

Research

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Presentation

Curious, patient and observant, Pierre Verger has all the essential qualities required to be a good researcher. Nevertheless, it is only after the age of fifty that he ventures into the complex world of archives, ancient books, rare documents, collecting of oral stories, anthologies and inventory of raw data. Gifted with an unlimited curiosity, he investigates a multitude of themes related to Yoruba culture, both in Africa and in Bahia.

Self-taught, with neither academic training nor durable institutional bond, Verger is able to develop a peculiar working technique. Taking notes of everything he sees, he gives the same attention to written sources, oral stories, artefacts and rituals, with the added advantage of being a skilled and experienced photographer. His largest scientific production comes from the research he undertook on the religion of the Yoruba people and of their descendants in Africa and Brazil, on the study of the social, economic and political consequences of the slave trade between Africa and Brazil and on the medicinal and liturgical use of plants.

Another fundamental quality of Pierre Verger's work as a researcher is the style of his writing, in which he always highlights the referred sources. Avoiding interpretation he chooses to play the discrete role of the narrator, and in doing so allows the reader to access the raw data. An insatiable information seeker, Verger gathered an enormous amount of data that could feed future research. Within the archives of the Pierre Verger Foundation are unpublished documents (slips and manuscripts...) awaiting more research.

{mospagebreak title=Ewé : Verger and Plants}Ewé : Verger and Plants

The botanical garden Verger dreams of never comes to fruition, but today it is enough to look at the piece of land surrounding his house, the current seat of the Pierre Verger Foundation, to notice that in its small space Verger managed to include the essential. Wherever he went he was interested in plants and never hesitated to ask for cuttings. This interest was born "at the beginning of the 1950s, when I was initiated as a babalaô, for I had the right and the duty to learn with the African masters the use of the medicinal and liturgical plants";

In Africa, Verger collects information about 3,549 plants used by the Yoruba, of which about 200 are known in Brazil under their African name. His interest focuses on their invigorating and calming use, "that occurs possibly in candomblé to help the persons to get into trance and also to come back to their normal state, but as the information I collected on their other uses could be of interest to other researchers, I also took note of them". Verger then makes a discovery of prime importance: "plants work in synergy, in combination with each other";

With only little space available, Verger gathers the plants to study them before donating them. In 1969, he gives 1,210 specimens to the Natural History Museum in Paris. In 1976, he sends 150 plants from the Bahian flora to the Biology Institute of the Federal University of Bahia. In order to gather and classify the plants, Verger receives support from institutions such as the Botanical Services of Ibadan, from researchers such as the biologist Alexandre Leal Costa, and from candomblé priestesses in the person of Mãe Senhora and Olga do Alaketu. His first writings on the subject are published in the late 1960s, especially looking at the memorizing of the use of plants through liturgical verses and at the plants classification system established by the Yoruba.

In 1995, the book Ewé is ready. It presents 2,216 recipes based on leaves, barks, seeds, fruits, flowers and roots used for the most diverse ends: skin problems, impotence, lack of money, nightmares... In addition to the identification of the plants with the formulas, in both Yoruba and French languages, Verger provides the words that must be pronounced during the rituals, a fundamental point in Yoruba liturgy. As Verger explains, "in candomblé, the most important thing is the matter of which leaves and plants are used during initiation. Nature is always present during the ceremony. Before it starts, a bath in water infused with herbs must be taken in order to gain axé, the essential force they contain"; .

{mospagebreak title=Orishás : Verger and Candomblé}Orishás : Verger and Candomblé

"Candomblé is very interesting for me as it is a religion exalting the personality, where one can be truly him/herself, and not as the society would like one to be. For those who have something to express through the unconscious, the trance allows it to manifest itself." During his intimate contact with candomblé and the world of the Orishas, Verger as an admirer, friend and initiate (Babalaô and Oju Obá) acquires a great knowledge and is granted respect and protection. To honour the trust invested in him, he spends the rest of his life collecting legends, liturgies and ritual sequences, all scrupulously documented in his books and photographs, that will become an invaluable source of information for other researchers and followers of the cult.

"It is only in 1948, two years after my arrival in Bahia and following a long trip to Recife, Haiti and Dutch Guyana, that I started to realise the importance of candomblé and the role it plays in conferring a special dignity to the majority of

the African descendants living in Bahia, ” It is also in 1948 that he goes for the first time to the terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, shortly before his departure for Africa, where he is given a grant to deepen his research on the multiple links between Brazil and the Black Continent. Mãe Senhora lends his head to the god Shangô, marking the beginning of a long friendship with the members of candomblé.

In Africa, he meets with descendants of ancient kings who were at the origins of the Yoruba myths, visits sacred places, witnesses and participates in numerous rituals. Back in Bahia, he continues his apprenticeship: “What is interesting is to share people’s life, to do the same things as they do and to participate without intending to understand. When one participates, things become completely different. This is what happened with me. I was living with the community at the terreiro Opô Afonjá, doing the same things as people there, without knowing why or how. I was living with them, sharing their concerns and beliefs”.

Besides the Opô Afonjá, Verger frequently visits many other terreiros, such as those of Casa Branca, Joãozinho da Goméia, Joana de Ogum and Catita where he has many friends. Then a few years later he helps his friend “father of saints” Balbino Daniel de Paula to found the Opô Aganju. Until the end of his life, Verger would declare to be a sceptic devoid of “strong religious feelings”, “a rationalist Frenchman who’s not buying into that", but to many, the depth of his knowledge, associated to a bare lifestyle and a mysterious personality would turn him into a reference as well as an example. Flux and Reflux: African Diaspora

During his numerous trips back and forth between Africa and Bahia, Pierre Verger never stops being struck with amazement by the resemblances between the people he frequents on each side of the Atlantic: physical appearance, way of talking or of walking and customs, through which he sees the tangible proof of interwoven histories. He is so passionate about this theme that he ends up playing an essential role in the re-establishing of the links between West Africa and Bahia. Here and there he organizes museums , receives and guides many people, carries messages and realises comparative studies. In order to understand in depth the historical reasons for those resemblances, he devotes himself during several years to the study of the slave trade that tore millions of Africans out of their birth lands, carried them to the Americas and, after the abolition, caused the return to Africa of many of their descendants. The result of his studies constitutes one of his main works: Flux and Reflux of the Slave Traffic between the Benin Gulf and the Todos os Santos Bay.

The research starts in 1949 in Ouidah, when Verger has access to an important testimony on the clandestine slave trade with Bahia: the trade maps of José Francisco dos Santos, made in the 19 th century. Verger progressively discovers that, during the last years of the traffic the slaves where almost exclusively Yoruba, that tobacco was used as legal tender and that the intensity of the trade was abominable: “The agents responsible for the trade with Bahia had close relations with this part of Africa. Some years a hundred ships sailed back and forth between the port of Ouidah and the Bay of All Saints”.

About twenty years of research is needed for the text to be ready. In 1966 Flux et Reflux du Trafic des Esclaves entre le Golfe du Bénin et la Baie de Tous les Saints is defended by Verger at the Sorbonne. Verger, a self-taught man expelled from two schools for indiscipline and who stopped studying at school at the age of seventeen, receives his PhD in African Studies. The thesis is published two years later, in 1968. The publication of the English version occurs in 1976. It is only in 1987 that the book is translated into Portuguese and published in Brazil by the publishing house Corrupio.

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Flux and Reflux has become a reference book. Within its 718 pages, the detailed study brings to light aspects of the economic, social and political consequences that had previously remained obscured. Verger was hard at work: he describes the trade relations, discusses in particular the slave rebellions, forms of emancipation, life conditions, legislation, return to Africa and the life of the Brazilian descendants. Literally transliterating a large number of the documents he looked at in archives in London, Lisbon, The Hague, Rio de Janeiro and Lagos, he produced the most historiographical of his books. "Many Blacks, when they returned as free men and women to Africa but with Brazilian customs, created there a kind of Brazil, in the same way as a kind of Africa had been created in Bahia", said Verger, who saw the re-establishment of the links between those people as something essential. With Flux and Reflux, a number of articles and some other initiatives, he actively contributed to this reconciling. As a matter of fact, the work of Verger promoted and continues to promote numerous breakthroughs in this domain, for it remains one of the most important sources of information for the Bahians and African people willing to know better their own history.