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# Filiation as a crossroads in Bahia

*João de Pina-Cabral*

*School of Anthropology and Conservation*

*University of Kent*

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We have been witnessing of late in anthropology a theoretical renewal of kinship studies that is associated to a very active interdisciplinary dialogue with cognitive studies, medicine, philosophy, and developmental psychology (e.g. Sahlins 2011a and 2011b, Pina-Cabral 2010b and 2017). The new emphasis that seems to be common to these approaches is a concern with the way in which the person is at the centre of sociality and, particularly, with personal ontogeny (that is, the process by which each one of us, as persons with an internal arena of presence and of action, was constituted by specific relations that evolve over time—see Toren 1999).

In this paper, taking recourse to ethnographic material collected in Bahia (Brazil),<sup>1</sup> I propose a new perspective on the notion of filiation and how it relates with personhood in contemporary Brazil.

## **A FATHERLESS LAY-PREACHER**

One day I was walking in the historical centre of the city of Bahia (Brazil, 2005) and, as I passed the old Church of Our Lady of Pity (*Piedade*), I heard a woman's voice inside.

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She was talking over the sound system for the whole congregation to hear about her own personal suffering with the fact that she lacked a father. According to her, it was due to this that she eventually came to find her vocation in God's work, the father of us all, thus compensating for her internal lack.

This called my attention immediately, of course. I had recently started doing fieldwork in Bahia, in a region of coastal mangroves some hundred and fifty kilometres south of the city, and I had witnessed a form of domestic living where young women who had children rarely found a permanent partner until they reached middle-age. Whilst many people eventually came to settle down into domestic conjugal living by their mid-forties, it was uncommon for domestic relations to become stable before that period in people's lives. What this meant is that many of the children that I was interviewing in the secondary schools of the small towns of Valença were being brought up as foster children (*filhos de criação*) by their aunts, uncles, grandparents or even more distantly related persons.

Did this mean that all of these people were suffering in their sense of selfhood, as this woman was claiming to be her case? How could her sermon be interpreted in terms of the widespread observation that fatherlessness is indeed not an uncommon experience in Bahia, since many of these young men whose girlfriends get pregnant seldom have the professional and financial security necessary to become heads of household?

I entered into the Church, sat on a pew, and turned on my tape recorder. She was an inspired speaker and her sermon convinced me that there was indeed something in her sense of personal incompleteness that required my attention. Unfortunately, by the time I got back home in the evening and I switched on the playback button, I realized that the sound system in the Church had created such an echo that I could no longer understand any of her words in the recording.

**HAVING A FATHER – *JESUS, MARIA, JOSÉ***

The memory of this undecipherable sermon kept nagging at me in the months that followed. As I carried out a series of life histories of teachers in the local schools of Valença (cf. Pina-Cabral 2005, 2010a and 2010b), I found confirmation of what I had suspected when I had first heard her sermon: the experience of fatherlessness is a topic that people often discuss and the need to overcome that “lack” is a conscious preoccupation on the part both of older relatives and of children themselves (sometimes even when they are already adults and, in turn, parents of children, like this particular woman). During the period I was there, some NGOs were even organizing “Paternity Campaigns”, aiming at encouraging men to validate retrospectively their paternity. Such acts of validation by older fathers are not uncommon and a number of such instances were recounted to me in the course of carrying out family histories. These are moments of heightened emotion for the participants, bearing a sense of relief and a hope of psychological resolution.

“Having a father” is no mean aspect of local living. The act of recognising paternity bears with it considerable economic responsibilities for a young man who is likely to be unemployed or dependent on irregular and uncertain means of income; it is no wonder that many of them should shy away from it. Older men, already established in life, typically invest in a domestic project in the company of a woman who, often enough, is not the mother of his children and has already children of her own by other men. It is not uncommon to find that these children become frequent visitors of the couple’s home and some even come to live with them, though this is by no means necessary, as by that time they have long established habits of domesticity and love in their foster homes. Again, it seems relevant to observe that, with the exception of some rare cases of very marked familial conflict, fostering does not run counter to the original act of parenting, as my interviewee confirmed.



*Figure 1. "This is my father. He is waiting at the Administrative Centre for the hour in which he will register me." Drawing by secondary school student (Una, Bahia, 2007)<sup>3</sup>.*

So, a year later, when I again found myself in the neighbourhood of Piedade, I decided to go in and ask for an interview. The group of women who run the church committee were surprised at my request and I had to be vetoed by a nun, who had to make sure that my intentions were genuine and that I was really a university professor as I was claiming to be. In the end, they were generous to me. They allowed for the interview to take place on condition that the nun be present. I managed to have a long and frank conversation with the lay preacher whose sermon I had heard the year before. She was a handsome, blond person in her early forties, with two adolescent children of her own, which she was proudly raising with the help of a devoted husband.

At first, when I heard her replies to my questions concerning why it was important to have a father, I interpreted her as providing me with an official "conservative", Catholic response directly inspired by the mythical prototype of the Holy Family. She said things like: "the person of a man in a house imposes... It imposes

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<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Inês Ponte who worked as a research assistant for our project in Una in 2007.

because, since the beginning of history, we know that the presence of the man is held as (corresponding to) a proper household (*casa de bem*).”

Soon, however, I saw that she was also passing on a quite different message; one where the issue was less to do with what was prestigious or not and more to do with what makes a person feel a sense of internal self-completion. “We can spend the whole day discussing these problems, but if you do not have a structure, someone that formed you – be that your biological father, your grandfather, or your uncle; if you do not have that, you will be a questionable individual, an unsatisfied individual, a difficult individual ... You will even find it hard to administer yourself: there are people that do not manage to do that, they do not accept themselves, they do not love themselves, because they are always searching for an answer that should have been there from the start and that life ends up giving to them, but in a haphazard manner (*de qualquer jeito*).”

Behind her formulations—and, of course, implicit in the nun’s punctuation of our debate—there was decidedly a Church inspired model of family which finds its guiding metaphor in the picture of the Holy Family (“*Jesus, Maria, José*”—the magic formula against evil, which one hears throughout the Catholic world in the lips of frightened people and which caused such depression to Lampedusa’s fictional alterego, the Duke of Salinas—2007). The Metaphor of the Crib has had a particularly important role in Brazil from the time of its popularization as a cult in the seventeenth century and one frequently encounters images of Joseph as carpenter in church altars throughout Brazil (Mott 1993).

Concerning the centrality of this *Metaphor of the Crib* in the ideological history of Catholic countries, however, the challenge for an anthropologist is to find modes of coping with kinship relations as they really are practiced in these countries that do not become imprisoned within the ideological moulds that such strategies of ideological engineering constitute. Whilst ideological frameworks often mould action, the reducing of people’s choices to them, would end up turning ethnography into a machine for the

furthering of the hegemonies that are favoured by such forms of cult. Ethnography has to be able to capture the spaces of creativity, of manipulation, and of constitution of new moulds for sociality. No form of life can be reduced to the hegemonically dominant tropes that struggle within it.

## FOSTERING

The lay-preacher's comments concerning the raising of children were compatible with everything I was hearing in my interviews in Valença: formal adoption, and in particular the attempt to hide the biological filiation of adopted children, are thought to be wrong, leading to a kind of lie that will eventually produce suffering. I told her of a case I had known of a young man who discovered upon reaching adulthood that the couple who had raised him were not his biological parents. He searched exhaustively for the latter, but ultimately he failed to discover them, as he had been offered to this childless couple by a passing beggar whom it turned out to be impossible to trace. The lay preacher replied about this case: "He is very, very tight! (*curtíssimo* – in the sense of not having a solution) He was raised by a father and a mother, but he has the right to know who engendered him. And why did they deny him that? Can you imagine the problems that mother suffered due to a society that did not welcome her? He is right ... I am against people who adopt and do not speak out the reference. All of us have our reference... we have reference: the people who engendered us."

So, one's history is written into us as "reference" (much like the history of our scholarly arguments in our bibliographical references) and all attempts at hiding it are seen as evil because, somehow, they would reduce our social validity. This reference transports a *continued identity* that supports us in life's challenges. She insists: "Father, mother and child (are needed) since my success, in my family, will be reflected on my children. When I witness the positive attitudes of my children, I see that behind them there are my own attitudes. Children's good behaviour is backed up by my own good behaviour and their future errors also, since it is in me that they will go to search for the

strength to try again and get it right second time round. The roots of an individual today are a father and a mother.”

Fostering is not the problem *per se*. People can compensate for other’s absence in ensuring that children’s personhood be properly constituted. “This is a society filled with parent-grandparents! There are many young people today that are good youngsters, but only because the grandparents played that role (...) they had a grandfather that fulfilled the role of father (or a grandmother, or an uncle...). I mean, without the person of a man and a woman, you can’t do it.”

Constitutive love is what must not be missing. A very special type of love, according to my interviewee: “It is a society with lots of suffering (...) for lack of that kind of respect which is associated to love, to love in practice; not self-love, but responsibility-love.” Now, for this constitutive love to function properly, she claimed, you require that the two genders be present and the reason for that, as she went on to explain, is that persons are intrinsically bi-gendered, they are intrinsically partible (cf. Pina-Cabral 2017: 99-134).

## **PARTIBILITY AND GENDER**

As we were coming to the end of the interview, the nun intervened and summarized what she thought she was understanding from the lay preacher’s explanation: “The figures of the father and of the mother must be present (...) even if they are not the ones that engendered us. (...) Humans are man and woman in themselves, so (...) there is a need for the two figures in the primordials of our existence to be present, so as to support us. This male and female reference (is needed) because humans are composed that way. We are like that, male and female, we have those two dimensions within us. So, if one of those dimensions is neutralized... No law of life can be transgressed without punishment, no law of life! It will have consequences, for sure; it will produce consequences.” In spite of the possible absence of the physical father or the physical mother, we witness a need to invoke those roles that can be displaced and resituated in the course of life.



In short, there is a notion in Bahia that parenthood is necessarily plural and bi-gendered because the person is composite. What was fascinating to me in their attempts at communicating the way they conceived of themselves as persons was that they combined a notion of personal partibility and gender-complexity (in many ways akin to that which Marilyn Strathern proposed as a general principle for anthropology—1988: 11-15) with a theory of personhood emphasizing personal individuation and “self-affirmation,” the principle that Luiz Fernando Dias Duarte has insisted to be central to modern Brazilian ideologies of personhood (Duarte and Campos 2008).

The lay preacher’s original difficulty in finding the internal integrity of her own person had apparently been caused by her lack of a male component: “(...) I lacked the person of the man and my mother had these two roles of father and mother. This performance (*desempenho*) she had to take on woke up a need in me – because no one can play the two roles at the same time – the person, the man, is very important for the emotional equilibrium, for the equilibrium of the very personality of the individual. It is necessary for it to be rooted in the experiences of the man, so as to manage to compose its personality. One cannot be tied only to female differences, but also masculine differences ... even if the person is a woman. (...) The father’s function can never be exchanged with the mother’s. The father has his own proper function, like the mother. Each one has distinct functions. And that is what helps the youngster acquire emotional stability.”

I do not propose to treat this lay preacher’s informal and untheorized discourse, as if it had been a kind of philosophical charter of Bahian personhood—a mistake anthropologists are often accused of committing. Indeed, in the same way as she claimed that fatherhood or motherhood were not exchangeable, she was explaining that, in her particular case, this is precisely what had happened: “Now if, unfortunately, in the course of life, something happens and this father is no longer the household’s reference – or even the mother, as we are sadly seeing so often today (women are revolting so much! They are forgetting their functions within the household) ... I think that someone must

be there with equilibrium, one of the two, to exercise the double function. So, as it happens, if the man stops being the reference, the woman must assume, but she has to be conscious of the fact that she will not fill up the void. She will try, right? But with a lot of effort.”

This, apparently, is what her mother had attempted to do. At times, she reckoned that the mother had managed to be father and mother, at others she claimed that she had remained with an internal disequilibrium that she had to fill up by searching for God’s paternity and, ultimately, by looking for and finding her own biological father, that she had helped reconcile with God shortly before he died. This had been the subject of her earlier sermon that had struck me so much and that I had not managed to record. In our interview, perhaps sensing that a discourse of that nature might have carried less power of conviction before a middle-class academic such as myself, she toned her speech towards the matter of psychic well-being and equilibrium.

## CONCLUSION

I want to conclude with the observation that, contrary to what so often is held to be the case, the discourse of “self-affirmation” and individuation that accompanies people’s desires of modernity (in Brazil doubtlessly, but also in many other parts of the world) is not in any way incompatible with a notion of the partibility of the person. The person is constituted by the crossing over of at least two different familial histories—the paternal and the maternal—and it is in the gendered complexity of that meeting that personal “completeness” can be achieved. In short, personal singularity is never individual, but always constituted over a ground of dynamic partibility—as Freud’s formulations highlighted a long time ago. Filiation, therefore, must not be seen as a simple binary relationship between a father and a child or a mother and a child, but as a crossroads. Alliance, in that way, is implicit in the very possibility of filiation.

Furthermore, as these Bahian cases so often highlight due to the frequency with which filiation occurs outside conjugal households in this region, filiation must also be

held to include other actors. Their role, however, as the lay preacher insisted, is not that of surrogate father or mother. Rather, like father and mother, they also perform the constitutive function of passing on to the child their *continued identities*. “Parent-grandparents”, as our interviewee called them, as well as uncles, aunts, elder siblings and other foster-parents intervene in filiation of their own accord, not as substitutes of the mother or of the father. This is the conclusion I reached when studying comparatively the institutions of namesakes and godparents (cf. Pina-Cabral 2010a).

I insist, I do not claim to grant a level of theoretical completeness to the discourse of this lay-preacher and the supportive comments of the nun that accompanied our conversation. Rather, I mean to use them as evidence of how filiation is lived in contemporary Bahia and, in turn, how that fits with the structuring notions that have been emerging in contemporary anthropological theory concerning the nature of personal ontogeny. Filiation, thus, must not be understood as a specific relation that can come in two kinds (paternal and maternal), as was depicted of old in ‘descent theory’ and in ‘alliance theory’, but as a field of caring relations that institutes a causal history of personhood.

Anthropologists have implicitly (and mostly unselfconsciously) accepted the positioning towards filiation that has been dominant in Christian Western Europe over the centuries and that, contrary to Confucianist approaches in East Asia, places the ontological drive on an older-to-younger movement. Filiation is, thus, conceived of from the authoritarian perspective of parentality. This, however, produces a sociocentric effect, to the extent that it naturalises personhood as an automatic by-product of pre-existing institutional determinations (namely “marriage”, which ideologically works to conjoin fertility, sexuality, and household—we are here reminded of Leach’s prophetic doubts on the subject, 1966). If we adopt an approach based on personhood as an emergent phenomenon within sociality (Pina-Cabral 2018), we are led to shift the focus away from parentality towards filiality; highlighting the way in which the latter brings different pasts together within a person that is not assumed to be there from the start, but needs

to be constituted at all times (in personal ontogeny). As it turns out, the unilineal emphasis that dominated descent theory in the old days was ethnographically ungrounded, even in its heartlands in Africa (Hamberger 2011).

A focus on filiality may also help us overcome one of the most harmful silent equivoques in the history of anthropology—the way in which filiation is differently defined in French/Spanish-speaking anthropology and in English-speaking anthropology.<sup>3</sup> This theoretical equivoque is not merely a sign of theoretical disagreement, for it does not apply to any theory in particular (‘descent theory’ and ‘alliance theory’ have long been dead) but it applies to different cultural-linguistic traditions within Euro-American anthropology.

We are trapped within this equivoque largely because we have for too long avoided addressing the matter of filiation from a comparativist perspective—not one that proposes universal agreements among all humans, but one that identifies overarching similarities in modes of human behaviour (see Pina-Cabral and Lydell 2008). As an attribution of personal causality (that is, my person was caused into existence by such and such another person), filiation and the way in which at least two distinct filiations are assumed for each person, comes to be a constitutive crossroads, a source of “miscigenation”—as an Afro-Brazilian priestess once explained to me, using the language of race/colour that is so pervasive in Bahia as a metaphor for the way personal identity is produced in triangulation.

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<sup>3</sup> For discussions of this problem, see Pina-Cabral 1989 and 2017: 125-128; see also Bonte, Porqueres, and Wilgaux 2011: 16).

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