

**St. Benedict of San Fratello (Messina, Sicily):
An Afro-Sicilian Hagionym on Three Continents**

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Abstract

Benedetto Manasseri da San Fratello (Messina, Sicily) became the first black canonical saint in 1807. The Sicilian-born son of African parents (1524), was first a hermit, and then a lay friar of the reformed minor order of St. Francis of Assisi. He died in Palermo in 1589. From the beginning of the 17th century his name and cult was connected in Brazil to the Catholic Rosary, together with the name and cult of three other black “saints”: Elesbão/Elisbão (from Abyssinia), Efigênia/Ifigênia (from Nubia), Antônio de Noto/Categeró (an African hermit who died in 1550 in Sicily, as Benedict did). It would be interesting to discuss the development of the four names in the Portuguese of Portugal and in the Portuguese of Brazil. The subject of my paper is the different forms of the names of the first hagionyms on three Continents, Europe, Africa and America: Benedetto da San Fratello (Italy), Benito de Palermo (Spain and Spanish speaking countries in America), Benedito/ Bento (Portugal, Brazil, Angola), and Bieito (Galicia). It is very interesting to notice the Portuguese development from Bento to Benedito in the first half of the 17th century, and the influence of this change on the names of popes in Portuguese, including our present Pope, Benedict XVI.

History of the research

Historical studies on Friar Benedetto Manasseri (San Fratello 1524 – Palermo 1589), sanctified by Pope Pius VI on 25 May 1807, began in Palermo in 1989 with a seminar whose proceedings were not published. This was followed by two Franciscan hagiographies (Castagna 1989; Mariani 1989) and a paper of mine, a study made in Portugal (Dell’Aira 1993). Two years after I edited the first Italian edition of the *Comedia famosa del santo negro Rosambuco de la ciudad de Palermo*, by Lope de Vega, a half-invented reconstruction of the life of Friar Benedetto (Dell’Aira 1995). In the *Introduction* to the comedy, I extended the research on the events which in 1624 led to the discovery, on Mount Pellegrino near Palermo, of the bones of the hermit Rosalia, proclaimed patron of the city twelve days afterwards. The publication of the Comedy persuaded the Palermo City Council to finance a study which was linked to the Institute of Modern History of the Faculty of Political Science of the local University and the City Library. In 1998 an international Congress was held in Palermo on the theme of “The Saint and the City: San Benedict the Moor,” as an expression of the increased local interest. In 2000, this was followed by a second international Congress sponsored by UNESCO and financed by the Palermo City Council, on “Slavery in the Mediterranean in the Modern Age.” I took part in both Congresses with papers on the Brazilian Devotion and Representation of San Benedetto (Dell’Aira 2000a) and on the Silence of the Council of Trent about Slavery (Dell’Aira, 2000b). From 1999 to 2007, I published other studies; among these was a book in Italy on the “Atlantic route” of the black saint. The appendix of this book contained the statutes of a fraternity founded in Salvador Bahia in 1777 (Dell’Aira, 1999). Later, in Brazil, I published an article on the alternating hagionyms

Bento - Benedito in Portuguese (Dell'Aira, 2005). In the meantime, Giovanna Fiume in Palermo worked on the historical analysis of the canonical processes (Fiume 2002), culminating in *Il santo moro* (Fiume 2006). A third Congress, on Saint Benedict the Moor and the Black Saints, took place in May 2007 in Palermo. This time, it was not possible for me to take part, but I did publish, at the same time, a paper on the *Ex-voto* of Angra dos Reis (Rio de Janeiro) devoted to São Benedito (Dell'Aira 2007).

Everything I have published on the theme up to the present is on the web (<http://www.povo.it/ad/biblio.htm>). Since living in São Paulo, I have devoted myself to the Afro-Brazilian traditions and the study of the European and Ibero-American iconographic language when compared to the success of the canonical processes, the politics of the ecclesiastical hierarchies and the evangelizing strategies of the religious orders. In this paper, I examine the various forms of the hagionym in Spanish and Portuguese. I hope that my conclusions will be useful to clarify the geneses of a number of Brazilian toponymies and will throw light on certain important aspects of Afro-Brazilian culture, like *capoeira*.

The life of the friar and the fame of the “saint”

Friar Benedetto, originally from Sub-Saharan Africa, spent all his life in Sicily. He was born in freedom in 1524, in the village of San Fratello, a peaceful rural environment on the northern coast of the isle. His parents were a slave (Christoforo, his father) and an ex-slave (Diana, his mother). It is not known whether his parents were born free or in slavery, and whether they arrived in Sicily together in chains. Benedetto spent his childhood and adolescence in San Fratello. When he was twenty, he left his family and until 1562 was an ascetic moving from one place to another under the guidance of Girolamo Lanza, a hermit of noble origins with a solid lay and doctrinal education. This experience, from 1544 to 1562, covers the period of the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and concludes with a gesture of obedience to a papal breve, inspired by the Tridentine canons: the entrance in a family of friars observing the regulations of Saint Francis of Assisi, initially in a monastery in the interior of the island, then in the monastery of Santa Maria di Gesù near Palermo. As he was illiterate, he did not receive the religious orders in the monastery: it was said that he had already taken them in the irregular Franciscan community of Girolamo Lanza. The ascetic wisdom gained in places exposed to the elements, and finally in Mount Pellegrino near Palermo, grafted onto the layers of African culture he had inherited from his grandparents. Both inside and outside Sicily Benedetto was well-known for curing and questioning the human psyche. He had already been in the monastery for nine years, when the Holy League removed the Turkish threat by the naval victory at Lepanto (1571), propitiated by Our Lady of the Rosary. One of the victors, Marcantonio Colonna, Viceroy of Palermo from 1577 to 1584, both knew him and was his friend, perhaps also because Benedetto, like his father and the majority of slaves converted to Catholicism, could skilfully recite the rosary.

Friar Benedetto died on 4 April 1589. His “official path to sanctity” took 218 years (Fiume 2006, 11–14), but the Latin American influence was immediately very considerable. The more difficult this path became through the procedural complications of the ecclesiastical tribunals, the more his fame overseas grew. In the New World his fame took on various original characteristics, influenced by local customs and traditions of the African slaves. There is not in fact a strict connection but rather a considerable hiatus between the life in Sicily of Friar Benedetto and his Latin American fame as the “glorious saint.” This is a unique case in the history of the Catholic Church. Though in the Hispanic American world the hagionym “San Benito” is always followed by the toponomic predicate “de Palermo”; in Africa, Portugal and Brazil “São Benedito” is used alone, with no place of origin, so much so that in Brazil many questions are often asked about it.¹ On the other hand, in Palermo and Sicily, before the reblossoming of the interest in the saint, the link between the visions of the clerics and the interest of the worshippers, the reduction of interest

in the image and the memory of the friar in the 17th century and the explosion of his fame in the Americas were all undervalued. It has been written that in 1995 in Palermo it was as if the cork of a bottle of vintage wine had exploded. In this sense, as Sicilians, we are very proud to have shaken the bottle.

The process of canonization and the worship

The first memorial from Palermo on Friar Benedetto is dated 1591. The *Ordinaria inquisitio*, which started in 1594 before the Archbishop of Palermo, lasted for two years. In 1620 there was a second process of canonization at San Fratello, and a third in Palermo between 1525 and 1526. The last coincided with the release by Pope Urban VIII of a number of decrees which restricted new cults which paid homage to religious and lay figures who had been dead for less than fifty years, except in the case of those who were acclaimed “by the popular cult” (Fiume 2006, 15–18). In these months, in Portugal, especially in Coimbra, the Franciscan Third Order, who were aware of the new regulations, did all they could to support the cause of Friar Benedetto. In 1630 Urban VIII decreed that the cities could only choose their patron from canonized saints. Though the initial decrees delayed the process of canonization of Friar Benedetto, that of 1630 favoured an alternative model of sanctification, supported in Sicily by the Jesuits: the hermit Rosalia Sinibaldi, called “of Mount Quisquina” and “of the Roses,” already patron of Palermo for six years, was inscribed in the *Martyrologium Romanum*. The Senate of Palermo had elected her patron on 27 July 1624, during an outbreak of the plague, twelve days after the reappearance of her presumed bones on Mount Pellegrino. The search for her body began after the Jesuit Ottavio Caetani had announced the discovery of a medieval *passio*, and was reinforced by the appearance, in a cave in the interior of the island, of her presumed signature in Latin, which is today considered to be false. In order to promote the image of hermit Rosalia, the Flemish artist Anton Van Dyck was invited to Palermo (Dell'Aira 1995, 22–23). The process of canonization of Friar Benedetto was then suspended. These were tense times: the Thirty Years' War, with its effect outside Europe, both on the East and the West, the competition between commercial companies, and the Atlantic slave trade. The holy cause was reopened in 1713: through the spread of the Latin American cult, the case of Friar Benedetto was admitted as one of the exceptions allowed by Pope Urban VIII. However, such conditions already existed in 1625: at least one of the witnesses called to Rome in the 18th century was amazed that Benedetto was not yet a saint, as he had already been on the altars for a long time (also in Portugal), and masses were said for him. But it took another thirty years for him to be beatified (11 May 1743). In 1790 the two miracles necessary for sanctification were approved, and these were proclaimed on 24 May 1807 (Fiume 2006b, 18). The patron of the slaves was finally a saint. A few months earlier, on 2 January 1807, Britain had repealed the slave trade. In Brazil slavery would officially exist until 13 May 1888.

The confrontation between the time of the clerics and the time of the worshippers would have interested Jacques Le Goff. In 1609 we hear about a fraternity in Lisbon dedicated to Friar Benedetto; in 1612 there was a cult in Rio de Janeiro, with an altar in the church of Lady of the Rosary. In 1619, in Lisbon, three senators from Palermo were amazed to discover a crowd of slaves following in a procession a standard of a black friar in clogs: Benedito de Palermo. In 1630 the first fraternity in Salvador da Bahia was founded. In 1635 the Sicilian artist Pietro Novelli painted Friar Benedetto, the missing patron of the city, kneeling before the Pope and the King of France, Louis IX, on their way to the crusades (Dell'Aira 1999; Fiume 2006a). In 1648 in Angra dos Reis was founded one of the oldest Brazilian fraternities (Dell'Aira 2007: the most ancient is still functioning in Rio, founded in 1640). The assumption of Friar Benedetto took place in 1652, as co-patron of Palermo together with a considerable group of saints not all of whom were canonised, through the decision of the Senate of the city and despite the prohibitions of Urban

VIII. In 1682–83 a painting of “Saint” Benedito was given to Oporto Cathedral by a bishop from Coimbra, member of a Franciscan Third Order (Dell’Aira 1995, 27).

The “Tordesillas line” of the rosary

The first black fraternities of the Holy Rosary in Lisbon date from 1490 (Dell’Aira 2002, 332). The rosary was proposed to the slaves by the European missionaries in the place of a Yoruba prayer instrument: the *ekuele* (or *opelé*) of *Ifá*, a tight rope with eight shells or half-seeds, which, thrown on a table could give some 256 combinations (Dell’Aira 2000a, 173–74). In 1486 Our Lady of the Rosary was chosen by the Portuguese to be the patron of Angola. The syncretism between Catholic and Yoruba rites gave way to a system of the symbolic substitution of the Catholic saints by the *orixás* from *candomblé*, intermediary entities between God and Man. Here, the black saint Benito/Bento-Benedito usually corresponds to Ossaim, an *orixá* of the leaves and the medicinal herbs (Dell’Aira 2000a, 174); while San Benedetto da Norcia corresponds to the *orixá* Obaluaiê, “lord of the land and master of the minds.” In the Iberian peninsula and then in Brazil another important organisation were the fraternities of “Our Lady of the Rosary of Black People,” or of “Our Lady of the Rosary and São Benedito,” and by the second half of the 18th century, of “São Benedito.” After the victory at Lepanto, through the decision of Pope Pius V, the fraternities of the Rosary were entrusted to the Dominicans as the rosary of Saint Domenico, which in the past had overcome the Albigensians, had gained the victory at Lepanto over the infidel Turks. The new arrangement resulted in a number of problems in the Iberian peninsula, where the fraternities of slaves were linked to the Order of Saint Francis. But in a number of areas like the Algarve, and in the areas of the New World where the Dominicans were not present, the Franciscans and the Third Order, especially the Portuguese, acted on their own. This was the situation in Cadiz, the first stopping point of the English corsairs, which was under the standards of the Benito de Palermo fraternities of the blacks which were already associated to Our Lady of the Rosary (Dell’Aira 1999, 35–37). In the south of the Iberian peninsula the hagionyms Benito/Bento-Benedito continued in the respective Spanish and Portuguese linguistic environments. As interested in restoring their independence, the Portuguese saw in the slaves of the Algarve a powerful force in case of a clash with the Spaniards. The doctors from Coimbra worked out an overseas evangelization strategy which would be based on the figure of the holy queen Isabel, canonized in 1625 – member of a Franciscan Third Order, as was her aunt Saint Elisabeth from Hungary – and on friar Benedetto, called “São Bento de Palermo” in a printed report on the feast days commemorated in Coimbra in honour of Saint Isabel in October 1625 (Dell’Aira 1995, 29–32). In the New World, the worship of the rosary spread, following the line of Tordesillas: Dominicans to the West in the Spanish language area, Franciscans in the East in the Portuguese language area. The hagionyms Benito/Bento-Benedito also respected this demarcation, as can be confirmed by the case of Colônia do Sacramento, a fortified town founded by the Portuguese in 1680 on the River Plate facing Buenos Aires, along the edge of the Tordesillas line. In this place, which is today Uruguay, where sixty African slaves joined the following of the governor of Bahia, a “clothed” statue of São Benedito–San Benito de Palermo punctually accompanied the destiny of a town which changed hands four times between 1680 and 1777 (Dell’Aira 2008).

The development of the name

The dialect form *Binidittu*, as an attribute of the name of God, reoccurs in a number of times in certain Sicilian songs of the corn-reapers. This repeated formula regulated the rhythm of the binding of the sheaves under the direction of a “chief binder” (Petix 1987, 115–117):

“E Binidittu quannu veni / lu beddu nomi di Diu!”
(Blessed when it comes / the good name of God)

When baptizing their son *Benedetto*, Cristoforo and Diana were hoping that it would be a good omen. *Benedetto da Dio* (Blessed by God) is the infant come into the free world through the will of the patron of Cristoforo, Antonio Manasseri, who had entrusted to Cristoforo the control of rural affairs. He was happy to give his family name to the infant. Cristoforo, extremely devoted to Our Lady, instructed the peasants in the recitation of the rosary. The African slaves had learnt them in the galleys on their way to Europe, and the galleys often had on board an image of Our Lady of the Rosary.

After Friar Benedetto was dead, his name was often mentioned in the exchanges of written and oral information of the Franciscan communities in Palermo and Lisbon. We know that a letter was sent in 1620 from the Lisbon monastery of Saint Francis to the Palermo monastery of Santa Maria di Gesù, requesting details on the edifying life of the Afro-Sicilian friar (Dell’Aira 1995, 29). The Sicilian *Binidittu* is pronounced in a very similar way to the Portuguese *Benedito*. So we suppose that the Portuguese form *Benedito* is derived from the oral and written form of the Sicilian *Binidittu*. The Italian personal name *Benedetto* derives from the Latin *Benedictus*, while the adjective *benedictus*, identical in Italian to the nominal form, in Spanish and Portuguese generates *bendito*, and in Portuguese also *benzido*, *bento*. In Portuguese, there still exists the other nominal form, *Bento*, derived as the Spanish *Benito* from the contraction of *Benedictus*. In a procession described in the chronicle of Coimbra of 1625, as we know, Friar Benedetto, whose sanctification was running its course, is mentioned as “São Bento de Palermo” and incredibly associated with three excellent saints: Saint Ignacio of Loyola, Saint Louis of the French, Saint Antony of Lisbon (Dell’Aira 1995, 30). The importance given to his figure can be explained by the interest of the theologians of Coimbra in giving a saint to the slave fraternities. Friar Benedetto had never been a member of a Third Order but as a lay friar who worshipped the rosary he could be assimilated to the Third Order; he would have been the most humble on the social scale of the Third Order friars admitted to the reign of Heaven. This was a daring theological position in a period when Africans were not considered to be human beings with a soul.

The report from Coimbra shows that the use of the contracted form *Bento* referring to Friar Benedetto lasted for some time in Portugal and Brazil together with the use of *Benedito*, which then becomes the exclusive form. It is very interesting to note that in Galicia the saint is still called *San Bieito de Palermo* (Dell’Aira 2003, 31). Various forms of *Benedito* (*Benedicto*, *Benadicto*, *Benadito*) were collected in Portugal and Brazil, as can be seen, for example, in the uncertainty of a stonemason, working in the church of Santa Ifigênia in Ouro Preto (Minas Gerais), who added a C in the name and wrote *Benedicto*, almost certainly influenced by the intervention of a priest.



Fig. 1a. Ouro Preto (Minas Gerais). Church of Santa Ifigênia

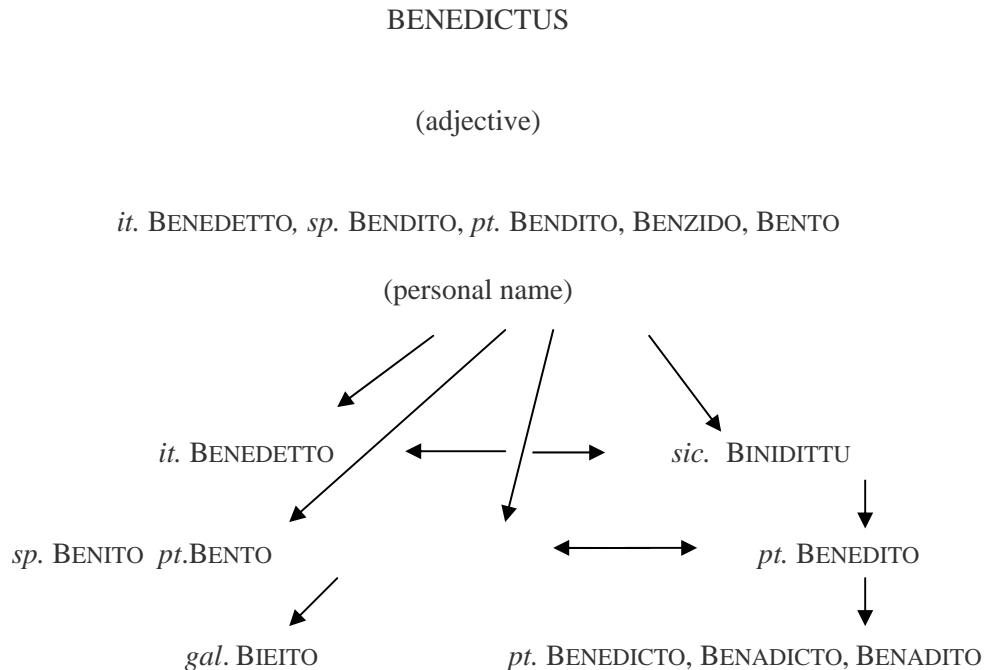


Fig. 1b. Church of Santa Ifigênia. Santa Ifigênia (by Aleijadinho?)



Fig. 1c. Church of Santa Ifigênia, Statue of São Benedito.
A wrong script *Benedcto* corrected in *Benedicto*

The following scheme illustrates the development of the hagionym.



In Spanish, *San Benito de Nursia* and *San Benito de Palermo* differ in the toponymic predicate, as in the case of *San Francisco de Assís / San Francisco de Paola*. In Portuguese this also happened until the hagionym was associated with one or the other predicate: *Núrcia/Palermo*. Thus, *Bento* and *Benedito* began to designate two saints with different origins, the abbot and the cook, this one lived a thousand years after the first. But until when did *Bento* also designate the cook? And until when did Portuguese keep the predicate *de Palermo*, associated with the hagionym *Bento*? The absence of the predicate can be explained by the interest of Portuguese in presenting the cook as a saint born in Africa, so that it was not necessary to distinguish his origin.

As for the former of the two questions, besides the Galician hagionym *Bieito de Palermo* still in use, we can look to other Brazilian references: a number of traditional songs, *cantigas*, and musical rhythms of *capoeira*, *toques*, and a number of toponyms. As has already been said, *capoeira* is a tradition whose roots are in the slave past but these origins have not been documented. In its beginnings it was a form of martial art wrestling which was also bloody (*capoeira Angola*), which borrowed the movements of animals and used the head and skills as a weapon of attack and defence. It then was transformed into a sort of dance without physical contact (*capoeira regional*), an expression of the ability of self-control of those who practice it. The performances are accompanied by musical instruments of African origin, among which there is the *berimbau*, a sort of bow whose string is made to vibrate with a coin or a metallic disc and gives out a rhythmic sound (*toque*), amplified by a small hollow pumpkin. The best-known *toques* of the *berimbau* are the *São Bento grande* and the *São Bento pequeno*, the former quick, and the second melodious. It is not known why they have these names, nor which of the two saints they are linked to. A number of old *cantigas* transcribed by Waldeloir Rego invoke São Bento against the poisonous bites of the snake, according to a tradition which has been spread throughout Brazil, as an *orixá* saint who “calls”, “holds”, “invades” and then “releases” the worshipper, in the *candomblé* or *umbanda* rites (Rego 1968, 52–53, 64–65, 119–120, 125, 243).

<i>Esta cobra te morde</i>	This snake will bite you
<i>Sinhô São Bento</i>	Master São Bento
<i>Ôi o bote da cobra</i>	Oh the bite of the snake
<i>Sinhô São Bento</i>	Master São Bento
<i>Ôi a cobra mordeu</i>	Oh the snake has bitten
<i>Sinhô São Bento</i>	Master São Bento
<i>O veneno da cobra</i>	The poison of the snake
<i>Sinhô São Bento</i>	Master São Bento
<i>Ôi a casca da cobra</i>	Oh the skin of the snake
<i>Sinhô São Bento</i>	Master São Bento
<i>Ô que cobra danada</i>	What a terrible snake
<i>Sinhô São Bento</i>	Master São Bento
<i>Ôi que cobra marvada</i>	Oh what an evil snake
<i>Sinhô São Bento</i>	Master São Bento
<i>Buraco velho</i>	An old hole
<i>Sinhô São Bento</i>	Master São Bento
<i>Tem cobra dentro</i>	There's a snake inside
<i>Sinhô São Bento</i>	Master São Bento
<i>Ôi o pulo da cobra</i>	Oh the jump of the snake
<i>Sinhô São Bento</i>	Master São Bento
<i>Ê cumpade</i>	Oh my friend
<i>Aí, aí, aí</i>	Ay, ay, ay
<i>São Bento me chama</i>	São Bento is calling me
<i>Aí, aí, aí</i>	Ay, ay, ay
<i>São Bento me leva</i>	São Bento is taking me
<i>Aí, aí, aí</i>	Ay, ay, ay
<i>São Bento me prende</i>	São Bento is holding me
<i>Aí, aí, aí</i>	Ay, ay, ay
<i>São Bento me solta</i>	São Bento is releasing me
<i>Aí, aí, aí</i>	Ay, ay, ay
<i>Sinhô São Bento</i>	Master São Bento
[...]	[...]
<i>Ê valha-me Deus sinhô São Bento</i>	And help me God Master São Bento
<i>Eu vô jogá meu barravento.²</i>	I'm going to throw myself into the wind.

The fact that São Benedito, in other *cantigas*, is mentioned as a “strong saint” and patron of *capoeira* doesn't prove the antiquity of the link between the black saint and *capoeira*: this could be a contemporary association on ethnic bases, also a result of the continuation of the cult of the black saint in Minas Gerais. The link between São Bento and the cobra snake seems to be more important. The Abbot from Norcia, according to the legend, once escaped from a poisoning attempt, but in Brazil this has nothing to do with the snake, differently from São Benedito and the friars of Saint Francis. This connection, which is very strong in the Northeast of Brazil, is seen in Salvador da Bahia, in a miraculous cure operated by an image of São Benedito, which, in 1622, enabled a diseased native of Porto to get rid of a small worm in the form of a snake which “had perforated his heart” (Reginaldo 2005, 78). This is confirmed by what happened some decades later in the old Franciscan monastery in Angra dos Reis (Rio de Janeiro): in the damp chapel the cobras slid onto the altar of San Bernardino of Siena to twist themselves around the neck of the statue (Dell'Aira 2007, 41, note 18). In my *Introduction* to the *Comedia* of Rosambuco, agreeing with other authors, I observed that the playful and confidential rapport with the animals and the

objects in daily use reoccurs in a number of *cantigas* from Galicia which are dedicated to São Bento (for example that in which the saint is called “santo das minhas tamancas” (brother, my foot) and all that which is not suitable to the solemn abbot but rather to the humble cook (Dell’Aira 1995, 32-33). It is also probable that in Brazil the two saints are often mixed up. The low level of knowledge of Latin has also complicated things. For example, it is often said in Brazil that the Child of Prague (*O Menino de Praga*) heals skin diseases, from the Portuguese name of the city (Praga=Prague) as the singular of *pragas* (plagues/diseases). Another example is found in the town of Pinhal de São Bento, not far from Foz do Iguaçu (Paraná), whose name is taken from a pine tree whose branches form a cross, cut down some fifty years ago. In a website of the Municipality of Pinhal de São Bento (<http://www.prdagente.pr.gov.br/modules/conteudo/conteudo.php?conteudo=759>) *Bento* is defined as a “divergence” of *Benedito*, but it is not said which of the two saints gave his name to the tree and the town.

In another centre, São Bento do Sapucaí (State of São Paulo on the border of Minas Gerais) the clear presence of both the hagionyms is symptomatic of the differing forms of worship of both slaves and slave owners in the past, and, in the present, of a tendency towards integration. The town, according to tradition, in the 18th century took the name of São Bento de Núrcia on the initiative of a farmer, very devoted to the white saint. At the beginning of the 20th century a large church dedicated to São Bento de Núrcia was built, in a strategic position and a few hundred metres from a small church built at the end of the 19th century, dedicated to São Benedito. The surprising thing is that three kilometres away from São Bento de Sapucaí, in the village called Quilombo (as the African style villages founded by the runaway slaves from farms were called), there is a small church dedicated to Our Lady of Conception, in which there is a small lateral niche with a bedside statue of São Benedito from the 17th century, 40 centimetres high, certainly made in Portugal, probably brought to Brazil in the luggage of a missionary.



**Fig. 2a. Quilombo (São Bento de Sapucaí, SP).
Statue of São Benedito, 40 cm high.
Second half of 17th century**

Friar Benedito, when he was not yet a saint, was always associated with Our Lady (of the Rosary, of the Snows, of the Conception). The statuette is carried in the procession held on December 8 of every year. Its typology is identical to that of a statue twice as big.



Fig. 2b. Lisboa, Statue of São Benedito, 87 cm high. Second half of 17th century

In 1992, I discovered traces of this statue in Lisbon in the catalogue of a municipal archive (Dell'Aira 1995, 32). My working hypothesis, to be verified from documentary sources, is that in São Bento de Sapucaí, through a “whitening” or “no longer remembering,” the cook saint, worshipped in the *quilombo*, was substituted with the abbot saint. I have already documented a case of ancient “whitening” through two small Portuguese pictures of São Benedito “patron of the *cezões*” (sore throat).



Fig. 3. Lisboa, National Library. Two small pictures of São Benedito. Second half of 18th century

These pictures reproduce an 18th century statue venerated in the church of Saint Francis in Lisbon, destroyed in the earthquake of 1755. The two pictures are almost identical except that in one of them the saint is black, while in the other, produced with a similar matrix but with no mention of the workshop, the saint is white (Dell’Aira 2000a, 167–168, pl.17a-b).

In São Bento de Sapucaí, both hagionyms are placed near each other on a sign outside of the church of São Benedito: *Obra Social São Benedito, fundada em 5 de Outubro de 2005 – Paróquia de São Bento [São Benedito social work, founded on 5 October 2005 – Parish of São Bento]*; moreover, on a wall of the patio of the church is reproduced an enlargement of the “medal of Saint Benedict” of Nursia, on the sides of which there are two circles of the same size, one alluding to the fraternity of São Benedito, the other to the São Benedito Social Work. The medal of Saint Benedict was introduced by Pope Benedict XIV, Prospero Lambertini, the same who in 1743 signed the decree of the sanctification of Friar Benedetto of Sanfratello. In 1742 Benedict XIV personally designed that medal and gave it powers of exorcism (Dell’Aira 2005, 8). Also in this case, as in that of the snake poison, there are points of contact between the two traditions, which in Brazil have produced this curious syncretism between the black saint and the white one. Among the miracles attributed to Friar Benedetto of San Fratello, one of the best-known, taken up by Lope de Vega in the *Comedy of Rosambuco*, is that of freeing from the Devil the young daughter of a Spanish viceroy (Dell’Aira 1995, 9). The “medalla de San Benito” is very popular in Latin America: many worshippers who wear it around their neck to protect themselves from evil attribute its powers not to the abbot but rather to the cook. Alberto Santos-Dumont, born in the state of Minas Gerais, flew in Paris in 1906 with his 14-Bis wearing on his wrist a medal of that type, given him by the Imperial Princess Isabel. Some time before, when he escaped from a terrible flying accident, he publicly attributed the fact he was saved by the “São Benedito medal.” His biographer, commenting on this incident, is in doubt whether the medal was that of São Bento or São Benedito (Dell’Aira 2006).

The alternating between *Bento* and *Benedito* also caused uncertainty on the day of the proclamation of Pope Benedict XVI, 19 April 2005, immediately after the “Habemus papam,” with the first improvised commentaries favouring *Benedito*. Half an hour afterwards the name was officially corrected as *Benedicto* in Spanish and *Bento* in Portuguese (Torres 2005). This had been the case with the other popes with the same name, except the fifteenth in the series (1914–1922), for whom the form of *Benedito* was chosen almost certainly for its closeness to the erudite form of *Benedicto*, preferred in Spanish to *Benito*. In any case, the choice of *Bento* is correct: the saint worshipped by Joseph Ratzinger is the abbot of Norcia.³

To sum up

The American fame of Friar Benedetto of San Fratello developed autonomously from that in Sicily, with an inversely proportional speed to the reduction of his fame in the Mediterranean. On the theological and social question of the link between Catholicism and slavery, of which the black saints are just one aspect, Franciscans, Dominicans and Jesuits lined up according to often contrasting logic and interests. In this complex scenario, the Roman Curia regulated the legitimization period of the cults. Thus the study of the hagionyms and the devotional and figurative language, associated with the study of the documentation or in absence of written sources, helps us to understand political, theological and philosophical questions, which would otherwise be difficult to comprehend. To show this, we can mention two popular verses from Minas Gerais and the Brazilian Northeast. The first, which can also be found on a webpage of *umbanda*, mentions the delayed canonization of São Benedito in the processions of Minas Gerais:

São Benedito
Foi cozinheiro
Hoje ele é santo
De Deus verdadeiro.⁴

São Benedito
Was a cook
Now he’s a saint
Of the true God

The second, widely diffused, in its oldest version is part of a *cantiga* of the Taieiras di Laranjeiras in Sergipe, virgins devoted to São Benedito (Ribeiro 2003, 69):

São Benedito
Não tem mais coroa,
Tem uma toalha
Que vem de Lisboa.

São Benedito
No longer has a crown,
He has a cloth
That comes from Lisbon.

This probably alludes to an alteration of the statues of São Benedito: the disappearance of the *resplendor* (silver halo), or the feathers of parrot around the head, or the flowers which in Portugal and Brazil, for more than a century, the saint had displayed on his left, remembering a marvel introduced by the Portuguese: the scrap of food picked up in the refectory of the Monastery of Palermo, exhibited to the viceroy of Sicily in the form of roses. Around 1750 the flowers were substituted by a Baby Jesus stretched out on a cloth (*toalha*), alluding to another miracle in the Sicilian tradition. This novelty was noticed for the first time in Lisbon in June 1743 by Apollinário da Conceição, as he related in a biography of the “blessed Benedito of S. Philadelphio” (Dell’Aira 2007, 38–39). The Taieiras regretted the alternating of the identity of the images, now assimilated to the *Antonianus* (*iconographic*) type with a sort of iconographic *reductio*, decided on in Europe shortly before the signing of the beatification decree.

These two examples confirm that the study of the names and symbols, in verbal and non-verbal language, are a valuable source for research. They are available to everyone and are not subject to the rules of archives and the selections made by the administrators of written information. We can refer to the enlightening words of the Nobel Literature Laureate of 1975, the Italian Eugenio Montale, according to whom “the world has the structure of language, and the language has the structure of the mind.”

Notes

1. The *Taieiras* (virgins devoted to São Benedito) in Laranjeiras (Sergipe), whose tradition goes back to the 19th century, have handed down a fantastic biography of the saint: “When alive was a priest, teacher and celebrated mass ... but as he was black, from Africa, baptized in a *terreiro* of *macumba*, ... he was alive and not dead ... and he incorporated *pais e mães de santo* (male and female macumba entities) in a *macumba terreiro* ...” (Ribeiro 2003, 69).

2. “Barravento” is a nautical term which means “the direction from where the wind blows.” In *candomblé* it is used for the stagger of someone who is going to be totally taken over by the *orixá* entity who already dominates her head.

3. In the official website of the archdiocese of Cuiabá (Mato Grosso do Sul), consulted on 15 March 2008 (http://www.arquidiocesecuiaba.org.br/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=61&Itemid=2), the adoption of the hagionym Benedito for the black saint is judged to be an intelligent choice. The text of the Dominican Hugo Cavalcante has the following premise: “With the help of a great Latinist, who preferred to remain *in Deo abscondito*, we reached the following conclusion: Bento or Benedito comes from the verb – *benedicere*. As happened with the other languages which derived from Latin, the Portuguese kept words which were nearer the original Latin, which were called erudite, and derived forms which were more popular” (as we have seen, Benedito is a popular calque on Benedetto / Binidittu, while the form “São Bento” is the erudite one). The website details also how the Portuguese language makes distinctions also for other hagionyms: Saint Antonio of the Desert is called Antão rather than Antônio; San Mauro, a disciple

of Saint Benedict of Nursia is called Santo Amaro, in order not to confuse him with a homonymous “Moorish” saint.

4. From the website <http://www.umbandamenor.kit.net/canticos.htm>, consulted on 15 March 2008.

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