

Iku and the Amefrican Nightmare

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The anthropologist Júlio Braga, the *babalorixá* (priest of the orixás) of the Axelóia worship house in Salvador da Bahia, in his book on devotion to Babá Egum, divinized ancestors worshipped in the *terreiro* (temple) of Babá Aboulá on the Island of Itaparica, quotes William R. Bascom: “Every four days, she descended from the sky and invaded the Ojalfé market; She killed, she and her people, as many people as she could, with the help of large staffs. Most of the inhabitants of Ifé were soon massacred. The survivors then turned to the orixás, invoking Lafogido (then called Oni), Oduá, Orixalá, Ijugbe, Alass and all other existing orixás, so that they would come to save them. But the orixás could do nothing against death” (Bascom, in Braga 1992, 106).

The narrative in question is one of the myths that explains how death, Ikú, was “tamed” by a man named Ameiygun, who deceived her and dressed her with colored cloths and mirrors, so that death, impersonal, collective and irrational devastation came to be worshipped in the individualized figure of the divinized ancestor, the Egum, who in Bahia is still dancing on sacred nights, dressed in the powerful, multicolored *opá*. Death, a terrible male scourge that does not bow to anyone, not even to the cunning Exu, can be, if not defeated, transcended, once symbolized and individualized and effectively embodied as ancestors and male guardians (Prandi 2001).

We must obviously understand these mythological and cosmogonic meanings in their deepest dimension, as Yoruban forms of thought and epistemologies that live in Bahia and other parts of the African diaspora, and which only have full meaning when integrated with complex worldviews, supported in ritual forms and in exuberant symbolic wealth. These forms and senses make up the secular and ever-revived repertoire of our América Ladina as described

and proposed by Lélia Gonzalez in “The Political-Cultural Category of Amefricanidade” (2018; first published 1988). As a result of the critical and political reflection mediated by numerous hemispheric and transcontinental meetings, “Amefricanidade” is certainly more than merely the repertoires associated with the indigenous and African traditions transplanted and/or buried in the so-called New World. In fact, Lélia seeks to develop a new way of thinking or rather to take the perspective of “a cultural force,” which takes the historical form of “resistance.”

Mainly, this is resistance against the persistent Europeanization, or whitening, of cultural forms and structures of consciousness. The effort of de-Africanization and de-indigenization is persistent and continuous in the Americas, and its constant failure suggests that its nature is always this denial of the Other, at the same time inventing the Other. América Ladina is this resistance, which overflows the repertoires and treasures of Maya, Quechua, Yoruba, Bantu; as she says, then, the category incorporates “an entire historical process of cultural dynamics” (Gonzalez 2018, 329).

Tragically, death occupies a central place in this historical process: Physical death, individual, prosaic, and occupying its place in the dining room and in the memory of families. And social death, a tutelary phantom guarding a border, a checkpoint between the zone of being and the nonbeing. The violent and brutal death, spectacularized and staged as an instrument at disposal of the heteropatriarchal colonial order, as the “true superiority” of the colonizers (Fanon 1983). In the space of the Amefrican resistance, from this point of view, situated in the middle of the *samba de roda*, the *xirê*, the *caboclo de jurema*, at the crossroads in the middle of the city, can we interrogate the cosmological meaning of death in the *nagô*

(Amefrican) tradition, can we interrogate black death? Or the meaning of the historical category of “social death” (Patterson 2008)?

Lélia Gonzalez has repeatedly referred to the unjustified magnitude of state violence and the more or less diffuse or objectified structural violence that affects black people in Brazil. In 1981, still under the military regime, she declared in an interview: “the law facilitates this violence against blacks and women” (2018, 118). In the amazing text “Racism and Sexism in Brazilian Culture” she went further to interpret in a psychoanalytic way the violence against the black man as a function of sexual remarks of the white patriarch, tormented by the panic of castration created by racism itself, by projecting onto the black man fantasies and anxieties (2018; first published 1980). Lélia also participated in the founding of the MNUCDR (Movimento Negro Unificado Contra a Discriminação Racial, later renamed Movimento Negro Unificado) in São Paulo in 1978 (Ratts and Rios 2010), probably the most important experience of national organization of Brazilian blacks in the period of transition to democracy in the late 1970s. For the MNU, the issue of violence was central and the act of founding the movement was marked by the denunciation of yet another horrible act of brutality and death. The murder of the young Robson Luis was reported in detail by the journal *Versus*. Robson Luis, married and a resident of Vila Popular, died on April 28, 1978, at the Hospital de Clínicas after stealing three fruit boxes with friends returning drunk from a party. His face was disfigured and his scrotum had been ripped off at the 44th Police Station in São Paulo. According to the newspaper, the deputy, while beating him, said: “Blacks have to die by the stick” (Cardoso 1978).

In the cosmological, religious, and philosophical Nagô tradition, death is part of a transcendental cycle and in its individual and personal eventuality, it is inscribed in an eternal mystical return, consistent with the circular and nonbinary symbolic structures that define this epistemology. Orixás, transcendental deities, express a relationship symbolized by nature and the cosmos, duplicated between *aye* (world) and *òrun* (beyond); the *eguns*, ancestral spirits, watch over stability and social

order. Orixás and Eguns require separate and distinct cults. The Eguns to assume their position as guardians and ancestor counselors require specific rituals after death, and some characters of the orixás religion in Bahia are now eguns individually recognized and worshiped in Itaparica. The important point is that death, and deaths, are inscribed in a regime of truth, meaning, and revelation through proper rituals, symbolization, and appropriation. As happens in Àsèsè, funerary ritual among the Yoruba is also practiced in Bahia. The ritual converts the savage misfortune of death into an element of a poetics of transcendental existence. “There is no confusion between the reality of the *aiyè*—the dead one—and its symbol and double in the *òrun*—the *Égún*. There is a social consensus, a collective acceptance that allows to transfer, to represent, to materialize in a complex symbolic system the *Nagô* culture reality of the simultaneous existence of *aiyè* and *òrun*, of life and death. The self, integrated by the three principle-symbols and conveyed by the principle of individual life, will keep the complex gear of the system in motion and, through ritual action, will propel the successive transformations and the eternal rebirth” (Santos 2017, 270).

Thus, for example, we observe, as in Babá Aboula in Itaparica, and in the city of Cachoeira, also in Bahia, that the Sisterhood of the Good Death, with its secret cults, takes care of symbolizing death, guaranteeing the balance of life. The secular Sisterhood of the Good Death, founded in Salvador in 1820 by black women of the *candomblé* religion, who are still the only ones allowed to participate, performs its great ceremony in Cachoeira. The Sisterhood undoubtedly is an Amefrican institution, in particular because of the way in which its members occupy or colonize white, Christian, Western institutions and religious brotherhoods and convert them into institutions of devotion to the orixás. In the cult of Our Lady of Good Death, the sisters say, the slaves asked for a quiet death “without martyrdom” (Barbosa 2011). And here we see how it is to tame the violence of individual death in an age where martyrdom was a state policy and form of social control.

Or we can see the way Luciane Rocha describes contemporaneously the meaning of violence in documenting and discussing the mourning and struggle of mothers who lost their children to violence in Rio de Janeiro. To theoretically understand the agency of these black mothers, she proposes the concept of “de-killing” (Rocha 2017), because under the scorching scourge of social death, of the effective genocide of black people in Brazil, the sociological meaning of death is the negation of the legitimacy and dignity of black life. There is no proper symbolization, no mourning or social commotion, no recognition of the humanity of the dead, of his mother, of his community, of his ancestors or descendants. There is especially this nightmare, where near-human specters fight or hide. They deny who they are and flee from their brothers or poison their masters and disappear into obscurity.

On May 4, Rio de Janeiro state governor Wilson Witzel, who during the campaign proposed that snipers kill alleged thugs from helicopters, released a video on his social networks in which he appears inside a helicopter in mid-flight. He announces the beginning of a Civil Police operation in favelas of the region of Angra dos Reis. While the cops shoot from the helicopter, the governor says: “Let’s put an end to the banditry.”¹ The governor was denounced to the United Nations (UN) by State Representative Renata Souza; he in turn has already requested her expulsion from the State Legislative Assembly, and it must be recognized that sadly many people in society support the pure and simple execution of supposed thugs in the favelas in a context of extreme urban violence, which tends to increase.²

The already incredible numbers of urban violence in Brazil have grown, and are expected to grow even more, affecting mainly black, indigenous and LGBT people. The number of deaths due to police intervention in Rio de Janeiro is the highest in the last 20 years. In the first three months of 2019 the state police killed 434 people in police operations.³ In Bahia, my home state, the indicators of violence have improved slightly, however, the level is so high that there is no reason to celebrate. In the first quarter of 2019, there were 293 fewer deaths compared to the same period in 2018. Even so, from January to March, there were 1,263 homicides,

robberies, and injuries followed by death.⁴ And as we know there is a strong racial bias in violence. According to the Map of Violence 2018, out of every ten people murdered in Brazil, seven are black. “According to the Atlas, there were 62,517 homicides in the country, which is equivalent to 30.3 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. The death toll caused by crimes among black people was 40.2 per 100,000 people, while among non-blacks it was at 16. Based on this proportion, research showed that 71.5% of individuals whose lives were harvested in 2016 in Brazil were black or brown.”⁵

It is in a context like this that the new Brazilian president, elected in 2018 with 57 million votes, proposes to increase access to and possession of arms, formerly exclusive to the military and for various professional and social groups such as residents of rural areas, elected politicians, lawyers, or truck drivers. According to analysts, if the decree is approved by the Congress roughly 19 million people will have legal access to automatic weapons of large caliber.⁶ It is easy to predict the intensification of violence, especially against indigenous peoples, LGBT people, women, peasants, and black youth.

It is easy and distressing to realize that the policies of death, genocide, state necropolicy (Mbembe 2003), and horizontal sovereignties will reach a nightmare level. The Amefrican dream of Lélia Gonzalez today, as yesterday, faces the supremacist and colonial nightmare that made martyrdom a device of nation building. Whether we are prepared or not, in Brazil and elsewhere, we come face to face with a time of death, which appears with the greenish color that haunted the voice of the prophet in Patmos: “When the fourth seal was opened, I heard the voice of the fourth beast crying: Come! And I saw a green horse appear. His knight was named Death; and the land of the dead followed him.” //

Notes

- ¹ Júlia Barbon, "Helicóptero com Witzel a bordo atirou em lona de oração em Angra, dizem moradores," *Folha de São Paulo*, May 8, 2019, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2019/05/helicoptero-com-witzel-a-bordo-atirou-em-lona-de-oracao-em-angra-dizem-moradores.shtml>.
- ² RJ2, "Witzel é denunciado à ONU por presidente da Comissão de Direitos Humanos da Alerj," *Globo.com*, May 7, 2019, <https://g1.globo.com/rj/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/2019/05/07/witzel-e-denunciado-a-onu-por-presidente-da-comissao-de-direitos-humanos-da-alerj.ghtml>.
- ³ Felipe Grandin and Matheus Rodrigues, "Número de mortes por intervenção policial no RJ é o maior nos últimos 20 anos; apreensão de fuzis bate recorde em 2019," May 3, 2019, *Globo.com*, <https://g1.globo.com/rj/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/2019/05/03/rj-bate-recorde-na-apreensao-de-fuzis-em-2019-numero-de-mortes-por-intervencao-policial-e-o-maior-nos-ultimos-20-anos.ghtml>.
- ⁴ "Mortes violentas têm redução de 18,8% na Bahia no primeiro trimestre de 2019," *Correio da Bahia*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.correio24horas.com.br/noticia/nid/mortes-violentas-tem-reducao-de-188-na-bahia-no-primeiro-trimestre-de-2019/>.
- ⁵ Amauri Eugênio, 2019. "Mortes de pessoas negras aumentaram quase 25% no Brasil em uma década," *Alma Preta*, June 5, 2018, <https://www.almapreta.com/editorias/realidade/mortes-de-pessoas-negras-aumentaram-quase-25-no-brasil-em-uma-decada>.
- ⁶ Tahiane Stochero, "Decreto que facilitou porte permite compra de armas antes restritas a polícia e Exército," *Globo.com*, May 10, 2019, <https://g1.globo.com/sp/sao-paulo/noticia/2019/05/10/decreto-que-facilitou-porte-permite-compra-de-armas-antes-restritas-a-policia-e-exercito-veja-quais.ghtml>.

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