DIVINING SLAVERY AND FREEDOM

Since its original 2008 publication in Brazil, *Divining Slavery and Freedom* has been extensively revised and updated in this first English translation, complete with new primary sources and an updated bibliography. It tells the story of Domingos Sodré, an African-born priest who was enslaved in Bahia, Brazil, in the nineteenth century. After obtaining his freedom, Sodré became a slave owner himself, and in 1862 he was arrested on suspicion of receiving stolen goods from slaves in exchange for supposed "witchcraft." Using this incident as a catalyst, this book discusses African religion and its place in a slave society, analyzing its double role as a refuge for blacks as well as a bridge between classes and ethnic groups (such as whites who attended African rituals and sought help from African diviners and medicine men). Ultimately, *Divining Slavery and Freedom* explores the fluidity and relativity of conditions such as slavery and freedom, African and local religions, and personal and collective experience and identities in the lives of Africans in the Brazilian diaspora.

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Divining Slavery and Freedom

the story of domingos sodré, an african priest in nineteenth-century brazil

João José Reis

Translated by
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For Stuart Schwartz
and
Katia Mattoso, in memoriam

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Preface

At 4:30 p.m. on July 25, 1862, a Friday, an African freedman named Domingos Pereira Sodré was arrested in his home in Salvador, the capital of Bahia, then a province in northeastern Brazil. He had been personally reported to the chief of police by a customs officer who accused him of receiving goods that slaves had stolen from their masters as payment for his divining sessions and for "witchcraft." His accuser, whose charges were immediately investigated, was himself a slave owner and one of the alleged victims. *Candomblé* – the term that the police chief used to describe what was going on in the African's home – was already in vogue at the time to denote religious beliefs and practices of African origin, or purported to be, as well as the place of worship. I will use the same broader meaning of the term in this book. Candomblé, it should be said from the start, is a spirit possession religion primarily based in Bahia, but also found in different parts of Brazil. It ranks as one of the most popular Afro-Brazilian religions, which also include Umbanda, Batuque, and Xangô, terms that are sometimes also used to refer to Candomblé.

More than twenty years ago, I came across the first documents pertaining to Domingos Sodré's arrest, which consist of a number of official letters exchanged between the chief of police, Antônio de Araújo Freitas Henriques, and the *subdelegado* (deputy chief constable) for the parish of São Pedro, Pompílio Manoel de Castro, where Domingos Sodré lived. These sources led me to others that enabled me to broaden the focus on the incident that took place in 1862. I went after information regarding the African freedman accused of witchcraft and theft and unearthed a great deal. He was born in Lagos, in what is now Nigeria, and was captured and sold to transatlantic slave traders under

unknown circumstances. After arriving in Bahia, he became a slave on the property of a major sugar planter in the Recôncavo, as the fertile lands that surround the Bay of All Saints are called, and there are strong indications that he won his freedom upon his master's death. I do not know when Domingos moved from the countryside to the City of Bahia, as Salvador was known at the time, but I found him there for the first time in the mid-1840s, in the baptismal records, standing godfather. By this time he was a freedman. Domingos prospered in the city, apparently as a merchant, and became a slaveholder himself, which I discovered in deeds of purchase and sale and letters of manumission registered by several notaries in Salvador, who also registered the purchase and sale of two houses that he owned. Domingos got married in a Catholic church, became a widower, and married again, according to the parish records. I have found that on at least two occasions, he took other African freedmen to court, one of whom he accused of murdering a friend of his. When he was near death, he dictated his last will and testament, leaving his few earthly possessions to his wife, Maria Delfina da Conceição. His probate records tell the story of his final illness, death, and funeral rites.

The sheer volume of information found so far about Domingos Sodré – and more is bound to appear – makes him an exception, although not the only case, among Africans brought to Brazil as slaves. However, while it has been possible to shed light on several aspects of his life story, we are still in the dark about many others. Therefore, our protagonist frequently leaves the center stage in this book to give way to the world he lived in and to the other characters that peopled it, through whom his story is largely told. This narrative method – call it micro-historic – fits well in any biography, because everyone lives in a certain context, whether immediate or broader, in which other individuals belong, with varying degrees of proximity. Naturally, the documents available to recount the history of the barons of slave society in monarchical Brazil are, as a rule, more abundant than those for slaves or freedpersons. The biographies of the latter are more fragmented, and necessarily full of gaps. Nevertheless, in addition to illuminating many aspects of specific life experiences, they serve as a guide that enables us to get to know a time, a society, and particularly the men and women who peopled this world, many of whom made up the social networks of the subjects of those biographies, with their ethnic differences; social and economic ranks; and institutional, social, political, and cultural practices.

Sodré's life in Brazil covered most of the nineteenth century. The century is full of landmarks in that country's history. In 1808, the Portuguese court migrated to Brazil, fleeing Napoleon's troops, and stayed there until the return of King João VI in 1821, leaving his son Pedro as regent. Prince Pedro proclaimed independence from Portugal the following year and became Brazil's often despotic – although with the title of "constitutional" – emperor for almost ten years until, under popular pressure and amid political turmoil, he abdicated the crown on behalf of his infant son, Pedro II, in 1831. For the next ten years, under successive regents, a series of regional, federalist, and liberal revolts shook the country from north to south, until the mid-1840s. Pedro II's reign was long and generally peaceful, except for a five-year war against Paraguay (1864–1870) in alliance with Uruguay and Argentina. The monarchy was abolished in 1889, in part because the emperor had lost support from land and slave owners dissatisfied with the abolition of slavery the year before.

Slavery had reached its peak during the imperial regime, having been kept untouched after independence, despite isolated voices who recommended its reformation. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century the slave trade had intensified manifold to provide the workforce for the sugar plantations and cattle ranches in the northeast, the sugar and coffee plantations in the southeast, the salted meat industry in the extreme south, as well as cities, towns, and villages all over the country. But slavery was not just the domain of major planters and ranchers. All sectors of agriculture, including small and medium-sized farms dedicated to sugar, cotton, and tobacco for export and to food production for internal consumption, used slave labor. Slaves could be found everywhere in the labor structure. Besides toiling as field workers, they were employed as miners, metalworkers, domestics, artisans, porters, barber-surgeons, fishermen, sailors, and in every occupation in the "mechanics" and building trades, to name just a few. In the cities, the ownership of one, two, and three slaves by people of lesser means was widespread, especially until 1850, when the transatlantic slave trade was definitively banned, having resisted, through officially tolerated contraband, the first legal attempt to abolish it in 1831. After 1850, however, a vigorous internal slave trade persisted and transferred thousands of enslaved men and women primarily from the decadent sugar-planting northeast to the prosperous coffee-growing southeast. But the decline of the slave population was inevitable when the African traffic ended, and it intensified after the 1871 "Free Womb" law that freed children born to slaves.

Already at the beginning of the century, way before the end of the slave trade, a large and fast-growing free Afro-Brazilian population had been formed, which substantially outnumbered the slave population by mid-century. Partly because of manumission, a particularly widespread phenomenon in Brazil, free and freed people, including the African-born, would become especially vital to the economic, social, and cultural fabric of major cities like Rio de Janeiro, Recife, and Salvador, among others. Although patron-client relationships functioned as a powerful mechanism of social control, poor Africans and Afro-Brazilians would become a source of concern because of their potential or actual support and participation, often in positions of leadership, in the social and political conflicts of that time.

Domingos Sodré either witnessed or participated in several of the processes that stand as the foundation of modern Brazil. When he disembarked in Bahia around the mid to late 1810s, he found a region that was experiencing a period of prosperity strongly linked to its main source of wealth – sugar production. Sugarcane was grown and processed in the plantations of the Recôncavo, primarily by African-born slaves, whose numbers rose dramatically when the slave trade intensified to keep pace with the triumph of Bahia's plantation economy. Domingos was one of the numerous victims of that Atlantic boom. In the land that enslaved him, he saw dozens of slave rebellions rise and fall on the plantations of the Recôncavo and in Salvador and its surroundings in the first half of the 1800s. Between 1820 and 1840, Domingos also witnessed major transformations and recurring political crises, starting with the struggles for independence from Portugal, followed by anti-Portuguese riots, federalist and republican movements, military uprisings, and a revolt against the ban on church burials. In the following decades, he saw a general strike of African street workers and a food riot, at a time when the city of Bahia was reorganizing its urban landscape by building roads and plazas, diversifying its public transport system as the local population grew in direct proportion to the decline of its African counterpart. Domingos witnessed (and suffered from) the local elites' embrace of civilizing projects molded along European lines that combated African and Afro-Brazilian customs they considered uncivilized. Slavery grew, changed, and declined with the end of the Atlantic slave trade, and became virtually extinct during his lifetime in Bahia. Domingos died on the eve of the abolition of slavery.

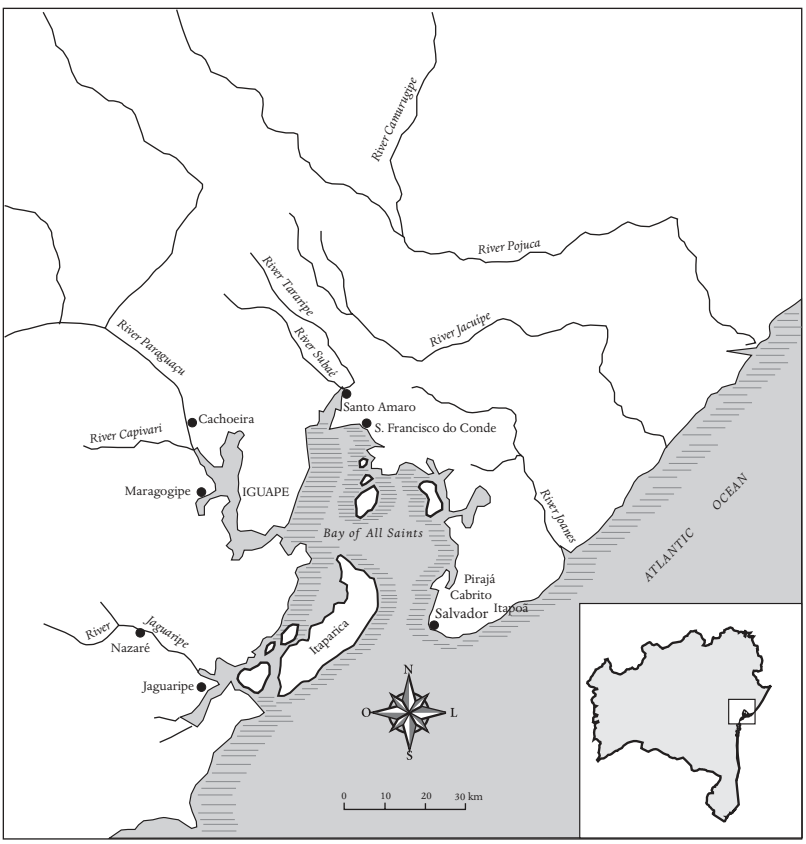
Through Sodré's life, we enter the world of African freedpersons, thousands of men and women who had negotiated with their masters to

Figure 1. View of the city of Salvador, Bahia.

obtain their manumission, sometimes free of charge, but more often – especially for African-born slaves – by purchasing their freedom. These freedpersons, most of whom worked in the streets, played a key role in the formation of Candomblé, a religion whose broad outlines developed precisely when Domingos lived in Bahia. Many of the leading figures in nineteenth-century Candomblé appear in this book, and their life stories are intertwined with his. Called *feiticeiros* (witches or sorcerers) in the official records and the press, these diviners, healers, and heads of houses of worship were the target of systematic persecution by the Bahian police, but the authorities did not always agree on the best way to punish them, or even if they should be punished at all. The police agenda often stressed the danger that these people represented to law and order in a slave society because of their transactions with slaves who went to them for help in confronting their masters. But the fact that other free segments of the community were also Candomblé practitioners, including whites of some social standing, was not the least of the concerns of those who combated the beliefs and ritual practices that Africans brought to Brazil and transformed and re-created there. Sodré's life unfolds as part of this cultural conflict and serves as a narrative thread when telling the history of Candomblé in the Bahia of his time.

Abbreviations

ACMS	Arquivo da Cúria Metropolitana de Salvador
AI	Arquivo do Itamarati, Rio de Janeiro
AMS	Arquivo Municipal de Salvador
AN	Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro
APEB	Arquivo Público do Estado da Bahia
ASCMS	Arquivo da Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Salvador
BNA	British National Archives
BNRJ	Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro
FHC	Family History Center, Church of Latter Day Saints, Salvador
FO	Foreign Office
LNT	*Livro de Notas do Tabelião*
LRT	*Livro de Registro de Testamentos*



Map 1. Recôncavo of Bahia, the sugar plantation region.