

Article

“Spiritual Warfare” or “Crimes against Humanity”? Evangelized Drug Traffickers and Violence against Afro-Brazilian Religions in Rio de Janeiro

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Abstract: Since at least 2005, drug traffickers in the cities and favelas of the state of Rio de Janeiro have been carrying out systematic and violent assaults on Afro-Brazilian religious communities. Motivated by their conversion to sects of Evangelical Christianity that regard Afro-Brazilian religions as devil worship, the traffickers have forcibly expelled devotees of these faiths from their homes and temples, destroyed shrines and places of worship, and threatened to kill priests if they continue to practice their religion. Scholars have often described this religious landscape as a “conflict” and a “spiritual war.” However, I argue that Evangelized drug traffickers and Afro-Brazilian religions are not engaged in a two-sided struggle; rather, the former is unilaterally committing gross violations of the latter’s human rights, which contravene international norms prohibiting crimes against humanity and genocide.

Keywords: Afro-Brazilian religions; Candomblé; Umbanda; evangelicals; Brazil; spiritual warfare; violence; crimes against humanity; genocide

1. Introduction

In mid-August 2019, police in the state of Rio de Janeiro announced that they had arrested eight drug traffickers who had been attacking devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions (i.e., Candomblé and Umbanda) and their places of worship (terreiros) (“[Polícia prende ‘Bonde de Jesus’](#)” 2019). The traffickers were part of a group known as “Bonde de Jesus,” or “Jesus Tram,” which they founded to organize and coordinate their efforts to use threats and property destruction to push Afro-Brazilian religions out of the communities that they control. One of the founders of Bonde de Jesus is Álvaro Malaquias Santa Rosa, also known as “o Peixão” (“the big fish”), a commander of one of Rio de Janeiro’s most notorious gangs, the Terceiro Comando Puro (TCP). The police received reports that Santa Rosa’s branch of the TCP had established its own church and that Santa Rosa had been ordained as a pastor.

Under the leadership of people like Santa Rosa, the members of Bonde de Jesus and other Evangelized drug traffickers¹ had threatened at least 200 Afro-Brazilian terreiros in the first eight months of 2019 (“[Polícia prende ‘Bonde de Jesus’](#)” 2019). In some cases, they set restrictions for the operation of these places of worship such as limiting the hours in which ceremonies could occur, prohibiting devotees from wearing white (a ceremonial color), and banning public displays of “santos”

¹ It appears that the majority of these drug traffickers belong to Neo-Pentecostal churches; however, reports of these attacks often use general language about Evangelical drug traffickers, making it difficult to exclude the possibility that other forms of Evangelical Christianity are also participating in violence against Afro-Brazilian religions.

(images of saints or deities known as orixás). In others, they evicted devotees from their own places of worship—by threat or by force—or simply destroyed these terreiros altogether.

Bonde de Jesus and the acts of religious intolerance that they carried out against Afro-Brazilian terreiros in 2019 are part of a larger wave of Evangelical extremism among drug trafficking gangs in the state of Rio de Janeiro that can be traced back to at least 2005. Commencing in Morro do Dendê on Ilha do Governador and Senador Camará favela in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro, militarized strands of Evangelical Christianity have infiltrated the favelas and cities across the state. Although these brutal assaults on devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions have continued for more than a decade and appear to be increasing in frequency and severity, the government of Brazil has been reticent to acknowledge the gravity of the problem or to implement meaningful efforts to prevent further violence.

In *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All*, Gareth Evans (2008) provides a dishearteningly lengthy list of serious human rights violations that occurred in the late 20th and 21st centuries despite the existence of an extensive network of international human rights treaties and organizations that was implemented precisely to prevent such atrocities. In this article, I argue that the attacks against Afro-Brazilian religious communities in Rio de Janeiro provide another example of systematic egregious human rights violations in the 21st century that have received little acknowledgment, denunciation, or intervention. This argument breaks with the traditional ways that scholars have described the religious landscape in Brazil. Although researchers have often written about recent Evangelical aggressions against Afro-Brazilian religions, they have typically employed the perpetrators' own language and worldview about spiritual "warfare" or "conflict" to describe these attacks. I contend that this terminology is misleading because it downplays the severity of the violence and inaccurately suggests reciprocal aggressions between Afro-Brazilian and Evangelical religious communities. I argue that Evangelical assaults on Afro-Brazilian religions are one-sided aggressions that contravene international laws and norms prohibiting "crimes against humanity" and that they may also constitute genocide.

I structure this article using a common law/legal studies format. I begin with a delimitation of the problem, describing the earliest reports of Evangelized traffickers committing acts of intolerance against Afro-Brazilian religious communities in the mid-2000s and then outlining the most recent series of attacks, which took place in four cities in the state of Rio de Janeiro from 2017 to 2019. After providing this background information, I explore how scholars have increasingly attributed acts of intolerance against Afro-Brazilian religions to Brazilian Neo-Pentecostals' ideology about "spiritual warfare." Then, I use the most widely accepted definitions of crimes against humanity and genocide to argue that Evangelical attacks against Afro-Brazilian religious communities, particularly those carried out by Evangelized drug traffickers, constitute grievous human rights abuses. I conclude by exploring some of the benefits of employing language that focuses on the impact on the victims rather than the worldview of the perpetrators.

2. The Origins of Evangelized Traffickers and Violence against Afro-Brazilian Religions

The history of Evangelized drug traffickers and their campaigns of violence against Afro-Brazilian religious communities has never been properly studied. I am unaware of any publication, in English or Portuguese, that describes the history of the traffickers' conversion and their attacks against devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions in meaningful detail. Therefore, before assessing whether these acts of violence constitute crimes against humanity or genocide, it is necessary to construct an outline of the history and nature of these attacks.

The reader should use this and the following section solely as an introduction to this little-known issue. In these sections, my purpose is not to analyze the relatively minimal sources that are available to study these traffickers, to explore the political and social stakes behind the traffickers' conversion or their practice of targeting Afro-Brazilian religions, nor to place these events in the broader context of the extensive literature on religion and violence. Instead, this background information will merely assist the reader in understanding why labeling these attacks as "spiritual warfare" is problematic and

why the traffickers' actions likely contravene international human rights law. I rely on news stories, human rights reports, and other sources to create this summary/overview.

The favelas of Brazil developed as workers who could not afford to live in the cities where they were employed set up informal settlements on the outskirts of the cities. The government offered these informal settlements, known as favelas or comunidades, little in the way of basic infrastructure such as water, power, police, and legal recognition of land rights. In the later part of the 20th century, as the drug trade increased in Brazil, trafficking gangs were easily able to take over these spaces that were traditionally without state support and control (Sandoval 2017). Over time, most Brazilian cities developed with two separate parts—those that are governed by the state and those that are governed by militias or gangs.

As of 2013, drug traffickers controlled 53% of the favelas in the state of Rio de Janeiro (Sandoval 2017, p. 238). There are at least three major drug trafficking gangs that dominate the landscape of the state. The oldest of the gangs is the Comando Vermelho (Red Command), which was founded in the late 1970s. The second oldest is the Terceiro Comando Puro (Third Pure Command), which was founded in the mid-1980s, when it split off from Comando Vermelho. The third trafficking gang is Amigos dos Amigos (Friends of Friends), which was formed in the late-1990s, also through a rift with Comando Vermelho. Initially, these gangs were tolerant of Afro-Brazilian religions and some scholars argue that many traffickers were once devotees of these faiths. However, all of this began to change by the late 2000s, as Evangelical Christianity took root among the traffickers.

One of the earliest accounts of these drug trafficking communities committing acts of intolerance against Afro-Brazilian religions was published in February 2006, when journalist Mario Hugo Monken wrote an article in *Folha de São Paulo* titled “Trafficker is accused of vetoing Umbanda in Rio” (“Tráfico é acusado de vetar umbanda no Rio”). Monken recounted several incidents wherein drug traffickers had issued threats against devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro. In 2005, traffickers in Piedade ordered the closure of an Umbanda center “because there was a war between rival gangs, who feared police infiltration” (Monken 2006).² That same year, according to Monken, the traffickers closed two terreiros in nearby Morro da Fazendinha because they feared that the sound of the ritual drums played during ceremonies could prevent them from detecting a police invasion. Around this same time, factions of the Comando Vermelho prohibited Afro-Brazilian terreiros from operating in four other favelas in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro (Jacarezinho, Mangueira, Manguinhos, and Vigário Geral) as well as “threatened to assault a woman in Manguinhos” because she was a devotee of an Afro-Brazilian religion (Monken 2006).³ While Monken reports that the restrictions on terreiros in Piedade and Fazendinha Hill were driven by concerns that Afro-Brazilian terreiros made them vulnerable to police invasions, he does not offer any rationale for the Comando Vermelho’s prohibitions in the other four regions.

In this article, Monken also provided one of the earliest reports of Evangelized traffickers placing limitations on the practice of Afro-Brazilian religions. In Senador Camará favela in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro, local drug traffickers banned “macumba dispatches and rallies.”⁴ Monken explained that the traffickers there had been attending an Evangelical Church-Igreja Assembléia de Deus dos Últimos Dias. Their leader, Robinho Pinga, had recently been arrested and surrendered to the police with a bible in hand, “claiming to be evangelical” (Monken 2006).⁵ In addition to Robinho Pinga’s restrictions on “macumba” in Senador Camará, Monken also averred that Fernando Gomes de Freitas (also known as Fernandinho Guarabu), a self-proclaimed Evangelical, had recently closed three terreiros in Morro do Dendê on Ilha do Governador and prohibited inhabitants of the favela from wearing bracelets

² Quote: “porque estava havendo uma guerra entre quadrilhas rivais, que temiam a infiltração policial.”

³ Quote: “ameaçou agredir uma mulher em Manguinhos.”

⁴ Quote: “despachos de macumba e reuniões.” Macumba is a (often derogatory) term used to refer to Afro-Brazilian religions. It is similar to the popular use of the term “voodoo” in English.

⁵ Quote: “afirmando-se evangélico.”

or necklaces associated with Afro-Brazilian religions. Fernandinho would eventually become the trafficker who most sources cite as the beginning of Evangelized religious intolerance in Rio's favelas ("Polícia prende 'Bonde de Jesus'" 2019).⁶

By time Monken published his report on intolerance in Rio's favelas, Fernandinho had spent approximately two years as the TCP's commander of 17 of the 18 favelas on Ilha do Governador in Rio de Janeiro, including the largest favela, Morro do Dendê (Anderson 2009). A few years later, estimates indicated that around 100,000 people lived in the 18 favelas on Ilha do Governador (20% of the island's 500,000 inhabitants). Around this same time, sources estimated that Guarabu made \$300,000 per month from drug trafficking and had significant income from other sources such as "protection money" from local businesses (Anderson 2009).

In the early years of his command, Fernandinho was known for throwing street parties (bailes funk) that were sites of drinking and heavy drug use. At these parties, Fernandinho occasionally took the mic to rap about taking out his enemies without mercy (Anderson 2009). However, in 2006, Fernandinho became close with a local pastor who had been ministering to the traffickers, Sidney Espino dos Santos. Pastor Sidney was the leader of an Evangelical Church—Igreja Assembleia de Deus Ministerio Monte Sinai (Mount Sinai Assembly of God Church)—in Parque Royal. After a time and due to Sidney's influence, Fernandinho converted to Evangelical Christianity.

Following his conversion, Fernandinho engaged in a series of actions that would eventually become typical of Evangelized drug traffickers. First, he "invited" all non-evangelicals to leave the area that he controlled. Specifically, in Morro do Dendê, traffickers closed down all 10 Afro-Brazilian terreiros that operated in that community. The traffickers also wrote bible verses on the walls of the favela and placed a sign over a community pool that Fernandinho built that said "This belongs to Jesus Christ" (Monken 2006; Anderson 2009; "Crime e preconceito" 2015).

Throughout all these attempts to proclaim Ilha do Governador as Christian territory, Fernandinho never ceased to carry out the violence that has often been rampant in Rio's favelas. In 2007, he threw a party to celebrate the defeat of one of his enemies, and when the police raided the party in an attempt to kill Fernandinho, they "found a four-and-a-half-foot cake decorated with the twenty-third Psalm, spelled out in icing" (Anderson 2009). Later that year, when the news of Fernandinho's conversion hit local newspapers and tabloids, it was featured under a headline about his penchant for beheading people who opposed him.

By 2009, Fernandinho's persistent murders put a strain on his relationship with Pastor Sidney. Yet, when Pastor Sidney took journalist Jon Lee Anderson to meet Fernandinho, there was still significant evidence of the relationship between Evangelical Christianity and Ilha do Governador traffickers (Anderson 2009). As they passed through various gang checkpoints, Anderson witnessed Sidney praying for the traffickers—laying hands on their head and yelling "leave" in a manner that sounds like he was trying to cast out demons. When Anderson met Fernandinho himself, the TCP commander at least paid lip service to his purported religious beliefs, proudly telling Anderson that he was trying to read the bible the whole way through, sporting a tattoo on his forearm that said "Jesus Cristo," and decorating his bedroom with pictures of various verses from Psalms.

Over the next few years, reports surfaced in other parts of Rio de Janeiro, suggesting that the Evangelization of drug traffickers had spread from Ilha do Governador back to mainland areas of the state. For instance, in the latter half of the 2000s, Evangelized traffickers banned white clothes (a symbol of Afro-Brazilian religions, worn every Friday as well as to religious ceremonies) in the community of Morro do Amor, in Lins de Vasconcelos. One mãe-de-santo (female priest) who did not wish to be identified told reporters that she suffered harassment when she was going to and from ceremonies and that the traffickers warned that they wouldn't tolerate any "macumba" in the community. One of the traffickers even came to her house to warn her that she would be evicted if she was seen again in

⁶ This 2019 article erroneously reported that Guarabu had converted only four years prior.

those “devil’s clothes” (white clothes). She secretly packed her religious attire in a bag when she went to ceremonies to try to avoid any problems. However, one day in 2010, she accidentally left her white clothes on the clothesline. The traffickers noticed and threatened her again so the mãe-de-santo moved to a new community (“[Crime e preconceito](#)” 2015).

Around this same time, in 2009, a different mãe-de-santo bought a plot of land in Parque Columbia in the city of Pavuna and sought to establish an Afro-Brazilian terreiro there. After she had done a few spiritual consultations and divination sessions, several traffickers showed up with the president of the residents’ association. The group informed the mãe-de-santo that an “Army of Jesus” was in charge of the neighborhood and they did not permit any “macumba” there. A few days later, the mãe-de-santo returned to find that the traffickers had put the property up for sale without her knowledge (Soares 2013; “[Crime e preconceito](#)” 2015).

By 2013, the US Department of State had picked up on the severity of this issue in its International Religious Freedom Report on Brazil. The State Department indicated that it had heard reports “that drug traffickers were persecuting adherents of Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian religions in impoverished Rio communities. The media reported that drug traffickers had forced Candomblé areas to close, expelled at least 40 Candomblé leaders from the communities, and forbid residents to wear white clothing or display other outward signs of being a Candomblé practitioner” (United States Department of State 2013). Stories in Brazilian media from the same time period suggest that these problems were concentrated in the North Zone of Rio, in communities such as Lins and Serrinha in Madueira, which were under the command of the TCP (Soares 2013).

3. Recent Evangelized Trafficker Violence against Afro-Brazilian Religions

In recent years, Evangelized trafficker violence has fanned out to other parts of the state outside of the favelas in the Rio de Janeiro greater metropolitan area (Figure 1). Most significantly, in May 2019, the Commission to Combat Religious Intolerance reported that of the 100 terreiros that had been targeted since the beginning of the year, 60% were spread across four cities—15 in Nova Iguaçu, 20 in Duque de Caxias, 15 in Campos dos Goytacazes, and 10 in São Gonçalo (“[Campos está entre as cidades](#)” 2019). It is important to understand the patterns of intolerance in these areas because they are some of the most heavily populated cities in the state. São Gonçalo is the second largest city in the state after Rio de Janeiro. In 2018, it had over 1.077 million people. Duque de Caxias is the third most populated city with 914,383 people, and Nova Iguaçu is fourth with 818,875 people. Campos dos Goytacazes is the seventh largest city in the state of Rio de Janeiro with just over half a million people. Therefore, the systematic assaults on these four cities alone threatens the religious freedom of over 3.3 million people.

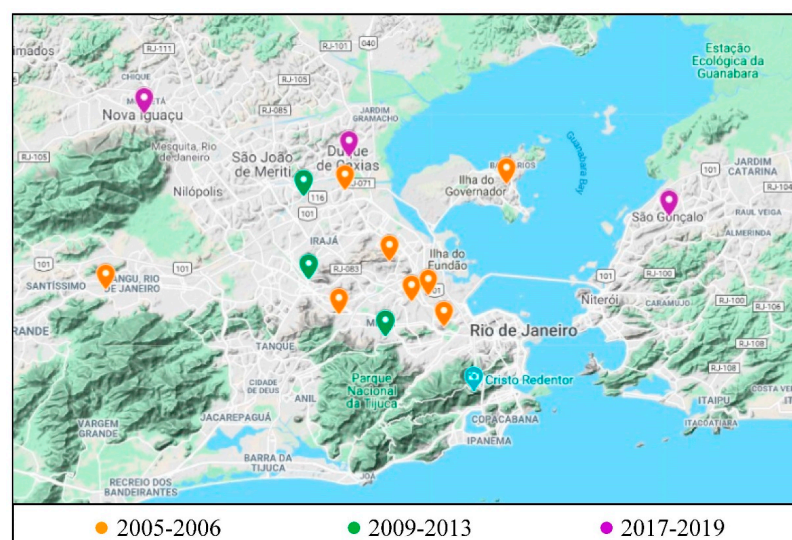


Figure 1. Locations of Trafficker Attacks.

a. Nova Iguaçu

Nova Iguaçu was the first of these four cities to experience systematic attacks from Evangelized traffickers. The bulk of the first wave of attacks took place between July and early September of 2017. During this time, at least seven Afro-Brazilian terreiros were destroyed in Nova Iguaçu (Sétimo terreiro é depredado 2017; United States Department of State 2017).

Evangelized traffickers recorded two of these attacks and someone (possibly the traffickers themselves) disseminated the videos on the popular messaging platform WhatsApp. The first occurred in August of 2017, and the identity of the victim has not been disclosed.⁷ The video shows a pai-de-santo (male priest) standing in the ruins of an Afro-Brazilian terreiro. He is holding dozens of sacred necklaces—ilekes—in his hands, breaking them one by one. A person behind the camera yells at the pai-de-santo, claiming “É só um diálogo que eu tô tendo com você. Da próxima vez eu mato” (“It’s just a dialogue that I am having with you. The next time, I kill”). A baseball bat appears in the corner of the screen with the word “dialogue” written on it. The traffickers tell the pai-de-santo that this area is under the control of the TCP and that they had made it clear that they did not want any “macumba” in their territory. They admonish the pai-de-santo, averring that he knew he should not be praying in this “dog house.” They order him to keep destroying the ilekes and to break the “Satanic” bottles (presumably ritual containers) sitting outside the terreiro. Before the video closes, the traffickers remind the pai-de-santo that if he rebuilds the terreiro, they will kill him.

In September 2017, the traffickers carried out a second attack in Nova Iguaçu that they also documented on film. In this assault, seven individuals who were armed with guns, iron bars, and baseball bats surrounded Mãe Carmen de Oxum and her companions as they were returning from the market (Filho 2017). Two traffickers held Mãe Carmen’s companions at gunpoint and forced them to lay on the ground while the other five followed her inside her place of worship. The video of her attack begins when the traffickers are calling her the “devil’s chief” and telling her to “break everything” in her terreiro. They order her to overturn the shrines of her deities one by one, telling her that only “the blood of Jesus has power.”⁸ After the last of the shrines had been knocked to the ground, the traffickers stopped filming. However, Mãe Carmen later reported that the attackers told her that they were representatives of the drug cartel and acting on behalf of “the man who did not want macumba” (“do homem que não queria macumba”). As the traffickers were departing, some of Mãe Carmen’s Evangelical neighbors reportedly applauded their actions and shook hands with them (Bustamante 2017; Nunes 2017).

Around the same time as the attack on Mãe Carmen, traffickers invaded another terreiro in Nova Iguaçu, Ilê Asé Togun Jobi (Barbosa 2019). This terreiro sits on approximately 1200 square meters of land and has more than 20 rooms devoted to different orixás (spirits or deities). The vandals caused massive damage throughout the space—breaking furniture, musical instruments, and shrines used to honor the orixás. The members of the religious community appealed to the commander of the local traffickers, asking for permission to return to the terreiro and retrieve important items. After three months, the leader of the traffickers allowed the religious community to return and reopen the terreiro. However, this permission came with the stipulation that they could not hold public services.

These three attacks on Afro-Brazilian places of worship in Nova Iguaçu were part of a larger pattern of religious intolerance taking place at that time. Before the end of September 2017, a state hotline that received reports of religious intolerance disclosed that 30 Afro-Brazilian terreiros in Rio de Janeiro had been destroyed in less than a three-week period during that month (Muggah 2017). It is unclear from these reports how many of these attacks were carried out by Evangelized traffickers; however, the two recorded assaults and the invasion of Ilê Asé Togun Jobi demonstrate that these traffickers were at least a central component of this large scale assault. After the wave of violence

⁷ This video is in the author’s personal files. A copy is available at <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=FbmQUv5iN7k>.

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between July and September 2017, trafficker assaults on Nova Iguaçu appear to have slowed down for approximately one year—possibly due to the substantial public scrutiny caused by these attacks. However, in 2019, Evangelized traffickers escalated their violence against Afro-Brazilian places of worship in Nova Iguaçu once more.

In the first five months of 2019, 15 Afro-Brazilian religious communities were expelled from Nova Iguaçu. One of these was Ilê Asé Togun Jobi. On 25 March 2019, a little over 18 months after the first attack, Evangelized traffickers invaded this terreiro for a second time. They removed the security cameras and began breaking the sacred objects inside. The traffickers wrote “Jesus is the owner of the place” (“Jesus é o dono do lugar”) on the external wall of the terreiro and used it as their headquarters for several months, forbidding the religious community and the lawful owners of the property from returning (Barbosa 2019; Seara 2019; United States Department of State 2019).

b. Duque de Caxias

In 2018 and 2019, Evangelized traffickers also targeted the city of Duque de Caxias and the neighborhood of Cordovil. Although Cordovil is technically considered part of the North Zone of the city of Rio de Janeiro, it is located about ten minutes south of Duque de Caxias. Both of these areas (Cordovil and Duque de Caxias) were under the control of TCP commander Álvaro Malaquias Santa Rosa, who was revealed in August 2019 as one of the co-founders of Bonde de Jesus (Travae 2019). Before widespread reports of his leadership in this extremist organization, Santa Rosa repeatedly made headlines because of his involvement in a brutal war with the Comando Vermelho over control of Cordovil. For instance, in April 2019, reporter Antonio Augusto Puga published an article about the TCP’s restrictions on the lives of persons residing in the favela, titled “Criminals Terrorize Residents of Cordovil” (“Criminosos aterrorizam moradores de Cordovil”). Puga asserted that Santa Rosa and his traffickers used cameras and drones to monitor movement in the community as well as controlled access to gas and public transportation (Puga 2019). The following month, in May 2019, traffickers under Santa Rosa’s command murdered seven young people from the Comando Vermelho and threw their bodies for pigs to eat (Traficantes que mataram 2019).

Throughout this gang war between Santa Rosa’s TCP forces and the Comando Vermelho, the TCP imposed significant restrictions on the practice of Afro-Brazilian religions in Cordovil. In May 2018, reports surfaced that they had barred devotees from wearing white and that their movements throughout the community had been restricted (Zuazo 2018). Furthermore, most Afro-Brazilian places of worship had been closed down in the area. On 30 May 2018, the traffickers also carried out an attack on a specific place of worship—they invaded and destroyed the terreiro of Mãe Didi D Yemanjá (Zuazo 2018; United States Department of State 2018). After wrecking her place of worship, the traffickers forcibly transported Mãe Didi and her children to a bus stop. They told her that the reason for the attack was that she had not heeded their prior warnings against practicing Afro-Brazilian religions.

In 2019, Santa Rosa’s traffickers turned their sights on eradicating Afro-Brazilian religions from another city in their territory, Duque de Caxias. In May 2019, Julio José Araujo, a representative from the federal public prosecutor’s office, reported that they had received a complaint that a pastor had led a group of drug traffickers to surround 15 terreiros in Duque de Caxias and prevent any religious activities from taking place in the area (“Governo do Rio intimado” 2019; United States Department of State 2019). Similar to the attack on Mãe Didi in Cordovil, over the following months, the traffickers carried out specific assaults on the terreiros that failed to abide by their warnings.

On 11 July 2019, the traffickers invaded a terreiro in Parque Paulista (a neighborhood in the northern part of Duque de Caxias) that had been in existence for more than 50 years. They held the religious leader, an 84-year-old mãe-de-santo, at gunpoint, and forced her to destroy all of her orixá shrines before they demolished the rest of the terreiro (Santos 2019; United States Department of State 2019). The following month, in August 2019, the traffickers invaded Ilê Axé de Bate Folha terreiro. They ordered everyone to leave and then broke all of the sacred objects and offerings. The traffickers also

threatened to kill the mãe-de-santo and set fire to the terreiro; terrified, she closed the terreiro and fled the state.⁹

c. Campos dos Goytacazes

Campos dos Goytacazes is the third city in Rio de Janeiro that has been the victim of recent Evangelized trafficker attacks. One will recall that, in May 2019, the Commission to Combat Religious Intolerance estimated that 15 of the 100 Afro-Brazilian terreiros under threat were located in Campos. In September 2019, the Commission more than doubled the number of those terreiros under threat in Campos from 15 to 40 (Amorim 2019). A 2015 report estimated that there were only approximately 100 terreiros in the city; therefore, perhaps 40% of the terreiros in Campos had been threatened by traffickers in 2019 alone (Núcleo de Estudos da Exclusão e da Violência 2015).

In June 2019, Gilberto Totinho, president of the Fórum Municipal de Religiões Afro-brasileiras (“Municipal Forum of Afro-Brazilian Religions”) reported more specifics about the nature of the threat against these communities (Abreu 2019). In the neighborhood of Guarus, Totinho averred, six terreiros had been closed in the preceding week. In the neighborhoods of Santa Rosa, Penha, Vila Manhães and Pecúária, traffickers gave all Afro-Brazilian places of worship until the end of 2019 to close. In the central part of Campos, traffickers had invaded nine terreiros and threatened their leaders. Across the city, they had restricted the operation of an additional 20 terreiros to daytime hours. Totinho reported that these threats, invasions, and expulsions were particularly concerning in Campos because 90% of religious leaders lived inside their terreiros. Therefore, closing their place of worship equated to an eviction of the families as well.

d. São Gonçalo

Unlike the other three cities, there is little information about the recent Evangelized trafficker attacks in São Gonçalo. However, *Rio On Watch* reporter Samuel Lima’s May 2011 article titled “Religion in Rio’s Favelas,” may have given a foreshadowing of the relationships that would lay the foundations for this extremism (Lima 2011). At that time, Lima explained that São Gonçalo was known as “the city with the most churches per square kilometer in Latin America.” Among these was at least one pastor, Luiz Cláudio of the Ministério Resgatando Almas, who focused on converting local drug traffickers and other persons who had been involved in violent crime. Cláudio himself was a former trafficker before converting to Christianity.

4. “Spiritual Warfare” or “Crimes against Humanity”

Since the 1970s, Neo-Pentecostalism has been growing in popularity in Brazil. Scholars have explained that this form of Evangelical Christianity centers on the principle that Jesus or God is engaged in spiritual warfare with the devil and that it is necessary to perform exorcisms and expel the devil (Rocha and Vásquez 2013; Da Silva 2016). Anaxsuell Fernando Da Silva (2019) contends that this religious concept of “spiritual warfare” has found popularity in Brazilian favelas because it fits with the “ethos of war and violence present in the favelas” because it “constructs their world as a place of war, battle, and conquest; a martial idiom becomes unavoidable” (p. 170). This worldview leads to attacks on Afro-Brazilian religions because many Neo-Pentecostals regard them as devil worshippers

⁹ In these cases, the traffickers left no video calling cards and reports of these two attacks do not include any statements that explain their motives. However, the reports of the arrests of the members of Bonde de Jesus contain specific details that strongly suggest that they were the culprits. One of the first members of Bonde de Jesus to be arrested, Jefferson Anísio da Silva, also known as Jefinho, was directly implicated in the 11 July attack on the 84-year-old mãe-de-santo in Parque Paulista. Furthermore, at least five of the eight traffickers arrested in the roundup approximately two weeks later were also from Parque Paulista. Therefore, it seems reasonably certain that these members of Bonde de Jesus were the ones behind both attacks. Jaline Santos, “Traficante que destruiu terreiro de macumba no Rio vai preso,” *Buxixo Gospel*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.obuxixogospel.com.br/2019/08/foi-presos-um-dos-autores-por-destruir-terreiro-na-baixada-fluminense/>.

and view the invasion of Afro-Brazilian temples and the destruction of their sacred vessels as a kind of “exorcism” or “demon-cleansing” (Da Silva 2016, p. 491).

Scholars who have written about Neo-Pentecostal intolerance against Afro-Brazilian religions have typically embraced this language about “spiritual warfare” to describe the religious landscape, despite the one-sided nature of these hostilities. For instance, in 1997, Ari Pedro Oro, a professor of Anthropology at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, published an article about the already budding Neo-Pentecostal attacks on Afro-Brazilian religions titled, “Neo-Pentecostals and Afro-Brazilians: Who Will Win This War?”¹⁰ However, despite describing the interactions between these religious communities as a “war,” Oro observed “the constancy and insistence of the attacks unleashed by the Neo-Pentecostal churches against Afro-Brazilian religions and silence, or pale responses, almost no reaction on the part of the latter”¹¹ (Oro 1997, p. 21).

Similarly, in 2012, Milene Cristina Santos wrote a thesis for a Masters of Law degree at the University of Brasília titled “Religious Proselytism between the Freedom of Expression and Hate Speech: the Neo-Pentecostal ‘Holy War’ against Afro-Brazilian Religions.”¹² Although the title references a “‘Holy War’ *against* Afro-Brazilian Religions,” throughout the text, Santos, refers to “the conflict *between* Neo-Pentecostalism and Afro-Brazilian religions”¹³ (Santos 2012, p. 8, emphasis added). Furthermore, in a subsection titled the same as Oro’s 1997 article, Santos argues that “Afro-Brazilian reactions [to Neo-Pentecostal attacks] intensified in the last decade”¹⁴ (Santos 2012, p. 216) However, the only “intensified reactions” that Santos discusses are Afro-Brazilian religious leaders filing complaints with the police, initiating court cases, creating websites to denounce religious intolerance, organizing walks in support of religious freedom, and forming campaigns to promote tolerance and respect for religious diversity.

More recently, Vagner Gonçalves da Silva published a chapter titled “Crossroads: Conflicts between Neo-Pentecostalism and Afro-Brazilian Religions” in the edited book *Handbook of Contemporary Religions in Brazil*. Like Santos, although Da Silva uses the phrase “conflicts between” in the title and discusses “spiritual warfare” in the text of the chapter, he only provides evidence of Neo-Pentecostals carrying out violent attacks against Afro-Brazilian religions—destroying their monuments, invading their temples, and committing acts of physical aggression against devotees. When he addresses Afro-Brazilian devotees’ response to Neo-Pentecostals, Da Silva merely describes their political and legal efforts to try to bring the perpetrators to justice. Da Silva does not allege that Afro-Brazilian religious communities engaged in retaliatory violence or even armed self-defense.

Although scholars have tended to adopt Neo-Pentecostals’ own language about “spiritual warfare” to describe their rhetoric and actions against Afro-Brazilian religions, the term “warfare” is an inappropriate descriptor of what is occurring in Rio de Janeiro. The most commonly accepted definitions of “warfare” describe it as armed conflict, struggle, or military operations between at least two enemies or nations.¹⁵ As Neo-Pentecostals are the only ones engaging in campaigns of intolerance and physical violence, and Afro-Brazilian religious communities have merely responded by asking for respect and seeking accountability for the crimes against them, “warfare” cannot properly characterize the one-sided conflict.

¹⁰ Title: Neopentecostais e afro-brasileiros: quem vencerá esta guerra?

¹¹ Quote: “É absolutamente desmesurada a constância e a insistência dos ataques desfechados diuturnamente pelas igrejas neopentecostais contra as religiões afro-brasileiras e o silêncio, ou respostas pálidas, quase ausência de reações por parte destas últimas.”

¹² Title: O Proselitismo religioso entre a Liberdade de expressão e o Discurso de ódio: a “Guerra santa” do Neopentecostalismo contra as Religiões afro-brasileiras.

¹³ Quote: “do conflito entre o Neopentecostalismo e as Religiões afro-brasileiras.”

¹⁴ Quote: “As reações afro-brasileiras intensificaram-se na última década.”

¹⁵ Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “warfare” as “military operations between enemies” or “struggle between competing entities.” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/warfare> Similarly, dictionary.com defines “warfare” as “the process of military struggle between two nations or groups of nations” and “armed conflict between two massed enemies, armies, or the like.” <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/warfare>

Rather than describing Neo-Pentecostal attacks on Afro-Brazilian religions, especially those carried out by Evangelized drug traffickers, as “spiritual warfare,” a more appropriate label would be “crimes against humanity.” The concept of crimes against humanity has been developing since the late 18th century and has been applied “particularly in the context of slavery and the slave trade, and to describe atrocities associated with European colonialism in Africa and elsewhere such as, for example, the atrocities committed by Leopold II of Belgium in the Congo Free State” ([United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect n.d.](#)). The most widely accepted definition is that found in Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which defines crimes against humanity as certain delineated acts such as murder, extermination, torture, and forced pregnancy, “when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack.” Two of the delineated acts apply to the attacks carried out by Evangelized drug traffickers in Rio de Janeiro: “(d) Deportation or forcible transfer of population” and “(g) Persecution against any identifiable group or collectivity on political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender as defined in paragraph 3, or other grounds that are universally recognized as impermissible under international law” (Rome Statute 1998, art. 7(1)).

The Rome Statute clarifies that “‘Deportation or forcible transfer of population’ means forced displacement of the persons concerned by expulsion or other coercive acts from the area in which they are lawfully present, without grounds permitted under international law” (art. 7(2)(d)). It seems without question that the drug traffickers in Rio de Janeiro have violated this section of the Rome Statute. As discussed above, the traffickers have closed down, damaged, and destroyed hundreds of Afro-Brazilian temples, and evicted priests and practitioners. These displacements are easily described as “forced” or “coercive,” as they have been achieved by invading and depredating their places of worship, threatening priests at gunpoint, and even seizing one temple, Ilê Asé Togun Jobi, for their own headquarters. These attacks have been ongoing since 2005; therefore, they would satisfy the element of the statute requiring the actions to be widespread or systematic.

In the context of “crimes against humanity,” the Rome Statute explains that “‘persecution’ means the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law by reason of the identity of the group or collectivity” (art. 7(2)(g)). The Evangelized drug traffickers in Rio de Janeiro have deprived devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions of their fundamental rights to freedom of religion or belief (by destroying their temples and threatening them with serious bodily harm or death if they continue to practice their faith), to freedom of expression (prohibiting them from wearing religious attire and adornments), to peaceful assembly and association (by prohibiting devotees from gathering for worship), and to life, liberty, and security of person (by threatening and physically harming devotees). Again, the continuation of these attacks for at least 15 years and the systematic nature of these assaults satisfy the criteria for this section.

In addition to crimes against humanity, activists from Afro-Brazilian religious communities have been calling upon Brazil and international human rights experts to recognize the violence against them as a form of genocide. For instance, immediately following the outbreak of attacks on Nova Iguaçu in 2017, one of the terreiros in the city, Ilê Àse Omiojúàró, released a report delineating some of the most recent assaults titled, “The rise of cases of racism and religious intolerance against religions of Afro-Brazilian matrix.”¹⁶ In the introduction to the report, the religious community characterized these attacks using words like “genocide,” “extermination,” and “annihilation” to describe the perpetrators’ intent ([Ilê Àse Omiojúàró 2017](#), p. 7). They denounced the government’s inaction in response to this “systematic” violence. The following year, Dennis [De Oliveira](#) (2018) expressed similar concerns in an article titled “Religious Racism: One More Form of Genocide of the Black Population in Brazil and of Brazilian Nazi-Facism.”¹⁷ De Oliveira explained that attacks on religions of African descent

¹⁶ Title: “Levantamento de casos de racismo e intolerância religiosa contra religiões de matriz afrobrasileira, Rio de Janeiro.”

¹⁷ Title: “Racismo religioso: mais uma forma do genocídio da população negra no Brasil e do nazifacismo brasileiro.” Activists and devotees frequently use this phrase “racismo religioso” (“religious racism”) to describe intolerance against Afro-Brazilian

are another mechanism to both physically and symbolically erase Black presence in Brazil. Most recently, in October 2019, Ana Paula Mendes de Miranda, professor of anthropology at the Federal University of Fluminense, explained that she and her colleagues preferred to use the terms “religious racism, genocide or terrorism” to refer to intolerance against Afro-Brazilian faiths because “these cases involved organized groups—militias, traffickers, groups of other religions—who deliberately attack Afro-religions”¹⁸ (Pessano 2019).

The term “genocide” came into popular usage following the atrocities of World War II. The most widely accepted definition of genocide is that found in the [Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide \(1948\)](#), which was approved and opened for signature on 9 December 1948 and which entered into force on 12 January 1951. Article 2 of the Convention defines genocide as having two components. First, the perpetrator(s) must have the intent “to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” Second, the perpetrator(s) must commit one or more of the following acts with that intent: “(a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.” Article Six of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court mirrors this definition.

One could argue that the actions taken by Evangelical drug traffickers satisfy all the required elements of the Convention’s definition of genocide. First, they satisfy the *mens rea* (mental requirement) of the definition because they have openly proclaimed their “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” As discussed above, the perpetrators have banned the practice of these faiths and threatened to kill those who defied their orders. These acts of intolerance stem from a worldview that regards Afro-Brazilian religions as demons and messengers of Satan who they must eradicate.

The attacks that the drug traffickers have carried out against Afro-Brazilian religious communities could satisfy the *actus reus* (physical element) of the definition in Article 2b on “causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group.” Although the Genocide Convention itself does not define “serious mental harm,” research tracking human rights court decisions about genocide reveal that it includes “threats of death and knowledge of impending death; acts causing intense fear or terror; surviving killing operations; forcible displacement; and ‘mental torture’” (Milaninia 2018, p. 1394). As discussed above, the Evangelized drug traffickers have held devotees at gunpoint, forcing them to destroy their own places of worship and threatening them with death if they rebuild their temples. They have caused intense fear or terror with their systematic invasion and destruction of places of worship. Furthermore, they have forcibly displaced hundreds of Afro-Brazilian religious communities. Some courts have specified that the mental or physical harm, in addition to being serious, must be connected to or contribute to the destruction of a group (Milaninia 2018). This is without question, as the invasion of temples, the violence against priests, and the threats of death are precisely intended to intimidate devotees into abandoning their faith, their homes, their temples, or all of the above.

Although there is substantial proof that Evangelized drug traffickers have harassed, intimidated, threatened, forcibly displaced, and physically assaulted devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions, and destroyed their religious shrines and temples, there is a potential complication with classifying these

religions. This is a complex term that typically references the historical origins of these religions in African-descended populations and the fact that intolerance against these religions began during slavery and was rooted in anti-Black racism. However, 21st century devotees are racially diverse and this terminology does not necessarily indicate that Black devotees suffer intolerance more frequently or severely than their white counterparts. It also does not indicate that the perpetrators of intolerance are typically white Brazilians. Unfortunately, official records frequently omit the race of the victim and perpetrator in cases of religious intolerance. Therefore, there is insufficient data to determine what role, if any, race places in these attacks.

¹⁸ Quote: “Esses casos envolvem grupos organizados - milícias, traficantes, grupos de outras religiões—que deliberadamente atacam os afro-religiosos.”

attacks as genocide. One could argue that the traffickers' intent was to eradicate any symbols of Afro-Brazilian religions and to prevent the practice of these faiths, rather than to destroy the devotees themselves. In some of the previously described examples, the traffickers permitted devotees to continue living in the favelas or cities that they controlled so long as they did not wear symbols of Afro-Brazilian religions or conduct ceremonies of these faiths. In other cases, they forcibly evicted devotees from their homes or temples but did not otherwise physically harm them. If the traffickers' intent was merely to destroy the religion and not the adherents themselves, courts could find these attacks to be "cultural genocide," which is not classified as genocide under the Genocide Convention or the Rome Statute.¹⁹ Additionally, if the courts believed that the traffickers' sole goal was forcible displacement—evicting devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions from their territory—this would also fall short of international legal definitions of genocide.²⁰

However, several aspects of these attacks underscore the necessity for further investigation before they are dismissed as cultural genocide or forced displacement. First, there have been numerous violent attacks against Afro-Brazilian religious communities over the past several years that have occurred in areas where trafficking attacks are rampant, but the perpetrators were never identified.²¹ For instance, shortly before the filmed assaults on Candomblé priests in 2017, unknown persons stoned, set fire to, and then bombed the terreiro run by Mãe Elaine de Oxalá in Nova Iguaçu (Roza 2017). When the bomb exploded, the devotees were inside the terreiro, holding a ceremony. Luckily, no one was seriously injured. Similarly, in 2014, unknown persons attacked members of Kwe Cejá Gbé, a Candomblé terreiro in Duque de Caxias (Constancio 2014; United States Department of State 2014). First, arsonists set a devotee's car on fire. Then, they shot at the terreiro and the neighboring house where some of the devotees live. The following month, they set fire to the upper floor of the terreiro and caused the roof to collapse. In 2017 and 2018, several pais-de-santo (male priests) were mysteriously murdered in Rio de Janeiro. Most notably, at least two of these unsolved murders occurred in Campos dos Goytacazes, where the largest number of trafficker attacks on Afro-Brazilians occurred in 2019 (Amorim 2019). If these violent attacks involving arson, bombings, and murder are connected to the traffickers, then their actions would be more likely to meet the standards of genocide because they suggest an intent to physically destroy devotees themselves rather than just to eradicate their religion or evict them.

Additionally, there is evidence suggesting that the trafficker invasions of Afro-Brazilian places of worship are not just meant to evict devotees. They are calculated to cause the kind of shock and fear that leads to devastating, including fatal, health crises. In particular, the traffickers seem to be targeting elderly priestesses, separating them from other devotees and holding them hostage while they force them to destroy their own shrines. One will recall the videotaped attack on Mãe Carmen de Oxum in Nova Iguaçu in September 2017. At the time of the attack, Mãe Carmen was 66 years old. Similarly, the previously mentioned trafficker attack in Cordovil in July 2019 targeted an 84-year-old mãe-de-santo.

This tactic is significant because some of the most widely publicized cases of religious intolerance in Brazil have been those in which elderly priests died following severe harassment. For instance,

¹⁹ In 2007, the International Court of Justice held that "the destruction of historical, cultural and religious heritage cannot be considered to constitute the deliberate infliction of conditions of life calculated to bring about the physical destruction of the group. Although such destruction may be highly significant inasmuch as it is directed to the elimination of all traces of the cultural or religious presence of a group, and contrary to other legal norms, it does not fall within the categories of acts of genocide set out in Article II of the Convention." In reaching this decision, they noted that the U.N. General Assembly had "decided not to include cultural genocide in the list of punishable acts" when drafting the Genocide Convention. Rather, "the definition of acts of genocide is limited to those seeking the physical or biological destruction of a group" (*Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro* 2007, ¶344).

²⁰ International Tribunal for the Prosecution of Persons Responsible for Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law Committed in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia has found that "forcible transfer does not constitute in and of itself a genocidal act" although it may be "evidence of the intentions" of the perpetrators (*Prosecutor v. Radislav Krstić* 2004, ¶33).

²¹ The International Commission to Combat Religious Racism has published a report, a database, and interactive maps tracking hundreds of cases of intolerance against Afro-Brazilian religions in the 21st century at www.religiousracism.org/brazil (accessed on 26 November 2020).

Brazil's National Day to Combat Religious Intolerance is held on January 21, the anniversary of the death of Mãe Gilda de Ogum. Mãe Gilda died in 2000, after the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God published an image of her in its magazine, which had 1.37 million subscribers, associated with an article about "quack sorcerers" deceiving their clients. Her daughter sued the Universal Church for moral damages and misuse of her image, and attributed Mãe Gilda's death to the stress of defamation (Rego 2008; Silva 2014).

More recently, in 2015, an Evangelical Church held an overnight vigil outside the temple run by 90-year-old Mãe Dede de Iansã in Camaçari, Bahia (Melo 2015). They shouted that Mãe Dede was a devil worshipper and prayed for god to burn down her temple. During the vigil, Mãe Dede suffered a heart attack and died. This case, like that of Mãe Gilda, made national headlines in Brazil. Therefore, if the traffickers in Rio de Janeiro have been intentionally targeting temples run by elderly priestesses, one could assume that they intend to cause the same types of health complications as those suffered by Mãe Gilda and Mãe Dede by shocking and terrorizing these religious leaders.

Despite the clear evidence that these drug traffickers in Rio de Janeiro are engaged in attacks that almost certainly constitute crimes against humanity and may meet the definition of genocide, the Brazilian government's response has not been commensurate with the severity of these human rights violations. Aside from the apprehension of several members of Bonde de Jesus that was mentioned in the introduction, few, if any, traffickers have been arrested for their crimes against Afro-Brazilian religions. Although the government's own human rights offices and hotlines have collected much of the previously cited data documenting these systematic efforts to eradicate Afro-Brazilian religions in Rio de Janeiro,²² they have not developed any meaningful efforts to ensure the safety and survival of these communities.

As noted above, since 2013, the U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report has recorded the ongoing problem of Evangelized drug traffickers harassing and attacking Afro-Brazilian religious communities. In 2015, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues expressed concern after receiving reports from devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions of "widespread impunity surrounding attacks on their person, places of worship, or instances of discrimination" (Izsák 2016, p. 18). The Special Rapporteur noted that "Lack of responsiveness to complaints filed, or failure to investigate allegations, further contributes to a sense of marginalization and discrimination on the part of the communities" (Izsák 2016, p. 18). Although international human rights reports have repeatedly noted the grave threat to Afro-Brazilian religious communities, Brazil has downplayed the issue in its own responses. For instance, in Brazil's periodic report on its compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, submitted in June 2020, the state revealed nothing about its ongoing struggle with these traffickers. Regarding its compliance with Article 18 of the Covenant, which guarantees freedom of thought, consciousness, and religion, Brazil briefly noted that "religious prejudice is especially directed at African-based religions," but minimized the problem by merely stating that devotees "are often disrespected for their opinions" (Governo Federal do Brasil 2020, p. 34). Furthermore, Brazil implied that they had implemented an effective solution to this prejudice, reporting that "this situation has required the adoption of specific measures toward this religious group" (p. 34).

Brazil's weak response to these severe human rights abuses is not particularly surprising, given the government's own extensive history of persecuting Afro-Brazilian religions. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, federal law criminalized Afro-Brazilian religions as a threat to public health and morality (Johnson 2001). During this time, police officers raided ceremonies, arrested devotees, and confiscated ritual objects.

²² For instance, even prior to the systematic assaults on Afro-Brazilian places of worship in 2017 and 2019, the Palmares Cultural Foundation (an office of the federal government) documented 218 violent attacks against Afro-Brazilian religious communities between 2010 and 2015 (United States Department of State 2015).

Even though Afro-Brazilian religions are no longer prohibited by law, state discrimination against them frequently continues in the present day alongside these trafficker attacks. For instance, in 2014, the year after the U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report drew international attention to the trafficker attacks on Afro-Brazilian religious communities in Rio de Janeiro, one of the branches of the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office (Ministerio Publico Federal) filed a lawsuit demanding that Google Brasil remove an Evangelical church's videos demonizing Afro-Brazilian religions from YouTube. Denying this request, a federal court judge in Rio de Janeiro, Eugenio Rosa de Araujo, ruled that these faiths could not be classified as "religions" and were not protected by laws barring religious discrimination ([Ministério Público Federal v. Google Brasil Internet Ltda 2014](#)). Additionally, less than a year after the videos of Evangelized traffickers attacking Candomblé priests made national and international headlines, the government of Nova Iguaçu installed a sign on one of the main entrances to the city that said "Welcome to Nova Iguaçu. This city belongs to Jesus"²³ ([Cruz 2018](#)). Such persistent biases among Brazilian officials likely play a role in the government's slow and ineffective efforts to curb the growing violence against Afro-Brazilian religions.

5. Conclusions: The Benefits of the "Crimes against Humanity" and "Genocide" Labels

The question of how one should describe the Evangelized trafficker violence against Afro-Brazilian religions is more than a mere issue of semantics. By adopting Evangelicals' own language about "spiritual warfare" to describe mass violence against devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions, scholars are privileging and promoting the worldview of the perpetrators in which these assaults are justified efforts to expel the devil from their communities. Furthermore, using terminology such as "warfare" and "conflict" suggests that Afro-Brazilian religious communities are also the perpetrators of violence and are complicit in the creation of this climate of religious intolerance. By contrast, categorizing these attacks using language about serious human rights abuses would center the discussion on the harms that the traffickers and other Evangelical extremists are enacting on Afro-Brazilian religious communities rather than on Neo-Pentecostal theology or worldview. It would also draw international attention to this largely unrecognized and grossly understudied problem.

In fact, international criminal law and human rights norms provide several possibilities for outside intervention to prevent crimes against humanity and genocide, should Brazil continue to mount a lackluster defense to the problem. Brazil has been a party to the Rome Statute since 2002 ([Decree No. 4.388 2002](#)). As such, the traffickers could be charged before the International Criminal Court (ICC) for all the crimes committed against devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions since Brazil became a party. Brazil could refer the case to the ICC or, pursuant to article 15 of the Rome Statute, the ICC Prosecutor could initiate their own investigation into these attacks. In such circumstances, the Rome Statute dictates that Brazil would be given the opportunity to open its own investigation; if they did not do so or if the Court determined that Brazil was unwilling or unable to prosecute the traffickers, the ICC could proceed with its own case against them.

Along these same lines, both crimes against humanity and genocide are considered to be *jus cogens* or peremptory norms. These norms "reflect and protect fundamental values of the international community, are hierarchically superior to other rules of international law and are universally applicable" ([United Nations 2019](#), p. 142). Peremptory norms create universal obligations, known as obligations *erga omnes*, that States owe "to the international community as a whole" ([United Nations 2019](#), p. 145). In essence, such crimes are considered so heinous that the entire international community is entitled to (and indeed has an obligation to) intervene to prevent them from occurring.

For these reasons, a lot is at stake in how Evangelized trafficker violence against Afro-Brazilian religions is characterized or labeled. Evangelized drug traffickers are forcibly displacing Afro-Brazilian religious communities and depriving them of their fundamental rights through attacks that constitute

²³ Quote: "Bem-vindo a Nova Iguaçu. Essa cidade pertence ao Senhor Jesus."

the most heinous crimes under international law. As the violence has increased, and has remained one-sided, the continued utilization of terms like “warfare” and “conflict” that imply reciprocal attacks is not only misleading but it also prevents the situation from being properly assessed and addressed.

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