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**V!22**

REVISTA V!RUS  
VIRUS JOURNAL

issn 2175-974x  
julho . july 2021



TAPETE  
CARPET

A INTERCULTURALIDADE DA LAVAGEM DO BONFIM DA BAHIA  
THE INTERCULTURALITY OF THE LAVAGEM DO BONFIM OF BAHIA FESTIVAL  
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How to quote this text: Avancini, A., 2021. The interculturality of the Lavagem do Bonfim of Bahia festival. Translated from Portuguese by Juliana Martinatti Penna. *VIRUS*, 22, July. [online] Available at: <http://www.nomads.usp.br/virus/virus22/?sec=5&item=118&lang=en> [Accessed dd Month yyyy].

ARTICLE SUBMITTED ON MARCH, 7, 2021

### Abstract

Lavagem do Bonfim is a religious festival whose tradition dates back to the colonial period. The purpose of this article is to discuss the cultural issues involved in the dynamics of the largest religious festival of the Brazilian state of Bahia, which has been taking place annually since 1755 in the city of Salvador, in Northeast Brazil. Such interculturality fits into the relations within the Latin American context, as a result of the amalgam between Christianity and African religions. Our research critically approaches the topic based on Louis Marin's (1994) "procession syntax", meaning the historical strength of cohesion and resistance. The existence of this festival for centuries is explained by devotion, marked by African-based religions, and seen as a symbol of the Brazilian people's daily struggle for survival. A historic debt yet to be conquered is to integrate black people as citizens into Brazilian society.

**Keywords:** Culture, Memory, Urban life, Religious festival, Daily life

## 1 Introduction

This study describes the religious festival *Lavagem do Nosso Senhor do Bonfim*, which transcends the past to reach our days but is not very well-known by the general public. The traditional street demonstration integrates aspects of identity, memory, and resistance as the heritage of the Brazilian people. Miscegenation and colonization are part of the identity construction of the Brazilian nation. The festival's intercultural borders integrate and connect not only Latin America, but also Africa and Europe in the realm of transmissions of rites and practices of human faith.

The transatlantic slave trade, in the geopolitics of plantation slavery, from the 16th to the 19th centuries, came from the coastal regions of Africa. Brazil received about 4 million enslaved Africans and Spanish America almost 1.6 million (Dorigny and Gainot, 2017, p. 29). From the *Lavagem do Bonfim*, we seek to reframe understandings of the Latin American context, especially Brazil, marked by the influences and cultural practices of African-based religions.

The objective of this article is to describe, analyze and interpret from different areas of knowledge the biggest religious festival in the Brazilian state of Bahia, using verbal and photographic records to work, above all, for the inclusion of social agents and popular knowledge. The strategic challenge of Lavagem do Bonfim is to promote the social pact and the responsibility of the state of Bahia regarding public policies. The research approaches the theme critically, based on the "procession syntax" by Louis Marin (1994), whose method of rereading the festival contributes significantly to cultural, artistic, historical, sociological, anthropological, religious, and urban studies in the Latin American context.

The *Lavagem do Bonfim* festival, in the city of Salvador, in the Northeast of Brazil, has Christian origins with a strong influence of Candomblé. This article is developed through historical research, but also photographic coverage carried by the author in different years. The ten photographs presented here were taken in 2018, made in colour with a Nikon D70s digital camera. The relevance of discussing the Lavagem do Bonfim festival lies in the possibility of opening horizons to rethink Afro-Brazilian culture and popular faith, despite the presence of all layers of the social sphere.

The survival of this religious tradition for almost three centuries is surprising and shows resistance to overcome difficulties and not to yield. The festival can also be considered a place to rebuild after traumatic events – wounds, aggression, and violence – which reflects the history of people of African descent. Eduardo Galeano (2017), in *Open veins of Latin America*, explains the conservation of African traditions and the maintenance of religious faith by the black population, mainly in Brazil and Cuba.

The African gods were still alive among America's slaves, as they were alive, fueled by longing, the myths, and legends of the lost homelands. It seems evident that in this way blacks expressed, in their ceremonies, in their dances, in their exorcisms, the need to affirm a cultural identity that Christianity denied. However, it also influenced the fact that the Church was associated with the exploitation system that victimized them. (Galeano, 2017, p. 125, our translation).

The starting point is to perceive religion as faith or devotion. The term "religion" finds its etymology in the Latin word *relegare*, "to recall or to gather", or as *religare*, "to rewire". That is, reconnect the being to the invisible, the magic, or the deities. One can consider the popular Lavagem do Bonfim festival as a gathering of people to make pilgrimages and offerings, to honor ancestors, and to find a sublimation that bypasses historical and social traumas. Devotion to *Senhor do Bonfim*, first made into the patron saint of those who faced the sea, gained recognition in the city and, also, around the world.

## **2 Former capital and mixed-race city**

After Carnival, this traditional street festival is established as the second largest popular event in the capital of Bahia. Since 1755, it expresses the worldly and sacred Brazilian feature, in addition to pointing out intercultural boundaries. The architectural, geographic, and historical place of Lavagem do Bonfim is the city of Salvador, in Northeast Brazil, its first capital and second Brazilian tourist centre (figure 1). The pleasant bay was found by Portuguese colonists in 1502, on All Saints' Day. Baptized with the name of São Salvador da Bahia de Todos os Santos, the city was founded on November 1st, 1549. Mixed race and diverse, it was "[...] homeland of many barons of the Empire, viscounts, counts, marquises, but it was also the homeland of the people of the docks." (Amado, 1972, p. 123, our translation).



**Fig. 1:** The meeting of the believers at the Conceição da Praia church, in the vicinity of the *Elevador Lacerda*, the Monument to the City of Mário Cravo and *Mercado Modelo*. Source: Author, 2018.

In 1763, the Portuguese crown transferred the capital of the Brazilian colony to Rio de Janeiro. The abolition of slavery and the crisis in the production of sugar cane accentuated the decline of Salvador, in the Northeast of Brazil, at the end of the 19th century. The city, which according to popular legend would have 365 churches, one for each day of the year, actually has 372 Catholic churches. It is, however, the most African city on the continent – the historic cradle of the ternary process between Europe, Africa, and America.

The “lavagem” (“*cleansing*”) ritual corresponds to certain religious practices, such as the Catholic tradition of internal cleaning of the church – a medieval Iberian custom –, initially performed by enslaved labour. In the lands of Bahia, Lavagem do Bonfim is the heritage of the people to surrender thanks to two deities: Nosso Senhor do Bonfim and Oxalá. This interculturality fits into the relations in the Latin American context, the result of the amalgam between Christianity and African religions. “A land where everything is mixed and confused, no one can separate virtue from sin, to distinguish between right and absurd, to draw the line between accuracy and deception, between reality and dreams.” (Amado, 2010, p. 48, our translation).

Miscegenation is a valuable opportunity, as long as it acknowledges the discrimination that originated in the 16th century when blacks were enslaved and forced to work in Brazilian lands. Today, at Lavagem do Bonfim, the leadership of black women from Bahia with their typical ceremonial costumes is revealing. The Bahian woman (figure 2) is the protagonist of the mythical narrative of the grand festival in which, in a way, she replaces the Catholic priest.

White and immaculate is the costume of the Bahian women who leave the church of Conceição to Bonfim early in the morning, carrying pots on their heads with clear water and white flowers; daisies, dahlias, roses, and angelics. They are plentiful black women, who go to Bonfim to wash the churchyard, carry their best bead strands with thick fingers, pig teeth encased in silver, beads, other amulets, and round acorns. Bracelets and your most luxurious clothes. (Carybé, 1976, p. 163, our translation).



**Fig. 2:** Around nine o'clock in the morning, Bahian women wait in their ceremonial attire for the beginning of the procession. Source: Author, 2018.

The tradition of Lavagem do Bonfim shares a history of coloniality. However, there is no longer the practice of internal cleaning of the church: It is, on the day of the festival, closed to the public. This fact is enough to dismantle the myth of Brazilian racial democracy. The discriminatory attitude avoids acknowledging that symbolic place as well as that of the blacks. Some scholars even believe that the Basilica Sanctuary of Senhor do Bonfim would have been settled in a sacred place for people of African descent. The sovereign white, past and present, has been a violent usurper in the exercise of erasing or weakening this tradition: "As if the other, who always preceded him in that place, had no rights and had not even existed." (Di Cesare, 2021, p. A12).

The last country in the West to abolish mercantile slavery, Brazil was the nation that most received African expatriates. There were 4.7 million people between 1550 and 1850, about 40% of the entire African diaspora. 130 years after the signing of the *Lei Áurea* (the Golden Law), which took place on May 13, 1888, the accumulated scientific knowledge allows us to understand new aspects of this regime that managed to perpetuate itself mainly thanks to the widespread use of violence. (Queiroz, 2018, p. 75, our translation).

### **3 An order behind the apparent chaos**

The Bahian motto "those who have faith go on foot" gives meaning to the journey to Bonfim. Walking through the festival is to be in contact with part of history and to unveil scenarios that hold treasures of Brazilianness. In transit, passers-by glimpse the dynamics of urban life, social issues, and the contrasts between privileged and underprivileged populations. Such as a rushing river, the collective crossing proceeds in continuous movement and transformation, and "[...] there is always something unpredictable, that the unexpected is just around the corner." (Labucci, 2013, p. 127, our translation).

The day of the big gathering is complex and not strictly linear. Yet there is always an order behind the apparent chaos: the moments of the pilgrims' meeting and dispersal. The meeting time, in the morning, brings the sense of the sacred and is divided into three phases: i. the concentration of Bahian women in the Nossa Senhora da Conceição da Praia church; ii. the procession of eight kilometers with the transfer of the Nosso Senhor do Bonfim walker; and iii. the symbolic cleansing in the basilica of Senhor do Bonfim. The dispersion stage, better known as Festa de Largo, complements the rites around the homage to the saint, a more festive dimension based on revelry – declared as profane –, and takes place in the afternoon and into the night.

There are approximately one million people on the route from the Conceição da Praia church to the Bonfim basilica. Annually and with a moving date, the summit of the event takes place around the basilica on the



Thursday of January prior to the liturgical mass of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which is held on the second Sunday after the Epiphany – Kings Day, on January 6th. Nosso Senhor do Bonfim (Jesus Christ) is considered the protector of the city. However, Nossa Senhora da Conceição da Praia (Virgin Mary) was declared the patron saint of Bahia by Pope Paul VI.

The concentration of Bahian women takes place around nine o'clock in the morning, at Conceição da Praia church, where the ecumenical ceremonies for world peace follow. It brings together leaders from different religions: Catholicism, Candomblé, Spiritism, Islam, Judaism, Presbyterianism, Umbanda, and Buddhism. Lavagem do Bonfim operates as an interfaith site. Access to the gathering and ecumenical worship is restricted.

The route of the crowd towards the Holy Hill – the name given to the place where the Bonfim basilica is located – runs through distinct urban paths from the Lower City to the Itapagipe Peninsula. One can glimpse the expressive architectural scenery of the religious ensemble in the city of Salvador, in the Northeast of Brazil (figure 3). The association of different stages of Lavagem do Bonfim can be synthesized by what Louis Marin (1994) defines as "procession syntax", the collective body in motion in a certain arrangement and at a certain time. "The order of the procession means the message about the messages, that is, the way the messages are to be understood." (Marin, 1994, p. 53, our translation). This narrative ranges from meeting to dispersion, from "dirty" to "purified" and from light (day) to dark (night).



**Fig. 3:** The transfer of the Senhor do Bonfim walker passes in front of Casa Pia and the Colégio dos Órfãos de São Joaquim.  
Source: Author, 2018.

In the secular tradition of the procession, pilgrims wear white and light clothing to face at least three hours of walking in the scorching heat of the tropical summer. The journey of faith requires a hat and lots of water. Nobody remembers any Lavagem do Bonfim in the rain. From the windows, residents look and are looked at. Popular groups wear ornaments, play, and dance in the proper ways of their styles. The pilgrims carry a frank smile; this natural gesture comes from singing to cheer the deities. At the end of the procession, the devout fill the Largo do Bonfim. There is almost no room left for prayers to the holy protector and to give him thanks or tributes. As in the stages of the Passion of Christ, the crowd slowly ascends the Holy Hill, represented as a symbolic cross.

The journey to the *Colina Sagrada* (the Holy Hill) today reveals a singularity instituted by the rector of the Bonfim church, Father Edson Menezes da Silva, in 2016: the carry of the image of the Senhor do Bonfim in a small walker by the people (figure 4). The event brings different perspectives and even surprises, such as on January 14, 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic, in which the city of Salvador, in the Northeast of Brazil, promoted a campaign to prevent people from participating in the Lavagem do Bonfim celebrations. The believers were instructed to follow the event over the internet. The mayor changed the festival slogan from "those who have faith go on foot" to "those who have faith stay home." (Mattoso, 2021, p. A4, our



translation). The cancellation of the event by the government for reasons of public health affected, however, numerous temporary jobs that the festival leverages (figure 5).



**Fig. 4:** Senhor do Bonfim ribbons tied to the walker. Source: Author, 2018.



**Fig. 5:** The motto suggested by the bead street vendor: "if you have faith, here, there's axé!". Source: Author, 2018.

#### **4 Portuguese captain of sea and war, and religious patronage**

What is the first source of the myth of Nosso Senhor do Bonfim (Our Lord of Bonfim)? According to the legend of oral tradition, it all started with the sinking of a Spanish ship, whose crew found, among pieces of wood on a beach on the Portuguese coast, the image of the crucified Jesus. The Christian symbol, therefore, promoted the construction of a small chapel in the city of Setúbal, which marked the foundation of the confraternity of



Nosso Senhor do Bonfim. With the grace achieved, the idea would be to thank the good outcome of the occasion.

On the other hand, the first testimony to the beginning of this devotion in Brazil came from England by the accounts of sailors John Bulkeley and John Cummins (1927), in the book *A Voyage to the South-Seas in the Years 1740-41* (1743). The two illiterate adventurers narrated to author John Narborough the adventures of the squadron of eight ships that left the port of St. Hellens (England), in September 1740, towards the southern hemisphere.

Historian Cid Teixeira (2000, p. 104) says that the duo's unusual experience began with the sinking of the ship Wager off the Chilean coast of Patagonia. From port to port, after numerous risky trips, they arrived in Rio de Janeiro. To fund their return to Europe (via Lisbon), they found work on the ship Setúbal, commanded by the Portuguese sea and war captain Theodozio Rodrigues de Faria, slave trader and religious patron, owner of three vessels dedicated to trafficking on the African coast. "Rich colonists paid for sumptuous buildings to pay promises and save their souls after death, getting rid of what they believed to be purgatory and hell." (Talento, 2021, p. B11, our translation). In Salvador, in the Northeast of Brazil, the two Johns finally embarked for Lisbon in September 1742.

About to arrive in Europe, on November 23, there was an unforeseen storm with a cyclone in front of the port of Lisbon. Surprised, the two English sailors found the crew on their knees in prayer, instead of pumping the water that flooded the vessel. Not content with the passive attitude, they complained to Captain Theodozio, who reacted and mobilized the crew. On the Portuguese mainland, more precisely in Setúbal, relieved officers and sailors went barefoot in procession with the sail and mast of the ship directly to the Church of Nossa Senhora da Boa Morte to thank the grace achieved. Theodozio fulfilled his promise, given in the moment of despair in the Atlantic, and ordered Portuguese artisans to make a cedar replica of the image of the crucified Christ: Our Lord of Bonfim, 1.1 m high. And the construction of the temple in Salvador was ordered, whose works started after the arrival of the sculpture in 1745. (Avancini, 2016, p. 48, our translation).

The construction of the then church of Bonfim was an attempt to escape from hell and to spend little time in purgatory, in addition to a monumental ex-voto – an object offered to the deity by grace achieved. The first mass took place on the day of St. John, on June 24, 1754. The people then began to consider the saint as belonging to Bahia and to attribute miracles and graces achieved to Senhor do Bonfim. The Bonfim basilica, an example of colonial architecture erected prominently at the top of the hill, is a monument in neoclassical style with a rococo façade. It defines the landscape with sumptuousness (figure 6).



**Fig. 6:** The crowd and the Festival's continuous feature. In the background, the two towers of the Basilica of Senhor do Bonfim.  
Source: Author, 2018.

## 5 A relief for misfortunes

The sky is decorated with rockets, confetti, and white balloons as the Bahians arrive at the churchyard of the Bonfim's basilica. Black women revitalized the Catholic festivities of Bahia, from the private and intimate rites to the festive atmosphere. The one who best represents Lavagem do Bonfim is the traditional Bahian woman: from her typical attire, emanate prestige, reverence, and aura. The vase, loaded with flowers and perfumed water, as well as the white robe, communicate the sacred.

There were hundreds of Bahian women gathered on the steps of the temple, all in the elegance of the white, ritual costumes: the round skirt, the starched petticoats, the lace and embroidery smock, the low-cut sandals. On their arms and lap, they held silver trinkets, props, and bracelets in the colors of their saints. Pot, jar, or moringa on the turban, on the head: smelling water for the obligation. Mothers and daughters of saints from all Afro-Bahian nations - Nagô, Jeje, Ijexá, Angola, Congo - and from the Cabocla nation, in *dengue* and joy. (Amado, 2010, p. 56, our translation).

Commitment to the fulfillment of promises, prayer, gratitude for the graces obtained, and surrender to amusements, pleasures, and emotions make the pilgrim recite poems of praise and beg for protection in a fusion between matter and spirit. Nobody doubts in Bahia that "he who sings scares away his woes". It is natural, therefore, to honor the love of Christ as well as to revere the power of Oxala.

Finding the salvation buoy in people or institutions in this dark ocean in which we live is part of our Iberian, Catholic, Portuguese heritage. We have this tendency to desire that a person or an institution be our salvation. (Gil, 2018, p. A17, our translation).

With the penance of the long walk, pilgrims seek merits that will alleviate their misfortunes: family anxieties, health problems, harmful habits, marriage wishes, financial distress, training, and professional activities. There is simply pure duty and delight in the festival's ongoing journey. On the way to the temple, the path is familiar to everyone, but each pilgrim fulfills it at their own pace. The history of the struggle of blacks for survival forced them to create autonomy and organization. The procession moves under a vastness of electronic and live sounds, such as religious hymns, samba, axé, and capoeira (figure 7).



**Fig. 7:** The festival is a succession of expressive moments, such as the agile movements and the musicality of capoeira.  
Source: Author, 2018.



Considered a pagan festival by the archdiocese of the city of Salvador, in the Northeast of Brazil – a racist and discriminatory decision – today, in Lavagem do Bonfim, there are redirections towards ecumenism. In a way, it is a popular response to the crisis established among government institutions, privileged Whites, and the aspirations to integrate Blacks as Brazilian citizens. The cultural provincialism of the ruling classes has always discriminated against the popular features of Bahia and the entire Northeast of Brazil. One of the acts of this intolerance was the extinction of the traditional festival by the decree-law, officially published in 1899, promulgated by the then archbishop of Bahia, Dom Luís Antônio dos Santos. Actions to whiten the festival, remove the pilgrimage, and dismantle the belief around Oxalá impregnates the constant interference produced by the public and religious authorities.

Although the festival survived, in 1950, they prevented access to the Sanctuary of Bonfim, destroying rights and dismantling traditions. The Bahian women then began to symbolically pour perfumed water over the staircase and the churchyard, a flat, fenced area in front of the church. In 1976, Archbishop Dom Avelar Brandão Vilela authorized the reopening of the temple's wooden portal. However, to this day, access is still prevented by a hollow iron door with the symbol of the Christian cross. This popular festival, strictly different from folklore, is a constant fight against intolerance.



**Fig. 8:** Father Edson Menezes da Silva opens the dialogue window and raises the image of Senhor do Bonfim to the pilgrims.  
Source: Author, 2018.

As of 2009, in a policy of reparation, Father Edson Menezes da Silva began to bless the believers at the temple window with the replica of the image of Senhor do Bonfim in his hands (figure 8). The pontiff, the rector of the Bonfim basilica, emotionally comments on the feeling of contemplating the crowd when he publicly shows the image to the believers: "Looking from up there is magnificent, an integrated event of races, creeds, and social classes. Today's social project is solidarity" (verbal information). Father Edson, a Bahian black man from Salinas da Margarida, recognizes the pride of the population and respects diversity, stating that the non-recognition of Lavagem do Bonfim by the Catholic Church leaves empty gaps: "We have a lot to learn from Afro-Brazilian culture and popular manifestations. I wish that the waters of this Cleansing help build peaceful times" (verbal information).

## **6 Water as the festival's central element**

The Bahian woman evokes symbolic images of the feminine and motherhood and welcomes ancient African deities into her heart, such as old father Oxalá, the sage with a trembling hand resting on his staff. The annual service of cleaning the sanctuary for the Senhor do Bonfim Sunday festival probably dates back "[...] to the memory of these Nagô slaves from Bahia to the lustrous rites representative of the Oxalá cult." (Serra, 1995, p. 235, our translation). When the internal part of the church was finished, in January 1755, the custom of cleaning the floor began to happen on Thursdays, together with the preparations for the Novena and the

Sunday mass of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Thus, the practice of Cleansing was established as a form of offering and a purification ritual to concretely remove physical dirt.

Today, the prominent place of the festival, the churchyard of the Bonfim basilica, is where the symbolic cleaning of the floor takes place, a traditional Bahian practice. Surrounded by iron bars, the idea is to restrict the people to promote the safety of religious leaders (including the Bahian women), the state apparatus, and the media. Anthropologist Ordep Serra criticizes how the churchyard is now fully protected: "Who created the beauty of this rite, of this festival, was the humblest people, the poorest, the black people. There was, in fact, a suppression of the public space as a democratic space" (verbal information).

The central element of the festival is clean water to remove impurities and bad things and to promote the amendment of one's self. The verbs "to be born", "to purify" and "to improve" are found in the oldest water traditions in African and Muslim cultures. Also, it is in the sacred relationship with the essential liquid that one of the arguments for Oxalá's analogy with Senhor do Bonfim resides. Although, "[...] no trace of the historical person of Jesus was transferred to Oxalá." (Berkenbrock, 1997, p. 249, our translation).

Water is the key to understanding the origins of the cultural and religious traditions of Lavagem do Bonfim. If in the past its function had been to clean the floor of the sanctuary by the servant arm of the enslaved Negro (figure 9), today it is transmuted to bless the pilgrim in the form of a splash or spray, which refreshes, rejuvenates, protects, and heals. The special moment of ecstasy for the believers, therefore, is the ritual of contact with the scented waters sprinkled by the Bahian women. The perfumed water is inside the flowerpots that the Bahian women take to Bonfim. "Water is the object of one of the greatest values of human thought: purity." (Bachelard, 1997, p. 15, our translation).



**Fig. 9:** "We have a lot to learn from Afro-Brazilian culture", Father Edson Menezes da Silva was quoted as saying. Source: Author, 2018.

Thus, devotees experience the first sensation of grace: the sprinkling water promotes bliss and legitimizes the powers attributed to the Bahian women. Everyone wants the solemn blessing symbolized by the divine will over men. The perfumed water means for the pilgrim the best elixir of Lavagem do Bonfim.

Jorge Amado (2010, p. 292) reports the feeling of completion on Thursdays in Bonfim. In the churchyard, the sprinkling happens on the pilgrims' heads "(...) with the waters of Oxalá (...)". While in the Catholic ritual the devotees enter the church to receive the blessing of the priests, in this case, the closed Bonfim basilica causes the devout to be purified outdoors by the celebration of the Bahians: a cultural transformation. The sprinkling of perfumed water, voluntarily consented, brings calmness, assurance, and promotes an elevation of ordinary thoughts. There is a conviction that the water from the flowering pots leads to a good ending. To Bonfim.



The moment of dispersion of Lavagem do Bonfim is the Festa de Largo, a tradition of mass Catholicism, whose church is the geographic centre of the celebration. The urban area is filled with food and drinks stalls. Free activities prevail in the afternoon and with no time to end. That is when the crowd experiences a few amusements: meals, snacks, drinks, dating, games, music, and dances. It is a chaotic, noisy, and sometimes violent universe.

Street vendors take advantage of the great flow and install their benches and trays on the margins of public roads. The tents in different colours and formats express themselves as sculptural landmarks. Conceived inventively for meals, they form curtained porches that attract a parish that is always ready to taste exquisite dishes. The heterogeneity of the elements makes the crowd react to sensory stimuli in which everything is predominantly bright, bland, Brazilian.



**Fig. 10:** A cohesive body in action. Source: Author, 2018.

Lavagem do Bonfim is a book spoken in communion for peace in the mixed dialect, integrating the sacred and the profane, as well as Christians and Candomblé practitioners. It aims at ethnic, religious, cultural, and political humanism. Symbolized by the miracle in the regular flow of everyday life, Lavagem do Bonfim creates the spirit of an integrated body of Brazilian people (figure 10).

## **7 Final Considerations**

The noisy dynamics of the city of Salvador favors incomprehension. A possible metaphor is the concentration of Bahian women around the Conceição da Praia church. The uproar among the general public, Bahian women, religious, politicians, the press, *capoeira* practitioners, and *afoxé* blocks is greatly ordered once they form the procession. The parade, which looks more like a samba school, welcomes the cosmopolitan essence of Salvador: the predominant Yoruba element of Benin. The Soteropolitano (a Salvador-born person) is the stereotype of the Brazilian people for foreigners, whose nature deals simultaneously with order and improvisation. The Bahian circumvents the obvious use of public spaces, in which everything is possible.

The whole universe fits in the Lavagem do Bonfim. The wealth and miseries inherent to the human condition are spread on the pavement of the streets. The urban area of the festival creates disparities that are as real as they are magical, welcoming the mystical condition of popular wisdom. Lavagem do Bonfim exposes the unofficial portrait of Brazil: the people are always fending for themselves. Certain concepts of sociology reveal that, since slavery, “[...] Christianity entered as a very important part of the ideological apparatus of domination, and African religions were elements of resistance in the dominated segment.” (Moura, 1988, p. 39, our translation).

Under conditions of deprivation and oppression, a force emanates from the community so that its history, identity, and wisdom cannot succumb. The festival's narrative highlights the historical strength of this resistance. Lavagem do Bonfim reflects the horizontality of most of its actors; its message conveys the call for a more cohesive and strengthened civil society. What the movement of the Bahian women achieves with great mastery is to highlight an opportunity, renewed each year, to reconnect with the African Brazilian identity, Bahia's history, and the roots of the Brazilian people. At this festival, two secular ties stand out: the permanent link of continuity with African religions and the abrupt discontinuity of slavery, which generated social vulnerability for the oppressed.

Popular religious festivals, whose essence lies in devotion, have always been a way of affirming the autonomy and self-organization of communities. Lavagem do Bonfim is interculturality transformed into practice. The streets, in this case, are multiethnic, multi-religious, and multi-social. The long journey towards self-achievement, in the middle of a tropical summer, marks the search for an encounter with the deities, the purity of the heart, and the memory of the ancestors.

Lavagem do Bonfim is the meeting place with the sacred, marked by diversity and plurality. In other words, it is a political and existential act, which implies peace and conflict with the other. A place of historically rejected people, spaces of fusion and order work simultaneously as the "[...] spaces of negation-segregation of the great Latin American centres." (Dezem and Avancini, 2019, p. 150). Not extraordinarily, parties are rituals and customs that serve two dimensions of human life: the daily and the unusual.

The Latin American subject is an opportunity to debate human issues. Latin America was born for obedience defined by, among others, the excesses of foreign colonization, violence against the natives, and slavery. The link with African cultures in Latin America exists on a constant tension between continuity and discontinuity, belonging and exclusion, purity and miscegenation, prejudice and tolerance. This research fits into the dialogical relations within the Latin American context, which encompasses Brazil, having been culturally marked by African-based religions. Discussing the Lavagem do Bonfim festival is a possibility of identifying issues of distortions promoted by forms of cultural control; of reframing understandings of the continent about the invisibility of non-hegemonic groups, and of opening horizons to rethink the currentness of Afro-Brazilian culture.

The Lavagem do Bonfim festival represents moments of poetic refuge in the believers' lives, implementing cultural identity and proximity to the sacred. Only the deities can sublimate the pain and protect from exploitation, which comes from the periods of colonization and slavery, in a country with a self-declared black majority. Is it the reason this street festival has existed for almost three centuries, seeking to integrate blacks and whites? One could assume that the "second abolition" is still in the process of reaching its "good end" ("*bom fim*" in Portuguese): by incorporating blacks into society. Citizenship is still Brazil's greatest historic debt.

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