

## Serendipity in Bahia, 1950-70

Almost a generation ago, the well known sociologist, Robert K. Merton reintroduced into the vocabulary of the social sciences the very useful term – “Serendipity” – the discovery through chance by a theoretically prepared mind of valid findings which were not sought for. By now, this rather strange term appears in standard United States dictionaries and is being used with diverse nonscientific connotations (i.e., a restaurant in New York is called “Serendipity”). Merton used the term in a brilliant essay which discussed the relationship between empirical research and theory in sociology (Merton, 1949, p. 97-111). The serendipity com-

ponent in research is the process by which new and unanticipated data, gathered while testing theoretically derived hypotheses, originates new hypotheses and theories. Since the concept of serendipity is not so widely used, I shall take the liberty in this essay to extend its meaning beyond the realm of theory; for the same principle not only creates new hypotheses and theories but also motivates new empirical research and attracts researchers into, a particular field or area of research. This was the case of the Bahia State – Columbia University Social Science Research Program initiated in 1949.

The present paper does not

pretend to be a complete history of this research project or its by-products; nor does it purport to resume the major results of over two decades of social science research resulting from the project. What I hope to describe is the "serendipity component" — the unexpected activities and research which this project set off. In addition, I hope this paper will be useful nowadays when international collaboration is actively pursued — even demanded — among social scientists working beyond the frontiers of their own nation.

A brief history of the Bahia State — Columbia University Research Project is necessary. It began at a time when the political scene was vastly different from that which now reigns both in Brazil and in the United States. In retrospect, at least to me, it seems like an "age of innocence". The initiative came from Brazil. Dr. Anísio S. Teixeira, a brilliant educational theorist and administrator who had once studied at Columbia University, was Secretary of Education and Health of the State of Bahia. He had for many years worked for close cooperation of the sciences with education. At his invitation, the author, in collaboration with Eduardo Galvão, a Brazilian social anthropologist who was then completing his doctoral dissertation at Columbia University, prepared a plan for social anthropological research in a series of Bahian *mu-*

*nicipios* in different parts of the State. It was agreed that the government of the State of Bahia would make available funds in local currency for the studies and the necessary dollar expenditures for travel would be provided by Columbia University. Dr. Thales de Azevedo was appointed to represent the State of Bahia as co-director of the program with the present author as the representative from Columbia University.

The actual field research was to be undertaken by post-graduate students (i.e., candidates for the Ph.D. degree) from Columbia University in cooperation with Brazilian students of the social sciences. The aim of the program was to study "the process of social and cultural change, especially the changes related to the appearances of different types of economy, of modern technology, of new ideology, and of concomitant complex administrative procedures in a relatively non-technically developed society" (i.e., representative *municípios* of the Bahian "interior"). (Wagley, Azevedo and Costa Pinto, 1950, p. 25).

During the academic year of 1949-50, Dr. Thales de Azevedo with the help of research assistants collected data on population, production, internal migration, administrative and juridical divisions and other pertinent aspects of Bahian community life. A bibliography of geographical, historical, and sociological sources on Bahia

State was collected by Dr. Azevedo and his collaborators. At the same time a seminar was held at Columbia University during the academic year in which all of the North American researchers participated. Based upon data collected by Thales de Azevedo and his collaborators, the State of Bahia was divided into six ecological zones: the Recôncavo, the Northeastern Sertão, the Southern Forest; the Central Plateau; the São Francisco Valley and the Western Plateau (Wagley, Azevedo and Costa Pinto, 1950. p. 27-30).

In June of 1950, the present author, accompanied by Marvin Harris, Harry W. Hutchinson and Ben Zimmerman from Columbia University arrived in Bahia. During seminar meetings in Bahia it was decided to initiate studies in only three of the six zones of the state, namely in the Recôncavo, the Northeastern Sertão, and in the Central Plateau. In each zone, a community was selected for study with a long and characteristic history, which was considered "traditional" in the zone and which was a seat of a município with an urban population of approximately 1,500 people. The communities selected thus tended to be rather stable and conservative. In addition, a second community in each zone was selected which was considered "progressive" — that is in which economic and social change seemed to be more marked than in the "tradi-

tional" communities. Comparison of the "traditional" with the "progressive" communities, we hoped, would provide us with a picture of the dynamics and substantive changes underway in each of the three zones. A team was assigned to carry out studies in each of the three zones — Marvin Harris and Nilo Garcia in the Central Mountains, Ben Zimmerman and Lincoln Allison Pope in the Northeastern Sertão, Harry W. Hutchinson and M. Carmelita Junqueira Ayres in the Recôncavo. In addition L.A. Costa Pinto was to carry out a regional sociological study of the Recôncavo<sup>(1)</sup> and Thales de Azevedo and the present author were to supervise the research in the various communities and to carry out comparative analyses. It was a neat and solid research plan which was quite feasible<sup>(2)</sup>.

However, almost from the start "serendipity" and the human element in social science research worked to modify, limit and expand this research plan. Shortly after field research began, Rollie Poppino, then a candidate for the Ph.D. degree in History at Stanford University, arrived in Brazil with plans to undertake a historical study of Feira de Sant'Ana. Given the crucial role of this city in the economic and social system of Bahia State, he was urged to make his study a part of our larger research scheme<sup>(3)</sup>. Within a matter of weeks, Nilo Garcia and Lincoln

Allison Pope, who were social science students from Rio de Janeiro, found that they had to return to Rio to resume their studies. There were but few advanced students of social science in Bahia, but we were able to recruit for periods such individuals as Josildete Gomes and Maria Guerra, and others for research in the community in Central Plateau which we called by the fictitious name of Minas Velhas; and Gisela Valadares for work in the Sertão community to which we gave the fictitious name of Monserrat. It soon became clear, however, that we had over-ambitious plans and a shortage of trained research workers. Although considerable field work was undertaken in the so-called "progressive" community of each zone, nothing was in fact published on Minas Velhas (Harris, 1956) and Vila Recôncavo (Hutchinson, 1957) in which use was made of the "traditional" — "progressive" comparison.

In 1950, the Social Science Department of UNESCO had set forth a plan to survey race relations in Brazil. Knowing of the existing research apparatus in Bahia State, Alfred Métraux, of the UNESCO staff came to Bahia. He proposed that our staff include as part of their work a study of race relations in each community. It was already clear to all of us that social stratification in each of the communities included race relations, so this was not considered a deviation from our project

aims; but such a study would not have become the first major publication from our project had we not been under pressure from UNESCO (Walgey ed., 1952). Furthermore, without the intervention of the UNESCO program on race relations in Brazil, Thales de Azevedo would not have been stimulated to undertake the research and to write his excellent book *Les Élités de Couleur dans une Ville Brésilienne* (1955). The UNESCO program did modify the Bahia State-Columbia University project from its fundamental plan but in doing so, it produced at least two books which are today accepted as basic to an understanding of race relations in Brazil.

Then, in 1951, Anthony Leeds, from Columbia University, attracted by the comparative data and the original research plan began his studies in the Cacao producing area (The Southern Forest Zone) of Bahia. His studies did not follow the format of our original plan, but his research, the first of its kind in southern Bahia, was sponsored now by the *Fundação para o Desenvolvimento da Ciência na Bahia* which had taken over from the State government the Bahia-Columbia University Program. (Leeds, 1957). In 1953, Carlo Castaldi, who is now a leading planning manager for Italconsult in Italy, went to Bahia to do research on urban problems and Afro-Brazilian cults in Itaparica. He was in 1953 a post-grad-

uate student at Columbia University. His major report on Itaparica remains unpublished (Castaldi, 1954) but he published an important article on folk catholicism (Castaldi, 1955). Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz, from São Paulo, undertook research sponsored by this program in Northern Bahia on a messianic religious movement (Queiroz, 1955). Somewhat later, Maria David de Azevedo Brandão undertook her studies of Abrantes, a community near the city of Salvador (Brandão, 1957, and 1959). Soon afterwards Harry W. Hutchinson (Hutchinson, H.W., 1957), and M. Carmelita J. Ayres Hutchinson (Hutchinson, M.C.J.A., 1957) returned from Columbia University to Bahia where Dr. Harry W. Hutchinson taught for three years.

Almost simultaneous with the initiation of the Bahia State-Columbia University Program, a similar program took form under the able leadership of Donald Pierson. This research program on communities focused upon the S. Francisco Valley, one of the zones delineated in our original proposal. It was financed and sponsored by the Institute of Social Anthropology of the Smithsonian Institute and by the Comissão Nacional do Vale do São Francisco. In this program Esdras Borges Costa did research in Cerrado and Retiro in Minas Gerais (Costa, 1955); Fernando Altenfelder Silva in Xique-Xique and

Marrecas in the state of Bahia (Silva, 1955); Levy Cruz studied Rio Rico, Município de Correntina, in Bahia (Cruz 1954); Alceu Maynard Araujo and Alfonso Trujillo Ferari in communities in Alagoas (Araujo, 1961 and Ferari, 1960). The results of this program carried out by well trained social scientists, from the Escola de Sociologia e Política of São Paulo extended immensurably the mass of sociological data for this important region of Brazil — a large portion of which lies within the State of Bahia.

In 1962, a new series of studies began in Bahia and it can be said that they were a continuation to the original Bahia State-Columbia University program. The same people reappear but in new capacities and new faces of a younger generation are present. In 1962, Columbia University with Harvard and Cornell Universities cooperated on a summer field training program; Harvard University made use of their field station at San Cristobal de las Casas in Mexico; Cornell University sent their group to Vicos Hacienda in Peru; Columbia University sent its students to Bahia where the cooperative social science program could be renewed<sup>(4)</sup>. Because of Maria David de Azevedo Brandão's earlier research in Abrantes, the region of Abrantes-Arembepe was selected for the undergraduate group research. For two years, a group of North American students came to study this

region. Such research groups were under the leaderships of Marvin Harris in 1962, and Carl Withers in 1963. Each of these research groups had the advice and council of Thales de Azevedo. Many of these students completed research papers such as "Offshore Fishing on the Bahia Coast" by David Epstein (1962); "Race Relations in Arembepe: a Fishing Village in North Brazil" by Conrad Kottak (1962); "Race Relations in a Rural Brazilian Community - Abrantes" by Virginia Greene (1962); "Land and Agriculture in Abrantes - a Brazilian Village" by David Berke (1963), and "The Children of Hipólito: a study in Brazilian Pentecostalism" by Gordon Harper (1963). Such papers have not been published but some of them led to further research and doctoral dissertations at Columbia University such as *The Structure of Equality in a Brazilian Fishing Community* (1966) by Conrad P. Kottak, as well as two published articles on kinship and class in Arembepe (Kottak, 1967a) and on race relations in the same village (Kottak, 1967b). Likewise, stimulated by his earlier research in Arembepe, Shepard Forman undertook field research in the fishing village of Coqueiral in Alagoas in 1964-65 which resulted in a doctoral dissertation, *Jangadeiros: the raft fishermen of northeastern Brazil* (1966) and at least one published article on the folk-science of fishermen in this community and

in Arembepe. (Forman, 1967).

In 1966, a group of social science students under the direction of Dr. Susana Bouquet and Daniel Gross returned to Bahia for a three month period from June through August. This was a project of the Columbia-Cornell-Harvard-Illinois Universities training program. Their research was focused upon the important Bahian religious shrine and the annual pilgrimage to Bom Jesus da Lapa. Unfortunately nothing has been published as yet on this research and training project but several excellent reports are available in manuscript form such as Gross (1967), Quick (1967), Radon (1967), and Yurts (1967). Such reports should provide the background for any future study of one of the most interesting socio-religious phenomena of Bahia State.

In addition to the student research described above, still another program for the training of post-graduate students in various disciplines of the social sciences focused upon Bahia in 1964 through 1965. This program, as the program mentioned above, was a direct outgrowth of the initial cooperative research project of the State of Bahia and Columbia University which began in 1949. Again, Thales de Azevedo served as advisor and coordinator of the field research orienting the students during their residence in Brazil. This program, known as the *Metropolitan Grad-*

uate Summer Field Training Program, was sponsored by the Institute of Latin American Studies of Columbia University with a financial grant from the Ford Foundation. The program was not limited to Brazil but functioned to send pre-doctoral candidates to various parts of Latin America to begin their research for their doctoral dissertations. Each wrote a preliminary report based upon a three months period of research. Thus Anne Morton wrote a paper on "The Candomblé of Senhora" (1964); "Sisal and Social Structure in Northeastern Brazil" by Daniel Gross (1965) which later, after an additional full year of field research in 1968-69 was developed into a doctoral dissertation at Columbia University under the same title (Gross, 1970); "The Social Structure of a Brazilian Sugar Plantation: Usina Dom João" by Maxine Margolis (1965); "An Experiment in Brazilian Education: a study of the Centro Educacional Carneiro Ribeiro in Salvador, Bahia" by Lenore Veit; "Squatting in Salvador: an exploratory study" by Nan Pendrell (1965), later expanded as a doctoral dissertation (Pendrell, 1967); and "The 'Liberto' in Bahia before Abolition" by Barbara Trosko (1966 and 1967).

The above description of social science research that resulted directly or indirectly from the original Research Program in Social Science of Bahia State-Columbia University is far

from complete even from the point of view of its influence upon research and teaching of social anthropology at Columbia University and other North American Universities (i.e., students from Harvard, Cornell, and other universities participated). Nor is it exhaustive in any way in regard to its influence upon social science in Brazil. In his book *As Ciências Sociais na Bahia* (Bahia, 1964), Thales de Azevedo discusses in greater detail some of the influence of this program on the social sciences in Bahia and in Brazil at large. Dr. Azevedo in this same book also provides a bibliography of articles and books produced in Bahia and elsewhere in Brazil resulting from this research. But more important, he stresses the element of human development as a function of the program... "in addition to its function in stimulating interest for scientific socio-anthropological studies in Bahia, it offered an opportunity for advanced training for almost ten students from Bahia and Rio. These people after participating in the field research, in the search for bibliography and archival data, and in the analyses and interpretation of the results of research went on to complete their training in Rio, São Paulo, the United States and in France. They chose a career of teaching and research in social anthropology, human geography, and history". (Azevedo, 1964, p. 70).

This was even more true for

the North American participants. Many of them teach today in North American universities and are known as outstanding interpreters of the Brazilian social scene. Many North American professors (all mentioned above in their student roles) began their research careers in Bahia. Marvin Harris, Columbia University; Anthony Leeds, University of Texas; H. W. Hutchinson, University of Miami (Coral Gables); Rolie Poppino, University of California at Davis; Conrad Kottak, University of Michigan; Daniel Gross, City University of New York; Shepard Forman, University of Chicago; Maxine Margolis, University of Florida; David Epstein, University of California at Los Angeles; Nan Pendrell, Chatham College, are examples. Surely, the element of human development set off by the original research plan of 1949 was one of its most important results.

This rapid and incomplete summary of the work of Columbia University with various Bahia institutions and with Thales de Azevedo stimulates several general reflections both autobiographical and theoretical. First, whatever happened to the neat and objective research plan delineated in 1949 and 1950? No general book on social change on Bahia has been published following the outlines of the general research plan published in 1950; and it is doubtful whether such a book could now, or ever could have

been written, from the data gathered from the research program. Yet, such general works on Brazil such as *Social Change in Brazil* by Thales de Azevedo (1963), or my own article *A Revolução Brasileira* (1959) and *An Introduction to Brazil* (1964) can be attributed in a large part on our original Bahian research. In these general studies of Brazil, there is constant reference to the research of the Bahia State-Columbia University data. I most certainly could not have written any of my own general interpretations of Brazilian society without the research undertaken by the Bahia State - Columbia University Social Science Research Program.

Second, neither Thales de Azevedo nor the present author could imagine when we began our association twenty years ago that such a mass of social data could be accumulated in the form of books, articles, unpublished reports and dissertations. It took place by the process of serendipity. The creation of a research instrument (i.e., an original plan and the nucleus of a team of research workers) attracted other researchers and students. All of them were in varying degrees intellectually prepared by previous study of the social sciences and of the social life of Bahia State. They were in Robert Merton's terms "prepared minds" and they discovered not just through chance but what they, individually, saw as important dif-



ferent problems. They did not necessarily follow the plan envisaged in the 1949-50 research project. Thus, the study of race and class relations emerged as an important area for research; the urban scene seem more crucial to some students than the little community; the place of fishermen seems worthy of study; the new export crop of sisal and its influence on north-eastern Brazilian social structure needed urgent attention; and without the new historical studies such as those by Thales de Azevedo (1949), Rollie Pop-pino (1953) none of our studies of contemporary social life would be placed into a time perspective.

Of course, not all of the social science research undertaken in Bahia between 1950 and 1970 can be attributed to the Bahia State-Columbia University program. Thales de Azevedo in his study *As Ciências Sociais na Bahia* (1964) has traced the rich history of research by Brazilians and foreign scholars on Bahian society. In the last two decades, other research on human geography, economic development, social history, urban planning, and other fields of the social sciences have been carried out in Salvador and in the State of Bahia. Such research has been done by scholars from Brazilian and foreign universities. Bahia has always and will continue to attract scholars in the social sciences; for it is a natural laboratory for the study of human society.

Bahia has a rich historical tradition as the first capital of a great nation. It was in the past a center of a lucrative sugar industry and a plantation slave society. Today with its multi-racial society which co-exists, in relative harmony, it has a lesson to teach to the world. Bahia today is a rapidly changing society but it is also a repository of traditional Brazilian custom and institutions. For these reasons, it attracts social scientists, artists, and humanists. Bahia should be the home of one of the most vigorous schools and research institute for the study of man in the New World. The Bahia State-Columbia University Program for social research initiated in 1950 was a modest effort toward that aim — as yet far from a reality. For one must admit that as yet Bahian society does not offer the economic conditions to contain or attract the trained personnel in the social sciences which such a training and research institute would produce. Bahia — and even southern Brazil — suffers from the "brain drain" as Thales de Azevedo has shown in his recent book *A Evasão de Talentos* (1968).

One can only conclude that social science research works by strange but highly human and humanistic routes. In financial terms, no money was ever better invested than those funds provided by the State of Bahia, Columbia University, and other sources in 1949 and

1950. In terms of the contribution of that original project to educational planning in Bahia, the project failed. In terms of the advancement of knowledge in general and of Bahia in particular, it was a success beyond all expectations. In terms of human development, it created a group of specialists upon whom Brazil and the United States can be proud. No social scientist could have written a program for twenty years in social research in Bahia. It happened because of "serendipi-

ty" — a group of trained inquiring minds were attracted to a wide spectrum of problems and they were guided by a highly tolerant and humanistic scholar and teacher, Thales de Azevedo, who allowed each to pursue his individual interest. If he had been dogmatic and theoretically rigid, it would not have been possible. He learned and studied with all of us. He created an atmosphere for creative serendipity. Bahia, Brazil and the world of scholars are richer from his work and leadership.

CHARLES WAGLEY and  
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- 1 The results of L. A. Costa Pinto's research appear in Costa Pinto, 1958.
- 2 The research plan is described in some detail in Wagley, Azevedo & Costa Pinto, 1950.
- 3 The results of his study appear in Poppino, 1953.
- 4 In 1964, the University of Illinois joined this consortium and established a field station in Ecuador.

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