

# Thales de Azevedo's influence on Brazilian studies by North- Americans: a personal note

As a result of its peculiar urban history and of certain characteristic life ways, Brazilians' study of Brasil has been characterized until quite recently, not by social science works dealing effectively with the national society, but rather with either regional studies or national studies viewed from somewhat regional perspectives. In this stream, we may cite such examples as Gilberto Freyre, Fernando de Azevedo, Florestan

Fernandes, Manuel Diegues, Jr., and even Celso Furtado.

I think that Thales de Azevedo is another such scholar, uniquely representing the city of Bahia and its hinterland. Although he has worked much more widely in Brasil than merely in Bahia, it is there that his greatest understanding, his greatest influence, and his foremost works have evolved. I would like to deal expressly with his influence as it affected a number of American colleagues

and myself, more, here, in the form of a personal document of appreciation than as a formal "paper".

Thales is profoundly Bahian. What being Bahian means has not yet precisely delineated, but all of us who have worked in more than one area or city of Brazil have a very definite feeling for what is Bahian as opposed to, say, Carioca, Paulista, or even Recife.

To be Bahian is to be aware of Salvador's having been the refulgent capital of colonial Brazil, with an opulence still to be seen in the great numbers of churches, so many adorned in colonial gold, in the antique elegance of rococo houses, in much of the content of the Salvador carnival.

To be Bahian is to have a sense of its variegated history and the shifting relationships between Salvador and its slowly cumulating and expanding interior — the sugar interior, the cattle interior, the gold and diamonds interior, the cacao interior, and, more recently, the petroleum and industrial interior attached to the national state by means of networks of cattle trails and other primitive roads, later shiplines, and, more recently, airlines and major highways, as well as new byways. Salvador has been the center for all of these and, in turn, has grown and changed from the effect of all, each leaving some kind of historical mark on the city — institution-

al, architectural, migrational, or otherwise.

To be a Bahian is to understand how the heritage of this history is played out today in the cultural understandings and systems of cues of the region and in local versions of *national* institutions and structures, as well as in specifically *local* institutions and structures. It is to understand how people behave as Brazilians in the Bahian context; how they understand the various layers of semantic codes that Kelleman's rightly described and how those codes have their Bahian version (in special forms of manipulation, I think); and, finally, how these behaviors and codes are played out within the parameters of the basic institutional structure of Brazil and its Bahian permutation.

To be Bahian means also to be aware, more intimately, perhaps, than anywhere else in Brazil, of the Africa moral and cultural orders infused into the Luso-Brazilian socio-political and cultural matrix. (Even in Rio, among the syncretic Afro-Brazilian religions comprised of macumba, umbanda, and quimbanda groups, one finds, on one hand, a turning to Bahia as an important source of inspiration and origin, as in the case of the saint, Pae Velho, or, on the other, a most prestigious valuation of the Bahian forms, the candomblés, also now found in Rio, with largely Bahian personnel.)

The African-Brazilian fusion relates to two other aspects of being Bahian. First is the extreme racial variation and the handling of this variation in terms of social discrimination and social hierarchy in a society where race does not define dichotomous aggregates, but somewhat fluid hierarchies of status levels. Second is a kind of religiosity which appears to me characteristically Bahian — combining a certain skepticism (“sou católico apostólico baiano”, as Bahians will often say, meaning, “I let it be and it lets me be”); a certain tolerance and understanding for personal variant and interpretation; and intensity of emotionality rather than a concern for doctrine; and a marked individualism of action often in the face of opposing authority (all of these seem to me perceptively portrayed in that penetrating movie, *O Pagador de Promessas*).

Finally, to be Bahian means also a concern for literary form and verbal expression, though not so much — as in Recife — for culture as such. The tacit or explicit admiration for a well-turned discurso — or even a badly-turned one when no other is available, regardless of content; the general adulation of the stylistic obscurities of “the greatest scientist of the world”, Ruy Barbosa (as some of my informants used to call him); the importance of Bahia and

Bahians in national letters, all attest to this. Perhaps as a special aspect of this Bahia’s reputation as a producer of pre-eminent jurists is also established.

A word about the permutations mentioned above. The peculiar urban-regional history referred to above involves a beginning in the captaincies and sesmarias and a moving through provincial and state phases up to the present. Unlike Spanish America, these political units — which were also economic and social to a considerable extent — had relatively great autonomy both from the crown and from each other. They therefore developed, given significant geographical and ecological foundations as well as different historical impingements (such as the Dutch conquest of Recife; the French threat to Rio; the deep Spanish influence in Rio Grande do Sul; and, later, the German influence in the other southern states), permutations of, and special adaptations to, the national institutions given form by the Crown and later by the Republican government. This history, ecologically, took place in the geographical framework of coastal enclaves which have only recently begun to mesh into a fully national societal structure, although they always had important economic and political connections (as in the export of xarque from Rio Grande do Sul to the northern slaveholding areas).

This history of local permutation and enclave growth underlies the emergence of the Brazilian social scientist as regional specialist or as comprehender of Brazil through regional eyes. On the other hand, the recent meshing into national societal structure has begun to produce an understanding of Brazil starting from the national level and sometimes working down to the regional. Such studies include the works of Juarez Brandão Lopes, Paulo Singer, José Honório Rodrigues, the more recent works of Otávio Ianni, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Leôncio Martins, and Celso Furtado.

Thales de Azevedo's pre-eminence seems to me as a regionalist, as a Bahian, despite his contributions on the gauchos and on European immigration. Perhaps his most significant works are his history of the settlement of Salvador and his study of race in Bahia, published in his *Color Elites of Bahia*, both topics of long-term interest to Thales. I think that both of these could best have been done mainly by a Bahian, at least as the first basic studies of the subjects. This is so because of the understandings and perspectives necessary to do such works — understandings and perspectives which are so characteristic of Thales.

This is what always recurs to me about Thales, when thinking over the almost twenty years of friendship, the several

episodes of active research collaboration, and the intervening periods of warm knowledge that both friendship and collaboration were always ready to be mobilized.

In thinking back over that history, I remember Thales as a constant font of perspectives and understanding, of insights about some element of process, some detail of custom, or some aspect of structure in Bahian society. He has always been, and appears more actively than ever to be, a stream of perception about things of Bahian culture and, very much, also, about their changes. His vision and kindly wit have kept him more awake than ever to these changes, which do not frighten him as so often a world in pervasive change — as Salvador and Bahia are today — does most people.

These comments bring me to what I think may be Thales' second greatest work — that is, the continual infusion of insight and sensibility about — and also enjoyment of and a somewhat ironic humor concerning — Bahia and its culture into so many younger scholars who came under his influence. Basic to Thales' capacity to do this is a combination of his apparently relatively easy acceptance of participation in the Bahian pattern of living with his equal capacity to see it from outside, as an object of observation, study, and reflection — and his capacity to

work with Americans with greatest generosity and modesty and without invidious competitiveness.

Also basic to this second great work and to his capacity to see Bahia so subtly is that Thales is Bahian. He grew up in the milieu of Bahian family relationships, Bahian Catholicism and religiosity, Bahian racial relationships, Bahian forms of humor and skepticism, the Bahian aesthetic of sea, red soil, palms, and patterns of rain and sun in the blue sea skies, the Bahian backdrop of monolithic sugar society and the pioneer massive economies of, first, mining and, later, cacao as these affected the structure and action of state politics and administration. He has long been a part of action and administration in Bahia in his own right — as lay Catholic and as professor and dean at the University of Bahia, a university itself peculiarly Bahian in culture and operation.

Thales' insight and sensibilities were infused in one degree or another into a number of us that I am aware of: Harry William Hutchinson, Marvin Harris, Ben Zimmerman, Carlo Castaldi (Italian, but then training at Columbia University) in an earlier season and, at a later one, such anthropologists as Conrad Kottak, David Epstein, Nan Pendrell, and many of the students from Columbia and Cornell who, having gone to Bahia in under-

graduate research programs, returned later as professional anthropologists, never having forgotten the first summer of their Brazilian content — in Bahia.

With Thales as Secretary of the Fundação para o Desenvolvimento da Ciência na Bahia, in the early 1950's, Bahia became something of a crucible for refining new American anthropologists and representatives of other disciplines (e.g. Rollic Poppino, in history), among whom are some of the best Brazilianists in the United States today. Thales became operational chief for a number of us — and at least for me, made the successful outcome of the field work possible through adept but unobtrusive administration: getting field helpers (which required requisitioning persons from other agencies of the State government); helping guide historical research on the cacao zone in Bahia; getting the necessary printing done; getting letters of introduction papers, identity cards and all the rest; providing transportation; arranging for money and so on.

But Thales was far more than operational chief. With his familial entourage, he visited the field sites, however difficult of access and long the road. This enabled him to bring his ever-increasing experience to bear on the understanding of the field work problems at the site, giving insights into local events

and contexts. He increasingly saw these local events and contexts in the perspective both of other localities — such as those studied by Hutchinson, Harris, Zimmerman, Altenfelder Silva, Procópio Camargo, Leeds, Castaldi, Poppino, Kottak, Thales himself, and others — and of the state of Bahia itself as a supra-local entity. This second viewpoint provided a different sort of insight for us, working in the field localities: an understanding of sets of constraints, of vertical relations, of the hierarchy of power — an insight which, in my case eventually led (if not forced) me to study national elites (including those using Bahia as an operational base) and in the national capital.

Finally, I think that Thales also influenced or gave stimulus in ways unique to each of us. Though Harris may have been interested in the race problem before he arrived in Brazil twenty years ago, nevertheless, Thales' highly refined and extensive sense of the race situation in Bahia, as clearly shown in his published work, appear to me to have been instrumental in helping define the issues and basic characteristics of these race relations so clearly that it made possible the kind of brilliant methodological and definitive substantive work on Brazilian color relations that Harris has carried out since. Thales' friendship and collaboration with persons who form

part of the class of sugar-plantation owners and his intimacy both with Bahian history and its present operational expressions helped formulate Hutchinson's outstanding work on the Recôncavo and his later extension of this work into other plantation areas of Brazil. Although Wagley never worked specifically in Bahia, I think that Thales gave a very definite cast to his understanding of race and class in Brazil.

In my own case, I think that his most significant influence was upon my understanding of the flow of custom and the modalities of interpersonal private behavior which are so fundamental in the operation of the societal apparatus and are precipitated in such social bodies as the *panelinha* and the *igrejinha*. He contributed to this understanding not only by his detailed and subtle commentary on the career and social group patterns and on the meaning of events in the careers of specific persons from a structural point of view, but also by allowing me to use him as one of the case histories. In that study, the Bahian data was incomparably the richest and the most revealing — both because of Thales' insight and because of the help, through personal contacts, introductions, and discussion, afforded by him and members of his family — Maria, his daughter, and Paulo, his son — who are in important

ways, also among those whom he has trained to be Bahian, to be Bahianists, and to be Brazilianists. The rest of us con-

sider ourselves, in one degree or another, Bahian by adoption — and extensions of Thales' extensive family.

*Tarma, Perú, and Austin, Texas, August-September 1970.*

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