



## Original articles

### Breaking the silence: the legacy of slavery and its transforming power in Brazilian popular culture

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#### Abstract

Based on ethnography, this paper analyzes the notion of captivity and its centrality to the practitioners of '*congada*', artistic manifestation of a religious nature, which is part of genuinely black and Brazilian traditions. It stresses that '*Congada*' breaks the silence about the slavery past in a singular way because it allows finding in this traumatic experience valuation elements of blacks and slaves' descendants, giving it, if not a place of honor, at least of respect in the Brazilian historical scene. The conclusion points to the fact that '*congada*' is part of an intangible cultural heritage of slavery, which carries a potential to challenge social inequalities.

**Key words:** Captivity. Inequality. Racism. Anthropology, cultural. Bioethics. Social sciences.



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'Congada' is a religious artistic manifestation developed amidst popular Catholicism, and its origin is linked to the notion of captivity. It comprises different groups denominated '*ternos* (groups of three)', guards or courts that play, dance, and sing verses praising saints such as Our Lady of the Rosary and Saint Benedict, in different rhythms. Led by a *captain* or *commander*, '*ternos*' gather around thirty people that keep kinship or compaternity ties, in addition to constituting a network of relationships in which solidarity and mutual assistance prevail.

Although people who do not consider themselves as blacks can participate in the groups, '*congada*' is perceived as *thing of blacks* in the cities where they occur. Men, women, and children parade normally, for nobody, fulfilling rigorously the function of paying homage to Our Lady of the Rosary. The devotion to the saint expressed in the dance is intrinsic to the experience of slavery, the context in which it was set the strong link of '*congadeiros* (congada members)' with Our Lady of Rosary and with Saint Benedict as well <sup>1,2</sup>.





According to narratives widely shared among 'congadeiros' from Upper Paranaíba, western region of Minas Gerais, the White Saint appeared in the middle of Woods to slaves and stayed at their side in moments of pain, even if lords tried continuously to transfer her to a chapel built in her honor. Her indefectible return to the space occupied by the slaves kept Constant, and it was only possible to transfer her definitively to the church when the captives themselves took her to the place, accompanying the route with their chants and dances.

The saint's preference for the enslaved blacks, manifested in the acceptance of the change of place, transformed them into the *people of Our Lady, the children of the rosary*, thus, giving back the human condition that captivity status had denied them. Equality status between lords and captives is established, even if restricted to the moment<sup>3</sup>. The slaves' dance remained in the 'ternos de congada', thought today as the unique forms of devotion to Our Lady of the Rosary. The periodic updating of the event occurs in festivities praising the Virgin and, more recently, also in the festivities of Saint Benedict and Saint Iphigenia. This allows to rekindle among 'congadeiros' the equality awareness established by intermediation of the Saint between blacks and whites or slaves and lords – that currently may be transposed for hierarchically unequal relationships, exemplified by the relationships between employers and employees<sup>4</sup>.

Thus, 'congada' reveals to be possible to find elements in slavery imaginary that allow elaborating a socio-cultural cosmology in which the negro appears in positive and socially acknowledged form. *Captivity* remembered by 'congadeiros' is not Just the place of victimized Black, where there is little to be valued, it is also the space for the enslaved as transforming agent of his reality – a kind of pedagogy for autonomy as Freire proposes<sup>5</sup>. After all, they were, through their chants and dance, who conquered the Love of Our Lady, revealing to the lords their positive value, which would enable them to occupy a standing position in the social order.

Therefore, 'congada', part of slavery intangible cultural heritage, may be seen as popular manifestation that carries in itself a contesting potential of social inequalities. In this sense, this work presentation seeks to stimulate bioethical reflection on the social and cultural inequalities that mark the country, collaborating toward changing society by means of deep knowledge of the historical and cultural reasons *that structure moral opinions*<sup>6</sup>, conform world visions, conditioning daily behavior and projecting inequity in the social life.

Even acknowledging that this type of analysis is not common in the bioethical realm, we consider that it may be pertinent not only as stimulus for consolidating transdisciplinarity<sup>7</sup>, but, mainly, because it *may provide the means for the empowerment of people by offering them a chance to understand that, in first instance, their life condition does not*





derive from personal incapability, but originates in the social structure manifested in its dynamics, in the way that each of society's segments are disposed and the power relationships established between them <sup>8</sup>.

Thus, the importance of extending the reflection raised by research to bioethics is due to the fact that, currently, this field of knowledge works with concepts deriving from human rights, such as equality, equity, vulnerability, that adequate themselves to the treatment of presented topic, just as seen in the *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights*, signed in 2005 within the scope of Unesco <sup>9</sup>. Additionally, bioethical reflection applied to the case presented in the Field research allows criticism to the status quo, crucial to the indispensable changes to transform the perverse features of the reported situation.

## Method

Before initiating the description and analysis of studied frame, common procedure in field research presentation in Social Sciences, it is necessary to present the features of the investigation that originated reflections by this article. It is a qualitative research developed from this field work undertaken in the town of 'Serra do Salitre' and surroundings located in Upper Paranaíba, western region of Minas Gerais. The project was carried out as research for doctorate study in Social Anthropology at the University of Brasilia (UnB), and the thesis was defended in September 2006 <sup>10</sup>.

The broader focus of the field work relied in the analysis of a subordinated social group and the forms of resistance activated by it by means of the manifestation of its popular culture.

The field work, participant observation and open interviews, was undertaken between February and September 2004 and it encompassed several location in the Upper Paranaíba region, which allowed going through several cities and to talk with 'congadeiros' from Patrocínio, Patos de Minas, Carmo do Paranaíba, Cruzeiro da Fortaleza, São Benedito, Salitre de Minas, Araxá, and Lagoa Formosa. However, the field work concentrated in the municipality of Serra do Salitre where the researched had lived.

All observations were noted down rigorously in the Field notebook and/or recorded, and later transcribe. Pictures of the studied group were taken, both during festivities and in daily life. Different religious festivities were also observed praising Our Lady of the Rosary, Saint Benedict, and Saint Iphigenia undertaken in distinct towns, as well as 'Congadeiros' Meetings that gathered 'congados' from several municipalities in the region. After the assessment and data collection period, several visits to the researched area were carried out until May 2006, with photographs exhibit of observed festivities, opened to the community.

## Captivity context

Slavery is thought, for many authors, exclusively as a set of negative associations to be forgotten and left -





behind. In its place, one stresses the African origin marked by historical magnitude, interrupted by slavery. Africa appears as generic and mythical notion, indifferent to the inter-racial variation, little located and frozen in the moment that black embarked in ships that would take them inside sorrows and horrors of captivity<sup>11</sup>.

To talk of this perspective in Brazilian studies, one can quote, particularly, the approach on the Afro-Brazilian cults by Carvalho<sup>12</sup>, who points to the omission of “captivity” present in the cults of the houses of Xango of Recife, which emphasize African gods and shut up in face of slavery, referring only to African experience prior to traffic and the experience of blacks after abolition as if the “captivity” had never existed. Nevertheless, Africa that appears as reference is diluted in a series of religious traces resulting in the syncretism between different religions and the Catholic religion, becoming, thus, a universe almost platonic, since everything that is carried out today is mere copy, imperfect, of the ancient glory, of the time when Africans did things (...). One feels in everything the insufficiency of the present and a desperate struggle to retain, or at least to record the human rich past experience<sup>13</sup>.

Afro-Brazilian cultural traditions and manifestations were, many times, transformed in a means to show the continuity with a past, African. To talk of a distinct and valued black culture, slavery is left behind and any desire to remember it becomes a hindrance, as

stated by Gilroy<sup>14</sup>. The same author proposes to perceive blacks as agents endowed with the cognitive capability and with intellectual history, which was denied to them by modern racism<sup>15</sup>. ‘Congadeiros’ from Serra do Salitre can, to certain extent, make possible the undertaking of this proposal.

In that locality, the reference to the *captivity time* as the *beginning of the world*, since which blacks are subordinated, is part of the popular historical perception shared by ‘congadeiros’, differently from the cult history taught in books and schools. ‘Congadeiros’ teach that a link with the past in *captivity* is enough to confer historical deepness to ‘congada’ and positive value to enslaved negro: *There are people who say that ‘congado’ came from Africa, (...) that African invented ‘congado’, since everything that is carried out today is mere copy, but that is wrong! This exists since the beginning of the world. This is thing of the ancient ones* (Queen Perpetua, responsible for the organization of festivity in praise of Our Lady of the Rosary).

The *root* category refers to slave origin and it expresses the continuous link with this past, being core reference to understand ‘congada’ regarding the constitution of its different rhythms, hierarchy of groups, forming of leaderships and meaning that emerge from it. It is the closeness with the root that confers authenticity to ‘congados’, something different than what some Church representatives highlight who, tuned in large extent with purposes and ideologies of the Association of Black Priest and Bishops, attributed





legitimacy to the dance as consequence of its supposed African origin, praised in the masses undertaken during the festivities.

Perspectives such as this, which praise the experience in Africa in detriment to slavery, can be seen as attempts to invert the subordinate social position historical occupied by the negro in the Americas. To that end, they assure previousness of African civilization in face of the Western civilization, inverting the status relation between the terms. Negroes became dominant in virtue of the previous culture, and to the whites is targeted a subordinate role <sup>16</sup>.

In parallel, the valuation of slave descent by means of 'congada' does not suggest social inversion, but an attempt to value its participants, and placing them, during festivities, in a more equal and less asymmetric position in face of the remaining local society. Objective achieved by the updating of the religious event that established greater equality between lords and slaves. Today, 'congadeiros', as example of this founding event, seek public acceptance and recognition of their singular form of praise, but they do not intend with it a rupture with the established order nor an inversion of it hierarchy.

Another black cultural manifestation equally marked by the non-rupture with the established order is 'capoeira' <sup>17</sup>. The indirect facing present in the blows and movement of 'capoeira' expresses Black resistance in slavery supporting society based

prior in negotiation, possibilities of bargaining and concession that in rebellions or direct confrontation: In 'capoeira', the body, perceived as memory support, speaks about slavery and through swaying, mainly, expresses this opposition between accommodation and resistance, configuring, therefore, a mixture of fight, game, and dance, fruit of a negotiation for autonomy and social recognition initiated in captivity <sup>18</sup>.

Our Lady of the Rosary appearance and her acceptance to be carried and transferred only by blacks placed lords and slaves in the same level of humanity. If the full symbolic liberation from slavery would be achieved only by this awareness of equality <sup>19</sup>, religious festivities in Upper Paranaíba periodically update this awareness and become refined forms of the struggle against the effects of poverty and discrimination experienced by today's 'congadeiros'. This struggle could be fought by the remembering and valuation of an African ancestry, however, mostly for the Serra do Salitre 'congadeiros', the memory that emerges is linked to slavery and it is from this traumatic past that one elaborates a form of social refutation that mixes art and devotion.

Serra do Salitre's 'congado' festivities constitute ritual events in which equality between 'congadeiros', poor and blacks in its majority, can be momentarily established with members of the social elite, but it does extend to other moments of the social life. This seems to result from the different ways that the memory of slavery can be activated by 'congadeiros' and non-'congadeiros' from the city, in a symbolic





rescue of human dignity of the former <sup>20,21</sup>.

### How does captivity appear?

In most times, captivity tells of a situation marked by exploitation, physical abuse, lack of freedom and productive autonomy. Usually, one refers to a period connected to the past, either a distant past, when *captivity* is synonym of the *slavery age*, of *slave quarters*, and *cowardice with the blacks*, or a close past in which there was not a formal slavery, such as that of the negroes, but reached rural workers coming from other regions, mostly from the Northeast, which many years after abolition went to work in coffee plantations in the Upper Paranaíba submitted to similar deprivations and discriminations. Reports narrated with some frequency by the '*congadeiros*' of the town.

A recurring story refers to a farmer who bought a truck load of '*baianos*' to work in his land and promoted the Constant indebtedness of employees, preventing them, thus, to leave the plantation until they paid their travel and everything they consumed in order to get settled. *Captivity*, thus, tells of a situation that establishes certain assumptions of inferiority to the enslaved and in the region reached preferentially but not exclusively, the Black people.

'Congada', while a dance of African origin, currently gathers all those who identify in their family histories situations of

deprivations attributed to *captivity*. 'Congados' aggregate, for this reason, descents of Black captives who built the Serra do Salitre and its farms, as well as those workers' children and grandchildren, who did not consider themselves as negroes, but recognize slavery as part of their past as group. For these people, it is urgent to update periodically Our Lady of the Rosary appearance and their recognition of the enslaved value for the white saint. If this reminds the degrading condition that tied the enslaved to lords, the event updating seems to institute na awareness of equality between employers and employees. To remember this event is to cultivate a memory of captivity, transforming and restoring self-esteem of the enslaved descents.

In the other hand, to remember the cowardice intrinsic to slavery is, for many, to update subordination and suffering that marked dancers' antecessors. If 'congada' reminds a transforming moment, this should be praised in the days of festivities, while captivity deprivations are part of the slavery memory carefully hidden by '*congadeiros*' in their daily life, but sometimes reminded with cruelty by local elite members, descent of ancient lords. The memory of slavery is not transforming, when activated in this way, but rather reinforcing current subordination of negroes, perpetuating in them the social status that characterized their antecessors.

The stories of suffering pervade family memory of the majority of Serra do Salitre '*congadeiros*',





who can point out the physical and psychological marks left by captivity in dancers' grandparents and great grandparents. Many 'congadeiros' stress also the existence of relatives who were not captives because they were born after abolition, but who equally lived dominated by bosses, submitted to the same cowardice that had reached the others. Thus, not wanting to touch the subject reveals more as an attempt to hide this pain than as a denial way or omission of this past. As revealed by a leader of one of the four 'ternos' of 'congado' from Serra do Salitre: "They are sadness, which we do not like to talk about and do not like to remember, and that we want to forget", but that we are unable. After all, it is striking the remembering of

grandparents and great-grandparents who were born *captives* and brought the marks of slavery in their bodies, such as lack of fingers in their feet or hand (or deformation of them), which acted as diacritical marks among slaves in each plantation.

It stands out also the remembering of antecessor who did not talk about captivity with their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, but who reproduced in their relationships the physical abuses standards lived one day in this context: "Eul thought that my grandmother was mean to me because she had been much abused, my gosh... She beat me with a raw leather belt, and afterwards she made me sleep on top of a big box, without blanket, pillow, without anything. She did not allow me to go to bed, it was cold... (...) I went also with her to farmed area, and she placed a sack of beans on top of my head. She was really mean. Oh, my Lord!" (80 years old 'congadeira', explaining grandmother's meanness if anyone would disobey her).

'Congadeiros' prefer to silence on such facts, although they may eventually report something, but slavery memories emerge at every moment in urban and rural landscapes of Serra do Salitre and other municipalities, breaking this silence as stone walls, big houses with tiles *made in the slaves' thighs*, in addition to basements located in the underground of houses and targeted to *captive blacks*. The stone walls built by the slaves are important emblems of captives' hard lives who transport for long distances innumerable quantities of stones targeted to the bases or foundations of walls and houses of the region.

Therefore, the *slave's quarters age*, refers to racial slavery, but slaves' quarters mentioned herein appears as a symbol of the period, not as much as concrete reference. Similarly to the stone walls over which the town's new buildings were constructed, the *ancient slaves and their descents remain invisible* for the local elite. Their importance in the present and in the past is little acknowledged, but they are crucial for the region's development.

Differently of 'congada's' participants, the older representatives of the town's founding elite may easily remember captivity and talk about *this past of cowardice with blacks* without much constraints. This remembering seems, often, wanting to praise long ago family wealth, certified by the quantity of enslaved negroes in plantations. About the physical abuse inherent to the period, they point that more *tyrant farmers* or with more *pro-slavery spirits*





were the *others*, never their own ancestors. In their speech, such heirs sought to stress the affection that also pervade the relationship of the lords with their captives: “*My mother used to tell that they had much fondness with the blacks, that the black women came by horse with lady, with all consideration...But there was another family (...) that was really mean... The man rode the horse and the slave had to run ahead to open the gate, if he did not managed, he got beaten [laughs]*” (descent from a traditional family).

Another indelible mark of slavery can be found in the *signing names* and, mostly, in ‘*congadeiros*’ nicknames. Slaves’ descents in this context may, eventually, carry the family name of their captive ancestors’ lords, in such manner that families with social status diametrically opposed are, sometimes, identified by the same family name. In their turn, nicknames may also refer to slavery in as much as they juxtaposed the individual’s name to the place where He had once worked as captive. Who worked at the ‘*Fazenda da Areia*’ (Sand Farm) was, therefore, known as Someone from the ‘*Areia*’, a derogatory nickname in the vision of those who got it, as it perpetuated the submission that the individual had undergone.

Thus, names and nicknames seem to meet an encompassing logic <sup>22</sup> that reveals a relationship of domination. The second element embraces the first, indicating to who this is subordinated, and to who he belongs. The enslaved, thus, belonged to families and plantations, the

perpetuation of these nicknames in their descents, denominated, now, as Mr. So-and-so, grandchild of Mr. So-and-So from “*Areia*”, became, along with other scars, social marks of slavery that hit his ancestors.

The silence or constrain to talk about the cowardice of captivity seems an attempt to distance the image of the victimized and oppressed slave that could be transferred to his descents, whose life histories are equally pervaded with suffering, now deriving from poverty and exploitation experience in work. For this reason, to Access life histories of members of ‘*ternos*’ can be a hard task, interweaved by evasive replies and marked by typical corporal Standards: curved body, shrunk shoulders, lowered head and fugitive glance, which almost does not face his interlocutor. As counterpart, when the same individuals speak of the festivities and on their role in them their voice pitch rises and the rhythm speeds up, the words flow out, and the posture is now erect, the head up, and constant smile, which also are reproduced when they play, dance, and sing verses in honor to the saint.

The disciplinary power clearly shows up in the body, such as stated by Foucault <sup>23,24</sup>, and it becomes the celebration moment of equality established by the saint between lords and slaves (or between rich and poor). ‘*Congada*’ is the primary way to update the experience of this human dignity for bringing in itself the freedom of movements that opposes to *captivity* constriction. Thus, by reproducing the cultural element of the celebration, ‘*congadeiros*’ seek to achieve (even if





momentarily) the rights intrinsic to peacefully with the rural workers of these human condition, manifesting autonomy localities. “Just ask for license!”, repeat the and freedom inherent to them in the ‘*congadeiros*’, teaching how to deal with body, sight, and in speech. the phenomenon.

The last manner used by ‘*congadeiros*’ to speak These stories suggest that in the labor world, the about the *time of cowardice* without causing divisor line between past and present becomes constraints to the speaker, refers to the haunting very fragile – as happens during the festivities histories told with enthusiasm by some of the that recreate Our Lady of the Rosary dancers: “*That ghosts exist, they do exist!* (...) appearance. However, if the ‘*ternos of congada*’ *There in the ‘Capao Fundo’, there is a house in religious celebrations remind public that you see slaves been beaten, to move the cans and recognition of the enslaved, the ghosts in the to cook. States D [rural worker and ‘congada’ dancer in livestock ranches that develop the same the city] who got up one night and heard them [the activities of living workers, make cowardice ghosts] beat rice and beans in the ground. They present, indicating the permanence of gathered the horses, saddled the horses, touched exploitation in current labor relationships. everything, do you know? And once could see them singing nicely. One Day, the J [the plantation owner] Thus, in some way, the ghost phenomenon said: “In the moment that they mess with the appears as possibility of reaction to cows, I will open fire!” That was it, he got up inequalities in current life and work and shot the dark, shot really nice, but only lay conditions, even if such response down food, it was ghost. D saw already a manifests just in playful way, as a kind of man standing right at the corral, and he said *revenge* emanated from hypersensitive then: “I Will ask them if they milked lots of cows, order that, similar to the saint’s because I, myself, am not doing anything, they intervention, resizes the relationships milk all night long ...” [laughs] (‘*terno*’ dancer of between power holders and subalterns. Serra do Salitre Mozambique’). Slaves devalued in the past appear projected as invisible eerie presence, imposing their existence on current farmers and workers.*

In such narratives, the suffering of the past remains in the figure of slaves ghosts that peopled the region and perpetually remaining as captives in the plantations that they haunt. The slave’s image, however, suffers now a transformation: the victim of captivity becomes an agent of reality, who reacts to past by revenging the *cowardice* in the ancient lords’ descents. While they scare and make insane the grandchildren of their executioners, they live in This figure that scares bosses suggest an inversion, since captive (because they are dead already) became unachievable and they cannot be physically abused anymore, although remaining connected to the condition of oppressed. If in plantations ghosts act ion impose recognition of captives’ presence and Importance, the descent of ancient slaves impose in





festivities, through the 'congada', a form of valuation and acceptance. Slavery makes itself contemporary in ghost stories, as well as in 'congada'. Ancestors suffering, in both, do not constrain their descents. Through the action of elements from the hypersensitive realm (Our Lady of the Rosary and the ghosts) the deprivations from captivity become, in some way, innocuous to today's dancers.

Members of 'congada' seem to prefer, when is not time of festivities, not to mention slavery from family memory. As mentioned, relics from this past invade urban and rural, and they denounce the striking presence of captivity in Upper Paranaíba. But, it is during religious festivities that slavery memory is again strikingly activated by slaves' descents, who in the dance remember the transformation of black captives in the people of Our Lady of the Rosary. The remembering of *cowardice* is present inevitably, but, in these moments, sadness can be controlled by the limits of the ritual, which has a precise timing to begin and to end.

### The centrality of captivity and its updating

If the word *root* refers to origin, which for 'congadeiros' is inseparable from *captivity*, slavery, for the local elite, is also of utmost importance to think on formation of the city, in addition to be guiding experience for current relationships between employers and employees. Such relationships seem to perpetuate, somehow, the exploitation experience in captivity. Although physical

abuses of that context are not reproduced explicitly, some practices, such as not receiving cash payment (when they receive something in exchange for their services) or having their entrance and exit from work rigorously controlled by employers, may destitute today's employees of their autonomy, as happened with the captives.

Slavery was the *beginning of everything* for the *captives' descents* and the founding context of the settlement, which later would turn into Serra do Salitre. The first official action of the peace district of Serra do Salitre was in 1872, inclusively, the registry of the sale of a slave<sup>18, 25</sup>. If slavery instituted the world for 'congadeiros' and the civil routine of the city, the negro in this context does not exist either before or unconnected to this subaltern social condition. Captivity is, therefore, strongly included in the local imaginary about the past and, as result, the negro appears non-dissociated from slavery, which has been confirmed since Gilberto Freyre<sup>26</sup>.

Color and slave ancestry can emerge in this context as diacritical traces of the population, difference affirmed by local elite member, which establish and reinforce the distance between *us* and the *others* in these terms. Black John, Little Nigger Mechanic, Little Nigger, and Mr. Delfino Nigger, as well as Mr. So-and-So of 'Miguel da Areia', are nicknames that evoke this difference, marked by color and origin in *captivity*. Negroes are, therefore, perceived by the founding families of the city as a distinct group, which should remain subordinated to the remnant.





While negroes have *manias* – derogatory in the condition as ‘*boia-fria*’ (cold meal); and in word that denotes some type of this lesser number, in livestock ranches, mental unbalance marked by rendering different services connect to praise – traditional families have *habits* maintenance of these animals. In the and *traditions*. As *manias*, are city, they may occupy positions of characterized their own way of speech, street cleaners, watchdogs, servants, walk, dress (or not dress, as it is the domestic workers, and, more rarely, of case of the feet, often barefoot) and shop workers. To the eyes of the local also the praising to Catholic saints in elite, the inferiority attributed to the ‘*congada*’. At the same time that the enslaved in the past is today presented difference of negroes is underlined by as intrinsic features of the negro and, local elite, it is also a diminishing and consequently, of the poor <sup>27</sup>. This devaluation factor. Aversion to *manias* naturalized racism and prejudice, turning of the blacks makes ‘*congada*’ them *instinctive* to the eyes of some city something equally depreciated and little dwellers.

acknowledged by part of this group. But, it may be appropriated eventually by the local political system in an aseptical ways and as folklore, either in civic festivities in the municipality or during electoral campaigns.

The majority of ‘*congadeiros*’, in its turn, can perceive as negro, what is not a strict rule, but they do not usually attribute to color the forming causes of the features that differentiate them from the local elite. Their modes of dressing and speak, for example, are derived from their poverty and of the consequent lack of schooling. Their specific form of devotion to Our Lady of the Rosary is, irrefutably, attributed to captivity, while today is shared by all that consider themselves as captives’ descents (negroes or not), who currently have subaltern position in the city.

Discrimination associated in the locality of blacks and slaves’ descents was, thus, transferred to the poor, which associates such categories, turning them often synonyms. The majority of ‘*congadeiros*’ works in farming,

The world, which in the past could be divided between whites and negroes or lords and slaves, currently is perceived as split between rich and poor, which encompasses that division in as much as poverty in Serra do Salitre has predominant color. Separation is verified by Serra do Salitre dwellers, but it is not rigid or fixed, it does not imply, for example, in existence of quarters exclusively targeted to one of these social classes. Poor and rich may live side by side, but traffic between their houses is limited and guided by hierarchy. The closeness does not imply in acceptance or valuation of those who have subaltern positions, which is especially reflected in the religious festivities when the local elite remains indifferent to the ‘*ternos of congada*’ that bring joy to the city and are conducted by their employees.

Usually, is in the condition of employees that ‘*congadeiros*’ attend the houses of the elite, as well as it is in the figure of the boss who requests services or as politician seeking for votes that the rich traffic among the poor. A symmetric relationship





between these different social types hardly is achieved. When it happens, in exceptional cases, there is immense difficulty by 'congadeiros' in finding a category capable to express this type of relationship. The rich who attend their houses without interest can be taken either as *blacks* or *poor like us*. For the local elite, in their turn, this traffic will be attributed with political or instrumental meaning, companionship as a favor to a subaltern to be paid back in votes or loyalty in labor issues.

Despite this division, the relationships between employers and employees may be marked, simultaneously, by affection and hierarchy, a standard of ambiguous relationship possibly inherited from captivity experienced in Serra do Salitre. The presence of basements located in the underground of houses and targeted to captive, instead of slaves' quarters, seem emblematic of this relationship kept one day between lords and slaves. Captives were primary part of the house, been close and mixing up, thus, with their foundations.

Therefore, they were the foundations of that structure, subordinated to it, oppressed by it and imperceptible to the organization that they supported. Just as the basement contiguous to the houses, the slaves maintained with the lords a close and metonymic relationship that could generated among relationships of friendship and intimacy, but it did not prevent the presence of cowardice, or resulted in an equality participation of negroes in the social order that they built

and helped to maintain. "They were as if a family", one could have praised, what seemed to turn them doubly captives, by affection and by physical domination exerted over them.

This double feature of captivity that acted in the subordination of the enslaved negro in Serra do Salitre remained in force after abolition, when slaves became aggregates to the farms where they worked, and it reappears in a very close past transposed in the figure of servants. These are referred to adopted people adopted when children by affluent families to exercise, first, tasks connected to children caring, been then denominated as *page* and, later, they became domestic workers, been responsible for all housework. They got, in exchange, food and clothing, but not getting any monetary remuneration.

Similar to the word captive, the category of *servant* also condenses the meanings linked to the hierarchy and to affection. At the same time in which the servant takes care of the house and the physical reproduction of it, he is supported and he feels cared by the lords' families. The affection inherent to the situation ends up forming a debt and gratitude feeling that morally imprisons servants in this relationship. The debt changes into loyalty and it may transpose successive generations, and it usual that servants' children become employees of the lords' children, but now as wage workers.

Affection reinforces servant's subordination since it prevents rupture with the physical and moral domination existing in there. As the enslaved, the





servant may have his autonomy hindered, in as much as employers regulate entrance and exit of work. In parallel, they are captured affectively by those who dominate them. *“It seems that tenderness captivates us, isn't it?”* A servant woman repeats. *The implicit condition of paternalism, traditionally related to raising poor children by well to do families, reveals itself as aggravating circumstance in the spurious situation in which these children find themselves. Reciprocity inherent to the survival gift does not imply just in meeting work demands, but adds up to the need of “hand kissing”- of those that patronize, installing a perverse morality that intend to instill respect or waken Love for those who inflict harm*<sup>28</sup>.

The servant expresses, thus, the permanence nowadays of the exploitation and affection relationship established once between lords and captives. As shown in several reports: *“I remember that my grandmother worked in the house of some people and she made lots of biscuits. I went wither sometimes and I remember her never taking a biscuit for the kids and grandchildren. Only one a while the patroness allowed her to take home some biscuits because they were old and in that house nobody would eat them”* (dancer of the *‘Vilao Fantástico’* from Serra do Salitre).

The importance of captivity to think on the hierarchical relationships at Serra do Salitre appears in acute for in these situations. In post-slavery context, the figure of the servant seemed to derive from compaternity relationships maintained between patrons and employees. In these cases, compaternity is associated to vertical ties (patronage), since it establishes in a

hierarchical relationships in which power inequality between patrons and employees prevents the symmetric exchange between parties also connected in a friendship relationship<sup>29</sup>. What patrons offer are things immediately tangibles, such as economic help and work, while employees pay back the support with intangible advantages, such as loyalty and gratitude demonstrations. Godfathers are substitute parents Who should raise the godchildren in absence of biological parents. ‘Congadeiros’ attribute immense responsibility to the link established between godparents and godchildren. For this reason, when the horizontal compaternity relationship establishes between them, one fears to baptize someone and in the future not been able to bear with the obligation to replace godchild’s parents in accentuated poverty condition. In a scenario where mortality rates among workers due to labor accidents and lack of basic sanitation increase, the possibility of godparents to raise a child is high. If this occurs, ‘congadeiros’ godchildren will be perceived as children and brothers in the family that shelters them.

In vertical compaternity, established between patrons and employees, in the other hand, the servant is created. For the later, the godparents become a mix of father and patron, ambivalence present, for example, in the speech in which the *godmother* becomes patroness when affection and admiration are replaced by obedience, which reveals the lack of autonomy characteristic in this





relationship: “When my father died, my mother thought that she wouldn’t be able to raise us, then I was not raised by my mother.

*She gave me to my godmother, a very good woman, who helped the poor (...). I do not forget that I was a ten years old girl when a ‘terno’ came to dance here in Serra, but my patroness, this lady that raised me, did not like us to go out. Thus, I wouldn’t go out, I couldn’t go for a walk, couldn’t get close. I stayed at the veranda watching the festivity, always wishing to be there amidst dancers, and I said then: One day I will get my freedom!”*

(dancer from the ‘Canarinhos da Serra’).

expressed today in poverty and in the prejudice that involves them. The devaluation of poor and negroes of Serra do Salitre seems to generate the invisibility of this portion of population, what is especially felt in the physical absence in the daily routine of the city, when, from six in the morning to five thirty in the afternoon, remain in livestock farms or coffee plantations rendering diverse services. Festivities in which ‘congados’ present themselves, emerge for ‘terno’ dancers as upmost instances of visibility, when slaves’ descents Express themselves in the condition of acknowledged and valued group.

### Final considerations

In physical and moral *captivity* that remains guiding social relationships between the elite and popular strata in Serra do Salitre, ‘congada’ emerges as synonym of freedom. During festivities, corporal postures are the most explicit indicator of this liberation. Curved postures disappear during the dance and give place to standing and proud head that loves Our Lady of the Rosary. ‘Congada’, in this sense, seems to carry a confrontation potential of inferiority attributed to the poor descent of captives, in as much as that the dance updates the social recognition by the white saint who moved to pity of enslaved negroes and valued them. The valuation of slaves present in the ‘congada’ allows that slavery to be remembered through a transforming memory, that does not invert social positions, but raises self-esteem of portion of the population identifying with *captivity* and suffering effects of this past,

Through ‘congada’, today dancers seek public valuation of their form of honoring inherited from captivity, aim at recognition of their social importance, as well as consolidation of their citizenship. But, similarly to what happened in slavery, members of ‘ternos’ deal daily with prejudice and periodically with indifference and disrespect in relation to its cultural tradition, in addition to experiencing in daily routine of social life the consequences of stigmas attributed to these groups in the past. The awareness of equality set by Our Lady seems, thus, to have been momentary, passing and restricted to the enslaved, and today perpetuated by their descents, but little present in the population that surrounds them. Festivities are, therefore, particular moments highlighted in daily life. In them, the silence about slavery is broken in terms of the slaves’ descents themselves, whose voices echo in the



'congados' that present and update this awareness of equality. 'Congada' unveils the confrontation potential of popular culture, which allows its practitioners to lead in a playful with poverty and discrimination that affects them.

The revelation of this picture allows grasping in which measure inequalities in access to educational and socioeconomic opportunities still are segmented in the Brazilian society, restricting citizenship of a large portion of population. In this sense, inequality issue, appearing in the notion of captivity, which impacts oppressors and oppressed in described society, reveals an eminently bioethical problematic, particularly when one considers Brazilian bioethics in its social trend<sup>30-33</sup>.

Incorporation of human rights to the field of bioethics, through the *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights*, allowed topics related to non-discrimination and non-stigmatization become to be discussed in the context of a discipline, as set forth in Article 11, specifically targeted to aspects discussed in this article: *No individual or group should be discriminated or stigmatized for any reason. What would constitute violation of human dignity, human rights, and basic freedom*<sup>9</sup>.

Therefore, discussions open to reflection, which involve ethnical minorities and social groups in vulnerability context that, thus, can be contemplated not only by revelation of the problematic affecting them, as usually is done in social sciences, but in the discussion about the ethical meaning of these circumstances. Thus, with the Declaration, the field of bioethics incorporated social topics revealing itself as an arguing tool in the struggle for changing unfair features that still mark social reality of peripheral countries<sup>33</sup>. In this sense, one underlines the importance of discussing about cultural rights that deserve deepened reflection both by particularity of cultural manifestations of each people, segment, group, or community regarding its association with the socioeconomic dimensions of human rights.

Then, it is important that those who dedicate to this field, as well as to other areas that one cannot omit in face of verification of inequalities still present in the Brazilian social framework, deepening reflection on the topic, since inequities among blacks and whites in Brazil can be checked beyond the limits of this research<sup>34</sup>. Providing visibility to this situation through bioethics is, therefore, an attempt to stimulate reflection and debate on these adverse conditions, seeking to achieve social justice for all.

## Resumo

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Quebrando o silêncio: o legado da escravidão e seu poder transformador na cultura popular brasileira

Baseado em etnografia, o presente texto analisa a noção de *cativeiro* e a sua centralidade para os praticantes da congada, manifestação artística de cunho religioso que faz parte das tradições genuinamente negras e brasileiras. Ressalta que a congada quebra o silêncio sobre o passado da escravidão de forma singular, pois permite encontrar nessa experiência traumática elementos de valorização do negro e do descendente de escravos, conferindo-lhe lugar senão de honra, pelo menos de respeito na cena histórica brasileira. A conclusão do estudo aponta para o fato de a congada ser parte de uma herança cultural intangível da escravidão, que traz em si um potencial contestador das desigualdades sociais.

**Palavras-chave:** Cativeiro. Desigualdade. Racismo. Antropologia cultural. Bioética. Ciências sociais.

## Resumen

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Rompiendo el silencio: el legado de la esclavitud y su poder transformador en la cultura popular brasileña

Basado en etnografía, este trabajo analiza el concepto de *cautiverio* y su centralidad para los practicantes de *congada*, manifestación artística de carácter religioso, que forma parte de las tradiciones realmente negras y brasileñas. Se hace hincapié en que la *congada* rompe el silencio sobre el pasado de la esclavitud de forma singular porque permite encontrar en esa experiencia traumática elementos de valoración del negro y del descendiente de esclavos, concediéndole lugar sino honor, por lo menos de respeto, en la escena histórica Brasileña. La conclusión del estudio apunta al hecho de que la *congada* sea parte de una herencia cultural intangible de la esclavitud, que lleva implícito una potencial respuesta a las desigualdades sociales.

**Palabras-clave:** Cautiverio. Desigualdad. Racismo. Antropología cultural. Bioética. Ciencias sociales.



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