



# **CROSSING CULTURAL BORDERS AND IDENTITIES IN BRAZIL AND DENMARK: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

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## ABSTRACT

This article compares identity-making among ethnic majorities who practice the religious traditions of ethnic minorities, i.e. of white Brazilian practices of Afro-Brazilian religion and ethnic Dane conversions to Islam. This unusual comparison illustrates the various processes, conditions, and consequences of such forms of identity-making. In the context of discussions on identity-making within modernity, globalization, and cultural complexity, the article argues that identity-making that includes taking on the cultural symbols and traditions of others involves certain tensions. Examining the cases of ethnic majority co-optations of the symbols and traditions of ethnic minorities in Brazil and Denmark, the article shows how such spiritual quests and forms of identity-making invoke positioning of difference and power relations connected to the histories and politics of identity and ethnicity. Both cases consequently imply the need for invoking notions of cultural purity and hybridity, both of which are used in different ways for legitimizing identity. In Brazil, hybridity is the point of departure and purity is an end, whereas in Denmark purity is the point of departure and hybridity is an end.

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## KEYWORDS

Minority. Religion. Identity. Transgression. Power.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In a temple in a village in São Paulo, a group of white Brazilians wearing African-style kaftans are honoring the *orisas*, *Yorùbá* deities from Nigeria. Practitioners of the *Yorùbá orisa* tradition,

most of them are newcomers to this religion. As they dance, they are singing *Yorùbá* words printed on sheets of paper that they hold in their hands (JENSEN, 2002).

In a living room in an apartment in Copenhagen, a group of Danish women wearing the *jilbab*, a Muslim long dress, are preparing for the *salah*, the Muslim prayer. As converts to Islam, the women exhibit their insecurity about the ritual practice by asking questions about and instructing each other in the movements and Arabic words that accompany the *salah* (JENSEN, 2007).

These two observations of rituals come from two separate research projects in very different geographical contexts. The first is from 1997-1999 fieldwork in São Paulo, Brazil, where Afro-Brazilian religion has become popular among the white educated middle class. The project dealt with white middle class Brazilians who practice Afro-Brazilian religion and seek to recover the roots of the “authentic” religion from Nigeria (JENSEN, 2002). The second observation is from 2004-05 fieldwork in Denmark, where the presence of Muslim immigrants since the late 1960s has resulted in various encounters between ethnic Danes and immigrants. The project dealt with Danes who convert to Islam (JENSEN, 2007). What makes the two cases of comparative interest is that they both focus on ethnic majority people who are crossing cultural and religious borders and identities within their native countries.

Conditions of modernity, globalization, and cultural complexity stemming from the migration of persons, cultural ideas, and practices entail processes of identity-making involving the taking on of cultural traditions and identities rooted in different contexts. This identity-making may consist of taking on identities that are otherwise ascribed to other ethnic groups and thus constitute apparent crossovers of cultural borders and identities. Based on ethnographic material from Brazil and Denmark on white Brazilians’ practices of Afro-Brazilian religion and Danes’ conversions to Islam, this article is a comparative study of crossing cultural borders and identities in two widely different contexts<sup>1</sup>. It focuses on identity-making

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented at the workshop in “Migrations: of borders, crossings and ambivalent identities” at the European Anthropological Association’s conference in Ljubljana, Slovenia, August 2008.

among ethnic *majorities* who start to practice the traditions of ethnic *minorities*, and illustrates the various conditions, consequences, and processes of such forms of identity-making. The article revolves around the question of what makes ethnic majorities start practicing the traditions of ethnic minorities, thereby crossing socio-cultural borders and identities, and how this process involves the social relationships between ethnic majorities and minorities. In so doing, the article explores the various identity constructions and positioning of difference and power at stake in this process.

First, however, two questions arise: why – and how – should one compare such different contexts as Brazil and Denmark? While the research project in Brazil inspired both the idea and design for the project in Denmark, the two projects were not strictly designed for comparative analysis, nor did they represent homogenous units. Nevertheless, comparisons today are not based on static cross-cultural comparison or synchronic societal ethnographies (GINGRICH; FOX, 2002; MOORE, 2005). A renewed interest in macrocomparative questions about general human conditions and interactions in a globalizing world, i.e. in globalization as connecting human beings and making them experience similar conditions, has led to new frameworks for comparative analysis. Comparison thus emerges from inquiries into the various ways in which people construct meaning within different societies (FILITZ, 2002, p. 222). Therefore, the objects of comparative analysis constitute contexts as circuits and processes of meaning constructions focusing on relationships between objects, persons, and situations (MELHUUS, 2002).

The two projects are primarily comparable in terms of contexts and theoretical frameworks<sup>2</sup>. Brazil and Denmark represent new and old worlds and thus widely different historical and social contexts for different encounters between different people. What makes a comparison between such greatly different countries useful is, among other things, the possibility of finding similarities in the midst of the differences and thereby illuminating general social processes. The task of this

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<sup>2</sup> Others have ventured into similar kinds of comparison, e.g. the experience of industrialization and the growth of different religious movements in Manchester and São Paulo (FRY, 1982) and identity patterns in Brazil and Denmark (SJØRSLEV, 2004).

comparison is to make intuitive contexts visible and to shed light on comparable conditions through transcending the discontinuities between these different contexts (MELHUUS, 2002, p. 82).

The main units of comparison are ethnic majority individuals who practice the religious traditions of ethnic minorities, with the meaning of “ethnic majorities” and “ethnic minorities” referring to different social statuses and power relations and varying according to context. In Brazil, “ethnic minorities” refers to black Brazilians who are descendants of former slaves and who generally represent Brazil’s subaltern population whose minority position is vis-à-vis a privileged white Brazilian majority. In Denmark, the term “ethnic minorities” refers to non-Western immigrants who began arriving in the late 1960s, are considered foreigners, and belong to Denmark’s subaltern population compared to the population of native ethnic majority Danes. Although the boundaries between majorities and minorities are drawn in very different ways in Brazil and Denmark, given their different historical conditions and socio-cultural contexts, domination and hegemony still characterize their relationships in both countries. Afro-Brazilian religion in Brazil and Islam in Denmark are both major but marginalized and stigmatized religions that belong to subaltern people. In Brazil, where Catholicism is the official religion, Afro-Brazilian religion is a “hidden” tradition commonly practiced by much of the population (BASTIDE, 1978). In Denmark, where Islam is the second largest religion, almost only immigrants and their descendants practice it. In both countries, ethnic majority individuals who start practicing these religions engage in a tradition transition – a movement from one worldview, ritual system, symbolic universe, and lifestyle to another (RAMBO, 1993). These cases in Brazil and Denmark represent a movement from hegemonic Occidental religious traditions such as Catholicism and Lutheran Protestantism to religions categorized as “non-Western” and represented by marginalized ethnic groups.

Both cases reflect an overall theoretical framework of comparable conditions such as identity-making within modernity, globalization, and cultural complexity. Modernity generally implies movement, flux, change, and unpredictability (LASH; FRIEDMAN, 1996), indicating a constant process of

becoming in which the future – characterized by reflexivity, ambiguity, and uncertainty – is open (GIDDENS, 1994). Modernity also depicts identity as mobile, multiple, and fragmented, a matter of free individual choice. Moreover, anthropological definitions of globalization that emphasize global interconnectedness, border crossings, and “cultural flows” (HANNERZ, 1992; PIETERSE, 2009) suggest that the choice of identity may involve cultural traditions and identities ascribed to other groups in local and global contexts. The notion of globalization relates to the context of cultural complexity, which in turn suggests multifarious influences and cultural interplays between different groups and meaning systems through the flows of migration and mass media (HANNERZ, 1992). Cultural complexity involves the possibility of taking on identities otherwise ascribed to other ethnic groups, as Danish converts to Islam and white practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religion illustrate. Furthermore, globalization is associated with intercultural crossover and hybridity.

The notion of globalization as “cultural flow” has been criticized as ideologically loaded, ignoring questions of political realities and power (FARDON, 1995), e.g. that borders may be difficult to cross (CUNNINGHAM, 2004). Moreover, the notions of crossover culture and hybridity are highly contested (FRIEDMAN, 1996; WERBNER; MODOOD, 1997) and tend not to reflect issues of power and politics of identity (FRELLO, 2006). In terms of the debate on globalization, this article makes two contributions. First, it focuses on the nature of “cultural flow,” “hybridity,” and “crossover culture” in identity-making. While cultural flow suggests that cultural creativity occurs in a *vacuum*, some discussions on history and the politics of identity argue that self-definition occurs in a world already defined, a world in which cultural realities are products of specific socio-historical contexts (FRIEDMAN, 1996, p. 117). Nevertheless, few empirical studies have explored actual differences in historical and social conditions and positioning among practitioners of globalized cultural practices (PALMIÉ, 1995). Second, while studies of globalization tend to focus on cultural flows from the first to the third world (HOWELL, 1995), this article deals with flows from the third or non-Western world to the first or Western world, i.e. from ethnic minorities to ethnic majorities.

This article illuminates identity-making as not only a condition in which the individual chooses and creates his or her own identity by taking on other cultural identities but also a process whereby the symbols used in this identity creation have their own particular history and identity. This approach calls for an analytical focus on constructions and positioning of identity as shifting, contested, and occurring in particular historically specific times and places, thus involving associations between social categories and power relations (HOLLAND; LEANDER, 2004). The comparative analysis illustrates both similarities and differences in which concepts, conditions, and consequences are at stake in identity-making. The units of analysis in this comparison are the personal quests of ethnic majority individuals for spiritual meaning within the cultural and religious traditions of ethnic minorities, and the relationships (between ethnic majorities and minorities) that are at stake in this process. The article illustrates that identity constructions among ethnic majorities involve various identity positioning and relations of power. Such identity constructions entail performances of other and exotic identities and modern constructions of identity based on spiritual quests for self-fulfillment in the “authentic” identities of others. These constructions of identity simultaneously activate various social identities, relationships, and positioning of difference and power between ethnic minorities and majorities, including issues of authenticity and legitimizations of identity with reference to notions of cultural purity and hybridity.

The following sections present the historical contexts, religious quests, constructions of identity, and the social identities and relations at stake in both cases. The comparative analysis and conclusion discuss the various different and similar human conditions and meaning constructions occurring in crossing cultural borders and identities.

## **2. CROSSING CULTURAL BORDERS AND IDENTITIES IN BRAZIL**

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Brazil, which was colonized from 1500, is a product of encounters between many different peoples. Some of the main

social actors were the Portuguese colonizers, the Brazilian Indians, and the African slaves. Due to the mixing of races that constitutes the Brazilian population, Brazil is often praised as a “Luso-tropical meta-race” constituting a racial democracy in which all Brazilians, independent of their racial background, are equal (FREYRE, 1946). Brazil is thus described as a relational society, mixing and creating relationships between oppositions, and emphasizing mediations and ambiguities (DAMATTA, 1991). Despite the popular image of Brazil as a country without racial differences, Brazilians tend to show hyperconsciousness of race, in which the black/white color spectrum determines social privileges (VARGAS, 2004). The ideology of racial democracy thus manifests itself as a white hegemony (HANCHARD, 1994). Moreover, different geographies of race depict a predominantly black and poor Northeast and a predominantly white and industrialized Southeast.

Although Brazil is a Catholic country, one of its distinct forms of ethnicity and culture is Afro-Brazilian religion, often referred to as *Candomblé*, which originated predominantly among West African slaves who were brought to Brazil in the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (BASTIDE, 1978). Their religion centered on the cultivation of the *orisas*, the *Yorùbá* term for deities related to different aspects of nature, and are also believed to reside over and manifest in human beings through possession (i.e. trance). The slaves were able to continue practicing their religions because they syncretized the *orisas* with Catholic saints, and because of ongoing connections between Brazil and Africa. The majority Brazilian image of Afro-Brazilian religion is generally ambivalent, reflecting disdain towards *Candomblé* while exhibiting national pride over its being one of the few authentic traditions in Brazil. This ambivalence mirrors the process of simultaneous cultural inclusion and social exclusion within Brazil: an inclusion of black culture (e.g. samba and *Candomblé* as national treasures) and a simultaneous social marginalization of people who are black and poor (SJØRSLEV, 2004). While *Candomblé* is a tradition of black Brazilians, white Brazilians nevertheless participate. The small Brazilian middle class, in particular as it lacks an independent identity, tends to draw on the cultural traditions of the black lower social classes (BROWN, 1979). Overall, white Brazilians participate primarily in the role of clients buying the magical



services of the *pai de santo*, the black religious leader in *Candomblé*. The relationship between black religious specialists and white clients within the domain of the Afro-Brazilian *terreiro*, the Afro-Brazilian religious center thus represents an inversion of power-relations (VELHO, 1975) in which the black encompasses the white (SEGATO, 1998).

Afro-Brazilian practitioners of *Candomblé* have always sought to Africanize their religion by purifying it from its Catholic elements to return to the genuine religious traditions from Africa. The insistence on “African purity” in Afro-Brazilian religion particularly includes West-African religious traditions, e.g. the *Yorùbá* (DANTAS, 1988). Since the 1960s, white middle class people from Southeast Brazil, particularly from the state of São Paulo, have also taken part in this Africanization. Waves of immigration from Northeast to Southeast Brazil in the 1950s and the 1960s, along with countercultural movements, led to a proliferation of practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religion. Scholars have related the presence of *Candomblé* in São Paulo to the contemporary post-modern society, i.e. as representing a movement from an ethnic to a universal religion, now open to all independent of color and social class (GONCALVES DA SILVA, 1995; PRANDI, 1991). However, the continuing leadership roles among *Candomblé* adherents, who are mainly black, and a “clientele” that is mainly white (ORO, 1999) shows that *Candomblé* remains associated with the power of black culture and black people. Furthermore, the Africanization of Afro-Brazilian religion may represent a form of “whitening,” as those who most radically insist on inventing the African roots are the white middle class Brazilians (JENSEN, 2002, p. 14). This latter interpretation indicates the likelihood of white middle class co-optation of a tradition that belongs to black Brazilians – an act that involves issues of race and power.

### 3. THE CASE OF THE ORISA TRADITION

While *Candomblé* is the domain of black Brazilians, the “*orisa* tradition” (*a tradição do orisa*), is the creation of white Brazilians. *Orisa* “traditionalists” (*tradicionalistas*) represent a

relatively small religious movement of white Brazilians who seek to Africanize *Candomblé* by reviving its religious roots among the *Yorùbá* in Nigeria. My fieldwork in São Paulo included two *orisa templos* (temples) dedicated to *orisas* in Nigeria. Each temple was headed by a female *iyalorisa*, mother of the *orisa* (the *Yorùbá* term for the religious leader), and included from 80 to 200 followers called *filhos de orisa* (*orisa* children). Both *iyalorisas* and their *filhos* were white, educated, and middle class, and descended mainly from European immigrants (e.g. Italians and Hungarians) who arrived in São Paulo at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Both *iyalorisas* and many of their *filhos* have been on a long path to their present religion, which represents a gradual approximation of African “purity.” They were born and raised Catholics within families that also practiced mixed forms of Spiritism. Moreover, many of them had practiced *Candomblé* before they settled for the *orisa* tradition. In so doing, they have followed the Brazilian cultural pattern of experiencing diverse physical signs (e.g. fainting, nervous attacks, and dizziness) that they interpreted as signs from the *orisa* to convert to *Candomblé* in a traditional manner of a “surrender” to the *orisa’s* call (GOLDMAN, 1982). Nonetheless, they became dissatisfied with *Candomblé* and started to practice the *orisa* tradition instead. One of the *iyalorisas*, *iyá* Laura, dissociated herself from *Candomblé* and turned to the University of São Paulo, where she studied African culture and *Yorùbá* language. Through these studies she began corresponding with a *babalawo*, a Nigerian religious expert, Abimba, from Lagos, and soon took up travelling to visit him in Nigeria. Abimba taught her about the myths and rites of the *orisa* tradition, and ended up adopting her as a religious daughter, providing her with a *Yorùbá* name and a new religious identity. Laura returned home and replaced all the syncretistic Afro-Brazilian objects and ritual traditions in her temple with ritual objects and traditions from the *Yorùbá orisa* tradition. Today, her temple and its followers belong to the Abimba family or “Abimba Clan” (*a clã Abimba*) in Lagos, and are thus related to each other and to Africa. The *filhos* have acquired *Yorùbá* names and wear colorful patterned Africa-style kaftans when visiting the temples, which they use to perform their African identity.

### 3.1 QUEST

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During a conversation, *iyá* Laura said: “the lack of knowledge here makes people search for something else abroad [in Africa].” Traditionalists seek knowledge of the African *orisa* tradition, which they say that the slaves lost when taken from Africa. Their quest for Africa is a quest for knowledge and understanding. Africa represents the origins and roots of “pure” knowledge of the *orisa* tradition such as the mythology of *orisas* as knowledge about *odu* and *itan ifa*, i.e. verses about the mythology of the *orisas*; traditionalists often said that the myths were lessons of life. Their invention of tradition involves recapturing an imagined African origin (PRANDI, 1991) that represents traditional life, community, homogeneity, ancestral relatedness, nature, roots, and origins. Their “primitivist” position reflects a quest for authenticity, roots, and “primordial” meanings (FRIEDMAN, 1996, p. 79) as something that pertain to the old world and were lost with the emergence of the modern one (TRILLING, 1971). Traditionalists’ quests for Africa thus also involve an intellectual quest for identity and self-fulfillment. Their images of Africa express a desire to escape the heterogeneous modern society in which they live to invoke tradition and restore an all-integrating sacred canopy (BERGER, 1990). Having mythological ancestry, accomplished through being a *filho de orisa*, is essential for their religious identity, as the myths of the *orisas* serve as a guide for the individual *filho*, bringing self-knowledge and self-fulfillment. The traditionalists’ pursuit of tradition thus also involves individual and spiritual quests for identity. In the center of this construction of religious identity is a spiritual quest for identity and self-fulfillment.

As part of the traditionalists’ recapturing of roots and true identities from Africa, they strongly reject Afro-Catholic syncretism, especially in the form of Afro-Brazilian *Candomblé*. In the words of *iyá* Laura, the main difference between the *orisa* tradition and *Candomblé* is syncretism: “the *orisa* tradition is neither Christian nor syncretic, that’s the primary difference.” Traditionalists referred to their religion as “Afro-descendent” (*afro-descendente*), which they opposed to the term “Afro-Brazilian” (*afro-brasileira*). By invoking the term

“Afro-descendent”, they distinguish themselves from Afro-Brazilian religion as an “impure” tradition. The term “Afro-descendent” indicates erasing the Brazilian influence on Afro-Brazilian religion to recuperate the “authentic” *Yorùbá* religion in Africa. Their discourses against syncretism as representing impurity, disorder, fragmentation, and loss of foundation may express a reaction against the fragmentation of modernity. At the same time, their disavowal of *Candomblé* is a way of differentiating themselves from Afro-Brazilians, possibly because of their inability to identify themselves with the history that created Afro-Brazilian religion.

Traditionalists often expressed a comprehension of the historical processes that led to Afro-Catholic syncretism, reproducing the scholarly discourse on syncretism as a survival strategy among the black slaves (BASTIDE, 1978). Traditionalists referred to Afro-Brazilian syncretism as “the memory of slavery” (*a memória de escravidão*). In traditionalists’ perception, syncretism was a holdover from slavery – a historical condition with which they did not identify and in which they embody the identity of masters instead of slaves. History – or, rather, different histories – is thus at stake in anti-syncretism among white practitioners of Afro-descendant religions (PALMIÉ, 1995). The traditionalists’ urge to recapture religious roots from Africa represents an attempt to bridge the gap in the particular history that has formed Afro-Brazilian religion. In this respect, the traditionalists’ stance reflects an urge to escape time, place, and context.

## 3.2 RACE AND POWER RELATIONS

*Ìyálorisa* Sueli, also belonged to the *orisa* tradition, leading a temple in Campo Novo, a major city in the state of São Paulo. Before her transition to the *orisa* tradition, she used to be a leader of an Umbanda *terreiro* (a “mixed” national form of spirit possession). An acquaintance of Sueli one day invited her to a festival in a *Candomblé terreiro* that was known for its cultivation of African “purity” (*pureza*). She consulted the *búzios* divination method with the *mãe de santo* leader of the *terreiro*, who told her that she ought to give *bori*, i.e. to initiate. Sueli

ended up initiating in the *terreiro*, yet her initiation caused a lot of conflicts. She was a newcomer to the *terreiro*, and yet the first to initiate there because she was middle-class and had the money to do it, contrary the other *filhos*, who had been in the *terreiro* for a longer time, but were poorer. The conflict thus revolved around money, seniority, and the proper right to initiate. Sueli was utterly unable to understand the climate of intrigue and conflicts in the *terreiro*, and finally resolved to leave the *terreiro* and *Candomblé* altogether. As her and many other traditionalists' stories reflect, the encounter and interaction with the followers of *Candomblé* made them leave *Candomblé*, due to their inability to make part of a ritual family whose members are mostly black and poor.

Although Afro-Brazilian religion officially constitutes a hidden tradition unofficially practiced by most Catholics, traditionalists differ from other white Brazilians by actually having become part of the *Candomblé terreiros*. They have approached *Candomblé* with a certain fascination for what they describe as black culture (*cultura negra*), for what is different and other. Yet in the *terreiro* they met persons whom they describe as black, lower class, poor, uneducated, and ill-mannered – in other words, people they consider as socially other and inferior. At the same time they were subject to the inversion of power between blacks and white within the *terreiro* (VELHO, 1975). Their lack of mastery of practical knowledge in the *terreiro* reinforced their position as outsiders in the milieu of *Candomblé*. They finally found their religious identity with other white people in the *orisa* tradition and in the distance of Africa. Their movement (from Catholicism) first to *Candomblé* and then to the *orisa* tradition thus represents a movement from a Western self to a non-Western other and back to a Western self. White Brazilians' transgressions of Afro-Brazilian borders bring about the experience of racial and social otherness.

Traditionalists often spoke about their biological and social relationships with black Brazilians – a black great-grandmother, a nurse – to demonstrate having no sense of black Brazilians as “other” and to emphasize the racial mixing and fluid constructions of race that constitutes Brazil (HARRIS, 1970; SEGATO, 1998). Part of their plot was to reveal the black spots that have been concealed in their own families, which

have suppressed any biological kinship ties to Africa. At the same time, however, traditionalists in various ways differentiated between the histories and identities of black and white Brazilians. They would reproduce the image of a white Southeast and a black Northeast, associating the capital of Bahia as the locus of Africanness in Brazil and viewing São Paulo as a Western society, shaped by European immigrants, in which black Brazilians are marginalized (BERNARDO, 1998). They thus demarcated blackness from whiteness (SHERIFF, 1997) and racialized color within a white-black continuum (VARGAS, 2004).

Given the symbolic capital that black Brazilians possess in Afro-Brazilian religion, traditionalists' transgressions activate positions of power and exclusion. The presence of white traditionalists in Afro-Brazilian religion evokes issues of race and power, especially because whites generally had more success in representing Afro-Brazilian religion in the public sphere, and thus in the overall field of power. In the Afro-Brazilian milieus, black practitioners would accuse white practitioners of claiming ownership of Afro-Brazilian religion. These practitioners were reacting to the white middle class co-optation of Afro-Brazilian culture (SHERIFF, 1999) as an act that reifies Afro-Brazilian culture and divorces it from its history, allowing those in power to exploit it (HANCHARD, 1994). The presence of whites in Afro-Brazilian religion suggests a position of challenging the symbolic power of blacks by activating positioning of power relations in the overall field of power, where whites are superior to blacks.

On the one hand, traditionalists would call their religion universal, transcending race and nationality, thereby justifying their space in the religion. On the other, they would emphasize skin color, complaining that their white skin represented an obstacle to membership in *Candomblé*. Traditionalists often expressed their lack of religious power *vis-à-vis* the black *Candomblecists*. *Ìyá* Sueli thus spoke of the prestige of *Candomblé* as constituting a genuine tradition in Brazil, saying: "I'm white, I don't have a tradition, I have to re-Africanize [*reafricanizar*] to create my religion, to legitimize myself." Given their lack of embodied religious capital, whites are thus stripped of their ability to act within the Afro-Brazilian religious field and must find other ways of legitimizing themselves in Afro-Brazilian religion.

Attempting to do so, traditionalists point not to black Bahia but to Africa itself. They state that by being mythologically related to the *orisas*, they belong to *Yorùbá* ethnicity (*a ethnía Yorùbá*). This “belonging” suggests their construction of several forms of kinship ties to Africa. They create social capital through their relatedness to the Abimba family in Lagos, Nigeria. They also create biological kinship ties to Africa by claiming biological African ancestry through for example, a relative who was a slave in Brazil, using the popular discourse on “mixing” and hybridity as constituting the Brazilian “race” (i.e. emphasizing a fluid construction of race). Other means that traditionalists use to legitimize their African ancestry include claiming that they have lived their “past lives” (*vidas passadas*) in Africa and cultivating African biological and mythological ancestry (*ancestralidade*). In their overlapping creation of genealogical kinship ties to Africa, the biological, social, religious, and mythological kinship relations conflate. This redundancy demonstrates the traditionalists’ attempt to create family origins in Africa and thus to construct an embodied form of knowledge giving them religious legitimacy for claiming “Afro-descendant” identity.

This case study shows that despite the popular associations of Brazil with hybrid racial democracy, racial distinctions exist. The constructions of religious identities among traditionalists reflect the availability of a cultural repertoire of African symbols used in a quest for identity. Nonetheless, the presence of white Brazilians in the Afro-Brazilian religious field and their claim to an African connection invokes positioning of difference and power between them and black Brazilians – involving the need for proving legitimate roots. The next two sections illustrate both similar and different processes in a very different country, Denmark, among Danes who convert to Islam.

## 4. CROSSING CULTURAL BORDERS AND IDENTITIES IN DENMARK

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Denmark is an old European nation state, often described as a culturally homogenous nation as a result of its

small size and cultural and historical homogeneity (HE-DETOFT, 2006). It is a country that officially cultivates “indigenous” Danishness (KVALE, 2007); the voices in public debates thus tend to negate the existence of cultural diversity in Denmark, and immigration is often represented as a problem for national social cohesion and social welfare. Immigration is often seen as new phenomenon in Denmark, with the major chain of non-Western immigration starting in the late 1960s with the appearance of guest worker immigrants from Turkey and Pakistan.

While the Danish government emphasizes the social inclusion of immigrants in the Danish society, e.g. through political participation, public debates signal their simultaneous cultural exclusion. These debates on immigration and social integration particularly point to immigrant culture as an obstacle to integration. “Muslim culture” and Islam in particular are pointed out as major obstacles to integration, and the public debate has a conspicuously anti-Islamic rhetoric (MOURITZEN, 2006). Over the years, Danish politicians and other public figures have depicted Islam as “the dark Middle Ages,” associating Islam with oppression, religious fanaticism, anti-secularism, and (lately) terrorism (HOLM PEDERSEN; RYTTER, 2011), and contrasting it to what they formulate as genuinely Danish core values of liberalism, individualism, secularism, and democracy. Consequently, the public debate generates a polarization between Danish and Muslim identities, categorizing Islam and Muslim immigrants as incompatible with Danishness and Danish identity. Such polarization is evident in the light of Danish civil culture, which accentuates the notion of equality in the sense of “imagined sameness” (GULLESTAD, 2002, p. 83). Uneasiness with difference as represented by “others” manifests in the language that Danes generally use for referring to immigrants – “strangers” and “foreigners,” i.e. people who do not belong.

About 83% of the Danish population of around 5 million inhabitants formally belongs to the national Lutheran church, known nationally as “the People’s Church” (*Folkekirken*). Church and state are not separate in Denmark, so freedom of faith exists without equality. Although Islam is the second largest religion in Denmark, Muslim congregations have become integrated into the systems of religious privilege to only



a limited degree (KÜHLE, 2004). The public image of strong boundaries between Muslims and Danes is reproduced within Muslim institutions, with their strong sense of belonging to a religious community comprising ethnic minorities. The near non-existence of relationships between Danes and Muslims may reflect a general lack of interaction between ethnic minorities and the majority (HERVIK, 2003). Thus any crossing of cultural borders, as in the case of Danes who convert to Islam, becomes an issue of great discussion among both ethnic minority and majority communities. Given the public image of Islam as something totally “other” than Danish, the act of transgressing identity boundaries between Muslim and Danish identities appears as a form of cultural contamination (FRELLO, 2006; JENSEN, 2008).

## 5. THE CASE OF DANISH CONVERTS TO ISLAM

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Since the early 1970s about 4000 Danes have converted to Islam. While a majority of the converts are women, an increasing number of men are also embracing Islam. Most converts are young, having converted in their teens and twenties. As in other European countries, many converts come from the well-educated middle class (ROALD, 2004), and, like the majority of Danes, converts began their religious lives as members of “the People’s Church.”

Danes’ conversions to Islam result from different encounters with people from other countries. An example is Abdullah Olsen, a well-known public figure in the Danish society. At the age of 17, Abdullah formally left the People’s Church. He spent the 1970s studying anthropology, experimenting with different forms of spirituality, and travelling to the Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Abdullah chose to convert to Islam when he was 28 years old and embarked on a trip to North Africa. After his return to Denmark, he started to study Arabic and married a Muslim woman from Morocco.

Converts often expressed in interviews that they considered themselves as having “reverted” (*reverteret*) rather than having “converted” (*konverteret*) to Islam. By using the term

“reversion” they indicated that they have always been Muslims, and that they view Islam as a religion constituting the natural state for human beings. Many acquire a Muslim name upon their conversion, and female converts in particular start to wear Muslim clothing, such as the *hijab* (the head covering), the *jilbab* (the long dress), and even the *niqab* (the full face veil), thereby performing Muslim identity.

## 5.1 QUEST

Danes have different motivations for and ways of converting to Islam. Some converts expressed having cultural or social motivations for converting, which they related to their fascination and identification with the “culture” and “traditions” of Muslim immigrants as alternate to Danish culture. Converts tend to perceive themselves as religious seekers on either spiritual or intellectual quests for truth. They are attracted to the notions of *halal* (allowed) and *haram* (forbidden) as guidelines for life conduct. As following the rules for what constitutes “right” or “wrong” conduct also entails following the perceived guidelines of God, converts emphasized their submission to God, as their creator, and spoke about the simplicity of Islam based on a pure relationship between the individual and God. Some converts expressed being “a slave of Allah.” They thereby recognized that they were merely human beings who are nothing without their creator. Converts in many ways emphasize holistic notions of an interconnectedness that they claimed to have found in Islam. Overall, they are attracted to the image of Islam as an authoritative tradition that directs human behavior. Converts’ quests may represent a response to the fragmentation of modernity. They generally expressed their negative reactions to modernity, saying that freedom of choice, with its consequent reflexivity and insecurity, is both exhausting and fragmenting. They also criticize the modern materialistic and capitalistic society for its lack of rules and stable values. Ironically, however, the freedom to make their own religious choice of Islam clearly stems from the condition of modernity, as do their individualistic and eclectic ways of being Muslim, i.e. using the cultural signs and symbols of Islam as the basis for their spiritual quests and social criticism.

## 5.2 MECHANISMS OF INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

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Socialization and co-existence with Muslims, along with fascination with their cultures, are significant factors in conversion. Converts differ from other Danes – and are generally aware of this difference – by having maintained social relationships with immigrants as schoolmates, friends, lovers, or spouses. When interviewed for the first time, converts usually hesitated to talk about their relationships with Muslims. This avoidance of talking about their often intimate interactions with Muslim immigrants appeared related to the converts' reproduction of a public discourse that associates Islam with an alienation from and a threat to the Danish society (HERVIK, 2003). Being intimately related and mixing with Muslims thus activates notions of “pollution” (DOUGLAS, 1966) of Danish identity.

Because of the prevalent opposition between Danish and Muslim identities, and the notion that Muslims represent strangers, the Danish society tends to categorize Danish converts as people who have transformed from a Danish “us” into a Muslim “them,” i.e. created a rupture with their Danish identity. Consequently, both “rupture” and “continuity” are at stake in different ways for Danish converts, who either provocatively affirm or resist these external categorizations of their identities as Danish Muslims (JENSEN, 2008). This issue is also reflected in their ways of talking about the Danish culture and society. From the very start of my fieldwork, converts spontaneously discussed whether being both Danish and Muslim was possible. Consequently, the Danish identity, culture and society became important topics in the interviews. Converts talk about Danish culture in two main ways, both of which relate differently to the Danish public discourse on the homogeneity of Danish culture. One way expresses an essentialized, reified image of a homogenous Danish culture, understood largely as Danish “customs,” such as beer-drinking, in which converts no longer take part. The other way in which converts speak about culture is as a political, hegemonic concept defined by those in power, who relate nationalism to the project of homogenization. Converts' ways of speaking about

Danish culture respectively affirm and reject the notion of cultural homogeneity, and thus represent positions of exclusion and inclusion in relation to Danish culture. Converts' discourses about Danish culture express their position as the victims of a homogeneous and xenophobic discourse on Danishness. They either accept this discourse by interpreting their conversion as an act that excludes them from the Danish society, or else they challenge the discourse by offering other, more heterogeneous and inclusive definitions of Danishness.

Many converts are intimately related to immigrants, particularly through marriages and friendships. Although Muslim immigrants may constitute significant others for converts, this relationship also leads to a realization of cultural differences, especially for those not married to immigrants. Many converts dissociate themselves from what they describe as "national" forms of Islam. Consequently, they have not succeeded in belonging to religious communities in the mosques, which they experience as closed milieus whose practitioners consist of those "born Muslims" who question a convert's Muslim identity. Likewise, converts tend to repudiate those born Muslims for "mixing religion and cultural tradition", thereby practicing a form of Islam that converts see as "wrong." Taking on Muslim identity thus evokes experiences of cultural, ethnic historical and social differences.

Many converts are intimately related to immigrants, particularly through marriages and friendships. Although Muslim immigrants may constitute significant others for converts, this relationship also leads to a realization of cultural differences, especially for those not married to immigrants. Yousef's fascination for Islam started one evening, when he was watching TV and channel surfing, and found an Arabic channel that showed recitations from the Qoran taking place in Mecca. For Yousef this was an extraordinary experience, and he watched the program for the next two hours: "something happened, because I was stuck on the program without understanding a word of what was happening – only that it was fascinating." While Yousef had previously had no special knowledge about Islam, now his interest was aroused. After his first difficult attempts to find shops selling Islamic literature, he started to read the Qoran and other books about Islamic theology. This experience made him question Christian theology. After some

time, he started having recurrent dreams forcing him to make a religious choice. He chose to convert to Islam without ever having been inside a mosque. He went to see a Danish *imam*, to whom he pronounced the *shabada*: “And it was done within five minutes, we signed the papers, and then I was a Muslim, and then I biked home again. And then nothing really happened.” For his first two years as a Muslim, Yousef did not really practise his religion. He had no social relationships with Muslims, did not know where to find Muslim milieus, and did not want to be tied to any particular religious group. His particular problem was that most Muslim milieus were represented by certain ethnic groups. “I don’t belong there” was how Yousef described his first unhappy experiences of going to a mosque full of Arab immigrants.

Today, Yousef considers himself a practising Muslim, though he still does not frequent any particular Muslim community. Yousef often said that “born Muslims” were reluctant to accept his Muslim identity because he was a “white Dane” and a “stranger.” Yousef himself strongly declared, “I may be a Muslim, and then I say: *Alhamdulillah* [‘Thanks be to God’], but I’m not an Arab, no.” By so stating he expressed his difficulties in identifying himself with immigrant Muslims, whose practice of Islam is rooted in their countries of origin. In that way, Yousef and many other converts dissociate themselves from what they describe as “national” forms of Islam. Consequently, many converts have not succeeded in belonging to religious communities in the mosques, which they experience as closed milieus whose practitioners consist of those “born Muslims” who question a convert’s Muslim identity. Likewise, converts tend to repudiate those born Muslims for “mixing religion and cultural tradition”, thereby practicing a form of Islam that converts see as “wrong.” Taking on Muslim identity thus evokes experiences of cultural, ethnic historical and social differences.

Converts generally dissociate themselves from national and traditional forms of Islam. Instead they separate culture from religion and emphasize a universal and “pure” Islam. Their universalization of Muslim religious identity appears to be a strategy of inclusion by which the definition of Muslim identity as purely religious (e.g. like being Christian) means a religious identity that any person can hold, regardless of

nationality or cultural background. Converts use this definition as a strategy proving that their Muslim (religious) identity is appropriate within a (national) Danish context (BEKTOVIC; THOSTRUP, 2005). They also use this strategy to claim a space for their own identities as Danish Muslims. In brief, they seek to create relationships between identities that are otherwise seen as incompatible, positioning identity as relational, mutually inclusive, and hybrid.

Converts to Islam are often described as “mediators” between the majority and the minority societies (GERHOLM, 1990; ROALD, 2004). Although converts have a certain agency from being ethnic Danes, they nonetheless have only a limited role in national Muslim communities. Converts appear to have more success in the new Muslim cross-national organizations represented primarily by “second-generation immigrants” (i.e. Muslims born in Denmark) and Danish converts. These two groups share identities in many ways, first as people who have experienced a religious awakening to Islam and second, as people who have distanced themselves from the religion of their families. These organizations constitute alternative public spaces, or liminal spaces, in which the transformation of meaning, negotiation, and creation of identity takes place (BACK, 1996). Converts thus construct connections in issues that in the public debate appear as mutually exclusive, e.g. being “Danish” and being “Muslim.” In contrast to the public discourses on Danish cultural homogeneity and negations of cultural diversity, the positioning of converts mirror hybrid identity constructions.

## **6. COMPARING CASES OF IDENTITY- MAKING IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERNITY AND CULTURAL COMPLEXITY**

The respective cases from Brazil and Denmark contain both similarities and differences. Generally, these cases share similarities in reflecting comparable conditions in meaning constructions, primarily by illustrating that transgressing cultural boundaries and identities remains problematic, no matter what the context.

This article began by asking the questions of what makes members of ethnic majorities start practicing the traditions of ethnic minorities, and how this process unfolds with respect to the social relationships between ethnic minorities and majorities in the two very different countries. In each case the units of analysis are both the personal or spiritual quests of ethnic majority individuals and the social identities and relations between ethnic majorities and minorities. This article illustrates a tension between different uses of cultural symbols and traditions in identity-making. While on the one hand culture forms part of a symbolic repertoire which everyone is free to use for identity-making, on the other hand culture is associated with historical, ethnic, and political consciousness and power relations. Several constructions and positioning of identity are at stake in this process: context-free individual performances of “other” and exotic identities, quests for identity and self-fulfillment, social interactions and positioning of difference, and issues of exclusion and power, followed by quests for authenticity and legitimization of identity. The remaining part of this paper concerns itself with all of these issues.

The social actors who are on a quest are the white educated middle class, who often are the main actors in the modern invention of traditions (HOBSBAWN; RANGER, 1997). They generally enjoy privileged positions. In both Brazil and Denmark their quests for alternative religious worldviews date back to the 1960s counterculture. Both cases reflect middle class use of the symbols of subaltern people. The case of the traditionalists in Brazil illustrates that the small Brazilian middle class tends to draw on the cultural traditions of the lower social classes due to reasons of their lack of a coherent and independent identity (BROWN, 1979). By contrast, the Danish converts to Islam reflect the visibility and use of Muslim identity and symbols stemming from the recent immigration of Muslims. Both cases reflect a cultural flow from the less powerful to the more powerful, whose fascination and interest in the cultures of others exemplifies the spiritual search of the educated Western middle class for meaning of life in the non-Western world (HOWELL, 1995).

What both the traditionalists and the converts have in common is their religious quests, despite the great differences in the two religions. Afro-Brazilian religion is polytheistic,

unconcerned with ethics (PRANDI, 1991), life-affirming, and this-worldly. Islam is monotheistic, moral, and otherworldly, i.e. focused on the hereafter. Nonetheless, both cases involve religious quests for traditions that are “other.” This desire for otherness entails not only the adoption of new African or Arabic names that signal identity transformations but also the performance of ethnified religious identity through wearing ethnified religious clothing. These religious quests also involve searching for deeper meanings, whether from Africa or the Qoran, than they find in Western church-based Christianity.

Both cases reflect identity making in modernity, illustrating religious identity as a matter of choice as opposed to one socially conferred at birth. This individual choice in the quest for self-fulfillment expresses modernity’s individualization of belief and its fragmentation of life-worlds. Both religious quests involve a movement from the disorder of modern society to the order of tradition. The Danish converts refer to Islam as a “natural” religion, and the Brazilian traditionalists’ quest for “primordial” knowledge suggests a new primitivism, i.e. a quest for a “real self” through the return to both purity and nature. Both cases have features that are fundamental to new religious movements: the return to holism and the relatedness of all things as a response to the fragmentation and individualization of modern life (FERNANDEZ, 1986). Not surprisingly, both groups reflect ambiguity between modernity and tradition, consisting in the ways that new forms of religiosity in the modern world take traditional shapes (HERVIEU-LÉGER, 2000). This construction of identity is relatively unproblematic when it occurs at the level of self-identity or group identity, because such identity constructions illustrate the existence and straightforward use of cultural repertoires. But when constructions of identity in one way or another affect the identities of others, relations of power come into play.

Moving from the question of “why” to the question of “how” illuminates the social processes and identities involved in these religious quests. Both quests entail the choice of religious identities and persons that, to different degrees, are socially stigmatized. The case of the Brazilian traditionalists subtly reflects the existence of cultural patterns for mixing cultures and identities that consist of practices of cultural inclusion.



These conditions refer to the very constitution of Brazil as a mixed country that celebrates “alterity” (SJØRSLEV, 2004) and thus to a past conditioning the future. By contrast, the Danish case reflects the conscious choice of a religious conversion rife with consequences, such as social exclusion from Danishness. The choices of the Danish converts therefore represent conversion in the widely used sense of “identity change,” which involves a rupture with an original identity. However, because social and biological relationships to others (e.g. to immigrants) are at stake in the conversion to Islam, the Danish converts in that sense share similarities with the Brazilian traditionalists. Nevertheless, converts tend to suppress these relationships in response to the Danish external perception of alterity as a threat (SJØRSLEV, 2004) that involves cultural pollution. In contrast to the Brazilian case, the Danish converts’ relatedness with immigrants represents a Danish future rather than a Danish past.

Despite these differences, some striking similarities exist for the actual interactions between ethnic minorities and majorities in the two countries, and the very existence of similarities in two such widely different contexts highlights the general conditions at stake in such interactions. The stories of *iyá Sueli* in São Paulo and *Yousef* in Copenhagen illustrate such similarities. The experience of both the Brazilian traditionalists and the Danish converts in lacking access to the religious milieus is one such similarity: neither group can identify or socialize with people who are born into these religions, thereby causing problems in legitimizing themselves in the new religion. Both groups form religious fellowships with people who, like themselves (i.e. white, middle class), are outsiders to the traditions they practice. This experience is more pronounced in Brazil, given the power accorded to Afro-Brazilian religion as one of the few authentic traditions in the country, a religion representing a site for the inversion of power between black and white Brazilians. In Denmark, the absence of access, identity, and socialization is related primarily to the experience of cultural and ethnic differences that reflect the general separation between ethnic groups in Denmark.

Despite the strong differences relative to hybridity and the separation of ethnic groups, both cases show that borders are not easy to cross. Cultural signs do not float freely, to

attach to new meanings, no matter how different the contexts. Notwithstanding the individual act of detaching cultural signs from their original meanings and moorings to use them in a personal making of self-identity, those cultural signs depend upon prior historical experiences (FRIEDMAN, 1996, p. 143) because identity positioning occur in historically particular times and places (HOLLAND; LEANDER, 2004). Consequently, the use of cultural categories and signs invokes positioning of power relations connected to history and the politics of identity and ethnicity. This point is in line with the criticism of the concept of globalization and cultural flows as ignoring questions of political realities and power (FARDON, 1995). It also emphasizes identity and hybridity within modernity as issues continuously entailing basic social divisions such as ethnicity, race, and class (ANTHIAS, 1999).

Furthermore, the two cases illustrate the consequences of cultural transgressions. The interactions between the ethnic majorities and minorities indicate the absence of common history between “native” and newcomer reflected in the inability of the newcomers to practice the particular cultural forms of those native to the traditions. This experience results in the choice of ethnic majority practitioners to detach themselves from local roots, instead emphasizing global and universal identities that represent a claim on purity and express a claim for identity and space. The claim on purity is well known from similar cases resisting syncretism (PALMIÉ, 1995)<sup>3</sup> and illustrates the preoccupation of the elite with authenticity (HOWELL, 1995, p. 178). These two cases, however, differ in the use of purity in their claims for identity, according to the different positioning of difference, exclusion, and power reflected in the parties for they need to legitimize their identities. The Brazilian traditionalists primarily construct their identity vis-à-vis black Brazilians, to legitimize their presence in the Afro-Brazilian religious field. By contrast, the Danish

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<sup>3</sup> In his article on the new American *Yorùbá* Movement and the Cuban-American *regla ocha*, Stephan Palmié illustrates that the different positions for and against syncretism between Afro-Cuba *santeros* and Afro-American revisionists refer to their different histories and religious socializations. Palmié observes that the “whiter” the constituency of *regal ocha* gets, the more its objectifications take on an “African” appearance (PALMIÉ, 1995, p. 85).

converts create their identity primarily *vis-à-vis* non-Muslim Danes, to avoid exclusion from Danishness and to legitimize their identity as perpetually Danish. *Whereas traditionalists in Brazil must legitimize themselves to the ethnic minority, converts in Denmark aim their legitimization at the ethnic majority.* The two cases clearly illustrate differences in the status of the ethnic minorities, differences that in turn reflect different movements in the processes of history, civilization, and acculturation. In Brazil, black Brazilians have accumulated their own distinct symbolic capital over the past centuries; in Denmark, where immigration is recent, immigrants are utterly subaltern.

While both groups insist on essentialism and purity as a strategy for claiming their space within the religion, they represent contrary movements in Brazil and Denmark. In Brazil, the quest for Africa and the claim on purity is used against syncretism, as a way of bypassing the history that has created the culture and identity of Afro-Brazilians and finding their own context-free place in Afro-Brazilian religion. In Denmark, the converts' separation of Danish culture from Muslim religion, i.e. pointing to their Danish identity as national and to their Muslim identity as religious, serves as a means of including Islam in a Danish context, and thus as a way of emphasizing cultural complexity and hybridity in Denmark.

For the Brazilian traditionalists, Brazilian hybridity – e.g. the notion that race is fluid – is used as a means of creating (African) purity. For the Danish converts, essentialism is not a goal but a means of producing hybridity and claiming their space as a person who is both Danish and Muslim. Both cases demonstrate the strategic use of hybridity (PRAVAZ, 2008). In Brazil, hybridity is the point of departure and purity is an end, whereas in Denmark purity is the point of departure and hybridity is an end. Consequently, the outcome of the identity constructions related to the cases in Brazil and Denmark differ in their respective emphasis on African purity and Danish-Muslim mixity. Together, the cases from Brazil and Denmark ultimately appear to represent opposite processes in search of what one does not have: either cultural purity or hybridity.

The respective constructions of identities that are essential and hybrid represent reverse images of “hybrid” and “homogenous” identities in Brazil and Denmark. The emphasis of Brazilian traditionalists on rupture and distinctions

reveals the existence of distinct black and white stories and identities in Brazil, in stark contrast to the myth of Brazil as a racial democracy. Danish converts construct relationships between what the Danish public debate terms “culture differences” within the Danish society. Both illustrations of crossing cultural borders and identities thus negate the public stories and identities at stake in the different countries and contexts, and serve as alternative narrations of the complexities of the particular societies and social identities.

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## 7. CONCLUSION

This comparison between the crossing of cultural borders and identities in Brazil and Denmark stems from a renewed impetus in anthropology on comparative method, focusing on globalization as connecting human beings and making them experience similar conditions (GINGRICH; FOX, 2002). The article has explored the nature of these conditions, and followed the themes that the cases represent by focusing on the contexts and processes of constructing relationships and meanings. What makes a comparison between two such different countries both provoking and telling is the possibility of illuminating general social processes. First, the comparative analysis has shown that in both Brazil and Denmark, the act of crossing cultural borders and identities implies various and similar identity constructions and positioning of difference and power. The two cases represent widely different historical and social contexts for different encounters and interactions between different people and national self-images as either culturally inclusive and “hybrid” or culturally exclusive and “pure” countries. Despite these differences, the cases show surprising similarities with respect to distinctions and positioning between ethnic minorities and majorities.

Second, while comparing two such different countries and contexts may constitute an “absurd comparison” (FRY, 1982), as a direct result of these internal differences, this form of comparison illuminates matters that are otherwise concealed in semantically dense images of each country, i.e. the claim of cultural purity in Brazil and of hybridity in Denmark. Thus

the comparison illuminates the presence of issues of Brazil in Denmark and of Denmark in Brazil. Each case represents narratives of identity and culture that stand in sharp contrast to the country's public self-representations as either "culturally hybrid" or "culturally pure." Such an analysis contributes to a fuller picture of the global complexity of culture and society, including the politicization of culture.

## CRUZANDO FRONTEIRAS E IDENTIDADES CULTURAIS NO BRASIL E NA DINAMARCA: UMA PERSPECTIVA COMPARADA

### RESUMO

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Este artigo compara a formação de identidade entre majorias étnicas que praticam as tradições religiosas de minorias étnicas, ou seja, de práticas de religiões afro-brasileiras por brasileiros brancos e as conversões dos dinamarqueses ao Islã. Essa comparação incomum ilustra os vários processos, condições e consequências desses modos de formação de identidade. No contexto dos debates sobre a formação de identidade na modernidade, globalização e complexidade cultural, este artigo argumenta que a formação de identidade que inclui a apropriação de símbolos culturais e tradições de outros envolve certas tensões. Examinando os casos de majorias étnicas cooptando símbolos e tradições das minorias étnicas no Brasil e na Dinamarca, o artigo mostra como tais aspectos espirituais e modelos de formação de identidade invocam posicionamentos de diferença e relações de poder ligadas às histórias e às políticas de identidade e etnicidade. Ambos os casos, conseqüentemente, implicam a necessidade de invocar noções de pureza cultural e hibridismo, sendo que ambos são usados de maneiras diferentes para legitimar a identidade. No Brasil, o hibridismo é o ponto de partida e pureza é um fim, enquanto, na Dinamarca, a pureza é o ponto de partida e de hibridismo é um fim.

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

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Minorias. Religião. Identidade. Transgressão. Poder.

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Recebido em outubro de 2014.

Aprovado em abril de 2015.