CHAPTER V
Ethnographic (Mis)Encounters:
The Search for a Primitive Mentality in Northeastern Brazil

Introduction

In February 1938, São Paulo’s Department of Culture and Recreation supplied four ethnographers with fifteen field books, some 170 blank acetate discs, and a portable audio recorder. The group embarked on a six-month tour of the Brazil’s North and Northeast regions to record music and collect musical instruments destined for a museum. The trip, dubbed the “Folkloric Research Mission,” had two central goals. First, the ethnographers hoped to develop an archive of folkloric music which São Paulo’s composers could later use as inspiration for additional nationalist symphonies. Second, the group sought to find and preserve documentary evidence of the nation’s primitive mentality. According to the psychological theories of the ethnographers, Brazil’s Northern regions had preserved a collective psyche that São Paulo and other southern cities had long since grown past. Collecting music and artifacts, according to this theory, would make it possible to scientifically prove Brazil’s Southern regions as mentally superior (thus justifying their continued political leadership).

This chapter follows the ethnographers through the trail of the evidence they left behind: the correspondence, field books, photographs, records, and silent films. The archival records...
reveal a series of behaviors that, at least today, appear quite unethical. The first section of the chapter considers the ethnographers’ actions from a historical perspective, meaning specifically that it explains how the model of cultural evolution (to which the ethnographers subscribed) served as a rationale for the apparent breaches of privacy, property, and protection.

The chapter then argues that these scientific commitments also had sonic consequences. The cultural evolution model combined with a Freudian anthropology, and together these led to a methodological silencing of informants. Singers were not given the opportunity to contextualize or speak about the songs they sang. What is more, the singers’ names and biographers were intentionally written out of the historical record. And when informants spoke up in ways they broke with the ethnographers’ expectations, these refused to listen. The result was a rich contradiction: a sonic archive filled with silences.

Finally, the chapter moves beyond the musical elements of the project to consider how ideas of regional difference influenced interpersonal dynamics in the 1938 folkloric mission. An analysis of the field books reveals that the behavior of the ethnographers was informed not only by their formal training (this seems obvious enough), but more significantly by the artistic production of Sao Paulo’s 1920s modernist movement. The ‘Northeast’ that São Paulo artists and writers had imagined and invented in their modernist work shaped how the ethnographers envisioned and interacted with the people they met and recorded. Artistic ideas brought real
consequences. The final portion of the chapter reflects on how diverse informants from across the five different states reacted, responded, and even strategically intervened to present alternative faces of region and self.

**Endangered Psyches**

Four men stepped off a boat and into the city of Recife, Pernambuco, on February 13, 1938. First was Luis Saia, head of the ethnographic team and in charge of the field books, finances, and photography. Next came Martin Braunwieser, the Salzburg-trained music director for the DC&R playgrounds and the São Paulo choir. Braunwieser took responsibility for overseeing the recordings and musical transcriptions. Benedito Pacheco and Antonio Ladeira followed close behind, responsible for carrying equipment and solving engineering problems.  

This was the first day of a six-month trip, from February to July 1938. The dates had been selected so that the group could witness two periods of traditional festivals: Carnival in February, and the *Festas Juninas* (harvest festivals) of June and July. Traveling the Northeastern states of Pernambuco, Paraíba, Ceará, Piauí, Maranhão, and the Northern state of Pará, the group would go on to record a wide variety of musical genres, targeting especially those types of music that their mentor Mário de Andrade had stressed: work songs, dramatic dances, and Afro-Brazilian and syncretic religious music. In addition to recording the sounds, the group filmed sixteen black-and-white silent shorts. Finally, they collected drums, idols, and sculptures for a museum in São Paulo.

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Recife. It was the city their mentor Andrade had visited in 1929 with a Kodak camera and field book in hand. Even more, it was the home of the famed Faculdade de Direito, the law school that, in the 1880s, had housed the professors who first lectured on the German social-science discipline of *völkerpsychologie*, or national psychology. The theories of the discipline had spread throughout Brazil and were now central to the ethnographers’ own intellectual formation. Here the ideas were coming back to roost; the ethnographers had come to gather evidence of the nation’s collective psychology.

But this was not the Recife of the 1880s, or even of 1929. In 1930, a military coup had installed populist military leader Getúlio Vargas as Brazil’s head of state. One of his first actions was to replace locally elected state governors with his own appointments, called “interventors.” The Pernambuco interventor, Carlos de Lima Cavalcanti, placed right-wing Catholic leaders in political positions throughout that state. When a group of communist organizers launched a failed attack in Recife in 1935 (the “Intentona Comunista”), the state’s leaders began to limit social liberties, including expressions of non-Catholic worship.

The project took on a new level of intensity in 1937, when Lima Cavalcanti was replaced by Agamemnon Magalhães. The new interventor had a particular disdain for Afro-Brazilian religions, asserting that they were “prejudicial to the security of the state” and filled with “ideas that corrupt our civilization.” Magalhães and his political partners lashed out at middling and even elite public figures such as author Gilberto Freyre and doctor Ulysses Pernambuco, figures who had (at varying levels) supported the preservation of Afro-Brazilian religious forms of expression. The interventor then worked to dismantle actual religious communities. Raids,

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arrests, drum confiscations, and slander campaigns became commonplace. In addition, the government forced the remaining houses of worship to apply for licenses in order to continue their practice, meaning that religious ceremonies became scheduled and monitored by those in political power.

This was the Recife to which the ethnographers had come, hoping to record precisely these types of religious ceremonies. The three distinctly Afro-Brazilian traditions were called Xangô, Tambor-de-Crioulo, and Babassue. A fourth was a syncretic religion called Catimbó, which blended Afro-Brazilian and Catholic beliefs with indigenous traditions and deities. Ten years previous, Mário de Andrade had documented a Catimbó encounter which served as critical primary-source evidence for Andrade’s own exploration of the musical psychoanalytic method. The ethnographers hoped to anchor such an experience into material form. But the transformed religious landscaped meant there would be hurdles to overcome.

Once in Recife, the mission met with Agamemnon Magalhães. The interventor told the team that they would have to clear their recording project with Secretary of the Economy Manuel Lubambo, who had concerned himself with how Pernambuco was perceived by other states, including São Paulo. Lubambo requested that Luis Saia avoid recording Afro-Brazilian music. A colleague chipped in, telling Saia that the group would do a much better service to Brazilian patrimony by recording dances and songs “inherited from erudite Portuguese culture” and not from Africa.

5 Gonçalves, Xangôs.
6 Blake, The Vigorous Core, 168-78. Blake provides a more detailed account of licensing practices of Afro-Brazilian religious communities. This had started in 1935, via the Serviço de Assistência a Psicopatas (SAP). Under Magalhães the licensing project expanded. The data previously collected was increasingly used against the houses of worship.
7 Luis Saia to Mário de Andrade, correspondence, February 16, 1938. Co 34, CCMPF.
The decision to meet with these political leaders had been a calculated move in hopes of gaining permission for licensed encounters with Afro-Brazilian religious houses. But doing so made it difficult to take advantage of existing connections coming from Mário de Andrade’s own scholarly contacts. As Saia described it, Lubambo “immediately made it clear to me that if the mission did not want to be thwarted...I had better keep myself as far away from Gilberto Freire [sic] as possible.”

The group left and, after meeting secretly with Freyre anyway, sought out local musicians. If Lubambo and Magalhães had not been sufficient proof that local musical traditions were in jeopardy, what the ethnographers found next seemed to confirm just that.

As a small theater called Santa Isabel, the ethnographers met for their first recording project. They were there for a most unusual sort of piano recording, considering that the piano would not be played. When Andrade had visited Recife ten years prior, the city had very limited access to pianos. So the Santa Isabel theater shared their piano with a local church. Every weekend, a group of carregadores de piano, piano-carriers, hoisted the piano on their shoulders and walked it from the theater to the church, and then back after the Sunday service. They sang as they marched, ensuring the carriers stayed in step so the piano would not fall.

Times were changing in Recife, and more pianos had arrived. Saia managed to get the old group of piano carriers together for a recording. But standing together in front of the microphone, they could not remember the words to their songs. It had been too long since they last sang together. One suggested actually hoisting a piano onto their shoulders to see if it would aid the memory. They grabbed the theater’s piano and sure enough, the songs came back to mind. They

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8 Luis Saia to Mário de Andrade, correspondence, February 16, 1938, Co 34, CCMPF.
spent the day walking around in circles outside of the theater. The ethnographers shuffled behind with the microphone, recording the tunes.⁹

One of the piano-carriers told the ethnographers about a Xangô terreiro (house of worship) in the neighborhood called Casa Amarela (Yellow House). Its leader, Apolinário Gomes da Mota, was one of sixteen Afro-Brazilian religious leaders cooperating with the Serviço de Higiene Mental (Service of Mental Hygiene), the institution which had begun the licensing project three years prior. Back then, cooperation with the state had given Gomes da Mota protection over his religious work. But under the Magalhães administration such privileges were no longer guaranteed.¹⁰ So over the next weeks, the ethnographers negotiated with the local Delegacia de Investigações e Capturas (Delegacy for Capture and Investigation) for written permission to record the Xangô ceremony in Casa Amarela. The negotiations were successful, and the local police gave the ethnographers written permission to record the ceremony. Moreover, they agreed to donate a collection of drums confiscated from recent raids.¹¹

Official permission, however, did not guarantee the safety of the musicians. When the worshippers gathered together and held the ritual service for the ethnographers, the police interrupted the performance. The musicians were terrified, and at least one of the drummers jumped out of the window to escape. Saia stood up and showed the police his letter of permission. The police accepted the document and left, allowing the performance to continue.¹²

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⁹ Saia’s note on the recording was predictably curt: “As toadas do pessoal do piano foram gravadas com ritmo condicionado às passadas deles. Ficaram um dia inteiro carregando pieno no teatro Santa Isabel.” Correspondence, Luis Saia to Mario de Andrade, Feb 26, 1938, CO-35, CCSP disc. The larger story comes from an oral history (1990) with Martin Braunwieser the year before he passed away, and is recounted in Álvaro Carlini, “Cante lá que gravam cá: Mário de Andrade e a Missão de Pesquisa Folclórica de 1938,” master’s thesis, FFLCH University São Paulo, (São Paulo, 1994), 79.

¹⁰ Gomes da Mota had granted interviews that informed the publications of ethnographic leaders of the period. See Gonçalves, Xangô; Ramos, O Negro Brasileiro; and Roger Bastide, “Contribuição ao Estudo do Sincretismo Católico-Feticista,” in Sociologia 1 (Universidade de São Paulo, 1946).

¹¹ Luis Saia to Mário de Andrade, correspondence, February 26, 1938. Co 35, CCMPF. See also Carlini, “Cante lá,” 81. The local contacts were modernist writers Ascenso Ferreira and Waldemar de Oliveira, friends to Andrade.

¹² Recounted in Carlini, “Cante lá,” 82.
The ethnographers made no mention of the incident in their correspondence with the DC&R workers overseeing the 1938 mission. Indeed, the event was not recounted until an oral history interview with Braunwieser years later. But halfway through the field notes on the session, Luis Saia wrote the word “police” in the middle of a group of song lyrics, and then scratched it out.\(^\text{13}\) It seems unlikely the Saia was trying to hide the fact since the word is still quite legible. Perhaps one of the singers yelled “police!” to alert the rest of the performers, and Saia momentarily thought it was part of a lyric until he saw the police come in. In a note on a subsequent page, Saia wrote in parentheses, “some [performers] outside the window are singing as well.”\(^\text{14}\) It is plausible that some of the musicians refused to come back into the room, fearing the police would return. This was the cohort’s first recording session dedicated to religious music, so they knew for the rest of their trip that their work had the potential to endanger local informants. The mission, however, was more important.

In the wake of the near arrest of the Xangô musicians, the ethnographic team continued to arrange recording sessions. The willingness to expose informants to danger reveals the group prioritized songs over safety and preservation over privacy. Indeed, the political and police tensions likely underscored for the ethnographers that these traditions were in danger of extinction. Recife’s political context of religious repression appeared as the governmental component of a deeper psychological context: that of a primitive regional psychology finally giving way to a modern mentality. For the ethnographers, if these documents were not collected quickly (and by any means possible), future scholars would have no way of psychoanalyzing the remnants of Brazil’s primitive past.

\(^{13}\) Field book 1A: 82. CCMPF.

\(^{14}\) (alguns fora da janella [sic] cantam tambem),” Field book 1A: 90. CCMPF.
But even though Brazil’s Northeastern states were undergoing changes in politics and society, not all cultural traditions were dying off. As the ethnographers began their second set of religious recordings, a series of telling misunderstandings occurred between the researchers and their informants. These “misencounters” reveal how much the model of cultural evolution created self-fulfilling prophecies. The ethnographers saw the dangers of cultural extinction where they wanted to and stopped listening when informants ceased to fit their preconceived model of primitivity.

Catimbó (Mis)Encounters

After leaving the state of Pernambuco, the ethnographers traveled north, where they hoped to experience the music from the syncretic religion Catimbó. Traversing the state of Paraíba, they managed to record three Catimbó sessions. Or at least this is what they told themselves. The records show that, in two of the three cases, the leaders of the ceremony explicitly insisted that they were not practitioners of the religion. In one case, all of the participants involved made it clear that they had never taken part in such an event. So what was this?

These were paid performances with varied levels of resemblance to Catimbó. Sympathetically, we could imagine that the ethnographers chose to pay for these performances in the belief that no other religious leaders would step forward. But the archival record suggests something quite different. Watching the ceremonies, the ethnographers attributed each blunder and botched line to the performers’ primitive mentalities. The scholars then deemed the sessions as legitimate expressions of cultural heritage, important precisely because they testified to the primitive mentality still governing the Northeast.
Saia began searching for Catimbó leaders in the Paraíba’s capital city João Pessoa. Many were in hiding because of local religious prohibitions and raids similar to those in Recife. Managing to find one catimbozeiro, or practitioner, Saia proposed a recording session. But the idea was immediately shut down. The leader explained he was working to cure a member of the community and “if there were a bombardment disturbing the energy [corrente] it meant certain death for somebody.” The “bombardment” may have referred to local police or could have been a diplomatic way of speaking of the ethnographers themselves.

The ethnographers left João Pessoa, but left word that they would generously reimburse anyone able to perform such a ceremony and that they would return within the month in hopes of realizing the session. They then left the city and, following a lead from a local contact, traveled to a sitio (ranch) outside of the small town of Itabaiana, Paraíba. There they proposed a recording session to Manuel Laurentino da Silva, who agreed to hold a small ceremony the next day with his wife. On May 5, 1938, the mission returned to the house and recorded 33 melodies.

Silva claimed he had been trained in Catimbó but did not hide the details: the seventy-year old had learned the religious practice while in Recife when he was 14, meaning he had learned the tunes in the 1880s. His wife, in turn, learned the songs from her husband. The field books provide no further information on their training. None of the ethnographers followed up with further questions to clarify if Silva had been living in Recife or just visiting, if he had studied under someone or just gone to a few ceremonies, and if he had performed at all since his learning experience more than fifty years prior.

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15 Alvarenga, Catimbó, 23. Other potential informants also declined on grounds of the police threat. In his field book, Saia wrote, “Apareceu-me no hotel o Luiz do Catimbó com as toadas dêle escriptas e...[ellipses in original] se queixando da policia.” Field book 6: 131. CCMPF.
16 Field book 5: 151. CCMPF.
Silva and his wife were familiar enough with the songs to sing verses together, although the recordings suggest they depended on each other to get to the end of the tunes. By the second half of the performance, the husband and wife were regularly committing noticeable errors. Silva would tell the group he was going to invoke one master, and then sing instead to a different one. Or both would forget their lines and tell the ethnographers they needed to start over. The duo began to push each other to finish tunes with injunctions such as an urgent “go!” Increasingly nervous, the wife began to lower her voice and mumble.\(^\text{17}\)

The anxiety and mistakes of the show provoked one of the few occasions in which the ethnographers logged personal reactions in the middle of a recording session. Usual session notes were limited to the title of each song, the lyrics sung, the disc number to which each song corresponded, and a list of any artifacts collected. The ethnographers rarely took the time to write summaries of rituals or performances after they occurred. Yet during the Silva performance, the ethnographers wrote down their own frustrations. Saia wrote “the woman knows more than the old man,” but then made a note of her repeated mistakes.\(^\text{18}\) In one case he jotted down, “The woman started the song, messed up again, turned out horseshit.”\(^\text{19}\) Ladeira or Pacheco, writing in another field book, concluded: “bad bad bad this is shit.”\(^\text{20}\)

Returning to the city of João Pessoa, the ethnographers learned that a man named Luiz Gonzaga Ângelo wanted to take the group up on their offer to pay for a ceremony. They agreed, making it possible for the team to record 28 melodies and produce a silent film.\(^\text{21}\) But it is not


\(^{18}\) Field book 5: 141-3. CCMPF.

\(^{19}\) Field book 5: 141. CCMPF

\(^{20}\) “mal mal mal uma mérda,” Field book 9: 59. CCMPF

\(^{21}\) This Gonzaga is not to be confused with the famous Northeastern musician of the same name who would move to Rio just a few years later. While the father of the Baião music style was in fact travelling the Northeast with the military at this same time, full names (Luiz Gonzaga do Nascimento versus Luiz Gonzaga Ângelo) and photographs
clear that what Gonzaga performed resembled a Catimbó ceremony. In the first place, Gonzaga himself insisted his performance was not Catimbó at all but rather a “Xangô.” He claimed to have learned the ceremony from a Xangô priest [babalorixá] in Recife named “Apolinário.”

Although Gonzaga could have been referring to the Apolinário Gomes da Mota who narrowly avoided arrest while conducting a ceremony for the ethnographers in Recife, none of Gonzaga’s Portuguese-language songs sounded like the Yoruba chants sung at the Gomes da Mota session. It may have been a different Apolinário, or Gonzaga may have learned the name from the researchers themselves and repeated it to gain credibility.22

Gonzaga asked a group of dancers to join him for the ceremony. He purchased white clothing and jewelry for each dancer, and then asked the ethnographers for reimbursement.23 The purchase implies dancers lacked the outfits for a ceremony. This makes sense, considering it was their first one; when the ethnographers asked the dancers where they had learned Catimbó and how long they had been performing, they all responded the same way: their teacher had been Gonzaga himself, and they had “never before sung or participated in any Catimbó ceremony.”24

Something similar occurred in the third Catimbó session, recorded in the small town of Alagoa da Roça. The ethnographers went to the outskirts of the town in search of a catimbozeiro named Zé Hilário, only to find that he refused to have anything to do with the project and shut his door on the crew. Returning to Alagoa da Roça, the ethnographers found a man on the side of the road, to whom Saia referred as “the cripple.” The man, Anísio José Xavier, claimed he had

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22 Apolinário aided scholars such as Fernandes Gonçalves in their ethnographic research. Fernandes Gonçalves, O Folclore Mágico do Nordeste (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1938); Alvarenga, Catimbó, 31.
23 In the field book, one of the informants wrote: “There are six men each man with white pants and white shirts and white hats. There are eleven pairs of shoes each 10$000 between men and women, while the women in addition have a kilo of bracelets of small pearls to give an idea of the bill for the xango ceremony.” Alvarenga, Catimbó, 36.
learned some of Hilário’s religious songs fifteen years prior while spending two weeks under treatment with the master. So in exchange for a generous 45$000—almost half of Braunwieser’s monthly salary—Xavier agreed to sing the songs he remembered.25 The mission set up their portable studio and recorded the one-man show.26

The songs were few: four total, two of which were sung to the same melody. At the beginning and end of each song Xavier repeated a prayer, doubling the length of each tune in an already scant repertoire. But Xavier was honest about his limitations, explaining that he “had never practiced Catimbó.”27

If none of the Catimbó singers were practicing religious leaders, and all of them were upfront with the limitations of their knowledge of the subject, why did the ethnographers pursue a recording session with them? The ethnographers may have initially courted these informants believing them to be the only ones they would find, thinking it would be better to hear the songs from laymen than to not hear them at all. But the archival record, alongside the publications in the wake of the trip, suggest something more at work. Specifically, the ethnographers decided that the legitimacy of the performance hinged on the performer’s display of traits that could be characterized as primitive.

This is most clear in the notes of Oneyda Alvarenga, the curator in charge of the recordings and museum artifacts that came as a result of the 1938 research trip. Alvarenga, herself a graduate of the SEF ethnography course, worked with the material over the following years and concluded that the scholars had indeed succeeded in finding and recording legitimate

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25 Saia received 500$000 a month, Benedito Pacheco 200$000, Antonio Ladeira 150$000, and Martin Braunwieser 100$000. In six months, 5,700$000 had been designated for salaries, leaving more than 90% of the budget for travel expenses and payment for performances and ethnographic objects. Mário de Andrade to Francisco Pati, correspondence, May 23, 1938. Co 29. CCMPF.

26 Field book 4: 70-74; Field book 5: 152-160. CCMPF.

27 Inscription on Disc FM 38, Carlini, Cachimbo e Maracá, 199.
Brazilian culture. The music librarian printed her reflections alongside transcriptions of the recorded material in a five-volume series published throughout the 1940s.

Reflecting on the Gonzaga session, Alvarenga stated she found direct continuity with earlier practices of primitive Amerindians, Afro-Brazilians, and superstitious Portuguese colonists. She noted “the endurance of two elements that characterize Amerindian cults: the ritual and mystic importance of the jurema ritual and the process of exorcism via smoke.”28 That smoke signified primitivity was stressed by Andrade (chapter 2) who highlighted this notion in his copies of the works by James Frazer and EB Tylor.29

When field notes did not align with Alvarenga’s assumptions, she chose to reject them. Saia had recorded asking the seven dancers in the Gonzaga performance about the length of time they had been involved in Catimbó. Every participant had responded that this was the first time they had ever performed in such a ceremony. Alvarenga concluded that the “response [was] incomprehensible.”30 Rather than recognizing that this was, indeed, the first performance for each of Gonzaga’s helpers, Alvarenga preferred the idea that the informants were unable to speak coherently.

Alvarenga’s presumption of a Northeastern primitive psychology appeared more clearly as she reviewed the Silva ceremony and puzzled over comments surrounding a deity invoked through song whose name was Mestra Angelina (“Angelic Mistress”). At one point, Silva’s wife had explained that Mestra Angelina was three separate women. On another occasion, the wife stated that the Mestra was a single entity. Alvarenga—in spite of living among a Catholic culture

28 “é constatával a permanência de mais dois elementos que se podem considerar fundamentais para a caraterização dos cultos de inspiração ameríndia: a importância mística e ritual da jurema e o processo de defumação exorcística e curativa por meio do cachimbo.” Alvarenga, Catimbó, 35.
29 See Chapter 3, footnote 59.
30 “Da sua ficha, consta uma informação que os dados anteriores tornam incompreensível: “É a primeira vez que canta no Catimbó.” Alvarenga, Catimbó, 20-21.
that affirmed the divine as simultaneously three and one—suggested it was primitive psychology that accounted for the contradiction: “we must remember,” Alvarenga wrote, “such a contradiction does not exist in the magic mentality of the masses [povo].”31 This was a direct reference back to the primitive mentality model espoused by Levy-Bruhl and taught to the ethnographers by Dina Levi-Strauss, according to which the primitive mind was oblivious to contradictions.

Even more puzzling to the ethnographer was that of Mestra Angelina’s nicknames: “Nossa Senhora” (Our Lady, aka the Virgin Mary) and also “negra da costa” (black woman from the Coast). How could the Catimbó community, wondered Alvarenga, believe a deity was both the Virgin mother and black? Alvarenga hypothesized:

If it is not probable that Manuel Laurentino [da Silva] is excluding the notion of color when he says “black woman of the Coast,” it appears certain that the fundamental idea he is trying to bestow is one of magical force: black woman of the coast would be the same as powerful sorceress.32

The comment reveals that Alvarenga here saw blackness as a mental category, not a color category. “Black” here referred not to skin color but to sorcery, magic, the mode of logic that anthropologists Frazer and Tylor claimed governed the primitive mind.

Alvarenga also used the primitive paradigm to explain the gaps in the documentary record. When field book entries were unclear, Alvarenga blamed the informant: “what sprouts forth from these notes and lyrics is a series of poorly-explained deities or ones that are naturally vague and diffuse.”33 Even when reflecting on the fact that the ethnographers did not fill out any

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32 “Se não é provával que Manuel Laurentino exclua das palavras ‘negra da Costa’ a noção de côr da pele, parece certo que a ideia fundamental que êle lhes empresta é a de fôrca mágica: negra de Costa seria o mesmo que feiticeira poderosa.” Emphasis in original. Alvarenga, Catimbó, 99.
33 “Por imprecisão das pesquisas ou pela própria incapacidade de esclarecimento do catimbozeiro informante, a verdade é que brota dessas notas e dos textos dos cânticos, uma série de divindades mal explicadas ou naturalmente vagas e difusas.” Alvarenga, Catimbó, 98.
of the index cards that the ethnographic society had sent along in order to gain data on each informant, Alvarenga blamed the loss of tradition instead of the ethnographers: “The divinities of this catimbó are, in terms of the available information, in the same precarious situation already pointed to in the catimbó of Luiz Gonzaga Ângelo.” Here, Alvarenga’s a priori assumption that tradition was dying out created the framework to interpret the lack of ethnographic information.

Alvarenga made use of what she considered to be vague answers, contradictions, and nonsense responses. For her, this “documentation still permitted a view” of the “magical-religious aims” of the ceremonies and of the lack of mental development of its performers. In other words, Alvarenga valued the performances precisely because of the way that they held up the primitive paradigm. Inasmuch as Alvarenga voiced the position of her cohort, her comments suggest that the ethnographic project was not just paying for a religious ceremony but rather for a performance that could be converted into material evidence of an underdeveloped regional psychology.

**The Sounds That Silence**

When it came to documenting encounters with informants, the researchers logged as many song lyrics as they possibly could, to the point of scribbling almost unintelligibly in order to get them down in real time. But before and after these transcriptions, the scholars never included comments from the informants themselves. Not a single unsung word of the Catimbó informants ever made it into the field books. Even the information about them is telegraphic at best, such as in this biography of Luis Gonzaga Ângelo:

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34 “As divindades dêste catimbó estão, diante dos informes disponíveis, na mesma precária situação já assinalada no catimbó de Luís Gonzaga Ângelo e que ainda assinalaremos no catimbó de Alagoa Nova.” Alvarenga, *Catimbó*, 98.

35 Alvarenga, *Catimbó*, 97.
Luis Gonzaga Ángelo, inf. no 277. Mulatto. 34 years. Born in Goiana, Pernambuco State. Parents: Francisco Viega Ángelo and Maria Filomena Ángelo, both born in Paraíba...He is the mestre of this catimbó recorded in João Pessoa and the soloist on these registered phonographs.36

More frequently, the informant was written out of the ethnographic record completely. Saia, preparing for the opening of the da Silva session, wrote in his field book:

5/5/38 Itabaiana        Catimbo-Mané

house covered with [sugar] cane straw. Here they only use cane straw to cover houses.

Incense, candle, alcohol,
honey, wine, cigar...

From there Saia made a list of all objects in the room, with two noticeable exceptions: the informants. These received no attention whatsoever until they began singing, at which point Saia transcribed their voices.

The treatment of the roadside Anísio José Xavier is equally curt, and Saia refused to even record the singer’s name: “We returned to Alagoa de Roça and there we found a cripple that, being cured by Zé Hilario, learned his lines.”37 The same silencing is reflected on the material component of the discs themselves. One of the discs of Xavier’s voice is representative: the middle of the disc had a space for marking down details of the session.

Material:
Anthropomorphic Indications:
Session: this line is sung with a cup of jurema
Accompaniment: maraca
Color:38

36 Alvarenga, Catimbó, 19.
37 Field Book 5, 152.
38 Reprinted in Alvarenga, Catimbó, 176.
Saia noted the instrument and the alcohol but ignored the speaker. By this account, he never asked the informant about the type of song (material), the deity invoked (anthropomorphic indications), or the color associated with the deity (or conceivably the skin color of the singer).

The silencing of the informant voice in the 1938 ethnographic record, I believe, was the result of something more than a lack of discipline on the part of the ethnographers. It was methodological. The ethnographic society’s larger project married the framework of cultural evolution with the methodology of Freudian psychoanalysis. Born as a logical consequence of this union was the decision to systemically silence informant voices.

Freud argued that individuals were not aware of the deeper motivations beneath their own words and actions. A trained psychoanalyst, however, could interpret behaviors, dreams, and slips of the tongue to find those unconscious and primitive motivations. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud applied this model to communities in colonial territories. The book implied that colonial communities (and informants within them), were unaware of the significance of their own traditions, totems, and taboos. But behind these rituals lay all sorts of primitive thought patterns and beliefs. Only the ethnographer as psychoanalyst that could lay bare the hidden significance of such cultural practices.

The scholar Michel Foucault made the same connection in the conclusion of his work *The Order of Things*. “Ethnology and psychoanalysis...are directed towards that which, outside man, makes it possible to know...that which ...eludes his consciousness.”39 In other words, ethnographers accepting Freud’s model turned to external rituals and material objects as an entryway to the communal unconscious. Where men create “representations” of themselves, ethnographers tried instead to look “behind those representations,” to find the hidden norms,

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rules, and systems. But since the Freudian framework held that informants did not understand the significance of their own local rituals, ethnographers came to intentionally “avoid the representations” that men give “themselves of themselves.” Freud, it seems, taught ethnographers to stop listening.

I believe this was the reason for the lack of informant voices in the archives of the 1938 mission. The São Paulo group believed informants did not have the mental consciousness to understand the significance of their own rituals. So why record informants’ words? According to their model, it was the music—alongside the totems and taboos—that had sprung from the national unconscious, and only a southern ethnographer had the mental development to make sense of it.

There is indeed evidence of such a link between the Freudian method and the silences of the historical record. In the lecture notes of Dina Levi-Strauss’ ethnography course, we encounter her instructions that the ethnographers are to collect “legends, myths, [and] the proverbs of the nation” in order to then “understand the nation.” But the “savages” she said, would not comprehend this. In her words, “That which for the civilized is simply tradition, for the primitives it has, we could say, a real life.” For Levi-Strauss, the informants lacked the hermeneutics necessary to interpret the significance of their own cultural traditions.

The São Paulo cohort was explicit that they hoped the collection of objects, stories, and musical recordings, would allow social scientists to venture a psychoanalysis of regional and national psychology. When ethnographer Luis Saia returned from the 1938 trip, a newspaper reporter asked him, “From the point of view of a Paulista [native of the state of São Paulo], what is the value of the collected material?” Saia answered that the documentation came from “the

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Brazilian regions” that “most purely conserv[ed] the characteristics of our traditional formation.” Saia’s answer paraphrased the opening words of *Totem and Taboo*: “There are men still living who, as we believe, stand very near to primitive man...and [we see in] their mental life...a well-preserved picture of an early stage of our own development.”

Saia went on to explain that this was a project that “explained, studied, and evidenced” the “psychology of [Brazil’s] southern population [*psicologia do povo sulista*]” by working with material “viewed as traditionally Northeastern, but [that] ought to be studied foremost as material speaking to our psychological and artistic formation.” Performing a psychoanalysis of Northeastern culture, according to this logic of mental evolution, would make it possible to unpack and preserve São Paulo’s psychological past.

The ethnographers’ scientific frameworks structured what they judged to be valid evidence and who they determined to be a valid informant. Yet the behavior of the ethnographers themselves—specifically how they interacted with informants—came not just from scientific training but also as a result of their own perceptions of the Northeast. A long tradition of scholarly production and popular writing had taught residents of São Paulo to perceive Northeasterners as backwards, oversexed, over-sunned, unhygienic, and infirm.

These ideas show up in the writings of Luis Saia, who began to keep a diary shortly after the third Catimbó encounter. More intriguing than the general presence of these ideas is the form they take. Throughout the diary, Saia made references to recent cultural production, including the artistic work coming out of São Paulo. The cases suggest that the arts had a significant influence on how Saia envisioned his own project and experience. More generally, the cases provide an

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outline of how artistic components of São Paulo’s modernist project have shaped the way that those from São Paulo have interacted with those in the North and Northeast.

Ethnography as Fictional Adventure

On May 30, 1938, after four months of ethnographic research in and around the Brazilian coast, the ethnographers prepared to leave the city of João Pessoa, Paraíba, and head into the interior. No longer able to move their sizable audiovisual materials by boat (the equipment included a 1930s Presto audio recorder and more than a hundred acetate-covered aluminum discs), Saia hired a man named João Gomes de Brito to transport them in his truck. With the help of Brito, they were able to travel with their phonograph, discs, motion camera, and ever-growing collection of religious artifacts. But because of the condition of Brazil’s interior roads, things quickly (and predictably) went sour.

The first piece to break was the cable to the truck’s steering column. Then came a near-flooding of the engine and subsequent stall-outs. After that the brake rod snapped. Each additional problem further frustrated Saia, who was already alternating between stomach pain, fever, and constipation. The truck broke down for the third time right as the group entered the state of Ceará. This was the brake rod case, followed immediately by “the truck [getting] stuck in the river Fortuna. To get out it needed work with a hoe, etc.”

Frustrated at the locals (who did not hoe to the ethnographer’s fancy), Saia made a cryptic comment at the end of the day’s journal.

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43 Field book 7: 2, 5. CCMPF.
44 Field book 7: 21. CCMPF.
entry: “the people of Ceará” he wrote, “are a group of *mugangueros*. I can’t get used to this Ceará.”**45**

*Muganguero* is not a word in Portuguese. It is a neologism, likely coined by Saia himself. The term is a reference to a 1930-31 serialized comic called “Tintin in the Congo” by Belgian cartoonist Georges “Hergé” Remi. The “Tintin” series told the story of a fictional Belgian colonist-adventurer of the same name. In the episode on the Congo, Tintin became an ethnographer and journeyed to Africa, where he met a population described as childlike, stupid, and apish. This comes as no surprise considering that Hergé worked for a conservative Catholic newspaper and served a larger media project supporting the Belgian colonial project. In the heart of the Congo, Tintin comes face-to-face with the antagonist of this ‘benevolent’ colonialism: a black-magic sorcerer named Muganga.

By adopting Hergé’s term “muganga,” Saia transposed the fiction of primitive Congolese witchcraft onto the real landscape and people of Ceará. The use of the term, and especially the moment in which it appears, suggest that Saia may have visualized himself as a Tintin of sorts, engaged in a similar project of colonial adventure.

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**45** Field book 7: 21. CCMPF.
Figures 1-6 show various cases of Tintin’s comments and behaviors which echo the attitudes and actions of Luis Saia and his cohort. Figs 1-2 depict a condescending Tintin (and dog) asking locals to guide them but then viewing them as lazy and unintelligent. Similarly, whenever Saia got angry with his own guide Gomes de Brito, Saia referred to him in the diary as “the calunga,” a term that refers to Afro-Brazilians coming from towns that were historic slave maroon communities. Since the term only shows up when Saia was angry, it was likely intended pejoratively.

Just as an angry Tintin scolded the locals for transportation problems, so too Saia blamed Brito de Gomes and others for their incompetency with the truck. “I paid them 4$000 to help me,” Saia wrote. “But if it had not been for the rock that I told a street-kid to fetch then we would have been fucked because the vine the calunga slipped behind the rear wheel came loose.”

46 Field book 7: 46. CCMPF
There are additional minor connections: Saia’s repeated commentary of Afro-Brazilian religious and cultural practices as indicative of “mental regression”; the use of the term “povo muganguero” to describe the residents of Ceará (Fig. 3); the phonograph and videotaping of religious houses (Fig. 4); and the use of quinine pills to alleviate Saia’s own fevers, reminiscent of Tintin’s decision to prescribe pills to the local Congolese as a scientific alternative to believing in “Juju” witchcraft (Fig. 5-6).47

These points are not intended to suggest that the São Paulo ethnographers somehow based their trip on a comic book. Instead, the significant overlap reveals that ethnography and colonial propaganda had been bedfellows for enough time to create archetypes and leitmotifs recognizable to a cartoonist in Belgium, and that—a akin to a feedback loop—could then be reproduced by recently-trained ethnographers in 1938 Brazil. The cartoon was one piece in a larger collection of publications that contributed to a behavioral script that Saia and the SEF ethnographers adopted. This came complete with assumptions of the ethnographer’s superiority over their informants in the areas of education, religious beliefs, speech habits, and race. That script was formed not only by international cartoons, but also by the local artistic work coming from Sao Paulo’s modernist artists.

**An Epic Poem**

The ethnographers continued their journey through Brazil’s Northeastern interior, until their truck gave out completely. Fortunately for them, they had made their way just outside the town of Terezinha, Piaui, where a railroad ran to São Luis, the capital of Maranhão state. The

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47 Field book 7: 5. CCMPF.
ethnographers took the train to São Luis and then, back on the coast, hopped a boat to Belem, Para, their final destination before returning home.

On June 22, 1938, the day after they arrived at Belem, the ethnographers visited the local theater. In the lobby, Saia spotted “a morena from another world.” Saia wrote she had “skinny legs but she is better than good.” This had to be, he continued, the very “daughter of Queen Luzia.” He followed her to her house that night, proceeded to “sleep well in a hot bed of women” and returned to her house on multiple occasions throughout the next week of their trip. The entries in the diary never reveal her actual name, referring to the lady always as the “daughter” or the “daughter of the Queen.”

Belem was part of Brazil’s democratic republic; it had no “queen.” Rather, the “daughter of Queen Luzia” was a reference to the 1931 poem “Cobra Norato,” written by Brazilian modernist Raul Bopp. As was the case with the “Adventures of Tintin in the Congo,” Saia’s own behavioral script, personal goals, and self-narrative were caught up in a web of cultural production. This time the web had been woven by an artist in São Paulo during the height of the city’s artistic engagement with primitivism.

In the epic “Cobra Norato,” Bopp narrates the story of a young man named Norato (short for Honorato) who wants to find and marry the daughter of a mythic Portuguese queen and king, hidden in the very depths of the Amazon jungle. In order to move quickly and covertly through the Amazon, Norato beheads a cobra and slides into the snake’s skin. With this disguise, he proceeds to slither through the jungle. But the jungle remains a dangerous place, and the quest for Queen Luzia’s daughter is fraught with the challenges of tropical chivalry. According to the poem:

48 Field book 8: 68.
“You have to hand over your shadow to the Beast of the Deep
You have to cast a spell when the moon is new
You have to drink three drops of blood”\textsuperscript{50}

For Bopp (as for many modernists) the Amazon provided a hyper-sexual environment.

“Everywhere they call to me—Where you going Cobra Norato?
I have three pretty young trees here
They’re all yours”\textsuperscript{51}

“Jungle wombs yell: Fill Me!”\textsuperscript{52}

“I got crammed in a mud uterus.
The air lost its breath”\textsuperscript{53}

The use of the sexual imagery to describe the Amazon may have been Bopp’s way of extending the sexual desire of the protagonist onto the physical environment. It aligns with Norato’s own explicit confession, “My blood is all aching for queen Luzia’s daughter and her witchy ways,” and resolution “tonight I’m gonna sleep with queen Luzia’s daughter.”\textsuperscript{54} Dressed as a snake—symbolic of the male organ—Norato forms part of a long tradition of male protagonists penetrating a feminine landscape.

Scholar Annette Kolodny has argued that this metaphor has real consequences: those that read about landscapes in sexual terms eventually see themselves as able to “possess” and “penetrate” those lands.\textsuperscript{55} Such metaphors normalize hypermasculinity and sexual objectification. Bopp’s poem alone, of course, was not responsible for the attitudes of the ethnographers. But it did form part of a larger artistic project that rendered the Amazon and the Northeastern region as having a raw sexual availability.

\textsuperscript{50} Raul Bopp, “Cobra Norato” ch2.
\textsuperscript{51} Bopp, “Cobra Norato,” ch 2.
\textsuperscript{52} Bopp, “Cobra Norato,” ch 13.
\textsuperscript{54} Bopp, “Cobra Norato,” ch 2, 3.
\textsuperscript{55} Annette Kolodny, The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters (Chapel Hill: University of N Carolina Press, 1975). See also the work of Johnson and Lakoff.
Saia’s diary shows a reproduction of the modernist metaphors. Leaving a small town called Campos Sales in the state of Ceará, Saia looked back and wrote, “The city of C. Salles is completely undressed, naked of trees.” There is a sketch of a woman on that page, and the comment occurred the morning after Saia commented that a woman had run away from him in her undergarments.

Cobra Norato eventually finds the “filha da rainha,” lying naked in the lair of his mythical rival, the Great Cobra.

“You know what that little girl is down there
...naked like a flower?
It's queen Luzia's daughter!”

Shortly after Norato enters the hole and steals her away, the Great Cobra realizes what happened and gives chase. Seeing the Great Cobra on his tail, Norato cries out for the local Indian witch doctor, the pajé, to create a diversion. When Great Cobra arrives at the pajé he asks, “Did you see Cobra Norato with a girl?” The pajé lies: “He went to Belém. He went to get married.” This gives Norato the time to make his escape.

The story of “Cobra Norato” is that of a city man who leaves civilization and dresses himself in primitive skins to pursue a sexual conquest of the Brazilian interior. And while the poem was iconic of Brazilian modernism’s primitivist phase, it was not alone in sexualizing the Brazilian interior. Indeed, the central metaphor of Brazilian primitivism—that of anthropophagy (cannibalism) or “eating” the interior—was as sexual as it was cultural (“eating” in Portuguese refers to both food and sex). Such sexual conquest was explicit, even central, to several key

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56 Field book 7: 58. CCMPF.
modernist works, such as Manuel Bandeira’s poem “Vou-me embora para Pasárgada” and Mário de Andrade’s *Macunaima*.

The presence of the “daughter of Queen Luzia” in the diary of Luis Saia is evidence that modernist stories of sexual conquest directly informed Saia’s understanding of his own trip. The narrative form and internal logic of “Cobra Norato,” teaches that the prize for surpassing multiple geographic obstacles is the right to steal and possess a native woman. It seems that Saia took this fictional message seriously. After his myriad difficulties with the truck, he arrived in Belém looking to possess his own native princess. Nor was this an isolated case of sexual conquest. Saia’s broader notes on the subject of sexuality reveal a great deal about his generation’s perspective, not just of women, but of the Northeastern region itself.

**Saia’s Pharmacy**

São Paulo’s modernist generation—the poets and the social scientists alike—had sketched out a Northeastern Brazil that was racialized (as Indian and black), pathologized (as mentally underdeveloped, unstable, and intoxicated), gendered (as feminine and sexually available), and rendered barren (stuck in drought, lacking food, water, and crops). Saia accepted and contributed to this regional sketch. The field books evidence he viewed these regional categories (of race, gender, mental development) as interchangeable. And through his daily practice of writing, Saia reinforced this picture. The writing process helped Saia justify his claim to material objects, cultural practices, and physical bodies.

This process began with word associations. In writing, Saia linked the words “negra” (black woman), “boa” (sexually attractive), and “apetitosa” (appetizing) together to the point of using one as shorthand for the others. In the state of Ceará, Saia wrote that “The woman of Crato
is *muito boa*. There are *negras* in the zone, and the rural woman also is quite *apetitosa*.“

By repeating the associations, Saia strengthened the links between these words (and his own belief in their interchangeability). Eventually one (negra) began to carry with it the weight of the others (boa, apetitosa). When Saia arrived in the state of Piauí, he wrote: “The women of Piauí are *boas* and really *sexuadas*. There are *blacks* around here.”

Saia did not feel the need to elaborate on the second sentence: the presence of blackness is already implied sex and appetite. In the same entry, Saia reinforced the connection, “A young mulata girl coming back from the drinking spicket was of an absolute total sex. Her curves looked like they wanted to break out of her dress. Her backside large and protruding. Appetizing.”

Describing women as appetizing, I think, not only highlighted sexual desire but reinforced the longstanding notion that the region made inhabitants hungry and thirsty. Hunger and thirst were constant themes in Saia’s writing. “Mineral water, guaraná, or anything similar cannot be found here. I have never in my life felt the thirst I feel here.” In another case Saia wrote, “Never in my life have I felt so much hunger and thirst. Not even in 1932.”

Saia treated his hunger and thirst for food and water as interchangeable with his desire for local women. “We stopped a bit further ahead in a house where we found out they sell *bananas*!!!!!!!!!!!! [all 12 exclamation points in original]. That way we can trick our stomachs a bit. I couldn’t stave off the thirst any longer and I drank the water served there in the house. I expect that it might mess up my stomach.”

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59 Field book 7: 53. CCMPF.
60 Field book 7: 84. CCMPF.
61 Field book 7: 84. CCMPF.
62 Field book 7: 34, 42. CCMPF. This language plays into the longstanding notion of a barren Northeast that has physiological consequences on its inhabitants. famous 1902 work *Rebellion in the Backlands* in which journalist Euclides da Cunha wrote that in the Northeast, “lungs that are reduced in size” producing “a maximum of organic energy and a minimum of moral fortitude.” This, for da Cunha, did not occur in Southern Brazil where there were “situations that are more encouraging, more beneficent and stimulating in their effect.” (Os Sertões, 60-61)
63 Field book 7: 35. CCMPF.
bananas there was a healthy, big-boned, hyper-sexed ‘cabôca.’” Saia had written down the regional pronunciation of *cabocla*, a term designating a mixed-race woman with indigenous features. The phrase again shows the connection between race (cabocla), sexual desire (hyper-sexed) and appetite: Saia continued, “Swaying her full body and curvy figure, [she] made one forget form, thirst, and hygiene.”

In that entry, everything about the house was deceptive. The bananas were to “trick the stomach”; the water would slake the thirst but then infect the body; and the woman’s hypnotic sway tricked Saia into forget form, thirst, and hygiene. The deception made Saia think of a local hallucinogen known as catuaba. “This catuaba,” wrote Saia, “is a tree that grows in the Araripe mountain range. The tea made of its bark or vine, gives sexual vitality [tesão]. In [the Brazilian city of] Crato they make a house wine with it. On the label of the wine there is an old man sitting at a table and a woman lifting her skirt to show the garter.” Here he made the connection back to the banana woman: “She is worse than any catuaba...They say it’s enough for a person to set up a hammock below her to start the circus.”

As an intoxicant, catuaba came to serve as synecdoche for the state of delirium that Saia imagined derived from time spent in the Northeastern landscape. Reflecting on a night spent in a small town before reaching São Luis de Maranhão, Saia wrote “In the pension, there is a young girl more or less really pretty. I think by really pretty I mean really fuckable because I am in a desperate state of *catuabismo*.” Here, Saia blamed his sexual objectification of local women on a state of sexual frenzy caused by the environment. The Northeast became a scapegoat.

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64 Field book 7, 38-9, CCMPF.
65 Field book 7: 38-9. CCMPF.
66 Field book 7: 38-9. CCMPF.
67 Field book 7: 113. CCMPF.
There is a greek term referring to an object that is simultaneously a cure, an intoxicant, and a scapegoat: *pharmakon*. Plato discussed the notion in the *Phaedrus* and then the philosopher of writing Jacques Derrida examined the concept further in an essay titled “Plato’s Pharmacy.” For Plato, writing could cure people of the disease of forgetting (writing reminds people of what they do not remember) even as it simultaneously aggravating the problem of forgetfulness (once a person writes something down, they strive less to remember it). Derrida reflected on how the Greek term itself was used historically to speak of a variety of concepts: remedies, drugs, intoxication, scapegoats, and disguises. Derrida’s first point was to teach a reading strategy: readers can look at the multiple ways in which a term is used to understand the assumptions and prejudices within the text. But Derrida’s essay also speaks to the nature of ambivalence: objects of desire can quickly turn into objects of disdain and a scapegoat for problems.

The Northeast was such a scapegoat for Saia’s own problems. Those elements of the Northeast that Saia imagined as having intoxicated him were the very problems for which he wanted a cure. Reflecting on his own sexual encounters in the wake of the trip, Saia wrote:

> “Could I be a sadist?”
> God I don’t want much.
> Good teeth, euphoria,
> health, good results from my research, free time.
> Anything more [would be] the ivory Christ from the S. Luis altar.
> Trips. To overcome the sexual problem.
> Not too much!”

The entry confirms the binaries that occur throughout Saia’s larger body of field notes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Northeast</th>
<th>São Paulo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hunger/thirst</td>
<td>health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raw information</td>
<td>research results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intoxicating sexual desire</td>
<td>sexual relief</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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68 Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” in *Dissemination*.
69 Field book 9: 79. CCMPF.
This vision of the Northeast further corroborates that the modernist scholarly and artistic production influenced how Saia viewed the region. Social science texts published around the period of Saia’s ethnographic training and trip affirmed the idea—already present in modernist art and poetry—that Northeastern women were sexually unrepressed. The unspoken corollary was that they were consequently available sexual objects. Paulo Prado, in his 1927 *Portrait of Brazil* had spoken of the “free and unchecked sensuality” of the Brazilian contact period which “contained the embryo of almost all the elements of posterior society.”

Gilberto Freyre’s influential 1933 *Masters and the Slaves* wrote that Africa had endowed Northeastern Brazilian women with a “special relish” for sex, food, and faith. Scholars Arthur Ramos and Julio Porto-Carrero spent their career (and publications) arguing that Brazilian social problems came as a result of the lack of sexual development of the Brazilian population, suggesting that sexual maturity depended on region.

Even the equation of Northeastern intoxicants with sexual desire was not invented by Saia; it was a trope developed by Brazil’s modernist poets. Saia’s comment that he was in a “desperate state of catuabismo.” echoes a line written in 1927: “It was the jurema of her beauty that intoxicated my senses!” That poem, called “Catimbó” and written by Pernambucan poet Ascencio Ferreira (whom the ethnographers visited during the first leg of their trip), shared the contours of Saia’s writing, specifically the use of a local intoxicant (*jurema* is another Northeastern hallucinogenic derived from tree bark) to describe sexual desire, and then place

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such desire alongside an endorsement of patriarchal sexual violence. The poem “Catimbó” continued:

I want to [sexually] enjoy the desire that burns on her lips
I want to feel the soft caress as a moonlight ray
I want to awaken the voluptuousness that sleeps in her breast
    I will have her,
    I will conquer her
Even against her own will.\textsuperscript{73}

Saia, in blaming his sexual desire on local intoxicants and geography, turned the region into a scapegoat. This \textit{pharmakon}—the scapegoat intoxicant that can heal or poison—was the Brazilian Northeast, its nature and its women. São Paulo’s scholarly community viewed the region as filled with people of a primitive mentality and women that were sexually available. The region was a poison to the nation insofar as it could push the larger nation back into mental primitivity. It served as a scapegoat in that political and legal scholars blamed many of Brazil’s federal and national problems on the region and its supposedly primitive mentality. And yet the region held the remedy to the problem of national fragmentation insofar as São Paulo state leaders believed that Northeastern folklore possessed a raw energy and power that could be developed into a body of artwork contributing to national unification and patriotism.

But this modernist scholarly and artistic portrait of the Northeast had real consequences. The comic books, scholarly essays, and poems conveyed to readers prejudice, assumptions, and value-judgements. These coalesced into a social script that determined how Saia and his fellow ethnographers viewed and interacted with locals from across the region. As a result, the ethnographers felt they had license to treat informants with condescension and women as sexual objects. The environment too, both natural and man-made, became an object to act upon and a

\textsuperscript{73} Ascenso Ferreira, \textit{Catimbó; Cana Caiana; Xenhenhêm}. Ed. Valéria Torres da Costa e Silva (São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2008 [1927]).
place to take from. This view scripted the ethnographic encounters and justified the
dispossession. As can be seen in the following paragraphs, it even allowed the creation of what
we might call Saia’s own “pharmacy”: the collection of stolen ex-votos—the Northeastern
objects designed to prevent the forgetting of a loved one—and their placement into a museum in
to ensure that Brazilians forget the presence of colonial structures at work in Brazilian
regionalism.

Collecting Ex-Votos:

Head ethnographer Luis Saia encountered his first such offering in Pernambuco and, from
then on, he and his team began taking these statues from church altars and gravesites. Saia
recounted the first encounter with the ex-votos: “On a lunch break [in Meirim, Pernambuco] I
visited a little chapel that existed there. The desire to find things carried me, as always, to even
more indiscrete searches. [Underneath] the finial of the constructed walls, [there were] boxes full
of something I could not make out...” In one of the boxes, Saia found a carved wooden head. He
carried it to a local resident, asked what it was, and then added it to the ethnographers’ collection.

The team then made a habit of collecting ex-votos as they continued beyond Pernambuco.
In the field books, Saia was more explicit about his methods: “At a chapel I found a very
interesting Saint Sebastian with a ribbed torso. I robbed a saint there.” Five years later, Saia
looked back at the pieces his group amassed, reflecting that “the state of Paraíba...provided the
majority of the upwards of a hundred pieces that can now be seen in São Paulo’s Discoteca

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74 “Em Meirim... num intervalo de lanche, visitei a capelinha aí existente. A vontade de achar coisas me levou, como
sempre, às procuras mais indiscretas: remate dos muros da construção, caixas cheias não sei de que, atrás do altar...
Precisamente atrás do altar desta capela encontrei uma cabeça de madeira que no primeiro momento julguei tratar-se
de uma parte de santo de roca. Mas, segundo informou o cicerone improvisado [Napoleão Xavier], era um milagre.
75 “Na capela daí um S. Sebastião popular very interessante com costelas de estrias. Furtei um santo aí.” (The
English “very” is in the original). Field book 4A: 13. CCMPF.
The team seemed most interested in pieces in good condition or that might provoke the aesthetic interest of viewers in São Paulo. “Visiting an open-air cruzeiro,” Saia wrote, “I found a good amount of pieces, some totally worn by weather, others somewhat burned, and others visibly new. I chose the ones that appeared the most interesting.”

A cruzeiro is a large cross placed in public spaces, used to designate a public meeting place or a site where a loved one had passed away. The presence of “visibly new” sculptures suggests this was a place that families were still visiting to honor their deceased.

The acquisition of relics commemorating the recently deceased invites the question of how Saia and his colleagues justified their taking of these objects. First, it is conceivable that Saia was not concerned about moral issues. Indeed, the larger body of archival evidence suggests that interpersonal considerations were not central to Saia’s work, and that he viewed informants as less-developed mentally and thus as people to be condescended to. But there are three other issues at stake.

The first is that one quote from the field books recounts a moment in which a local told Saia that old ex-votos were burned. Although the comment came late in the trip (after the team had taken the majority of the relics), the note could be indicative of the rationale of the ethnographers: if the object will be burned, why not take it for posterity? Second, the group’s instructions from Dina Levi-Strauss had made it clear that they were to “collect everything that

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76 “O Estado de Paraíba..forneceu a maior parte da centena de peças que hoje se encontram no Museu da Discoteca Pública de S. Paulo.” Saia, Escultura, 10.
77 “Na cidade de Tacaratú, onde ficamos aboletados, visitando um cruzeiro ao ar livre, no alto de um morro próximo, achei uma regular quantidade de peças, umas já completamente desfeitas pelas intempéries, outras meio queimadas e outras visivelmente novas. Colhi os que me pareceram mais interessantes.” Saia, Escultura, 9.
78 Other cases of taking recently-created ex-votos can be noted in the field books, such as: “Tacaratú (Pernambuco) 259. Cabeça de madeira, tamanho médio de fatura recente. Cruzeiro de Gameleira.” Field book 2B: 48. CCMPF. There was one case in which Saia appears to have paid for an ex-voto: “na Capela de Santo Antonio...á noite. Ela estava em cima do altar. Custou 2$000.” Field book 2B: 47. CCMPF. Still, the case invites the questions of why the ethnographers were entering chapels at night and who was selling them altar-top saints.
could be instructive.” Indeed in the 1930s, theft, misinformation, deception, and grave-robbing remained standard practice for ethnographers across the world.

But the third and central issue revolves around the scientific paradigm that Saia had accepted: cultural evolution. According to the model, the Northeast was the final refuge of Brazil’s primitive mentality, a peculiar psychology that would soon become extinct. Saia likely saw his behavior as justifiable insofar as (in his mind) the stripping of objects out of local communities would make it possible to preserve the objects for posterity and for scholarship.

Conclusion

The São Paulo ethnographic society suggests a case, not in which moral considerations were absent, but rather in which the commitment to a scientific methodology (that of a Freudian anthropology) served as the central pillar of a moral architecture. As a consequence, local informants had their voices muted. The São Paulo ethnographers found the ‘evidence’ of the primitive mentality they set out to find, but their trip had consequences. It dispossessed locals of instruments, religious objects, and memorials. Back in Sao Paulo, it contributed to making regional difference (a social construction) appear as a scientific and indisputable fact.

Historian Jan Goldman and anthropologist Didier Fassin have written on strategies for capturing ethical perspectives of the past. Rather than condemning historical actors as unethical, we do better to note the multiple ethical commitments visible in the historic record and then determine which of these commitments took precedent over others. In the case in question, the

79 Aulas 6 and 14. SEF microfilm, roll 1, CCSP.
Didier Fassin, “Beyond good and evil? Questioning the Anthropological Discomfort with Morals,” Anthropological Theory 8, 4 (December 2008): 333-344. See also Berber Bevernage’s argument that there is an inherent danger in contemporary scholarship that renders historical actors as immoral. This teaches a “temporal Manichaeism” meaning that readers walk away believing that “past = evil, present = good” while implying that the future will be even better.
São Paulo ethnographers prioritized their commitments to research (the production of knowledge) and nationalism (a São-Paulo dominated nationalism). They likely genuinely believed that such commitments were in and of themselves contributing to a moral project: one of preserving the past while encouraging national mental development.

The local informants had their own commitments: to present themselves as carriers of tradition, to earn money, to get new clothes for family and loved ones. Some would-be informants (such as Mestre Hilario) engaged in “ethnographic refusal” by literally shutting his door. Others, such as Mária Plácida pushed for a compromise: she would allow songs to be manually transcribed, but not recorded.\(^1\)

As the ethnographers traveled through multiple Brazilian states, they carried with them racial assumptions and expectations about the people they would meet there. These ideas predetermined their experience, meaning the ethnographers were able to selectively assemble ample evidence to confirm their prejudices. For the ethnographers, the legitimacy of the Amerindian or Afro-Brazilian performance was not associated with a metrics of training, secrecy, or number of followers. Rather, the measure of legitimacy was the extent to which acts (speech, ritual, or performance) aligned with the anthropological ideas of the primitive mind, such as the magic highlighted by Frazer or the contradictions highlighted by Lévy-Bruhl. Looking for a caricature of primitivity, the ethnographers found it. The mistakes of the elderly Silva and the limited repertoire of the roadside Xavier confirmed for the ethnographers their own pre-conceived ideas of primitive psychology and their narrative of national identity: that Brazilian

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culture and psychology was evolving but at different paces. Brazilian primitivity remained alive in the Northeast and was present only in custom and superstition in southern cities such as São Paulo.

The scholars believed they needed to document this primitivity to understand Brazil’s national psychology. They also collected artifacts and recorded music in hopes of inspiring the production of national Brazilian art and music. Artifacts, melodies, and rhythms from previous such trips had, indeed, served as reference points for Brazilian modernist artistic production. But the 1938 ethnography trip reveals that such artistic production was not directly rooted in, say, performance traditions of Paraíba, but rather in primitivist representations of a homogenized Northeast, complete with value judgments regarding race, religion, and region.