

## Discovering "Brazil's Soul": A Reading of Luís da Câmara Cascudo

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Have you consulted Cascudo? Cascudo's the one who knows. Bring me Cascudo here. Cascudo arrives and finds the solution. Everyone respects 'him' and agrees with 'him.' He's not really a person, but rather, he's a person in two thick volumes, in the form of a dictionary, always worth having within arm's reach. Ready when a doubt arises about our people's customs, celebrations, and arts. He explains every detail of Brazil's soul—its magical heritage, its rituals, its behavior in the face of simple mystery and reality. Instead of saying 'Brazilian Dictionary,' one would save time saying 'Cascudo,' its author. The author, however, is much more than simply a dictionary. His vast bibliography of folkloric and historical studies reflects a wonderful life's work within the concern for experiencing Brazil.

Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1998, 13)

Carlos Drummond de Andrade's brief profile of Luís da Câmara Cascudo is very expressive. Drummond highlights specific characteristics, and the poet's choice of definition for the folklorist and historian is telling both for what it selects and for what it seems to overlook.

A twofold movement guides Drummond's portrait of Câmara Cascudo. On the one hand, it expresses tension between the metonymic value attributed to his most significant work, the monumental *Dicionário do Folclore Brasileiro* (*Dictionary of Brazilian Folklore*), and the recognition that Cascudo had done "much more." On the other, it reflects the recurring association between the author and Brazil, since Cascudo is presented as a person who knows and makes "Brazil's soul" known, and whose intellectual work is guided by the "concern for experiencing Brazil."

The task of presenting a synthesis of Cascudo's work is not a trivial one. He was an intense and galvanizing personality, son of a Northeastern colonel who assumed the conservative identity of his ancestors as his family surname.<sup>1</sup> Cascudo was simultaneously an internationally respected researcher<sup>2</sup> and an habitu e of the *zona da Ribeira*,<sup>3</sup> a translator of Walt Whitman's poetry and an enthusiast of the *cordel*<sup>4</sup> of the Brazilian backlands;<sup>5</sup> a passionate husband who, in his later years, liked to contemplate the moon while holding his wife's hand, and also a renowned drinker and bohemian; the catholic to whom the Vatican granted the ecclesiastical benefice of the S o Greg rio Magno order and a specialist in white magic, superstition and fetish<sup>6</sup> and a mandatory presence at all Natal *terreiros*,<sup>7</sup> coordinator of the Rio Grande do Norte integralist movement in the 1930s and a writer who in the 1960s was admired and respected by leftist intellectuals such as Celso Furtado, Jorge Amado, and Moacyr de G es; a learned expert in classical and renaissance literature and the captivated interlocutor of the fishermen Chico Preto and Pedro Perna Santo and of Bibi, his parent's old house servant whom he considered a "humble and illiterate Sheherazade;"<sup>8</sup> a great figure in Brazilian ethnography and folklore studies and a writer infrequently read by more recent generations of social scientists.

In the labyrinth that appears before those who dare to approach the life and work of C mara Cascudo, Drummond's short portrait suggests, through the magic of the poet's words, an Ariadne's thread that allows one to follow the paths that cross the multifaceted body of Lu s da C mara Cascudo's works: the encyclopedic nature of the work and the author's profile as an explorer of Brazil.

### A Brazilian Encyclopedia

"*The Cascudo*," thus converted into a noun, signifies to Drummond and to many other Brazilians the *Dicion rio do Folclore Brasileiro*, published in 1954 by the Ministry of Education and Culture through the "Instituto Nacional do Livro" ("National Book Institute"). This is why the poet identifies the author with one of his books and asserts that Cascudo "is not really a person, but rather, he's a person in two thick volumes, in the form of a dictionary, always worth having within arm's reach."

In the prologue to the first edition, while explaining the genealogy of the *Dicion rio*, C mara Cascudo provides an important key to its reading. This refers to one of the many attempts to revive the dream of encyclopedists of

all times—deconstructing and summarizing the world. The *Dicionário* was Cascudo's response to Augusto Meyer, then president of the "National Book Institute," who had invited a group of Brazilian intellectuals to carry out Mário de Andrade's frustrated 1939 preliminary plan for a *Brazilian Encyclopedia*.<sup>9</sup> Still, the *Enciclopédia* would remain only a project. However, its only effectively realized fragment, Cascudo's *Dicionário*, seemed to accomplish Mário de Andrade's hopes for the great *Enciclopédia*—to provide a synthesis of Brazil both "to the educated man" and "to working-class homes."<sup>10</sup> Still a unique work of its genre to date, Cascudo's *Dicionário do Folclore Brasileiro* is a basic reference for scholarly researchers as well as for participants, popular singers, and carnival directors ("carnavalescos") who prepare samba school themes ("enredos").<sup>11</sup>

The *Dicionário* reflects a synthesis of Cascudo's work, and was updated until the end of his life in various new editions.<sup>12</sup> In it, the author expressed his intellectual credo by asserting:

Contrary to teachers' lessons, I believe in the dual existence of culture among all peoples. In each of them, there is a sacred, official culture, reserved for formal ceremonies, and a popular culture, open only for oral transmission, made of hunting and fishing stories, of comic and war episodes, the exploits of the heroes most accessible to children's retentive memory. A vast and common repository of anecdotes exists among indigenous Brazilians, alongside the secrets of higher beings, donors of land cultivation techniques and of precious seeds. The secret of Jurupari is inviolable and the discloser is punished with death, but there are stories of Jurupari without the sacred uncton and without the rigors of secrecy, known by almost all the men of the tribes. They are positive examples of the two cultures. The second is really folkloric.<sup>13</sup>

The *Dicionário* was also the work of a careful and obstinate collector who, since the publication of *Vaqueiros e Cantadores* in 1939, had begun to "slowly put together a guide for Brazilian folklore."<sup>14</sup> His work shaped the majority of the entries, aided by the collaboration of some of his many correspondents throughout the country, the musicians Villa-Lobos and Guerra Peixe, the folklorists Edison Carneiro and Renato Almeida, and the professors Manuel Diegues Junior and Gonçalves Fernandes.

In the "prologue," Cascudo summarized his method of work as the rigorous completion of what he understood as the protocol of his occupation:

“The three phases of folkloric study—collection, analysis and comparison of data, and research on origins.”<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, if the importance and publishing of the *Dicionário* seemed to justify the discursive slippage allowing Drummond to declare that “*The Cascudo*” was the *Dicionário* capable of resolving all doubts about Brazilian popular culture, the poet does not fail to establish that Cascudo the author was “much more.”

A prolific writer, Câmara Cascudo authored more than 150 books on the most diverse topics related to Brazilian culture. As an ethnographer and folklorist, he collected, analyzed, and incessantly published legends,<sup>16</sup> proverbs,<sup>17</sup> and stories.<sup>18</sup> He also produced numerous monographs, among which his books on the hammock<sup>19</sup> and the *jangada*<sup>20</sup> stand out, and wrote texts of a more theoretical character.<sup>21</sup> As an historian he produced works that can be considered part of the tradition of positivist history,<sup>22</sup> as well as many others that characterize what he himself called “micro-history.”<sup>23</sup> A chronicle-writer for more than fifty years, he published his “*Actas Diurnas*” (“Daily Report”) in the Natal newspaper *A República*, and also wrote for newspapers in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and many other Brazilian cities. He also recorded his memories in four books of memoirs;<sup>24</sup> an untiring researcher, he communicated the results of his investigations in scientific journals in Brazil and abroad. Also a man of letters, he wrote poetry and a novel to which he attributed particular importance. For the author, “no other book possesses emotional totality as does this one.”<sup>25</sup> A compulsive correspondent, he exchanged letters with intellectuals of the broadest geographical and academic range.

Drummond was correct when declaring that the author from Rio Grande do Norte was “much more” than his best-known work, the *Dicionário do Folclore Brasileiro*. Each time anyone enters into *Babilônia*, as Cascudo humorously called his chaotic library—now threatened by the neglect of those responsible for preserving cultural memory in Brazil—new manuscripts are discovered.<sup>26</sup>

### Discoveries

Drummond was not the only one to associate Cascudo so directly with the search for the “Brazilian soul.” He had already been deemed “a man called Brazil” (Oliveira 1999), and the association of his name with the illustrious modern explorers of Brazil, intellectuals who, through different itineraries,

dedicated their lives to the always novel and always constant and unchanging task of unmasking the secrets of the Brazilian land and its people.

Câmara Cascudo sought to understand and explain Brazil as did many others, among whom many were his principal correspondents. They included Mário de Andrade, with whom he maintained an extremely important epistolary exchange from 1924 until the death of *Macunaíma's* author; Monteiro Lobato, to whom Cascudo wrote more than four hundred letters; Edison Carneiro, with whom he held a rich correspondence regarding the folkloric movement in Brazil; Gilberto Freyre, with whom he also maintained a correspondence governed by the mutual respect characteristic of relationships between Northeastern patriarchs; Villa-Lobos, Guimarães Rosa, Josué de Castro and many others. The originality of the itineraries of Cascudo's explorations and his unique profile as an explorer were less obvious.

In Cascudo's case, an important distinguishing element is the fact that he was an explorer who developed a vast symbolic cartography of Brazil without ever lifting anchor from his home harbor.

An eccentric explorer who obstinately refused to be seduced by the large Southeastern urban centers, where the dynamism of intellectual life, the country's most important universities, the direction of the folkloric movement on a national level, the abundant libraries and the offering of public positions summoned him more than once during his eighty-seven years. He repeatedly refused to trade in the Northeastern city of Natal where he was born for other larger cities and he assumed as a proud title the identity of "incurable provincial" given to him by Afrânio Peixoto (Peixoto 6). His countless trips were always work-related, both within Brazil and abroad. But his refuge was always Natal and his private lookout, the large Ladeira house that was then called *Junqueira Aires* and today carries his name.

Nevertheless, this mark of distinction was not exclusively his own. Gilberto Freyre, the master of Apipucos, decided to return to his native Recife after his years of study abroad. Like Freyre, Cascudo investigated the Brazil rooted in the Northeast and was a plural and versatile writer, but his navigational routes were different from those taken by the Pernambucan sociologist.

The peculiarity of Câmara Cascudo's exploration of Brazil resides, in the first place, in the methods he adopted. The key to this method seems to lie in the notion of *convivência* (shared living).

Cascudo bases his ethnographic authority on his *convivência* with the people and popular traditions, for having been a child from the backlands and for never having abandoned provincial life. For this reason, he considered himself an expert—in an almost intimate way—of popular speech, gestures, mysteries and myths, and, in his later years, a master of an erudition recognized by all. In the “prologue” of *Tradição, Ciência do Povo*, he boasted of the method used for the research collected there in an almost emblematic summary, “not libraries, but *convivência*,”<sup>27</sup> suggesting the valorization of the experience of shared living (*con vivere*) as a form of construction of knowledge.

However, if it is through what he calls *convivência* that Cascudo particularizes his research methodology, he enables the identification of the course of his particular *exploration of Brazil* in the relationship between this fundamental process of shared living and the collection of his work’s most relevant empirical data—folklore studies. This constituted one side of his work; the other necessarily was related to the “translation” of the empirical data into interpretive syntheses.

It is possible that both the description of his process of collection of folkloric material and the understanding of his function as a folklorist, mediator and interpreter of that which, though seen by and familiar to all, is only revealed to very few, are most clearly reduced to their most simple expression in *Canto do Muro*. In this book, while describing his observations of the animal world, to which he attributes intelligence and inventiveness, Cascudo claims to have carefully noted everything he had observed of the animals that traversed his yard: “characters defined by the freedom of all the hours of the day and night... they were observed by me without knowing that they were to be the subject of future scholarly investigation.”<sup>28</sup>

Such an assertion, made in the context of a work with clear allegorical connotations, allows an adaptive appropriation indicative not only of what *convivência* meant to him as a method, but also of the modality of his observation as an ethnographer.

For Câmara Cascudo, folklore was tradition and tradition was the “science of the people.” In one of his definitions of folklore, he synthesized the importance of his study:

All the countries of the world, races, human groups, families, professional classes, possess a patrimony of traditions that is transmitted orally and defended and

preserved by custom. This patrimony is both ancient and contemporary. It grows daily as long as it is integrated into group and national customs. This patrimony is FOLKLORE. 'Folk': people, nation, family, kinship. 'Lore': instruction, knowledge, in the sense of an individual awareness of knowledge. Knowledge that knows. The here and now, an immediate awareness of knowledge made present.<sup>29</sup>

In later writings, he expands on the same topic and points to elements that identify why the secret of the "Brazilian soul" resides in folklore. In 1973, he claimed:

Memory is the Imagination of the People, communicable through Tradition, putting Cultures into motion, brought together for Use, over Time. ... The People keep and defend their Traditional Science, a secular patrimony which contains elements of all ages and locations in the World.<sup>30</sup>

And in 1986:

No science so much as Folklore possesses a larger space for research and for approaching human life. It is a science of collective psychology, of Mankind's broad culture, of tradition and of the timeless in the Present, of the heroic in the everyday, it is a true Standard History of the People."<sup>31</sup>

Consequently, what "Brazilian" is assumes meaning in folklore, since it is in it that the relationship between each of popular culture's particular manifestations and "the general culture of mankind," between the particular and the universal, and between the momentary and the timeless becomes evident.

Cascudo qualified the "standard man," the common man, as the bearer of Brazilian originality. That which made the Brazilian people both different from all others, and, paradoxically, what founded their myths, traditions, behavior, narratives, and beliefs in the universal could be seen in the daily life of the people and in their imaginary.

For this reason he compared the people to a coelacanth,<sup>32</sup> a prehistoric being that survives unaltered into the present. Citing Cláudio Bastos, he categorically asserted: "The people are a classic that survives."<sup>33</sup>

To Cascudo, the folklorist-explorer seemed to have a mission: that of observing and seeing the world of the people's culture in a way analogous to

that which had characterized other explorers, the nineteenth-century naturalists, in their approach to the natural world, because: "The naturalist-traveler's gaze is based on the principle of the insertion of particular beings into a universal order."<sup>34</sup>

Cascudo pertinaciously sought to follow this same route through the territory of popular culture in both endless research in the library, which he considered his laboratory, and in his fieldwork and in all of his writing. In order to know and explain the "Brazilian soul," it was necessary to seek out that which identified it. However, it should not be sought through the definition of a substantive Brazilian identity. According to Cascudo, it was possible to discover the secret of "origins" in a twofold process of insertion. Let us dwell on this process.

First, the *exploration* was made through the identification of the common "origins" of high and popular culture and through the insertion of both into the same cultural universe, in this case, that of Brazilian culture. Thus Cascudo, undertaking a trip through Brazilian oral literature, was able to assert, with a scientist's certainty upon finding the empirical evidence that he sought: "Alongside literature and educated intellectual thought, run the parallel, solitary, and powerful waters of memory and popular imagination."<sup>35</sup> Later he added: "I proved the single roots of these two forests, separate and proud of their exterior independence."<sup>36</sup>

Second, Cascudo attempted to map another insertion that permitted Brazil to be located as a continent in the vast ocean of universal culture. This was possible through the careful classification of popular behavior, myths, legends, and proverbs and the identification of "common origins," understood as a mysterious permanence, among those and many other similar cultural traits belonging to remote times and distant locations.

This constant search compelled him to travel to Africa in search of the waters that depart from that continent and flow into the vast estuary of Brazilian culture. Other trips, representative of this search, led him through classical literature and through the traditions of many lands, in order to find in them a common source of the specific amalgam that, for him, was Brazil.

When he encountered what he sought, he did not shrink from announcing it far and wide, with the pride of explorers of all eras. This is what happened when he was surprised to find in the words of a midwife from the backlands of Rio Grande do Norte in 1920 a long-forgotten tradition recorded in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. This tradition attests that in the room of



a woman in labor no one should cross their legs, since doing so would put the birth of the baby in danger:

The midwife from the backlands of Santa Cruz helped Ilitia, like all Greek and Roman mothers, thousands of years before Christ... —Kids, I witnessed it!<sup>37</sup>  
... I had seen a sacred rite to protect the life of the child, from the Greek Thebes to the backlands of Rio Grande do Norte. Typical. Real.<sup>38</sup>

To Luís da Câmara Cascudo, the “Brazilian soul” to be discovered was the amalgam of multiple and ancient traditions that, translated by the specific chemistry resulting from the “lucky convergence of the three races,”<sup>39</sup> made up the Brazilian population through indigenous “participation,” black “survival,” and Portuguese “permanence.”<sup>40</sup> The result was a fusion, without confusion, of the Brazilian people with the “human race.”<sup>41</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>“Cascudo doesn’t really denominate my paternal family name... My grandfather, Antônio Justino de Oliveira (1829-1894)—son of Antônio Marques Leal (1801-1891), received his father’s Portuguese name—was, during his later years called ‘old Cascudo’ because of devotion to the Conservative Party which also had this nickname. Two sons, Francisco (1863-1935) and Manuel (1864-1909), had the idea of attaching Cascudo to the name.” Cascudo, *O Tempo e Eu* 32-33.

<sup>2</sup> Câmara Cascudo was a member of the American Folklore Society; of the Mexican, Chilean, Bolivian, Argentine, Uruguayan, Peruvian, Irish, and English Folkloric Societies; of the Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa; of the Société des Américanistes de Paris; of the Société Suisse des Américanistes; of the Centro Italiano degli Studi Americani di Roma; of the Instituto Português de Arqueologia, História e Etnologia; of the Asociación Española de Etnología y Folklore; of the Academia Nacional de Historia y Geografía de México; of the Comisión Internationale des Arts et Traditions Populaires de Paris; of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research of Göttingen, in Germany; of the Academia das Ciências in Lisbon; an Honorary Member of the Sociedade Portuguesa de Antropologia e Etnologia of the Universidade do Porto; and received an Honorary Life Membership of the American International Academy.

<sup>3</sup> The neighborhood of *Ribeira* is the city of Natal’s red-light district.

<sup>4</sup> The *cordel* is a type of popular Northeastern literature, accompanied by drawings and disseminated in the form of pamphlets, often telling the stories of local personalities and offering moralizing lessons. (Translator’s note)

<sup>5</sup> See Cascudo, *Vaqueiros e Cantadores*.

<sup>6</sup> In 1951, he published the study and testimony on white magic titled *Meleagro*; on superstition, *Superstições e Costumes* (1958); *Voz de Nessus* (1966, and republished in 1973 as one of the chapters of the book *Tradição, Ciência do Povo*); and on fetishes, he published *Gorgoneion* in 1949.

<sup>7</sup> Houses of Afro-Brazilian worship. (Translator’s note)

<sup>8</sup> Cascudo, *Trinta "Estórias" Brasileiras* 13. Bibi, frequently cited as a favorite informant in Cascudo's many works, was named Luísa Freire.

<sup>9</sup> See Andrade, *Enciclopédia Brasileira*.

<sup>10</sup> Andrade 6 and 22.

<sup>11</sup> See the interview with João Clemente Jorge Trinta (Joãozinho Trinta), a *carnavalesco* known for his bold innovation while working with the Beija-Flor and Viradouro samba schools. Oliveira 357-59.

<sup>12</sup> Until 1988 there were six editions of the *Dicionário*.

<sup>13</sup> Cascudo, *Dicionário do Folclore Brasileiro* xiii. In the note about Jurupari, the author explains that this is an indigenous myth about the incarnation of the spirit of evil, the knowledge of which is reserved to the initiated. These are men who upon reaching puberty demonstrated an ability to tolerate pain.

<sup>14</sup> Cascudo, *Dicionário* xi.

<sup>15</sup> Cascudo, *Dicionário* xiii.

<sup>16</sup> Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *Lendas Brasileiras. 21 Histórias Criadas pela Imaginação de Nosso Povo*. Rio de Janeiro: Tecnoprint, 1988.

<sup>17</sup> Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *Coisas que o Povo Diz* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Bloch, 1968).

<sup>18</sup> Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *Cinco Livros do Povo* (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1953); *Contos Tradicionais do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: América Editora, 1946).

<sup>19</sup> Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *Rede de Dormir: Uma Pesquisa Etnográfica* (Rio de Janeiro: MEC, 1959).

<sup>20</sup> Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *Jangada: Uma Pesquisa Etnográfica* (Rio de Janeiro, MEC, 1957). The jangada is a sailing raft used especially on the Northern and Northeastern Brazilian coasts for fishing. (Translator's note)

<sup>21</sup> See, above all, *Civilização e Cultura: Pesquisas e Notas de Etnografia Geral* (Rio de Janeiro/Brasília: José Olympio/MEC-INL, 1973); *Ensaio de Etnografia Brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: INL, 1971); *Folclore do Brasil (Pesquisas e Notas)* (Rio de Janeiro: Fundo de Cultura, 1967) and *Tradição, Ciência do Povo* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1973).

<sup>22</sup> Among these works, the following stand out: *O Conde D'Eu* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1933); *A Intencionalidade no Descobrimento do Brasil* (Funchal, Tipografia d' "O Jornal," 1937) and *História do Rio Grande do Norte* (Rio de Janeiro: MEC, 1955).

<sup>23</sup> Luís da Câmara Cascudo, "O Sorriso da História," *A República* (Natal, 04/01/1940). Included in the group of books that can be considered part of this category, are, for example, *História dos Nossos Gestos: Uma Pesquisa Mímica do Brasil* (São Paulo: Edições Melhoramentos, 1976) and *História da Alimentação no Brasil* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1967).

<sup>24</sup> Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *O Tempo e Eu. Confidências e Proposições* (Natal: Imprensa Universitária, 1968); *Ontem: Imaginações e Notas de um Professor de Província* (Natal: Imprensa Universitária, 1972); *Pequeno Manual do Doente Aprendiz: Notas e Imaginações* (Natal: UFRN, 1969); and *Na Ronda do Tempo: Diário de 1969* (Natal: Imprensa Universitária, 1971).

<sup>25</sup> Cascudo, *Canto do Muro* 266.

<sup>26</sup> In 1999, the originals of two of his writings from the 1930s were located. One was a history of transatlantic aviation entitled *No Caminho do Avião* and the other, *A Casa de Cunhaú*, the story of the massacre of a group of Catholics in the seventeenth century.

<sup>27</sup> Cascudo, *Tradição, Ciência do Povo* 10.

<sup>28</sup> Cascudo, *Canto do Muro* 2.

<sup>29</sup> Cascudo, *Folclore do Brasil* 9.

<sup>30</sup> Cascudo, *Tradição, Ciência do Povo* 9, 29. The use of capital letters in the middle of sentences in order to indicate the importance of an idea or concept, as in this segment, is common in Câmara Cascudo.

<sup>31</sup> Cascudo, *Contos Tradicionais* 15.

<sup>32</sup> Cascudo, *O Tempo e Eu* 211.

<sup>33</sup> Cascudo, *Folclore do Brasil* 18.

<sup>34</sup> Lorelai Kury and Magali Romero Sá, "Os Três Reinos da Natureza" 29.

<sup>35</sup> Cascudo, *Contos Tradicionais* 15.

<sup>36</sup> Cascudo, *Literatura Oral no Brasil* 16.

<sup>37</sup> An allusion to the poem by Gonçalves Dias, "Y-Juca-Pirama," in which an older warrior recounts his observations ("Meninos, eu vi!") through oral history to the younger generation. By invoking this well-known phrase, Cascudo links oral transmission of observed experience to the type of continuity of tradition he identified between the Greco-Roman period and his observations in Santa Cruz. (Translator's note)

<sup>38</sup> Cascudo, *Tradição, Ciência do Povo* 150.

<sup>39</sup> Cascudo, *Folclore do Brasil* 101.

<sup>40</sup> The topic of fusion between the three races as a particular chemical reaction responsible for Brazilian identity is a constant in Cascudo's work and is extensively dealt with in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of *Literatura Oral no Brasil* 78-183.

<sup>41</sup> Cascudo, *Canto do Muro* 58.

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