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Review: Blacks of the Rosary: Memory and History in Minas Gerais, Brazil

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ELIZABETH W. KIDDY. *Blacks of the Rosary: Memory and History in Minas Gerais, Brazil*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press. 2005. Pp. xvi, 287. \$55.00.

In 1642, the ambassador from Kongo entered Recife, Brazil, escorted by costumed dance troupes brandishing weapons to honor their homeland and hosts. Remarkably similar dances, performed by *congada* troupes from the Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary of the Blacks, continue to be performed, according to Elizabeth W. Kiddy, the author of this impressive new study of lay religious organizations of Minas Gerais, Brazil. Kiddy's book is a thorough-going investigation of the meaning and function of devotional groups in the lives of enslaved and free Africans and their descendents in colonial and postcolonial Brazil.

In this book, the first major study of black brother-hoods in thirty years, Kiddy argues that the African slaves created "transnational and multiethnic communities" that "celebrated" spiritual powers of Catholic and African traditions, cultivated "unseen powers," and provided for a better afterlife through rituals and symbols during their activities in the rosary brotherhoods (p. 5). She explains that their religious life and ideas blossomed into a rich alternative tradition under the aegis of the church, adapting to historical conditions in Brazil. Rather than merely sketch the trajectory of beliefs or institutions, however, Kiddy weaves an intricate tapestry of the four centuries of the religious brother-hoods in Minas Gerais, drawing together information on the brotherhoods' institutional development, related political and economic circumstances, the history of race relations and social status, and the devotional practices of Luso-Brazilian Catholicism.

In her introduction, Kiddy draws on contemporary theories of racial identity and social memory formation to underscore the importance of the creation of the brotherhoods "of the blacks" in contradistinction to white and nonreligious organizations. Each subsequent chapter impressively documents the history of the central political, economic, and ecclesiastical factors that shaped the religious and social lives of blacks in the rosary brotherhoods. While some readers unfamiliar with the convolutions of colonial developments may be overwhelmed by the details, these sections are valuable additions given that Brazilian history—especially concerning slavery and racial demographics—is so little known.

Kiddy begins, in chapters one and two, with the Old World antecedents to the rosary brotherhoods, in the saints' veneration and religious organizations of the medieval Roman Catholic Church and the vital cosmology of the Central and West Africans whose lives were devastated by slavery. In Africa and later in Brazil, Portuguese Christians utilized Marian devotion and the rosary to evangelize Africans, while converted slaves adapted the rituals to their own understandings of the relationships between the human and divine realms. In Brazil, the rosary brotherhoods were cultivated by whites and blacks alike, to both similar and divergent ends, perpetuating deep misunderstandings beneath the conjoining of popular Catholicism and African religious worldviews. There, while religion provided the slave holders with another means of controlling the underclass of slaves, Africans and their descendents created a

community of resistance around their own myths of Mary's preferences for blacks, feast-day celebrations, and rituals for the dead.

Chapters three through six trace the progressive history of the rosary brotherhoods for blacks, beginning in the colonial gold boom of the 1690s, and continuing through the political and economic reorganizations of the nineteenth-century Brazilian Empire and twentieth-century republic. Begun as loosely organized groups dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary, brotherhoods hired their own chaplains, arranged rituals, elected festival kings and queens, and even built their own chapels. Members gained autonomy through their community-shaped identity, strategically evading or delaying church or state control. Gradually brought under centralized authority, rosary brotherhoods in Minas Gerais revitalized their African heritage, blended with Catholic popular religion, and experienced a resurgence in the 1880s. In chapter seven, Kiddy's meticulous history is brought to life with the vivid interviews of festival kings, queens, and *congada* dancers, complemented by accounts of current celebrations and tantalizing hints of the secret ceremonies and symbols kept just out of the public view.

This project draws on regional and national archives and extensive fieldwork with the participants in contemporary festivals to create a rather compelling history, concluding with "the story of the past as lived by the *congadeiros* themselves" (p. 11). Although Kiddy usually leaves aside analysis of the meaning of and impetus for religious devotion among Africans and their descendants, her work nevertheless provides important insights into the creative preservation of African heritage woven into Brazilian Catholicism and the development of racial identity among blacks, without neglecting the interplay of the dominant hierarchy and power structures of church and state within Minas Gerais. A challenging and rewarding read, the book offers scholars a valuable resource for the understanding of the development of social and religious organizations of "blacks" in the African diaspora.

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