

Article

“Building Community through Death”: Freed African Religiosity and Faith-Based Social Networks in Nineteenth-Century Salvador da Bahia, Brazil

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Abstract: This article adds to existing discussions on slave religions by offering the analysis of four post-mortem testaments left behind by formerly enslaved African women in nineteenth-century Salvador da Bahia to elucidate the different roles that faith and religiosity played within their lives, communities, and understandings of self. After contextualizing these primary sources within the relevant historiography on African and African descendant religiosity in Atlantic slave societies, it focuses on the centrality of baptisms, strong pleas for forgiveness, elaborate funerary arrangements, *irmandade* membership, and lives spent within the precepts of Roman Catholicism present in the testaments. It also considers the realities of enslavement and the Atlantic slave trade as important factors that shaped the considerations of freed Africans when faced with the imminence of death. In a world where life was fleeting, death became a major site for community formation, for the assertion of principles, and for exercising agency. The proximity of death and the realities of Atlantic slave societies shaped *libertos*' considerations of justice and honor, as well as the final rites they required for their dignified passage to the afterworld. This article concludes that Africans in the diaspora constantly managed, negotiated, and enlarged the small spaces for self-determination, and for the preservation and recreation of identities and communities, with which they were left, while they also carved out other parallel spaces for themselves. Among these, Roman Catholic-derived religious communities and affiliations, and the continuation and creative adaptation of African religious practices, were of essential importance to the identities and community formations of *libertos*.

Keywords: death; Catholicism; African cosmology; African diaspora; slavery; lay brotherhoods and sisterhoods; final rites; funerals; testaments; wills



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1. Introduction

This article seeks to understand freed African women's religiosity and to add to the discussions on slave religion through the analysis of four post-mortem testaments from nineteenth-century Salvador da Bahia. To this end, it focuses on the centrality of baptisms, strong pleas for forgiveness, elaborate funerary arrangements, *irmandade* membership, and lives spent within the precepts of Roman Catholicism. In the process, it also considers the realities of enslavement and the Atlantic slave trade as important factors that freed Africans contemplated when faced with the imminence of death. The proximity of death and the realities of Atlantic slave societies shaped their considerations of justice and honor, as well as the final rites they required for their dignified passage to the afterworld.

This article focuses solely on individuals born on the African continent and enslaved in Brazil, who were able to acquire their freedom through the *alforria* system. *Alforria* made it possible for the enslaved to buy their freedom, primarily in the settings where urban life coexisted with the civil rights that emanated from Catholicism. *Alforria*, in turn, resulted from the greater freedom that existed in urban daily life in the first place: being able to engage in *trabalho de ganho*—to hire out their labor and keep part of their earnings after giving a previously decided sum to their owners—made it possible for the enslaved to save the quantities necessary to purchase their own freedom, or that of their loved ones

(Almeida 2007, 2009; Cezar 2013; Mattoso 1988, 2004b; Nunes 2008; Reis 2021). In most urban African diaspora settings, women outnumbered men, while they were also more likely to receive their *alforria*. The fact that all four testaments analyzed in this article have been composed by women is certainly significant, even though this article does not directly tackle the question of the role played by gender with regards to the centrality of faith to freed African processes of identity formation and community building in Brazil. Faith-based identifications, solidarities, and communities were certainly essential in the lives of these four women, as they most likely were in the lives of many other freed African men and women with whom they were connected in Bahia. This is also the reason why these testaments permit conclusions that apply to the freed African community as a whole.

The focus on the freed African community is a direct corollary of the argument that “Africanness” (with ethnicity as a sub- and dependent category) functioned as the main shaper of identity at this time in the Bahian capital within the larger community of people born in Africa, and united by their enslaved pasts or presents. The documents studied here refer to ethnicity only in passing in the initial clause of the testaments where *libertos* refer to their place of birth, and more often in the clauses where they refer to the ethnic identities of their own slaves. While scribal choice seems to have been a factor in this, with most scribes simply noting *libertos* as having been born “in Africa” or on the “African coast,”¹ this absence is also rooted in the contemporary dynamics of life in Salvador, where the lines separating enslavement and freedom were, if not porous at least reconcilable to a much greater extent. Another principal factor is the Malê Rebellion, which was perceived as a decisively African revolt that united both the free and the unfree African populations of the state, but especially of the city. “Africanness” appeared as the identifying and uniting principle within the revolt, as well as the main basis for the persecution that took place in its aftermath, with the “foreignness” of Africans and their culture being perceived as the most significant challenge to slave society.² In their testaments, the personal worlds of freed Africans also appear to be made up almost to an equal extent of people who found themselves still or no longer enslaved. Africans were also the group that experienced dislocation and rupture most intensely, fighting against them in ardent ways, with innovative strategies of identity formation, kinship, and community building. One central element within these processes was the strategic use of faith and religiosity.

The next section of the article offers a review of the relevant historiography on faith and religiosity in the African Diaspora, with a focus on Brazil. It is followed by a brief section that elaborates on the validity and limitations of *libertos*’ testaments as windows into their religious worlds. The main body of the article is formed by four distinct case studies from the testaments of freed African women in nineteenth-century Salvador, each highlighting different aspects of enslaved and freed religiosity. The final section of the article offers a series of conclusions, which connect these case studies back to the historiography through underlining their most salient points.

2. African Religiosity in the Diaspora

Many important works have tackled the religiosity of Africans and their descendants in both Africa and the diaspora, making clear that questions of faith were often deeply linked to questions of community, kinship, and resistance. John Mbiti argues that “[African] religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it,” and that “it is the strongest element in traditional background, and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned (Mbiti 1970, p. 1).” Their capacity to permeate all spheres of life makes fluidity into a central component of African religions, as they present no clear distinction between the spiritual and material aspects of life, and consequently between earthly life and the one that follows (Mbiti 1970, pp. 2–6).

Mbiti also argues that because of the all-embracing nature of African religions that encompass “the whole person and the whole of his life, conversion to new religions

like Christianity and Islam must embrace his language, thought patterns, fears, social relationships, attitudes and philosophical disposition [. . .] (Mbiti 1970, p. 4).” Along the same lines, James Sweet has studied the processes of retention, continuation and adaptation experienced by African religions in the diaspora, insisting on the role of faith as a main shaper of kinship and other personal relations (Sweet 2003, 2011). Sweet’s main argument has been for a “bi-religious” faith experienced by the majority of Africans and their descendants, where they took part in both the Roman Catholic religion and African beliefs, in different ways, and often in separate spheres. Sweet has also seen sufficient leeway within the State-imposed faith for Africans in Brazil to find meaningful spaces and roles for themselves, as well as enough similarities to facilitate the process of conversion, while their beliefs remained “bi-religious” to a great extent, with Africans “sliding seamlessly from one belief system to another, a process that was informed by a common core cosmology that emphasized earth-bound pragmatism over faith” (Sweet 2003, p. 114), within the overarching framework of the fluidity of African religions as argued by John Mbiti.

Over time, these practices of different origins gradually came together to constitute a broader repertoire of African religions in the diaspora, grouped around their commonalities and shaped according to the requirements of slave societies. Roman Catholicism and African-derived religions in Brazil constituted parallel repertoires and vocabularies that could be summoned for different situations. Africans in their great majority “viewed their religions as a way of explaining, predicting, and controlling events in the world around them” (Sweet 2003, p. 108), within a cosmology that unified and connected the visible and invisible worlds. Religious and spiritual solutions and practices were often applied to their daily lives and their material existences, while Africans would move smoothly and selectively along the continuum of different repertoires that were available to them (Santos 1996, p. 136).³ While a specific problem, such as the need to assert honor within Brazilian society for example, or the navigation of the justice system, would be countered with practices that were more Roman Catholic in nature, social evils or injustices, or dishevelment within the community that directly emanated from the experience of enslavement, would demand more African-derived rituals as their solutions, since their causes were primarily seen to be spiritual in both Africa and Brazil.⁴ Freed Africans in Brazil were successful in readapting African practices to Brazilian realities, but also in moving in and out of these different frameworks as they saw fit, while bringing them together within their identities and communities. Social disruptions had been present back in Africa as well, and the practices that had been employed in their solution and appeasement were now translated into the setting of Atlantic slavery.⁵ As always, the capacities of simultaneous adaptation and resistance of Africans and their descendants in the diaspora worked in their favor.

John Mbiti asserts that African “traditional religions are not primarily for the individual, but for the community of which he is part,” as being “human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community (Mbiti 1970, p. 3).” This communal element of African religiosity directly responded to the needs of Africans in the worlds of Atlantic slavery, where they found a partial replacement for the broken bonds of family and community that were a direct consequence of the Middle Passage and their subsequent enslavement, within the mutually inclusive spaces afforded by religion and faith. In this context, Mariza de Carvalho Soares has understood the *irmandades* or Black lay brotherhoods and sisterhoods in Brazil as important spaces for community formation as well as political activity (Soares 2011).⁶ She has insisted on funeral processions as significant spheres for community building, reaffirmation of identity and rank, as well as of personal bonds, while emphasizing their centrality to African (and African descendant) social visibility and political participation in the public and religious spheres. Along the same lines, Vincent Brown has concentrated on death as a primary shaper of Atlantic slave societies and of life for everyone under slavery, underlining the specific meanings given to death, and to its related

ceremonies and rituals. He has understood death rituals as microcosms that present in condensed form the personal networks and community formations of enslaved and freed Africans in the diaspora (Brown 2008).

Within Brazilian historiography itself, the historical and anthropological studies of Pierre Verger (Verger 1968, 1981), along with the ethnographic research of Roger Bastide (1973) and Nina Rodrigues ([1939] 2006), have laid the groundwork for understanding African-derived religious practices, a line that has been continued by many contemporary scholars ranging from João José Reis and Lisa Earl Castillo, to Luis Nicolau Parés and Renato da Silveira (Castillo and Parés 2007; Castillo 2012; Parés 2012, 2013; Reis 1991, 1993, 1997, 2021; Silveira 2010). They have looked more closely at African religious practices and organizing principles within specific religious and faith-based communities, but also at the importance of the continuation of transatlantic networks for their constant nourishment, which in turn has provided a stronger basis for African community formation in Brazil. Similarly, J. Lorand Matory has understood Candomblé as an African-derived religion of the entire Atlantic World (Matory 2005). With regards to the intrinsic connections between death and religiosity in the manner of Vincent Brown, João Reis has examined the centrality of death and the changing attitudes towards its perception in the nineteenth century through the perspective of *mentalités*. He has also enhanced our understanding of the centrality of death rituals to community formation, as well as to African and African-descendant identities, by connecting what came to be known as the *Cemiterada* protest of 1836 in Salvador to the social visibility and political participation in Bahian life through *irmandade* membership and the “spectacle” of death (Reis 1991).⁷ All scholars working on the subject have suggested that the rituals and organization of the Roman Catholic Church offered Africans spaces in which to enact certain sets of values that made sense to them from an African perspective. Altogether, these studies provide an important framework against which to understand and problematize the religiosity of freed Africans in nineteenth-century Salvador da Bahia.

3. Tracking Religiosity in the Testaments of Freed Africans

The testaments of freed Africans are among the most important narrative sources on the lives of enslaved and freed people in the city. Historical studies of slavery in Brazil have already made extensive—and principally quantitative—use of testaments (Oliveira 1988; Mattoso 1988, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). Yet, these documents have previously never been studied qualitatively and in depth to shed light on individual lives and communities. Even within the confines of official documentation that directly emanates from the state–ecclesiastical apparatus, however, *libertos’* testaments are capable of greatly adding to our understanding of what it meant to be a freed African in the Bahian capital. They also constitute an important window into African understandings of faith in nineteenth-century Salvador da Bahia. Each testament comes across as a distinct and condensed life history, with its references to specific spaces of daily life and rites of passage within the city of Salvador, its acknowledgements of community and kinship, and its struggles to prepare for, transition into, and come to terms with, the afterlife. In this context, each testament is as exceptional as it is representative of the members of this highly complex Brazilian community of African heritage and descent.

Yet, having been composed by a more privileged segment of the African population, and being official documents where certain things could not be openly stated, testaments encompass some very important limits. Africans were required to include, like all individuals composing these documents, at least a minimum of formulaic statements proving their faith in the Roman Catholic religion in the initial clauses of their wills. Additionally, they could not openly refer to any other beliefs in their testaments. The *libertos* who sought to put their last wishes into writing were also those who were used to taking advantage of legal channels and operating within the dynamics of the state–ecclesiastical apparatus. As partial as the information that they provide may be, however, *libertos’* wills nevertheless offer significant degrees of insight into how freed Africans saw their worlds and shaped

their communities around notions of faith in nineteenth-century Bahia. Accordingly, they also assist us to a certain extent in gaining a better conceptualization of their cosmologies and ensuing worldviews.

4. Ana Rita Gonçalves da Silva: The Centrality of Baptism and Repeated Evocations of Faith

Ana Rita Gonçalves da Silva ⁸ was from the Mina Coast. She stated having been baptized in the parish of Conceição da Praia, indicating the importance of this ritual to her identity and life trajectory. Indeed, baptisms constituted an important rite of passage in the lives of freed Africans as well as a major basis for their community formations. As not all *libertos* chose to refer to their baptisms, such statements can be taken as an indication of the importance played by the ritual for the individuals who made a point of mentioning it openly.

The statement of the place of baptism is equally indicative of the centrality of locality to *liberto* community formations in nineteenth-century Bahia, in addition to constituting proof of the importance of faith within their understandings of self. Rather than simply being geographic neighborhoods, *freguesias* were parishes, corresponding to an agglomeration of parishioners, and thus to both an administrative and religious division of the city (Nascimento 1986, pp. 44–46). The inhabitants of a *freguesia* were linked to the *igreja matriz* or mother church of their parish, where they had their baptisms and wedding ceremonies. Within the parish, the vicar constituted the highest authority. Finally, the *matrizes* of each parish also oversaw the socio-religious activities of all their *irmandades*. As Nascimento asserts, “Rare was the *matriz* church that did not count one or two lay brotherhoods/sisterhoods, affiliated with its patron saints (Nascimento 1986, p. 45).” This is why many parish names contained the names of saints within them, and also why so many *libertos* belonged to at least one *irmandade*. Participation in *irmandades* symbolized identification with the Bahian setting and with Brazilian life, as much as it was an indication of religiosity or a demonstration of faith. It was also a statement of belonging within a local community of people who came together around their African origins. However, that identity went also well beyond local boundaries, creating a community that spread throughout the urban and peri-urban areas of Salvador, and even into the interior of Bahia. Consequently, *libertos*’ identification with their respective parishes went beyond a simple attachment to locality and referred to the centrality of faith to their lives. This played a major role in *libertos*’ decision to continue to reside in the same urban parishes where they had been enslaved. Freed Africans often asked to have their final rites at the *igreja matriz*, or to be buried within its grounds.

Ana Rita Gonçalves da Silva had been married to Francisco Pires, who was an *homem livre*, also of the Mina “nation”. In contrast to *liberto*, which would have implied former enslaved status, “livre” normally referred to someone who had been born free. It is open to question whether this was actually the case with Francisco whose African birth would have normally pointed to formerly enslaved status, or whether Ana Rita wanted to underline her husband’s social status as a free man, but the choice of the term certainly remained exceptional. No children had resulted from their legal union, but Ana Rita had given birth to three children as a single woman. Their names were Manoel Gonçalves, José Gonçalves, and Maria Anacleto da Silva. They were all free at the time she registered her testament. As dictated by Brazilian law for all direct descendants, they were to be Ana Rita’s legal heirs. Therefore, making bequests with regards to her material assets was not Ana Rita’s main motivation for composing her testament.

Yet, her requirements for her last rites were quite lengthy. Interestingly, she asked to be shrouded in a habit that was to be chosen by her husband, which could refer to the closeness of their relationship, her husband’s own religiosity, and the fact that she clearly expected him to survive her own death. She asked to be buried in her own *freguesia* of Conceição da Praia where she had been baptized, and to be accompanied by the Reverend Vicar and twenty other priests in her funerary procession. They would each receive the customary

alms for their services. Both the content and tone of her testament demonstrate the Catholic faith played a major role within the union of Ana Rita and her husband Francisco. Perhaps he had even played a role in the development of Ana's faith. Ana Rita had trusted Francisco with all her funerary arrangements. Further, upon having three children out of wedlock, she had united with Francisco in a legal Church-sanctified marriage. The difference between the arrangements regarding her relationships could mean that Francisco's belief in the Roman Catholic religion and acceptance of its precepts and requirements had shaped their marriage, while they affected Ana Rita's understandings of faith and community to a significant extent as well.

Ana Rita's religiosity also came across in her membership in two *irmandades* of the city of Salvador: Rosário and Redenção. She requested the members of both to join in her funeral procession and in carrying her coffin to its place of sepulture. Ana Rita demonstrated her commitment to the Catholic faith in her specification of elaborate final rites as well. She asked for the large number of twenty-five masses of "corpo presente" (funeral masses in presence of the dead body) to be said for her soul at Conceição da Praia's mother church. She added that in case it was impossible to have the total number of masses delivered at the *igreja matriz*, the remainder could also be completed at other churches. Three more *capelas* of masses were required for her own soul, while six of these were to be "applied" to the soul of her late master, another six to the soul of the late Teresa Gonçalves, and another twelve to that of the late Manoel Duarte Silva. Ana Rita did not provide any further information on the identity of these people in her testament. Yet, similar to the gratitude she chose to show her late master through the request of masses, the latter two individuals must also have been close to her, or had assisted or supported her during her life. They might have helped her in paying for her *alforria*.⁹ Ana Rita also requested twelve additional masses for the souls of all those with whom she had carried out her business affairs, specifying four for the soul of the late Antônio Pires who had been a business partner, and four for his late wife Ana Maria de Almeida. This provision was clearly linked to honor, as Ana Rita sought to make sure that any injustices she may have committed towards others would be rectified upon her death. Yet, as will be seen below, a deeper meaning might also be embedded in these assertions—one marked by the context of the Atlantic slave trade and membership in Brazilian slave society.

5. Antonia de Araújo: Faith and Religiosity in Patronage Networks and *Irmandade* Membership

Antonia de Araújo passed away on 12 June 1823.¹⁰ She also stated having come to Bahia from the Mina Coast. She had similarly been baptized in the *freguesia* of Nossa Senhora da Conceição da Praia where she currently also resided. Antônia requested that her dead body be shrouded in a Franciscan habit and buried at the Franciscan Convent in Salvador da Bahia. She was listed there as a member of the *Irmandade de São Benedito*. Antônia was also a member of the *irmandade* of Redenção in her own parish. She asked to be accompanied in her funerary procession by the members of the said *irmandades*, along with her Reverend Vicar, sexton, and other priests. When her active *irmandade* membership is added to Antônia de Araújo's requests of a religious nature which are already quite elaborate, she certainly comes across as a "person of faith" from her testament.

The masses that Antônia requested include several interesting details. She asked for two *capelas* of masses to be said for her own soul, one of which would in fact be reserved for the soul of her late husband, thus pointing to an eternal connection that Antônia wanted to establish between them through her final rites. All possible remaining masses for her own soul were to be said on the same day that she passed away. Most interestingly, however, she asked for eight more masses to be delivered for the souls of her late slaves, and six more for the souls of her late "patrons" or "protectors." Antônia must have felt guilty for not having provided her slaves with their freedom prior to their deaths, or for having treated them in ways that she herself might have considered "unjust." The first possibility of feeling remorse for not having provided them with their *alforria* appears more likely,

especially in light of the fact that Antonia de Araújo remembered her late “patronos” at the same time as her deceased slaves when requesting masses for their souls. They probably had provided her with the opportunity of, and assistance in, gaining her freedom. Even though Antônia de Araújo referred to more than one person, it is possible that at least one of these individuals had been her former owner. If she had felt grateful for the opportunity to acquire her own *alforria* while pondering her death, she would also have been reminded of the fact that she had not provided some of her own slaves with the same privilege.¹¹

Different relationships of patronage seem to have played a central role in Antônia de Araújo’s life. Not only did she request masses for the souls of her “patronos,” but she also made additional requests for masses to be said for the souls of her late godparents: Three for her late *padrinho* Onofre de Oliveira and one for her late *madrinha* Rita de Tal.¹² Antônia’s requests thus underlined the importance of godparentage as a major institution for the construction of kinship networks among freed Africans, as well as a principal form of patronage in Brazilian society as a whole. The importance of patronage is enhanced by the fact that Antônia not only referred to the people she received it from, but also to the people whom she provided with protection. One more mass was to be said for the soul of the late Maria, who had been her *agregada*, and thus lived under her protection and patronage as a free dependent. Finally, three more masses were to be delivered for the souls in purgatory who needed them the most, and each of these many masses were to receive the customary alms of a *pataca* each. Antônia de Araújo’s detailed requests for funerary masses are especially significant from the perspective of funerals and last rites representing a microcosm of the communities inhabited by Africans in Salvador. It demonstrates that these were often formed around notions of faith, and that people consciously used death as a way to reconstruct and reaffirm the realities of their lives, in terms of their personal networks, bonds of affection, understandings of rank, cultural values and beliefs, and other social understandings.

In line with her detailed funerary arrangements as well as her elaborate requests for masses which constituted a direct reflection of her networks of patronage, Antônia de Araújo left a sum of twenty thousand *réis* and two *vinténs*¹³ to the *irmandade* of Nossa Senhora da Conceição da Praia located in her own *freguesia*, ten thousand *réis* to the Nossa Senhora do Rosário, ten thousand more to the Senhor Bom Jesus da Redenção do Corpo Santo, and another ten thousand to the Glorioso San Benedito, all located in Conceição da Praia. Simultaneous membership in five different *irmandades* was certainly significant, especially considering her material bequests to each of these. The fact that Antônia de Araújo left alms to all the *irmandades* of the *freguesia* in which she had been baptized and enslaved, along with her having chosen to continue to live there as a free person, demonstrate both a clear commitment to locality, as well as a clear involvement with its communal and religious life.

Antônia de Araújo had built her Salvadorean life primarily around associations of faith. She had been a member of several *irmandades* that brought people together for purposes of community, mutual aid, protection, and patronage, while providing a sphere where Africans and their descendants could be visible and accepted in the social and political roles that they took on. James Sweet credits the emergence of Black Catholic lay brotherhoods, created by both Africans and their descendants born in the Americas, as one of the most central shapers of the “bi-religious” understanding of religion within the State-sanctioned spaces allotted them by the Roman Catholic religion in Brazil. As associations directed towards both religious activities and social work, their members were endowed with special privileges, among which came first and foremost a decent Christian burial, and appropriate final rites including masses (Sweet 2003, p. 206).

Vincent Brown elaborates on funerary festivities as the most important site of social communion in Jamaica, where Africans and their descendants engaged in great ostentation. In this sense, these last rites were true festivities, encompassing wakes, dances, and feasts. Death rituals, in this sense, composed anything and everything from the preparation of testaments to the actual funeral processions, from inheritance processes to masses said

for the souls of loved ones (Brown 2008, p. 63). The festive aspect of last rites was also evident in Brazil, as is evident from the title of João Reis' 1991 book *A morte é uma festa* (*Death is a Festival*), where he elaborates on the nature of these death-related festivities of community, social visibility, and the transition of the soul to a different, and hopefully better, realm. Everyone wanted their funerals to be communal affairs to a certain extent, as well as a microcosm of the dynamics and social networks within which they had spent their lives. More than anything perhaps, they wanted them to reflect who they had *wanted* to be in contradistinction to who they had been *allowed* to be in the slave societies of the Atlantic world.

6. Ana Ludovina de Oliveira: Irmandade Membership and Responsibilities as Indicators of Faith and Honor

On 10 September 1827, Ana Ludovina de Oliveira¹⁴ found herself sick in bed. She asserted being from the “Costa do Leste” (“the Eastern Coast”). While a direct interpretation of this description would have implied that she was a “Moçambique,” it is much more probable that Ana Ludovina was in fact from the eastern part of the Mina Coast, from one of the areas designated as the “lower ports,” such as Porto Novo, Apa, or Badagry. This inference gains greater credibility in consideration of the fact that the Bahian nineteenth century was primarily dominated by Mina/Gegê enslaved arrivals and cultural influences. Ana Ludovina indicated being a sister in the *irmandades* of São Benedito and São Francisco. She also held the post of *juiza* (judge) in the same *irmandade*. Within an *irmandade*, elected *juizes* or judges were vested in official ceremonies. As Renato da Silveira states, their positions were not fictive posts without actual weight or agency as argued by some researchers. These individuals publicly represented the *irmandade*, assumed political positions in official rituals, and even participated in liturgy in certain cases (Silveira 2010, p. 144).¹⁵ This is also significant in the context of the social and political roles that could be presided over by African women, in a highly patriarchal society which placed enslaved and freed women at the very bottom of the social hierarchy.

While composing her testament, Ana Ludovina was deeply concerned with the fact that she had not yet been able to pay the dues for the office that she held, which directly spoke to her sense of personal dignity, especially in the context of the communal and faith-based implications of these responsibilities. Accordingly, Ana Ludovina asked her executor to pay for her *juizado* after her death in case she had been unable to do so before. Indeed, honor was central to membership in lay brotherhoods and sisterhoods. The internal rules of the *irmandades* stipulated that only people with material assets and good behavior be accepted. Accordingly, all members had to pay regular dues. Additionally, *irmandade* members must not have been accused by the forces of justice of having committed major crimes or participated in political contestation. Consequently, in order to be *irmandade* members, Africans needed to prove themselves worthy, as dignified and honorable individuals within Bahian society. They also sought to abide by these understandings during their years of membership. They wanted their funerals to be reflections of the same dignity and honor, and to surpass the limits that slave society had placed on Africans' being perceived as such during their earthly lives. They also sought to make sure that in paying debts and *irmandade* fees, they would remain worthy and honorable upon their deaths.

As would be expected, Ana Ludovina also requested to be buried at her *irmandade*, in line with the important role it had played in her life. She asked her first executor to arrange her funeral as he saw fit, keeping in mind that he would be responsible to pay for all the expenses. In such cases of final rites being entrusted to executors without further specifications, it is probable that these people had been members of the same social networks as the testators, and probably of the same *irmandades*. Nevertheless, Ana Ludovina did not fail to specify certain additional rites for her passage to the afterworld. The Reverend Vicar himself would accompany her to her place of burial, and in return would be presented with the customary alms. The sexton would receive half of that amount. Ana Ludovina not only had the necessary financial means for dignified last rites, but she

also possessed the religious and social clout that also constituted an important requirement for these.

Her executor would arrange for three masses of *corpo presente* to be said for her soul, for alms of 320 *réis* each. She also requested two more masses of the same amount of alms to be said for her former mistress Leonor Francisca da Rocha, who had already passed away, once again engaging in an act of simultaneous piety and gratitude. She also asked for four more equal masses to be said for those people with whom “she had conducted business,” with the objective of “relieving my conscience.” All the masses that she asked for were to be said in the Freguesia da Nossa Senhora do Pilar, where she had been baptized. In light of her clear religiosity, the importance she gave to her membership in the spiritual community represented by her *irmandade* and the active role that she had played within it, it is clear that Ana Ludovina felt committed to both Roman Catholicism and to the dominant norms and understandings of Brazilian society. There was a clear “local” element to her Salvadorean identity, which placed the Pilar parish at the center of her life, from the time of her baptism to the time of her death. There were also clearly African elements to that identity, linking the lower Mina Coast to the *irmandades* of Salvador da Bahia, which influenced her understanding of Christianity, her networks built around faith, and her belonging in her local community.

7. Ana Francisca da Conceição: The Importance of Living According to Catholic Precepts and of Religious “Education,” and the Lingering Ghost of the Slave Trade

In another testament, Ana Francisca da Conceição¹⁶ was also quite elaborate in her requests for final rites, and they closely resembled those of Ana Ludovina. They also demonstrate her close adherence to the Catholic religion and its communities of faith in Salvador. Ana Francisca indicated being in perfect health and in full possession of her capacities at the time she dictated her testament. She stated that she simply wanted to make sure that her material assets would be disposed of according to her own wishes at the advent of her death. In her testament, she repeatedly referred to her lifelong efforts to conserve herself within the laws and precepts of the Roman Catholic faith. These efforts were also reflected in the fact that she had joined her husband—whom she defined as “Senhor Francisco da Silva Guerra,” thus endowing him with an honorific in her will and underlining her perception of him as an honorable and dignified individual—in a legal church union. She also underlined this fact by stating that she had lived with her husband “according to the rules of the Holy Mother and the Church.” Ana Francisca had strived to respect Catholic precepts, and to be a worthy member of her Roman Catholic religious and spiritual community in Salvador. She sought to make sure that these efforts would be put into writing and survive her into eternity. In the process, she established herself clearly as an honorable and dignified member of Brazilian society of African origins. In case she died before him, Ana Francisca da Conceição asked her husband, heir, and executor to take care of her funeral arrangements, asserting that she fully trusted him in every way. The bond of marriage that she shared with him was clearly important to her, while the husband and wife had probably also shared similar understandings as to what constituted proper religious last rites, as well as with regards to the importance of Roman Catholic precepts within their lives.

She asked to be wrapped in a white shroud and carried over to her place of burial at the main church of the parish of Conceição da Praia by the members of her *irmandade* of Nossa Senhora do Rosário of the same parish.¹⁷ She also asked to be accompanied by the Reverend, the Vicar, the large number of twenty-nine priests, and the sexton. Ana Francisca also sought to make sure that they all received the customary alms, which varied depending on the rank of the religious officials. Ana Francisca listed the elaborate final rites that she wished to have performed upon her death in several other detailed clauses. Fifty masses would be delivered on the second or third day following her death, while another twenty-five would be said at the Convent of São Francisco in her own parish, for instance. Twelve more would be performed at Santa Barbosa, each being compensated with

the customary alms. Interestingly, she also asked to be accompanied by thirty-three poor persons in her funeral, who would each receive eighty *réis* in return for this service, thus underlining Vincent Brown's understanding of death rituals as condensed microcosms of the personal networks and community formations, as well as confirmations of the statuses, of enslaved and freed Africans in the diaspora.¹⁸ She also "left for her [own] soul" two more complete *capelas* of masses, offering total alms of three hundred and twenty *réis*. Ana appears to have been dominated by her fear of death and concerns for her soul, and to have sought to use both her significant financial means and her social standing within her community to make her passage into the afterlife a dignified one. In a way that was similar to the assertions of the two *libertas* whose testaments have been discussed above, Ana Francisca asked for twelve more masses to be said for the souls of people "with whom she had had business dealings while alive," and compensated them with the same amount of alms.

Ana Francisca might have felt like she had not always been as just and honest as she should have in these business dealings, or she simply sought to make up for any dishonest acts that may have occurred outside of her knowledge in an effort to underline her honor. However, it is highly likely that these statements, encountered with a certain frequency in *libertos'* wills as evidenced by those discussed above, refer to dealings concerning the slave trade and enslavement, and that people like Ana Francisca are in fact requesting masses for the souls of the people in whose enslavement and sale they had played a role. This understanding is enhanced by Anna Francisca's economic clout, which made it possible for her to request highly elaborate funerary rites. While she could have considered participation in slavery and the slave trade as a totally accepted part of life in the slave societies of the Atlantic world in addition to being a legitimate and lucrative business, the imminence of death is known to change people's outlooks, causing them to reconsider their choices or mistakes. It can also bring them closer to faith. Both aspects seem to be at work with regards to the last rites that Ana Francisca requested, for her own soul and those of others.

Ana Francisca's lengthy dispositions did not stop there. While membership in more than one lay brotherhood was common among African *libertos* in the nineteenth century, her simultaneous membership in six different *irmandades* remained unusual. She left her primary *irmandade* where she also asked to be buried, the Conceição da Praia chapter of Nossa Senhora do Rosário, the alms of 10,000 *réis*. She also left the same amount to Senhor da Redenção do Corpo, and smaller amounts of alms to Nossa Senhora de Santa Ana, São Joaquim, Nossa Senhora da Boa Hora, and Nossa Senhora da Piedade. All were situated within and affiliated with the Santa Casa de Misericórdia of Ruy Barbosa, pointing to the importance of locality in her understandings of identity and community. All these sums would have been in addition to her lifelong support of these *irmandades*, the regular payment of her annuities, as well as the specific payments that would be made upon her death for the realization of her funeral expenses and other last rites. Finally, Ana Francisca also asked for a *corpo presente* mass to be said for her from the altar of the main church of Conceição da Praia, for which she set aside the high alms of two thousand *réis*. It appears to have been highly important for Ana Francisca to have her *corpo presente* said at this church—a clear symbol of her communal identity linked to both faith and locality. It also pointed to her relatively high social status and considerable economic standing, as well as her sense of belonging within the established parameters of the slave society, evident both in all the alms she was able to set aside and her highly specific requests regarding the setting and nature of her last rites. She exercised clear deliberation in deciding that her money would primarily go to religious institutions and funeral arrangements. Her detailed requests for final rites also leave no doubt regarding her active participation in the Church both as a religious institution and as an important sphere of community building in nineteenth-century Salvador.

Ana Francisca also left her former mistress Maria Custódia, who had retreated to the Convent of Desterro, the non-negligible sum of forty thousand *réis*, and openly stated

both her “appreciation” and her “great love” for the woman in question. This was not a negligible token of appreciation and gratitude. Even though she had liberated herself from her through the payment of her *alforria*, a lifelong bond had tied Ana Francisca to her former mistress, as the two had continued to form a “networked family” along the lines defined by Elisabeth McMahon (McMahon 2013a, 2013b). Maria Custódia’s personal retreat to a convent in her later years also points to her own religious leanings. If we accept the argument in favor of a certain “education” provided by slaveowners to the enslaved they held under their authority, this would have been the case for Ana Francisca and Maria Custódia, and one that encompassed a significant dimension of faith. What I mean by education here is the assistance *libertos* received as they integrated into Bahian society as first enslaved and then free individuals. Freed Africans used this word themselves in their testaments, as they thanked their former owners for the education they were provided with, and as they chose executors to educate their own heirs. While the latter might have referred to a more direct understanding of education (and protection) that would be provided to minors, the former almost always implied community building, and processes of countering “social death” as one adapted to Bahian slave society, its hierarchies, and requirements. While freedom remained the central goal to which all enslaved individuals aspired, *de jure* freedom as represented by freedom papers was only the starting point.¹⁹ In order to translate into the actual capacity to survive as a free individual within Bahian society, legal freedom needed to be accompanied by the necessary economic factors, such as the possession of a place of dwelling and a steady source of income.²⁰ Social factors such as “education” and social integration proved to be just as essential, as freed people needed social networks to support and assist them, as well as to give social, cultural, and emotional meaning to their lives. If slaveowners permitted or even facilitated the arduous effort of integration and community building for the enslaved, the latter sought to make a point of demonstrating the appreciation, deference, and gratitude that was expected of them in their wills.

Leaving money to her former mistress who had retired to a convent also constituted a way for Ana Francisca to reassert her personal Christian values of piety, and once again to appease her concerns for her own soul. By then, Maria Custódia would have been advanced in years. The two women had never lost track of each other’s whereabouts, even though Maria Custódia had clearly changed her place of residence. Ana Francisca remembered her former mistress as she contemplated her own death, and she indicated that what she felt for her was love, in addition to the gratitude usually expected in these circumstances. In leaving her former mistress a non-negligible sum that could make a difference in her life at the convent, Ana Francisca found the opportunity to reassert her faith and Christian piety. Simultaneously, she was able to underline the importance of—and the appreciation she felt for—a more lenient experience of enslavement, the provision of a certain communal or religious “education,” and the possibility of freeing herself from slavery.

8. Conclusions

This article has drawn upon the testaments left behind by four formerly enslaved African women in nineteenth-century Salvador da Bahia to elucidate the different roles that faith and religiosity played within their lives, communities, and understandings of self. These case studies have demonstrated that Africans in the diaspora constantly managed, negotiated, and enlarged the small spaces for self-determination and for the preservation and recreation of identities and communities with which they were left, while they also carved out other parallel spaces for themselves. Within these spaces, Roman Catholic-derived religious communities and affiliations, and the continuation and creative adaptation of African religious practices, were of essential importance to *liberto* identities and community formations.

In the context of the turmoil, extreme hardships and constant struggles that were part and parcel of enslavement in the Americas, African-derived faiths and religious practices became part of the multi-layered cosmologies that were integrated into the Roman Catholic

faith by Africans in Brazil. The funerary rites of lay brotherhoods and sisterhoods provided Africans with a ritual and communal space where different components of their religious, cultural, and social repertoires came together within their identities, and where they joined together in order to make sense of the events and associations that marked their lives. The fatality and finality of death was confronted in funerals, which also served to redefine and make sense once again of the social networks and personal bonds that had brought Africans together during their Brazilian lives.

The analysis of these four freed African women's testaments has also shown that Africans and their descendants found opportunities to be politically active and socially visible within these rituals, as well as accepted by the society at large for the roles that they played. These activities and associated visibility are especially significant with regards to freed African women, at a time when their White counterparts could rarely aspire to such roles. While asserting themselves as "honorable" Brazilian citizens within the slave society, *libertos* also sought to act in a dignified manner towards their own communities by underlining the different roles played by their members within their own lives. This desire was evident in the provisions with regards to debts and other kinds of responsibility present in their wills, since they all sought to enter the afterlife with clear consciences. Consequently, their final rites profoundly reflected their understandings of morality, merit, justice, and honor.

Africans in Brazil simultaneously underlined their unique identity by exercising agency in the specific ways in which they organized and enacted their rituals. These rituals became illustrations of their social values, and of the social and political hierarchies within their communities, independent of the impositions of the state and slave society. They thus demonstrated what specific individuals had meant and how they had related to different people within the community. Therefore, funerals reaffirmed the hierarchies and social roles that existed within the African community itself. The fact that different groupings within the community could have distinct rituals, shaped primarily by their economic capacities, also underlined the divisions within the personal networks of Africans in Bahia. These differences took place within African communities that encompassed people from many different social statuses, formed primarily around personal networks centered on the experience of "Africanness."

Death is a phenomenon which highlights the fragility and fears of individuals, leading them to ponder subjects that may not have been previously central to their thought processes. The omnipresent reality of death led freed Africans to think of those they would be leaving behind, and especially about their own transition from one life to the next. John Mbiti asserts that the absence of a clear distinction between the physical and spiritual realms in traditional African religions results in even "life in the hereafter [being] conceived in materialistic and physical terms (Mbiti 1970, p. 6)." In the context of the slave societies of the African diaspora, James Sweet similarly argues that the seamlessness and ease in which Africans moved between different religious contexts was also linked to the equally "seamless dialogues [that existed] between the living and the dead, staving off the isolation and loneliness wrought by the forces of the Atlantic World (Sweet 2003, p. 104)." He explains that alongside the visible shell of earthly life, the "soul" was understood as the primary form of existence, and the eternal force which actually defined a person and their being. The centrality of the soul to African cosmologies, as well as to the rites of passage from the material world to the spiritual one, are what made Africans and their descendants deeply concerned with ensuring secure and dignified passages to the afterlife, while providing for the wellbeing of the souls of loved ones, as well as their own. In African cosmologies, "the next world is in fact geographically 'here,' being separate from this only by virtue of being invisible to human beings. (Mbiti 1970, p. 208)." Consequently, earthly life was not seen in any way as inferior to that which would be enjoyed upon one's death as in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and freed Africans gave equal importance to the two realms, and strongly sought to translate characteristics from one life to the next, as in the case of dignity and honor. As João Reis also asserts, death was only perceived of as the end of the body,

since the soul was to simply move to another world, another life. For this very reason, it was even met with joy, which in turn was reflected in wakes and funerary processions as already discussed above (Reis 1997, p. 96). This interconnectedness between the earthly and afterwordly existences of the soul come across clearly in the testaments of freed Africans, which provide invaluable testimonies to their religious cosmologies and the role of faith within their communities.

According to John Mbiti, the “many, often complicated, ceremonies connected with death, burials, funerals, inheritance” all stem from the fact that death “is something that concerns everybody, partly because sooner or later everyone personally faces it and partly because it brings loss and sorrows to every family and community (Mbiti 1970, p. 195).” This is why death rituals are elaborate in different ways in almost every society, and also why community remains at the center of these rituals. The testaments analyzed in this article additionally constitute direct extensions of the extreme concerns with death under slavery which emanated from the hardships and calamities of the Atlantic slave trade and enslavement, as well as the perils of life in tropical climates (Brown 2008; Browne 2017). In a world where life was fleeting, death became a major site for community formation, for the assertion of principles, and for exercising agency. Mariza de Carvalho Soares states that it was indeed the “preoccupation with death, particularly understandable in a slave regime characterized by high mortality, [that] led many blacks [. . .] to record a testament that specified their final wishes and their preferred conditions of interment (Soares 2011, p. 126). In this sense, *libertos*’ testaments themselves constituted important components of their last rites. They marked an end to a life that was supposed to have been guided by moral concerns, and thus came to construct a symbolic realm where the community’s principles and guiding referents were reenacted. Last rites—including testaments—were microcosms of life, but they also represented African utopias. If enslavement had kept freed Africans from living the lives they deserved, they would at least make sure that both their wills and their funerals underlined what these lives should have been, rather than what they had simply been permitted to be.

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Notes

- ¹ The scribes of different parishes in Salvador demonstrated individuality in deciding to record ethnicity or not, and certain patterns can be traced regarding their choices based on the list of official scribes for the year 1855 in Bahia (Masson 1854). The fact that certain ethnonyms were noted more than others (*Gegê, Mina, Guiné*) may in fact point to ethnic identity being more essential to the members of certain ethnic groups during this period, along the lines argued by Hawthorne (2010, pp. 8–12, 90–6, 177–91), in addition to them being more predominant in nineteenth-century Salvador da Bahia.
- ² The revolt has been extensively studied by João José Reis (1993). See also: (Ferreira 1903).
- ³ This idea of adapting, changing, molding itself to specific necessities, moving in between different religious repertoires, and being open to other influences also constitutes the general understanding towards most African-derived faiths in Brazil today. Even a Candomblé priestess like Maria Stella de Azevedo Santos, who is a traditionalist in many ways, testifies to the openness and adaptation capacity of African-derived religions when she states that the strength and adaptability of the Orisha faith is what has enabled both its survival and expansion in the diaspora (Santos 1996, p. 136).
- ⁴ This was often the case with physical diseases, which were seen to have spiritual causes in almost all African religious practices.
- ⁵ The case of Domingos Álvares himself, as well as that of others discussed in Sweet’s (2011) book, demonstrates that many of the African-derived rituals practiced in Brazil had in fact been banned back in Dahomey.
- ⁶ *Irmandades* were Roman Catholic associations of lay people that originated in the Iberian Peninsula and were later transferred to the New World, where they were also opened to Africans and their descendants and became central to their community

formations. While the Catholic Church initially took advantage of the lay brotherhoods and sisterhoods to alleviate its own responsibilities of indoctrination vis-à-vis the African population, the *irmandades* soon became autonomous spaces for the active participation of Africans in social and political life, as well as for the enactment of African values and social structures.

7 From the Portuguese word *cemitério* meaning cemetery.

8 Arquivo Público do Estado da Bahia, Seção Judiciária, Livro de Testamentos 10: pp. 208–211v.

9 In the cases where *libertos* were incapable of paying for their own freedom or did not have the support of family members or others close to them, the *irmandades* would help pay for the *alforria* of their members who were still enslaved. They would also provide assistance to their members' dependents. Both of these factors added significantly to their centrality in the lives of enslaved or freed Africans.

10 Arquivo Público do Estado da Bahia, Seção Judiciária, Livro de Testamentos 10: pp. 91 to 96v.

11 It is also possible that Antonia de Araújo might have wanted to remember her former slaves to whom she had offered their freedom, but in that case she would have referred normally to them as “meus libertos” and not “meus escravos.”

12 The designation De Tal implies slave ancestry almost without exception.

13 The *vintém* corresponded to one twentieth of the Brazilian *real* at the time.

14 Arquivo Público do Estado da Bahia, Seção Judiciária, Livro de Testamentos 15: pp. 115v–120v.

15 [Silveira \(2010\)](#) explains that lay brotherhoods were formally understood in Brazil as voluntary and monetized organizations, where annuities were paid, and where the adherents themselves saw over the selection of new participants, as well as over the direction and maintenance of the conglomeration, although under the official supervision of state authorities. To these initial obligations were added devotional and festive responsibilities, political functions, burial and financial assistance. The majority of officially sanctioned African organizations of a religious nature belonged in this category. In the nineteenth century, Salvador came to have around a hundred of these lay religious associations, all with an intense annual program and a dynamic religious economy.

16 Arquivo Público do Estado da Bahia, Seção Judiciária, Livro de Testamentos 4: pp. 158v to 163.

17 For more on the processions of the Rosário *irmandades*, see ([Reginaldo 2005](#)).

18 In this, Ana Francisca seems to have followed a more African pattern of making her funeral into a highly communal affair. It remained important for many Africans everywhere in the diaspora to be accompanied to their final places of rest by a large number of people.

19 For the complexities surrounding freedom papers in the Atlantic World, see ([Scott and Hébrard 2012](#)). For primary sources concerning the complications that could arise from *alforria* arrangements in Brazil, see ([Conrad 1984](#), pp. 319–57).

20 Kathleen J. [Higgins \(1999\)](#) writes in length about these necessary components of freedom.

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