

**Slaves' mobility in Brazil in the 18th century:  
aspects of tolerance in the catechization/  
integration process and religious consequences**

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**Introduction**

The catechization in Brazil has been studied from the perspective of missionization, in particular the Jesuit action, with emphasis on the processes of catechization of the indigenous people, especially regarding the confrontation between cultures, adaptation of religious practices and miscegenation. However, the bishops also played a role in the process of Christianization of Brazil, in diocesan contexts, in the post-Tridentine period when, after the impulse of the Council of Trent, the indoctrination of the faithful gained relevance, and the prelates were committed to carrying it out in their respective dioceses (Feitler 157-173; Souza 175-195). In Brazil, due to the characteristics of the territory and a profound lack of doctrine, the episcopal power created a catechism especially addressed to the group of slaves. The purpose of the present essay is to observe this catechism, understand how it took shape and prove that, in terms of the catechesis of slaves, in order to more easily inculcate the faith, the bishops, influenced by the Jesuit practice, adapted processes and forms of indoctrination and tolerated deviations committed by slaves. By adapting doctrinal norms and considering cultural and linguistic elements of the slaves' culture in catechetical contexts, they contributed to the existence of religious syncretism in Brazil.

This study focuses on the diocese of Bahia, the oldest in Brazil and one of the most extensive of the Portuguese empire in the 18th century. The doctrinal and catechetical norms of Bahia, among which those addressed particularly to slaves, were embodied in the Synodical Constitutions of the Bishopric of Bahia, published in 1707, whose mentor was Bishop D. Sebastião Mon-

teiro da Vide. In fact, religious and ecclesiastical life in Bahia, similar to what happened in other dioceses in the Catholic universe, was regulated by diocesan constitutions, composed of ecclesiastical, doctrinal, catechetical and sacramental norms. The main particularity of the Synodal Constitutions of the Bishopric of Bahia, when compared with similar constitutions of other Portuguese dioceses, is related to the existence of a set of specific norms concerning slaves. The analysis focuses on catechetical norms, particularly the catechism of slaves, so that aspects of the content and forms of indoctrination of this specific group can be discerned (Constituições 219-222).

Taking into account that in the constitutions of Bahia it was recommended that the catechesis was to be carried out in the language of the slaves whenever possible (Constituições, 219), and because the overwhelming majority of slaves in Bahia, in the 18th century, came from Africa, from the region of the British speakers, in Costa da Mina (Silva Jr. 21-52), the glossary *Obra Nova da Língua Geral da Mina* by António da Costa Peixoto was also used as a source. It is originally a handwritten work, dating from 1731 and with a 2nd more complete version written in 1741 and only published in 1944. The work, in dictionary form, translates words and expressions from Gbe into Portuguese. Peixoto aimed at facilitating the process of communication between Portuguese and Gbe-speaking slaves. It was the first attempt to translate this language into Portuguese and constituted a valuable communication tool used by the authorities in Brazil (Lima 157-158). The present study intends to observe the way in which terms of a religious nature, such as God, pray, mass, church, Lent, Easter, Devil and Our Lord were translated, in order to understand the relationship in terms of the signifiers and meanings of the words, between the culture of Gbe-speakers and Portuguese.

The term tolerance, in the context in which it is presented and used in this essay, and which appears in similar studies of religious history, must be understood as “to take it with patience”, through the adaptation of the processes of catechization, and/or the permission of certain illicit practices, without penalizing those who commit them. Naturally, it cannot be understood from the

current perspective, that is, from the universal form of absolute acceptance of diverse and heterogeneous attitudes and practices.

### **Bahia in the 18th century: a slave society**

In the 18th century, the diocese of Bahia occupied a territorial area of about 510,000 km<sup>2</sup>. It was an extensive territory, formed by a considerable part of the current States of Bahia and Sergipe and by the northeast of the State of Minas Gerais, inhabited, in the middle of the century, by about 130,000 faithful. In the 18th century it was a territory with rapid population growth. Indeed, Salvador, the main urban center, witnessed a sharp increase in population: from around 20,000 inhabitants at the end of the 17th century, to 34,419 souls in 1756, growing further to 65,281 people in 1780. The demographic increase was boosted by the existence of an extraordinarily high population mobility, especially of African slaves. The economy in Brazil depended on slave labor and was fed by the slave trade. Estimates indicate that, between 1701 and 1810, around 600,000 African slaves arrived in Bahia (Parés, *A formação* 63). The archbishop of Bahia, D. Sebastião Monteiro da Vide, stated that “more than 2000 slaves entered this city in Bahia” in 1711 alone (Nunes, *A diocese* 64-66).

The overwhelming majority of slaves who arrived in Bahia in the 18th century came from the Costa da Mina, which corresponds to the current Republic of Benin and the coast of Nigeria. It was a region made up of several peoples, therefore multilingual and multiethnic. The overwhelming majority spoke the Gbe language, which was a linguistic family made up of several languages, but whose members understood each other (Silva Jr. 21-52). With the massive entry of African slaves, they ended up forming a large part of the population that inhabited the population centers; of the more than 90 thousand faithful counted in the beginning of the 18th century, 50 thousand were African slaves. Thus, in the middle of the 18th century, it was common for villages to be, as is the case of S. Amaro do Ipitanga, composed mostly of “brown and black people”. In the parish of N. S. Do Rosário da Vila de Cairú, the majority of the population, in the mid-18th century, was made up of “black and brown captives”.

In three parishes it was possible to discern the distribution by ethnicity in the mid-18th century; in a population that totaled 4070 souls, only 204 were Caucasian, that is, 5.1% of the general count. Even in the City of Bahia, whites were in the minority, numbering up 32.7%, the remaining being slaves, pardos and free blacks (Nunes, *A diocese* 66-67).

The education levels of slaves were incipient, especially among Africans, who were considered by the religious authorities as “fools” or “rude”; many did not even know a single word of Portuguese. The problem was aggravated, in some cases, by the complete lack of knowledge on the part of the Portuguese authorities of the language spoken by these slaves. Contacts between culturally and socially very different groups turned out to be particularly difficult. Cultural and linguistic barriers made communication extremely difficult. In addition, they professed beliefs and religions very different from the Catholic faith. One of the most important of those, which came from Costa da Mina, focused on the *vodum* cult, which were spiritual entities of an animist type (Parés, *O rei* 37)

Slaves were deeply lacking in matters of doctrine. At the beginning of the 18th century, the episcopal power recognized, that “the slaves of our Archbishopric and of the whole Brazil are the most in need of Christian Doctrine, with so many nations and diversities of languages” (Constituições 218-219). Cultural and linguistic aspects, different worldviews, but also the fact that some slave masters were careless in matters of doctrine were the common reasons given by religious authorities for the levels of lack of doctrine. In the 18th century, the episcopal power considered the catechization of slaves as urgent. That is the reason why they created a catechism especially aimed at this particular group.

### **The Catechism of Slaves**

The Catechesis, that is, the indoctrination of the faithful through teaching the fundamentals of Christianity, was one of the basic elements in the process of Catholic reform after the end of the Council of Trent in 1563. Religious institutions, bishops and parish priests played a major role in this process. In Brazil, the

catechesis assumed extraordinary relevance. In the 18th century, in Portugal the catechesis was already conducted without major obstacles. In Brazil, however, this process was, in that century, still marked by difficulties related to population mobility, lack of resources, the disorderly growth of the population, the geography of the territory and the existence of very different ethnic and cultural groups (Paiva, *A recepção* 32-36).

Believers were required to have varied doctrinal knowledge, namely: that they knew the Sign of the Cross, the three persons of the Holy Trinity and the Articles of Faith. It was equally essential that they could say the main prayers: Creed; Our Father; Holy Mary; Hail Queen and Confession. In addition, they should know the Commandments, Sins, Virtues, Sacraments, Beatitudes, the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, Virtues, Powers, Senses, and Works of Mercy (Constituições 212-219).

This plan, due to its complexity, was not feasible when applied to slaves who had never had contact with the Catholic faith, who did not know the Portuguese language, and who lived immersed in cultural universes that were based on totally different worldviews, rituals and practices from the Judeo-Christian culture. Aware of this fact, the Archbishop of Bahia, D. Sebastião Monteiro da Vide, had a catechism prepared in 1707, to be used with slaves called “Breve Instrução dos Mistérios da Fé, acomodada ao modo de falar dos escravos do Brasil, para serem catequisados por ela” (Constituições 219-222). The catechism should be distributed to parish priests for the indoctrination of slaves in their parishes, as well as to the slaveowners so that they could use it for catechizing. Indeed, the parish priests were obliged to have “copies made, to be distributed among the houses of their customers, in order for them to instruct their slaves in the mysteries of the Faith, and Christian Doctrine by the form of said instruction” (Constituições 219).

The slave catechism focused on the most elementary aspects of the faith. The prayers were limited to the Our Father, Hail Mary, Creed and Commandments of the Law of God. They were also obliged to know the Act of Contrition, which was adapted, by eliminating the part of the prayer that mentioned the “Triune

Lord God” and the reference to Jesus Christ. In other words, the Act of Contrition of the slaves was simpler, it focused only on God excluding the Trinity. Concepts of the Trinity, as was already the case with the indigenous people, were abstract concepts that did not fit in with cultures based on animist religions, whose meaning was commonly associated with elements of nature.

The catechism also dictated that slaves should understand concepts associated with sacramental practice, namely Confession, Host, Chalice, and Mass. The catechism decreed that these concepts should be explained in simple words so that they could understand what was being taught, because only then would they be able to affirm their proneness to receive the sacraments. The emphasis was placed on creating a catechetical instrument that would lead the slaves to understand the doctrine, and not just to memorize it, similarly to what the Jesuits did.

The catechization of slaves also involved the use of questionnaires, similar, in formal terms, to those used by missionaries (with questions asked by parish priests/masters and respective answers that should be given by slaves). This is a particularity of the catechism of slaves when compared with the catechisms created by the episcopal authorities and addressed to the other faithful who did not, as a rule, have this specific format. Two elements contributed to favoring catechesis in the form of a questionnaire. Firstly, the experience of missionary work in the territory that dates back to the 16th century. The Jesuits in the missions used questionnaires to indoctrinate the indigenous people more effectively. Secondly, the fact that the main mentor of the catechism of slaves, D. Sebastião Monteiro da Vide, had a Jesuit instruction; before leaving for Brazil, he had studied at the Colégio do Espírito Santo in Évora (Portugal), which was a Jesuit institution (Paiva, *D. Sebastião* 45).

The questionnaires focused on God, Christ, the Virgin Mary, Heaven, Hell and the sacraments of baptism, confession, communion and extreme unction. Similar to the Jesuit catechisms, the questions were simple, objective and clear and the answers, that should be given by the slaves, were often limited to monosyllables. For example, regarding God the questions and their an-

swers were as follows:

“Who made this world? God;

Who made us? God;

Where is God? In Heaven, on Earth and everywhere in the World  
Do we have one God, or many? We have only one God.”

Heaven and hell are presented through the dichotomy good/evil, presenting the idea of eternal life, which would surely be attractive to slaves:

“When we die, does the soul also die? No. Only the body dies [...]

And where does the body go? Down to the earth.

Will it come out of the earth alive again? Yes.

Where will the body of a bad-hearted soul go? To Hell.

And where will the body of a good-hearted soul go? To Heaven.

Who is in Heaven with God? All those who had good souls.

Will they leave Heaven, or will they be there forever? They will be there forever.”

Regarding the sacraments, the same rule was followed, with care being taken to introduce their significance, for example: What is Confession for? To cleanse the soul from sins; Do you want Communion? Yes; What for? To put Our Lord Jesus Christ in the soul. It was important that the slaves understood the meaning of the sacraments in an elementary way and expressed their agreement to receive them, a *sine qua non* condition for them to be administered by the parish priests. However, it is significant to point out that the sacraments of confirmation and marriage were not considered in the catechism, even though polygamy was established in the culture of many African slaves, as was the existence of unions that were not consecrated by the Church. Episcopal authorities acknowledged that aspect:

“And because the concubinage of slaves needs a prompt remedy because it is usual and almost common for everyone to let themselves walk in a state of condemnation and that they do not respond to, due to their rudeness and misery, we order that, in the above-mentioned form, concubinage should be reprimanded, but no pecuniary penalty is imposed.” (Constituições 310)

As can be seen, slaves were treated differently, considering their

condition, and were not subject to a penalty – a fine – for living with a concubine. In Portugal, in terms of sexual morality, those who lived in concubinage were the object of fines by the episcopal power and in some cases the target of imprisonment and exile. (Nunes, *Crime* 198-208)

D. Sebastião Monteiro da Vide stipulated that the doctrine should be taught carefully “in parts, and slowly”, and not hastily, repeating it as many times as necessary in order to be effective, due to the cultural and linguistic particularities. Furthermore, the it should, whenever possible, be taught in the language of the slaves. If the parish priests did not know it, they could turn to interpreters. The knowledge of the language, as seen in the catechization in the context of the missions, was fundamental in the doctrinal process. But did it make sense to translate words of religious nature? If so, how was the translation carried out? What words were used?

The overwhelming majority of slaves from Mina who arrived in Brazil were, as previously mentioned, Gbe-speakers. In the 1730s, the first glossary of the Gbe language appeared, composed of a set of words in this language with the respective equivalent in Portuguese, called *Obra Nova da Língua Geral da Mina*, by António da Costa Peixoto. It was the author’s purpose to facilitate the process of communication between the Portuguese and slaves in Mina by translating terms and expressions used in everyday life. In the table below are some examples of how terms of religious nature were translated:

<b>Obra Nova da Língua Geral da Mina</b>	
<b>Gbe</b>	<b>Portuguese (English)</b>
Hihávouvódum	Nosso Senhor (Our Lord)
Avóduno	Padre (Priest)
Avó-dumchuhê	Igreja (Church)
Avódumgê	Contas de rezar (Prayer beads)
Avódumcu	Quaresma (Lent)
Avódumnhí	Páscoa (Easter)
Avódumzambe	Domingo (Sunday)
Avódumzampê	Dia Santo (Holy Day)
Ecodugê	Já se batizou (Has been baptized)

Mahiponvódum	Vou à missa (I’m attending mass)
Mahido-vodum	Vou confessar-me (I’m going to confession)
Máhiclevódum	Vou para a Igreja (I’m going to church)
Humbihóhéhihàvou vódum	Peço-vos pelo amor de Deus (I beg you for the love of God)

As can be seen, the root of the religious words used in the translation is “vodum”, evident, for example, in the words “Our Lord”, “priest”, “church”, as well as in the expressions associated with the sacraments such as “baptism”, “mass” and “confession”. Now, vodum, a term that refers to something uncertain and unknown, was the designation given by the peoples of Costa da Mina to animist deities associated with forces and elements of nature (Parés, *O rei* 37). There was a pantheon of vodum deities with different strengths and meanings, for example deities of fire, the force that controls life and fertility. Voduns had specific names. The most popular of all was Legbá. He acted as an intermediary between divinities and men and assumed the role of guardian of the determined order, in an active and malicious way. He also was an intermediary between deities, sometimes resorting to deceit and lies. As communication between voduns and men was established, sacrifices were made to obtain divine favors. However, despite his characteristics, he did not inspire fear, but rather affection. He is represented in strange and impressive ways, sometimes associated with elements of a sexual nature (Aguessy 25-33). It is thus understandable why the link between Legbá and the devil was made (in Peixoto’s translation these elements appear associated). The characteristics of the divinity, associated with deceit and lies and elements of a sexual nature, and the fact that it was highly worshiped by African peoples, surely ended up determining the association between Legbá and the devil.

By promoting the catechization of slaves in the respective language and considering the relationships that were established between the words of a religious nature, the episcopal authorities promoted processes of cultural interpenetration between the African culture and the Catholic religion. The slaves did not aban-

don cultural practices, whose indelible marks they carried with them from Africa. The association between vodum and Legbá with God and the devil, respectively, contributed to reinforce the symbiosis between cultures. The experience of the missions in Brazil showed that the association/linguistic transfer between cultures in the catechization, in itself, did not lead to the end of manifestations of indigenous worship. The Jesuits helped to reinforce beliefs marked by the symbiosis between pagan and Christian elements; the words used in the translations of the Jesuit missionaries reflect Tupi-Guarani beliefs. The translations mix the Eucharistic doctrine with Tupinambá revenge and exocannibalism (Lee 64-90). The episcopal authorities, when determining the use of the slaves' language in the catechization processes, considering the way in which the terms of a religious nature with associations to voduns were translated, also ended up promoting religious syncretism.

One of the most evident forms of syncretism in Brazil associated with peoples of African culture, which has reached our days, is Candomblé. It is one of the most extraordinary manifestations of Brazilian culture; a magical-religious practice, of African origin, of cults to animist deities (orixás and voduns), composed of sacrifices, dances, music, in particular the use of drums, trance states and offerings. It was performed by African slaves or their descendants, a practice that incorporated elements of animist religions (rituals and deities) and Catholic forms through the cross and saints. (Parés, *A formação* 38)

### Final Note

Historiography considers that many religious forms present in Brazil stem from the existence of a multicultural and heterogeneous society, from the difficulties of affirming Catholicism in the colonial period due to the lack of human and material resources, especially clerics and temples (Souza 87-88). However, more recent studies have drawn attention to the fact that syncretism also resulted from forms of tolerance. The adaptation was made through the adjustment of the catechetical process and the use of native linguistic and cultural aspects, incorporated in the cat-

echesis (Lee 64-90). This process leads to the existence of hybrid forms of religion, which mixed aspects of popular culture with the Catholic faith.

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