Narratives and Afro-Muslim conflict in Brazil: culture and struggle for desires and powers

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Abstract
This article, by excavating narratives, suggests the reading of lifestyles and beliefs shared in the difference. By shedding light in the idea of culture as a signifying practice, the review of accounts given by an Iraqi leader of a trip to Brazil (1865) calls into question narratives about a cultural-political dispute sparked off by Afro-Muslims in Bahia in 1835. Considering a movement fraught with intermingled cultures and processes of inventing the other, the review highlights a plot of relationships and uses of power and knowledge. The reflection suggests to media and culture researchers that narratives, in its distinct forms, might be understood as constitutive of a political/esthetical process of producing of identities.
Keywords: Narrative, culture, difference

INTRODUCTION

The theoretical framework that underpins this paper includes the issues raised by the triangle narrative/culture/otherness.[1] The broader assumption underlying these thoughts is that the consolidation and division of the categories we/they— historical, theoretical, discursive constructs (Ramadan, 2010)—constitute and are part of frequent stereotypical representations that make dichotomous interpretations of world events and reiterate the position of an 'I' instead of an invention of the other. In this sense, by understanding a process of juxtaposition of narratives and inclusion of such narratives in the media, the subject matter of this paper is the Malian Rebellion (1835)—understood as a political and cultural battle—and proposes a reflection on culture as a place of negotiation and conflict (Bhabha, 1998).

Because it staged conflicting geographies and interests, the battle that took place in Brazil in the nineteenth-century was hegemonically perceived as a religious struggle

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[1] Ricoeur (2005 and 2010), Lévinas (2004) and Bhabha (1998) are key in this reflection.

(Reis, 2003). Vis-à-vis a reductive historiography combined with the press, which, in a concerted effort, represented the winners' perspective, this paper seeks to revive potential meanings of this conflict by looking into a layer of narratives about it. By delving into narratives, the paper seeks to identify the process of constructing a realm that defines and reiterates the Malian protagonists as barbarians and representatives of a radical otherness, and to point out markers of differences that, despite having been obliterated by power, may produce important meanings in the attempt to understand the conflict.

By doing so, this paper helps understanding the narratives by means of their ambiguous nature: they are part of consolidation projects and, at the same time, reconstruction of identities, in which the political, cultural and discursive gestures of inclusion and exclusion of subjects are intertwined. Certeau helps us better understand this perspective by considering the accounts as a venue of creation of boundaries and mobilities. The author says: "the accounts unceasingly set boundaries" and, at the same time, reveal proximities drawn "by the meeting points between progressive appropriations (…) and the successive displacements (…) of players" (Certeau 2008: 212-213).

The unveiling of layered narratives about this conflict stems from a travelogue left by al-Baghdádi, an Arab religious leader who came to Brazil in 1865.[2] Through the histories and diverse spaces, worlds we either recognize, or actually know through these accounts, he also reveals clusters of signification. Put it differently, what brings us closer, but also distances us from this narrative, is not the narrative per se, but the ways in which we experience the multiple spaces and times that the narrative gives us, reading the intertextual messages it provides us, and seeing the images that are merged with it. The study of representations of this uprising throws light on the layer of narratives that is found in the production of meanings about this political-cultural conflict, unveiling the struggle for hegemonies and pointing out, to a significant extent, to the place of narrative as a key venue of production of knowledge about the conflict per se.

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[2]The story is called "O Deleite do estrangeiro em tudo que é espantoso e maravilhoso" (A foreigner's delight with anything that is either dreadful or wonderful) and was translated by Paulo Farah and published by the National Library of Rio de Janeiro (2007).

ARRIVING IN BRAZIL

From Turkey, en route to the city of Basra, Iraq, Abdurrahman al-Baghdádi landed in the harbor of Rio de Janeiro by chance, when climatic conditions altered his voyage. From 1865 to 1868, he lived in Rio de Janeiro, Salvador and Recife, when Brazil was experiencing a very significant historical period: the years preceding the abolition of slavery. 'For the first time, Ottoman ships arrived in the city' (Farah 2007: 3) and, although a significant number of Arab Muslims immigrated to Brazil as much as a century later, Brazil already had a 'significant Muslim presence in the early nineteenth century' (Reis 2003: 9). The Imam al-Baghdádi's manuscript, which recounts his experience of encounters with Brazil's black African community, is an important record of an Arab view of the multi-ethnic, multi-confessional society that blossomed at that time. Additionally, 'it is the main [contemporary] travelogue of a Muslim Arab individual to Brazil and South America' (Farah 2007: xx).

By reading al-Baghdádi's narrative, my purpose is to (re)gain an acquaintance with the differences — following the direction taken by Bhabha — that mark this encounter. Instead of offering an exhaustive explanation, my intention is to unveil the *ad infinitum* that marks the narrative game. Like an 'articulation of symbolic forms', as Ricoeur puts it, it is in the narrative that 'cultural processes articulate experience' (Ricoeur, 2010: 92); a revealing gesture toward the 'things of our uneasiness' (Ibid.: 99) that ceases in either the course or process of interpretation that every narrative raises. For Ricoeur, 'recounting, following, interpreting stories is merely the "continuation" of untold stories' (Ibid.: 116). From this angle, what al-Baghdádi's narrative offers is the possibility to unravel the significances of the uprising that occurred in the city of Salvador, in 1835.

THE BETWEEN-US AS A SPACE OF SIGNIFICATION

One of the assumptions that accompany this reflection suggests that looking at the multiple times and intertextualities that are woven into the narrative also reveal the marks on the fabric of culture. In fact, what is at stake is the idea of culture as 'a proliferation of inventions in confined spaces', as de Certeau argues (1995: 19). For de Certeau, who suggests the uselessness of the singular form of the term 'culture', a look at interstitial spaces and intersections—and, therefore, at the differences— would

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highlight the practices of signification as pivotal elements. These practices are 'forms of differentiation [that] refer each excerpt to the work of others' (Ibid.: 18) and therefore explain, in what is conceived as cultures, both the constancy of a time to come and the coexistence of different cultures.

In this game, which inevitably involves processes of negotiation and struggle, we must, however, attend to a problem of a theoretical and a methodological nature, raised by Bhabha. According to Bhabha:

> Considering the commitments of late liberal cultures with the biased culture of migrating minorities, we need to change our perception of the arena in which disputes will be better understood. Here, our theoretical understanding … of 'culture as difference' will enable us to understand the articulation of the border, the rootless space and the time of cultures (Bhabha, 2011: 83).

From this perspective, we should consider Bhabha's particular interest in thinking about the polarization of a dominant culture, one he calls the 'biased culture of migrating minorities'; the accounts we analyze here high-light the collisions that always occur from the angle of efforts to underpin hegemonies. Al-Baghdádi's accounts raise the same dispute, either because the main protagonist is a religious imam—a genuine depository of divine knowledge—who finds faithful believers enslaved in the other's country, or because, in that country, other hegemonies beyond the imam's geography are also disputed.

In conceiving of culture as a signifying practice, al-Baghdádi's accounts thus help us to examine ways of life and to serve as an example through which to discuss the dynamics that involve the efforts of sedimentation of the powers and forces that invariably evoke other desires and other experiences, often of a non-hegemonic nature. By combining his experience with the practices, beliefs and struggles of black people (Africans, Muslims and slaves in Brazil), al-Baghdádi helps us cross time and space. With his accounts, we are introduced to the social relations and the power games of that time, and we are led, at the same time, to other experiences, to have contact with other cultural marks and relationships that outlined and designed geographies that were initially disparate and distant.

THE MIDDLE EAST: INTERSTITIAL SPACES IN THE OTHER'S WORLD

El Khalili, located in the same space as Al-Baghdádi's accounts — the Middle East —

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serves as a metaphor in this paper. In El Khalili, all worlds seem to be possible. The bazaar, established in Cairo in 1382, crosses time and space without the slightest qualm. While walking on a dirt floor, we see the marks of time that are present, either in the rubbish scattered on the ground, or on the water pipes and culverts on which we walk; in the ancient mosques we pass; in the bread carriers who pass us, or in the remains of other millennia that we carry in our imagination.

In addition to the local shops, where ancient Aladdin-style hats are manufactured and cotton spinners shed snow-like cotton through the streets, the seemingly limitless space shelters stalls that sell the perfume and the flavor of karkadeh—the hibiscus flower—or other unimaginable flowers, seeds and herbs. Typical male and female clothing—djellabas and burqas—are sold side-by-side with the sexy clothes and masks that are worn by belly dancers, and a myriad of colorful underwear that combines to form the supposed shields and blemishes of what we call 'the Arab world'.

The world El Khalili presents us retains all of the imagery of the desert, which comes to us through Scherazade's thousand and one nights, Ali Baba and his forty thieves and other stories, including the most recent ones, which narrate the conflicts that persist there. This is how we access the accounts of 'the other'. The differences they evoke are not just simply and directly consistent with what we assume to be different from ours. Between them and us—categories constructed and invented by historical-cultural relations (Ramadan 2010)—there are always traces and relics, an opaque area, 'an infinite in us' as Lévinas (2004: 248) writes, which, far from a unity of meaning, indicates a relationship. In El Khalili, time and space intersect where whatever belongs to 'the other' and whatever is ours meets. It is through these pathways that there are several possible worlds.

According to Rita Schmidt, the backbone of Bhabha's work is 'the outline of an epistemological project intended to be an alternative to multiculturalism and its discourse of cultural diversity' (Bhabha 2011: 59). Bhabha makes a significant distinction between thinking of the world as a place where differences and the light of what he sees as meaning through difference are juxtaposed. According to him, culture embeds temporalities and records of 'the conflicts caused by cultural difference' (Bhabha 2011: 144), traces that ultimately lead us to recognize the space in which they are embedded as a living mesh.

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The mere conception of existence and the coexistence of various worlds within the other's space, and the possibility of reducing it to what is ours, making equal what is not the same as that which is ours, are small productive stratagems for the problem that permeates this article. If, as Bhabha puts it, the marks embedded in the other's culture are interstitial spaces that form communities of experience and discourse, '[originating] in a precarious sense of survival committed with the "uniqueness" of events, linked to the trans-historical memory' (2011: 147), these very marks of experience and discourse are those with which we are concerned.

It is through them that conflicts, concepts of distance and closeness can be recognized. This is a complex process that gives rise to a paradoxical movement that is fraught with the interweaving of the cultures and processes that invent the other. From this perspective, this study's core objective is to note these markers of difference in order to recognize them as part of this movement—and this is the important issue here—which takes place despite the dominant materiality and geopolitics that divert cultures, divide individuals and decode ways of life.

RELIGION AND CLOTHING: WAYS TO BE THE OTHER

The fact that it is a written account marked by past experiences and apparently fixed locations does not undermine al-Baghdádi's narrative, whether in terms of form or content. It is a rhymed story accompanying a tune known to belong to the Arabs, which does not leave out any references to contemporary dates and the historical events taking place. This is why its intertextualities and times became prominent.

The title of the work and the way that al-Baghdádi calls his readers are the keys to a careful reading of its intertexts:

> I have called [this work] 'The delight of a foreigner upon everything which is astonishing and marvelous'. Those who observe it are asked to ignore the lack of clarity and the weakness of its form, because my education contains little awareness, and the eye of kindness is blind to every weakness (al-Baghdádi 1865, in: Farah 2007: 66).

An account that is said to be precarious imposes upon us, the readers, an inquisitive attitude. What does a foreigner who is so delighted and so aware of his own blindness, convey to our eyes? Which worlds does he transmit? What does his gaze from the outside tell us about the place that is ours? According to Farah, the imam's

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manuscript sheds 'light on the situation of Muslims living in the country (…) and should contribute to deepening diachronic comparative analyses' (Farah, 2007: 01).

As I suggest, the manuscript is the record of an intertwining of cultures and differences. Among the various times and places introduced through al-Baghdádi's eyes, the year 1835 in Bahia presents a very significant period. The *Malês* uprising, a 'rebellion' of African-Muslim slaves in the city of Salvador, raises important issues for those undertaking a consideration of the concept of distance and closeness in the light of this political and cultural confrontation.

In al-Baghdádi's accounts, two primary scenes launch us into an abyss of space and time where stories have become intertwined. The first of these presents clothing as a central element:

> I wished to wear my usual costume to walk around the city, but Muslims dissuaded me from that by putting forward several arguments. One of these arguments was [they said]: 'If you wear your own costumes, we will not be able to go to your house [anymore], and your usefulness will fade away because, once Christians learn that you are a Muslim, they will think the same of us' (al-Baghdádi, 1865, in: Farah, 2007: 89).

As we go further into the Imam's accounts, we see that those Africans were making an effort to omit identity. In trying to understand why they should not wear their costumes, the blacks al-Baghdádi meets say that 'a war happened between them and the Christians; the black people wished to take over the region, but the Christians have triumphed' (al-Baghdádi, 1865, in: Farah 2007: 90). A war—presented as religious—erupted thirty years before the Imam's arrival and was still echoed in the habits, gestures and ways of life he reported.

Critical of a dominant discourse that gave rise to the explanation of this rebellion as having been merely a religious struggle, Reis (2003) points out that given the country's conditions at that time and the people who had been trafficked from Africa to Brazil, the uprising had nothing to do with a supposed 'religious fanaticism'. The movement was, rather, 'a revolt of Africans, and they, as Africans, engaged in it hoping for a better life' (Reis, 2003: 270). For Reis, only 'the ethnocentric blindness of the early scholars of the *Malê* people' could see 'a mere religious fanaticism' in those men (Ibid.: 149).

Al-Baghdádi's account thus reveals the power of the hegemonic imperative that

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prevailed at the time. He finds slaves marked by that gesture of defiance, a movement in which, quite possibly, the blacks he met did not directly participate. Reis presents a scathing critique of the dominant media and historiographic discourses, noting that they neglect, especially in this case, the very understanding of what this fight would have been, had it actually been religiously motivated. As Reis puts it, 'even [if it had been] a jihad, it is important to note that, historically speaking, one of the classic motivations of jihad has been precisely the resistance against the oppressive scenario' (Reis, 2003: 386), which alone would have justified this slave movement.

The fact that the rebellion was 'primarily a movement of Islamized slaves' (Ibid.: 443) contributed to the construction of a hegemonic discourse that posits those slaves as rebels provoking social disorder. We speak of a society that was going through an 'initial period of formation of the Brazilian state' and thus its privileged social sectors were struggling to 'define the political, cultural and racial content of their new nation' (Reis 2003: 443).

That is to say, while the slaves used the cellars of their masters' houses to plan the revolt, there was an ongoing political project of the legitimation of orders that underpinned, before the country and the world, the manner in which that 'new nation' sought recognition. It should be noted that this entailed, at any cost, the implementation of an identity project that defined both who 'we' are and who 'they' are. For those slaves who participated in the revolt, in the midst of this struggle for recognition and through the conflicts they stirred up, the only place left was the other's place: that of the barbarians.

Particularly in this case, the opposition between Catholicism and Islam assigned to the religious element a nature that signaled the difference that 'divided the "Brazilians" and those contemptuously called the "local blacks"' (Cunha, 1985: 13). As we can see, the same mark that in 1865 prevented al-Baghdádi from wearing his own clothing appears—due to the passage of time and our knowledge of other narratives—as part of the vestiges of other struggles, other ventures of occupation and takeovers. As Cunha argues, the idea that these were 'local blacks', assigned to the African-Muslims the characteristics of foreigners who were odd enough to '[become] slaves *par excellence*, the epitome of danger, in the first half of the nineteenth century' (Cunha 1985: 12). Such oddity was embedded not only in their costume. A second scene in al-

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Baghdádi's narrative also presents and corroborates the idea of religion as a symptom of difference. The Qur'an, found by chance by the Imam in the streets of Rio de Janeiro, might also be seen as one of these elements. As al-Baghdádi himself tells us:

> one day I went to the market to observe the wonders that the Creator had made and I passed by the shop of a man who sold Christian books. In the shop, I looked for a book about Arabic and Portuguese translations. I found a Qur'an published in France in letterpress print, free of distortions and errors, duly adorned and hung on the wall. I asked him [the bookseller] how he had found that Qur'an and he replied, 'In my job, I need to bring books from different countries so I can decorate my shop and delight the believers. I got this Arabic book in France. For some time it has been here and nobody in this country has ever expressed any interest in it' (al-Baghdádi, 1865, in: Farah 2007: 83–84).

The object displayed for sale, unattractive to Brazilians, and likely to be found by anyone looking for an Arabic-Portuguese dictionary, probably remained there much longer, not only because it was a sacred scripture, different from the Bible, but also, and indeed because of, the very impossibility of anyone being able to read and understand it. Just like the costumes that could not be worn, the Qur'an was also not an object of consumption. Besides the Arabic writing, whose signs are not commonly shared, the religious connotation implicit in this object made it an exception, something beyond any desire or possibility of consumption.

Based on the costumes and objects, many of the scenes found in al-Baghdádi's account reveal differences that embed badges of identity that draw and reduce the boundary between them and us. These differences are the very marks that contribute to a process of inventing the other that certainly extends through time and space. The African-Muslim, this other, invented according to prevailing political interests and by the articulation of religion as a building block of difference, carried 'a different ethics and a different aesthetic' (Reis, 2003: 444). As can be seen, their distinctive features founded processes of negotiating meanings and defining places that are occupied in Brazil and evolved in the first half of the nineteenth century.

While Islam, in 1835, served as a form of expression that combined 'different ethnic groups under its umbrella', and which, according to Cunha, lies 'at the basis of the Islamic revolts of Bahia' (Cunha, 1985: 28), thirty years later, as noted in al-Baghdádi's reports, it was banished, frowned upon and unwanted. In this case, religion

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operated as a central axis that was enough in evidence to be highlighted, since it was a problem that had previously appeared in other insurrections of this type.[3] Besides this, one must always consider the usual and complex interweaving of religious and political projects and, specific to Brazil, the 1824 constitution, in which 'Catholicism appeared as a state religion, the only one with the right to stage public ceremonies and set up places of worship openly' (Reis, 2003: 247).

In the narratives about the struggles experienced by African-Muslims enslaved in Brazil, Islam is presented to us as something both constitution-ally and symbolically forbidden, not because everyone who participated in the struggle was a follower of this religion, but because that specific religion was, at that time—and perhaps continues to be in the West—a way of being the other. 'Just because it exists', Reis argues, Islam 'subverted, to say the least, the prevailing symbolic order' (2003: 248). This can be said since it contributed to concretizing the widespread imagery of Muslims as people who are somehow outside the established order.

THE *PATUÁS* AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE BLACKS: ELEMENTS OF UNION AND SEPARATION

The different ethics and aesthetics, the manners and customs which that banned religion revealed, on various occasions worked both as elements of union and separation. After writing of the joy that the slaves felt when they heard him speak Arabic, although they could not understand him, al-Baghdádi refers to the Africans' accent and explains why they would find it difficult to pronounce words with phonemes unknown to them; it was because they had had no contact with 'the letters and books of foreigners' (al-Baghdádi, 1865, in: Farah 2007: 78-79).

As he reports,

> It is difficult for these Muslims to pronounce them [he refers to the Arabic letters and phonetics], and I struggled to teach them that. They highly appreciate the ancient language and *keep [their manuscripts] in safes for blessing rather than education* (al-Baghdádi, 1865, in: Farah, 2007: 79, emphasis added).

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[3] There are accounts of other battles similar to those of 1835, though not so strong as the latter. The same "*Malês*", "also known as muçulmis, muçulimi, muxurimim, mucuim and muçurimi" are considered those responsible for the uprisings that occurred in 1807, 1809, 1813, 1816, 1826, 1827, 1828 and 1830 (Farah, 2007: 09).

In an explanatory note, the translator helps us read between the lines of this speech: 'Arabic texts—especially taken from the Qur'an—were often used for protection. Many Muslims used to carry objects of protection, including … *patuás* and various texts with quotations from the Qur'an' (Farah, 2007: 79). The so-called 'blessing safes', known to us as *patuás*, were amulets carried by those Africans whose ancestors came mostly from Nigeria and Benin. This practice, which the Imam did not recognize—carrying objects of protection around one's neck—brought the mark of the divine word, which, in the eyes of religious people, would serve as protection.

Though in 1865 those objects and writings seemed to serve as protection, previously they had other roles. It seems that in 1835, these *patuás* were also carried by slaves around their necks. They were filled with sand, cabalistic figures, excerpts from the Bible and images of saints. In addition, *patuás* also held Arabic manuscripts. At the time of the uprising, these manuscripts contained information about gatherings, plans for the revolt and, therefore, 'equipped those going to war [not just] with a talisman' (Reis, 2003: 257), but also with a device to define the battlefield, thus functioning as a symbol of struggle and resistance. In short, and above all, these objects spoke the 'language of the blacks'—as the Arabic language was known—and rendered ordinary the speech of those who shared a knowledge of this language and who were interested in the revolt as a form of occupation in nineteenth-century Bahia.[4]

By drawing attention to the marks that were still present on the bodies of the slaves in 1865, al-Baghdádi reminds us of other senses that help us to understand how these elements of union had also served as elements of separation at one time. From what, or from whom, those slaves found by the Iraqi Imam wanted to be protected are questions whose answers are ever changing, since the history of those who still carried them, thirty years after the uprising, was filled with the persecution faced by their ancestors. In 1835, just because they had the same *patuás*, which the police in Bahia called '*Malês*' notebooks', African-Muslims were arrested, if not sold to other states, deported or killed.

The 'epitome of danger' in the nineteenth century led to trial and prison. These 'Arabic books', as they were also known, served as a proof—for the police—that the

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[4] Several of these writings are in a museum in the city of Salvador and still serve as objects of study, especially for researchers of anthropology and history (Cunha, 1985; Reis, 2003 and Farah, 2007).

slaves were involved in the rebellion. In addition to being black, the fact that they carried 'one knife, one dagger and at least one "*Malês*' notebook"' (Reis, 2003: 143) justified their being labeled criminals. Hence, even though these *patuás* were important elements of union, since they are signs of the experience and sets of discourse that fed the community of African-Muslims in nineteenth-century Brazil, they appear as markers of a separating difference. Like the traces of a crime, these books fulfilled the purposes of a prevailing logic and discourse among the authorities and slave owners, eager to find the guilty ones and exterminate the culprits of the disorder.

According to Reis,

> many manuscripts were found by the police (…) For a society whose dominant group, the whites, were still predominantly illiterate, it should not have been easy to accept that African slaves employed such sophisticated means of communication. Writing, after all, was a clear sign of civilization (2003: 228).

Indeed, civilized is what this 'other', as invented, could not be.

THE NARRATIVE: BINARIES AND POTENTIALITIES

Reis works with the hypothesis that 'the rebellion was a complex many-sided movement designed (…) by enslaved individuals who sought (…) freedom and had to face a powerful enemy' (2003: 282): the slave masters and the state. His criticism of the hegemony of historiographical and media narratives that are consistent with the prevailing discourse illustrates the extent to which such hegemony also holds a position in the discourse of knowledge.

That historical narrative, especially what we know as 'modern' history—is always against the losers, as Benjamin argues (1985). It weaves its binary narratives and reduces that movement to the Manichean logic according to which anything that is different takes the place of the evil. It is also worth noting that the reductive aspect assigned to this plot was also supported by contemporary media narratives, since they endeavored to excuse the struggle from the hegemonic perspective, reiterating the invented facts: that speaking the language of blacks and carrying Arabic books were

marks of identity that called for separation.[5]

Along with the narratives of knowledge, the media narratives have thus contributed greatly to the setting apart of geographies, the spreading of common perceptions, while kindling the process that invented the Muslims as the other.[6] The binary mode of assigning meaning to political-cultural struggles contributes heavily to the strengthening of reductive effects and the explanation of orders that often justify stances taken by those who are powerful. Weirdness, barbarity and danger—strengthened by the prominence and dominance of such narratives—are words that were profoundly attached to those who lived in Bahia in the nineteenth century and fought for better conditions. No difference is capable of withstanding, as difference in itself, such absolute processes. In this vein, for the 'other' who has been made a barbarian, there is no way out other than by expurgation.

A paradox in this case is that reducing cultures to their differences, or assuming the completeness of their similarities—gestures that are embedded in these binary narratives—could effectively reiterate the concept of a world that could live peacefully even with diversity. As a metaphor, let us describe it in this fairly simplistic way: El Khalili could be reduced to another market, the *Saara* (a Portuguese word which means the Sahara Desert), which is in Rio de Janeiro's city center. Although djellabas and burqas are not for sale there, the same herbal teas and the hats of other 'Aladdins', and the plastic flowers that turn into underwear, coexist in the space with everyday clothing, electronic goods and a variety of products sold by street vendors, who actually sell the same masks and costumes for belly dancers, which serve as carnival costumes in Brazil. Just as in El Khalili, times and spaces intersect in the *Saara* market, where many worlds also appear to be possible and, in fact, are. One must, though, be attentive, the closeness

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[5] In Reis (2003), there is an overview of the role of Brazilian and British media in the period concerned; this is an extensive area that requires further research. Nevertheless, initial contributions show the economic interests of Brazil/England in Africa as being forceful, strong conveyors of meanings in the accounts of the slave uprising that took place in Bahia.

[6] These observations add up to the issue of 'processes of inventing the "other"' and echo arguments I have been developing since 2009 in a larger research study, "Narratives of Conflict: The Representation of the Other in Media Discourse" (CNPq/Faperj). The analysis of contemporary documentaries and news in Brazilian newspapers about events on the Arab-Israeli border, which in the course of the twentieth century have narrated these conflicts, help delineate some of the strategies that are used in narrating these battles, while showing the strength and the impact of religion in the process of meaning production. Al-Baghdádi's account, as an opening text on relations between Brazil and the Middle East, expands the scope of that research, even as it makes the problem more complex.

and potential similarities of their worlds do not make them one and the same place, and neither are the distant realities of their surroundings—Rio de Janeiro and Cairo—enough to render them complete strangers to one another.

Bhabha's criticism (1998; 2011) of those who insist on thinking about the world as a place of the juxtaposition of differences seems clear in the light of these binary ways of seeing and narrating the world. In the direction taken by Bhabha, this is a treacherous path, to the extent that it increases distances and simplifies proximities. In taking a contrary route, we note from the Imam's perspective that much of the complexity of the problem with which this essay deals lies in the fact that Africa and Brazil, with the various worlds inscribed in these spaces, are far from, yet close to each other; one fact does not eliminate the other. As researchers of media and culture, our challenge consists in thinking about the extent to which and how to contribute to minimizing the problem of building binaries.

In an interview with the Brazilian newspaper *O Globo*, when Bhabha was asked about the issue of 'cultural survival', he referred to the power of narrative as an area in which differences can be noted. According to Bhabha:

> The true nature of narrative always raises the questions: if things were different, what could be the result? If I were not myself, how would I view the world? If my neighbor were a stranger, what would my relationship with him be like? Questions about otherness, alternation and counter-factual conditionality are at the heart of the cultural project (…) and that is why I think it helps us to survive (Bhabha 2012).[7]

In this reflection, the narrative in its binary and non-binary forms is perceived to constitute a political and aesthetic process of production and redefinition of identities. The modes of constructing the categories 'we and they'—with the projects of dissociation interwoven—are remarkable as we unravel the layers of narration taken from the writings of al-Baghdádi. It is through these layers that we have access to the powers and differences that are also presented in the form of layers during this game. From this perspective, the blacks who were part of the uprising in Bahia both defaced the hegemonic narrative—including that which holds them as subjects of a hypothetical process of miscegenation—and proposes that other narratives coexist in a Brazilian scenario whose imperative rhetoric is the peaceful coexistence of differences.

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[7] O Globo, Homi Bhabha e o valor das diferenças. Rio de Janeiro: January 14, 2012.

CULTURE AS A PROBLEM

It is through these layers of narratives and power that religion, the *patuás*, and the Arabic language are perceived as strong features and key elements of mediation, union and the separation of a struggle taken up in Brazil. Like acts of historical significance, these features express what Bhabha calls 'a form of performative contingency/contiguity' (2011: 149), since they are experiences and discourses that coexist in different times and spaces. In order to negotiate meanings gathered from these narratives, he suggests including them 'in the contingent temporality of the significant' (Ibid.: 2011: 150). The contiguous and distinct modes of existence of these features thus allow us to reflect on relationships and power games fought not only in each of the geographies that surround these features, but also in larger spaces, in the geopolitics from which they draw meanings.

The Arab world seen as the 'other'—from our perspective, of course—is also explained in the light of this micro-space, of these cultural-political struggles. The dimension of a 'cultural arena' (Appadurai, 2003) drafted at the border of the differences, therefore directs our attention to steps taken backward and forward, in the form of the promotion of restraints and encouragements. From this viewpoint, culture is no longer a mere object of reflection; it is viewed as a problem that makes more complex the purpose of interpretation, as far as possible of the subjects' stances and their projects, whether hegemonic or not.

Viewing culture as a space of signification is highly relevant to this reflection. In this paper the macro-geographical perspective from which East and West are seen are as important as the fact that in the wake of the geopolitical forces that are thus built, power and its uses are then established. Any actions that denote practices of signification interrelated in these geopolitical constructions are overtaken by these powers. It seems that there is no way to embrace the problems of the culture that is woven in such spaces without tackling the barriers that surround them. Whether this path involves a decreased risk of letting ourselves be overtaken by the illusion that the differences overlap is something that should be investigated on an ongoing basis. In any case, it is a means that seems to raise our awareness of the struggles waged within what Appadurai (2003) recognizes as culture: a constant struggle against uniformity.

BETWEEN ONE AND ANOTHER

'I, Muslim' are words that open the Imam's meeting with the Africans in Brazil. Nevertheless, once uttered by several of the blacks who saw someone leaving the ship wearing clothes that they recognized as being from 'their' land, this form of self-presentation did not lead immediately to the desired process of identification and recognition. As al-Baghdádi says, 'none of our military officers understood what they said, since there was nobody who understood Portuguese' (al-Baghdádi, 1865, in: Farah 2007: 67). Only later, as he continues,

> there came (…) a group of respectable black people who spoke words similar to those of the former [I, Muslim] and accompanied us until the afternoon. So, we got up to perform the duties that God—the Exalted—charged us with. All of the others stood up, made the ablution and prayed with us. *Thus, we recognized that they were Muslims* and believed in the unity of the Creator of existence (al-Baghdádi, 1865, in: Farah 2007: 67, emphasis added).

More than the speech, more than the name, it was the gesture that proved to be the trigger of a process that then defined the desire and the need, in the Imam's eyes, to settle in the place where he had landed by chance. The recognition of a religious practice made him decide to stay in that unknown country. Although al-Baghdádi was fearful of being persecuted by the authorities, who seemed to disapprove of his unusual costumes and practices, he chose to leave the steamship 'to assist those Muslims living in that country' (al-Baghdádi, 1865, in: Farah, 2007: 65).

The fact that this gesture incorporates a trace of power—the place of the Imam's knowledge before those slaves—is as relevant as the fact that complexities are unveiled by it. In the beginning of al-Baghdádi's account, when he describes what it was that the encounter with Africans in Brazil had pro-vided for him, multiple forms raised by the cultural encounters[8] are notice-able, due to the usages and powers involved: 'I used to sip from a pure glass, now I sip from a mottled and blurred one' (al-Baghdádi, 1865, in: Farah, 2007: 62–63).

While traveling as a way of expanding knowledge about Islam denotes one more

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[8] In Sabry (2010), the concept of 'cultural encounters' is pivotal for the development of the thesis that within cultures, encounters are invariably multiple and unshaped, without any particular or chronological order. This makes it necessary to interpret the process of producing meanings in the light of differences that are present in various layers of time and space.

way of exercising power, it 'represents a major route of transmission of knowledge in this Abrahamic religion' (Farah, 2007: 18), it should be understood that this same journey is the one that makes it possible to ponder and question possible actions. Toward the end of his narrative, al-Baghdádi says:

> Those with discretion and discernment have acknowledged that love for one's nation is part of faith. What I noticed in [my] influence over these Muslims and the strangeness of this religion led me to a crisis of fate and fortune. My mind was shaken with questions that resulted in insomnia and sleepless nights (al-Baghdádi, 1865, in: Farah 2007: 117–118).

Although it is not possible to say what the 'insomnia and sleepless nights' effectively produced, differences were somehow put into play. Besides a subjective and personal dimension that can be considered from the Imam's observations, what is emphasized is the play that is established between the effort of naming oneself—'I, Muslim'—and the strengths and weak-nesses of gestures that do not require names.

We thus see the processes of the interweaving of cultures and the invention of the other as mingled, making up a single problem: they are the after-math of a struggle between the effort to nominate—and, therefore to support identities—and the re-signifying, usage and creation of links of identification. Among demands and weakness, culture emerges as a fabric made up of remnants, as de Certeau argues (1995), a living thing derived from a constant spinning that, within experiences and narratives, is constantly unwilling to be reduced to one gesture or another.

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