

AGONTIMÉ E SUA LENDA: RAINHA NA ÁFRICA, MÃE DE SANTO NO MARANHÃO. UM ROMANCE SOBRE O DAOMÉ E A CASA DAS MINAS NO MARANHÃO

AGONTIMÉ AND HER LEGEND: QUEEN IN ÁFRICA, MOTHER OF SAINT IN MARANHÃO. A NOVEL ABOUT DAOMÉ AND THE HOUSE OF MINES IN MARANHÃO

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RESUMO: Este presente artigo aborda como o romance Agontimé e sua lenda (1970, 1974), originalmente escrito em inglês, de autoria de Judith Gleason, e traduzido em português com o título Agontimé e sua lenda: rainha na África, mãe de santo no Maranhão (2022), por Carlos Eugenio Marcondes de Moura, narra a trajetória de Nã Agontimé, no antigo Reino de Abomey, Daomé, antes de ser escravizada pelo seu enteado Adandozan e trazido ao Maranhão, onde funda a Casa das Minas, explorando o feminismo negro na década de 70 do século XX, sobretudo, as relações entre o Maranhão e o Daomé e como este segundo contribui para um tipo de patrimonialização cultural do Maranhão a partir da religiosidade, em especial, dos terreiros de Mina. Além disso, o artigo explora como a literatura, enquanto legibilidade, propõe um tipo de leitura de sujeitos históricos por se tratar de um romance etnográfico, jogando luz de como as análises interpretativas sobre o passado são encapsuladas pela arte da escrita ficcional.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Agontimé; Daomé; escravização; literatura; Maranhão.

ABSTRACT: This article discusses how the novel Agontimé e sua Legend (1970, 1974), originally written in English, by Judith Gleason, and translated into Portuguese under the title Agontimé e sua Legend: Rainha na África, Mãe de Santo no Maranhão (2022), by Carlos Eugenio Marcondes de Moura, narrates the trajectory of Nã Agontimé, in the ancient kingdom of Abomey, Dahomey, before being enslaved by her stepson Adandozan and brought to Maranhão, where she founded Casa das Minas, exploring black feminism in 70s of the century XX, but above all, the relations between Maranhão and Dahomey and how the latter contributes to a type of cultural heritage of Maranhão based on religiosity, in particular, of the terreiros of Mina. In addition, the article explores how literature, while legibility, proposes a type of reading of historical subjects because it is an ethnographic novel, shedding light on how interpretive analyzes of the past are encapsulated by the art of fictional writing.

KEYWORDS: Agontimé; Dahomey; enslavement; literature; Maranhão.

REVISTA
Decifrar

(ISSN: 2318-2229)

Vol. 12, Nº. 24 (Jul-Dez/2024)

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* Artigo traduzido para o inglês com recursos do programa Amazonia.



10.29281/rd.v12i24.16328

Fluxo de trabalho

Recebido: 18/10/2024

Aceito: 07/02/2025

Publicado: 07/02/2025

Editora da Universidade Federal do Amazonas (EDUA)

Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras

Faculdade de Letras

Grupo de Estudos e Pesquisas em Literaturas de Língua Portuguesa (GEPELIP)



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Verificador de Plágio

Plagius

The present article addresses how the novel by Judith Ilesley Gleason¹ narrates the trajectory of the enigmatic life of Nã Agontimé, former queen of Daomé (late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century), who became a slave subject still in Africa and was brought to Brazil, to Bahia, where she first landed, until she headed to Maranhão in the early nineteenth century.

The novel in question is *Agotime, her legend*, originally published in English in 1970 by New York: Grossman and Viking Compass Books (1970), then reissued in 1974 by the same publisher, with drawings by Caribé. The novel was translated into Portuguese by Carlos Eugenio Marcondes de Moura². The novel was translated into Portuguese by Carlos Eugenio Marcondes de Moura, with the authorization of the American author's heirs, who hold the copyright to the work. In Portuguese, with the permission of Gleason's children, the novel is entitled *Agontimé e sua lenda: Rainha na África, mãe de santo no Maranhão*, published by Editora da UEMA, in coedition with Editora Pitomba (2022)³.

An inflection about the addition of the subtitle incorporated by the translator is worth mentioning. "Rainha na África, mãe de santo no Maranhão" correlates by the place the translator takes the importance of the work for Maranhão and its sociocultural aspects, especially religious, approaching the ethnographic or even historical account and conferring literariness from its protagonist and, at the same time This is because 52

1 Judith Gleason was born in 1929 in Pasadena and died in 2012 in New York City. She received her MA in Literature from Radcliffe College and her PhD in Comparative Literature from Columbia University. She has served as a consultant to colleges and organizations initiating programs in African humanities and literature. She is the author of *This Africa: Novels by West Africans in English and French* (Northwestern University Press, 1965), *Orisha, the Gods of Yoruba Land* (Atheneum, 1971), *A Recitation of Ifa, Oracle of the Yoruba* (Grossman, 1973), *Santeria, Bronx* (Atheneum Books, 1975), and *Leaf and Bone: African Praise Poems* (Puffin, 1994). His book *Oya. In Praise of an African Goddess* was published by Bertrand Brasil (Rio de Janeiro, 1993) with the title *Oiá. In Praise of an African Goddess*.

2 She began her academic studies at the University of Geneva, Switzerland, where she studied for two semesters at the Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences and at the School for Interpreters at the Faculty of Letters. He earned his doctorate from the Department of Sociology of the School of Philosophy, Sciences and Languages of the University of São Paulo. At this University, he did his post-doctorate at the Institute of Brazilian Studies. He graduated in acting from the São Paulo Dramatic Art School. As a Fulbright Scholar, he attended the 1965-1966 academic year at the Yale University School of Dramatic Art, in New Haven, Connecticut, USA. He is a former professor at the School of Theater and Dance at the Federal University of Pará and at the Department of Scenic Arts at the School of Communications and Arts (University of São Paulo). He is the author of books in the areas of Anthropology, Theater, Regional Studies and Bibliography. He has organized, co-authored, and published eight collections on Brazilian religions of African matrix, with emphasis on Candomblé. His books include: *O Teatro que o Povo Cria. Cordão de Pássaros, Cordão de Bichos, Pássaros Juninos do Pará. Da Dramaturgia ao Espetáculo* (Belém: Secult, 1997), *A Travessia da Calunga Grande. Three Centuries of Images of the Negro in Brazil (1637-1899)* (São Paulo: University of São Paulo Press, 2nd edition, 2012), *I Am Here. Always Have Been. Always Will Be. Indigenous People of Brazil. Their Images. 1505-1955* (São Paulo: University of São Paulo Press, 2012). The book received the Jabuti Prize (2013), awarded by the Brazilian Book Chamber. *We Came from Far Away. Far Away We Go. Povos Originários do Brasil Dos Paleoíndios à Contemporaneidade. A Bibliography* (São Paulo: Museu Afro Brasil, 2020). Professional translator, with sixty translations published, among others, by Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, Brasiliense, Perspectiva, Stúdio Nobel, Paz & Terra, Duas Cidades, Cosac & Naiffy and Três Estrelas.

3 Carlos Eugenio Marcondes de Moura holds the copyright for the translation. FAPEMA, in turn, funded the publication in Portuguese through the research project coordinated by Professor Henrique Borralho, *Périplo Literário: Brazil (Maranhão) Africa (Angola, Mozambique, São Tomé and Príncipe and Cape Verde) and Europe (Portugal): construction of identities, affirmation of meanings*, funded by FAPEMA (Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa e ao desenvolvimento científico do Estado do Maranhão), through the edict IECT: Public management and creative economy no. ° 008/2017 - IECT, passing on 2% of the copyrights to the heirs of the author of each book sold, who granted printing permission. If the sales do not exceed US\$ 10.00 per year, FAPEMA is exempted from paying the copyright, because Judith Gleason's heirs understand that this is an action taken by a Public Research Foundation and by a publisher of a Public University, UEMA.

years have passed between the first publication in English, in 1970, and its publication in Portuguese, in 2022⁴, and the way the translator introduces a possible idea from the author is also linked to the place that the novel took over the figure of Agontimé.

Moreover, literariness, in this aspect, is configured as the novel “invents” a character, or the way in which Agontimé is seen, read, interpreted, that is, beyond the real historical figure, the character is sometimes confused with that one, and in this way literature assumes the role of visibility and social sayability about a time, people and places.

Carlos Eugenio Marcondes de Barros, in his presentation of the novel (2022, p. 256), mentions:

Judith Gleason (1929-2012) is not unknown to our readers. Her book *Oyá. A Praise to the African Goddess* was published in 1993 by Bertrand Brasil, of Rio de Janeiro. It is plausible to imagine that it is a tribute to the orixá Oyá/Iansã, the deity of her devotion.

The author's interest in the legendary figure of Queen-Mother Agontimé arose from reading Pierre Verger's article entitled “Le culte des voduns d'Abomey aurait-il été apporté à Saint Louis du Maranhão par la mère du roi Ghezo” (*Mémoire de l'IFAN*, n. 27, Dakar, 1953), according to his daughter, Professor Maud Gleason.

Judith Gleason cites, at the end of the book, “some authors, artists, and travelers who paved the way for Abomey, colonial Bahia, and candomblé. Among the authors are Melville Herskovitz (*Dahomey, an ancient west African kingdom* (1936), Manuel Nunes Pereira (*A Casa das Minas: contribuição ao estudo das sobrevivências do culto dos voduns, do panteão daomeano, no Estado do Maranhão* (1947) and Octávio da Costa Eduardo (*The negro in northern Brazil* (1948).

These narratives are the object of this article's analysis, among them the fact that in the novel, Adandozan, son of King Angoglo⁵, who imprisoned Agontimé and made her an enslaved subject and sold her to Brazil, is the sorcerer. Agontimé is stripped of her royal status and placed in the condition of an enslaved subject because she is accused of witchcraft. In the Casa das Minas, she takes the name of Maria Jesuína de Toi Zomadônu, according to Sergio Ferreti (2008). And herein lies the main objective of this article: to highlight how the novel points out how different oral traditions tangented differences about the same plot, Nã Agontimé, and how this figure helped in the articulation of

⁴ Between the English versions (1970, 1974) and the Portuguese translation and its publication by Editora UEMA (2022), there are numerous differences in format, size, text additions, and even the non-existence of the Portuguese version of Caribé's drawings. There are differences between the English and Portuguese versions; the Portuguese version, translation, has texts by Carlos Eugenio Marcondes de Moura, an article by the late professor and anthropologist Sérgio Ferreti, authorized by his widow, anthropologist and professor Mundicarmo Ferreti, also a scholar on the subject, as well as explanatory notes, a glossary, and an introductory text of the Portuguese version telling of the publication of the translation by Henrique Borralho.

The translator Carlos Eugenio de Marcondes Moura, despite having received proposals for publication in other states and by other institutions, understood the importance of publishing in Maranhão, the object of part of the novel and where Agontimé supposedly spent his last days. Through Alessandro de Lima Francisco, member of the Eric Weil Study Center, to which professors Francisco Valdério and Henrique Borralho, both professors at UEMA, belong, Alessandro Rodrigues Pimenta, friend of Carlos Eugenio, proposed that the novel be published by UEMA.

⁵ He ruled Daomé from 1789 to 1797, husband of Agontimé, this being one of his many wives, according to tradition.

Maranhão's historical-cultural heritage. Judith Gleason drew on ethnographic research⁶. The novel builds a weaving of how Maranhão recomposes the daomean traditions starting from the tambor de mina.

The different traditions are important because they go back to the debate in the beginning of the 20th century, when the fight against miscegenation acquired more resonance and, in the same perspective, the demand for the correction of the black presence in the country's history. Besides that, in the specific case of Maranhão, according to Antônio Evaldo Almeida Barros (2007)⁷, it was at the beginning of the 20th century that the re-actualization of the Myth of the Brazilian Athenas⁸ is resignified by elements of popular culture, including Afro-Brazilian religious manifestations, even with certain press attacks on these manifestations. That is, in the case of Maranhão, the slavery past of the Brazilian Athenas - white, elitist, supposedly literary - incorporated the dimension of

6 According to translator Carlos Eugenio Marcondes de Moura, in his introduction to the novel, he mentions (2022, p. 257): "The reading of authors such as Melville Herskovitz (Dahomey, an ancient west African kingdom (1936), Manuel Nunes Pereira (A Casa das Minas: contribuição ao estudo das sobrevivências do culto dos voduns, do panteão daomeano, no Estado do Maranhão (1947) and Octávio da Costa Eduardo (The negro in northern Brazil (1948), gave great support to the field research she conducted first in Brazil and later in some regions of Nigeria, especially in Abomey, in Benin, where twelve kings reigned, between 1625 and 1900. In Abomey, where she returned twenty-five years after her first researches, Judith Gleason had the opportunity to meet Gagbadjou Glèlè, a fifth-degree grandson of Queen Agontimé and her husband King Agonglo, who showed her his personal shrine, where several sculptures related to the vodun Zomadônu and, to her great surprise, a sculpture representing Agontimé were found. When she visited the local Historical Museum, she came across Agontimé's tiny throne in the Hall of Thrones, and the museum guide informed her that there was no other queen's throne there but hers!"

7 The central thesis of the author (BARROS, 2007) is to understand how Maranhão came to be represented as a mixture of erudite and popular patterns among whites, mestizos and blacks, building a regional identity through cultural manifestations, which he calls "modeled identity". This process of "adaptation" (the modeling of identity in the middle of the 20th century), is, according to the author, based on three "complementary and "interdependent" movements: the cultural manifestations and of popular, mestizo and black religiosity, such as the bumba-meu-boi, tambor-de-mina and pajelança, for example, appropriated by segments such as the press, resignified by the clergy and by portions of the Maranhense intelligentsia; by the growing interest of the Estado Novo, starting with the intellectuals, in integrating, in a symbolic way, the Maranhense Negro to the history of the region; and by the resistance of popular segments to the prejudice and persecution to which they are subjected, either by the state, the press, the clergy or the intellectuals. It is in this context that the Brazilian Athenaeum is reappropriated, in a singular and hitherto unusual way. According to Barros (2007, p. 17), "One tries to build the idea that the Brazilian Athens would only have been possible because of the racial mixture; that the fundamental of the Maranhense had been infiltrated by the imaginative sap of the African; and that from this came the essential element of regional identity: the love and attachment to the land".

8 This discussion about the Brazilian Athenas, Atenas, is vast and started in the 1940s and never ended. Since then, many authors have focused on understanding it, especially because it is one of the pillars of the identity of São Luís and even of Maranhão, since, in the nineteenth century, the state was comprised by São Luís and vice versa, "Maranhão Island", since the city is insular, one of the three capitals, besides Vitória and Florianópolis. This is an extremely neuralgic question, since it refers to the debate of cultural heritage, dear to the people of Ludovicão, a true ethos. Roughly and briefly, the central idea is that São Luís in the second half of the 19th century, extending to the middle of the 20th century, would be a hotbed of poets, novelists, intellectuals, journalists, printers, politicians, among others, of great national expression, for they were emulating great ideas and building a regional and national project in the Brazilian Empire and later Republic, with figures such as Antônio Gonçalves Dias, João Lisboa, Odorico Mendes, Sotero dos Reis (Grupo Maranhense, 1844-1866), Antônio Henriques Leal, Sousândrade, Manuel de Bethencourt, Frederico José Correa, Aluizio Azevedo, Arthur Azevedo, Raimundo Correa, later, Graça Aranha, Humberto de Campos, Benedito Leite, Josué Montello, among dozens of other names. The "Grupo Maranhense", for instance, would be the emulator of issues such as: the foundation of a Brazilian poetry (Gonçalves Dias), the construction of another interpretative historiographic model of Brazil and the didactic teaching in the press of the great issues of the Empire (João Lisboa), the translations of Greek and Latin works into Portuguese (Odorico Mendes, besides having been part of the Regência Trina), the construction of a history of Brazilian literature and the Brazilian Portuguese language, (Sotero dos Reis). The Brazilian Athenas is one of the most studied themes in Maranhão historiography. Among the various works, see Borralho (2010, 2011).

the cultural richness of the Maranhão province, not only for its Lusitanian past, but for the existence of Afro-Brazilian richness.

From the methodological point of view, this article is based on the literary analysis of a work, having as theoretical contributions authors such as Compagnon⁹ (2006), Terry Eagleton (2006)¹⁰,_ and Antonio Candido¹¹(1988), whose perspectives assume the intentionality of an authorship, as opposed to arguments such as Maurice Blanchot's¹²(2011),_ and Josefina Ludmer¹³(2014), of which rest arguments on the “autonomy of the text” and “public imagination.”

Under this aspect, we believe that the author of the novel, Judith Gleason, assumes the role of the narrator, giving voice, meaning, literariness, because it is an ethnohistorical novel made from a research done in Benin in the late 60s of the 20th century and, although it is not the duty of literature, function, to tell the truth, because if it does, it ceases to be literature, the novel fills a historical gap about the figure in question.

There is an intentionality in the narrative, which lays roots in positions such as those of feminism against symbolic and male domination. However, the novel is much more than that, it is not only about the trajectory of a former queen of Daomé who became an enslaved subject in Brazil. It is a plot with characteristics of black feminism in the 1970s, in the United States; of a reafrikanization of that country during the processes of struggle against discrimination and racial injustice, apartheid, supported decades ago by legal contributions. Moreover, the character's protagonism underlies a stance in the struggle against slaveholding colonialism. In the novel, the racial aspect imposes itself on the national one, as it is linked to an enslaved black queen. Her mission is not to corroborate the formative path of the nation-people, but to recompose under dominion

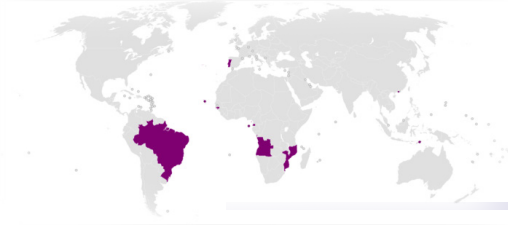
9 Antonie Compagnon starts from two premises of the analysis of a work, among other issues: the critique of ideology and the linguistic analysis. Moreover, he himself states: “everything that can be said of a literary text does not belong, therefore, to literary study” (2006. p. 45).

10 According to Terry Eagleton: “Why read literature? The answer, in short, was that such literature made people better. Few reasons could have been more persuasive. When, a few years after Scrutiny's creation, Allied troops arrived in the concentration camps to arrest commanders who had spent their leisure hours with a volume of Goethe, the need for explanation became clear. If reading literary works really made men better, then this did not occur in the way imagined by the euphoric supporters of this theory. It was possible to exploit “the great tradition” of the English novel and to believe that by so doing raise questions of fundamental value—a question of vital relevance to the lives of men and women wasted away at fruitless labor in the factories of industrial capitalism” (2006, p. 53).

11 Antônio Candido works with the concept of committed literature to name literary art committed to confronting social problems and inequities (1988).

12 For Blanchot (2011), there is the solitude of the work, always unfinished, always dismissed of its authorship, the spirit wants to realize in the infinity of the work. The work of art is not finished or unfinished, it just is. He who depends on the work finds himself in solitude. The work is solitary. It is the work that dominates the author.

13 “According to Ludmer (2014, p. 93): “Today I conceive of criticism as a form of cultural activism, and I need to define the present in order to act. I use some conceptual tools; one of them is what I call public imagination, which allows me to read without the categories of author and work, outside the divisions between private, individual, and social. The public imagination would be everything that circulates in the form of images and discourses and a collective force and work that fabricates “reality”. One can also imagine it as a virtual real territory without forces, like a net that we weave and that surrounds us, penetrates us and constitutes us. Literature would be one of the last threads of the public imagination” (2014, p. 93).



the ethnic dignity of the people of Daomé in the Americas. And, in this, Maranhão occupies a strategic role in the narrative.

The work, printed by EDUEMA and Editora Pitomba, recomposes an important trajectory, that of the Casa das Minas, Querebentan (temple) of Zomadônu (king of the water spirit), vodum of Agontimé, founded by her in the beginning of the 19th century, whose space was declared Cultural Heritage in 2005, and that constitutes one of the most important Mina terreiros in Maranhão; It is a reference for anthropological, historical, and ethnographic studies, whose trajectory marks an important aspect of Afro-Brazilian cults.

The work was born from ethnographic research, since the author was in Abomey, former capital of the kingdom of Daomé, visiting the Museum of the Royal Family Abomey, getting to know the throne of Agontimé, which deeply influenced her. Under this aspect, the novel, although in the field of verisimilitude, is a historical novel, preserving the elements of fictionality.

The novel in question assumes characteristics of a narratology that is not only fictionalizing a story, but didacticizing it, telling it, assuming political and feminist characteristics, with a denouncing character against the atrocities of the slavery period; the multiple transnational relations involving modern states, the traders of enslaved subjects, many of them, besides being rich, vigorous operators of a triple continental commerce that fed the current capitalist system, and whose practices of such inhumane commerce lasted until the end of the 19th century.

Novels with these characteristics assume a character of denunciation, of an engaged literature, far from its merely aesthetic apprehensions and its concepts of beletrism, to simply entertain and place themselves in the position of another history, antagonizing old, legitimized interpretations about the slavery past.

The narrator sometimes appears in first person in the speech of her protagonist and sometimes in third person. This deflects the moments in which Agontimé takes the reins of the narrative, as if she were giving the interpretative tone of how she would like the reader to hear from her own mouth or see with her own eyes. The times when the narrator is in third person, he explores semiotic elements of typical magical realism narratives as if he were a camera following the scene unfolding frequently.

“Now listen. It is the tale of Princess Aligbonon, daughter of the King of Tado, who went to the bank of the Mono River. She was slender, slender as the branch of a willow tree, but she was well-built in body, her hands were remarkably calloused and strong. She went to the edge of the river, accompanied by her servants, in order to choose sturdy leaves for rubbing gourds in the courtyard of her father’s home.” (Gleason, 2022, p. 20).

This position taken by the narrator is intentional, and it is not enough to just listen to her: it is necessary to unveil the minutiae of the scenes, of the many exploring the magical and enchanted everyday life.

“This, however, is another story. This story was told to me by a little bird, and as soon as he finished, he turned into a stone. The stone rolled around, and whoever is able to catch it must travel all the way to the royal road that leads to the beach at Uida. Now you are all dispensed and it’s time to go to bed. Soon, soon it will be Zan-nan-nan (bad night), that’s the time when the snakes come out of the bush to cross the steps of the unprepared, and when all things change hands. So go in peace while it is still possible to greet you all with a ‘good night’ and a ‘goodbye for now.’ “And forever,” she added quietly (Gleason, 2022, p. 21).

The novel, unquestionably, has as its narrative focus the royalty of the ancient Daomé (present-day Ghana and the Gulf of Benin). On this aspect, the splendor, the vigor of Africa of the old empires, such as Mali, Songai, Oyó and Dahome itself, is emphasized much more than specifically the continent that was plagued as a supplier of enslaved subjects, the stage of modern slavery. Without forgetting that the African kingdoms themselves also had such practices, but by emphasizing the vigor of the kingdom of Dahome, even with its contradictions, the narrative explores the human condition, the vicissitudes, the existential character of the people who lived there, and not the objectification as cattle, typical of the ways such subjects were treated when they arrived in the Americas.

It depicts the reign of the Dahomean king Agonglo, who married Nã Agontimé after looting his village, an attack that led to the death of his mother¹⁴. During the reign of Agonglo’s son Adandozan, Agontimé is arrested and held captive in the Fort of São João da Mina for five years. This information is supported years before the publication of the novel by Pierre Verger¹⁵, when, after a discussion with Adandozan, he finally made the decision to sell her as an enslaved subject to European merchants; a practice considered outrageous for a member of the Royal Family. The narrative describes Adandozan as a despot - and this contrasts with certain historiographies¹⁶ – placing the period of his reign as kind, as well as prosperous.

Possibly, the novel is one of those responsible for the resumption of the positive image of Agontimé and characterization of Adandozan as a bad guy, especially because the queen was sold as an enslaved and trafficked subject in the late eighteenth century. Adandonzan’s relations with Europeans, merchants, and the Christian religion are

¹⁴ According to Carlos Eugenio Marcondes de Moura (Gleason, 2022, p. 257), “he married the young Agontimé, born in the village of Gbohuele, in the Mahi, a region located in the extreme north in what was then the Daomé, and who, due to internal wars, was taken as a captive to Abomey, with her father and two brothers.

¹⁵ According to Ferreti (2008).

¹⁶ Among them, Pares (2013), Araujo (2010), Viveiros de Castro (2019).

punctuated leading the narrator to cadence the process of demonization of vodun practices and cults and how Adandozan not only traded, but had close ties with slave merchants, Adandozan not only traded but had close ties with slave traders, such as Francisco Félix de Sousa¹⁷, an emblematic figure worshipped in Benin today. He is also associated with the corruption of the Daomé customs, miscegenation and degeneration, while Agontimé represents purity, the preservation of ancient practices, such as that of the panthers.

“She was in no immediate danger. The sacrilege would have been difficult to understand for those obtuse women who never paused to understand the real meaning of a kposi (wife of the panther). As for the children - for this narrative belonged solely to their son and his progenitors - what more appropriate farewell gesture could there be? The narrative expressed their strange change of understanding, their most unthinking longings. That the spirits gathered at the tamarind foot would understand and forgive her motives. She would go, she would need to narrate the tale that night.

“Kpo ñã, kpo ñã,” she began, “the panther moves on, the panther moves on.”

“Avũ be, avũ,” the children completed the sentence, “and the dog hides, the dog hides.”

“No power can stand up to kpo,” Agontimé continued. “Now listen. It is the tale of Princess Aligbonon, daughter of the king of Tado, who went to the bank of the Mono River. She was slender, slender as the branch of a willow tree, but she was well-built in body, her hands were remarkably calloused and strong. She went to the edge of the river, accompanied by her servants, in order to choose sturdy leaves for rubbing gourds in the courtyard of her father’s home.” (Gleason, 2022, p, 20).

By exploring Adandozan’s arrogance, sometimes placing himself as the owner of Daomé, the narrator contrasts the commanding position of a king versus that of a queen, dignified and respected, because in prison everyone not only respected her but worshipped her, even the king’s wives who, deep down, feared her. Authority being thus, to explore an analogy from Hannah Arendt (2016), Adandozan uses the attribute of force for the exercise of power while Agontimé enjoys authority without the use of such a resource, although Arendt recognizes that the use of force is an exercise of power; however, if an authority needs the resource of force, it is because it does not have it.

In the argument between Agontimé and Adandozan, he decided to sell her, a legitimate process of self-recognition of the use of force. Furthermore, during her imprisonment, Agontimé takes up the entire spiritual repertoire surrounding Daomé; such as the Leopard, a treatment consecrated to the kings’ mothers, since she supposed

¹⁷ Francisco Félix de Sousa (1754-1849). On the trajectory of this slave trader, see, among other works: Araújo (2010). His text *He who “saves” mother and son* aims to reconstruct the myth of the slave trader from textual sources, interviews conducted with family members, and the examination of the memorial of Francisco Félix de Souza, analyzing the reconstruction of the memory of the trader within the family, at the same time trying to understand how the memory of the ancestor expresses the political implications associated with the memory of slavery in contemporary Benin.

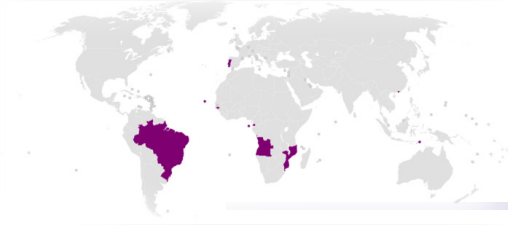
they were descendants of Agassou, the royal family's ancestor; the cult to Zomadônu - the King of the Water Spirits, considered the most powerful vodun of the Fon Kingdom, in Abomey, his name means "you don't put fire in your mouth"; the consultation to the oracle, instructing her to take her vodun to Brazil; the cult to the panther, the totemic ancestor of the Domean dynasty, to the point that even the other women of the "panther" respected her and even the panther admired her; the respect to Legba that, in the House of Mines, was associated with a type of demon, but in Dahomey was related to destiny, and, above all, the fact that, in the narrative to the cult, the rituals would be a form of political organization, a matter of resistance, that is why Adandozan wanted to erase the memory of the queen.

"Inspire me, my master.
Inspire me, my ancestors.
And you, Alaba, who dwell in the mysterious Ife,
Inspire me.
All those more knowledgeable than I,
Come and help me.
Gods of life and death,
Vodun of the earth,
Vodun of the waters,
Help me.
Legba, intercessor,
Allow me to speak" (Gleason, 2022, p. 30).

By relating so closely to slave merchants and Christians, the King ultimately dismisses the entire process that legitimized a Homoean ancestry, to the point that the arrest of Francisco Felix de Sousa, after collecting a debt from the King, demonstrates how much he owed the merchant.

Purposefully, it leads the reader into a process of affection, consummation, of empathy with the protagonist. Agontimé was branded before coming to Brazil, as one brands an animal. On the ship *tumbeiro*, she and the other enslaved subjects are coerced to convert to the Christian religion, being all baptized, because during the entire journey they were in the company of a priest who at all costs demonizes the practices of vodun worship.

During their stay in Bahia, the first-person narration in Agontimé's voice says, "In Africa we only tell stories at night" (Gleason, 2022, p. 153). The night assumes a semiophorization of antagonism to the day, because storytelling, in addition to the gregarious, communal aspect, expenses in the form of surrender to the unknown, the forces that are hidden during the day, dispersed by the rhythm of work, hindering access to



the zones of sensitization, the imaginary, the imagination, the hidden and what is hidden in the collective unconscious, being accessed more prominently in the chinks of the night.

She thought of fleeing to Maranhão, but her interlocutor interposes her:

“What nonsense! How long have you lived in this country and still don’t know that Maranhão is not a place to take refuge, as if it were a quilombo. It’s a place where the most stubborn, rabble-rousers, murderers are sent” (2022, p. 173).

At this point, the novel takes as its inflection the most direct connection with Maranhão. According to Maria Laura Viveiros de Castro (2009), the Casa das Minas arises in the nineteenth century, first decades, created by black minas jeje coming from the former Gold Coast. The name Querebentam is of Jeje origin and the voduns of Abomey would have been brought to São Luís do Maranhão in the early nineteenth century, because of Agontimé.

According to Ferreti (2008), when Agontimé founded the Casa das Minas, he became Maria Jesuina de toi Zomadônu. The main ritualized festivals in the Casa are the Averequete, linked to São Benedito; Banquete dos cachorros; homage to São Lázaro; the Arrombam, which closes the tambor de mina terreiros at the beginning of Lent; the Festa do divino Espírito Santo. In other words, the Casa das Minas has a deep relationship with the oral traditions in Maranhão, with the festivals, merrymaking, carnival, and São João.

According to Antonio Evaldo Almeida Barros (2019), the newspapers of São Luís, in the first decades of the 20th century, detracted from the tambor de mina in Maranhão in general and not only specifically the Casa das Minas. In correlating the narrator’s speech when Agontimé intended to flee to Maranhão, considering it a place where “the most stubborn, rabble and murderers” are sent, there is a connection between the two worlds: Africa and Maranhão, both connected not only by the transatlantic crossing, but by the stigma of the past, once proud and, at that moment, the first century of the 19th century, already starting its process of “economic decline”.

Agontimé can be thought of as a metaphor for Maranhão, once the capital of part of Brazil in the 17th century, which reaches “its apogee” between the 18th and 19th centuries, the first half; the period of the arrival of the Queen of Maranhão - even if treated as an enslaved subject -, embodying “the spirit” of Maranhão. The arguments of the metaphor will be resumed later on.

In 1621, the Royal Letter¹⁸ of June 13 created the State of Maranhão, becoming responsible for a significant part of what would in the future be understood as Brazil,

¹⁸ State of Grão-Pará and Maranhão was a Portuguese administrative unit in South America. It was created under the name Estado do Maranhão, on June 13, 1621, by Philip II of Portugal (or Philip III of Spain), in northern Portuguese America (now Brazil), and renamed Estado do Maranhão e Grão-Pará in 1654, and Estado do Grão-Pará e Maranhão in 1751, which was divided in 1772.

during the phase of Portuguese Colonial America. This phase was then divided into two distinct administrative spaces: Bahia, up to what can be understood as Rio Grande and the State of Maranhão, then Grão-Pará and Maranhão, alternating the headquarters of this regiment, sometimes in São Luís and sometimes in Belém. The relations between Maranhão and the Amazon, since this region is Amazonian, are tenuous. Belém was created in 1615, after São Luís (in 1612), and to provide protection to the latter, both fortresses against “invaders”, read other Europeans than the Portuguese. Furthermore, it was understood that Maranhão was the mouth of the Orinoco River in Peru and the gateway to the long-dreamed-of El-dorado¹⁹.

Because of the strategic position and to increase the plantation system, the First General Company of Commerce of Brazil was created (March 10, 1649). Note that this company was a derivation of one already existing in Cape Verde (Africa), whose operations took place from Ribeira Grande de Santiago, later known as Cidade Velha, on the island of Santiago, in that archipelago.

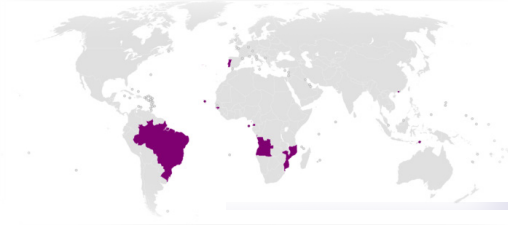
The conflicts between the Jesuits and the colonists culminated in the expulsion of the Jesuits for defending only African slavery, never indigenous slavery, object of catechetical interest and whose developments resulted in the Beckman Revolt (1684), in the dispute with the Companhia de Comércio do Maranhão, a branch of the Cia. Geral de Comércio do Brasil. Due to the strategic, political, and economic importance of Maranhão for this region, Father Antonio Vieira, who stressed, among other things, the lewd, insubordinate behavior of the “natives” of this place translated into the environment of Maranhão, making it a land of “lies”, because, according to Antonio Vieira²⁰, in Maranhão even the sky lies, the sky begins sunny, and then it is clouded “with clouds”, in his sermon on Lenten Thursday.

Maranhão was also the space of the new conciliatory model between the new mercantilist policy and the illustrated ideology after the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1759, later implemented in all Portuguese America²¹. And, in the process of acquiescence of

¹⁹ According to Barbosa de Godóis, in *A história do Maranhão* (2008, p. 76), “The legend of El-dorado, which had diverted the English pirates to the Orinoco and exerted influence on the adventurers who sought America, dominated by the lust for easy and considerable riches, had in Gabriel Soares a credulous expeditionary in search of the so-called kingdom of Grão-Paititi or Grão-Mocho. He was the head of the first Portuguese expedition led by land to the north of Brazil”. Maranhão was then North; the invention of the Northeast only occurred in the 20th century.

²⁰ Padre Antonio Vieira lived in Maranhão between 1652 and 1661. According to him (*Sermão da Quinta Domingo da Quaresma*): The sun dawns very clear, promising a beautiful day, and in an hour it clouds the sky, and it begins to rain as in the most entrenched winter. This is the substance of the apology, neither poorly formed nor poorly apportioned, because, even if the application of the vices is totally untrue, it nevertheless has the semblance of truth, which is enough to give salt to the satire. And, supposing that Spain had the upper hand, I believe that the part of it that concerns our Portugal is the language, at least as understood by the foreign nations that treat us most closely. The vices of the language are so many, that Drexélio made an entire and very copious alphabet of them. And if the letters of this alphabet were distributed among the states of Portugal, which letter would belong to our Maranhão? There is no doubt that M. M - Maranhão, M - to whisper, M - to mock, M - to curse, M - to mock, M - to gossip, and, above all, M - to lie: to lie with words, to lie with deeds, to lie with one's thoughts, that in all ways and in all ways one lies here.

²¹ According to Langer (1997, p. 68): “According to Pombal's plans, after overcoming these challenges, the revitalization of the economy would take place through the restructuring of mercantilism and a set of reforms in the social and cultural spheres. In 1759, all Jesuits, as well as those who worked as missionaries in the villages of Grão-Pará and Maranhão,



metropolitan interests for this part of Portuguese America, with vast interest in Amazonia, the second Company of Commerce of Grão-Pará and Maranhão was created in 1755, (Royal Charter of June 7) by the Marquis of Pombal, boosting the agro-export economy, increasing considerably the contingent of enslaved subjects coming from Africa, especially from Jejês, Nagôs, and Bantos. Maranhão would become one of the richest places in Portuguese America sustained by enslaved labor.

The “decadence” of the agricultural system begins in the early nineteenth century, experiencing upheavals due to the dependence on foreign markets, enjoying a new boom with the War of Secession in the United States, increasing the production of cotton for England and going into decline again soon after the end of the conflict, when the United States returns to supply the market of its former metropolis.

Maranhão, a place that was already “born” as a considerable administrative part of Portuguese America, divided between the territories of the State of Brazil and the State of Maranhão, then Grão-Pará and Maranhão, was since the arrival of the Europeans (16th century, possible way to El-dorado); then, in the 17th century, “hope” for growth. Later, in the XVII century, it was a “hope” for growth for colonists and natives, importing Azorean settlers to increase rice and cotton activities, through the creation of the Cia. Geral de Comércio do Brasil, enslaving the native natives until the Beckman Revolt. In the following century, the country experienced a new boom in its eagerness for growth due to the actions taken by Pombal: the great economic growth beginning in 1755.

In the 19th century, the explosion of agro-exports and the construction of luxurious mansions in São Luís, when even neighborhoods such as Praia Grande, downtown were decorated with tiles from Portugal, the construction of sumptuous mansions in Alcântara, the enrichment of farmers in the whole cotton, rice and sugarcane producing region, such as Itapecuru, Viana, living through seasonal economic crises during the entire XIX until the end of agroexports in the second half of this century, sustained by the enslaved arm, experiencing new economic crises throughout the XX century.

The metaphor of Maranhão rests in the social imaginary of the Maranhão people due to the fact that it was the capital of an administrative part of Portuguese America (Francisco Félix de Sousa was a Bahian merchant of enslaved African subjects in Daomé, later Benin, becoming one of the main refuges of the returnees, former enslaved subjects in Brazil); to have reached by the discursiveness of the agro-exporters a period of prosperity between the middle of the 18th century and the middle of the 19th century, exactly when the crisis of the agro-export system begins, initiating a period of intellectual, social, and architectural brilliance exactly because of the existence and the economic support of the

were expelled from the Portuguese domains. From then on, the effect of the link between mercantilist economic policy and illustrated ideology would take on an irreversible character in the missionary villages in colonial Brazil.

enslaved arm. And, when it enters in crisis, the model itself starts in the local speeches the period of the society's *débaclé* in an unrestricted sense.

Agontimé was an African queen, arrives in Maranhão as an enslaved subject in the late eighteenth century, founds the House of Mines, and in the novel is located by the envoys of her son Guezó to return to Daomé, when the narrative leaves in suspension whether or not she has returned, giving hints that she is embroiled in Maranhão itself.

In the 20th century, far from the discursiveness of the Athenas Brasileira and the period of "brilliance" of Maranhão's economy, Maranhão reappears in the Brazilian news not for economic issues, but for its cultural conditions, such as religious, festive, the sociabilities of popular expressions, and, in this, the Casa das Minas has an important role, that is, Agontimé arrives in Maranhão in the period of increase of cotton and rice agroexports and disappears exactly at the beginning of the agroexporting crisis. Maranhão's importance changes inflection, and resuming Almeida Barros' arguments, Athenas is reconfigured by black and indigenous elements fostering popular culture, being reappropriated. Thus, Maranhão will no longer be read as an economically rich state, but culturally, precisely because of the indigenous and Afro-descendant characters, among them religious, especially the religions of African matrix.

Intentionally or not, Judith Gleason's novel is a metaphor of Maranhão with Agontimé as an expression of its ethos. An African queen, enslaved by her husband's son, made a captive, transported to the new world, founder of one of the most important *terreiros de mina* in Maranhão and a reference for other Afro-Brazilian cult practices, sought out by her son Ghézo²², Some spellings point to Ghezo, Guezo (1818-1858), promising to restore the brave times of ancient Daomé, her son with Agonglo, dethroning Adondozan in 1818, who was very closely related to merchants of enslaved subjects, concerned with his power, not caring about the old rituals and even allowing a growing process of religious discrimination from the presence of priests.

There are correlations between Agontimé and Maranhão. The reign of her son Ghézo was marked by his mother's search for years throughout the American continent, in an attempt to "restoration" of the kingdom of Dahomey, until possibly having found her in São Luís; there are controversies and whose historiography does not confirm this fact. The return of Agontimé would be a symbol of this process. In prison, Francisco Félix de Sousa, arrested for collaborating with Adandozan, meets Agontimé and plots to remove his tormentor from the throne by conspiring for Ghézo to become king, as he actually

²² According to Carlos Eugenio Marconde de Moura, in his introduction to the novel, he states: "when the young Gankpé assumed the throne, from then on he was known as Guezo, whose reign was a long one (1818-1858).

did, which is why he is revered in present-day Benin, the place where part of the African returnees (the Agudás) and founding a neighborhood known as descendants of Africans who lived in Brazil and who had children in Brazil.

In Daomé, Zomadônu was only a Tohosu chief. There was a greater Daoméan political force than him, but not without São Luís. In this respect, the presence of Agontimé, a former queen residing in São Luís, represents the restoration of Daomé in Maranhão and not only the restitution of the former kingdom on African soil, making Maranhão a queen's place, an enchanted link.

She not only sensed that Gankpé (Guezo) would one day succeed the throne of Adadonzan but had been warned of what was happening in Daomé by Zomadônu: “Dois sois não podem reinar no céu ao mesmo tempo. Descei do trono. Não sois mais rei. Longa vida ao terceiro filho. A profecia se realizou. Nós nos submetemos ao frescor da água.”

“How did you know all this, Agontimé? You described the scene as if you were there, sitting among the wives.”

“A little bird told me,” she said smiling, “but she didn't tell me, everything. For instance, I have no idea how things are behind the high walls of the residential wards of the royal wives, walls that I wished in vain I could climb like a lizard or hover over them in unimpeded flight.” (Gleason, 2022, p. 223).

The narrator places Agontimé not as queen, but as an entity. Did Zomadônu make Ghézo a great king so that he would be even greater in Maranhão? Or did she build the temple of the House of Mines as a way to please Zomadônu and free herself from him and from a debt? After all, Zomadônu never incorporated Agontimé in Maranhão and several inflections can be made from this.

The first concerns the fact that in Daomé, Agontimé was a queen, in Maranhão an unknown, though admired, initiator of a new spiritualist practice in the lands of the new world, that is, her respectability was related to what people saw in her, not to her royal past. Thus, Zomadônu begins to see her as an entity, not just as a devotee.

Second inflection: Zomadônu “gave up” Agontimé either because he recognized that his destiny was already set, that he had already fulfilled his role as protector, or, because he saw new forces at work. Among these was the fact that Agontimé, upon arriving in Maranhão, met Currupira, a forest entity, protector of the animals, who immediately respected her. The encounter, besides characterizing the relationship between two forces, signals a rite of passage: American entities met with African ones, in a process typical of Brazilian religious syncretism.

Third inflection. The abandonment of Zomadônu took place after Agontimé bathed in the waters of the Itapecuru River²³. He - King of the Spirits of the Waters -

²³ According to Borralho (2021a, p. 26), “Itapecuru is of indigenous origin, ancient home of the Tapuias, as a linguistic

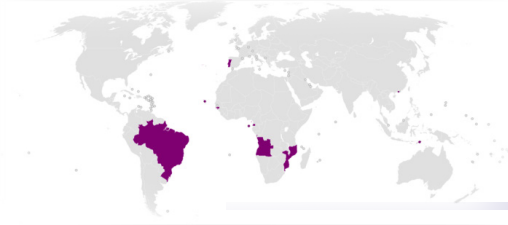
recognized the power of that river, one of the most important rivers in Maranhão, the longest one and one of the two genuinely Maranhense; that through its waters carried enslaved subjects from the Port of São Luís to other places.

The Fourth Inflection: Agontimé knows the festivities of Bumba-meu-boi and all the strength of the analogy this carries with it from the Maranhense ethos. Bumba-meu-boi, whose rituals go back to African dances, Indian practices and religious syncretism, which involves Catholicism, indigenous and African practices. The Bumba-meu-boi represents a process of semiophorization; one of the, because Pai Francisco even receiving the warning from the master of the farm, the owner, that all the other bullocks he could keep, except the Moonbeam, the most beloved, even so he complies with the wishes of his wife Catirina, who was pregnant and craving ox tongue. When the master of the farm wakes up, sensing that something is wrong, he searches for Moon Shine and can't find him. When he learns of the kidnapping by Pai Francisco and Catirina, he goes on a search with his foremen.

When he finds them, he whips Francisco, a black man, to the point of fainting. When Catirina, a black woman, cries out for her companion's life, claiming that she was responsible for his wish, she promises to live it again if the master of the farm would allow her to evoke the strength of her orixás. With no result. In desperation, she asks for the presence of Catholic ladies who live in the neighborhood to pray for Shine of the Moon. Also, without success. Finally, the indigenous people are also summoned by the force of the Kazumbás, spirits of the forest, to bring to life the beloved calf. They are also unsuccessful. Only with the sum of the forces of Catirina and Pai Francisco, of the Catholic prayers and the Kazumbas, the ox resuscitates. The auto of Bumba-meu-boi, which retells this story during the June festivities in Maranhão to this day is the representation of the contravention, the interdict, the transgression, the insubordination of the enslaved subjects Pai Francisco and Nega Catirina.

The representation of the auto, which is repeated every year in honor of Santo Antônio, São Pedro, São João and São Marçal, resumes the principle of insubordination, indolence, and maliciousness, initiated by the Maranhenses, present both in the texts of Father Antonio Vieira and in the speech of Agontimé's interlocutor, when she was in Bahia. The bumba-meu-boi, even though it is not a cultural practice specific to Maranhão, but to all of Brazil, is the very symbolization of negation, of counterposition, of insubordination, of revolt, of the affront to an existing system of oppression and social injustice. Maranhão

derivation." (BORRALHO, 2021a, p. 30-31): "Why is the Itapecuru River the river of Maranhão's life? Who answers is Raimundo Lopes, when he states (1970, p. 74): "In Maranhão, the settlement started mainly from the coast, but particularly from the Gulf, the island, the capital. The rivers were the great routes of settlement, the distributors and concentrators of demographic movements, and were the reason for their accessibility as navigable arteries. The settlement stopped next to the great forest, in the transition belt where the agricultural areas appeared. Only in Itapecuru and Mearim, the human current departing from the Gulf, slow and weak, crossed the obstacle, already encountering, in Pastos Bons, the Bahian-Piauiense current, also weakened, and in Tocantins and Pará.



was enriched at the expense of slave labor, and it was precisely this labor that operated the greatest social discrepancies.

Besides this, the Bumba-meu-boi, by bringing together African elements; the dance, the drums, the orixás; Indians, worship to the ox; Portuguese, prayers, homage to Catholic saints; indigenous, *kazumbás*, *pajelança*, is a metaphor for the construction of a mixed, composite Brazil. Agontimé, an African, meets Currupira, an indigenous, American force of nature, assumes a Portuguese name (Maria Jesuína, derived from Jesus) and begins a ritualistic practice that includes Catholic saints (São Lázaro, São Benedito, etc.), in the Historical Center of São Luís having such elements celebrated during Carnaval and São João.

There was a Saint
Sent by the Lord
To wash away the sins of the world.
Alleluia, Saint John, Alleluia.
(Gleason, 2022, p. 224).

Agontimé, even though she was met by the ambassadors of her son Ghézo, most likely Francisco Félix de Sousa, was in the entourage and refuses to return to Daomé. The narrative makes another prolepsis by saying that she already knew that Ghézo would become king, even after the ambassadors found her in São Luís. In the same way that still on Udá Beach, in Abomey, she refuses to be a legend, maybe that is why in the House of Mines she became a temple janitor and does not return to be near her son, just as she does not stay in São Luís, taking an unexpected turn, according to the novel.

The refusal to be the mother of the king and to be referenced as an important vodunisi, is the understanding that neither world belongs to her; neither Daomé because of the enslavement of her brothers, especially she who had experienced such suffering; nor Maranhão because it was the stage of this humiliating practice.

The metaphor between Agontimé and Maranhão is linked to the fact that she did not return to Daomé, for she knew that that proud past no longer existed, just as Maranhão could no longer boast of being a rich region for supporting enslaved arms. In the Maranhão imaginary of the twentieth century there is the image of a fantastic past, before the stabbing present, what Borralho (2011) called “modernity in reverse”, since the references are always linked to the past, before the caustic present.

Agontimé possibly does not return to Daomé, as in the novel it is also left in suspension whether or not she remains in Maranhão. She had fulfilled her role: to establish a connection between Africa and Brazil and, through religiosity, to illuminate the elements of affirmation of the African descendant condition, of female positivization, of the struggle against slavery, of black culture, and of the search for an anti-colonialist,

affirmative, propositional, and profound identity. Judith Gleason's novel leads to these and other reflections.

“When the ambassadors arrived punctually that afternoon, Leocadia, somewhat mysteriously, reported that Mother Agontimé had disappeared.” (Gleason, 2022, p. 240).

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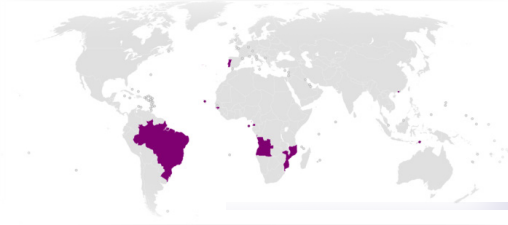
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