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Entangled Histories of Cerrado Women

Histórias Entrelaçadas de Mulheres Cerradinas

Historias entrelazadas de mujeres cerradinas

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RESUMO

Neste texto, são apresentadas as trajetórias entrelaçadas de Santa Dica, Maria José Alves Dias, Maria Lourdes Sousa Santos e Dona Procópio, mulheres afrodiásporizadas sustentadoras das memórias de luta do cerrado goiano. A proposta da pesquisa é perceber os modos de organização dessas mulheres para lidar com as questões coletivas relacionadas às consequências para a população afrodiáspórica, dos processos de racialização e colorização impostos aos africanos e seus descendentes, ao longo do tempo. O argumento é que suas ações coletivas conformam um tipo de feminismo que emerge nos entrelugares das instâncias de poder (público e privado), disputadas entre homens e mulheres brancas. Para tanto, discute-se o tensionamento das políticas de controle na relação corpo-território-linguagem-conhecimento-espiritualidade. É possível constatar as organizações de mulheres cerradinas nas irmandades, nas congadas, nas pastorais, nos quilombos, nos movimentos sociais, na educação escolar, na literatura, na comunicação social, nos conselhos. Essas ações coletivas possibilitaram a elas a restauração e a “manutenção de uma coesão que foi perdida ou desarrumada durante o processo de escravização” e que está perdurando com as colonialidades. O objetivo principal desta proposta é contribuir para visibilizar o protagonismo do povo negro e indígena, sobretudo as mulheres, nas áreas social, econômica e política, pertinente à História do Brasil, em conformidade com as leis 10.639/2003 e 11.645/2008, com as Diretrizes

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Palavras-chave: Histórias entrelaçadas. Mulheres cerradinas. Afrodiáspora. Cerrado goiano.

ABSTRACT

This text presents the entangled trajectories of Santa Dica, Maria José Alves Dias, Maria Lourdes Sousa and Dona Procópio, Afro-diasporic women who sustain the cerrado of Goiás. The research proposal is to understand how these women organize themselves to deal with collective issues related to the consequences for the Afro-diasporic population of the processes of racialization and colorization imposed on Africans and their descendants over time. The argument is that their collective actions form a type of feminism that emerges in the in-between places of power (public and private) disputed between white men and women. To this end, the tension between the politics of control and the relationship between body-territory-spirituality-language-knowledge is discussed. It is possible to see the organizations of white women in brotherhoods, congadas, pastorals, quilombos, social movements, school education, literature, social communication and councils. These collective actions have enabled them to restore and "maintain a cohesion that was lost or messed up during the process of enslavement" and which is enduring with colonialities. The main objective is to rescue the contribution to making visible the protagonism of black and indigenous people in the social, economic and political areas pertinent to the History of Brazil, set out in Laws 10.639/2003 and 11.645/2008, in the National Curriculum Guidelines for the Education of Ethnic-Racial Relations and for the Teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture, which guide the BNCC.

Keywords: Entangled stories. Clenched women. Afro Diaspora. Goiás Cerrado.

RESUMEN

Este texto presenta las trayectorias entrelazadas de Santa Dica, Maria José Alves Dias, Maria Lourdes Sousa y Dona Procópio, mujeres afro-diasporizadas que apoyan las memorias de lucha en el cerrado de Goiás. La propuesta de investigación es comprender las formas en que estas mujeres se organizan para abordar cuestiones colectivas relacionadas con las consecuencias para la población afrodiáspórica, de los procesos de racialización y colorización impuestos a los africanos y sus descendientes, a lo largo del tiempo. El argumento es que sus acciones colectivas dan forma a un tipo de feminismo que emerge entre instancias de poder (público y privado) disputadas entre hombres y mujeres blancos. Para eso, se discute la tensión de las políticas de control en la relación cuerpo-territorio-lenguaje-conocimiento-espiritualidad. Es posible ver organizaciones de mujeres cerradinas en cofradías,

congadas, pastorales, quilombos, movimientos sociales, educación escolar, literatura, comunicación social. Estas acciones colectivas les permitieron restaurar y “mantener una cohesión que se perdió o se interrumpió durante el proceso de esclavización” y que perdura con el colonialismo. El principal objetivo de esta propuesta es contribuir a visibilizar el protagonismo de los negros y los indígenas, especialmente las mujeres, en los ámbitos sociales, económicos y políticos relevantes para la Historia de Brasil, previsto en las leyes 10.639/2003 y 11.645/2008, en las Directrices Curriculares Nacionales para la Educación de las Relaciones Étnico-Raciales y para la Enseñanza de la Historia y la Cultura Afrobrasileña y Africana, asesores del BNCC

Palabras clave: Historias entrelazadas. Mujeres cerradina. Afrodiaspora. Cerrado de Goiás.

Introduction

In the Brazilian Midwest, the role of black women over time is notable. Names like Santa Dica, Maria José Alves Dias, Maria de Lourdes Souza, Dona Procópio, and Vó Rita are becoming more and more known among the people of Goiás. Among them, the “dorority” described by Vilma Piedade (2017) guaranteed the complicity of co-existing with the dehumanization of their lives, the devaluation of their origins, the precarization of their labor, the sexualization of their bodies, the invisibilization of their actions, the demonization of their spiritualities. We argue here that pain is not the only common point between them. African ancestry allowed different forms of resistance, sisterhood, care, and struggle to emerge from this encounter.

The role of these Black women in previous decades can be associated with the achievements that feminist movements made in projecting women beyond the domestic sphere. However, drawing on the work of Lélia Gonzalez (1984), Beatriz Nascimento (1976), Sueli Carneiro and Tereza Santos (1985), Núbia Regina Moreira (2011), and Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí (1997), we believe that the collective actions of Afro-diasporic women are shaped by the marks of colonization, stemming from the inheritance of African matrices and the colonialities imposed upon them. Therefore, Black women in the current context of the state of Goiás, since colonization, equipped with a non-binary understanding of themselves and the world, have both challenged and reinforced Brazilian patriarchy, giving rise to varying forms of patriarchal

organization based on the dynamics of domestic groups, within the home (including *terreiros/quintais*). This aligns with what we term “Feminismos de terreiros” (Marinho; Simoni, 2020; 2021; Marinho, 2022; 2023), as we aim to demonstrate throughout this text through the different trajectories of distinct women.

Overcoming the abysses and gaps of official history, which has reserved its focus for male members of the elite with European ancestry, presents a significant challenge. In addition to the coloniality of power, which is implicit in the historiographic erasure of those who have been subalternized, we also confront the coloniality of the body, marked by gender and sexuality (Lugónes, 2008). That is, Afro-diasporic women experience a dual process of erasure: for being women and for not being white. Even with the advent of feminism, they remain obscured under the category of “woman,” whose definition is rooted in sexual dimorphism, fundamentally defining femininity through motherhood, reproduction, sensitivity, beauty, and a vocation for domestic activities.

Thus, we problematize the relationship between body-territory-language-knowledge-spirituality and the policies for the control of bodies, in order to intersectionally tension the enunciative mesh of the geo-ontoepistemic-linguistic power in the space located in the complexity between afro-religiosity, “popular” Catholicism, and official Catholicism.

In order to do so, we have developed, from the work in the Latin-American and Caribbean Network on Feminismos de Terreiros - RELFET, as a methodological proposition, the critical historiographic fabulation, under the inspiration of Saidiya Hartman (2008) and Tavia Nyong’o (2019), aiming to ally historical research in official records and documents to the Oral and Life History of contemporary afro-descendants in order to offer perspectives on the entanglement of the past which made possible their existence in the present. Therefore, we utilized oral reports from contemporary black women about their own trajectories and that of their ancestors as interpretative keys for understanding the types of relationships established between them in the colonial past.

When producing this knowledge, we sought to contribute for the applicability of Brazilian legal dispositions on affirmative actions, such as Laws 10.639/2003 and

11.645/2008, the National Curricular Guidelines for the Education of Ethnic-Racial Relations and for the Teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture, guidelines for the Common National Curricular Base. We understand that it is important to promote a multiple view of history, including the history of afro-diasporic women, to incorporate the approach of contemporary themes that affect human life at a local, regional, and global scale into the syllabuses and pedagogical proposals, preferably in a transversal and integrative way.

Sisterhoods and the Terreiros

In Goiás, the work of Afro-diasporic women, still in the colonial context, took place in the living spaces specific to enslaved black men and women, be it around the *senzalas*, brotherhoods, plantation fields, mining camps, ranches, and cordons in carnivals and festivities, which extended to the porches and backyards of freed slaves, *quilombolas*, and free blacks, where they performed blessings (*benzeções*), Catholic celebrations (such as *congadas*, revelries, and festivities in devotion to the saints), Candomblé, Umbanda, and other rituals, in addition to living together and carrying out part of the daily domestic work activities. In these in-between spaces, located between the public and the private, which we call “terreiros,” black women, in their daily work, in their conversations by the stove, during the preparations for celebrations and rituals, contribute to the dissemination and materialization of what Segato (2003) calls the “Afro-Brazilian codex,” pointing to the existence of a fixed code in action behind the observable practices, a cryptic, coded, subterranean inscription that is constantly manifested in the discourse of some of these women. Thus, the *terreiros* become a space for territorialization and mobilization of collective and individual actions of mutual aid related to the hardships of racism and Western patriarchy.

The possibility of these women acting in this way may, therefore, be related to the multiple and dual conceptions of African matrices, such as those of Yoruba origin, which was the most present ethnic group among the captaincy's arrivistes in the 18th century. As Oyěwùmí (2016) has highlighted, the classifications between men and women in pre-colonial Africa were based on divisions and asymmetries (such as those

between obinrin and okunrin, or between ana-males and ana-females), but they do not necessarily correspond to the Western binary gender hierarchy, with seniority being more relevant for thinking about the relationships between people and their spiritual configurations, codified by matripotency. Thus, procreative power, of spiritual origin, derives from òyá and is therefore not limited to co-sanguinity or biology. In this cosmoperception, as in Asante and Igbo, there is a metaphysical, emotional, and practical combination that condenses the supreme power of the woman/mother, although the man is also matripotent.

The perspective that focuses on the knowledge of pre-colonial peoples enables the achievement of interculturality as advocated by Vera Candau (2020) and Enrique Dussel (2016) by promoting a deeper and more holistic understanding of the diverse cosmologies and forms of social organization that existed before the imposition of European colonial models. This approach not only enriches intercultural dialogue, but also challenges the hierarchies and categories imposed by colonial thinking, allowing a true encounter between distinct cultures and knowledge systems.

Enrique Dussel argues that interculturality should be understood as an ethical and political project that challenges the coloniality of knowledge and power. He proposes a “philosophy of liberation” that recognizes and values the knowledge and practices of indigenous peoples, breaking with the Eurocentric epistemology that dominates Western thought. Vera Candau, in turn, argues that intercultural education needs to promote recognition and dialogue between different cultures, overcoming racism and exclusion. Oyěwùmí’s perspective, by highlighting that classifications between men and women in pre-colonial Africa do not fit into the Western binary gender hierarchy, reveals the diversity of forms of social organization that existed before colonization. This is in line with what Dussel and Candau propose, by recognizing and valuing these alternative cosmologies as an essential part of intercultural dialogue.

African cosmoperception, with its emphasis on matripotency and seniority, offers an alternative structure to think about social and spiritual relations. This diversity of conceptions allows a more equative intercultural encounter, where non-Western cosmoperceptions are not only tolerated or seen as exotic, but recognized as

legitimate forms of knowledge and social organization, which manifest themselves intertwined with European cosmoperception.

Thus, some Afrocentered meanings became intertwined with the Catholic ecclesiastical organization, with Christian principles, and with Amerindian rituals, and served as a stimulus for the emergence of a new way of expressing spirituality. Elements of African origin infiltrated Catholicism, producing situations within Catholicism itself that were foreign to the authority of this institution, such as the advent of the Black Brotherhoods or the inclusion of women in their boards of directors, or even decisions made within the Brotherhoods that were not in accordance with the statutes, or even the absence of statutes, or even the performance of black men and women as healers, “sorceresses”, *benzedeiras*, and messianic leaders, in addition to the high number of concubinage relationships, among others.

This rearticulation or translation of elements produces ambivalences, causes instability and uncertainties, both in colonial discourse and in Catholicism itself and in the patriarchy. Therefore, although concepts such as syncretism and popular Catholicism do not allow us to put into perspective the impacts and effects of these mixtures with ancestral African values, such as those of Yoruba origin, the relationship between men and women, the holistic perspective on the relationships between the physical, human, and spiritual planes, demonstrated especially through the use of herbs and plants in rituals of blessings and spells, matripotency and seniority are presented as constants in the myths, practices, corporeality, and sensitivity of many of these black people. In the “terreiros”, primarily, this knowledge is communicated, shared, and incorporated, giving continuity to the processes of subjective construction of the subjects, as occurs within the scope of the Brotherhoods of Blacks.

Thus, it would be in the “terreiros”, notably, that the symbolic superstructure of the African matrix, through celebrations, revived myths and daily practices (including the understanding of gender), establishes a link between Afro-Brazilians and their African past. Despite the colonizing violence and the attempts at Christian control over blacks, we believe that in the Brotherhoods of Blacks, linked to the Catholic ecclesiastical order, networks of gender relations were preserved that function in a

relational way, with seniority being more relevant than femininity or masculinity, as a legacy of the African Yoruba matrix.

The existence of queens and female judges, pointed as the most important positions in the Brotherhoods of Blacks, along with male judges and kings, can be an indicative of this multimodality of gender, also present in the African matrix religions, in which matripotency is revered as controlling the great spiritual energies, though such reality has been historically hidden due to an imposition of meaning by the patriarchy.

Mary Karasch (2012), Cristina Cassia Moraes (2012), Maria Lemke Loiola (2009), Rosinalda Simoni, and Thais Marinho (2021) have highlighted the importance that queens, judges, princesses, princesses of bouquets, and perpetual queens have had within the Brotherhoods. Only in the Brotherhoods of Blacks in the Brazilian Midwest, in contrast to the Spanish Cofradias and Brotherhoods of Whites, positions in the executive boards directed to women were identified, as seen in the table books of the more than 34 Brotherhoods existing in the former captaincy of Goiás, between 1736 and 1808 (MORAES, 2012).

In the space of the Brotherhoods, differences were negotiated, while maintaining the conduct of practices considered pagan by the Catholic Church, such as processions, burials, reinados, *folgedos*, revelries, raising of maypoles, and dance circles. In the backyards and “terreiros” of the Chapels and churches of the Brotherhoods, they organized the celebrations, at the same time that they transmitted ancestral knowledge orally, in conversations by the wood stove, and in practice with the preparation of ornaments, clothing, food and rituals.

Quilombola Matriarchs

As the alluvial mining activity began to decline in the 19th century, a large contingent of arrivistes (immigrants) developed other means of subsistence. In the shadows of the settlements, amid fears of the “decline” of gold mining, many quilombos emerged and continued mining activities after the mines were depleted, being responsible for the discovery of gold veins and contributing to the diversification

of agricultural production (Salles, 1992). Agriculture and livestock farming began to be developed as economic activities focused on subsistence and mutual aid, in addition to supplying the local market.

As exemplified by the Kalunga community, it largely fell to the women in the quilombos to safeguard ancestral heritage, whether through storytelling and oral traditions within the family, through the worship of orixás in Candomblé and Umbanda, through the Christian reinterpretation within Afro-Catholic practices, such as the festivities for Our Lady of Deliverance and Our Lady of Abadia among the Kalunga, as well as other saints, or through the maintenance of the *batuque* rhythms of the “bruacas” and African rhythms like Sussa, by reinterpreting the use of herbs and plants for healing, as with the *benzedadeiras*, exercising matriarchal power, particularly in their roles as midwives, while preserving seniority and showing respect for the elders.

The African matrix would then be a possible foundation for the notions of healing (associated with medieval European superstitions), based on the belief that ailments of the body or soul (which are not perceived as distinct or antagonistic) can be cured by the energy emitted from rituals involving the combination of natural and/or manufactured elements that flow vital energy (*axé*), in bags of mandinga, patuás, and amulets, as well as through the consumption of herbs and medicinal plants in the form of teas, infusions, “garrafadas,” and syrups.

The political status of quilombola women in the Kalunga community is exercised not only in various public spaces within their communities but also regarding descent, which is bilateral (both maternal and paternal) and concerning inheritance rights. Thus, the distribution of land and livestock is carried out among all children, regardless of gender (Marinho, 2008 and 2019). This tradition recalls the lineage inheritances among the Yoruba, as described by Oyěwùmí (2016), where belonging is defined by birth rather than through marriage. Therefore, all children have the right to build homes on family land, including women.

Many quilombola women “lead” their families due to widowhood or the dissolution of marriages, which is not uncommon. New unions are formed without disrupting family stability, as in many cases, living arrangements occur within the extended family. Typically, these women, in addition to being religious leaders, have

begun to take on roles as community leaders who negotiate with local politicians, land-grabbers, and farmers. As redemocratization occurred in the 1980s, these leaders, allied with the Black movement, started to organize themselves into associations to fight for their territorial rights and the recognition of their identities, consolidating the quilombola movement.

This is the case, for example, of Iaiá Procópio dos Santos Rosa, now 92 years old, matriarch of the Kalunga community in Goiás, who received an honorary doctorate from UEG in 2022 and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prizeⁱⁱ in 2005 for her fight for the rights of the quilombola community. Following in her footsteps, several other Kalunga women have emerged as political leaders in the state of Goiás, such as Maria Helena Rodrigues, known as Tuya; Lucilene Kalunga, National Secretary for Women of the PSB and one of the highest-voted candidates for state deputy in the last election (2022); Eriene dos Santos Rosa, councilwoman for Cavalcante; and Versilene Francisco Dias, a lawyer and legal coordinator at CONAQⁱⁱⁱ, among many others.

Messianic Leader, Sorceresses, and Benzedeiras

By positioning themselves as protagonists—complete ontological units—exercising political and economic power within the leadership of the Brotherhoods, or as “rezadeiras” and “benzedeiras” in their traditional communities, these historical agents contradict the ecclesiastical space defined by the Catholic Church for women within a binary conception. Furthermore, they enhance Catholicism by introducing fluidity, complementarity, and unity even among the rigidly defined binary pairs, such as male and female, sacred and profane, material and spiritual, body and soul. Both realities are obscured by historiography through the imposition of the notion of religious syncretism or popular Catholicism. Hence, our insistence on the term Afro-Catholicism.

Such is the case of Benedicta Cypriano Gomes, the woman Saint, Santa Dica, who challenged the principles of Catholicism from the moment she entered the world. Since she was a child, Benedita, or Dica, demonstrated sensitivity to interaction and communication with the higher realm, as well as the ability to heal. As an adult, she

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became a midwife and benzedeira. Dica's power of counsel and healing spread, attracting a multitude of people to the Rio do Peixe, where she was born, and due to her spiritual functions, she became a social and political leader in the Lagolândia region of Pirenópolis, a place of powerful people.

Dica's ideals disturbed the local power structure. For her, the land belonged to God and could not be owned by anyone individually; it was meant for all those who needed it to live, not for accumulation. Her plan was to build a socialist republic on her lands, the Republic of Angels or the New Canaan. This is how she came to be known as *Dica of the Angels* (Waldetes Aparecida Rezende, 2011) and later as Santa Dica.

With the pilgrimage moving towards the Rio do Peixe in search of relief, healing, or any other assistance, the pilgrimage of the Divino de Trindade suffers setbacks as it begins to dwindle. The Redemptorist priests use their voice of authority and power to attack Dica from the pulpit and in the church newspaper. The priests, landowners, and politicians slander Dica, but she already has leadership and influence over the poor and exploited people. She continues her spiritual work and the spread of her ideas.

The Church, the State, and the local economic elite accuse, judge, and condemn Dica without granting her the right to a defense (Tânia Ferreira Rezende, 2022). As a result, Dica, her family, and the entire village of Lagolândia suffer a terrible attack on their lives, an event referred to as the "Day of Fire." There were injuries and fatalities, but Dica, protected by her spiritual guides, emerged unscathed. Even as a victim, having lost loved ones, Dica was criminalized for the attempted murder she endured.

Even being a victim of attempted homicide, Dica and the entire village of Lagolândia, where many of her loved ones died, were accused of qualified crimes under the Penal Code of 1910. Based on Article 157, all religious or sacred practices that were not Christian were criminalized, with penalties including imprisonment and fines. Those responsible for the attempted murder of Dica and several people from the village were not prosecuted, but Dica was criminalized for her spiritual practices and her political beliefs and actions.

When she was summoned for questioning, Dica reported one of the men she trusted, Caxeado, for sexual violence that occurred about ten days before the Day of Fire. The violation of her body altered her healing powers, and Dica felt the need to reorganize her strategies and methods of struggle. To organize herself in a more defensive manner, she formed and led a male army. To confront the persecutions she faced, Dica forged more assertive alliances with the State. In one of these alliances, she and her army fought for Goiás in the revolutions of 1930 and 1932. Another alliance involved joining the “Batalhão Patriota” or “Coluna Caiado” to prevent the entry of the Coluna Prestes into Goiás.

The State exploited Benedita when it was convenient for them, when they needed her, relying on the Church and the local economic elite — who sustained the State — against her when she was no longer useful, when she was a political burden. For the suffering and exploited people of the land, Benedita was Madrinha Dica, Santa Dica. Dica challenged the local power, sometimes confronting its dominance and other times aligning with its interests. Regardless, she defied and shook the power structure: the Church, the State, and the economic elite.

The assimilation of elements originating from Spiritism, from the African and Amerindian matrices, promoted the possibility of Dica communicating directly with divinities and spiritual entities, allowing her to offer spiritual guidance, solutions to problems, and the cure of physical or emotional diseases during her trances.

“Titias”, Iyalorixás, and Mães De Santo

The secrets of manipulating mandingas and patuás and communicating with the saints, entities, and orixás, voduns, or inquices, in many Brazilian cases, were led by the Iyalorixás or mães de santo, as in Salvador, Bahia, as previously described by Ruth Landes (1967) in the early decades of the 20th century. Many of these women migrated to Goiás, either with their families or by starting new families here with arrivistes from Minas Gerais and São Paulo, especially

In Goiás, the ancestral knowledge of prayers and benzeções, as well as the use of herbs for healing, has been preserved. The benzedeiros and midwives

maintained much of this knowledge. However, the elements that exalt African heritage are often reserved for family gatherings, such as the case of the 'titias,' as reported by Sonia Cleide Ferreira da Silva, Mãe de Santo at the Umbanda Terreiro Nanã Buruké, located in the southeastern region of Goiânia, while recalling her journey into Umbanda and Candomblé. According to her, the 'titias' would be spiritual, mystical, and magical entities, wise and ancient, that manifest daily for some people, guiding actions, promises, and rituals to be followed (Silva, 2023).

These entities are almost always connected to the lines of Preto Velho, spirits of ancestors who may be African or Afro-descendant. Preto Velho, according to Ribeiro (1996, apud Simoni, 2014), is the line that ritualistically most resembles the ancestor worship experienced by African groups of Yoruba ethnicity. In this line, grandmothers, grandfathers, uncles, and 'titias' manifest. The Preto Velhos in Umbanda are associated with healing in all forms, seniority, and resilience (Simoni, 2014). Many women and men were godparented by these entities, and under their inspiration and guidance, they founded *ternos de Congadas*, *Reinados*, and *Folias* dedicated to different saints that became traditional in the current state of Goiás, such as the congada of Vila João Vaz in Goiânia, founded by Pedro Alves Casemiro and his sister Maria José Alves Dias. Seu Pedro, Padrinho Pedro, as he was and still is called in the congada, has nearly sixty years of existence and is in his fourth generation, according to memories collected by Simoni between 2013 and 2016 (Simoni, 2017). Among them, the presence of a Preto Velho, Seu Pedro's spiritual guide, is mentioned, to whom he offered tributes and honors during the festivities of the congada.

One of the symbols of the congada is the captain's scepter, to which mystical powers are delegated. Seu Pedro's scepter, which is now held by his great-grandson, has the face of a Preto Velho carved into it, Seu Pedro's guide. The congada took to the streets for the first time in the 1970s, in response to a request from this entity, as stated by Ozorio, the former captain of the congada and Seu Pedro's son: 'This was my father's and the congada's godparent' (Ozorio Alves, 2014). The story of Seu Pedro confirms the constant presence of the entities or 'titias' and 'titios' in the daily lives of Afro-descendants.

Similar to the 'tias' from Rio de Janeiro reported by Nubia Moreira and Joanice Conceição (2023), the Afro-descendant women of Goiás maintained authority based on the seniority described by Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (2016). Today, some of them, like Valéria Eurípedes Souza Santos (Santos, 2023), who, in addition to being the president of the Congada 13 de Maio, is an Iyalorixá of Candomblé. Her mother, Maria de Lourdes Souza (1943-2006), was the first bandeirinha of the Congada Cor de Rosa and was a founder of Congada 13 de Maio, alongside her husband Onofre Costa dos Santos. Maria de Lourdes followed in the footsteps of Maria José Alves Dias (1937-1996), who assisted in founding Congada Cor de Rosa in the 1970s and was the founder of Congada da Vila João Vaz, along with her brother Pedro Casimiro, just a few years later, also in the 1970s. She was also a founder of the Afro Pastoral in Goiânia in 1980, emphasizing the health of the Black population (Pastoral da Mulher Negra, 1986), co-founder of one of the first Black Women's groups in Goiânia, the Malunga Black Women's Group, and participated in the founding of the Dandaras do Cerrado Group, together with Marta Cezario de Oliveira.

Maria José Alves was famous for her speeches, and there wasn't an event where people didn't ask to hear Dona Maria José. With a gentle and articulate voice, she led her neighborhood and the Congada da Vila João Vaz to become the only group with its own church. It was thanks to Dona Maria José's political mobilization that the Church of Nossa Senhora do Rosário and the Church of São Benedito in Vila João Vaz were built. She was responsible for the liturgical part of the celebration, which she led until her death. Dona Maria José passed away of natural causes in 2008. In the narratives of other congadeiras, Dona Maria José is depicted as the one who 'taught our culture, our roots, showing us that Jesus was for everyone and by everyone, teaching that the struggle of Black people happens every day.' She was known as "Maria José das Congadas e da pastoral afro" (Maria José from the Congadas and the Afro Pastoral); she was also a root doctor and one of the founders of the health pastoral. Among other things, Maria José was responsible for introducing discussions in the public sphere about the health issues affecting the Black population, with an emphasis on sickle cell anemia, diabetes, and glaucoma (Alves, Divina, 2020).

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Her work found support and continuity in her daughter Divina Alves, who carried on her legacy of struggle and liturgy in the congada until her death in 2021 due to complications arising from sickle cell anemia.

Regarding Maria de Lourdes, her legacy continues through her daughter Valéria and granddaughter Lourdysane Valeska Oliveira, who inherited from their mother and grandmother the rosarian devotion and the political activism. Valéria states that her journey in Candomblé began with the arrival of Pai João de Abuque, a Pernambucano who immigrated to Goiás in the 1980s (Santos, Valéria, 2023). It was his responsibility to introduce the concepts of kinship of Nation and Axé, as reported by Marcos Torres (2009). Sonia Cleide (2023) also indicates that her connection with Candomblé occurred outside the Goiás context, in Salvador, during one of her trips as a political activist and religious leader.

Until the 1980s, only the presence of Umbanda and Omolocô had been noted, identified among some Goiás practitioners as Brazilian religions that worship Brazilian entities (Preto Velho, Caboclo, Erês), which only clap hands, and not of African matrices, like Candomblé, which uses drums. This type of religious manifestation is present in many quilombos, such as the Quilombo do Cedro in Mineiros (Vieira, 2020).

In the urban context of Goiânia, Umbanda took place in domestic spaces. It was only in 1953 that the group managed to establish a headquarters, the Centro Eclético Espiritualista Tenda do Caminho. Despite a strong Kardecist orientation, the House conducted work, including healing rituals, within the lines of Umbanda, under the leadership of Maria Antonieta Alessandri. Later, the Centro São Sebastião emerged, along with Dona Geraldina, Pedrinho da Serrinha's house, and Mãe Joaquina de Oxum's house, all founded in 1960. Finally, the Centro Espírita Anjo Ismael, led by Luís Salles, was established in 1967. In 1974, the publication 'Cinco de Março' reported the existence of 450 Umbanda terreiros in the region (Nogueira, 2009).

Mother Watusi warns that

we come from a very difficult process of mixture. It is a skein of yarn which is very complicated to disentangle, and I don't even know if it is necessary to disentangle. So it gets very complicated to say, sometimes, 'this goes this way, that goes that way'. That's why I don't like it when people say (...) since I don't give catiço, I don't worship catiço, and then people say, like, 'oh you're

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pure ketu?’ I always say, people, purity doesn’t exist. For us, even less so here in Goiás, you know? Here everyone is already very mixed. (Mãe Watusi, apud Mota, 2018, p. 27)

As such, the “process of mixture” is what predominates, seen as a strategy of counter-miscegenation (Goldman, 2015), as it represents a mixture that does not dissolve, dilute, negate, or undo singularities. The elements are, therefore, intertwined and reflect distinct temporalities and historicities that have been violently and irreversibly joined together. The ways of doing and ways of conceiving the world are the fruits of different branches that render the establishment of rigid boundaries fruitless; they are relational philosophies.

Thus, we see that despite the actions of many matriarchs in preserving African identities, the imposition of Christian and patriarchal meanings has enabled Afro-descendants to mobilize other identities that appear to be more rewarding. This demonstrates that Blackness, as an ethnic component, is not constructed based on essentialism, but rather through historical processes that are interconnected locally and globally in terms of ethnicizations (Marinho, 2008; 2017; 2020; 2019). Therefore, we observe an ambiguity regarding “curandeirismo,” sometimes tolerated and other times stigmatized and persecuted.

This ambiguity contributes to the spiritual practices of African origin, ranging from benzeções to the rituals of Umbanda and Candomblé, which, according to each Axé, occur in the interstice of the “terreiros,” as a way of negotiating and integrating the public and private, the sacred and the profane, the masculine and the feminine, the material and the spiritual.

Congadas and Parity

Congadas have happened in the city of Goiás since the first half of the 18th century, according to Eliene Macedo (2015). According to Daiane Moreira Manoel (2018), Congadas have been held in Catalão since 1879, in October, as part of the celebrations for Our Lady of the Rosary. The celebration requires months of preparation to raise money through dinners, dance nights, friendship fairs, as well as the terços do Congo and Copa Congada (a futsal competition), the making of

costumes, and rehearsals for the Congada groups (around 20 in Catalão). The celebration recalls Catholic devotion, but also serves as a memory of slavery, the Atlantic crossing, and a distant Africa, as indicated by Ratts and Rodrigues (2008). Other regions of the state have Congada groups as well, such as in Pires do Rio.

With the transfer of the state capital from Vila Boa (Cidade de Goiás) to the planned city of Goiânia, a new space for Catholic institutional action emerged, and the feminisms de terreiros were put into practice. This marks the emergence of the Congadas. Despite being a planned city in the 20th century, the Goiânia project did not provide housing for the manual laborers who came to work on its construction. The workers began occupying areas that fell outside the urban planning, such as Vila Nova, Fama, the banks of Córrego Botafogo, Vila João Vaz, Vila Santa Helena, among many others. In these neighborhoods, immigrants started to reinterpret the new spaces they occupied by recalling Afro-Catholic traditions.

The female protagonism is notable, especially in the Congada 13 de Maio, currently presided over by Iyalorixá Valéria. In addition to leading the Terreiro de Candomblé and presiding over the Congada, Valéria is a political activist; she served on the Municipal Culture Council of Goiânia in 2015, participated in the Sectorial Collegiate of Afro-Brazilian Cultures of the Ministry of Culture in 2016, and is an active participant in public hearings on violence against women. She recalls that the Congada was born from a partnership between her father, Onofre Costa dos Santos, stemming from a promise made by his mother and the experience of her mother, Maria de Lourdes Sousa Santos, the first bandeirinha of the Congada Cor de Rosa. The partnership between men and women is also highlighted by Valéria, as she emphasizes the importance of men in the Congada, stating that without the “strength of men,” there would be no batuque, since the instruments are crafted and played by them, requiring effort during the long journeys made by the Congada between the Matriz de Campinas, the houses that made promises, and the home of Rei Ozorio (Santos, Valéria, 2023). However, there is a perception of the Congada as a fundamentally masculine universe.

The imposition of patriarchal meanings on these manifestations, as reflected in academic works, has led to a binary reading of genders, where masculine and

feminine roles are seen as clearly defined and delineated within the ritualistic context of this Afro-religious cultural expression. However, by undertaking a decolonial turn and transcending gender coloniality, we recognize the crucial role of women in this manifestation, which permeates all functions that comprise this vast religious expression.

Thus, in addition to participating as queens and *bandeirinhas* in the Congadas, women use the *terreiros* of preparation for the celebrations to engage in conversations “by the stove” about rights, social and gender equality, as well as to care for one another in combating domestic violence and overcoming challenges. It was in this context that Maria José Alves Dias contributed to the organization of the group of Black women *Malunga*, introducing the Afro Mass into the festivities of the Congada da Vila João Vaz, where they gathered to sew the adornments, with her taking charge of the homilies during the *novenas*. She was instrumental in founding the CEBS - Base Ecclesial Communities, the Pastoral of Black People, and the Pastoral of Women.

The relationships between men and women in the universe of Congada 13 de Maio, as well as the distribution of roles and access to public and private spaces involving the group, bring us to the notion of duality, as outlined by Rita Segato (2012) and Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (2016), in contrast to the Western gender binary. Thus, they recognize the differences between men and women, as reproduction and sexual dimorphism highlight this difference, especially expressed through masculine “strength,” which is responsible for activities requiring greater physical effort, such as the construction of drums and their handling during the Congadas. The characters portrayed as kings, queens, princesses, and princes also denote differences in roles. However, despite the differences, hierarchies, and division of tasks between men and women, both possess ontological and political fullness to occupy roles in either public or domestic spaces.

The interweaving of meanings based on seniority and matripotency of Yoruba origin, alongside the binary essentialism of Western patriarchy, has allowed a notion of parity to emerge among groups of Afro-descendants.

It was in this universe that Afro-diasporic women have begun to undertake collective actions, forming families beyond consanguinity, mobilizing resources for

mutual aid, addressing issues related to manumissions as well as gender and class oppression (everyday feminism). This work has been notably exercised in the “terreiros,” especially facilitated by religiosity/spirituality, and the participation of these women has fostered a shift both in the patriarchy formulated in Brazil—the feminisms de terreiros (Marinho, 2023)—and in Catholicism, enabling discussions about Afro-Catholicism. It is from this historical movement that the organization of the different movements of Black women today has become possible.

Final Considerations

The history of Goiás is filled with the trajectories of Afro-descendant women who created spaces for action where they, contrary to the binary gender system, organized individual and collective actions, mobilizing resources with an intentional orientation through social relationships within a system of opportunities and constraints. Such organizations can be observed in sisterhoods, congadas, pastoral groups, quilombos, social movements, literature, and councils. These collective actions enabled them to maintain a cohesion that was lost or disrupted during the process of enslavement and that endures with coloniality. Thus, contrary to Eurocentric expectations, the involvement of Black women was not limited to slavery during the colonial period, nor can it be confined to the domestic sphere before and after abolition.

Despite their biographical configuration of gender, religion, class, ethnicity, and language—essentially the body-politics or social position of Black women being obscured in favor of the relationships established between the mind, God, and reason, with the universal institutionalization of the Christian church, Catholic and later Protestant—many of these women preserved significant traits of ancestral African traditions, which intertwined, in diaspora, with Indigenous cosmoperceptions, at times resisting and at other times assimilating the gender/sex hierarchies that privileged men over women and European patriarchy over other forms of gender configuration and sexual relations.

There exists a fractured, ambiguous locus within colonial relations that allowed the subalterns to interweave, beyond notions of gender, their relational and holistic cosmoperceptions with spiritual/religious hierarchies, in an environment that privileged Christian spiritualities over non-Christian/non-Western ones. In the case of African matrices, as analyzed by Luis Parés (2016), the "principle of aggregation" enables a high degree of religious tolerance, flexibility, and openness among the Jeje, Yoruba, and other peoples categorized as "Mina," as well as Angolan traditions, while also interacting with Catholicism and Islam.

In the case of Goiás, the intertwining of Amefrican matrices with Catholicism allows us to think about Afro-Catholic manifestations or perhaps even Amefrican Catholic ones. Thus, despite their apparent absence, African identities in Goiás are present through the actions of women within the framework of Catholicism itself, from the brotherhoods of the 18th and 19th centuries, including their roles in the reigns and raising of masts for saints in the quilombos, to the establishment of the CEBs, Afro Pastorals, congadas, and reigns in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Far from the colonizers' spotlight, various groups of Afro-diasporic people, led by Black women, resisted and preserved, through oral traditions, oral narratives, and lived experiences, elements of African matrices. These can be perceived through the community sense that ensures the intertwining of public and private spheres, by maintaining notions based on parity, seniority, and matripotency, which grant certain authority to women within family and community settings. This is transmitted through storytelling, the preservation of rhythms, the drums, and African dances such as in the Congadas, Sussas, and Reigns to the Saints, or through fellowship within brotherhoods, through the tradition of prayers in litanies by rezadeiras, and through the re-signification of the use of herbs and plants for healing, as with benzedadeiras and midwives...

We sought to present the trajectory of these relevant historical figures in the historiography of the state of Goiás, who still require greater understanding from historiography, to promote a historical education focused on interculturalities. After all, effective intercultural education must go beyond the simple inclusion of different cultural contents; it should promote a profound questioning of the categories and

assumptions that underpin already consolidated knowledge. The incorporation of pre-colonial knowledge, such as that of African societies, allows for a critique of the universality of Western concepts, enabling marginalized voices and epistemologies to be heard and valued. This approach is fundamental to constructing an education that truly promotes interculturality, understood as a dynamic process of exchange and transformation between cultures.

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Notas

ⁱ Bolsista CAPES pós doutorado estratégico pela PUC-Goiás

ⁱⁱ Dona Procópio foi indicada, ao lado de outras 51 mulheres brasileiras, escolhidas por um comitê internacional, com sede na Suíça, composto por organizações não-governamentais feministas e de direitos humanos, para integrar o Projeto Mil Mulheres, apresentado à Organização das Nações Unidas (ONU)

ⁱⁱⁱ CONAQ -Coordenação Nacional de articulação das comunidades negras rurais quilombolas