ABSTRACT: Studies of native constructions of tradition have generally worked within a paradigm opposing a subaltern view to a hegemonic one. Analyzing how different groups portray Black culture in Argentine, the paper calls attention to the fact that usually there are more than three constructions (hegemonic, subaltern and scientific), and that within the subaltern field, or groups, there is also an intense competition for the meanings to be assigned to tradition and ethnic identity. The paper shows how groups of practitioners of Black culture in Argentina present differing representations of Afro-Latin American tradition and ethnicity, using academic studies on the subject. Afro-Argentines have almost lost their ability to present their own version of their culture and were replaced as spokesmen of their own history and tradition by Afro-Uruguayans and by practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions.
The notions of tradition, history, culture and ethnicity have come under close scrutiny in the past decades. The idea that these concepts had fixed meanings that the anthropologist had to unravel has been increasingly questioned. It is quite appropriate to consider that there is a paradigm shift happening, inasmuch as the more recent studies increasingly have started regarding *the processes of construction* of ethnicity (Barth 1969, Royce 1982), culture (Wagner 1975) history (Guss 1993, 1996) and tradition (Linnekin 1983, Hanson 1989, Friedmann 1992). These studies do not see ethnicity, culture or tradition as real entities, existing out there, but try to understand how individuals engage in a creative process of utilizing and redefining existing symbols, and producing new ones.

Anthropologists have seen their accounts (ethnographies) of cultures, traditions and histories questioned not only by fellow anthropologists (Clifford and Marcus 1986) but also by "the natives" themselves, who have started *self-consciously* constructing their own version of them (Wade 1997). This process of native construction of culture and history, and the role anthropological studies have played in it, has, in turn, become a new area of study, sometimes called the "invention of tradition" perspective.

These studies have generally focused on how the natives' version is constructed, and how it is at odds with the official (i.e. the governmental or sometimes the anthropological) version. They have mainly worked within a paradigm opposing a subaltern view to a hegemonic or dominant one. The construction by the subaltern of a particular tradition (i.e. their own view of what their culture and history is) is seen as an empowering act, resulting in the creation of an identity that contests the hegemonic one. When considering processes of "ethnic reempowerment", Hill writes: "To successfully resist ongoing systems of domination, racial or ethnic stereotyping, and cultural hegemony, the first necessity of disempowered peoples, or of marginalized subcultural groups within a national society, is that of poetically constructing a shared understanding of the historical past that enables them to understand their present conditions as the result of their own ways of making history" (1992: 811)

What I want to do in this paper, is to call attention to the fact that usually there are more than two views (hegemonic-subaltern) or three views (hegemonic, subaltern and scientific). Within the subaltern field -or groups- there is also an oftentimes fierce competition for the meanings to be assigned to tradition, cultural patterns, or ethnic identity. This struggle takes place in different social arenas where the different groups may manage to temporarily impose their views on some of these social grounds and not in others. This contest is usually open-ended, with the groups winning partial battles in certain arenas.

In the paper, I will show how three different groups in Buenos Aires (Afro-Argentines, Afro-Uruguayan immigrants and local white practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions) present differing and contested representations of the city’s black culture and tradition. In the process, they utilize and reelaborate academic studies on the subject. Until recently, Afro-Argentines, who lacked a clear visibility in the city, had almost lost their ability to present their version of their culture and heritage. They had been replaced as spokesmen of their own history and tradition by Afro-Uruguayans and by practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions. In the past two

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1 This is still true of more contemporary works -like Wade (1995); Jackson (1995); Briggs (1996)- which do show a more diversified view of the process of construction of traditions.
years, however, a group of Afro-Argentines have created an organization called *Africa Vive* which has managed to restore them some visibility.

1. Afro-Argentines in Buenos Aires

*The black community in Buenos Aires in the 19th century*

As I have argued elsewhere (Frigerio 1993), accounts of the fate of Afro-Argentines in Buenos Aires can be likened to the “Chronicle of a death foretold” – to paraphrase the title of Garcia Marquez’s famous book. Since the second half of the 19th century, for more than a century, writers and scholars have taken turns to note that blacks had disappeared or were vanishing in Buenos Aires.

In 1863, José Manuel Estrada wrote :

“Today there are almost no blacks in Buenos Aires..... Race mixture, on the one hand, and the gradual improvements of racial types by influence of the weather, cultural patterns and of the elements, as well as the influences of civilization in the development of the skulls, have caused genuine examples of the Ethiopian race to be lost among us.” (quoted in Rodríguez Molas 1962: 149)

Victor Gálvez voiced a similar concern twenty years later in 1883:

“Today there are few, very few blacks, there are no more candombes. The "neighbourhood of the drums" is but a memory...” (Gálvez 1883: 257)

Forty-two years after Estrada’s statement, an article (“Gente de Color”) in a 1905 issue of the most important magazine of the time, Caras y Caretas, read:

“Little by little this race dies out.... the black race of the sons of the sun walks towards death....” (“Gente de Color”, Caras y Caretas 1905)

However, it is only in a 1967 magazine article, one hundred years after the first of these quotes, that Afro-Argentines voice their own concern regarding their dwindling numbers

“Alfredo Nuñez: "Our people are disappearing because of the mixed marriages. The number of blacks gets smaller and smaller....."

Haydee San Martín: "Years ago, when we organized a dance, this looked like a coal deposit...... Now many whites come. Our class is disappearing " (Porteños de Color: "Chongos y Gente de Clase" – newsweekly Panorama 1967)

In the most thorough work about the Afro-Argentines to date, Reid Andrews (1980: 6-7) underscores the predisposition to minimize the role played by the black community in Argentina and its numerical importance in the society, especially since the second half of the
nineteenth century 2. Rout (1976) contends that a similar attitude may be found in various Latin American countries. According to the census data, as late as 1838, blacks comprised 26% of the population of Buenos Aires (having reached a peak of 30% in 1810). The dramatic decrease of their participation in the population to just 2% only 40 years later (see figure 1), plus the statements of the aforementioned writers of the time as to the fact that “now there are no more blacks in Buenos Aires”, lent credibility to the myth that blacks had disappeared from the city.

Figure 1. Census data for Buenos Aires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>% Black</th>
<th>Black Population</th>
<th>Total population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1778</td>
<td>30 %</td>
<td>7.236</td>
<td>24.363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1810</td>
<td>30 %</td>
<td>9.615</td>
<td>32.558</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1838</td>
<td>26 %</td>
<td>14.928</td>
<td>62.957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>2 %</td>
<td>8.005</td>
<td>433.375</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Reid Andrews 1980: 66

Reid Andrews is wary of these numbers, however. He proposes that blacks were underrepresented in the 1887 census. In his opinion, since they lived in the least desirable houses and neighborhoods, and were distrustful of census takers, they were underenumerated—especially young males (1980: 80). Most importantly, he argues that lighter colored blacks were classified in the category trigueño or “wheat colored”, which, however, did not automatically imply African ancestry like mulato or pardo (1980: 84). When demographic statistics were compiled and published, trigueños were tabulated as whites instead of blacks (although this cannot be documented). (1980: 87). Moreover, he does not believe in two arguments usually proposed to explain the “disappearance” of blacks: 1) that many males were killed in the 1865-1870 Paraguayan war. He argues that only two all-black battalions served in this war, and there are no statistical data to back up this argument, and 2) that many died in the 1871 yellow fever epidemic which affected Buenos Aires. He argues that 17,729 of the 23,748 casualties had race listed, and only 268 of these were black. Apart from the numerical arguments he advances, Reid Andrews also notes that the several Afro-Argentine newspapers showed no concern for a diminishing population – although they were worried about the socio-economic conditions in which most of the black community lived.

2 Of the comparatively few studies dedicated to blacks in Argentina, the more rigorous ones are those dealing with the colonial period and up to the abolition of slavery in the first half of the 19th century (by Marta Goldberg, Miguel Angel Rosal, Florencia Guzman and Silvia Mallo). Few studies examine the situation of the black community in the second half of the 19th century, after the downfall of Buenos Aires governor Juan Manuel de Rosas (Rodrigues Molas 1962, Soler Cañas 1963, Reid Andrews 1980). For the 20th. century information is even scarcer. Reid Andrews (1980) only offers some information in the epilogue of his book, and except for Binayan Carmona’s (1980) insightful work on the community in the 60s and 70s, there are only a handful of journalistic articles which provide some information on the Afro-Argentines of the 20th century (Caras y Caretas 1905, Panorama 1967, Clarin 1971, Ebony 1974).
Following Reid Andrews’ lead, I consulted some of the black newspapers kept in the Biblioteca Nacional. Through them, one gets a glimpse of a community that not only continued to exist but was also very active socially. In these newspapers and some chronicles of the period can also be found clues as to the survival of autochthonous black cultural patterns presumed to have been lost.

Clues pointing to the richness of black social life and the survival of black cultural patterns include:

- many newspapers which were edited by and for the people of the black Community
- reports in these newspapers of several weekly meetings (tertulias) that members of the community organized in their homes, as well as rehearsals of carnival groups
- carnival societies which held weekly rehearsal practices
- dancing saloons owned by blacks which organized dances for the community.
- the survival of *candombe*, the Afro-Argentine music
- the survival of Afro-Argentine religion.

3 Starting with *La Raza Africana* in 1858, these journals became increasingly popular between 1870 till 1885 (Reid Andrews 1980: 179, Soler Cañas 1963). We know

4 It might be the case that these carnival societies were even more important than the mutual aid societies described by Reid Andrews (1980). From what can be gleaned from the black newspapers, these groups probably gathered a bigger number of people during a longer period of time than the mutual aid societies did. They probably outlived them, also, surviving until the beginning of the twentieth century, only disappearing together with the Buenos Aires carnival.

5 In 1882, some black journals complain that certain members of the community play *candombe* in inadequate contexts—basically, outside of private parties, in public contexts or in the streets, where it is subject to the ridicule of whites.

6 Famed Argentine writer José Ingenieros describes a religious ceremony he witnessed in 1893 (a time when no African traits where supposed to exist). The ceremony he describes (which he partially saw when he was a child, taken by his black cook) is very similar to the ones which are still performed in Brazil: "They used to get together to "dance the saint" ("bailar el santo").... With drumming in the background, offerings were made before an Afro-Catholic altar.... the priest or witch-doctor would pray in African language, and these prayers were sometimes answered or repeated by the audience, until one of the black women present started to dance, getting more and more frenetic, until she fell into an epileptic hysterical seizure which could last for a few minutes or many hours. After this the "saint" was danced (el "santo" estaba "bailado"): then the witch-doctor cured by praying or by laying his hands over the patient....." (Ingenieros 1920: 38)
The black community in Buenos Aires in the 20th century

Data about the black community in the first decades of the 20th. century are very poor. There are no surviving newspapers that may give a glimpse of its life. There are, however, certain hints, which show that the community persisted. Efforts were still made to organize it and edit journals reflecting its problems. The surviving evidence includes:

- Newspapers: The newspaper La Protectora, edited by the most successful mutual aid society, is published intermittently until 1910 (Reid Andrews 1980: 154). In 1910 there also existed a newspaper called La Verdad edited by Benedicto Ferreira.

- Black Societies: The most successful black mutual aid society, La Protectora, probably existed into the 1950s, since it is remembered by some Afro-Argentines even today. Other mutual aid societies on record are: the Agrupación Patriótica 25 de Mayo, the Círculo Social Juvenza and the Asociación de Fomento General San Martín.

- Recreational societies: According to the carnival historian Puccia (1974: 92), at the beginning of the 20s dances attended almost exclusively by blacks were held at the Teatro Marconi. The Shimmy Club—which, we shall see, last until approximately 1974—was founded in 1922 (Ortiz Oderigo 1980: 34).

These data show that in the first decades of the 20th century, "the many blacks of the Republic" (as an article in Caras y Caretas states in 1910) still constituted a community which strived for public recognition. This is true for most of the 20th century. Although scholars who have researched Afro-Argentine culture and history virtually neglect any survivals into the second half of the century, the careful examination of data from two sources show that—

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7 According to an article which appeared in Caras y Caretas, Ferreira, who worked in the intendencia, was a passionate defender of the "rights and glories of the black race in Argentina". He strongly complained when Falucho's statue was moved from its central location, and he also tried to get a monument built for Lorenzo Barcala, a famous black colonel". ("La Mudanza de Falucho", Caras y Caretas 13/8/1910).

8 The Agrupación Patriótica 25 de Mayo left a plaque in the monument to the Afro-Argentine hero Falucho una placa in 1910 (Estrada 1979: 119). The (same?) Centro Patriótico 25 de Mayo leaves another plaque in the monument in 1923 (Estrada 1979: 119). Afro-Argentine guitar player Enrique Maciel recalls the sociedad "Patriótica 25 de Mayo" as one of the Afro-Argentine associations he knew in his youth (Blomberg 1949). The Círculo Social Juvenza also left a plaque at the Falucho monument in 1924, which reads: “The CSJ to Antonio Ruiz (Falucho) in the name of his brothers for the fatherland and the race —1824-february 7- 1924” (Estrada 1979: 119). The Asociación de Fomento General San Martín also leaves a plaque at the same monument in 1923 (Estrada 1979: 119). The text of the plaque does not indicate that this is a black society. Argentines scholar Ortiz Oderigo (1980: 34), however, lists it as such.

9 "La Mudanza de Falucho", 13/8/1910.
least- into the 1970s black cultural patterns persisted, which served to differentiate this community from other groups.

These sources include interviews with Afro-Argentines in the 1990s, and a couple of lengthy magazine articles appearing in the late sixties and in 1980 (Panorama 1967, Clarín 1971, Binayán Carmona 1980). The data attests to the existence of a black community which was very much aware of its existence, got together occasionally to play and dance a music which they considered their own and which distinguished them from other groups. The community was stratified, and used some African or African derived words to denote the white others.

Enrique, an Afro-Argentine in his mid-fifties, gave me, in 1991, the following account of a carnival dance organized by the Shimmy Club, and held in a ballroom for rent named "The Swiss House":

"This was around 1973, 1974... I used to go to the Casa Suiza... There were tables around the dance floor, and that is where the elders sat.... I remember la Negra San Martín, who was very well known... very respected in the community. There were also the Nuñez, the Lamadrid, all elders... well known in the community. And people danced. First everybody danced, and then the older blacks went out to dance candombe. And then no white danced, they did not let whites to dance.(...)

When, at midnight, they started playing this, everybody started shouting: "eh, eh, eh, bariló, eh, eh, bariló", which means let the drummers come to the floor. And then the drumming started. After midnight, it was the experienced blacks who danced, and if a white person (who were at the time called "chongos") tried to dance, people would shout: "Out with the chongos! Out with the chongos!" and throw them out. And then all the blacks danced, the elders danced. "Eh, eh, eh, bariló, eh, eh, eh, bariló". And they all knew each other, and shouted at each other: "do this step, do this other one!". And then the younger blacks danced; oftentimes they danced a more modern type of candombe, maybe influenced by other dances. But they let them do it because they were "sons of" or "grandsons of"; and after it was over whites danced again. And then anybody could play the drum (if they played it well). But when midnight arrived, it was blacks who played the drums, and it was blacks who danced. (...)

Argentina candombe is danced differently from the uruguayan one. The style of the Argentine candombe, I think, is... because of the type of steps and movement, a dance of elderly people. Because it is danced in the manner of an old black (...)... it is not like the Uruguayan candombe, they move around a lot. The argentine one is different, it is smooth... slow movements. (...)

The drummers were all argentines. When black uruguayans went there, it was a struggle! Uruguayans went to a corner to play, they did not let them play in the foreground. And sometimes there was trouble. I know that black Uruguayans were not liked too much... I never knew why this was, and why there was this rivalry with Uruguayans. But Argentine blacks never liked Uruguayan blacks. [...]

And I saw it in the parties of the Shimmy Club, Uruguayan blacks were shunned. There was no integration with Argentine blacks. And this comes a long way. (...)

I still remember that when the Casa Suiza closed, at maybe two or three in the morning, blacks went out parading through Corrientes avenue, playing the drums. I remember that.....”

Other people who interviewed blacks or wrote about them in the sixties and seventies ratify Enrique's testimony. In the only essay describing the Afro-Argentine community in the second half of the twentieth century, Binayán Carmona (1980) attested to the survival and importance of the Shimmy Club, and also pinpointed the existence of candombe, a particular form of music and dance, characteristic of the community. According to the information provided by this author, the Shimmy Club was founded in 1924 –for Oderigo (1980) the date is 1922- and had “maybe hundreds” of members. It also accepted whites. Members got together the first Saturday of each month in a club in the neighborhood of Almagro, and every carnival they rented a big ballroom, where they danced from midnight to dawn Afro-American dances: candombe, rumba and a mixture of both. Regarding candombe, there was a lively discussion between traditionalists and modernists, and at a point in time there were two rival groups of drummers and dancers. [Binayán Carmona 1980: 71-72, see also Panorama 1967: 81].

Some words of apparent African origin were used in the community: *bemba* (mouth) and *bembón* (loud mouthed), *calunga* (partner), *bariló* or *wariló* (used during the candombe: “é, é wariló”) and especially, *chongo* and *carne de mundele*, which are pejorative terms for white person. According to the article in the newsmagazine Panorama (1967) -subtitled “Chongos y gente de clase”- blacks referred to themselves as “la clase” (the class) or “gente de clase” and called whites *chongos*. Some examples include:

"When two blacks talk about somebody else and want to know if he is black, they generally ask: "Es de clase"..., meaning does he belong to the community?. A young man said: "my sister is dating a chongo" (meaning he was white) " . (Panorama 1967:81)

"You are not black, you are a chongo!" one male told another who refused to dance candombe . (Binayán Carmona 1980: 69).

According to Enrique’s testimony, when candombe was danced at the Shimmy Club, blacks shouted "out with the chongos”

With the closing of the Shimmy Club in the beginning of the 1970s, the black community lost its only meeting place and also most of its already scarce visibility. The few articles which appeared about blacks in the media during the 1980s and 1990s were more about discrimination and “being black in Buenos Aires” than about “the blacks of Buenos Aires”. These reports, however, featured interviews to as many Afro-Brazilians and Afro-Uruguayans as Afro-Argentines. The very idea that the city had an Afro-Argentine community –which had

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10 According to one of the blacks interviewed in the Clarín (1971: 37) article, another black social club, the *Asociación Martín Fierro*, functioned from 1965 to 1970.
been the focus of the articles of the 1960s and the 1970s had disappeared. In fact, several articles which focused exclusively on Afro-Argentines, stated as a matter of fact that there were no more of them left.

The closing of the Shimmy Club perpetuated Afro-Argentine invisibility, as did the scholarly indifference to these extant cultural activities. As I have argued at some length elsewhere (Frigerio 1993) even the most noted scholars on Afro-Argentine culture and history (who wrote in the 1960s and 1970s) and whose works are considered “classics” in the field, tended to disregard the “authenticity” and significance of the black community of their time, and to ignore their cultural characteristics and production as not “authentic” enough. They froze the apogee of the Afro-Argentine candombe in the 1850s, and considered any subsequent forms as corrupted. In their haste to devalue these corrupted forms, they looked for a purer, more authentic one in the Afro-Uruguayan candombe and used it as a model for the “candombe del Rio de la Plata” (Frigerio 1993). This attitude ignores the distinction made by contemporary Afro-Argentines who, supporting the above-quoted version provided by Enrique, strongly differentiate their version of the candombe from the Afro-Uruguayan one.

2. Afro-Uruguayans in Buenos Aires: Candombe Wars

*The black culture of “the Rio de la Plata area”*

If Candombe has gained the status of the black music of the Rio de la Plata area, the fact that there could be different versions of it according to the national origin of the black community involved was generally ignored. While the candombe practiced by Afro-Argentines

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11 The titles of the two most prominent articles –several pages in important magazines- of the 1960s and 1970s were “Porteños de color” (Panorama, June 1967) and “Buenos Aires de Ebano” (Clarín Revista, 5/12/1971). The later ones were titled “El apartheid porteño” (El Nuevo Periodista, 15/7/88) and “No se aceptan negros” (Clarín 30/12/91). The vast majority of blacks interviewed in the articles of the 60s-70s were Afro-Argentines, while in those of the 80s-90s Brazilian and Uruguayan blacks are featured as frequently as the local population.

12 “Los negros, nuestros primeros desaparecidos” (Humor # 168 and # 169, February and March of 1986); “Cosas de negros” (Somos 29/7/91) and “Qué pasó con los negros argentinos” (Noticias, 8/9/91). The article in the prestigious newsweekly *Somos* states: “Unlike in Brazil and in other American nations, African blacks left only superficial traces and evaporated misteriously at the end of the XIX century.” In a cover article on the origins of the Argentine population which appeared in the famed newsweekly *Noticias*, the celebrated historian Félix Luna wrote a column titled “What happened to the Argentine blacks” in which he states that “they (blacks) were not made to disappear, they disappeared on their own, because they improved and mingled, or because their condition worsened and run the sad destiny of marginals.”

13 According to the author of the newsweekly *Panorama* (1967: 81) article, “The candombe that is played in Buenos Aires... deserved this opinion from Nestor Ortiz Oderigo, (the most noted Argentine specialist in Afro-American culture): "Among us, the only things that remain from the candombe are some drum noises."
throughout the 20th century was dismissed by scholars as a minor cultural form - a remnant of the “true” 19th century one - the contemporary Uruguayan candombe has been consistently considered as an example of what the “real” candombe must have been like. This can be appreciated in a number of different arenas:

- Scholars of Afro-Argentine culture use descriptions of candombe in Uruguay (often without acknowledging this) in order to portray what the Argentine one was or could have been like (Frigerio 1993).
- Photos of the uruguayan comparsas are always used to illustrate articles or books on candombe (Gesualdo 1982, Ortiz Oderigo 1969, Carámbula 1995).
- In Argentina, movies and theatre depict candombe comparsas portrayed the Uruguayan way.
- Argentine contemporary artists who want to rescue the nation’s or the area’s (the River Plate) black heritage use Afro-Uruguayan percussionists or rhythms in their music.

The eroding of national differences is largely achieved by creating a culture area, “the Rio de la Plata area”, and claiming that candombe (the Uruguayan version) was the black music of both sides of the river, disregarding local variations.

The adoption, by Argentine scholars and by cultural entrepreneurs who are interested in black culture, of the Uruguayan candombe as the Rio de la Plata black music – due to their ignorance or disregard of local forms – has also been supported by Uruguayan and Afro-Uruguayan musicians living in Buenos Aires. These migrants have also tried to advance their national candombe as part of the heritage of the Rio de la Plata area, i.e. the black music of both shores of the River Plate. In Uruguay these musicians would not question the national origin of the music, but once they settle in Buenos Aires they start stressing its pertinence to “the Rio de la Plata area”.

The two most successful examples of this strategy are Yabor, and the Grupo Cultural Afro. Yabor is a white Uruguayan who recorded a couple of very successful hits with candombe rhythms in the 1980s, and who since then has become one of the cultural entrepreneurs of candombe in Buenos Aires. In the 1990s, for example, he succeeded in selling to the city’s cultural authorities a program called “Candombe goes to the schools” and also organizing candombe workshops, in which he stressed that this was “musica afro-rioplatense”. The Grupo Cultural Afro, which I shall examine in more detail below, is composed of 7 Uruguayans (2 white, 5 blacks) who, in 1989, started organizing courses, parades and shows in which they taught and showed the Uruguayan version of candombe, in what they saw as an effort to vindicate the black culture of the River Plate area.

Candombe and the black community in Uruguay

If the black community in Buenos Aires saw its numbers dwindle with the years, and increasingly lost visibility as a distinct community, the Afro-Uruguayans concentrated in Montevideo maintained its distinctiveness. Uruguayan blacks probably comprise about 3 or 4% of the population, although official numbers are smaller.

Candombe still plays a very important role in the community, being probably the most important cultural pattern around which an ethnic identity is built. Although we lack a detailed history of the black community of Montevideo, there is widespread agreement that during the 20th century there were two downtown neighborhoods that concentrated many of the city’s
blacks (Palermo and Sur). During the 1960s and 1970s, two big enclaves of black population could be found in these neighborhoods: the conventillos Mediomundo and Ansina. The military dictatorship destroyed both in the seventies, causing their black inhabitants to relocate to more distant neighborhoods.

Candombe is played in private meetings in houses, but also surfaces many days of the year in small llamadas, group gatherings parading through their neighborhood playing the drums. Special days for llamadas are the 25 December, 1 January, 6 January, 12 October (Día de la Raza) and Mother's day—and special festive occasions, such as when a particular football club wins, or after an election. Candombe achieves its greatest visibility during carnival, which still is a very important event for Uruguayans. One of the festivity's highlights is the parade of the black comparsas (carnival groups). The official parade of the black comparsas, called Las Llamadas, is generally held at the beginning of February. Here, groups of costumed characters, dancers and drummers (from 20 to 60) parade through the streets of Palermo competing in an official contest (Frigerio 1996, 1997).

The situation of the black community in Uruguay is similar to that of other black communities in the continent. Most blacks are poor, and interethnic relations are quite tense. Mixed couples are rare, except in the cases of blacks (male or female) who have ascended socially. There is a noticeable prejudice against blacks in Montevideo, and one of the main stereotypes concerning them is that of a black drunk man playing the drum. "Drum" and "wine" are probably the two elements most closely associated with blacks.

**Afro-Uruguayans and candombe in Buenos Aires**

In the last twenty years there has been a very important migration of Uruguayans to Buenos Aires. The city's proximity, its cultural similarity and its bigger job market make it a natural destiny for dissatisfied Uruguayans. Among migrants to Buenos Aires are many blacks. Although Buenos Aires is not without its share of prejudices and stereotypes regarding race, blacks are not immediately conceived of as socially inferior, as is the case in Montevideo. Maybe because of this—or maybe also because of the rates of unemployment in Montevideo—there are many black Uruguayans in Buenos Aires. For many youths—especially musicians—Buenos Aires provides a chance to be treated with more respect and to find a spouse of higher social status.

Many, if not most, Afro-Uruguayans also play drums. Some take advantage of their musical skills to supplement their regular job incomes. Most only play the drums occasionally, when socializing with their kindred, or when, on the same dates as in Montevideo (especially on 25 December, 1 January, or 6 January) they perform llamadas and parade in Buenos Aires. The very place where these llamadas are held—the neighborhood of San Telmo—provides a good example of historical appropriation. San Telmo is in Buenos Aires' historic district and was known, in the mid-19th. century as “el Barrio del Tambor”, where several African nations were located and held their traditional candombes. Contemporary llamadas start from the main plaza in the neighborhood, a place where a very popular flea market takes place every Sunday. Llamadas in Buenos Aires are generally quite spontaneous affairs—although there are one or two groups of drummers who, by means of their continuous presence in these affairs make possible their continuity. Beginning in 1990, one group of young Uruguayan migrants
has tried to channel these activities into an explicit reivindication of the candombe and the role blacks have played in the Rio de la Plata area.

1989- The Grupo Cultural Afro: Candombe politics

The Grupo Cultural Afro was formed by a group of 7 young Uruguayan immigrants to Buenos Aires, who were mostly related. The main proponents of the idea, two brothers, succeeded in organizing a candombe workshop in one of the University of Buenos Aires’ cultural centers. They agreed to found a group that would further the knowledge and the practice of this Afro-Uruguayan tradition. The two brothers came from a famous lineage of drum makers in Montevideo. Their father, who was black, had married a white woman, and as a result of this union the brothers were phenotypically different. Whereas Jaime was a dark mulatto, Alberto, his brother, is white, almost blond. I only mention their phenotypic appearance because this caused them problems at different times.

They started teaching percussion classes in the hall of an old usurped house of one of the members of the group, and also started performing candombe in various bars, theaters and cultural shows. In these endeavors they were helped by a young black musician named Dario - a gifted and respected drummer- and by Mario, a white Uruguayan who made drums. A group of four other Afro-Uruguayans, two sisters and a brother and a sister, all dancers, helped them in some of the shows.

Their most ambitious project, in December 1989 and January 1990, was to form a black carnival comparsa, which could perform in festivals and parade through Buenos Aires during the 1990 Carnival. In order to do this, they had to convince other members of the Buenos Aires Afro-Uruguayan community to join them. They organized weekly rehearsals, taking as many as ten or fifteen drums to some of the main plazas in San Telmo (one of the traditional black neighborhoods in Buenos Aires) hoping that more Afro-Uruguayans would join them.

This was not an easy process, since their proposal had some very definite norms that had to be respected by those who were to join them. First and foremost was the prohibition against publicly drinking alcohol during the rehearsals. In this way they tried to counter the Uruguayan stereotype that equates blacks to drums and alcohol. As one of the female members of the group said in a meeting: "the drum is culture, we have to get rid of the alcohol". Second, those joining them had to abide the ethical and esthetical instructions given by the group's members. Although Dario, who coordinated the drumming was a young but respected black, the two most forceful group leaders behind the whole enterprise (Alberto and Mario) were whites. Although, as I mentioned, Alberto had a black father, because of his appearance he is considered white - by blacks and whites in Buenos Aires and Uruguay. Although whites also participate of the llamadas parades in Uruguay, it is generally experienced blacks who are traditionally in charge of coordinating the percussion.

To coordinate ten or twenty drummers is not easy. There are many disputes as to who is out of rhythm, and, since there are three different kinds of drums which play different rhythms and with differing degrees of complexity, it is also a disputed matter of prestige and knowledge as to who gets to play which drum. Coordinating a group of drummers is always very risky business, and feuds are likely to ensue. In Buenos Aires this was particularly problematic since the Uruguayan blacks present in the city come from different neighborhoods of Montevideo, where different rhythms are played (especially the leading –piano- drums). To these difficulties
must be added that the four main members of the group were either unemployed or did menial jobs. Therefore, their willingness to construct candombe drums, to take them to the plazas, and make them available to not always friendly (Afro)Uruguayans was a taxing effort.

In trying to form the comparsa, the Grupo Cultural Afro members had two goals in mind. The first one was to mobilize the many Uruguayan blacks who lived in Buenos Aires into joining their project and getting committed to it. This meant not only forming the carnival group but also adhering to the group’s rigid norms of not drinking during the drumming. As Mario told me in an interview,

“the easy thing is to say: "well, blacks like wine ... so, come here and play the drum, and I will pay you two bucks"; whereas what we are saying is "Don't drink, play the drum -colgá-, respect the group, and respect yourself...”

The second goal, at another, more general level -trascending the Afro-Uruguayan community in Buenos Aires- was to call the local society’s attention to the city’s black heritage.

Initially, they had some success at both levels. They participated in shows which presented various aspects of black culture, including, for example, one on the black roots of tango and also organized presentations on Afro-American culture, the most successful of which took place at the city’s foremost cultural center, the Centro Cultural San Martín. They were also invited to participate in neighborhood festivities, where they paraded in the style of the Afro-Uruguayan llamadas de candombe. They brought together 20 drummers at one such parade, in the traditional neighborhood of La Boca.

Their rehearsals for a black comparsa, which took place every weekend at one important and historic downtown plaza called Parque Lezama had mixed success. Some weekends they gathered 20 drummers; on others, few people joined them who were not from their group. After several months of uneventful rehearsing, the Grupo Cultural Afro drummers got into a feud with another group of older candombe drummers. This group, which I shall call the “old blacks” (negros viejos) was composed of black and pardo Uruguayans who were mostly in their forties, and who always participated in the informal parades in Buenos Aires. They had, for a time, formed an Afro-Uruguayan comparsa in the city in the 1970s. These old-timers considered the GCA members –who were in their early twenties- to be too young to control the candombe activities in Buenos Aires and enforce behavior rules –like not drinking alcohol- during the parades. Members of the two groups had, with some distrust, collaborated in the parades of Christmas Day of 1989, and of New Year’s day of 1990. Although they never trusted each other fully, the collaboration of these two groups had made the candombe parades of the end of 1989 singularly successful. Therefore, the Afro-Uruguayan community in Buenos Aires and the locals who followed the candombe scene looked forward to the parade of 6 January (the traditional day of San Baltazar, one of the two patron saints of black people in Argentina and Uruguay). However, when this much-awaited day arrived, conflict ensued.

The members of the Grupo Afro had intended this day to be a general rehearsal for the carnival comparsa which would parade in February. They distributed bermudas with the colors of their comparsa and drums to several of the many Afro-Uruguayans who showed up that day to participate of the parade. As the walking/drumming started, there was a fierce musical battle by members of both groups as to who would lead the drumming. As the thirty drummers and
the many onlookers moved through the streets, the passionate duel continued. Midway through the almost twenty blocks of the parade, a discussion ensued as to whether there would be a stop to re-calibrate the drums, or if they would continue straight on. The Grupo Cultural Afro people stopped, arguing that the drums were out of tune and needed re-tuning. The group of "old blacks" argued that they never stopped in the middle of the parade. In the middle of a heated argument, one of the "old blacks" got out a knife, and with it slashed the leather of the drums of the Grupo Cultural Afro drummers, leaving them out of the parade.

This aggression -which fortunately did have not a more violent ending- deeply affected the Grupo Afro, especially regarding its standing within the Afro-Uruguayan community. The two leaders of the group who had most steadfastly upheld the comparsa project, Dario the Afro-Uruguayan drummer and Mario, the white Uruguayan drum-maker, virtually left the local candombe scene. Mario went to live in Brazil a few months later, and Dario stopped attending local parades for some time. The group continued performing at some shows, but the comparsa project was frozen, and their local visibility dwindled.

1998- Kalakan-gue: The return of the drums

A couple of years later a tragedy that befell one of the members of the group would revitalize their activities. In April of 1996, Jaime, the dark mulatto brother of white Alberto, argued with some policemen who were questioning a couple of Afro-Brazilians in the street. The policemen took him to a downtown precinct, where he was beaten to death. In complicity with a local judge, the police argued that Jaime had suffered from an overdose of cocaine, and the case was closed. After a strenuous personal effort, Alberto managed to get a second autopsy of his brother’s corpse performed in Montevideo, Uruguay, which contradicted the overdose hypothesis and showed signs of a severe beating. With the help of Argentine and international human rights organizations, the case was reopened.

Together with his judiciary and human rights activities, Alberto vowed to form a carnival comparsa in memory of his brother and of his activities to uphold the black heritage of the River Plate. This time the project was much more ambitious than before. Ten years earlier, the idea of the group had been to form a comparsa like the ones in Montevideo, with as many members of the Afro-Uruguayan community present in Buenos Aires as possible. Although explicit references were made to the city’s black past, that time the comparsa was not claiming to represent it. This time, however, with the help of a local anthropologist, Alberto prepared a project describing the purpose and the form the parade would take. According to the original project, its goals included:

“- To parade through the streets of the old Neighborhood of the Drum (Barrio del Tambor) depicting in different scenes the history of the Africans in the Río de la Plata
- To divulge African cultural heritage in the Río de la Plata
- Pay homage to our black ancestors ”

A flyer, distributed when the parade took place, explained why the project was called “Homenaje a la Memoria ”:
“Homenaje a la memoria (...) is a homage to Jorge Martínez, researcher and activist of the African culture of the Río de la Plata (cultura afrorioplatense) who found an early and tragic death, and to all the River Plate Africans (africanos rioplatenses) who with their struggle and hard work contributed to the growth and freedom of the Río de la Plata.”

For more than a year, Alberto taught candombe drumming lessons in four cultural centers of the city. The lessons were free, but students had to make a commitment to take part in the candombe comparsa and parade. He also tried to enlist the help of several academics who could help with devising scenes that told the story and showed the culture of Río de la Plata blacks, and write a introduction or description to each.

When the day of the parade came, the end result was not as comprehensive as the original project, but it was spectacular nonetheless. Alberto formed an Uruguayan-style comparsa, “Kalakan-gue”, with close to a hundred members. The comparsa and three other groups - one of African percussion, another of Afro-Brazilian Orixá dances and an Uruguayan carnival murga - paraded through the old neighborhood of the drum, San Telmo, up to a stage in the main plaza of the city, almost in front of the government house. After the comparsa arrived Alberto gave a speech in which he told the story of his brother’s efforts and untimely death. He was followed by testimonies of a group of mothers’ whose sons had been victims of police violence, and then by several groups which played candombe in its various forms. Although most of the drummers were white, and the Afro-Uruguayan ones that the group had originally intended to gather partook of the act more as onlookers than as active participants, the event was a success and bolstered Alberto’s reputation as a cultural entrepreneur and local representative of black culture.

3. Devotees of Afro-Brazilian Religions in Buenos Aires

Afro-Brazilian religions arrived to Argentina in the second half of the 1960s. They were brought mainly by Argentine practitioners who were initiated in the South of Brazil (in and around the city of Porto Alegre) and by Uruguayans who were initiated in Montevideo (where these religions had been present since the 50s) (Frigerio 1998, Oro 1999). They grew slowly during the 1970s, and boomed in the 1980s, with the return of democracy to the country in 1982. Today about 500 temples function legally – registered in the Registro Nacional de Cultos No Católicos - although practitioners claim that as many as 3000 temples may be found in the city of Buenos Aires and its suburbs. People who go to these temples are middle and low-middle class white porteños who look for answers to health, job and family problems (Frigerio and Carozzi 1996, Carozzi and Frigerio 1997). Temples practice both umbanda (a mixed variant, with strong Spiritist and Catholic influences) and batuque (a more African variant, similar to candomblé) which thrives in Porto Alegre and developed in Rio Grande do Sul (Frigerio 1989).

“Sorcerers”, priests and cultural entrepreneurs

With the return of democracy in 1982, these religious practices not only boomed, but also became more visible within Argentine society and the media. Since they gained social visibility
, in the second half of the 1980s, these religions have had a bad image. They were accused of being “magical sects” or “cults” (Frigerio 1991, 1993). This image worsened, after one temple leader was falsely accused of ritually killing a girl in 1992 (Frigerio and Oro 1998). After that they were considered as not only “magical sects” but also dangerous ones. The bad image of the religion is an important source of concern for most temple leaders, who have tried to improve their image using two successive strategies (Frigerio 1993, 1997).

During the 1980s these leaders stressed that they practiced a religion which shared many features with the Catholic Church (it is monotheistic, it has a dogma, specific rituals, and a priestly hierarchy). They publicly identified with Umbanda (although most temples practiced both Umbanda and the more African variant batuque) and denied killing animals in their ceremonies. The slogan most commonly used, both in interviews in the media, and in public events which they held in fancy hotels was: “Umbanda is a religion”

In the 1990s, their strategy changed. After two African kings (the Oni of Ife and the Obi of Onitsa) visited Buenos Aires in January of 1990, most temples started publicly identifying with Batuque—which was already called Africanismo—stating that they practiced an African religion, that had an ancient tradition and was part of a rich cultural heritage. Further, this heritage was stated to be part of the Argentine culture heritage because of the important (but often unacknowledged) African roots of the national culture. The slogan most commonly used, both in interviews with the media, and in public events which they held in downtown theaters now was: “Africanismo is culture”.

Their public events, which before were called “Umbanda congresses”, now had names which emphasized both the words “African” and “culture”. Some examples include:

- International Congress of Afro-American Cultures (1991)
- Seminar of Yoruba Religion (1994)
- Exhibition of Afro-American Folklore and Art (1995)

These events featured as speakers not only religious practitioners but also anthropologists, historians and, on two occasions, Afro-Argentines. They also featured shows of Afro-Brazilian religious and secular dance, Afro-Cuban religious and secular music and Afro-Uruguayan candombe, as well as exhibits of African art, Haitian paintings; Afro-American religious altars and clothes; and Afro-Uruguayan art depicting candombe scenes.

In addition to organizing public events which featured Afro-American performances and art, practitioners of African-derived religions in Argentina have also produced radio and cable television programs emphasizing the cultural aspects of the religion and the history of blacks in the country and appraisals of their influence in the nation’s culture. They have had some success especially at a county level, where some of the temple leaders became quite successful cultural entrepreneurs. Some have gained a wider audience. One of the temples has an Instituto de Investigación y Difusión de la Cultura Negra (Institute of Research and Diffusion of Black Culture) which has hosted three international conferences on black culture, and an African art and folklore exhibit at one of the city’s most famous cultural centers (the Centro Cultural Recoleta). Its members have even published a short piece on “Blacks in the history
and culture of Argentina” in an international academic journal devoted to black culture and history (Ile Ase Osun Doyo 1991).

4. Return of the Afro-Argentines: Conflicting views on black heritage

“Africa Vive”

When it seemed that Afro-Argentines were getting replaced by Afro-Uruguayans and practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions as spokesmen of the black heritage of the country, a group of them founded a new association called "Africa Vive". In 1996 two consultants for the Programa de Alivio a la Pobreza en Comunidades Minoritarias de América Latina of the Banco de Desarrollo Interamericano visited Buenos Aires with the intention of contacting local black organizations and integrating them into an international organization called Afro America XXI which gets support from BID to alleviate the poverty of the Afro-Latin American communities. They invited two Argentine black women, one a fifth-generation Afro-Argentine, Paula, the other a first generation Afro-Argentine from the Capeverdean community in Buenos Aires, to a meeting of this black Panamerican organization in Washington -and later to ones in Honduras and Colombia – as representatives of the local black community.

Encouraged by this foreign support –which finally turned out to be more symbolic than economic- Paula, the criollo Afro-Argentine woman, founded Africa Vive, which has since gained legal status as a non-governmental organization (NGO). Although she did not succeed in gathering many Afro-Argentines beyond her (quite large) extended family, the group did manage to gain some visibility. After some of its members participated in an important and much publicized seminar on discrimination the group caught the press´attention. The leader was interviewed in several important media outlets, and this exposure led to the publication of an eight-page article in the Sunday magazine of Clarín –the most important national newspaper- which, suggestively, was entitled “Stories and Passions of Afro-Argentines”. This article was particularly relevant, not only because of its length and the outlet in which it appeared, but also because it acknowledged the existence of an Afro-Argentine community. This was a change from previous articles, which –as I mentioned- generally featured Uruguayan or Brazilian blacks and spoke of Argentine blacks in the past tense. The last article to focus on a native Afro community had been the 1971 piece (which also appeared in the Sunday magazine of the same newspaper) called “Buenos Aires de Ebano”.

The participation of Africa Vive leaders in the seminar against discrimination was particulary relevant because it caught the media´s attention and restored a measure of visibility to the Afro-Argentines. It also put the leaders of the group in contact with official institutions which would later give it some support. For instance, the Defensoria del Pueblo of the City of Buenos Aires, which promised to provide a building for a center for the preservation of Afro-American culture.

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14 The seminar was called Seminario de los Pueblos Originarios, Afro-Argentinos y Nuevos Inmigrantes: Juicio a la discriminación inferiorizante y excluyente. It was organized by the Cátedra Abierta de Estudios Americanistas of the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad de Buenos Aires, and held at the Auditorio de la Cámara de Diputados de la Nación, between the 23-25 of June, 1999. Because it had academic and parlamentary backing, it was an important event.
At the same time, this seminar also provided a forum for the different groups, which promote black culture in the city, to come together and publicly interact and present their views on the subject. Vying for the public’s attention, their conflictive and conflicting interpretations as to what constitutes the city’s black heritage and who has the right to represent it became apparent.

Conflicts about Afro-Argentine heritage

The seminar, which lasted three days and was held at the Library of Congress, featured general lectures and more specific workshops, where representatives of the different groups involved (Native Americans, blacks, new migrants) got together to discuss their experiences and ideas on the topic of discrimination. The one on Afro-Americans featured, among others, individuals of the three groups I have already discussed. The leader of Africa Vive was there, as was Alberto—the creator of Kalakangué and the Grupo Cultural Afro— and one of the foremost leaders of African-derived religions in Argentina.

In one of her interventions in the workshop, and with no apparent reason, the leader of Africa Vive charged against the practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions in Argentina, stating that:

“I want to stress that we—as a non-governmental organization—do not become involved with religion, nor in politics. In religion, because our religion is not the one you are practicing, because there is no Bible, there is no Bible for our religion. It is transmitted orally, and we blacks know that … my grandmother could have taught it to me, or other elders could and after that it was over. Now there is nobody who can say “this person is a mãe or a pai (religious leaders)”. In my opinion, there is no one in Argentina today who can certify this.”

The (white) religious leader, who reaffirmed their right to practice the religions, immediately interrupted her:

“Excuse me, I do not agree with this. I represent the black religions in Argentina (…) and I think that nowadays whites are being discriminated for practicing a black religion. (…) There is a prejudice which says that only black people can feel the Orixás, and whites can’t. I do not agree with this. (…) Also, that nobody can tell who is a mãe or a pai, I disagree with this, because we know, we have a methodology, we have ritual initiations (…) We are white and we are discriminated in our own country for practicing a religion of blacks and Indians. That is why we are here today.”

One of the coordinators of the workshop interrupted the argument, stating that if there was a hypothetical discrimination of blacks against whites that would be wrong too, but that they were there to discuss the discrimination that blacks suffered at the hands of whites, which was more frequent.

A few moments later a new argument ensued, this time between the leader of Africa Vive and Alberto. When a female coordinator of the workshop invited people to discuss the experiences of discrimination that they—or their relatives—may have encountered, Alberto told
the story of the murder of his black brother Jaime, forcefully asserting that none of the blacks present, nor their organizations, accompanied him to the demonstrations he staged in protest against the police violence. He explicitly reminded the Afro-Argentine leader that he invited her and other members of the organization to the marches, and they never came. He explained his own work and goals as a cultural entrepreneur in the following way:

“I taught how to dance, how to play and how to parade, and to explain what blackness in the Rio de la Plata area is. This is why I started teaching in several workshops, and through them I got people to think about why blacks here are dying and why it is said that there are no blacks in Argentina. Because blacks have to get together, it does not matter if they are Capeverdeans, Brazilians, Argentines or Uruguayans, it does not matter, they have to get together, they have to unite. Somebody said yesterday that the leader of Africa Vive is a heroine, and I hope she is and I hope that she continues with the struggle she began three years ago. But in my opinion, my brother was a black hero, and nobody is supporting his cause, and I think that you have to fight for his rights... this is real, he died here and during a democratic government, he died like the thousands who of blacks who died to make possible the growth of this country and who are not mentioned in history books. (...) I emphasize the cultural aspects, which are the ones I am familiar with, because I come from a lineage of drum-makers, and, as I already told you, Paula (now speaking directly to the leader of Africa Vive) I am willing to teach you to play candombe, because you descend from blacks, I will even make the drums for you. I do that with pleasure. But I have been working alone for two years now. And I would like you to consider this, and if you have a different perspective, if you do not think that what I say is true, tell me. But I would like to know the reason why you have not collaborated in this cause. I can understand the fear, I can understand everything, but in this way, you will keep on dying one by one, until there is nobody left who will fight for your rights because there will be no one left. And so, I would like to know why, why nobody came when I invited you and until today ......”

The discussions between the leader of Africa Vive and the white mãe de santo, first, and with Alberto after that, can only be understood in terms of the past interactions between the parties involved. Although the leader of Africa Vive had never personally met the mãe de santo, she was well aware that leaders of African-derived religions had organized conferences on Afro-American culture and were claiming for themselves the right to speak for black culture and history in Argentina.

These are not solely personal quarrels, but conflicts that correspond to different positions in the black cultural field (in Bourdieu’s use of the term) in Buenos Aires. The feud continued in very similar terms in another arena. A few months later, a local scholar organized a series of lectures on Afro-Argentine history and culture at a private university. Since most of the scholars who specialized in these topics were invited to talk at one of the eight panels, it was, together with the previous seminar, one of the rare opportunities in which black culture and history could be publicly debated. Alberto was not featured as a speaker, but he went to most of the meetings. As always, however, he played an active role as part of the audience, making a similar statement about the death of his brother and about the little help he had received from
blacks. The leader of *Africa Vive* was not featured as a speaker either, but one of the Capeverdean co-founders of the group, who now has chosen to keep a low profile in its activities, presented a paper on the black organizations existing in Buenos Aires over the last three decades of the century. She did make a brief reference to the Grupo Cultural Afro, and to Jorge’s death, but did not mention the cultural activities of leaders of African-derived religious temples –since they are not black. The same religious leader who had been at the Seminar attended several talks, and at the last one, which was on the current situation of blacks in the city, was invited to read a five-minute presentation. In it she lamented the discrimination that her fellow believers suffered not only from Argentine society but also from blacks, and made several explicit references to how their plight was the same that the slaves of the city had suffered.

“I want to talk about the religious discrimination suffered by those of us who have adopted the religions brought to America by the slaves (...) The social visibility of blacks and their culture is continuously denied by our society. “There are no blacks in Argentina”, they say. “Thank God”, it seems they would like to add. And since God is white and has blue eyes, blacks, “brands from hell” (as they were called in the city), cannot be recognized by Him. Even less so, those heretics and excomulgated whites who have converted to African religions. This is the reality these days (...) Our plight is as hard as was that of the black slaves. I suffered prison, my house was raided by the police, I was segregated by my family and by the society at large. The State finds us strange and different. For the Nigerians, we are white. And for the Afro-Argentines we are whites who have stolen their religion. And we are almost a million believers in Argentina. And we have not stolen anything. We have simply adopted the traditional African religion because it moved our hearts, because we chose that path. Yet even blacks discriminate us. So, then, we say: only for Olodumare, God, we are equal. It is only in His eyes that we are equal. Thank you very much.”

In the second half of the 1990s, then, the presence and relative power of entrepreneurs of local black culture increased, due to the combination of several unrelated factors: a police murder; the visit of Pan-American cultural activists; the awareness of discrimination as a social problem in Argentine society; and increased scholarly interest in Afro-American history and culture, among them. This created a more interrelated social field, with somewhat stronger players and potentially higher interests at stake -like the possibility of a building for a black cultural center; foreign and domestic aid for black groups and renewed press interest. With increased interrelatedness also came conflict, and the public ventilation of different views about the characteristics of black heritage and its authentic purveyors.

5. Conclusion

The data presented above show the variety of competing actors who, even in a city with a reduced number of blacks like Buenos Aires, can get involved in disputes regarding what exactly is the black heritage of the city and who can claim to represent it. I have only presented the major contenders, since each subgroup (Afro-Argentines, Afro-Uruguayans and
practitioners of African-derived religions) has its own internal disputes. Other, more detailed papers on the inner debates within each of these groups could show, for example, how other Afro-Argentines contest Paula’s capability to be a spokeswoman for them and claim that role for themselves. Or the focus could also be on the disputes inside the Afro-Uruguayan community in Buenos Aires, and the fierce criticisms Alberto’s whiteness, youth and knowledge of candombe have provoked. Although I have concentrated on what I consider to be the three main contenders to the role of spokesmen for black culture in the city, I could have also broadened the spectrum of actors in the debate to include Afro-Brazilians who are teaching their dances and music, or Afro-Cubans who are doing the same, or the white entrepreneurs who created the dance institutes where they all teach. All of them claim to represent Afro-American culture, and because of their particular expertise may claim to teach the more authentic or relevant form of black culture or the correct way of interpreting the black experience in the area.15

What I have tried to show in these pages is as follows: 1) the multiplicity of versions that may characterize the natives’ conceptions of tradition and 2) that we may also have a multiplicity of natives -or that it may be difficult (sometimes? most of the times?) just to establish who are the natives. Most studies on construction of tradition have focused on how the natives’ version is at odds with an “official” one -which may be the government’s or the anthropologists’ one- . Thus they work within a paradigm which opposes a subaltern view to an hegemonic or dominant one. Here I have tried to call attention to the fact that usually there are more than two views (hegemonic-subaltern) or three views (hegemonic, subaltern, scientific), and that within the subaltern field -or groups- there is also a generally fierce competition for the meanings to be assigned to tradition, cultural patterns, or ethnic identity. Too preoccupied with power relations between hegemonic actors and the subaltern natives, we have forgotten to focus on the power relations within the subaltern group/s.

The need to consider race, class and gender as main variables of analysis is now commonplace. And, in an increasingly globalized world, I would also add nationality as a variable. However, their interplay creates groups of natives with different and sometimes opposing interests.

Class certainly divides contenders in this case. Although there are important internal socio-economic variations, as a whole practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions are better off than Afro-Argentines and Afro-Uruguayans. This is particularly true of the groups’ elites. The priests who stress the African roots of their religions, and who provide “cultural” arguments to make links between their practices and the city’s black past certainly belong to the most educated, middle class end of the spectrum of devotees. The mãe de santo who argued with Paula and Alberto can sustain middle class living standards through the religious services she provides: she lives in a nice neighborhood, has a car and her son attends a private university. Paula, the Afro-Argentine spokeswoman, comes from a working class background; she currently works as a domestic employee and lives in the city’s periphery. Alberto always performed odd jobs and has never enjoyed economic stability. No doubt that when it comes to discussing who can represent black culture, class differences strike a wedge between Afro-

15 There is also a Capeverdean community in Buenos Aires (Maffia de Poteca 1986). However, they do not stress their African heritage, nor do they –except for a few of its members- interact with other black groups or with entrepreneurs of black culture.
Argentines and Afro-Uruguayans on the one hand, and the leaders of terreiros on the other. Yet even though the mãe de santo is white and middle class, she is nonetheless also stigmatized, because she practices a black religion. As she stated in the speech she delivered at the university, she suffered police persecution because of her religious beliefs, and her son never had an easy time in the university because he was a macumbero (sorcerer). And in a seminar on discrimination, her case was not taken seriously.

Race must also be taken into account. For all his allegations that he comes from a black family, and that he is “an invisible black” Alberto’s credibility within the black community has always been limited—something he also acknowledges. Although it has improved after his brother’s death, and his success in forming the comparsa and the parade, the truth still is that most Afro-Uruguayans were watching the parade rather than playing the drums in it. Compared to Paula, both Alberto and the religious leaders, being white, have a phenotypic disadvantage when talking about black culture.

Handicapped regarding race, class and national origin, Alberto—apart from his fierce will and self-confidence—has clear performance advantages relative to Paula and the mãe. Although he is not considered a good drummer—remember that it was Dario, his black cousin, who led the drumming in the Grupo Cultural Afro—he can, nonetheless, play the drums and make them. Being better read than Paula, his discourse combines a knowledge of what scholars wrote on candombe with his vast experiential knowledge. Although always “the white boy”, he did grow up in one of the most traditional black shanty-houses in Montevideo.

He can sidestep the fact that he is not Argentine proclaiming that he is an expert in the black music of the Rio de la Plata area—a cover term which as we saw, classical local scholars have used. Furthermore, the candombe variant of music in which he is an expert is the music that these scholars have considered the black music of the area, whereas the Afro-Argentine variant has been considered by them just the “noise of drums”. Thus, the use of the local scholarly tradition—which establishes the existence of a cultural area spanning Argentina and Uruguay—somewhat neutralizes national origin as a disadvantageous variable.

Paula, on the other hand—who is a somewhat voluminous woman in her fifties, very outspoken, and who deserves a lot of credit for the attention she has earned—comes from one of the most well-known Afro-Argentine families, one which has managed to retain certain distinctive cultural characteristics. Her family constituted one of the core groups which participated of the Shimmy Club dances at the Casa Suiza in the 1960s and 1970s. They know how to dance Argentine candombe, and retain some African songs and words. In this she differs from—and has some advantage over—a couple of other Afro-Argentines who enjoyed some media and scholarly visibility before her. These belonged to the few elite black families, which had university degrees but possessed scarce knowledge of the local black culture—therefore their claims to represent Afro-Argentines were somewhat limited. Paula, on the other hand, claims to represent the country’s disenfranchised black people, a group to which she ostensibly belongs. Although lacking male drummers, she and her cousins and aunts can still dance candombe. They performed it at the closing of the seminar on discrimination, and at a public dance she organized recently at the Casa Suiza, in a somewhat symbolic return of the aforementined Shimmy Club dances which were so dear to the community. Although the candombe performances she staged are not as colourful or strong as the Afro-Uruguayan ones, she can lay claim to expertise on certain cultural characteristics which are specific to the Afro-
Argentine community – a fact which has gained support from contemporary scholars (Frigerio 1993, Picotti 1998, Liboreiro 1999).

Apart from having different actors with different versions of the black heritage of the area, there are also different social arenas where some of these actors and versions have more success than others. Priests of African-derived religions have had some success as local entrepreneurs of black culture –establishing paid radio and television programs in neighborhood or regional media-. Occasionally, they have been able to organize conferences and lectures in important downtown cultural centers. The national media, however, have been unsympathetic to their efforts, if not downright hostile, stigmatizing them as magical and dangerous sects (Frigerio 1991). They did manage to win some endorsement from ambassadors or cultural attaches of certain African countries, who have even given them nominal support by attending their activities (Frigerio 1993).

Afro-Argentines have gotten –for the moment- a good response from the national media, which have interviewed Paula and have been sympathetic with her claims. Certain government institutions –at the City level- have also supported the group.

Afro-Uruguayans have practically monopolized the performance arenas, being called to perform in any show that wants to show the city´s black roots. With the work of the Grupo Cultural Afro they also had success in neighborhood and in a few important cultural centers and some of them made the transition from performers to teachers of black culture. In this arena Alberto and his brother were the most successful entrepreneurs. After his brother´s death, with his mixed human rights and ethnic activist discourse, Alberto has also managed to get more attention in government institutions –again, at the City level- and in academic circles. The City government has apparently agreed to donate a building –probably in the old neighborhood of the drum, today San Telmo- to host a black cultural center. According to Alberto, this building will have to be co-administered by him and by Africa Vive. This would show that at least for the moment, there is a tie between both organizations regarding their success to acquire legitimacy to represent the black culture of the city.

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Rout, Leslie

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Soler Cañas, Luis

Wade, Peter

Wagner, Roy