Building a quilombola identity from the body/ cultural practice of *jongo*

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Abstract: This paper aims to describe the process of building a *quilombola* (Brazilian maroon) identity from the body/cultural practice of *jongo*. A qualitative study was conducted in the *quilombola* community of Santa Rita do Bracuí, in the city of Angra dos Reis, state of Rio de Janeiro. Empirical data accumulated over two years of work (2010 and 2011) make up a vast amount of material combining ethnographies of *jongo* rounds with in-depth interviews conducted with key characters. The community has been building and reaffirming their *quilombola* identity around the body/cultural practice of *jongo*.
Keywords: Jongo. Quilombola identity. Quilombola community.

1 INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, among some remnants of *Quilombola* (Brazilian maroon) communities in the state of Rio de Janeiro, we see a process of identity building and reassertion through *jongo*, which has begun to strengthen very recently. Communities that no longer used to dance it or had never danced it before started to re-signify it as a way to join and strengthen the state's *quilombola* movement. We emphasize that the main re-signification of *jongo* in that context focuses on children and young people joining dance rounds, which

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used to be forbidden in the past due to the magical character attached to it. This article aims to describe the process of building a *quilombola* identity from the reinterpretation of the body/cultural practice of *jongo* – which we will discuss later. We have conducted a qualitative study in Santa Rita do Bracuí – a *quilombola* remnant community located in the city of Angra dos Reis, state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

The choice for such empirical field is justified because the practice of *jongo* was highly appropriated by the community in the process of self-attribution as *quilombolas* (BRAGATTO, 1999). According to Mattos et al. (2009), communities that have *jongo* as their cultural heritage reassert their historical trajectories and their ethnic authenticity, thus gaining political visibility and new prospects for collective survival. In Santa Rita do Bracuí, *jongo* was latent for a long time during the twentieth century – primarily due to the bias related to *macumba* (African-Brazilian religions) and lack of interest by young people immersed in a context of growth and modernization of Angra dos Reis. However, it now plays a core role in the lives of young political leaders, becoming an instrument of permanence in the fight for their territory and external acknowledgement. The term *quilombola* identity is used here based on the concept of ethnic identity described by Barth (2000), which refers to social boundaries, that is, the cultural contrast between a particular ethnic group and "other" or "others". Therefore, the author sees culture – and hence body/cultural practices – as a result of a group's organization, rather than something preconceived. Thus, we can say that the tradition of *jongo* is re-signified in some *quilombola* communities of Southern Rio de Janeiro, similarly to what occurred in Santa Rita do Bracuí. It aims at communities' reassertion of their ethnic and cultural belonging, which occurs through the difference expressed by a know-how that distinguishes and legitimates that belonging.

Field research was based on the anthropology/physical education interface. Starting with concepts from anthropology such as ethnic identity and alterity, we take a careful look at identity

building through a *quilombola* African-Brazilian body/cultural practice that integrates drum percussion, collective dancing, and singing. It is in this sense that anthropology – and its method of participant observation called ethnography – has brought new study perspectives, as it provides the basis for description of subjects as well as the social and cultural phenomena related to them.

Ethnographic doing concerns description, observation and field immersion work. It is a theoretical-methodological option that answers questions and/or problems emerging from anthropological theory that, in our case, are linked to the already established field of research in physical education, focused on the relationship between body and culture. As Geertz (1989) reminds us, what researchers do in anthropology is the practice of ethnography, that is, they select informants, transcribe texts, survey genealogies, map fields, keep diaries, and so on – without, however, describing rules. On the contrary, for the author, ethnography means reaching the set of symbols that determine actions through thick description. Thus, ethnography would be a tool to search for reality data concerning culture, and anthropology would be the science that interprets them.

Following Geertz's (1989), we have accumulated rich material in our seven field work fronts in Santa Rita do Bracuí between 2010 and 2011, through the following tools: ethnographies of *jongo* rounds, which provided us with important clues about re-signification processes linked to its practice as well as the social role it takes on within the community; and three in-depth interviews[1] (one with the community's oldest *jongo* dancer, and the others with its two young political leaders – both of whom have been participating in *jongo* since the beginning of its revival and consolidation, of which 2005[2] was a landmark).

[1]In the case of in-depth interviews, we work with the oral history approach, understanding it as a source of research in which memory plays a central role (ALBERTI, 2005). By working with memory through core characters' oral history, it was possible to understand the ways in which the past relates to the present.

[2]In that year, a non-formal educational project related to *jongo* teaching for children and young *quilombolas* called "On the pathways of *jongo*" was implemented in the community.

2 PRESENTING THE EMPIRICAL FIELD

Before presenting some facts on the *quilombola* community researched, we should briefly introduce the reader to the genesis of the concept of *quilombo* in order to understand its contemporary meaning, particularly with regard to the normative recognition of their territorial demands, recognized and legitimized by the Brazilian State.

The term *quilombo* has been subjected to constant re-semantization processes since it was first employed in the colonial period. It was accompanied by different meanings and responded to distinct political issues. Our interest here is to present re-semantizations that are needed to understand the contemporary concept of *quilombola*,[3] i. e. a *quilombo* remnant or *quilombola* community. We initially point out that such term is no longer related to the classical historiographic concept of *quilombo*, which dates back from colonial times – and is used until recently – as a group of runaway slaves. It rather means slave-descendant communities that have a specific organizational type, with their territoriality characterized by common use and occupying space according to kinship ties based on relations of solidarity and reciprocity (ARRUTI; FIGUEREDO, 2005). Note that the latter definition was based on two different re-semantizations that are nevertheless complementary.

The first re-semantization had its landmark in Article 68[4] of the Temporary Constitutional Provisions Act of Brazil's 1988 Federal Constitution. That article sought to repair the

3For more information on the processes of re-semantization of the term *quilombola* since Brazil's colonial period to the present day, see ARRUTI, 2008.

4"Final ownership shall be recognized for the remaining members of the ancient runaway slave communities who are occupying their lands and the state shall grant them their respective title deeds."

damage brought by slavery and by its abolition without any form of compensation, such as access to land. However, the lack of an explanation for criteria defining those subjects would make room for interpretations that would hinder not just the designation of *quilombola* communities, but also the very process of issuing titles on their territories (ARRUTI, 2008). Back to the author's argument, the history of Article 68 indicates, on the one hand, the struggle against racial prejudice and, on the other, the struggle for a comprehensive land reform. It is precisely that history that will subsidize the second re-semantization of the contemporary concept of *quilombola*.

This second re-semantization, which happened after the Constitutional process, refers to the proposal made by the Brazilian Anthropological Association (ABA), resulting from a series of re-semantizations under way both in academia and within social movements. Differently from the conceptualization hitherto presented by the Federal Constitution, the ABA advances in defining criteria: *quilombos* would be groups that developed resistance practices to maintain and reproduce their typical ways of life in a certain place. The document stresses that "they are not isolated groups or homogeneous populations" (ASSOCIAÇÃO BRASILEIRA DE ANTROPOLOGIA, 1994, p. 1). Therefore, they would be ethnic groups, i. e., "an organizational type that confers belonging through standards and means employed to indicate affiliation or exclusion" (ASSOCIAÇÃO BRASILEIRA DE ANTROPOLOGIA, 1994, p. 82).

Santa Rita do Bracuí is the name of a *quilombola* remnant community located in Southern Rio de Janeiro, in the municipality of Angra dos Reis. It was certified as *quilombola* by Palmares

Cultural Foundation[5] (FCP) in 1999. Concomitantly and/or subsequently to certification, an anthropological report was made (BRAGATTO, 1999). It showed the land's history of occupation after slaves remained in the former Santa Rita farm, following the death of its owner Commendator José de Souza Breves in 1889, under a system of family possession, with a common area housing equipment such as the cane mill, and the little mill used for alcoholic beverages and sweets made from cane. However, its recognition as a *quilombola* remnant community, which could result in regularization and land titles on behalf of the resident's association, has not meant successful completion of the process so far.

There is no consensus on figures regarding the population. Not even the anthropological study and report (BRAGATTO, 1999, MATTOS *et al*., 2009), which we examined, provides information about the number of families currently occupying the area or about the size of the territory, since much land was lost due to land conflicts that have been plaguing the community. Many families would have been pressured to leave or sell their land for low compensation. Others chose to sell theirs on their own, sometimes informally and without a legal purchase and sale process.

One of the local leaders said that the *quilombo* of Santa Rita do Bracuí has about 380 families – according to a census conducted by residents themselves. However, that figure may be even higher, since some families are also entitled to the land even though they no longer live in the *quilombo*. Therefore, that inaccuracy as to those who are no longer in the territory may have resulted in underestimation during the residents' survey.

We emphasize that the community's residents' association consists mostly of *quilombola* youth that have worked with high

[5]The Palmares Cultural Foundation (*Fundação Cultural Palmares*, FCP) was created in 1988. FCP Certification is the first step in the process of issuing titles for *quilombola* territories. For that title to be granted, candidate communities must submit the minutes of the meeting of the residents association approving recognition and self-attribution as *quilombola*. In addition, FCP asks for a summary account of the group's common trajectory, i. e., the history of the formation of the community.

commitment in the struggle for the territory already begun decades ago by their relatives and ancestors. Their massive representation in the association as well as their increasing interest in bringing the community as a whole to debates about their constitutional rights show the role played by those youth. However, it was through the practice of *jongo* that the whole process of struggle begins to make sense to young people of Santa Rita do Bracuí.

3 INTRODUCING THE ANALYTICAL SUBJECT: NOTES ON *JONGO* AND ITS HISTORICAL CONTRIBUTION

Despite its increasing proliferation and its registration as intangible cultural heritage[6] of Brazil by the Institute of National Historical and Artistic Heritage (IPHAN) in 2005, *jongo* is still not easily known and/or recognized by society as a whole. Highly recognized in specific social spaces, such as in the very *jongo*-practicing communities or in *jongo* group performances that have been growing in the urban context of the city of Rio de Janeiro, little is known by common people about the meanings ascribed to its practice. Thus, we can say that academic research on the topic is innovative – especially because of the little and dispersed knowledge accumulated so far. It is also relevant, since it depicts an African-Brazilian cultural practice now appropriated by the *quilombola* movement in Southern Rio de Janeiro state, to reassert their identity and in their struggle for their territory, among other factors.

Firstly, recognition of *jongo* as intangible cultural heritage by IPHAN was the result of a study begun in 2001 by experts and anthropologists from the National Center for Folklore and Popular Culture (CNFCP). Then *jongo* would become the first recognized

6 Celebrations as well as musical, artistic and religious expressions such as *jongo*, conveyed from generation to generation and recreated by communities and groups according to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, started to be designated as intangible heritage after Decree 3551 of August 4, 2000, which created Brazil's National Program of Intangible Heritage, under the Ministry of Culture.

expression of singing, dancing and drumming by African-Brazilian communities of Southeastern Brazil. Mattos and Abreu (2007, p. 70) mention some reasons for nominating *jongo*:

> [...] its representativeness in the much-vaunted thesis of "multifaceted Brazilian cultural identity was pointed out, according to the very documents produced by IPHAN's study. Its role as representative of African-Brazilian resistance in the Southeast was also praised as well as its character as a cultural reference, as remnants of the legacy of the African Bantu-speaking peoples enslaved in Brazil.

Also called *caxambu* or *tambu*, *jongo* is a practice that integrates singing, round dancing and drum percussion. It was brought to Brazil by Africans of the Bantu ethnolinguistic group, who arrived in the country's Southeastern coast in the first half of the nineteenth century, from the areas now known as Angola and Mozambique (MATTOS; ABREU, 2010) and consolidated in slave quarters in Southeastern Brazil. It is part of a set of African-Brazilian dances with some elements in common, including the use of drums,[7] a vocal style consisting of short phrases sung by a soloist and repeated by other participants, and the presence of *umbigada* – a dance step where practitioners touch bellies (PACHECO, 2007). When seeking *jongo's* links with cultural practices in Africa, Slenes (2007) says that couples dancing in the center of the circle were described by travelers in Luanda's rural areas and southwestern Angola in the nineteenth century. According to the author, the singing and the verses including interaction of soloists with the choir, in which the latter call and the former answers, at times of work or play, was typical of songs found in the region of the former kingdom of Congo – today's northern Angola – in the same period mentioned. It is precisely the historiography on the trafficking of Africans who arrived in the Southeastern region of Brazil that shows the origin of *jongo* and its social functions in the

[7]The types and number of instruments and the way to combine them vary from group to group. In general, drums and puítas (an ancestor of today's cuíca) of different sizes and types are used, with usually two drums (tambu or caxambu – a larger drum – and candongueiro – a smaller drum).

slave quarters of old farms.

In the period of slavery, *jongo* was a form of communication among black people. Through enigmatic or codified "points" (metaphors that only they understood), they used to express a poetic and complex form of resistance – a space to exercise their sociability in a situation of captivity (PEREZ, 2005). To illustrate it, those points can be considered analogous to our proverbs, and they metaphorically deal with community life, in addition to being used to resolve disputes, similarly to what happens in some ethnic groups in Africa. According to Passos (2004), since *jongo* has played the role of socializing individuals whose expression had been forbidden or monitored since slavery time, they created ways to say what only they could understand through metaphors.

While *jongo* is now considered intangible cultural heritage, in the nineteenth century, "government officials and foreign travelers used to consider the drumming of the slaves of the Southeast as barbaric dances with wild and rude music marked by wild and grotesque manners" (MATTOS; ABREU, 2007, p. 99). Thus, when foreign researchers visited Southeastern Brazil in the nineteenth century, they saw *jongos* and *caxambus*, even though they were not concerned with the expressions of African origin and did not call them that. According to historiographical research by the authors cited above, "*batuque*" (drumming) was the generic term used by most of them to describe any gathering of "Blacks", including *jongo*.

For Mattos and Abreu (2007), it was only between 1960 and 1970 that folklorists, sociologists and anthropologists took more interest in *jongo*. Carneiro's (1974) work conducted during that period described *jongo* and *caxambu* as distinct practices. While *jongo's* choreographies are described in detail, *caxambu* is presented only as connected to *jongo*, mainly in terms of choreography. Furthermore, *caxambu* appears as a dance whose only reference was the use of the drum called "*cachambus*". Note that, for most scholars, *jongo* was about to disappear together with old *jongo*

dancers who still used to practice it, since, until then, children and young people were forbidden to participate in rounds as a way to protect them from spells from that cultural practice mastered only by the most experienced people – the "*cumbas*", or masters who held *jongo's* magical knowledge and spells.

In the 1980s new research addressed the presence of *jongo* in Rio de Janeiro's slums and their role in the origin of samba (MATTOS; ABREU, 2007), concluding that, differently from initial assumptions, *jongo* had not disappeared completely, suggesting new re-signification processes linked to its practice. While studies show the presence of *jongo* in Rio's slums in the 1980s, there are few theoretical references from that time about its presence in the communities we now call *quilombolas*. With the process of re-semantization of the term *quilombo*, some rural and urban black communities began to call themselves *quilombolas*. Thus, some anthropological reports identifying *quilombola* communities in Rio de Janeiro, such as Santa Rita do Bracuí (BRAGATTO, 1999), give the practice of *jongo* a strong self-identification character for slave descendants and consequently *quilombo* remnants.

From the aforesaid, we point out that the type of *jongo* that we see today is very different from the one present in the memory of old living dancers or in the discourse around the magical-religious character of the *jongo* of yore. Enigmatic points proffered by "*cumbas*" seem to have been abolished in most communities, indicating a departure from their magical-religious origin. As a result, children and young people are called to learn *jongo* as a way to assert cultural and identity belonging, which had not happened in the past.

Although there are no specific rules for *jongo* rounds, in festivals celebrating patron saints, Our Lady of the Rosary or Saint Rita, some African-Brazilian deities – like *pretos velhos* – or Old Black Men – and Abolition or Black Consciousness Day celebrations, as well as birthdays of important people in the communities with tradition in *jongo* mobilize people to sing and

dance it. Moreover, it is common for a *jongo*-practicing community to invite dancers from neighboring communities to participate in rounds at their parties. But, as the oldest dancer from Santa Rita do Bracuí said: "In the old times, there was no time or day for it to happen, we'd just feel like it and we'd do it" (May 2011). Thus, the practice of *jongo* has been recreated and re-signified by communities and the main reason for that seems to be the change in social roles assigned to it.

4 IDENTITY BUILDING THROUGH THE BODY/ CULTURAL PRACTICE OF JONGO

We believe that the cultural identity and/or ethnic elements of a particular community, tribe or group can be observed precisely in the social use people make of their biological bodies. In their relation to everyday elements, bodies express customs that are somehow specific of the group to which they belong, thus showing us – by their expressions and body techniques – that each of them has habits that are peculiar to it (MAUSS, 1974). We now present some physical education studies describing relations between body practices and identity formation in the *quilombola* context.

Alvarez et al. (2011) state that dances may be a privileged space to express memory and identity. In the Kalunga *quilombola* region of the state of Goiás, the dance called "*sussa*" – typical of that cultural tradition – is a strong indication of group identity.

Silva and Falcão (2011) present a collection of articles assessing relations between body practices and identity formation in five *quilombola* communities in the state of Goiás. Their traditional expressions, games, playful interactions, celebrations and dances were analyzed without losing sight of the social, political and economic structures that, to a greater or lesser degree, constitute their lives. From the description of those practices, researchers address identity issues of the groups studied; however, they do not discuss their authenticity, rather focusing on the social roles the practices play in the community and in their ethnic relationship.

Lara *et al.* (2009) examined body/cultural practices – specifically those related to sports and leisure – in the Paiol de Telha *quilombola* community (recognized as such since 1988), addressing the meanings of the creation of a music and dance company called "Kundun Balê". The authors explain that the company was created precisely to fulfill the community's alleged lack of Black culture. Therefore, they promote workshops and performances mixing music, theater and choreographic elements with representations of African-Brazilian rituals, thus recreating a tradition of the group and contributing to strengthen their ethnic identity.

According to Alvarez *et al.* (2011), studies on *quilombolas* conducted in Brazil have emphasized the issue of identity based on ethnic boundaries between communities and the local population. For some considerations on these social boundaries that determine who is or is not an ethnic group (BARTH, 2000), those studies focused on territorial relations and were fundamentally important for recognition demands, for instance, contributing to regularization of *quilombola* land.

Assuming that memory[8] is a primarily element for establishing a common historical reference on the origin and formation of ethnic groups – a discourse that is essential in the case of the *quilombolas*' process of land regularization, especially in the early stages of recognition and certification – we focus on material conditions for its transmission and sharing. To answer this question, we refer to Peter Burke's (1992) exercise seeking to systematize some possible supports for memory transmission. The author points out five forms of memory transmission: oral traditions; written memories; image memories; space (physical or imaginary); social and

[8]Concept used in the anthropological approach proposed by Halbwachs (1990) in the field of collective memory.

repetitive actions (related to rituals, ceremonies and body techniques). We can say that physical space and/or imagination has been most commonly used as a support for the emergence and transmission of memory among ethnic groups, and therefore for identity building and reassertion. Arruti (2006, p. 242) conducts a dense narrative about the occupation of the territory of Mocambo – a *quilombola* community he studied in Northeastern Brazil. He showed that, rather than a historical memory of the group's formation, it is a territorial memory carried by *Mocambos*, since "to talk about their past we have to visit all the landmarks related to the passage of time and record the existence of important characters". According to the author, the privileged relationship between memory and territory defined an interpretation of the historical origin of *Mocambos*.

While there is already a more established line of research on *quilombola* communities with emphasis on the processes of memory transmission through physical space, the previously mentioned studies have put forward a new platform for analysis pointing out the role of body/cultural practices for memory transmission and identity building among *quilombolas*.

In the case of the Santa Rita do Bracuí community, we are interested in the support for transmission of memory related to social and repetitive actions (BURKE, 1992). That is justified by the fact that *jongo* is a ritual of memory transmission among *quilombolas*, since it comprises a traditional and effective set of physical techniques (MAUSS, 1974), which have been transmitted through constant processes of re-signification since the period of slavery. Thus, the privileged relationship between memory and body allows us to reflect on the ancestry of the group as well as about the history of its formation, based on a reference to its African past.

Therefore, self-identification as *quilombola* in the community studied is directly related to a process of positive recognition of their identity and reassertion of their cultural practices such as *jongo*. To describe the above, we resorted to the speech of the current general coordinator of the *quilombo's* residents' association, who has also participated in *jongo* rounds since the beginning of their revival in 2005. In an interview in April 2011 at his own house, he was asked about the meaning he attributed to *jongo*, and his answer was:

> To speak about *jongo*, I have to say what a *quilombola* community means to me. The *quilombola* community, for me, in my mind, when our ancestors were kidnapped, they knew they were not coming back. So they left us this heritage, this territory, they left a bit of that Africa for us ... This learning, this culture, this way of thinking we have in the *quilombo*. And *jongo* is part of that. For me, *jongo* is the territory, for me *jongo* is to welcome our ancestors. *Jongo* for me is to thank those ancestors for the roots I have, for the memory I have. *Jongo* is a greater good, a treasure that was left for us to be always remembering those who are gone, those who are still here, and those who will come, so the fight never dies, so we never forget who we were and who we will be.

Therefore, in addition to assisting them in building a collective memory of the group about their ancestry by re-signifying and perpetuating traditional knowledges surrounding it, the practice of *jongo* has been ensuring a path for political visibility hitherto unreached by other means. Even if we can still watch kings' festivals and *calango* dances, it is around *jongo* that Bracuí has been reasserting its ethnic belonging and establishing cultural boundaries between "them" and "others" (BARTH, 2000).

So far we have used ethnographic data to present the above. At the festival in honor of the patron saint Santa Rita held in the community in May 2011, we witnessed both the Kings' Festival and

the *jongo* round. While the former was formed by a select group of older people, the latter included mostly children and young people who, since the beginning of the party, were very enthusiastic about the *jongo* moment. Few people from the community took part in Kings' Festivals, and outsiders (non-*quilombolas*) who attended the event were also not very motivated to observe it. On the other hand, in *jongo*, in addition to massive participation by children and young *quilombolas*, who formed a large circle highlighted by calico skirts, everyone's enthusiasm and curiosity were visibly high. As one of the young political leaders of Santa Rita do Bracuí – who has also participated in *jongo* since 2005 – reminds us (November 2010): "*Jongo* is present within the community. Some people may not even know how to dance *jongo*, but they know what *jongo* is". Some outsiders even joined the round to dance it, invited by local dancers. Others, who preferred not to take the risk, helped in the choir, responding to the soloist who launched points, and clapping.

The ideas presented here point to the importance of a careful analysis of body/cultural practices in the context of ethnic group studies, since they bring new insights to reflect on their knowledges. That is, about the identity of communities that do not favor exclusively memory transmission through orality, images or physical or imagination space itself, but rather emphasize that transmission through effective body techniques expressed through social and repetitive actions linked to rituals and expressions and bodily/cultural practices.

5 FINAL REMARKS

We can say that, in the case of the *quilombo* communities, it becomes important to recognize what or which body/cultural practices and expressions have being re-signified to serve the process of reasserting their condition as ethnic groups. Therein lies the challenge to researchers who intend to work with the topic of ethnic identity building by such groups. Analysts must be aware of the signs that have been built in the correlation of forces that will

define the *quilombola* identity and which are the ways to access it. In the case of Santa Rita do Bracuí, it is in *jongo* that *quilombolas* are finding support for the process of identity building and political recognition and visibility.

From another perspective, beyond the relationship established between a body/cultural practice and building a *quilombola* identity, we cannot disregard the major relevance gained by *jongo* in the educational context, especially under Brazil's Federal Law 10.639/03,[9] which makes teaching of history and African-Brazilian culture mandatory in Elementary Education.

[9]Article 26: In elementary and Secondary schools, both public and private, teaching of Afro-Brazilian History and Culture becomes mandatory. § 1 The syllabus referred to in the heading of this article will include the study of history of Africa and Africans, the struggle of Black people in Brazil, Brazilian Black culture, and Blacks in the formation of Brazil's national society, restoring their contribution in social, economic, and political areas relevant to Brazilian history. §2 The content relating to Afro-Brazilian History and Culture will be taught across the whole school curriculum, especially in the areas of Art Education and Brazilian Literature and History.

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