

## Female empowerment: a case study in the State of Maranhão, Brazil

**Antenor Ferreira Corrêa**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0257-3059>

Universidade de Brasília, Instituto de Artes

[antenorferreira@yahoo.com.br](mailto:antenorferreira@yahoo.com.br)

**Marise Glória Barbosa**

Universidade de Brasília

[mariseglora.barbosa@gmail.com](mailto:mariseglora.barbosa@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** Based on a field research conducted in the State of Maranhão (Brazil), we consider aspects of empowerment prompted by a traditional female leadership existent in several cities of that state. This headship was established in the context of the celebrations in honor of Holy Spirit and provides material which raise interesting questions, such as: Has the female leadership empowered women who play during this festivity? How do the women who participate evaluate their own role within the overall context of the ceremony? Did their headship contribute to undermining racial, social, and gender prejudices? Although our object of study belongs to the field of cultural studies, encompassing both performative and representational aspects of this widely spread Brazilian manifestation, in order to exemplify empowerment, these questions will be addressed having as a case study a group of women called *Caixeiros do Divino* [The Holy Spirit's Drumers], who are the responsible for the general organization of the ceremony.

**Keywords:** Empowerment; female leadership; Caixeiros do Divino, Holly Spirit celebration in Brazil.

### EMPODERAMENTO FEMININO: UM ESTUDO DE CASO NO ESTADO DO MARANHÃO, BRASIL

**Resumo:** Tendo por base uma pesquisa de campo realizada no Maranhão (Brasil), consideramos alguns aspectos do empoderamento engendrados por meio de uma tradicional liderança feminina presente em várias cidades deste estado. Esta liderança estabeleceu-se no contexto das celebrações ao Divino Espírito Santo e fornece material para interessantes interrogações, tais como: Essa liderança feminina empoderou as mulheres que tocam durante essa festividade? Como estas mulheres avaliam seu papel no âmbito do contexto geral da cerimônia? Essa liderança contribuiu para minimizar preconceitos raciais, sociais e de gênero? Embora nosso objeto de estudo pertença ao campo de estudos da cultura, englobando aspectos performáticos e representacionais dessa manifestação amplamente espalhada pelo Brasil, de modo a exemplificar o empoderamento, essas questões serão conduzidas tendo como estudo de caso as Caixeiros do Divino, grupo de mulheres responsáveis pela organização geral da cerimônia.

**Palavras-chave:** Empoderamento; liderança feminina; caixeiros do Divino; celebrações ao Divino Espírito Santo.



# Female empowerment: a case study in the State of Maranhão, Brazil

Antenor Ferreira Corrêa, Universidade de Brasília, antenorferreira@yahoo.com.br

Marise Glória Barbosa, Universidade de Brasília, marise gloria.barbosa@gmail.com

## 1. Introduction

This text addresses some current understandings regarding empowerment (Zimmerman 2000; Christens 2012; Akchurin and Lee 2013; Chomba et al 2015) specifically in relation to gender and music. The concept of empowerment is considered here using the traditional female leadership within the Festival of the Holy Spirit, in the state of Maranhão, north of Brazil as a case study. The women in question, who participate in this ceremony, are called *Caixeiros do Divino* (women who play drum during the festivity. More about them ahead) and the purpose of this article is to reflect on empowerment's psychological and symbolic basis within this specific tradition. Although, our object of study belongs to the field of cultural studies, encompassing both performative and representational aspects of a widely spread Brazilian manifestation, called *Festejos do Divino Espírito Santo* (celebrations in honor of the Holy Spirit), The Holy Spirit (also known in Brazil as the Divine Spirit is celebrated in the Catholic and other Christian traditions on Pentecost Sunday. The date moves every year since it is scheduled to happen 50 days after Easter. Pentecost celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples of Jesus after his Ascension. The iconographic representation of the Holy Spirit is a dove, a reason why many elements used by *Caixeiros do Divino*, such as instruments, clothes, walls, flags, among others, are painted with the image of this bird.

The tradition of the Holy Spirit celebration presented here was historically scattered throughout the whole of the country. However, it was only in Maranhão, a state situated in the northeastern part of Brazil, where women took on the leadership of the celebrations. Being more specific, although there are similar festivities in several states led by men, it is only in Maranhão that this celebration is organized entirely by the *Caixeiros do Divino* (with some help of other women). It is worth of note that drumming is very important part in this celebration. In many African-based religions, drumming is a male role, and forbidden for women. Therefore, the fact that women also have taken this role is very intriguing from the historic and gender point of view. This unique female protagonism indeed presents some historic and musical questions, such as: why did women specifically assume the leadership of this festivity? Why do they play on drums? Notwithstanding these interesting inquiries, the empowering aspects involved in musical practice (Travis Jr. 2013; Clay 2006) also raise significant questions: firstly, has the female leadership of the festival empowered other women who also play during this festivity? Secondly, how do the women in charge evaluate their own role within the overall context of the ceremony? Thirdly, to what extent does

their headship contribute to undermining racial, social, and gender prejudices? In order to approach these questions, and to comprehend the purpose of analyzing these issues in relation to the issue of empowerment, it is necessary to have some information about the region where it happens so to apprehend the social context where the manifestation is accomplished. These data will also be used to support the forthcoming conclusions.

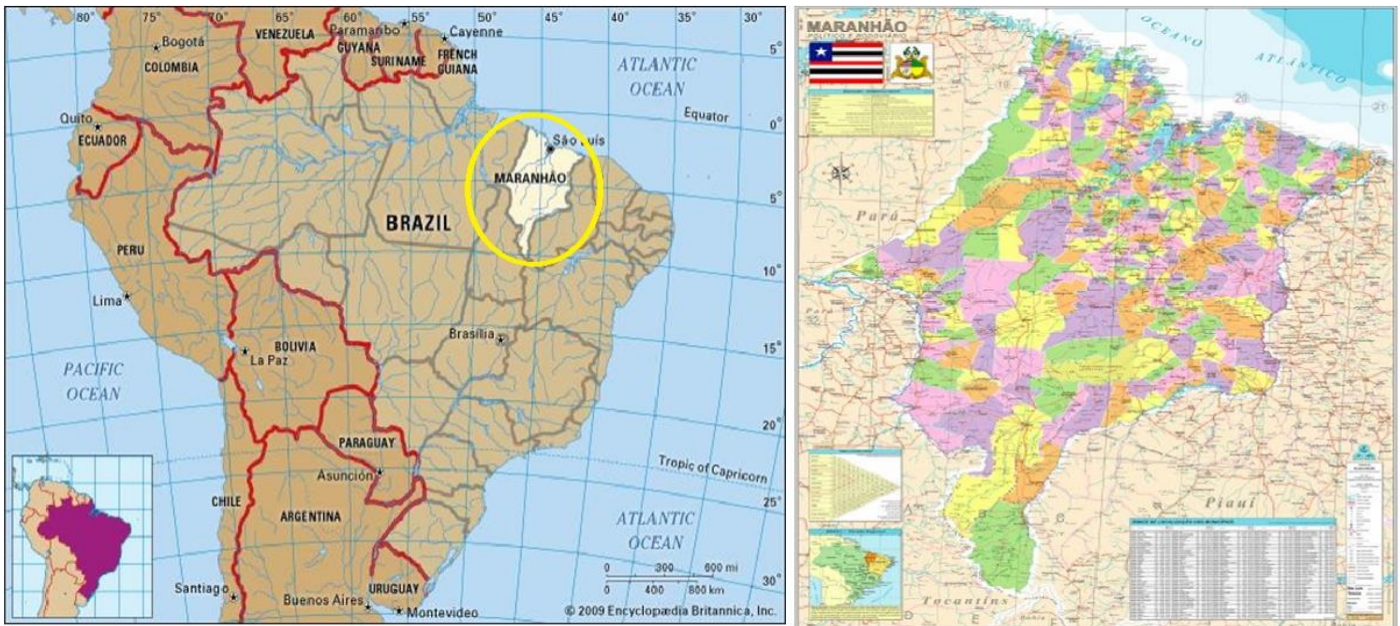
Still, regarding the idea of empowerment, it is necessary to recognize the existence of some types or conditions involved with the notion of what constitutes empowerment and what are the necessary preconditions required in order to empower someone. These will be presented in the topic 3 below. However, right away we wish to clarify that there is also a general understanding attached to empowerment when it occurs *through* or is propitiated by music. This understanding is the very belief that music can empower people; an idea to which several authors have already attested. Raphael Travis Jr., for instance, claims "pioneers of various elements of Hip-Hop culture have been empowered through the ability to voice their reality and find a meaningful identity alongside others who found purpose and function in embracing Hip-Hop culture" (Travis Jr. 2013, 139). Also within the field of hip-hop, Andreana Clay researched the ways the youth in San Francisco Bay Area had used hip-hop music and culture to empower non-musical organizations. In her study, she verified that "hip-hop music assists in the development of a political consciousness among youth activists. In other words, music can enable youth, disenfranchised from electoral politics, to engage in the practice of democracy." (Clay 2006, 105). In the field of rock music, regarding the field of indigenous rights, Chris Gibson and Peter Dunbar-Hall observed how aboriginal Australian situated in the region of Nitmiluk managed to reconstruct their post-colonial spaces. Within this process, the music played by aboriginal Australians played a meaningful role allowing for the congregation of indigenous people around their cause. In this sense, the authors stressed "the importance of popular musical expression as mediator of geopolitical conflict, and as an accessible tool of education, communication and identity construction" (Gibson and Dunbar-Hall 2000, 40). Thus, in view of these understandings, we will interrogate if the music has empowered the women who play in the Holy Spirit celebration and if the music was a vehicle allowing for empowering the other women who hold any kind of leadership role in this festivity.

## 2. The State of Maranhão in Brazil

Maranhão is a relatively large state, occupying an area approximately the size of Germany. The State is divided into 217 small cities. According to the latest population projection in 2017, it had approximately seven million inhabitants. Its HDI (human development index) is the second worst in the country: 0,639 (Federal District, the highest HDI among all Brazilian states, is 0,824. Source: IBGE<sup>1</sup>), and other kinds of assessment indicate huge social problems. For instance, the number of those aged between 18 and 24 years old who do not complete secondary school is about 50%, with 58% of women completing vs. 44% of men. Figure 1 gives an overview about the geographic localization of Brazil and the state of Maranhão in relation to the rest of the country.

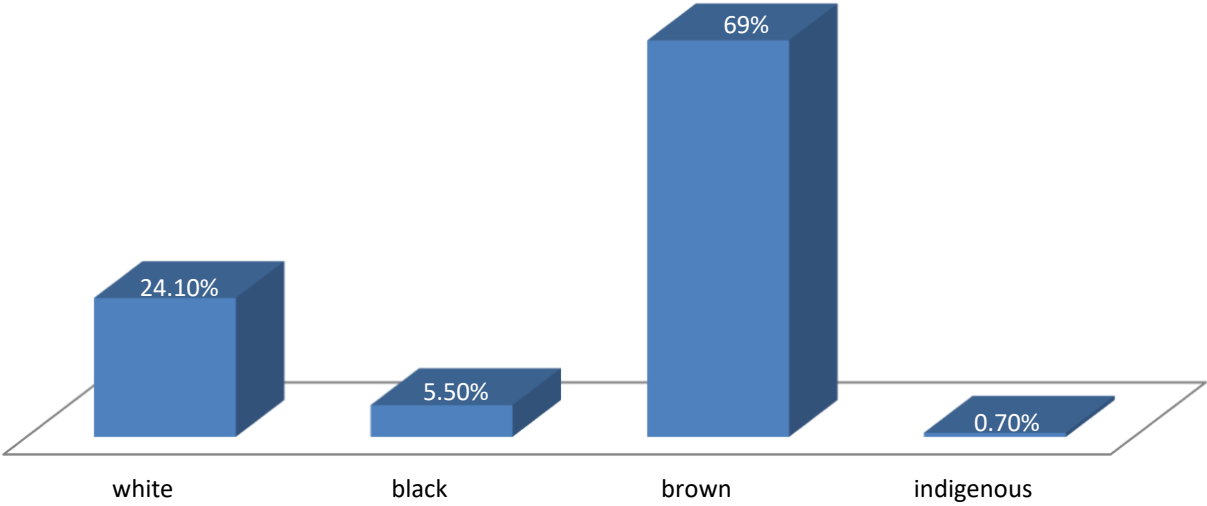
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<sup>1</sup> IBGE stands for Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistic. The IBGE is an entity in activity since 1936, run by the federal administration, under the Ministry of Planning, Budget and Management. The function of this foundation is "identifying and analyzing territory, counting the population, tracing the evolution of the economy as a reflex of people's employment, production, and pointing out, as well, how people live" (IBGE website).



**Figure 1 -Brazilian map highlighting the state of Maranhão (left). Maranhão map and its division in 217 cities (right). The Holly Spirit ceremony is celebrated in 153 cities.**

According to the last IBGE census (2010), the population of Maranhão is 6,574,789 million people and the proportion of men/women is 50/50. The per capita nominal household monthly income is R\$ 461(circa of US\$ 123) the worse of the whole country (just to compare, the Federal District, which includes the country’s highest monthly income is R\$2548, about US\$ 690). About 56% of the residences do not have access to the internet and circa of 30% of the households do not have a running water supply. There are about 283 public health clinics in São Luiz, the capital city (in São Paulo, the biggest city in South America, there are 2541 public health clinics) and the majority of the population is of African heritage (See Figure 2), circa 69%, though, due to reasons surrounding prejudice in Brazil existent in Brazil, many self-identify as ‘brown’ instead of ‘black’.



**Figure 2 –Graphic showing the proportions among races in Maranhão. (Source IBGE, 2010).**

Maranhão has a particular difference from other Brazilian states regarding its colonization. The slaves brought to this region came exclusively from Benin, at that time, a French colony named French Dahomey situated at the west side of Nigeria (Eltis and Richardson 2010). In this area, Vodun is the predominant

religion, a fact that explains the several worship-houses dedicated to the religion in São Luiz do Maranhão (the capital city of Maranhão). Even though the majority of the population are of African heritage, and notwithstanding the existence of numerous African-based worship houses, when asked about religious affiliation the majority of people self-declare Christian – overwhelmingly Catholic, 81%, but also evangelical 19% (See Figure 3).

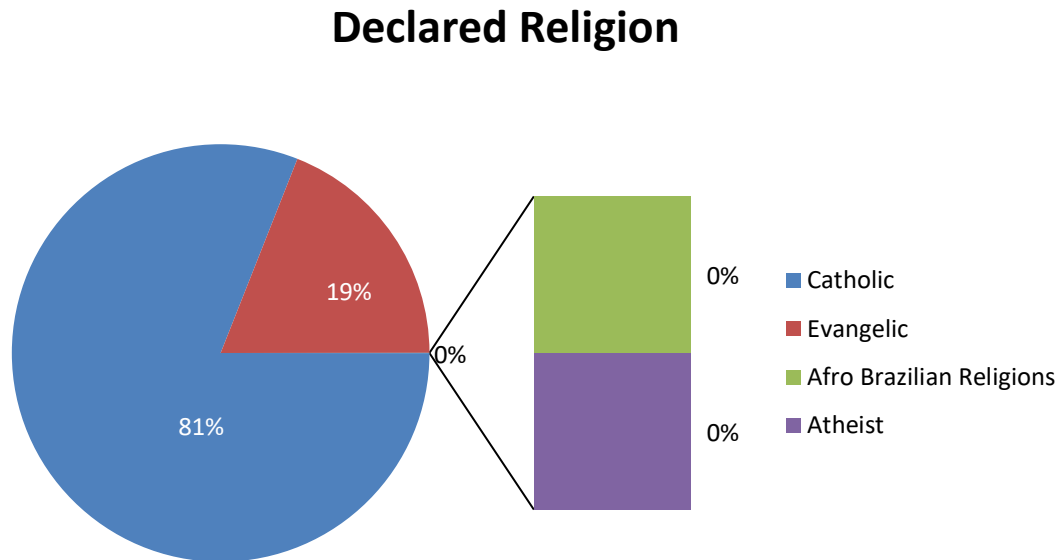


Figure 3 –Graphic showing the proportions among self-declared religion in Maranhão. (Source IBGE, 2010)

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This diagnosis of the state of Maranhão is helpful here for two particular reasons. The first is that it provides an overview of the conditions of the state regarding general aspects of its economic structure. These statistics will be used subsequently as a parameter to assess levels of empowerment. Secondly, the indexes also show characteristics as well incoherencies of Maranhão that are also valid to all Brazilian society. In this respect, it is worthy of note, for instance, the reluctance of people in admitting to being atheist or member of African-based religions. This is due to an ongoing prejudice against these religions which is faced all across the country. One particular aspect of Brazilian society is the religious syncretism that coalesced to form its cultural heritage. It is well-attested that Portuguese, Indigenous, and African roots are present in several Brazilian traditions. However, to avoid being discriminated against, people chose to declare themselves as non-practicing Catholic. According to the Human Rights Ministry, between January 2015 and the first half of 2017, one complaint involving religious intolerance is filled every 15 hours. The largest majority of victims belong to religions of African origin, making up 39% of total



complaints. These reports comprise of invasion of temples, verbal assaults against religious, destruction of sacred images, and even incendiary attacks or attempted homicides.

The state of religious intolerance explains the hesitancy of people in admitting their belonging to African-roots religions. This fact is worthy of note given that many of the Holy Spirit festivities are also celebrated in African-religions worship-houses, and *Caixeiros do Divino* means the women who play on drums in this celebration, themselves belonging largely to these marginalized religions. In a small city named Entre Rios, there is an Umbanda worship-house where its leader Dona Angélica celebrates Holy Spirit because she considers him to be her *Santo de Cabeça* (head saint). However, *Santo de Cabeça* is a denomination used in *Candomblé* and *Umbanda* to nominate the energy linked to nature that has the power to transfer its physics and behavioral characteristics to the person who worships it. Casa Fanti Ashanti (São Luiz) is a traditional worship-house belonging to a Dahomeyan religion named Vodun, most known as *Tambor de Mina*. In this house, Holy Spirit has been celebrated for the past 42 years and has become part of its festive calendar. Thus, just through these few examples, it is possible to observe the complexity of the religious context in Brazil.

### 3. Empowerment

In the chapter entitled *Empowerment Theory*, Marc A. Zimmerman (2000) discusses different definitions of what empowerment mean. One of the descriptions he considers asserts that: "empowerment is an intentional, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources" (Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989, *apud* Zimmerman 2000, 43). This notion of empowerment centers a great deal on the collectivity rather than the individual, that is, who gains power and, from the power obtained, whether members of that community can act on behalf of all in the sharing of resources and assets. This is a process run by and aimed to the benefit of a community in each, at least in thesis, the figure of a single leader is not significant. Another analogous definition considered by Zimmermam is quoted from Rappaport: "empowerment is viewed as a process: the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives," (Rappaport 1984; *apud* Zimmerman 2000, 44). This description also places a group in the center of empowerment processes and is motivated or intended to promote social changes or to improve the conditions of a particular collectivity. Likewise, Zimmerman renders his own definition thus: "empowerment suggests a distinct approach for developing interventions and creating social change. It directs attention toward health, adaptation, competence, and natural helping systems. It includes the perspective that many social problems exist due to unequal distribution of, and access to, resources." (Zimmerman 2000, 43).

We can notice in these three definitions empowerment is driven by and oriented toward a collectivity that needs firstly to be empowered to then (re)take control of their lives. This kind of analysis suggests thinking about the concept of empowerment as a necessary resource to be used by poor communities, minorities or any other type of marginalized or oppressed group. However, this is also the exact same type of designation adopted by big corporations. The word "empowerment" is commonly used in the organizational realm to designate a decentralization of leadership in favor of an alleged more open and participatory administrative model where a group holds the power for taking decisions. In this sense, in the companies where empowerment is acknowledged as the management model, decisions are delegated to

the group, once there is not a single authority figure responsible for the resolutions. Therefore, because the demands are divided among the group, employees can actively participate in choosing the commercial strategies they consider as effective. Similarly to the above definitions, this last one also places a group as decision-maker but adopts a different political focus. Also definitions of empowerment are a big discussion in feminist theory. Around difference between liberal/corporate feminism (see for example Sandberg, 2013) and Marxist and Radical feminist definitions (see Walby, 2011).

Parallel to these understandings, empowerment can also be considered under a more personal perspective. A person can feel being empowered by playing an instrument, driving a car or holding a gun. However, it does not imply any kind of influence over decision-making at a societal level. Of course, if one holds a gun and requires some kind of action from someone else, it does not imply influence on the decisions another person takes in the former's ability to affect social outcomes, rather this implies compliance through subjugation. At the subjective level, empowerment can be considered as having a psychological basis. This means that an individual can feel empowered and thus improve or change his/her own condition. Psychological empowerment can be accomplished by external instances. A great leader, for example, can stand as a model or an inspiration to transform a milieu. Being affected by someone could inspire an individual to take or modify attitudes. A well-delivered speech watched on TV could motivate or trigger in a person a wish to take actions or demand changes from an authority (for instance a government member, employer, principal, etc.). Also related to psychological empowerment, Brian D. Christens emphasizes that along with emotive and behavioral constituents, power can only be established through relations. Through this requirement, he claimed that it was possible to expand "our conceptions of psychological empowerment through the addition of a relational component can enhance our understanding of psychological empowerment and the effectiveness of empowerment-oriented community practice." (Christens 2012, 114). In the following, we intend to demonstrate the importance of the relationships for the constitution of the leadership accomplished by the *Caixeiras do Divino*.

By the same token, it is possible to observe the occurrence of so-called symbolic empowerment which blends together elements of both the social and the psychological. Gilliam Jr., for instance, exemplifies this category of empowerment in relation to racial justice: "for blacks, in particular, the presence of highly visible black elected officials raises group pride as group members receive broad psychic benefit from the governing activities of black politicians." (Gilliam Jr. 1996, 60) McCormick presents a similar example of this form of empowerment considering the examination accomplished by David Cronor of the well-known black leader Marcus Garvey. According to McCormick, Cronor delivered an image of Garvey that gave "Negroes everywhere a reborn feeling of collective pride and a new awareness of individual worth" (McCormick 2008, 253).

For the purposes of this article, empowerment will be considered as the condition where one person or a group holds some leverage or possibility to take or to influence the decisions. To put it simpler, empowerment is the level of decision-making effectively exerted by a person or by a community. In the particular case of the *Caixeiras do Divino*, who have the responsibility to command Holy Spirit celebration, we will see in the following that the symbolic empowerment holds a crucial role in the construction of the self of these women.

#### 4. *Caixeiras do Divino*

As already stated, *Caixeiras do Divino* is the name given to the women who play on drums in the festivities in honor of Holy Spirit. *Caixa* is the name of a percussion instrument more alike to a field drum, since it contains snares in the bottom skin. Figure 4 shows a group of *Caixeiras* from Alcântara (also a Maranhão city) and their instruments.

Because many of these women have African ancestry, or are even adept to *Candomblé* or *Tambor de Mina*, it is important to keep in mind the role of women in African-heritage religions. Women perform an extremely important function in traditional African religions, despite the fact that some scholars argue otherwise. Such is the case of Marion Kilson, which in her article *Women in African Religions* (*Journal of Religion in Africa*, 1976), claims that women are restricted to lesser roles. In Brazil, it is at least well-known that the protagonist role acquired by some women is often done in the context of African religions and that some of these women (called *mães-de-santo*, meaning a priestess), became important political leaders in their own communities. On the other hand, it is also noteworthy that women are prohibited from playing on the drums during the worship. In the domain of *Candomblé*, *Umbanda*, or *Cuban Santeria*, women are not allowed to play drums during rituals. During the *Tambor de Mina* worship it is acceptable for women to play shaker (*maracas* or *caxixi*) or bell (called *gam* or *gã*), but they are forbidden from playing on drums. For the most part, women's musical participation is restricted to singing. However, in the more modern worship-houses, women are allowed to play on drums outside of the worship, in the festivities or moments deemed to be 'secular' or 'cultural'.



Figure 4 –*Caixeiras do Divino Espírito Santo* from Alcântara. (Source: Marise Glória Barbosa's private collection)

This veto makes it all the more interesting that a group comprised entirely of women assumed the leadership of all aspects involving the Holy Spirit celebration, including its musical side. In so doing, they



broke, so to speak, the veto that precludes women from playing drums during rituals. Besides drumming, the women also took responsibility for the overall organization of the festivity, which, among other things, included gathering food to be distributed among participants, cooking, organizing parades on the streets of the city, and all musical activities (playing and singing). The Holy Spirit celebration is an ancient tradition, which has been perpetuated for at least 200 years in Portugal and Brazil.

By analyzing this particular manifestation as one 100% run by women, it is possible to explore some particular issues surrounding gender and its role in relation to music within the festivities, such as, why, historically, did women specifically assume leadership of this festivity when they have been excluded from performing or participating in other religious ceremonies? Furthermore, given the gendered nature of drumming in other African religious traditions, why do women play the drums specifically, and no other instruments, during the festivities?

Some anthropologists have tried to explain this female leadership based on economic factors (Ferretti 2005). In this sense, historically, before the official slavery abolition in Brazil (1988), it was customary for the slaves buying their freedom. However, men slaves worked in farms in a sort of incarcerated condition, and they did not receive any payment for their labor, what made impossible for them to pay for their Freedom Letter. Women, on the other hand, in addition to their slave labor on the farms, had the possibility of working selling food on the streets. With this, they could make some money and pay for their freedom. After being set free, women took on the functions involved with Holy Spirit Celebration simply because men could not do this, given that men were enslaved on the farms themselves in prison-like conditions.

As stated before, women perform an extremely important function in traditional African religions. Consequently, a prominent or influent position within a religion would be preserved in the civil life. Therefore, it could be expected them to broaden their roles to other contexts, from worship-houses to the streets, for instance, since their lives were not restricted exclusively to religion. Because of this, women who had some prominent role within the worship houses, also improved their standing in civil society.

Moreover, celebrating a Catholic tradition such as Holy Spirit was also a way to disguise the slaves' own religious beliefs. This is a well-documented aspect acknowledged by many historians under the practice of syncretism, meaning that because African religions were forbidden in Brazil, it was usual for black people to replace the names of their Orishas with those of Catholic saints. Only in 1946 did Brazil decree a law granting religious freedom to all people.

Obviously, syncretism is a complex concept that is often discussed. The definition offered above is just one possible way to face the intricacy of relationships which coalesced to form many aspects of Brazilian culture. Anthropologist Sergio Ferretti summarizes this density considering the religious aspect:

Syncretism in Afro-Brazilian religions does not represent a mere disguise of African entities in Catholic saints, but a 'reinvention of meanings' and a 'circularity of cultures'. It is a strategy for transculturation reflecting the cleverness that the founders also brought from Africa and, they and their descendants, have expanded in Brazil. As a result of the syncretism, we can say that Afro-Brazilian religions have something African and Brazilian. However, they are different from the matrices that generated them (Ferretti 2007, 112).

By anchoring the interpretation of an extended authority from worship-houses to the streets, we're getting closer to comprehending the use of the drums. It is true that the type of drum used by women in these ceremonies goes back to a Portuguese tradition brought to Brazil during the colonial times. However, it is important to remind the reader that slaves did not have the freedom to worship their African gods. Consequently, they were prevented from promoting gatherings and building instruments<sup>2</sup>. So, they had to use the type of percussive instruments available, and *caixa* was the most similar to their native African instruments.

Adopting the field drum, they could at least keep a resemblance of the conga-drum sound memory used in Vodun ceremonies. Another point to be considered is that the players go on parades on the streets. So, even if the women had had the possibility of using conga-drums, these would have been quite difficult to play and walk at the same time because, besides being much heavier than field-drum, the conga is designed to be played seated.

The anthropologist José Jorge de Carvalho (in an interview with one of the authors) raised a curious reflection. He suggested that the fact that women play on drums during the celebration could be a way to emulate or to contest the male dominance typical of African rituals. This assumption could not be proved either disproved, however, it makes a lot of sense if we pay attention to the proscriptions imposed on the women within the traditions. In this way, the deployment of this rivalry created a parallel situation where due to women's exclusion from playing other instruments during Vodun worships, a similar veto was imposed on the men, who are prevented from playing on drums during Holy Spirit ceremony.

In Maranhão, playing on drums during Holy Spirit festivities is deeply associated with what is considered a socially 'feminine' activity, and in light of some particular cultural taboos or traditions, the act of playing drums during the festival came to be established and acknowledge as a 'woman's task'. When playing on drums, women do not wear long trousers. According to religious prescriptions, they must use skirts. Although it is common to find many testimonies of men who also would like to play, they are forbidden; and, perhaps because of this requirement to wear a skirt, it is considered common sense throughout Maranhão that men who play Caixa are gay, thus deploying well-established colonial connotations of homosexuality with femininity and 'sexual inversion'. To illustrate this mentality, we can observe the words of a *caixeira* named Margarida:

There are many men playing quite well... But, they don't play during the party because the people will say they are not men, they are faggots. I have a friend who plays caixa and sings very beautifully. But he doesn't play on the parade at streets, he only plays indoors. (Dona Margarida, quoted from Barbosa 2006, 269).

Another fact that could be counted in favor of the idea of contesting of male dominance by the Caixeiros, as suggested previously, came from the report of José Bráulio Sousa Ayres, a priest in São José do Ribamar (small city in Maranhão). He received his Ph.D. from Ateneu Teresianum in Rome in 1995 with the thesis "Santos e Voduns Ancestrais e suas Incidências na Pastoral do Maranhão" (Ancestral Saints and Voduns and their occurrence in the parishes of Maranhão). During his fieldwork (1991), he traveled to various

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<sup>2</sup> There are several references about the prohibitions imposed to slaves in Brazil. Regarding worship and music see, for instance: Lühning, Angela Elisabeth and Sivanilton E. da Mata. 2010. *Casa de Oxumarê: Os cânticos que encantaram Pierre Verger*. Salvador: Vento Leste.

zones in Africa, and it was only in the capital of Lomé, Togolese, that he witnessed a special cult for Tobossi (the Vodun girls), in which women played on drums during the religious ritual. This may indicate that the women's exclusion from playing drums during a religious ceremony is well-established in Africa, and the situation he saw was a rare example of this forbiddance being broken.

It is a general understanding among the historians that Holy Spirit Celebration in Maranhão descends from a Portuguese tradition born from the archipelago of Açores. There are many videos available on YouTube showing the celebration in Açores. When women started the festivities in Maranhão, this Portuguese ritual was mixed with African elements. Even though this is admitted as a genuine Catholic tradition, the Holy Spirit celebration has no formal links with Catholic Church. The mass, for instance, very often is not officiated by priests. Moreover, some priests don't allow the Holy Spirit parade to be concluded with a mass inside the church. This sort of attitude stems from ancient forms of prejudice since the priests tend to consider this party as merely focusing on the African characteristics attached to it. Nevertheless, nowadays, some priests allow drums inside the church and even agree to officiate the ceremony within African-rooted worship-houses, like *Tambor de Mina*, for instance.

Finally, especially for the purpose of reflecting upon symbolic empowerment, it is necessary to keep in mind the high level of prestige that result from the relationship between percussionists and adherents of African religions. Firstly, not just any person is allowed to play on percussion instruments. A percussionist (called *ogã*) has to be male and pass through an initiation process. Second, by handling a sacred instrument, the percussionist is not limited to a mere role of sound-producer. Rather, he is seen as performing a major function of bridging the physical and metaphysical poles. It is up to the percussionist as to the responsibility for opening the communication channels so that the entities can manifest themselves. As soon as the percussionist propitiates the connection with the divine realm, the Orishas, in response to the messages sent by the drums, come down and are manifest in the priestesses. By reason of this crucial function, we can understand the prominent position acquired by the percussionist and the magnitude of the role he performs. For this motive, a percussionist occupies a high position in the hierarchy of African religions, what contributes, consequently, to raise his level of symbolic empowerment. Similar instances of symbolic empowerment can be observed in the *Caixeiros do Divino*; and, this is will be the topic considered in the conclusions.

## 5. Conclusions: *Caixeiros do Divino* and empowerment

Similarly to the men who play during the rite of African religions, the *Caixeiros* have also acquired a prominent position in the Holy Spirit ceremonies. Moreover, within the group of *Caixeiros*, there are hierarchical levels that differentiate them in respect to the roles performed. All the *Caixeiros* play and sing. However, the command posts are obtained by those who play, sing, and know the repertoire and the sequence of the full Holy Spirit ceremony. In Alcântara the highest role is called *Caixeira Mor* [main drummer], but in São Luís the hierarchy is built on the position of *Caixeira Régia* [regal drummer] who is aided by the *Caixeira Mor*, who, in her turn, is the second in hierarchical importance and responsibility. *Caixeira Régia* is the one who decides what to sing during the rite, she maintains the energy, pulse, and rhythm of all the group, as well as the sound ambiance necessary to keep the audience present and attentive.

Occupying a position within *Caixeiros'* sisterhood, and consequently within the context of Holy Spirit ceremony, impacts on these women both psychologically and symbolically, empowering them beyond the

religious sphere and increasing their standing and respect in civil life as well. Some examples of this symbolic empowerment could be analyzed from the following situations.

For instance, one of the authors was following a *Caixeira* who was going to play in a festivity. When we arrived at the venue, the main door was still closed. So, she knocked on the door saying: "Open the [front] door because my Drum will not enter through back door!" (Barbosa 2006, 110). This sort of attitude put in evidence the fact that she does not see herself as a maid or a servant (who, like in the past, was prevented to use the main entrance). Otherwise, she feels like belonging to a different class, and this status is due to the fact that she plays *Caixa*. And, status improvement is one of the various modes of symbolic empowerment.

It is also well known the belief that the words or chants have magic powers. In this ways, the *Caixeiros'* songs can work as blessing, spell or curse. For example, Dona Marcelina, a *Caixeira Mor* from Alcântara recounts the following:

Once, a neighbor was sat and I sang to him trying to get money for the party. So, he throws me 2 coins and said: "get these and go buy a new dress". I looked at him and I sang a lot of bullshit, and threw the money at him! I regretted having sung. He had a small company that went broke! A time later, his wife came to my house and said "Marcelina, I've come to make you a request. What did you do there at my home? My husband is about to become a beggar because of the verses you sang. I told her that was his fault, and to reverse the situation he had to pray to Holy Spirit. (Barbosa 2006, 77-78)

Apparently, it is imprinted in the people's imaginary the force attached to the Divine Holy Spirit, who can be angry with such disrespects, and the *Caixeiros* are believed to know how to bestow their wrath, as well as their blessings upon others.

The groups of *Caixeiros* are constituted by the women who play during the festivities. The constant encounters motivated by the celebration also builds the intimacy and sympathy between them. As Alzira Pires remarks: "We are sisters because the religion of one is likewise the religion of all. This is a very important ceremony and we value it because we consider Holy Spirit as God" (Testimony of Alzira Pires, quoted from Barbosa 2006, 123). Thus, they have in the party their performance space, what also generates moments to strength their bounds. In this way, the *Caixeiros* recognize themselves as a specific group that shares a common code, which means, they see themselves as owners, maintainers and responsible for perpetuating a secular tradition.

The establishment of these sisterhoods could be quite beneficial, once women associations have proven to be effective. As Akchurin and Lee explain "Women's organizations may influence gender income equality via three important forms of mobilization in associational fields: professionalized women's activism, labor women's activism, and women's mobilization in popular movements" (Akchurin and Lee 2013, 681). Although *Caixeiros'* sisterhoods have a striking impact on the symbolic level, unfortunately, when it comes to impacting on the raw reality of everyday life, the situation is rather different. These women did not manage to consolidate these sisterhoods as a politically influential association and this was not only in the sphere of the social but also within the very context of the Holy Spirit celebration. The following quotations help to understand this issue:

When the party is over, we have to beg for a ride, because we have no money to pay a cab fare, and there are no busses riding after 11 pm. (Maria Celeste *apud* Barbosa 2006, 83).

I ain't got no shame if someone gives me a used sandal or dress. My grandmother used to receive a lot of charity. What really bothers me is when somebody disrespects my work (Dona Margarida, *idem*, 87).

It is very tiring! We work hard and receive no money" [...] "Sometimes when tourists come, they give us some penny. But, I really don't care, I just play my drum and nothing else matters (Ana Benedita Ferreira, *idem*, p.84).

Yes, I'm really exhausted, but I've got to do this job (Dona Jacy, *idem*, 91).

On the other hand, the globalized face of neoliberalism has guided some investment policies by the State Government in the region. This is due to attempts to stimulate the religious tourism in Maranhão. Nonetheless, the *Caixeiros* do not receive any money, because only officially registered houses of worship and commercial organizations recognized by the government can receive financial aid. A *Caixeira* thus expresses her disappointment by saying that: "these people from the Ministry of Culture, I have to tell you, [...] I'm going to ask them why they did not give anything to the *Caixeiros*, and they gave that money only to the worship-houses owners" (Barbosa 2006, 129).

Reports from the Ministry of Tourism in São Luiz and data from Infraero (the Brazilian company responsible for Airport Infrastructure) show an increase in the so-called religious tourism during the Holy Spirit celebrations. However, it seems the governmental offices fail in associating this increase with the good organization of the party accomplished by the *Caixeiros* and studies have shown that a lack of financing through governmental policy is counterproductive, given that there is a direct correlation between women's empowerment and economic growth. Duflo, for instance, pointed out that "there is a bidirectional relationship between economic development and women's empowerment defined as improving the ability of women to access the constituents of development—in particular health, education, earning opportunities, rights, and political participation" (Duflo 2012, 1053).

In this regard, the presence of women as heads of families is noteworthy in Maranhão. Nevertheless, the number of families headed by women, which receives one or less than one minimum wage per month is enormous. As shown in Figure 6 data from the last census in Maranhão indicates that there were a total of 684,769 private housing units with a woman as the household head against 969,200 urban permanent private housing units having a man as the household head. Within this context, is worth to observe that the relationship among householders considering their gender and race also shows a meaningful numeric difference of black women as head of the family when compared to white men (see Figure 5).



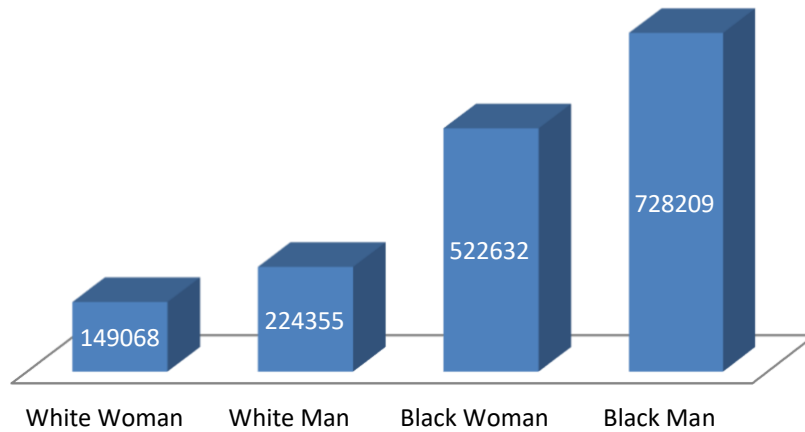


Figure 5 –Relationship among householders regarding gender and race (Source: IBGE 2010)

Concerning the average family earnings, the census revealed that 90% of the families live with less than one minimum wage per month. In addition, women receive smaller salaries when compared to men. The average earnings from all jobs of employed men aged 16 years and over is about R\$928,39 (about U\$253) while the average earnings from all jobs of employed women aged 16 years and over is about R\$782,13 (about U\$213).

Finally, trying to comprehend the gender issue in a broad context, when considering if the women headship has contributed to undermining racial, social prejudices, the outcome is frustrating. The difference between white and black people who did not finish secondary school is huge and, moreover, statistics have shown, despite the majority of black people living in Maranhão, when asked about race and religious affiliation, the answers reflect a kind of resistance in identifying as black and belonging to an African-rooted religion. Most of the people do not feel comfortable in identifying with or belonging to *Candomblé* or *Tambor de Mina*. Regarding the average earnings for family, the census revealed that 90% of the families live with less than one minimum wage per month (See Figure 6). In addition, black women receive smaller salaries when compared to white and black men and white women. The monthly average earnings from all jobs of employed white persons aged 16 years and over is about R\$1304,80 (about U\$355) while the monthly average earnings from all jobs of employed black and brown persons aged 16 years and over is about R\$726,80 (about U\$197).

Total number of families with per capita household earnings up to 1/2 minimum wages, in single families and main cohabitants, living in private housing units	886.994	families
Total number of families with per capita household earnings of more than 2 minimum wages, in single families and main cohabitants, living in private housing units	99.178	families
Proportion of families headed by women in relation to the total number of families, in single families and main cohabitants, living in private housing units	41,3	%
Proportion of families headed by with women in relation to the total number of families headed by white persons, in single families and main cohabitants, living in private housing units	39,2	%
Proportion of families headed by black women in relation to the total number of families headed by white persons, in single families and main cohabitants, living in private housing units	41,8	%

Figure 6 –Relationship among householders earnings (Source: IBGE 2010)

In Maranhão, the Holy Spirit celebrations, within the African-religions worship-houses, this can be considered as a particular form of spontaneous acculturation. Acculturation because it provokes a kind of blending between African and Brazilian elements, and spontaneous because the activity is an unplanned form from which a type of objective political action is organized. In the particular case of the *Caixeiros do Divino*, this action is directed to the attainment of some sort of control of cultural elements. In this way, a mixture of cults takes place and so establishes an analogous relationship between African deities and the Holy Spirit.

In her groundbreaking *Feminine Endings* (1991), Susan McClary noted the stereotype of operatic characters where male roles are strong, brave, warriors or conquerors, while female characters are always depicted as fragile and seductive. In the case of *Caixeiros*, it is possible to note they are very far away from fitting into this stereotype since they are quite strong women who defy established context. The presence of the *Caixeiros* in the twenty-first century is the result of a hard task accomplished by these women, that is, to keep alight the flame of the tradition they carry on. Because this is a folk tradition, it can be recreated continuously, and even while facing adverse situations, their group goes on driven by their devotional practice.

The establishment of sisterhoods was and is indeed valuable, once these sisterhoods create bounds that help to glue the group together so perpetuating *Caixeiros'* historical leadership. In doing so, these women could use the power of these sisterhoods in order to increase their standing in civil life. In case they could accomplish this; consequently, they would raise their level of decision-making effectively exerted on the communities where they belong. However, as we could observe in the data and statistics, the real situation is certainly different. Although, the *Caixeiros'* leadership within Holy Spirit celebration have a considerable impact on the symbolic level (as noticed in their own evaluation), unfortunately, when it comes to impacting on everyday life the situation is rather different. These women did not manage to consolidate their sisterhoods as a politically influential association in the social sphere. In this sense, their empowerment did not succeed.

Notwithstanding, we can rightfully claim that it is the renewing power of the Holy Spirit celebration that guides these women's view of the world and constructs principles of solidarity and social identity within one of the country's poorest conditions. The majority of these women are poor, elderly, Afro-descendant, living practically ignored by the government. However, it is in the perpetuation of the cult for the Divine that they strengthen their ties of friendship and solidarity, experience their conflicts, promote creativity, and, above of all, give meaning to their lives.

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