, the formation of a new civilization occurs with eclectic materials from diverse sources. In Freyre's as well as in many others' interpretive models, Brazilian civilization originates from the mixture of Portuguese, Indigenous, and African inheritances. In Bastide's terms, African civilization is recreated in Brazil through (and in spite of) the encounter between these three civilizations. Thus, the Brazilian Africa is not a copy of the original model, but a re-elaborated, hybrid product.

In these authors, the discussion of formative processes was based on tracing the historical conditions of the formation of the patriarchal family (in Freyre's case) and of the implantation of Africa in Brazil (in Bastide's). Freyre described a dually-structured society—master's house and slave quarters, master and slave, blacks and whites, mansions and shanties—whose dualism did not compromise the survival of the whole. On the contrary, the totality was nourished precisely by the "balance of antagonisms."¹⁴ The

characterization of the Brazilian formative process as grounded in a principle of balanced antagonisms, emblematic of Freyre's work, was generally corroborated by Bastide in his 1960 text, in his earlier work *Brasil, Terra de Contrastes* (1957), and later in *As Américas Negras* (1967). However, the dual structure was complicated by the French scholar. For Bastide, the contrasts that sever the Brazilian social fabric are multiple; therefore, integration or balance are always problematic.

As I have tried to demonstrate, Bastide was a careful reader of schools of thought already consolidated in Brazil; however, his role as a creator of new traditions in the country cannot be forgotten. Through his activities at the Universidade de São Paulo as a professor and research advisor, he was responsible for the initiation of a new approach to sociological studies in Brazil. For instance, Florestan Fernandes was one of his direct heirs. Along with Bastide, Fernandes began his sociological research investigating folklore in the city of São Paulo. During the 1950s, professor and student joined to coordinate São Paulo's contribution to the broad research project on race relations in Brazil sponsored by Unesco.¹⁵

Not only sociological studies benefited from Bastide's presence at the Universidade de São Paulo. Along with Jean Maugué and Lévi-Strauss, he was also responsible for the formation of well-prepared and productive critics—Antonio Candido, Gilda de Mello e Souza, Décio de Almeida Prado, Paulo Emílio Salles Gomes, among others, these Brazilian students with their French teachers have “learned how to study” and to be interested in Brazilian topics. Ruy Coelho's words exemplify this: “Bastide, like all French professors, directed us to Brazil.”¹⁶

Notes

¹ This argument is further developed in my book, *Diálogos Brasileiros*.

² An intellectual biography of Roger Bastide can be found in Ravelet, “Bio-Bibliographie de R. Bastide.” On the literary ambitions of the author, see Ravelet, “Roger Bastide et la Poesie,” and Morin.

³ *Éléments* 143. Bastide probably became aware of the example of black Bahians as a result of Mauss' reference to the work of Nina Rodrigues, “O Animismo Fetichista dos Negros Baianos,” published in *Année Sociologique* 5 (1900-1). Reuter suggests that a desire to research Bahia was the decisive factor in Bastide's coming to Brazil.

⁴ It is curious that Bastide returned to the work of Durkheim during his Brazilian period, especially through Mauss' and Lévy-Bruhl's interpretations, and abandoned Gaston Richard, who was a fundamental reference in Bastide's earlier work. The sociologist's education came through its link to Richard, a specialist in legal sociology and his professor in Bordeaux, and to

the group of Protestant intellectuals gathered around the *Revue Internationale de Sociologie*, home of opponents of the Durkheimian school. On the group led by Richard in the context of French sociology of the 1920s, see Pickering.

⁵ All information suggests that the relationship between Bastide and Gurvitch began before the (re)encounter in Brazil, where the Russian-born sociologist (1894-1965) was also working as a Professor of Sociology. See Morin, 38-39. Among Gurvitch's sociological works are those published after 1950, especially *La Vocation Actuelle de la Sociologie*, that would more directly impact Bastide's conceptions regarding the contact of civilizations.

⁶ Though he was said to prefer the notion of "interpenetration of civilizations" over syncretism, Bastide used both indistinctively.

⁷ On the founding of the Universidade de São Paulo in 1934, see Cardoso and Limongi.

⁸ The essays of Queiroz and Simon call attention to this point.

⁹ By regularly writing reviews in newspapers, Bastide followed Brazilian visual arts and literature. For this reason, it's not unusual that his name is remembered as one of the active critics during the 1930s and 1940s, along with Sérgio Milliet. It should also be mentioned that in addition to his activity on the domestic scene, he remained tied to the French press in Brazil (*Boletim da Aliança Francesa*) and also to French agencies, such as the magazine *Mercur de France*, with which he collaborated between 1948-1965. On this production, see Amaral.

¹⁰ Bastide's reflections on the Brazilian baroque can be found in *Psicanálise do Cafuné* and his account of his trip to the Northeast in *Imagens do Nordeste Místico*.

¹¹ See "A Poesia Afro-Brasileira" and "A Incorporação da Poesia Africana à Poesia Brasileira" in *Poetas do Brasil*.

¹² See *O Candomblé* and *As Religiões*.

¹³ In his words: "Gilberto Freyre estudou bem em *Casa-Grande & Senzala* esses diversos fenômenos (do sincretismo) mas estudou-os do ponto de vista da civilização brasileira, e não do ponto de vista que aqui nos preocupa: o das civilizações africanas. Precisamos, pois, retomar à questão, examinando-a, se nos permite a expressão, pelo outra extremidade da luneta" (*As Religiões* 103).

¹⁴ For an analysis of the centrality of the notion of the "balance of antagonisms" in Freyre's work of the 1930s, see Araújo.

¹⁵ See Maio. The results of the research project in São Paulo were published in Bastide and Fernandes, *Branços e Negros em São Paulo*.

¹⁶ Ruy Coelho, statement for the magazine *Língua e Literatura* (São Paulo) 10-13 (1981-4): 129. On the French professors at the Universidade de São Paulo, see Peixoto [Massi], "Franceses e Norte-Americanos" and "Lévi-Strauss no Brasil." On this generation of critics, see Pontes.

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