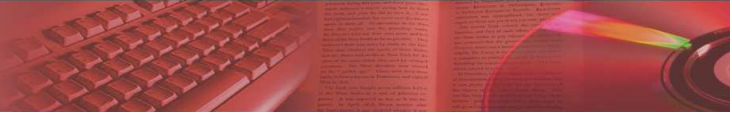


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Lula Buarque de Hollanda, dir. *Pierre Verger: Mensageiro Entre Dois Mundos (Messenger between two worlds)*. DVD. Brazil: Melhor Programa Cultural para TV, Grande Premio Cinema Brasil, 2000. 83 minutes.

Reviewed by Ivor Miller

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## Honoring Verger's Legacy

This tribute to photographer, scholar, and Ifá initiate Pierre “Fatumbi” Verger is required viewing for students of transatlantic African civilizations. Narrated by musician Gilberto Gil, a native-son of Salvador who later became Brazil’s minister of culture, the film explores multiple facets of the art and scholarship of a privileged European who lived among several West African and Brazilian African-descendant initiation communities. It includes extra scenes of Gelede dance; Zabata dance; close-up shots of faces of people in African locations; interviews with Verger (in Portuguese), with scholar Milton Guran (in Portuguese), and with filmmaker Jean Rouch (in French); and commentaries by the director (in Portuguese).

The film opens poetically with a scene on a Salvador beach where a rope extending into the ocean is pulled by scores of African descendants, a metaphor for the collective process of maintaining fragile ties to African inheritance through daily practice. Verger, described as “the messenger,” is celebrated for his contributions to the communication between culture bearers on both sides of the Atlantic in the late twentieth century, and in so doing is valued and respected by them.

Through excerpts of Verger’s diary narrated by Gil, photographs by Verger, and recollections of local historians and fellow initiates in Africa and Brazil, as well as interviews with Verger in his nineties (conducted at his bedside on what turned out to be the day before his passing away in 1996), Verger’s biography is recounted within a larger discussion of the transatlantic

slave trade and its contemporary repercussions. Born into an elite Parisian family in 1902, Verger eventually rebelled against their social constraints. When his immediate family passed away in the 1930s, he pursued a bohemian life of clubbing with the Caribbean migrants working in Paris, and later traveled the world as a photographer of humans at work and at play. In an interview with Rouch, we learn that Verger’s photographs were used in many exhibits in the Musée de l’Homme, Paris.

Arriving in Salvador in 1946, Verger made this a permanent home base. His early photographs capture the people in their daily activities as fishermen, market women, sailors, and exuberant participants in public festivals like *carnaval*. Verger remained in Brazil because he enjoyed being with Afro-Brazilians; the simplicity of this decision was matched by his frugal lifestyle and work ethic. Part of the bohemian life in the 1950s and 1960s in Salvador was belonging to a *candomblé terreiro* (community). Opô Afonjá (founded in 1910) was the terreiro of the personalities of Salvador. His close friends, writer Jorge Amado and sculptor-painter “Carybé” (Héctor Julio Páride Bernabó), introduced him to Mãe Senhora, the leader of Opô Afonjá for over thirty years, with whom Verger developed close relations of friendship and *orixá*-initiation. Several Afro-Brazilian females who knew Verger well reflect openly that it was his destiny, or the will of the orixá, for him to stay in Salvador and participate in the *candomblé*. In turn, Verger wrote in his unpublished diary: “I enjoyed living in the world of *candomblé*, and it wasn’t just curiosity. In addition

to my liking for the descendants of Africans, I was not insensitive to the power of this religion in maintaining their identity and their faith.” In other words, Verger did not use what he learned to further an academic career or score a political point. Rather, he contributed his resources and energies to furthering the community’s understanding of its own history and philosophies while finding a sociocultural niche in which to live in psychological harmony.

While preparing Verger for his first journey to Ketu, Dahomey, Mãe Senhora ritually charged him with the thunder god Xangô, making him an authorized messenger, so that he could “speak her name” there. Verger recounts being able to greet West African shrines appropriately based on Brazilian protocol. Through a series of extended research trips, Verger lived off and on for seventeen years in what is today the Republic of Benin and Nigeria. When traveling to Osogbo, to the shrine of Osun, Verger conveyed messages, including ritual phrases and sealed letters from Mãe Senhora, to various ritual authorities, including the Ataoja or traditional ruler of Osogbo, whose palace protects the principal shrines of Osun near the banks of the sacred river of that name. Mãe Senhora, a daughter of Oxum (or Osun), claimed descent from an Osogbo lineage; the information from its contemporary leader brought by Verger reinforced her position at home. In Sakete, Verger participated in ceremonies for Sango. In Ketu, he studied Ifá divination, eventually becoming initiated as a *babalawo*, receiving the name Fatumbi, meaning “born again thanks to Ifá.” A *babalawo* there recounted that Verger had known his grandfather: “We told him who the real Ifá men were in each village. Verger went to them and realized that was something that he himself could do. And that is what opened the path to everything. He carried out his research on the *orisa*.” Verger wrote: “The town of Ketu was particularly important for me because the first candomblé houses in Bahia had been founded by people from there.” To test Verger’s reputation, Gil asked a Ketu local: “When Verger was here, how did he behave?” The response was: “He didn’t force his will, he negotiated, he became integrated with the group.” In an interview, Verger stated: “In Africa, I lived among them, and never asked any questions. I lived among the people as if it were natural, which it was, because I knew how to behave.” These conversations are interspersed with contemporary performances of events that Verger had photographed in his time, like the amazing aerial “bamboo dance” of Ketu, or a yam harvest celebration, or Egun-gun body mask performances.

After photographing cultural practices and learning about them as an apprentice, Verger published several volumes that document ritual activity on both Atlantic coasts. These pioneering works are unsurpassed for their aesthetic beauty, as well as for their utility for comparative studies of cultural transmission. In Bahia, a photographer commented that Verger “wasn’t interested in photography. He always used to say: ‘It was really that beautiful. It was there,’ as if he hadn’t done it. It looked beautiful because it was.” His photographs eventually became a tool “to illustrate his writing and research.” Anthropologist Juana Dos Santos claimed that Verger “was the first to show the similarities” between the ritual symbols of West Africa and Bahia. “He was like a detonator in showing that there was a strong element of continuity between Africa and Brazil.”

Gil visited several traditional leaders in Ketu, Sakete, and Zogbedji who display local shrines and divination techniques. One *babalawo* recounts a legend of Ifá’s journey from Saudi Arabia to old Dahomey. Another who knew Verger reminisced about how much fun he was to have as a guest in Sakete: “He was my friend. When he was here, he would stay at my house. When Pierre Verger arrived, everyone would rejoice, because everyone knew that he would buy them drinks, and give the children money. And the *babalorixá* would get money too. So everyone knew that they would have fun whenever Pierre Verger got here.”

Verger knew how to learn by paying attention and helping in collective activities. He reflected: “My research was for myself, and for my friends in Bahia. The idea of publishing my findings for a wider public had not occurred to me.” When discussing Verger’s legacy, elders in Bahia and Benin extol his discretion and respect for initiation vows that limit the public presentation of information. According to Mãe Estela, who apprenticed to Mãe Senhora, and who had known Verger since the 1940s: “I think nobody ever went inside the core of it ... as much as he did, because he had a lot of access, and he also swapped recipes with the Africans. He was a very dear man, a very intelligent man, so he made the best of everything that he learned. You know that has to do with a superior power. It isn’t a matter of being white or black, because it is Olorum’s [God’s] wish.”

Verger was clear in his own mind that his greatest duty was to support the historic and living culture, rather than to interact with those who “study” African descendants; he seems to have dismissed academics as a path to knowledge, even while making vital contributions to

scholarship in his book *Flux and Reflux* (1968), described by historian Milton Guran as a “fundamental, definitive book on this illegal trade. It is a very competent historical compilation. All the documents are there. You can now spend one hundred years studying what Verger merely hinted at.” However, his methods were not appreciated by Melville Herskovits, who thought he was contaminating the “field” by sharing information between African and Brazilian initiates. In contrast, he was great friends with sociologist Roger Bastide who produced pioneering studies of African-derived communities in Brazil.

The cinematography is first rate, with many poetic and ironic scenes created through juxtapositions. In one sequence, the scene of an African metalworker making a pistol by hand is juxtaposed with statements from a variety of perspectives about the complicity of West African warlords in the slave trade with European and Afro-Brazilian merchants, including the Souza family of Ouidah. Several initiated African elders discuss the history of wars between the Fon and Yorùbá-Nago that led many into slavery. One particularly well-fed “king” of Abomey is used to represent this class in the present generation. Such a profound discussion among Africans and Brazilians about the power struggles and migrations that have shaped their communities is a step forward in the process of recognizing the complex relationships that made the trade possible, and in speaking to the trauma that has yet to be healed. This concrete dialog about a shared history is light years away from the self-examination of U.S. professors as seen in the Herskovits documentary, recently reviewed and published on this list.

A brilliant section on transatlantic “memory” shows a parallel process of selective memory in both Bahia and the Republic of Benin. Benin’s “Brazilians” descend from enslaved Africans in Brazil who returned to the Gulf of Benin after their emancipation in the late nineteenth century, where they recreated aspects of their lives in Bahia and still carry Portuguese family names. They continue to speak Brazilian Portuguese and wear Brazilian dress on festive occasions even though few have ever personally visited Brazil. Conversely there are Bahian candomblé members who use West African names and identities. Statements from people on both littorals express perspectives ranging from extreme nostalgia to profound

disinterest, with most somewhere in between. Implied in this conversation is how a “transatlantic identity” is useful to members of each community in response to local circumstances.

The film concludes showing various communities celebrating Verger’s legacy. In Rio de Janeiro, a samba school performance dedicated to Verger and Bahia is represented with huge replicas of his head and several of his books, while erotic dancers shake to pulsing samba rhythms. Toward its conclusion, the film delves bravely into the easily oversimplified question of whether Verger “believed” in orixá or not. Verger spoke to this issue in his own writing, noting that the concept of “belief” is more appropriate to the monotheistic context, than to the process of initiation in orixá. Moreover, he reveals to Gil with humor that he was regretfully never able to discard Cartesian skepticism, even though some of his ritual colleagues in Salvador—excluding Mãe Estela—claim him as a fully integrated devotee and spiritual father (*pae do santo*).[1]

Verger did not have biological children. The candomblé community in Bahia was his extended family, and many there called him “father.” Thus, in the role of Verger’s chief mourner and equipped with the knowledge that Egungun masks are used in Yorùbá-speaking Benin to honor the ancestors, Gil traveled to both Sakete and Ketu to organize the appropriate rites for Verger. When Ifá divination was performed, the oracle announced that “Fatumbí’s soul rests in peace, because he did on the earth what he was meant to do.” A funerary procession was assembled with drummers and singers who carried his portrait through the town. In using a photograph to channel his spirit to the ancestral realm, the African and Brazilian communities celebrated the very process used by Verger to demonstrate their respective cultural achievements. The film ends, as it began, with an Egungun mask dance, indicating Verger’s transition to revered ancestor.

#### Note

[1]. This complex topic has recently been addressed by Jerome Souty in a book-length intellectual biography, *Pierre Fátumbí Verger; du regard détaché à la connaissance initiatique* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2007).

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