Heritage, negotiation and conflict

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the issue of cultural heritage, focusing on the process of negotiating reality. It calls attention to the aspects of divergence and conflict derived from the distinct values and interests of the actors involved. A number of examples are cited, such as the registration of the Casa Branca candomblé *terreiro* in Salvador, Bahia, and the paradigmatic case of Copacabana. It aims to show that public heritage policies cannot be dissociated from the heterogeneity and complexity of social life.

Key words: Cultural Heritage, Politics, Cities, Heterogeneity, Conflict

When I was a member of the National Historical and Artistic Heritage Board, I had the opportunity and privilege to act as the special rapporteur, in 1984, for the registration of the Casa Branca candomblé *terreiro* in Salvador, Bahia. This was the first time that the Afro-Brazilian tradition had received official recognition from the Federal State. Recalling some of the episodes involved in this initiative will, I hope, provide some insight into the dynamics and transformations of cultural heritage.

At that time, the MEC[1] secretary of culture was Dr. Marcos Vinicios Vilaça, who was also president of the board of SPHAN[2] and played a fundamental role in the success of the registration. The Board was heavily divided on the issue. Several of its members believed it was unreasonable and mistaken to register a piece of land lacking any monumental or aesthetically valuable constructions that could justify the initiative. It is worth remembering that, until this period, the registration statute had been applied essentially to religious, military and civil buildings from the Luso-Brazilian tradition. The first measures taken to provide legal protection to the country's heritage related to buildings from the colonial era and, to a lesser extent, the period covered by the Empire and the First Republic.

The Casa Branca terreiro presented a tradition over 150 years old and undoubtedly performed an important role in the symbolism and cultural imaginary of the groups linked to the

world of candomblé and the Afro-Brazilian religions in general. From the viewpoint of this population, what mattered was the *sacredness* of the terrain, its sacred energy or *axé*. In terms of material culture, there was a boat, important in the rituals, and a cluster of simple houses, as well as a wood and rocks associated with the orixá cult. There was nothing that could be likened to the São Francisco Church in Ouro Preto, the sculptures of the prophets by Aleijadinho in Congonhas, both in Minas Gerais, or to the São Bento Monastery, the Imperial Palace of Quinta da Boa Vista or the Santa Cruz Fortress, all located in Rio de Janeiro. Without question, it was a novel and challenging situation.

I was appointed special rapporteur in my capacity as an anthropologist, also then head of the Department of Anthropology at the Museu Nacional, having just completed my mandate as president of the Brazilian Association of Anthropology. I had highlighted the important contribution made by Afro-Brazilian traditions to Brazil as a whole. In particular, my work had drawn attention to the religious beliefs involved in these traditions, including their influence far beyond their formal boundaries. I defined culture as an all-inclusive phenomenon that encompasses all the material and immaterial manifestations expressed in beliefs, values and worldviews existing in any given society. I claimed "that at a time when recognizing the importance of the cultural manifestations of the lower classes has become a concern, candomblé must be recognized as a religious system fundamental to the identity of significant portions of Brazilian society."[3]

I stressed that Casa Branca amounted to "a social fact, a functional *terreiro*, with its followers, priests and rituals in full dynamism." In recommending registration, I felt it was essential to underline the fact that "SPHAN's monitoring and supervision should, while maintaining its high standards, incorporate a sufficiently flexible stance in relation to this religious phenomenon" and further that "the registration will ensure the continuity of the cultural tradition that identifies Casa Branca as a sacred space." However, I stated that sacredness was not a synonym of immutability and that SPHAN would not be abandoning the seriousness of its norms by "seek[ing] an adequate solution for dealing with social phenomena in a permanent process of change."

I concluded by recommending "the registration of the entire site, an area of approximately 6,800m , with the buildings, trees and main sacred objects, accompanied by all the measures needed to ensure that this heritage site is properly safeguarded." I agreed with the view of authors like Gilberto Freyre and Roger Bastide, who analyzed and valorized this contribution. I also pointed out the crucial role played in the area of sociability and conviviality among the lower classes and between the later and other social sectors. I stressed that, at least since Nina Rodrigues, it had become clear that the Candomblé *terreiros*, and especially Casa Branca, comprised an important social and symbolic space. The life of urban Salvador could not be understood without this dimension. On the other hand, I sought to demonstrate that within

the heterogenic and complex setting of contemporary cities, religious activity, with its rituals and beliefs, is essential to the construction and dynamic of identities.

Those members of SPHAN's Board who contested this position had honest and deep-rooted convictions, the product of decades of practices dedicated to another type of heritage policy. It was also argued that registering a religion was impossible. Almost everyone present at the meeting in Salvador concurred that protecting the *terreiro* was necessary, but some insisted that the measure of registration should not be used.[4] It is worth recording that a large number of board members failed to attend the meeting. These seven absentees almost certainly included various opponents to the registration.

There were also doubts concerning the legal situation of the land occupied by Casa Branca. The mayor of Salvador himself, present at the meeting, sent a note to the president stating that ownership of the land by the Casa Branca *terreiro* was guaranteed by the local council. There was an intense debate among those for and against. As I mentioned, some of the arguments against the proposal based their reasons and explanations on the actual implementation of the policy up until then. However, it has to be admitted that in some cases there was probably a certain disdain for what we believed to be important cultural manifestations of the Brazilian nation.

Undeniably, victory in the registration process was only made possible by a groundswell of local support in Salvador, uniting artists, intellectuals, journalists, politicians and religious leaders, all of whom invested considerable energy in the campaign to recognize this Afro-Bahian heritage. There was a real clash of opinions that extended beyond the confines of the SPHAN Board. Influential sections of the Bahian press declared their opposition to the registration, which was accused – in varying degrees of subtlety – of being demagogic. It is important to recall these facts since the victory proved extremely difficult and met strong resistance. A large degree of effort was needed on the part of a group of board members, the Secretary of Culture of the MEC and sectors of the public for the project to eventually be successful.

The historic session of the Board was held in the imposing halls of the Santa Casa da Misericórdia, in Salvador, in the presence of a highly agitated and passionate public. The meeting was opened in the presence of the Cardinal Primate of Brazil, Dom Avelar Brandão. The final voting was heavily disputed with three votes in favour of registration, one for deferral, two abstentions and one vote against, expressing the degree of difficulty encountered in implementing the measure. The registration was celebrated in jubilant fashion by most of the public present, though the euphoria could not mask the strong differences in opinion and points of view.

The case of the Casa Branca registration can be analyzed as a social drama in the terms proposed by Victor Turner (1974). There was a well-defined group of actors with distinct and

antagonistic opinions – and indeed interests – concerning an issue that became emblematic for the discussion of national identity itself. Irrespective of the technical and legal aspects, what was effectively at stake was the symbolism associated with the State in its relations with civil society. The question amounted to deciding what could be valued and consecrated through the registration policy. While recognizing the valid concern of board members with implementing the registration parameters in proper fashion, today it is impossible to deny that what was under debate, more or less in conscious fashion, was the very identity of the Brazilian nation. The brief appearance of the Cardinal Primate at the historic meeting could not hide the fact that the more conservative sections of Bahian and national Catholicism regarded the valorization of Afro-Brazilian religions disapprovingly.

When board members argued that "a religion cannot be registered," undoubtedly they believed that the registration of hundreds of Catholic churches and monuments had been effected for purely aesthetic-architectonic reasons. However this seemed incorrect to us. Thus the registration of Casa Branca signified the affirmation of Brazilian society as a multiethnic entity, constituted and characterized by sociocultural pluralism. State recognition also undoubtedly represented a form of compensation for the persecutions and intolerance manifested for centuries by the Brazilian elites and authorities against Afro-Brazilian beliefs and rituals (see Maggie 1993).

During this episode, the city of Salvador became the focal point for a clash whose repercussions affected the whole of Brazilian society. Afterwards, not only were other *terreiros* registered: various monuments and buildings linked to traditions other than the Luso-Brazilian legacy were also recognized, such as a colonist's house in Rio Grande do Sul, a Japanese tea house in São Paulo and more recently, through the valorization of immaterial culture, indigenous rituals such as Quarup.

These differences and divergences are explained by the characteristics of modern-contemporary complex society with its multiple sectors, categories and strata and the heterogeneity of its diverse cultural traditions. One of the basic problems affecting and characterizing large contemporary cities in terms of protecting and preserving heritage is the real estate issue. In the case of Casa Branca, the construction industry was interested in building on its land. This pressure to occupy urban soils, inevitable to a certain extent in capitalist development, lies at the heart of the main problems and polemics relating to the policy of cultural and environmental protection and conservation. But it is not simply a question of demonizing the real estate companies and their insatiable voracity, which has already inflicted irreversible damage to Brazilian cities, destroying or disfiguring a considerable part of their natural and cultural heritage. Placing limits of civil engineering is always very difficult since it comprises one of the main markets for unskilled labour among the lower classes.

On the other hand, dealing with public policy measures that affect sectors of civil society is also highly sensitive. The complaints and demands made by residents in towns and cities in response to the limits imposed by the registration of properties means these decisions and their implementation have to be continually re-evaluated. Here we can also include the disagreements and impasses between federal, state and municipal bodies. We can highlight, for example, the conflict between the federal heritage policy and the political interests of local councils, which frequently present urban development projects that go against the guidelines of the former SPHAN, nowadays IPHAN. I recall other cases that occurred during the time I was a member of the Board, when mayors from historic towns in Minas Gerais wanted – and sometimes managed to – build constructions that severely damaged registered areas and their surroundings, such as sports stadiums, squares with modern fountains with colored sparkiling and sprinkiling water, coach stations, and so on. These works – with varying degrees of transparency – represented the aspirations and interests of public authorities and business groups, sometimes counting on support garnered from part of the population.

One of the most striking examples of the conflicts with conservation concerns caused by pressure from the construction industry for growth is the case of Copacabana. Development of the district began with the opening of the Old Tunnel in 1892, linking Copacabana to Botafogo. As I wrote in a previous work:

> Prior to this, there was little occupation of the area, with a population of fishermen, few country houses, scattered clusters of dwellings, a few pathways and rough roads. However, the area developed rapidly as the capital of the new republic expanded. New streets, public works and extension of the tramlines stimulated demographic growth with the multiplication of residential areas and commercial establishments. By the 1920s, Copacabana had already become an important district of the city, bordered at each end of the beach with the forts of Copacabana and Leme (now named Duque de Caxias), and boasting the recently inaugurated Copacabana Palace as a symbol of affluence, international prestige and tourist potential (Velho 1999:11).

The pace of development of the district accelerated and with the new technology of elevators and reinforced concrete, it became the first Brazilian district to be predominantly occupied by buildings with over eight stories. Its population grew, reaching a peak of over 200,000 inhabitants in the 1960s before declining. Indeed, Copacabana came to exemplify the contradictions and paradoxes of urban life. The area was sold as a seaside paradise, with a beautiful beach, stunning scenery and fresh air. During the first years of development, the climate was marketed as an attraction in terms of health and well-being. Houses were knocked down until few remained by the 1970s and the former low-rise apartment blocks were replaced

by taller and more modern constructions. Copacabana's characteristics as a primarily residential district altered with the development of intense and varied commerce, as well as various cultural and leisure attractions, such as cinemas, theatres, art galleries, nightclubs, show venues and so on.

Copacabana, along with its original natural attractions, became a hot-spot for the consumer society of Rio de Janeiro and even Brazil. Its peak was probably between the end of the Second World War (1945) and the middle of the 1970s. In the 1950s, especially after the Juscelino Kubitschek government and the wave of development that swept the country, new changes began to affect the district's social reality. The growth in consumerism and social mobility generated new aspirations and life-style expectations. At the outset, it was mainly middle-class families that dreamed of moving to Copacabana (see Velho 1973 and 1999). They came from other parts of the city – the South Zone, the Centre, the North Zone and later even the outskirts. Many of the new residents came from other states, as well as foreigners who from the start saw Copacabana as an area of preference.

Rio de Janeiro's role as capital of the Republic, comprising the Federal District until 1960, meant that the city became a home for politicians, bureaucrats and technicians, all in their particular ways linked to the National State. There are numerous cases of people who arrived in Rio de Janeiro to take on temporary jobs or posts only to settle permanently in the city with their families. For many years, Copacabana was the first-choice for these more or less elite social sectors. This population was supplemented by the diplomatic staff and the representatives of large international companies. The famous "little princess of the sea" became a fairy-tale place with an intense night life that presented a variety of options and alternatives for all kinds of tastes. For example, along with the fame of its beautiful women, a heavily advertised point, the district also became an important gay centre (see Guimarães 2004 [1977]).

This splendour brought with it the seeds of its own decline. Copacabana was over-crowded, over-built and worn-out. The wall of apartment towers built without any concern for urban planning blocked out most of the scenery and affected the climate, meaning that the temperature difference between the Avenida Atlântica and the streets located a few blocks inland could exceed 3 degrees centigrade. The abundance of transport, a feature valorized by those wishing to live there, contributed – along with the general rise in the number of cars – to worsening the pollution, as well as producing large traffic jams, high noise levels and discomfort.

One of the most decisive factors in terms of the district's transformation was the construction of large blocks of small bed-sit or one bedroom apartments. These were designed to house a less affluent population, the majority tenants, who sacrificed residential space in order to live in a district that had good transportation, met consumer needs and produced – in accordance with the dominant ideas of the time – *social prestige* (see Velho 1973). Dues to the

sheer number and mixture of occupants, this type of building is very often the setting for conflicts and tumults. Many of these blocks ended up being ill-regarded and stigmatized, such as the notorious Barata Ribeiro 200, which gave rise to a theatre play (see Velho 1971). Thus, there was a gradual social decline in the district's residents, accompanied by the ageing of its population.

Today, Copacabana is the Brazilian urban district with the highest proportion of elderly inhabitants. These are the people who arrived in the 1940s, 50s and 60s and who decided to stay for a variety of reasons. Most of them, despite the rising insecurity and violence, value the relative comfort still offered by the pharmacists, health centres, clinics and shops, as well as the leisure opportunities provided by the beach, boosted by the promenade built at the start of the 1970s. There are also people without the financial means to leave the district and try to live in areas with a social level comparable to the Copacabana of the past.

Rio de Janeiro's South Zone undoubtedly occupies a special place in the imaginary not only of the city but of the country as a whole, and even internationally. Copacabana was for many decades the main centre of these representations. Despite its relative decline, it is still an important attraction for various types of tourism, as well as for many inhabitants from the city and the state of Rio de Janeiro. Even so, there has undeniably been a massive change from 'seaside paradise' to the current situation of urban chaos, run-down buildings, street dwellers, illegal commerce and various forms of violence. It therefore comprises an interesting case to reflect on the more general issue of the city and its heritage. From the viewpoint of socially-aware architecture, responsible urban planning, conservationism and environmentalism, Copacabana is undeniably a powerful symbol of the erroneous and mistaken, of what should not have been done or allowed. Indeed, the category *copacabanization* was created as a synonym of urban neglect and predation.

On the other hand, it cannot be ignored that an essential dimension of what happened in this world-famous district was the result of the search for a better quality of life on the part of different sectors of society, at the start more prosperous but increasingly less affluent. Neither should we forget the impact of the growth in shantytowns throughout the city of Rio de Janeiro and which have sprung up on the hills in and around Copacabana in an unconcealable and sometimes threatening manner. Prominent among the various motives that were a source of attraction to the district were the so-called *urban resources*, unequally distributed not only in the city of Rio de Janeiro, but the country in general.

The possibility of change to a more fun, sporting and agreeable lifestyle was also important, the development of 'beach culture' establishing new leisure, entertainment and aesthetic patterns. This phenomenon was not confined to Copacabana: it extended to the beaches and districts further along the coast, such as Ipanema and Leblon. In the latter areas, despite equally frenetic transformations, there seems to have been a greater concern and

awareness of the need to avoid the dangers of *copacabanization*. Here we can recall the phrase, attributed to Tom Jobim, that Brazil would be happy "when everyone could live in Ipanema." Hence we are confronted with a question that not only divides different actors but also individuals themselves who oscillate between a more conservationist stance, which can be labelled 'elitist,' and another more modernizing and invasive stance, which may appear 'more democratic.'

In reality, we are faced by a problem here that is not just Brazilian, but extends beyond our borders as a global issue. In fact, it is the more general theme of *mass societies* – linked to the development of capitalism, urbanization, technology, transportation, communications, the media and so on – that allows us to comprehend these processes. Given this reality, the intellectual and political challenge consists of learning how to deal with social memory and cultural heritage. Since Halbwachs (1976) we have known of the importance of the social organization of space and the places of memory for the construction and dynamic of individual and social identities. The destruction of reference points, monuments, houses, buildings, streets, cinemas, churches and other structures has consequences for the emotional and cognitive maps of the inhabitants of different types of localities (see Lins de Barros 1999).

At an opposite end, though, we find those who arrive more or less as 'outsiders' or 'invaders,' lacking the bonds and profile of the older residents and keen to enjoy the advantages of quality of life and social climbing provided by the new addresses. Hence, in examining public heritage policies, we are dealing with complex questions that involve emotions, affects, an enormous range of interests, preferences and tastes, and heterogeneous and contradictory projects.

Elsewhere in Rio, Barra da Tijuca, a more recently developed area, has been the setting and indeed battle field for a clash between conflicting interests and aspirations. The famous Lucio Costa plan, with a series of carefully considered proposals for ensuring 'balanced growth' for the area, respecting and protecting the natural environmental, has already been trampled numerous times by politicians, construction companies, middle class condominiums and invasions carried out by less wealthy sections of the population, with a rapid growth in shantytowns. Clandestine changes, outside the law, or even with the connivance of public authorities, have disfigured the original urban project, carried out as ever under the flag of progress and development.

Another recent example in Rio de Janeiro is that of the polemical APACs (cultural environment protection areas), which have been used by the local council to protect some districts, such as Ipanema, Leblon and Jardim Botânico, from actions that could 'detract from their character.' As a result, municipal officers employ specific heritage criteria to select particular buildings and houses to be conserved, preventing their demolition and the construction of buildings that disrespect social memory and harm local identities. In the debates

surrounding this initiative, the concern to prevent more *copacabanizations* has been voiced a number of times. The logic of the conservationist position is self-evident. Those opposing these measures are, once more, construction companies looking for new works and profits, but also include residents from protected buildings. The position of the latter is based on the argument well-known to those who deal with the problem of heritage, ownership rights. This, they say, is being disrespected by interference from the public authority, restricting the owners and devaluing their properties.

Organized campaigns have emerged in these districts against the APACs, leading to demonstrations and legal actions. For now, the local council's view has predominated. Today there is undoubtedly a greater awareness of the need for conservation, especially in the university-educated sectors, influences by the seriousness of issues involving ecology, the environment and quality of life. These groups are represented in the legislature and possess a relatively high capacity to pressure the public authorities. The latter oscillate within a battle of interests at various levels, caught between adhering to these conservationist values and expectations or ceding to the interests and motivations of companies and individuals whose main frame of reference is the market, along with the already mentioned property rights and individual freedoms.

The position of the social scientist, particularly the anthropologist when faced with this complex and conflictual scenario, does not necessarily involve academic neutrality. However, our task of working to perceive and comprehend different points of view remains critical. At least since Simmel, we have known that conflict is a constitutive phenomenon of social life (see for example Simmel 1964 and 1971), which I perceive as a constant and uninterrupted process of negotiating reality, with comings and goings, setbacks and advances, alliances being forged and broken, and projects that adapt and alter in parallel with institutional and individual transformations.

The city and its heritage bring to the surface these issues of vital interest to sociological and anthropological theories. The heterogeneity of modern-contemporary complex society, dramatically manifested in the big cities and metropolitan areas, indicates the difficulties and limitations of any public action designed to defend and protect a heritage whose choice and definition necessarily implies judgment and, at some level, the exercise of power. We return to the old question of whether there are always winners and losers; in other words, in each case and situation, we need to be ready to evaluate the costs and gains of the decisions that are taken and the values that underwrite them.

Despite all these problems, I am convinced, returning to where I started, that protecting and registering the Casa Branca candomblé *terreiro* was the correct decision in terms of cultural policy, in spite – or indeed even because – of the debates and polemics it engendered. Such

clarity is not always possible, but when it is, we should strive to comprehend the complexity of these kinds of situations and conflicts, even if *a posteriori*.

Notes

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[1] Ministry of Education and Culture.

[2] National Historical and Artistic Heritage Service (*Serviço do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional*).

[3] Acts of the 108th meeting of the National Historical and Artistic Heritage Advisory Board, the Office of Culture, held on 31st May 1984.

[4] Seven board members were present at the meeting. I am the only one still living. I should add that at the time in question I was not yet 40 years old, while all my colleagues were over 65 years old.

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