

PIERRE FATUMBÍ VERGER : a view from Bahia

(Dedicated to Gilbert Rouget)

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Pierre Fatumbí Verger, Frenchman by birth¹, Bahian by choice and African by affinity, arrived in Salvador, Bahia, in 1946, choosing the city as his residence from that time until his death fifty years later. He arrived as a photographer and transformed himself into an ethnographer, an anthropologist, an historian and a botanist, among the numerous other activities he pursued. He was without a doubt one of the great researchers of Afro-Brazilian religion and culture and left a vast oeuvre as the result of his innumerable research projects.

This article will focus less on his work² than on his life, based on his own testimony and tales of his experiences, along with notes and observations that I was personally able to make during more than ten years of professional and personal contact with him. The article will concentrate on the years in which Verger lived in Brazil and the strong impression that Bahia made on him –to the point of rediscovering Africa from his new vantage point in Bahia. In order to convey the wide range and variety of his life, however, it will be useful to include a brief analysis of certain of his publications that exemplify particular phases of his life and thought.

A Multifaceted Work and Life

Most of those who knew Pierre Verger immediately remember his work as a photographer, having travelled to innumerable countries after 1932 and publishing photos in books, magazines and newspapers that became classics of visual anthropology. Others know the publications with which he entered the world of academia, first as an autodidactic and later as a Doctor of African Studies (3^e cycle) at the Sorbonne in Paris for his work *Flux et reflux*

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¹ Paris 4/11/1902 – Salvador 11/2/1996

² For a more thorough analysis of Verger's work contextualized within his life, see Lühning (1999).

de la traite des esclaves entre le Golfe du Bénin et Bahia de Todos os Santos, du dix-septième au dix-neuvième siècle (1968). In Brazil, he only became known as the author of photographic collections and books –classics of Afro-Brazilian studies– in the 1980s, thanks to the Corrupio publishing house in Salvador. Nevertheless, few people besides a few colleagues and close friends know more details of the life of this man who crossed so many continents, countries and cultures, dedicating his life to his research, and leaving a vast body of work that today is located in the Fundação Pierre Verger¹.

The result of this intense life is a multifaceted work, at once in terms of the quality of the material, the scope of the themes treated and the diverse places where it was published, always based on his contacts and friendships in diverse cultures. He published in all of the places he went and in various languages. Neither his work nor his life are known in their full scope and detail partly because few people had the opportunity of knowing him in more than one specific setting –be it France, Africa, or Latin America. He furthermore had friends of all sorts– European expatriates and local artists, artisans and intellectuals, photographers, researchers, candomblé initiates, capoeirista masters, street vendors, etc. It is probably safe to conclude that no-one can speak definitively on Verger in all of the phases of his 93-year life².

One might wonder about the research and questions of this man who never founded a family, who distanced himself so much from his culture of origin and left in search of something which perhaps even he could not precisely describe. As he wrote :

The only conclusion I can draw, looking back on the years I have lived, is that I never knew very well what I wanted. I knew on the other hand what I didn't want. By refusing to do what I didn't want, my life took on a certain

¹ Founded by Verger himself in 1988, nearly ten years before his death, in order to manage his oeuvre and give continuity to his work, the Fundação Pierre Verger is the heir and administrator of all of Verger's works and rights. Its principle objectives the preservation of Verger's archives (library, collection of 63,000 photographic negatives, audio recordings, notes, manuscripts, etc.), the continuation of his research, and the maintenance of his archives as a resource for researchers and others who are interested.

² Verger considered writing a longer autobiographical text, but found it extremely tedious to write down his own thoughts and actions. He once suggested recording conversations about his life, but soon abandoned the project.

form, without my necessarily being aware of it. You might compare the result to a statue, which is ultimately the remainder of what was once a solid block of stone, after the elimination of what the sculpter deemed useless (Verger, 1980 : 274).

Despite his always saying that he never believed in destiny, this quote suggests that he believed in some form of outside forces, slowly shaping his life. He mentioned some of these influences in personal conversations that I had with him after 1985 and particularly after 1988. I will now touch on some of the principal themes of these conversations.

The Discovering of Bahia: some background

The facts of Verger's early life are sufficiently well known that I will only mention here a few interesting and relatively unknown details¹. After having lived exclusively from his photography between 1932 and 1946, traveling incessantly, his foot ever in the stirrup², as he and Métraux used to say in their personal letters², he discovered Bahia on August 5th, 1946 – one of the key moments of his life. He received a contract with the magazine *O Cruzeiro*, between 1946 and 1951, and between 1954 and 1957, with *O Cruzeiro Internacional*³. A few of his French friends came to visit him in Brazil, such as Métraux e Rouget, as well as Bastide, who had already discovered Bahia. With Métraux, Bastide and Rouget he formed friendships

¹ Verger's brother, for example, was a bohemian who died young in an automobile accident, was portrayed in Jean Fayard's novel *Dans le monde où l'on s'abuse* (1925). His brother's tragic end led Verger to reflect on his own death and may have influenced his own choice of lifestyle.

² This later became the title of their published correspondence *Le Pied à l'étrier* (Métraux/ Verger 1993).

³ I would like to mention a few other facts relating to his life as a photographer. In the London *Daily Mirror* we find in 1935 and 36, a series of captioned photos, mostly from Indochina, signed by Mr. Lensman, a pseudonym of Verger. While in Argentina in 1941 and 42, he worked for *Argentina Libre*, an anarchist journal journal difficult to find in libraries and official institutions (probably due to its ties with the political opposition) and for the illustrated magazine *El Mundo Argentino*. During his stay in Argentina, Verger had a good deal of contact with photographer Giselle Freund and French sociologist Roger Caillois who, along with Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris, founded the Collège de Sociologie in 1937. Caillois also founded the literary review *Les lettres françaises* as a platform for French expatriates in the Americas to publish their works.

that lasted until death, including correspondences stretching from 1947-48 to Métraux's death in 1963 and Bastide's death in 1974¹.

His arrival in Brazil marked the beginning of a long period during which he established a new circle of friends and colleagues, including among others writer Jorge Amado, artists Carybé and Mário Cravo, anthropologists Thales de Azevedo, Vivaldo da Costa Lima and Waldeloir Rego, journalist Odorico Tavares, historians Godofredo Filho, Cid Teixeira, and Carlos Ott, as well as artisans, capoeira masters and street vendors –not to mention the countless people whom he knew through candomblé who would accompany him in his new life.

His gradual discovery of Afro-Brazilian culture in Bahia afforded him the possibility of establishing new bonds –particularly with West Africa, which he had already visited in 1935-36 without having noted any particular interest. Only after his contact with Bahia did he discover the importance of Africa and the many ties that existed between that part of the world and Brazil. At the end of 1948, after having seen the *xangô* cult in Recife and *vodun* at the Casa das Minas em São Luís do Maranhão, he entered the world of candomblé and, became friends with Mãe Senhora, his future Mãe de Santo, who upon learning of his voyage across the Atlantic consecrated his head to Xangô, thus making him an emissary between Bahia and África². This trip signalled a change in perspective and the beginning of Fatumbí's new activity as an ethnographic observer, writing down his observations and experiences, which would be published after 1951³. Soon afterwards, in

¹ The correspondence with Métraux has already been published, that with Bastide is in preparation for publication and that with Rouget has not yet been scheduled for publication. Correspondences with diverse other friends and colleagues are currently being evaluated for possible future publication.

² He would later receive in *Ilê Axé Opó Afonjá* the title of *Ojú Obá*, as well as so many other titles and posts in diverse other candomblé houses in Bahia as well as in Africa, without even mentioning the other decorations and honors that he received in diverse locales.

³ A 1951 letter to Métraux signals that he had begun to put his observations in writing : “Incredible but true !!! I have started writing up some of my notes, ... and as it is always the beginning that is the most difficult ; ... I think I will continue... this Calvary” (Le Bouler 1993:124). Verger always insisted that he would never have begun writing were it not for the “orders” of Theodore Monod to publish, after having given Verger his first grant. Verger had never imagined that he would write about his research, thinking that the photos he sent to IFAN would be sufficient to fulfil his obligations.

1953, he was initiated in the town of Ketu as a *babaláwo*, or *Ifá* priest with the gift of divination. Thus he ceased to be Pierre Verger and becoming Fatumbí¹.

This even intensified his contact with and interest in African culture. After some minor publications, he published *Dieux d'Afrique* (1954), his first work on Yoruba culture. From that time on his production did not cease, and he began to devote himself to a few favorite themes that would characterize his works, reflecting his personal search, until the end of his life. These written works mainly concentrate on the universe of Afro-American cultures and religions, especially on the contacts between West Africa and Brazil, and sometimes including other countries of the New World, such as Cuba, Haiti, Surinam and French Guyana.

Fatumbí's Relationships with People, Life and Research

Fatumbí became one of the major experts of the Yoruba cultural universe, thanks to his thirst for knowledge, his immense desire to be free from unnecessary ties and obligations, and his curiosity to observe and understand the multiple facets of man. In fact, the key to his work can be found in the simple fact of always having been fascinated by the human condition and human individual. Gilberto Freyre once described Fatumbí's personality based on Théodore Monod's observation that "Verger had an exceptional gift for human contact". According to Freyre :

also, the other singular quality of knowing how to join sympathy for the questions he studies with the capacity to consider them with the necessary distance for scientific objectivity. To this [he continues] one must add yet another –the condition, so rare in professional ethnologists or anthropologists, of being Pierre Verger a free man; free of rigid academic compromises ; free of bureaucratic ties to universities ; free of obligations to this or that scientific orthodoxy. Thus the freshness of his pages, which divulge and reveal exotic cultures ; thus the blending in his

¹ In a letter to Métraux we read : "I received your letter on my return from Ketu, where I arrived Pierre Verger and returned FATUMBI, which means "Ifá brought me into the world". This is extremely fortunate, for there is still something childish about my behavior, it is now perfectly normal. And furthermore, when you turn 70, I'll only be 20. I have moreover broken my last ties to my family, and if I ever lie to non-believer, it will be easier than ever for me to say : "If this is not true, my name is no longer Pierre Verger".

*photographs of artistic magic with an exactness that gives them the status of scientific documents, without prejudicing or compromising them*¹.

Fatumbí let himself be touched by people, by their lives and their stories. Everything he touched turned to an expression of life, his photos and texts are visual and verbal descriptions of the quotidian, the human and the living. He was moved by human contacts and experiences to document the deep intensity of Life. We might even say that it was not the academy that led him to do research, but Life itself. As he used to say: “In Bahia and Africa people live ; in Europe, they think”.

At other times Fatumbí attempted to analyze the formative aspects of the human individual, whom he saw as a perpetual battleground between the innate –often unconscious and repressed– and the culturally learned or induced.

I used to believe that a man became that which his environment destined him to be. As I grew older, however, I became aware that every man possesses an innate sensibility and character that remain tied to him throughout his entire life (Verger 1996 : 106).

His search for the natural and innate, untainted by dubious social rules and institutionalized education led him –after having observed many other religions during his travels– to choose candomblé as a religion of the exaltation of the deep inner nature of the human individual. One of the questions intimately linked to this theme is that of trance, fundamental in many religions, which Fatumbí tackled on numerous occasions².

But what happens is that people are not informed by education. People are perhaps deformed by education. So if people go against this, it remains in the unconscious. Now, this unconscious can only affirm itself when the consciousness is abolished. So when people say that these religions are religions of possession, the term is completely false. These are not crises of possession, they are crises of expression of the profound inner being... The orixá is an unconscious, repressed part of the person that can express itself at the moment when the conscious part is stifled or extinguished. It is a possibility to express oneself, to express one's inner nature repressed by life. It is an excellent thing (Verger 1988 : 6-7).

¹ Published in an undated article from 1955 in *O Cruzeiro*, archived at the Fundação Pierre Verger.

² The question of altered states of consciousness, in their many forms and among diverse cultures, all simply labelled “trance” in the West, is treated by Verger’s friend Gilbert Rouget, in his classic *La musique e la transe* (1985).

This question was certainly the motor behind much of his research. The enigmas of the human personality drove him to attempt to understand the Other, in order to understand himself. Indeed, one of the questions that most occupied Fatumbí was that of the innate and the learned, a question that was basic to his personal path in life. He searched for an answer to this question until the end of his life¹. His interest in *candomblé* was an expression of his search for spirituality, in contrast to the rationality of his upbringing. In his work this question is accompanied by a treatment of the question of trance in diverse contexts.

While in Africa the *orisha* is a family inheritance, in Brazil it is an expression of individuality and largely independent of lineage and ethnicity. The question of trance in the Brazilian context led Fatumbí to defend the idea of psychological archetypes that express characteristics of each *orisha* in relation to the deep structures of the human psyche. Through the discussion of archetypes, Fatumbí renewed and deepened his exploration of the question of the innate unconscious. It is unclear whether Fatumbí himself ever experienced trance, for example during his initiation as a *babaláwo*².

With his many trips between Bahia and Africa, Fatumbí truly became “The Messenger”³ between the two sides of the Atlantic, renewing and innovating, creating and recreating human contacts at a time when commercial ties between those two coasts had become far less frequent than in former centuries⁴. This activity was not always well-viewed. Fatumbí always recounted with a certain tone of amusement North American anthropologist Melville Herskovits’ annoyance with him for having

¹ I was able to observe this search beginning in early 1988, when I had the opportunity of working with him on a daily basis. Many of our conversations led to reflections and notes that would often outline subjects to be treated.

² Verger never personally affirmed having experienced any altered state of consciousness, and even explicitly denied it. Nevertheless, there exist stories in Africa that he did indeed experience such a state during his initiation (see Guran 1998).

³ He used this term as the title of one of his last photography books (Verger 1993).

⁴ He also served as host and guide in Africa to many friends and colleagues from Bahia and France, such as Bastide and Métraux in the 50s, Vivaldo da Costa Lima, Júlio Braga, Deoscoredes Maximiliano and Juana Elbein dos Santos, Antônio Olinto and Zora Seljan in the 60s and *pai-de-santo* Balbino Daniel de Paula and Arlete Soares and Cida Nóbrega of the *Corrupio* publishing house in the 70s. Besides hosting Brazilians in Africa, he also received African visitors in Brazil, such as Olabiyi Yai.

destroyed the “natural laboratory” that Herskovits had discovered in Bahia in 1941-42, and in which he hoped to study the processes of acculturation and inculturation that had occurred during the time that Afro-Brazilians had remained without direct contact with Africa. Fatumbí’s arrival four years later heralded a revival of those contacts, reuniting families, religious traditions and historical facts¹. Fatumbí’s intense interest in this subject ultimately led to the making of the film, unfortunately little-known in Brazil, *Africains du Brésil - Brésiliens d’Afrique* (1975).

Fatumbí once described to me how after his discovery of letters by slave merchants and others² in the town of Whydah in Dahomey in 1949, he began to see himself in the Africa of that time, identifying with the past, sensing that history was coming alive and past and present were melding together. This impression further intensified when he began to personally encounter and get to know descendants of freed slaves who had returned to Africa, relating to him their own historical roles and historical visions, never before observed. Here we arrive at one of the most important themes in both Fatumbí’s work and philosophy : he wanted to promote union and mutual comprehension. As he liked to say : “*In Bahia you find affectionately what people have in common not aggressively what makes them different*” (Verger 1992 : 94).

Fatumbí hoped through his research and publications to contribute to the creation of a positive image of African culture in order to help overcome past injustices. He believed in the power of positive examples, and always said that an attitude emphasizing conflicts without offering solutions led to poorer results than one based on affirmation. While not denying existing problems and conflicts, he sought to leave a positive message of the power of culture and cultural identity. His extreme integration within various African and Afro-Brazilian communities is still attested to by people visiting the places he lived in Africa, and witnessed the great respect with which he was remembered³.

¹ Despite these differences of methodological focus they maintained a good deal of contact for many years and there even planned a book to be published by Herskovits with photos by Verger, although for unknown reasons it was not realized.

² Especially Tibúrcio dos Santos, known as the “Alfaiate”.

³ Such Milton Guran, who visited Nigeria and Benin while filming “*Mensageiro entre dois mundos*” (Guran 1998) and Peter Cohen who recently conducted interviews there in.

In Fatumbí's life there is a patent divide between his activities as a photographer and as a writer. He even completely abandoned photography in the late 1970s, after fifty years, although he continued to organize exhibitions from his vast photo archive. Nearly all of his written work deals with Yoruba culture, whether in Nigeria, Benin or in the Diaspora (and particularly Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Surinam and French Guyana). According to his friend and colleague Ulli Beier, one of Fatumbí's principle motives for writing about Yoruba culture with such dedication and even obsession was *"to observe, collect and record this vast body of knowledge in a form that written cultures might respect that they do other religions that have a sacred book"* (Beier 1997 : 160). This will to document the richness of Yoruba culture in order to help it gain the recognition it deserved led him to examine the differences between the structure of Yoruba religion that of the "revealed" religions. He believed that encouraging a reflection on Yoruba religion might help to inspire a less prejudiced vision of African religions and ultimately lead to a more enlightened encounter and exchange between cultures. In sum, we may observe in Fatumbí two attitudes that often meld together : one, the painstaking and patient researcher, ever intent upon observing human nature, and the other, the messenger, charged with the mission of keeping alive the contacts between the two sides of the Atlantic, while at the same time serving as a messenger of peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding between diverse cultures.

As a photographer, Fatumbí always disliked artificial poses and photographing celebrities, preferring to photograph simple people in the context of their daily lives. This was rather unusual at the time, as the paucity of the visual record of popular culture and daily life from that epoch testifies. The photos Fatumbí took of popular celebrations such as Carnival in Bahia thus constitute a valuable historical document. A parallel might be drawn here with his texts, which also treat themes that had formerly remained outside of the official versions of history, especially in relation to African and Afro-Brazilian cultures, thus giving them a voice.

What was the personal position of this man who was so involved in Yoruba religion and culture ? In spite of his deep personal involvement in Yoruba religion, Fatumbí was extremely rational skeptical and, although generally very calm, suffered from worries and doubts. He was not a religious person—at least not in appearance. He simply lived and shared the religion of the orishas, believing in its value and importance, without making public declarations about his religious convictions. In fact, he was by nature an extreme skeptic, and even a pessimist, often saying that it is better to

prepare for the worst and be pleasantly surprised than to expect the best and be disappointed. Neither was he a collector of art, nor a researcher interested in the application of theories –on the contrary, he enjoyed referring to the world of intellectuals as a “civilization of parrots”. His principal interest was in people, in their historical and socio-cultural dimension, who created works of art and used them in their daily lives and religion. He was interested in the dignity, self-confidence and pride that Afro-Brazilians in Bahia derived from their religion.

It was people themselves, rather than their material goods or social status that held importance for Fatumbí. It is not for nothing that he chose as his residence in Salvador from 1960 until the end of his life a modest house in Vila América, in the Alto do Corrupio –a working-class neighborhood with many connections to candomblé¹. An essential theme in his life was a desire to remain free of all unnecessary things, and particularly material goods, with their ties to the world of consumerism, thus cutting people off from essential values and creating false necessities². This search had led him to Buddhism while he was in Cambodia. Yet, while abdication of personal goods attracted him, as a means of achieving spiritual and material freedom, he eventually discovered that this was an interested renunciation, because it was done in the hope of achieving a better reincarnation. Thus he concluded that Buddhism was not what he was searching for. He had no similar disappointment with Yoruba religion. On the contrary, it became so important to him that it inspired him to live for years in Africa and fueled decades of research.

Perhaps it would be best to conclude that Fatumbí was searching for the essential. Challenged in his Western rational vision of the world, he sought to contest that vision, through his innumerable experiences with other religions, accepting chance and incomprehensible destiny.

¹ Before that he lived, starting in 1946, at the Chile Hotel, in Salvador’s historical center, in a modest room under the eaves (which had –as he always remarked– a wonderful view), and then in the 1950s, in a room in nearby Caminho Novo do Taboão, which served as the inspiration for the description of the home of the character “Quincas Berro d’Água” by Jorge Amado.

² It is interesting to observe how his life slowly took on different aspects: among the photos of Verger, there is one showing him seated at a desk, probably in Africa, with a large quantity of involucrios of sound recordings of classical music. Beier confirmed this by saying that Verger liked classical composers. Yet in the final decades of his life this interest was already part of the past and never mentioned.

The Life of Pierre Fatumbí Verger in the Context of his Work

Some of Fatumbí's work shows his personal involvement with diverse aspects of Yoruba culture and thus deserves special emphasis.

In the first phase, during which he photographed but had not begun to write, Fatumbí's involvement in Yoruba culture led him to collaborate in some research that was later published in text form. During the period that he worked for *O Cruzeiro*¹, Fatumbí made suggestions for five articles on the Brazilian presence in Nigeria and Benin which were published in August 1951 as a series entitled "They happen to be Bahian", under the byline of Gilberto Freyre. Freyre later re-published these articles as a chapter in his book, *Problemas brasileiros de antropologia* (Freyre 1959:263-313), and again in *Bahia e Bahianos* (Freyre 1990:91-134), in both cases unfortunately without the original photographs. In the books, Freyre added an introduction recognizing Fatumbí's importance in the research. The letters between them about the project make it clear that not only was the original idea Fatumbí's but that he also carried out nearly all of the research². Some of the data he collected during this project concerned the musical traditions of Brazilians who had returned to Benin. Fatumbí had extensive contact with the leader of a Brazilian association in Benin, Casimiro de Almeida, himself of Afro-

¹ During his first contract with *O Cruzeiro*, Verger submitted more than 110 photographic reports, although only about 80 of them were published. During his contract with *O Cruzeiro Internacional*, he submitted over 80 reports, of which only a few were published, although the reason for this is not known. The fate of this valuable photographic material has never been determined. One may note that in this second period, Verger generally photographed and wrote many of the texts from the second phase are still in existence(???)

² We continue to find letters from Verger to Freyre and from Freyre to Verger. In one letter dated June 27, 1950, Verger explains in detail all of the material that he had sent to Freyre, including research notes and bibliographical material related to Africa. The letter shows that Verger had already begun to do his first archival research in Bahia in search of complementary material. In the text mentioned earlier (see note 14), Freyre writes: "This is why I am happy to have in Pierre Verger a collaborator in the research on which I have been working for years on the subject of exslaves Brazilianized by Brazil. Returning to Africa, they founded in African lands a form of Afro-Brazilian civilization of which there are even today interesting survivals : the subject of a possible book that I hope to write in collaboration with Pierre Verger." The book was never published.

Brazilian descent, in Whydah, where to this day there are traditions of *Bumba-meu-boi* and the *Festa do Bonfim*¹.

The publication of the articles in *O Cruzeiro* was indirectly accompanied by the recording of songs collected by Fatumbí from two elderly women who had returned to Africa as adolescents. This recording, which dates from the early 1950's and remains unedited to this day, was made with the assistance of Fatumbí's friend ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget, who collaborated with him on many projects in Africa.. Remarks Gilberto Freyre :

The testimonies, whose importance he so astutely perceived and collected using state-of-the-art technology, of two Brazilian women of African origin, are not simply documents of scientific interest, they have a certain poetry to them [...]. Monsieur Gilbert Rouget - of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris assisted Pierre Verger in recording this document rich in suggestion. We should give thanks as well for the recording technique. But it is this new aspect of Pierre Verger's work - that of recording the voices of Afro-Brazilians in Africa whom the mother culture has only partially succeeded in re-absorbing - that deserves very particular attention from researchers interested in the African origins of the national culture of Brazil. It is a masterpiece of Afro-Brazilian studies which continues to attract attention due to its painstaking attention to documentation and use of the most modern technology and the most difficult fieldwork. A truly admirable effort (Jornal do Comercio, Recife 31/8/60).

Freyre thus emphasizes the “trans-Atlantic” nature of Fatumbí's work in giving voice to silenced and forgotten communities on both sides of the Atlantic. His interest in ethnomusicological research came from his close contact with Gilbert Rouget, yet Verger always considered himself an amateur in the area. In 1952, Rouget left him a tape recorder; which from then on became an indispensable resource for the recording of rich traditions of oral literature, and the collecting of music : both of Africans

¹ The repertory was recorded in the 50s by Luís Heitor de Azevedo in Paris. This recording is found in the Library of Congress. One of the groups who maintain these traditions to this day was recorded by ethnomusicologist Marcos Lacerda Brenda. The repertory was released on CD as *Drama, e Fetiche. Vodun, bumba-meu-boi e samba no Benin*. Funarte, *Dicionário Sonoro do Folclore Brasileiro*, vol. 48.

and of their descendents in Brazil¹. The two elderly women, Maria dos Anjos Ojelabi and Maria Romana da Conceição, were recorded on many more occasions after those first sessions, later broadcasted by the “Rádio Ministério da Educação” in Rio de Janeiro, Bahia and Pernambuco².

Just as Fatumbí showed special interest in uncovering the lived, oral, and musical history of slaves who returned to Africa, so he also discovered fascinating elements in reconstructing the history of diverse aspects of Afro-Brazilian religion in Brazil. The cult of the *voduns* of São Luís do Maranhão³ provides a good example of the interrelationship between lived experience, events, contacts, research, photo-documentation, and incidentals. In three successive texts, Fatumbí deals with the history of the *voduns* in São Luís and their relationship to the royal family of Benin, examining the history of the exiled queen, Na Agontimé, and the curious presence of the throne of an African king and a flag from the court of Dahomey in the collection of the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro (Verger 1952 ; 1970 ; 1990). The first text is a preliminary exploration based on Fatumbí’s initial oral research in São Luís do Maranhão (1948) and in Dahomey (in 1936 and after 1948). The second, which involved archival research in museums and photo-documentation, deals with the exchange of gifts between sovereigns above and beyond the history of the royal throne. The third truly resolves the question, analyzing all of the information uncovered during research for the first two articles and utilizing detailed visual documentation⁴. Fatumbí’s research on the royal throne demonstrates in a very fluid way his skill in

¹ Among the publications that came out of research by Rouget and Verger, one might mention several records by Rouget, with photos and at times texts by Verger: *Dahomey, Musique de Princes. Fête des Tohosou*, Musée de l’Homme LD 5, Contrepoint MC 20.093, 1955 ; *Ogun Dieu de Fer – Chants d’Afrique Occidentale*, Musée de l’Homme LD 12, Contrepoint MC 20.159, 1958 ; *Fête pour l’offrande des premières ignames à Shango au Dahomey*, Musée de l’Homme LD 2, 1965 ; *Musique des Revenants*, and two CDs accompanying the book *Un Roi africain et sa musique de cour* (Rouget 1996).

² See Olinto (1980:261). Unfortunately, it has still not been possible to find the exact date of the radio program. Nor do we know if it might not be identical to a program broadcasted on December 22, 1958, as part of a series called “Vamos cantar a Bahia” which touches on the theme of the Brazilians returned to Africa. Thescript for the program, by Verger, is found in the archives of the FPV.

³ São Luís is the capital of Maranhão, a state in northern Brazil.

⁴ The text was republished as “Os que no Brasil permaneceram fiéis aos valores africanos. Na Agontimé” in Verger (1992 : 66-86).

combining historical issues with artistic and social ones, as his starting point was oral tradition combined with photo-documentation, paying especially careful attention to the project's relevance for the people with whom it is concerned.

We may also understand Fatumbí's special interest in African culture in a more general sense as a search for vital expressions of cultural identity. While in the company of such colleagues as Wande Abimbola, Olabiyi Yai, Ulli Beier, Wilfried Feuser and Adeagbo Akingjobin at the then recently-created Nigerian universities, just after independence, it was uncommon in academic circles to seriously consider African art and culture as such. On the contrary, the concept of "primitive" art and culture still predominated. In this context a movement arose affirming the importance of Yoruba culture, in which Fatumbí and his research played an important role. The *Extra- Mural Department* of the University of Ifé was created at this time (Beier 1997:157-65) with a more Yoruba local perspective, focused on Yoruba culture. Later, between 1976 and 1979 when Fatumbí was a visiting professor in Ifé, was one of the writers of a manifesto -demanding that a physical space be established on campus for the practice of Nigerian religious traditions. Despite a supposedly ecumenical vision, this Nigerian religion had somehow been forgotten, although others had been included. The manifesto was published in 1977 bearing the signatures -apart from that of Fatumbí- of such figures as Wole Soyinka, Wande Abimbola and Abdias do Nascimento.

At the end of this period, Fatumbí suffered a bitter disappointment in Nigeria. In 1979, on his way back to Brazil, he was arrested on a number of trumped-up charges, including having been involved in the robbery of the bronze sculpture from Ifé, known as the head of Olokun, and first described by Frobenius in 1910. A copy of the piece, which had been seen and found in the house of Fatumbí's friend Carybé in Bahia, was alleged to be the original. It was seized and "returned" to Nigeria, and on examination revealed to be nothing but a plaster copy of a bronze replica housed in the British Museum¹. The original bronze from Ifé is lost to this day. These unjust accusations, stemming from a frenzy of Nigerian nationalism gone awry, resulted in Fatumbí's imprisonment as he neared his eightieth year, causing him great pain, all the more so since some of those involved were his colleagues and friends.

¹ More details on the story of the bronzes and their copies can be found in William Fagg and Leon Underwood (1949 : 1-7).

Fatumbí's feelings about Nigeria would never be the same after the events of 1979, but until the end of his life he felt a longing to return to Africa, and especially to Benin, where he had formed particularly close ties. Throughout the last decades of his life, he continued to receive cards and visits from his friends in Africa. In 1994, during a period of hospitalization he even received a visit from the king of Kêtu and his court, whose African royal attire created quite a stir among the hospital staff.

Fatumbí was also concerned with promoting the visibility of African and Afro-Brazilian culture and its historical antecedents in local culture and memory, not only through books but through other activities as well. Few people know that Fatumbí played a central role in the creation of the Museu Afro-Brasileiro in Salvador. In 1974, the Centro de Estudos Afro-Orientais (CEAO) of the Federal University of Bahia (UFBa), with funding from the Brazilian Government, asked him to acquire pieces for the museum's collection in Africa. Thus he became part of the core staff charged with developing the museum. During 1975 he bought the pieces -mostly made to order by African artisans- and also set up possibilities for exchanges with and loans from other museums. After his stay in Ifê as Visiting Professor, he returned to Bahia to prepare captions and explanatory texts to be exhibited along with the pieces, as well as photographs of his own be included with the collection. The "Museu Afro Brasileiro" opened in 1982 as the first stage of a longer-term more ambitious project¹. Fatumbí also participated in the subsequent development of the "Casa do Benin" ("House of Benin"), which had a personal significance for him as a memorial to the importance of the historical relationship between the two countries. Inaugurated in Salvador in 1988, the "Casa do Benin" is today linked to the city government. In the late 1990s, this idea was borrowed in creating houses of Nigeria and Angola.

Another project, which was unfortunately not completed before his death, was the creation of a botanical garden on the grounds of the Fundação Pierre Verger, focused on plants of medicinal value and those utilized in candomblé rituals. This project reflected Fatumbí's great interest in documenting the importance and power of medicinal plants and the complexity of the Yoruba system of plant classification. This system was transported to Brazil during the time of the slave trade and the knowledge was maintained within the sphere of candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian

¹ In November 1999 the museum was reinaugurated after a complete structural renovation.

religions. Even today many of these plants are known in Brazil by their Yoruba names.

Besides the *orixá* religion, which has already been discussed above, ethnobotany and the *Ifá* system of divination are two areas in which knowledge is transmitted orally. The range of oral culture and its processes of transmission and memorization were unquestionably subjects that held Fatumbí's interest for many years. He was extremely interested in understanding traditional knowledge and communicating his importance, especially because of how it had been so long neglected in Western history, in spite of the great vitality with which it had been kept alive in Brazil.

It is important to note that in the 1950s Fatumbí already mentions doing research related to both ethnobotany and *Ifá*, since the two areas both depend on knowledge transmitted orally by the *babaláwos*. For several decades Fatumbí was interested in the power of medicinal plants and their other properties, whether liturgical or related to divination and healing. Clearly this interest was closely linked to the entire complex of knowledge of the *babaláwos* related to divination and the two aspects together constitute, as it were, the nexus of power of Yoruba culture. The rules for the use of medicinal plants are memorized by the *babaláwos* by means of short verses, of which Fatumbí collected close to 2000 and published around 200, with the intention of emphasizing their poetic and aesthetic aspects. Fatumbí always planned to write a book on the history and knowledge of the cult of *Ifá*. But this research, which he began in Nigeria, was curtailed by the political difficulties he suffered in 1979, and sadly, his dream of a book on *Ifá* never became a reality¹.

The unusual experiments of Dr. Lapeyssonie, director of a hospital in Whydah in the 1960s, with *Rauwolfia serpentina* and *Sabicea calycina* encouraged Fatumbí to become increasingly interested in the stimulating and tranquilizing effects of plants and their possible uses in rituals and medicines

¹ One example of Verger's the extent of interest in *Ifá* is the fact that he had the staircase in his house built with 16 steps, in order to recite on a daily basis the 16 odus of *Ifá*. One might also remark Verger's fascination with the number 4 (which also happened to be the day of his birth). He would often choose dates and numbers on the basis of their having or not having a 4. His P.O. box (1201) was chosen for this reason. This personal "numerology" also extends to his interest in the I Ching, which he compared with the histories of the cult of *Ifá*, illustrating yet again his search for the mystical and for destiny.

(Verger 1985). But it was only after the publication of articles concerning the linguistic aspects of the verses of the *babaláwos* that Fatumbí began publishing articles on their botanical dimension. This is partly because he had been collecting plants for a number of years, putting together a herbarium that was identified and classified by the Botanical Service in Ibadan¹. As a complement to his work on the other side of the Atlantic, he collected a herbarium with close to 150 plants native to Bahia, which he had organized with the assistance of people from *candomblé*, including *mãe-de-santo* Mãe Senhora and Olga de Alaketu².

Analyzing plants' biochemical action Fatumbí always insisted that the properties of plants in isolation did not always explain their properties when used in conjunction with other plants. While they might not produce any specific effect when used separately, their effect when used together might be quite powerful, recalling the old adage that there is strength in numbers. Fatumbí was also interested in understanding the effects of plants that act as stimulants or sedatives on internal structures of the unconscious. To what extent do these plants collectively act on a person's capacity to return to their innate personality, particularly through the inducement of altered states of consciousness ? Fatumbí emphasized the role of plants during *candomblé* initiation rites in reinforcing the deepest innate characteristics of the individual and overcoming influences acquired through education, thereby strengthening the neophyte's true personality. Similarly, he was also interested in the positive effects of remedies that strengthen the memory through similar processes.

With his great interest in all of the forms of knowledge in Yoruba culture, Fatumbí went beyond the Linnean botanical system of Western science, and began to examine the Yoruba system of plant classification, formerly unknown to Western audiences. At a time when "ethnoscience" and "cognitive anthropology" had not yet been invented, Fatumbí demonstrated through his research that other cultures had developed consistent systems of classification comparable to that of Western science.

¹ The Herbarium later was sent to Paris, according to letters from 1970, confirming the sending of 1210 plants in 1969.

² The plants were identified and classified by Dr. Alexandre Leal of UFBA. The herbarium was donated to the Departamento de Botânica do Instituto de Biologia da UFBA em 1976.

Fatumbí's thoughts and experiences emerge clearly in several "autobiographical" texts he wrote, as well as in certain of his books of which he was particularly fond. Two books held a very special place in his heart. One, *Notícias da Bahia-1850*, originally intended for publication in French, is a social history of the Bahian capital. Surveying all of the social groups of the city and their interactions, it summed up what was for Fatumbí the message of Afro-Brazilian culture, so powerfully expressed in Bahian history. *Os Libertos* shows *via* seven life histories the diversity of paths that enslaved Africans chose upon gaining their freedom: some through adaptation others through resistance. Two of his last photography books, *Retratos da Bahia* (1981) and *Centro Histórico de Salvador* (1989) show the Bahia that he had fallen in love with on his arrival in 1946. The texts of both books are decidedly autobiographical.

These final reflections bring us back to the opening of this article, when we examined Fatumbí's versatility and the poetry of his visual language, which possessed a breath of expression that encompassed so many stylistic genres and academic disciplines. It is important to emphasize the idiosyncrasy of his style: through his publications he managed to communicate with extremely diverse audiences, striving for cross-cultural understanding and unity rather than difference. His images of Africa and Brazil frequently made his readers want to experience for themselves the places he had photographed. His eye was fundamental in opening up new ways of seeing Afro-Brazilian and African culture. When he began to photograph, most of his audience lacked any appreciation of the aesthetic sense of African and Afro-Brazilian culture, and was unaware of its cultural importance and its role in strengthening identity¹. Fatumbí's photographic style, which always expressed the alive and spontaneous, never the artificial or the calculated, is complemented by his style of writing captions for the photographs. There is no want of humor, irony, or even self-criticism. His personal style is perceptible, with its capacity to make his words come alive, like animated images. In his scientific texts he allowed his historical sources and informants to speak. He detested theories, preferring lived experience, taken in historical context. As he used to say: "The problem with people is that they try to impose their logic on life. Life, however, has no logic". This is why he always emphasized the importance of observing *how* things happened instead of trying to understand *why*, since the "why" of things, invariably led to answers of questionable veracity.

¹ Till this day, there is a lack of work evaluating the aesthetic and technical aspects of Verger's photographic work. For one of the few, see Garrigues (1992:115-39).

It is interesting to observe that Fatumbí in a certain way anticipated the most recent transformations in the field of anthropology, in carefully examining the interaction between the studied subject, the social actor, and the studying subject, the observer. At the same time his style is difficult to classify within any single ideological or theoretical framework. This brings us back to the question of interdisciplinarity and his use of diverse media: from photography to film, the written word and sound recordings. There is also his constant movement between a wide range of subjects and different disciplines. He remained faithful to certain ideas, to a style of life and an independent path. Even though he may not have always known what he wanted, he did know what he *didn't* want, as he often said in interviews. Thus –perhaps without realizing it– he ultimately did what he wanted at the core of his being, in confirmation of what he so often said about the unconscious: its extreme importance, especially with regard to religion ! Fatumbí was one of a rare but essential breed in the world of science: he demonstrated that it is both possible and necessary to do research not just with the head, but also with the heart. As he always said, “I didn't want to do research. I wanted to live with them ... I didn't want to know anything, and that is why they allowed me to participate and trusted me”. His empathetic research unquestionably led him into approaches and styles that were highly unusual and innovative. Fatumbí's life and work is simply human, as much in its origin as in its application, its essence and its medium. His work and life still hold many surprises, as we attempt to discover the message that he left us, both those of us who are here now and those who are still to come...¹

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¹ One way of better understanding Fatumbí's life is through the preparation for future publications of his numerous unpublished manuscripts, texts and annotations, such as correspondences, a project currently being undertaken by the Fundação Pierre Verger.

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