Reis, João José. - *A morte é uma festa: ritos funebres e revolta popular no Brasil do século XIX*

Monsieur Richard Graham

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religions rituelles, comme le candomblé et l’umbanda, et les religions éthiques, comme le kardécisme et le pentecôtisme. Cette distinction est tout à fait opérante lorsqu’on se cantonne au discours ou à l’idéologie véhiculée par ces religions. Mais dès lors qu’on s’intéresse aux pratiques sociales des unes et des autres, les distinctions s’estompent pour laisser apparaître de grandes similitudes. La différence entre la glossolalie, le don de prophétie du pentecôtisme et la parole médiumnique du possédé est minime. À l’inverse, la liberté d’action de l’umbandiste par rapport à l’adepte du candomblé est sans commune mesure. La rigidité du règlement dans un territoire de candomblé le rapproche sans conteste des communautés pentecôtistes.

R. Prandi semble avoir une vision un peu trop « christianocentrée » des religions lorsqu’il se pose la question de l’absence de dogme dans le candomblé, ce qui freinerait ses prétentions à l’universalité. Une fois encore, la pratique sociale vient lui donner tort : il n’est qu’à voir l’usage qu’en font les Brésiliens de toutes les couches sociales pour savoir que la question du dogme ne se pose pas. En considérant le candomblé comme une alternative religieuse parmi tant d’autres, l’auteur nous laisse entrevoir, de façon fort pertinente, le paradoxe de la société brésilienne qui s’est construite autour du concept d’identité métisse, concept qu’elle revendique à chaque étape de son évolution et qui, au même moment, se cloisonne dans une hiérarchie de couleurs et de classes très prénante et à laquelle il est difficile d’échapper si ce n’est dans la multitude d’alternatives religieuses qui lui permet de re(-trouver) son identité métisse.

Emmanuelle Kadya Tall


Thresholds and boundaries loom large in any culture, and of these liminal moments none is more significant than death. The rituals that accompany it and the meaning attached to those dramatic acts reveal both the actors’ cosmology and their understanding of their social place. In a slave society like that found in early nineteenth-century Salvador (Bahia), the finely ranked distinctions of status, color, and wealth made for sharp distinctions in ways of dying, but did not break a uniform conviction that they mattered.

In this richly researched book, Professor Reis, of the Federal university of Bahia, explores every detail of death and dying in that time and place. He describes how people prepared for death, first, by writing wills in which they commended their souls to God, planned their funerals, determined the number of masses to be said for their souls, distributed worldly goods, settled debts, and recognized their natural children. The moribund then received the last sacraments and prepared his or her soul to ward off last-minute temptations of the devil, while neighbors gathered, lit candles, concocted home-made medicines, and began to prepare clothes to be worn by the deceased. Great store was placed on thus securing a “good death”.

After death, the soul had to be aided on its way out of this world. Household members secured the robes of religious orders, preferably Franciscan (although this varied by social class and color). Mourning clothes had to be prepared for the living. A carpenter, cabinet-maker, and other specialists would be contracted
to build the table on which the corpse would lie and to drape it in black along with the doors and windows while musicians were hired to play. Invitations in the wake and funeral procession would be printed and distributed. Family members notified the lay brotherhoods to which the deceased belonged, so that the largest possible number of members could accompany the body to the church where it would be buried, carried in a rented coffin and delivered into the grave in a shroud. Torches and candles lit the way, as the preferred time for these processions was at night. The ranked order of the processants gave visual expression to the social estates of society at large. Alms would be distributed to those poor who has joined the procession, both to enlarge the retinue and to display the paternalistic values that need be exalted. And the largest possible number of priests set about saying masses "with the body present" as well as in the days, months, and years to come. As much as a third to a half of the estate (and in some cases even more) could be used up in these expenses, among which those for masses were especially important, as they could assure the soul a more rapid passage through purgatory.

In all this the lay brotherhoods played and especially important role. Hundreds of such brotherhoods and third orders existed and one of their principal purposes was to assure their members and appropriately pompous funeral and numerous masses. Some were restricted to the white elite, others limited their membership to Black or to mulattos, some attracted particular professions, but all contributed to what Reis calls the "baroque" funerals characteristic of Salvador at the beginning of the last century. The more prosperous brotherhoods had, over decades and centuries, built their own churches; other had to be content with a side chapel in an existing church. In either case, burial within the church building, or at least in the church burial vaults or church yard, formed one of the principal privilege of membership. The alternative could be an ignominous mass grave such as was reserved for slaves.

When enlightened medical practice, seeking scientific explanation for epidemic and endemic disease, yet still short of bacteriological discoveries, seized upon "miasmas" as its principal cause, the presence of decomposing bodies in closed church buildings where people gathered amongst a fetid stink appeared a clearly dangerous practice. For the sake of public health, argued the new generation of doctors and reformers, burials should be moved to cemeteries. Meanwhile the Catholic Church distanced itself from the gaudy displays of popular religion and from belief in souls that, for want of a good burial, haunted the living. Bishops and archbishops found little to object to in the proposed prohibition against burial in churches. The provincial legislature passed such a law and a new cemetery was built to accommodate the change.

That set the stage for major clash. An end to economic prosperity and novel political institutions within the newly independent Empire coincided with this split in world-view between the common people and the elite. Traditional practices that fit the accepted social order has been placed in doubt, for cemeteries—not yet filled with gravestones and mausoleums—resembled a mass grave. The people would have none of it. Possibly encouraged by those who stood to lose business, a riot broke out in 1836 that destroyed the newly-built cemetery and threatened to spread disorder unless the new law rescinded.

Professor Reis has ably reconstructed the issues that lay behind this riot, as he has placed the funeral practices of the day within the social and economic
context of the time. Writing clearly and pleasantly, often displaying a keen sense of humor, he has presented us with a book that is both enjoyable and instructive. Although one may wish he had said more to account both for the fact that the “baroque” way of death survived so late in Brazil and for its eventual demise, he nevertheless deals astutely with change over time. His underlying argument is for the autonomy of culture, but he does not belabor the point. The wealth of documentary material consulted, the broad bibliography, the comparisons made with France and England, the quantitative and qualitative data, the appropriate examples, all contribute toward making his book a major contribution to social history.

Richard Graham