

The ephemeral Barnabite mission in the sertão (hinterland) of Pernambuco (1903-1905): ego-documents, religious writing an institutional memory

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Abstract

The objective of this text is to interpret the Barnabite mission in Pernambuco through the writings produced by the religious (letters, reports, and chronicles), understood here as ego-documents (Artières, 1998), that is, records in which self-writing operates as an exercise in identity production. To this end, it mobilizes documents preserved in archives located in Brazil and Europe, in dialogue with references from cultural history (Chartier, 1990), archive criticism (Farge, 2009), and collective memory (Halbwachs, 1990). The interpretation suggests that religious writing not only recorded practices but also operated as a strategy of legitimation and a certain symbolic pedagogy. Considering the concept of self-writing, it is concluded that these writings functioned as devices for elaborating the missionary experience, through which a brief mission, marked by tensions, was re-signified as institutional learning and converted into legitimate memory of the order. The article thus highlights how ephemeral experiences can become places of memory and devices for forming collective identity.

Keywords: Barnabites. Sertão (hinterland) of Pernambuco. Ego-documents. Institutional memory.

A efêmera missão barnabita no sertão de Pernambuco (1903-1905): ego-documentos, escrita religiosa e memória institucional

Resumo

Interpretar a missão barnabita em Pernambuco a partir dos escritos produzidos pelos religiosos (cartas, relatórios e crônicas) entendidos aqui como

ego-documentos (Artières, 1998), ou seja, registros nos quais a escrita de si opera como exercício de produção de identidade, é o objetivo do texto. Para tanto, mobiliza documentos preservados em arquivos localizados no Brasil e na Europa, em diálogo com referências da história cultural (Chartier, 1990), da crítica do arquivo (Farge, 2009) e da memória coletiva (Halbwachs, 1990). A interpretação sugere que a escrita religiosa não apenas registrou práticas, mas operou como uma estratégia de legitimação e uma certa pedagogia simbólica. À luz do conceito de ego-documentos, conclui-se que esses escritos funcionaram como dispositivos de elaboração da experiência missionária, por meio dos quais uma missão breve, e marcada por tensões, foi ressignificada como aprendizagem institucional e convertida em memória legítima da Ordem. O artigo evidencia, assim, como experiências efêmeras podem tornar-se lugares de memória e dispositivos formadores de identidade coletiva. Palavras-chave: Barnabitas. Sertão pernambucano. Ego-documentos. Memória institucional.

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La efímera misión barnabita em el sertão (región agreste) de Pernambuco (1903-1905): ego-documentos, escrita religiosa y memoria institucional

Resumen

Interpretar la misión barnabita en Pernambuco a partir de los escritos producidos por los religiosos (cartas, informes y crónicas), entendidos aquí como ego-documentos (Artières, 1998), es decir, registros en los cuales la escritura de sí mismo funciona como ejercicio de producción de identidad, es el objetivo de este texto. Para ello, se movilizan documentos conservados en archivos ubicados en Brasil y en Europa, en diálogo con referencias de la historia cultural (Chartier, 1990), de la crítica del archivo (Farge, 2009) y de la memoria colectiva (Halbwachs, 1990). La interpretación sugiere que la escritura religiosa no solo registró prácticas, sino que operó como una estrategia de legitimación y una cierta pedagogía simbólica. A la luz del concepto de ego-documentos, se concluye que estos escritos funcionaron como dispositivos de elaboración de la experiencia misionera, a través de los cuales una misión breve, y marcada por tensiones, fue ressignificada como aprendizaje institucional y convertida

en memoria legítima de la orden. El artículo pone así de manifiesto cómo las experiencias efímeras pueden convertirse en lugares de memoria y dispositivos formadores de identidad colectiva.

Palabras clave: Barnabitas. Sertão (región agreste) Pernambucano. Ego-Documentos. Memoria Institucional.

Introduction

The arrival of the Order of Regular Clerics of São Paulo, known as Barnabites, to Brazil in 1903, cannot be understood only as a punctual missionary displacement, but as part of a broader policy of the Holy See in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, researched and presented by Águeda Bittencourt (2017), as the "age of congregations", in the studies she developed on Catholic confessional schools, and by Paula Leonardi (2023), who has focused, among other research, on the heritage and territory of Catholic schools that have settled in Brazil. The Barnabites, thus, responded to the invitation of Pope Leo XIII, "[...] the ninetieth pontiff who, even at such an advanced age, lived attentive and vigilant for his sheep, threatened by the government he called hungry wolves [...]" (Oliveira, 2024, p. 11), who saw in Latin America a privileged field to reinforce the Catholic presence in the face of the advances of secularization and liberalism. The Barnabites were part of a missionary expansion project that also responded to the pressures experienced on the European continent, especially after the Italian *Risorgimento*, which had limited the action of religious orders and weakened the papal territories.

In this movement, the newly secular republican Brazil offered an ambiguous space to the Barnabites: on the one hand, the separation between Church and State, with the constitution of 1891, which restricted historical privileges and, on the other, the opening of possibilities for new forms of insertion, especially through education and missionary action in the interior of the country, acting in the formation of the clergy, as in the Seminary of Belém or in schools of the congregation that were created over time.

It is in this context that, in 1903, a group of 5 Barnabite religious, composed of priests Francisco Richard, Afonso Di Giorgio, Norberto Phalempin, Florêncio Dubois and brother Fernando Warnez, accompanied by the Bishop

of Olinda, D. Luiz Raimundo da Silva Brito (Mercês, 2003), took the ship in the port of Bordeaux, France and disembark in the port of Recife to immediately start "[...] working in the interior of Pernambuco, in Cabrobó, Boa Vista and Petrolina, from where they entered even more through the hinterland, Juazeiro and Alagoinhas" (Oliveira, 2024, p. 12). The mission, however, lasted only two years, ending in 1905. Its brevity, far from reducing its relevance, forces us to reflect on how ephemeral experiences can become institutional memory. Pierre Nora (1993) already warned that memory is also constituted from brief and intense events, capable of generating lasting representations.

In this case, the short Barnabite mission in the hinterland can thus be understood as an institutional meteor: an event of rapid passage, but which left traces in the writing and memory of the Order and the Church, allowing to reconstruct, albeit partially, the narrative of the Order about its performance in the interior of Brazil, in addition to describing elements present in the hinterland culture and reality. As Ana Chrystina Mignot and Maria Teresa Cunha (2006) observe, the so-called "ordinary papers" such as letters, reports or diaries cease to be mere functional records when preserved and begin to operate as memory devices, capable of revealing practices, sensibilities and ways of life that would escape the official record. In this sense, the documents of the religious, kept by the Order, fulfill the same function: what seemed banal or fleeting became a memory on paper, guaranteeing the symbolic permanence of a brief mission that, without such records, might have been lost in oblivion. The image of the meteor, therefore, accurately translates the paradox of experience: despite its ephemerality, it remains alive by the force of the preserved documents, the transmitted reports, and the readings that the congregation has made of itself over time.

The present study aims to interpret the Bernabite mission in Pernambuco from the writings produced by the religious (letters, reports, and chronicles) understood here as ego-documents (Artières, 1998), that is, a record in which the writing about oneself operates as an exercise in identity production. The hypothesis that guides the analysis is that, although the mission has failed in practical terms, it constitutes a fundamental symbolic event in the trajectory of order in Brazil, through its discursive and memorialist elaboration.

From a methodological point of view, the work mobilizes a set of sources preserved, albeit in a dispersed way, in the archives of the Order in Brazil (Belém and Rio de Janeiro) and abroad (Belgium and Italy). Such documentary dispersion requires the researcher to engage in cross-referencing work, in the manner that Arlette Farge (2009) refers to as a "patient hunt" in the archive, where institutional memory is revealed through gaps, silences, and fragments. The research is based on the perspective of cultural history and the history of education, adopting as references Roger Chartier (1990), to think about the materiality and circulation of writing, Arlete Farge (2009), to understand research in dispersed archives, and Maurice Halbwachs (1990), to interpret collective memory as a social construction. The analysis will be conducted through documentary criticism, articulating the textual, material, and institutional dimensions of religious writings.

The relevance of this study is to show how a brief experience, almost erased from the historiography of education, can reveal writing practices, legitimation strategies, and institutional memory construction processes. By rescuing the Barnabite mission of 1903 – 1905, we seek to fill a gap about religious orders in the hinterland, showing how religious writing became a pedagogical and memorial device capable of converting ephemerality into symbolic permanence.

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The arrival of the Barnabites in Recife (1903)

The arrival of the Barnabites in Brazil, in 1903, cannot be interpreted only as a logistical operation of missionary displacement, but a simultaneously political, religious and symbolic act. The disembarkation in the port of Recife, carried out in the company of the Bishop of Olinda, D. Luiz Raimundo da Silva Brito, immediately gave legitimacy to the presence of the congregation, inscribing it in the local ecclesiastical field under the protection of the episcopal authority. This gesture of public acceptance was not only cordiality, but a way of situating the new missionaries in the framework of forces of the Brazilian Church in a moment of redefinition of roles after the separation between Church and State.

The seemingly trivial act of disembarkation became a true rite of passage – the crossing of the Atlantic was completed with the symbolism of a new cultural and religious field. The port, a space for the circulation of people and goods, became a stage for missionary insertion: there were concentrated the eyes of the curious population, the official reception of the episcopate and the self-perception of the religious themselves. More than a geographical point of arrival, Recife represented the threshold between "being a foreigner" and "becoming a missionary", a movement in which otherness was reframed as a vocation.

When describing the arrival, the religious revealed the impact and surprise of this new mission:

The trip was long and tiring, but when we saw the lands of Brazil, our hearts were filled with hope. The port of Recife was teeming with people, and the humid heat made us feel already in another world. The bishop of Olinda, with paternal kindness, received us, assuring us that the Church in Brazil needed our effort and dedication (Letter from Fr. Richard, 1903).

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The excerpt from Father Richard's letter offers more than a description of travel, it constitutes an act of identity registration. When the religious says that "the trip was long and tiring", he establishes an initial image of sacrifice, reinforcing the idea that missionary displacement is already a proof of fidelity. The mention of the "harbor teeming with people" and the "moist heat" is not just a detail, it is a way of marking otherness, of indicating that the missionary has entered a radically different world. In addition to disembarkation, it is necessary to highlight the itinerary that linked Recife to the hinterland. As Rafael Borges de Oliveira (2024) pointed out, after two weeks of accommodation in the episcopal palace of Soledade, the priests were sent to the Seminary of Olinda to study the language. On November 30, they boarded the Jacuipe steamer, traveling the Maceió – Penedo – Piranhas – Jatobá route. From there they rode for about sixty leagues to Cabrobó, where they arrived in mid-December 1903, received again with a popular party (Mercês, 2003).

The reports produced, according to the impact of the arrival, seen from the perspective of Roger Chartier (1990), are never neutral reflections of reality, but social practices that represent it, according to disputes and legitimation

strategies. This reality is here configured as a border to be crossed, a rite of passage that transforms the foreigner into a missionary. The description of heat, of still strange language and of popular enthusiasm functions as a legitimization device, transforming concrete difficulties into signs of providential election.

The central point, however, is the reference to the episcopal welcome with paternal kindness. This phrase operates multiple registers. It immediately legitimizes the mission, remembering that it is not only foreigners who have landed, but envoys recognized by the local authority. At the discursive level, the paternal adjective reinforces the family metaphor that the Church often mobilizes, naturalizing power relations such as care and affection. Michel Foucault (1996) already draws attention to how discursive practices produce regimes of truth; here, the report organizes the experience as if the reception were not only a diplomatic gesture, but the confirmation of a providential destiny.

Perhaps as part of their mission, "[...] when moving from one place to another, missionaries used to record their impressions, astonishment, anguishes and joys [...]" (Oliveira, 2024, p. 64). In another report, one of the religious highlighted the cultural contrast that immediately marked them:

Recife is a busy city, but the people look at us with curiosity. Many ask where we came from, and others, suspicious, say that more foreign priests will not change the fortunes of this land. We felt, from the first steps, that it was not enough to wear the cassock, but that it would be necessary to win trust with works and words (Missionary Report, 1904).

The report describes that the people looked at them with curiosity, but also that there were those who said that "more foreign priests will not change the fortunes of this land." The phrase, short and seemingly marginal, carries a universe of tensions. First, it exposes the gaze of the other, that is, the religious person perceives how they are being observed and interprets the gestures and murmurs of the local population. This displacement reveals that, in addition to the expectation and enthusiasm of Catholic sectors closer to the episcopate, there was also the distrust of the population. The Republic, by decreeing the separation between Church and State through Decree 119-A, of January 7, 1890, despite the "autonomy" that was given to the Church for the creation of new dioceses, without the need for Lusitanian intervention, the law had, in a

way, shaken the power of the Church and provoked intense debates about the presence of foreign religious in the country.

It is important to note that "curiosity" and "distrust" coexist as social feelings that place Barnabites in an intermediate place, neither fully welcomed nor fully rejected. As Michel de Certeau (1994) recalls, all discursive practice is crossed by relations of power and negotiation, in this case, religious people are forced to recognize that their presence is not neutral, but depends on gaining legitimacy before the people. Even being received by the people, by ecclesiastical and civil authorities in the port, the phrase "it is not enough to wear the cassock, but it would be necessary to win trust with works and words" is fundamental. It reflects the perception that religious authority is not guaranteed only by the institution, but should be confirmed by the daily exercise of proximity and service.

8 This awareness indicated an important difference from the European model, in which the figure of the priest, by itself, already carried social legitimacy. In republican Brazil, especially in a northeastern capital marked by political and religious disputes, clerical cassock was not enough. It was necessary to produce symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1987) through actual gestures, works of charity, convincing sermons, daily coexistence. The foreign presence was apparently viewed with suspicion because, on the one hand, it referred to the ultramontane tradition, and, on the other, to the fear of further interference in a country that sought to assert its republican autonomy. This document, therefore, points out that the arrival in Recife was an ambivalent act, because, while there was a rite of insertion, accompanied by the bishop, there was also a meeting with the population that was not automatically conquered. It is in this context that the celebration of the first mass on Recife soil recorded in the community's chronicles book is highlighted:

We celebrated the first mass in Recife with great devotion. The church was full, and many faithful came to see who those foreign-accented priests were. We preached about the need for perseverance in faith in times of trial, and the people responded with enthusiasm. The bishop exhorted them to welcome us as brothers who come to serve this land (Book of Chronicles, 1903).

The narrated episode shows that the liturgy also functioned as a pedagogical space of visibility. Through it, the Barnabites were publicly presented, had their cultural difference framed by the episcopal authority and were able to transform the initial estrangement into a legitimation rite.

These documentary fragments, at first sight banal, can be understood from the perspective of Philippe Artières (1998) as ego-documents, because every act of writing of oneself is not reduced to a simple record, but constitutes an active process of construction and affirmation of identities. In the Barnabite case, these documents suggest that the arrival in Recife functioned as an inaugural frame of memory (Halbwachs, 1990): the first contact with the new land, the first public gesture of evangelization, the first moment in which the congregation presented itself as part of the Brazilian Catholic body. As Pierre Nora (1993) recalls, memory was also constituted from brief and intense events. The episcopal reception, the initial masses and popular curiosity were incorporated into the repertoire of memories of the Order.

Thus, the landing in Recife in 1903 should be understood as a foundational act of the Barnabite mission in Brazil. The port, the bishop, the first mass and the reports of reception and distrust were not only circumstances, but constituted the symbolic elements that would give meaning to the brief presence of the Order in the hinterland of Pernambuco. More than a geographical starting point, Recife was the place of memory (Nora, 1993) where the Barnabite missionary identity was condensed and where ephemerality began to be transfigured in symbolic permanence. This initial milestone allows us to better understand the narrative of the ego-documents that would come later, not only as institutional administrative records, but as devices for writing oneself and producing identity.

9

The hinterland as a symbolic space and missionary challenge

The Barnabite mission in the hinterland of Pernambuco (1903-1905) should be understood not only as a geographical displacement, but a symbolic production, visible in the reports and records left by the religious themselves. In letters and reports, the hinterland emerges as a space of trial, resistance, and promise, configuring a narrated and interpreted territory, more than simply

descriptive. In the report of February 1904, sent by the religious to the superior general of the Order in Rome, we read:

The land is dry, and the distances between the villages make us walk for hours under the strong sun, without finding even a shade of trees. Peoples receive us with curiosity, but few understand our words, and language is still an obstacle to us (Missionary Report, 1904).

The observation made by the religious goes beyond the merely descriptive character of an itinerary. In it, the arid landscape and the linguistic barrier are not only presented as concrete circumstances, but signs of a space built by the religious in the key of sacrifice. Drought and isolation, along with the misunderstanding of the language, are interpreted as marks of hostile territory, whose crossing becomes a kind of *via crucis*. Thus, the daily experience also gains a spiritual resonance, in which the missionary sees himself as a pilgrim of faith, therefore, of a redemptive mission that is carried out in resistance and penance.

10 The records themselves highlight that, in 1904, rains were very rare, with temperatures between 30° and 35° Celsius and outbreaks of malarial fever in Cabrobó and Boa Vista. The physical toll came not only from the climate, but from the combination of long horseback journeys, scarce nutrition, and material hardship, recounted as evidence of loyalty. In addition, the missionaries took over four parishes in the cities of Salgueiro, Cabrobó, Boa Vista and Petrolina, covering about 70,000 faithfuls distributed within a radius of about 360 km. At the beginning, the extension of the territory reinforced the incompatibility between parish care and community life, a dilemma reiterated several times in Father Richard's letters. This framework confirms what Maurice Halbwachs (1990) points out: memory is not simple conservation, but construction based on social frameworks. Narrating the drought, diseases and distances may also have been a strategy of inscribing the brief mission in a greater logic of missionary sacrifice and legitimation of the Order before its superiors.

As Arlette Farge (2009, p. 26) recalls, "[...] the archives do not give us our whole life, but pieces torn, remains, patches of existence". These fragments, dispersed between Brazilian and European archives, allow us to reconstruct

not only the daily life of the mission, but, above all, the way the Barnabites represented the hinterland. It is precisely in the silences and between the lines that the meanings attributed to space are evident: a place of absence, but also of promise, of lack, but also of missionary identity. In another part of the letter, it is possible to read:

Here the people keep a living faith, but very mixed with superstitions. We find improvised processions, homemade devotions, and the need to teach the fundamentals of religion amid practices we know little about (Letter from Fr. Richard, 1903).

This excerpt reveals how missionary writing produced an indemnity portrait of the hinterland people. The "living faith" is recognized, but immediately contextualized by the notion of "superstitions", which functions as a mark of disqualification. Instead of understanding popular religiosity in its own logic, the Barnabites frame it as a lack or deviation from Catholic orthodoxy. At this point, the reading of Darcy Ribeiro (1995) is fundamental, because, according to the author, the Brazilian hinterland constitutes a cultural border, that is, a space of meetings and clashes between different matrices (indigenous, African, Iberian) that mix and reinvent themselves continuously.

The result is not simple survival of traditions, but the creation of new forms of life, hybrid and resistant, which escape rigid classifications. However, for the religious, this vitality was perceived and interpreted from the perspective of deficiency, so that multiple religious practices were reduced to "superstitions," and the cultural frontier was seen not as a creative force but as a deficit to be corrected through pastoral action, following the ultramontane models that were applied in the church in Brazil at that time.

This interpretative logic is even clearer when it approaches the concept of *negative identity*, formulated by Douglas Rodrigues Barros (2020). According to the author, this discursive mechanism manifests when otherness is confined to a position of deficiency and does not allow for a perception of complexity, instead being fixed in a negative identity, always defined by what it lacks in relation to the hegemonic standard. Applied to the case of the Barnabites, the concept clarifies how popular religious practices were reduced

to what they supposedly lacked in relation to the liturgical and catechetical model of the Church.

More than a simple ethnographic observation, missionary writing operates as a device of power. By framing the hinterland person as an incomplete individual, in need of correction, the role of the missionary as a bearer of truth and agent of orthodoxy is reinforced. What appears in the reports as a record of reality is, in fact, the construction of a negative identity of the other, which at the same time confirms the legitimacy and authority of the one who writes.

This discursive operation of framing the hinterland as a deficient individual is not limited to the identity level. It also projects itself in the way religious people organize the memory of their own experience. This textual construction is far from neutral. Maurice Halbwachs (1990, p. 58) recalls that "[...] collective memory is not simple conservation of the past, but reconstruction according to the social frames of the present." The framework that guided the memory of the Barnabites was the missionary ideal: to narrate scarcity and precariousness as a proof of faith. When recording the hardness of the land and the supposed ignorance, the religious inscribed the ephemeral mission in a greater logic of fidelity and obedience. Also in the report, the religious describe that:

The hinterland demands more from us than our forces allow. The distance, the heat and the loneliness remind us that we are in the land of the cross, but also of hope. If the Church has not flourished here, it is because it has not yet brought continuous watering (Missionary Report, 1904).

It is important to note that this type of writing reframes the experience. The "land of the cross" was, at the same time, a sign of the hardness and metaphor of the promise. As Roger Chartier (1990, p. 17) recalls, "[...] the texts do not reflect reality, but build it according to social practices and uses". In the Barnabite documents, the hinterland is not only verified, it is transformed into a theological and indemnity argument.

Another point that the religious reveal in their writing is the absence of the State. In one of the undated letters sent to the superior of the mission in Pará, Father Richert, the religious report that "[...] the government does not offer us support, and the people seem to live on the margins of the laws. Here

you feel the absence of the State and the Church, as if we were in a territory without an owner" (Letter from Fr. Richard, n. d.). By emphasizing the political and religious void, the Barnabites not only describe the institutional precariousness of the hinterland, but also produce a strategic representation, since the lack of State and ecclesial presence is mobilized as an argument that explains and, to a certain extent, justifies, the brevity of the mission.

It is at this point that the presence of the "colonels", civilian local chiefs who exercised absolute power over the hinterland population, must also be considered. As Victor Nunes Leal (1997) showed, the "colonels" constituted a command system that, in the First Republic, filled the gap left by the absence of the State, articulating networks of personal dependence and control of the vote. In the narratives of the Barnabites, the colonels appear as indispensable "mediators", regulating access to land, chapels and even religious festivals. In a letter of 1904, one of the religious, writing to the Father General of the Order in Rome, recorded: "Here one does not walk without the permission of the leaders, men of arms and lands, who decide on the processions and on what anyone can speak to the people" (Missionary Letter, 1904). In that same letter, the religious narrated an episode in which, before the arrival of the priests, the people exclaimed: "Run, run, it is a bullet, it is a bullet! Here only the priest is a saint [...]" (Missionary Letter, 1904), evidencing both the devotion and the tension that surrounded the missionary presence in territories controlled by the "colonels". This political dimension shows that the mission failed not only due to drought, isolation, and material difficulties, but also due to the confrontation with a social order marked by "colonels" authority, in which the Church needed to negotiate space with powers already consolidated.

In this movement, failure does not appear as pastoral failure, but a confirmation of the urgency and relevance of the evangelizing project. The lack of structures was thus reframed in proof of the need for expansion of the Church and the indispensability of the Order itself.

As Pierre Nora (1993, p. 15) observes, memory is rooted in "[...] gestures, images, objects and texts [...], which condense experiences". The Barnabite letters and reports are, in this sense, genuine sites of memory, as they are texts that, by recording experiences in the fleeting mission, preserve them as part of the tradition of the Order and the life of the Church. In them, the

hinterland emerges as a symbolic space built by religious writing, in which the identity of the hinterland people is narrated in a deficient key, while that of the missionary is projected in a heroic key. By archiving such narratives, the Order ensures that the brief passage through the hinterland, although little studied and disclosed, did not dissolve into oblivion, but is transfigured into collective memory, an operation that highlights the strategic role of the archives that will be explored in the next section.

Writing and hinterland: literary approaches

14 Reading the Barnabite ego-documents shows that the religious, when recounting life in the Pernambuco hinterlands, apparently drew on images that referred to broader representations of Brazilian literature and culture. Although their objective was pastoral and religious, the reports approached literary discourses that had already given the hinterland a symbolic centrality at the beginning of the 20th century. Among these speeches, we highlight the formulations of Euclides da Cunha in the book *Os Sertões* (The Hinterlands) (1902) and, decades later, the re-elaborations of Ariano Suassuna in the book *O Romance d'A Pedra do Reino* (The Romance of the Stone of the Kingdom) (1971).

In the reports, the hinterland appears as a territory of aridity and trial. In a letter of 1904, we can read: "The long distances, the scorching sun and the stony soil make each visit to the villages a sacrifice. The people seem to live apart from everything, keeping their faith in ways that surprise us" (Letter from Fr. Di Giorgio, 1904). This description echoes, albeit indirectly, the vision of Euclides da Cunha, for whom "[...] the hinterland person is, first of all, a fort" (Cunha, 1902, p. 117). Both build adversity as a structuring element of hinterland life, but in different records: science and tragedy in Euclides, penance, and pastoral care in the Barnabites.

However, if in Euclides the hinterland is a tragedy and for the Barnabites it is a trial, Suassuna will resignify this same hinterland as a space of aesthetic invention and cultural power. While the religious reduced popular religiosity to "superstitions", Suassuna, according to Ariel Roemer (2020),

through the Armorial movement, founded in 1970, will raise it to the foundation of a scholarly art rooted in the popular:

I seek to create a traditional and popular style, capable of welcoming as many stories, myths, characters, and events as possible, to achieve, through what I can glimpse in my region, the traditional and universal spirit (Suassuna, 2008, p. 47).

In *Romance d'A pedra do Reino* (The Romance of the Stone of the Kingdom), Suassuna re-elaborates the hinterland as a territory of myth, messianism and carnivalization, approaching the notion of grotesque realism (Bakhtin, 1999). The book's narrator, the character Quaderna, is not a tragic hero, but an accountant who demeans and reinvents the great themes of history, mixing religion, politics, and popular culture. While the Barnabites narrate the hinterland as a space of spiritual scarcity, Suassuna transformed it into the center of an aesthetic epic, where popular culture (cordel, singing, woodcutting) was not "superstition," but the foundation of an erudite national culture.

This difference is revealing. For the religious, the hinterland religiosity is deficient and demanded correction; for Suassuna, it is a creative power. As Albuquerque Júnior (2009) observes, the hinterland, in Suassuna's work, is a space of nostalgia and invention, a timeless territory in which tradition and imagination intersect. In this sense, the Barnabite narrative, therefore, is inscribed in a discursive regime of power, that of disciplining and correcting (Foucault, 1996), while the Suassuna's narrative is inscribed in a regime of invention and symbolic consecration.

It is at this point that the comparison with Euclides da Cunha becomes unavoidable. Published in 1902, *Os Sertões* (The Hinterlands) precedes the arrival of the Barnabites in Brazil by one year. According to Rafael Borges de Oliveira (2024), there is no evidence that the religious have read or had any contact with the book, not least because, newcomers from France, Italy and Belgium, they barely mastered Portuguese. Even so, the ways of narrating the hinterland keep surprising proximity. Without having read the work, the descriptions made by the religious people align with the same model of

representations, confirming the hinterland as a central symbolic place at the beginning of the 20th century.

For Euclid, the land is hard, stony, almost inhospitable; for the Barnabites, it is "land and cross", requiring penance and resistance. Both describe aridity as a structuring force of social life. The figure of man also converges, albeit in a different way. Euclides crystallizes the hinterland person first as a strong man (Cunha, 1902), a synthesis of physical and moral resistance in the face of adversity. On the other hand, for the Barnabites, this same man appears as an individual of "[...] living faith, but mixed with superstitions [...]" (Missionary Report, 1904), a recognized spiritual force, but, as previously presented, reduced to absence. The praise of resistance, in Euclides, becomes a pastoral justification for the writing of the Barnabites.

The differences, however, are revealing. While Euclides denounces state abandonment as a national tragedy, the Barnabites describe it as "[...] a territory without an owner [...]" (Letter from Fr. Richard, n. d.), but this void is mobilized to legitimize the brevity of the mission and reinforce the need for the Church's presence in the hinterland. In both cases, the absence of the State appears, but assumes different meanings: political denunciation in Euclides; theological argument for the Barnabites. In style, the contrast is also revealing. The book *Os Sertões* (The Hinterlands) is built as a scientific and tragic epic, mixing geology, sociology, and military strategy. The Barnabite letters, on the other hand, assume a penitential and pastoral tone, in which adversity legitimizes the missionary as a hero of the faith.

Therefore, even without a direct contact between the narratives, it is possible to observe how the hinterland was raised, almost simultaneously, to a symbolic place of proof, resistance, and limit. Euclides did it by the pen of a military engineer, inscribed in the scientific paradigm of his time; the Barnabites, by the religious pen, inscribed in the grammar of the ultramontane pastoral. Both, however, ended up fixing images that, each in their own way, became lasting in the national memory, in the case of Euclides, and institutional, in the case of the Barnabites.

The dialogue between the Barnabites, Euclides and Suassuna shows, therefore, how the hinterland was multiple in the narratives of 20th century: a territory of trial, tragedy, and invention. The missionary writings, despite their

ephemeral and localized character, are part of this broader symbolic universe, participating in the construction of a memory that is not only of the Order, but also of the nation. Archived, they become traces of an institutional meteor: brief in its duration, but intense in its radiance, capable of illuminating, for an instant, the hinterland landscape and, at the same time, leaving marks that project beyond the Order, fixing themselves as persistent images in the collective memory of the Church and Brazil.

Final considerations

The analysis of the ephemeral Barnabite mission in Pernambuco (1903-1905) confirms that brief experiences can play a decisive role in the constitution of institutional memory. In the light of the notion of collective memory, as formulated by Maurice Halbwachs (1990), it is observed that the episode was not preserved as a simple memory, but reconstructed according to the social frameworks of the Order itself, which reinterpreted the practical failure of the mission as a formative experience capable of legitimizing the Order and preparing future missionary expansions. Territorial dispersion, internal tensions, and conflicts with civil and ecclesiastical authorities were reorganized in narratives as proofs of fidelity, resistance, and obedience, integrating themselves into a collective memory that surpassed the short time of experience.

In this process, the ego-documents (letters, reports, and chronicles) are revealed, in this sense, less as simple administrative records and more as instruments of identity production, in which the missionaries inscribe themselves as witnesses of sacrifice, resistance and fidelity. As proposed by Philippe Artières (1998), such writings should not be read as neutral records, but as exercises in self-writing, in which individuals construct their identities, justify choices, and produce meaning for their own life trajectory. In the Barnabite case, to narrate the drought, the diseases, the long distances were not only to verify adversities, but to transfigure them into tests of divine election; to record the "living faith mixed with superstitions" was not only to observe the other, but to frame him/her in a deficient identity that legitimized the pastoral presence. Thus, missionary writing fulfills a double function: it builds a portrait of the hinterland and, at the same time, reaffirms the place of the Order as a mediator between faith

and civilization. The interpretation suggests that the religious writing of the missionaries not only recorded practices, but also operated as a certain symbolic pedagogy, insofar as the very displacement of the religious, their impressions of the Pernambuco hinterland and the disputes with the government and the Church, for example, served to account to superiors and guide them about the need to learn the language and the knowledge of existing religious customs and practices.

Such records dialogue directly with what Maurice Halbwachs (1990) observes: collective memory does not conserve the raw past, but reconstructs it according to the social frames of the present. Likewise, Pierre Nora (1993) notes that places of memory emerge not only from great events, but also from ephemeral, intense and documented experiences. The Barnabite mission in Pernambuco constitutes precisely this type of institutional meteor: short in its duration, but intense in its effects, fixing itself as a narrative that surpassed the episode and became the symbolic patrimony of the Order. The Pernambuco hinterland, in this sense, not only remained as a geographical space of the mission, but was transformed into a memorial place, in which narratives of sacrifice, learning and missionary vocation were condensed.

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From a methodological point of view, the research confirms the relevance of what Arlette Farge (2009) calls the "patient hunt" in the archive: scattered fragments, isolated letters, incomplete reports, and lacunar chronicles that, when articulated, reveal not only daily practices, but also power strategies, modes of legitimation and institutional memory devices. This exercise of hermeneutics shows how history work can transfigure documentary fragments into analytical narratives, illuminating broader processes of religious and educational history.

Finally, it should be noted that the Pernambuco experience was not useless or marginal. It prepared firm and strong religious cadres, in the words of Fathers Dubois, Di Giorgio and Richard, who later had central roles in Belém do Pará and Rio de Janeiro, and ignited the Order's missionary ardor, in 1928, to accept the missions of the Gurupi-Guamá, with Father Richard as Apostolic Administrator. Thus, the apparent failure became institutional learning, transforming itself into a formative memory for the Barnabite expansion in Brazil.

Therefore, by reinscribing this experience in the historiography of education and religion, this article shows that ephemerality does not imply erasure, but can become a symbolic permanence when mediated by writing, archive and collective memory. The Barnabite case illuminates the ways in which religious orders produce memory of themselves, projecting beyond their actual presences. More than recovering a poorly studied episode, it is a matter of understanding how religious writing, when organizing the narrative of the mission, transformed the hinterland into a place of memory and ephemerality itself into a pedagogical and identity device of the Bernabite Order.

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