

# **AFRICAN GODS IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZIL**

**(A Sociological Introduction to Candomblé Today)**

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## **I: Popular Religions in Brazil**

In Brazil, Catholicism has historically been the major religion, Protestants and other faiths being a small minority (Camargo, 1973). Within this second group are the so-called Afro-Brazilian cults, which, until the 1930's, could be included in the category of ethnic religions that preserved the traditions of the former African slaves and their descendants (Bastide, 1978 a; Carneiro, 1936). These religions existed in different areas of Brazil with different rites and local names derived from diverse African traditions: Candomblé in Bahia<sup>1</sup>, Xangô in Pernambuco and Alagoas<sup>2</sup>, Tambor de Mina in Maranhão and Pará<sup>3</sup>, Batuque in Rio Grande do Sul<sup>4</sup>, and Macumba in Rio de Janeiro. It seems that the resurgence of those black religions in Brazil occurred fairly recently. Since the African people brought to the New World during the final period of slavery (the last decades of the 19th. century) were located mostly in cities for urban jobs, they were able to live physically and socially in closer proximity than they had done before, and this fact provided the propitious social conditions for some African religions to survive. At the end of the 19th. century, several Protestant denominations as well as French Spiritism (founded by Allan Kardec) were introduced into Brazil. These religions flourished, but Catholicism continued as the preference of more than 90% of the Brazilian population until the 1950's, although in the country's most industrialized region, the Southeast, there has always been a lower

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<sup>1</sup> Rodrigues, 1935; Bastide, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Motta, 1982; Motta, 1985; Pinto, 1935.

<sup>3</sup> S. Ferretti, 1986. M. Ferretti, 1985; M. Ferretti, 1993; Eduardo, 1948.

<sup>4</sup> Herskovits, 1943; Corrêa, 1992.

percentage of Catholics. Here was a more marked increase took place in the number of Protestants, Kardecist Spiritist and followers of Umbanda, an Afro-Brazilian religion that emerged in the 1930's in Brazil most developed urban areas and which, despite its origins in the black population, does not seek to preserve an African cultural patrimony in a "pure" form.

The recent process of religious conversion in Brazil is complex and dynamic, with its incorporation and even creation of some new religions. The three most important religious groups in terms of the number of followers are: Catholicism in both its traditional and modern forms; Protestantism, which presents multiple facets; and a diverse array of Afro-Brazilian religions. Nowadays, Afro-Brazilian religions, Pentecostalism -a form of Protestantism which originated in the United States- (Rolim, 1985) and two recent expressions of popular Catholicism, the Christian Base Communities -CEBs- (Pierucci & Prandi, 1996) and the Charismatic Renovation Movement -also from the United States- (Prandi, 1997) have become increasingly popular. As a result of syncretism the followers of the Afro-Brazilian religions continue to identify themselves as Catholic. For this reason it is extremely difficult to calculate their numbers. Estimates indicate they account for about 8% of the Brazilian population, while approximately 70% define themselves as "officially" belonging to the Catholic Church. Pentecostalism represents somewhere between 10 and 20% of the total.

Umbanda, Brazil's most important popular religion, has an identity native to Brazil but draws heavily on African, American and European religious traditions.<sup>5</sup> As a religion, Umbanda has sought to legitimize itself by erasing some features of Candomblé, especially those referring to Africa, slavery and tribal behaviour and mentality (Ortiz, 1978). As compared to Candomblé, the Umbanda initiation process is simpler, cheaper, and its rituals do not demand blood sacrifices. The spirits of *Caboclos* (Indians) and *Pretos Velhos* (Old Slaves) manifest themselves through the bodies of initiated when they are in a ritual trance in order to dance, give some advice and cure those who look for any religious or magical help. Umbanda absorbed from Kardecist Spiritism something of the Christian virtues of charity and altruism, thus making itself a more Occidental religion than the other Afro-Brazilian ones.

Since its early times the African cults of orishas<sup>6</sup> in Brazil have to a certain degree undergone syncretism with Catholicism and Brazilian indigenous religions one of

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<sup>5</sup> Camargo, 1961; Brown, 1987; Concone, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Verger, 1957; Verger, 1985 (a); Verger, 1985 (b).

their most important characteristics being the worship of saints, in keeping with the Catholic traditions that existed prior to the reforms of Vatican II.<sup>7</sup> Contributions from French Kardecist Spiritism were added later, especially the idea of communicating with the spirits of the dead in a state of trance with the goal of practising Christian charity, since the living should help those who suffer in this world as well as the dead who still have not achieved eternal peace. As I have already mentioned, around 1930, in Rio de Janeiro, the traditional Afro-Brazilian religion gave birth to Umbanda, a major step towards turning these religions with African roots fully Brazilian. This step moved it closer to Catholicism, indigenous faiths and Kardecist Spiritism, rather than to its sources in Africa. Until recently, many social researchers linked Candomblé to the Blacks and Mulattos of Bahia and Pernambuco, its following in Rio de Janeiro and other Brazilian states being less numerous. Umbanda, however, became a religion that transcended issues of color and race.

Since the 1950's Umbanda has been a very popular religion among the poor and the lower middle classes. It is impossible to imagine any synthesis of Brazilian contemporary popular culture without considering the devotion to the orishas as one of its fundamental elements. The cultural influence of the Afro-Brazilian religions is present in all areas: music, theater, cinema, the arts in general, literature, cuisine, etc. The largest religious festivity in Brazil today is the event which takes place on beaches throughout the country on the 31st of December - the tribute paid to Yemanjá (goddess of the Seas, the Great Mother). Every year some hundreds of thousand people from the city of São Paulo celebrate this event at the beaches of Santos (50 miles from the city of São Paulo).

## **II: Candomblé today**

By the 1950's Umbanda had become a religion for all sorts of people regardless of color, race, social or geographical origin. In fact, many Umbanda followers are of European descent. Although Umbanda has no fixed social class boundaries, most of its followers are poor -maybe because most of the Brazilian people themselves are poor. Because Umbanda developed its own outlook on life, a kind of mosaic of elements from Catholicism, Kardecist Spiritism and Candomblé, it could claim a transcendence that enabled it either to replace the old Catholic traditions or to join Catholicism as a supporting vehicle which would provide a renewed religious sense of life. After consolidating its features as a

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<sup>7</sup> Valente, 1977, S. Ferretti, 1994.

universal religion in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Umbanda spread throughout the country, and can now be found in Argentina and other Latin-American countries as well.<sup>8</sup>

During the 1960's something surprising started to happen. With the large emigration from the Northeast (the poorest and most traditional region of Brazil, with an agrarian economy subject to prolonged periods of severe drought) to the Southeast of the country (the modern and industrialized region that absorbs the workers who come from the poorest areas), Candomblé began to penetrate Umbanda's well-established territory, and followers of Umbanda began to convert to Candomblé and to abandon Umbanda. The movement grew and it led Umbandists back to the old Candomblé, to the so-called true, original, more mysteriously sacred, religious matrix that Umbanda had once come from. During this period of Brazil's history, these older traditions found a more favorable economic situation in which to develop, since Candomblé's religious ceremonies require significant expenses. Also, it was a time when important middle class social movements searched for what could be taken as the original roots of Brazilian culture. Intellectuals, poets, students, writers, and artists participated in that quest which wound up at the front doors of the old Candomblé houses in the city of Salvador, capital of the state of Bahia, in the Northeast. Travelling to Salvador to have one's future read by the *mães-de-santo* of Candomblé (the high priestesses of the *terreiros* -shrines- of the religion of orishas) became a must for many, a need that filled a lack of transcendence that had dominated in the secularized, modern lifestyle of the big, industrialized cities in the Southeast (Prandi, 1991 a).

Candomblé found all the social, cultural and economic conditions it needed to be reborn. From then on it was no longer a religion whose followers would only be black. Poor people of all ethnic and racial origins could be found at the *terreiros*. To give some idea of the social significance of the Afro-Brazilian religions, according to our latest estimates there exist approximately 50 thousand Afro-Brazilian worship centers among the 16-million inhabitants of greater São Paulo city (which includes neighboring municipalities), 4 thousand of which are Candomblé while the remaining are Umbanda.

Candomblé can be divided into different "nations" in accordance with the ethnic origins preserved in the rites (Lima, 1984). Basically, the ancient African cultures that have been the main sources of the current "nations" of Candomblé were brought from the Bantu cultural areas (today corresponding to the countries of Angola, Congo, Gabon, Zaire, and Mozambique) and the Sudan cultures of the Gulf of Guinea: Yoruba and Ewe-Fon (corresponding to the present countries of Nigeria and Benin). These, however, do overlap.

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<sup>8</sup> Oro, 1993; Frigerio, 1989; Prandi, 1991 (b).

In the so-called Ketu "nation", in Bahia, the Yoruba pantheon of orishas and initiation rites predominate. The ritual language also has a Yoruban dialectal source, although, over time, the meaning of the words has been lost and the sacred songs can no longer be translated. The following "nations" are also of Yoruba origin: the Nagô in Pernambuco, the Efan in Bahia, and the Batuque in Rio Grande do Sul. The Angola "nation", with Bantu sources, adopted the pantheon of the orishas of the Yorubans as well as many of the initiation practices of the Ketu "nation", but its ritual language, also untranslatable, originates from the Kimbundo language. In this "nation" of primary importance is the worship of the *caboclos*, indigenous spirits, considered by the Angola "nation" as the true Brazilian ancestors. It was probably the Angola Candomblé that gave rise to Umbanda. The Jeje-Mahin "nation" of the state of Bahia and the Mina-Jeje "nation" of the state of Maranhão are related to the Fon traditions. The Jeje "nations" worship voodoo instead of orishas, and their ritual language is of Fon origin.

### **Celebrating Mãe Menininha do Gantois**

The Candomblé that enjoys the greatest prestige and is best known throughout Brazil is that of the Ketu "nation".

During the week of February 2-7, 1994, in the city of Salvador, Bahia, there were a series of events commemorating the 100th anniversary of the birth of Mãe Menininha do Gantois, who died in 1986. She was the third *mãe-de-santo* (high priestess) of the Terreiro do Gantois, the second oldest *terreiro* of Ketu Candomblé in Bahia and an important point of reference for both followers of Candomblé and researchers ever since the end of the last century. The commemoration included the official opening of a square named Largo de Pulchéria - Pulchéria was the second priestess of the Terreiro do Gantois and a great-aunt of Mãe Menininha - presided by the mayor of the city of Salvador and the governor of the state of Bahia, a seminar on Candomblé's traditions, an exhibition of sculptures, the release of a postage stamp commemorating the 100th anniversary, and a performance of a choral work that assembled followers from different *terreiros* and some very important Brazilian singers, such as Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, Maria Bethânia, Gal Costa, and Daniela Mercury, which was shown by Brazil's biggest TV network. The American writer Steven White, who attended the commemoration of Mãe Menininha, provided me with the following observations:

"One of the fundamental ideas underlying the "Seminar on Afro-Brazilian Religion and Continuity of Tradition" was that of putting aside differences between the

various "nations" of Candomblé and any difficulties between and within the hierarchies of the *terreiros* as a way of coming together and reflecting on the future of Afro-Brazilian religion. The seminar was held in the ritual dance area (*barracão*) of the Terreiro do Gantois. Outside was a sacred *iroko*, a massive tree wrapped in a long white ribbon of cloth called on *ojá*; atop the *terreiro's* unmistakable and elegant facade, a white flag was flying. Inside, Mãe Cleusa, daughter of Mãe Menininha, sat in a wicker chair with a high, round back beneath longer-than-life photographs of the three *Iyalorishas* who preceded her. At the front table, bathed in the bright light for television cameras (the evens were given national coverage), Prof. Júlio Braga (Director of the Centro de Estudos Afro-Orientais da Universidade Federal da Bahia and the high priest of a Ketu *terreiro* and one of the organizers of the seminar) invited Mãe Stella (who, after the death of Mãe Menininha, became Candomblé's foremost living figure) from the *terreiro* Axé Apô Afonjá to bless the gathering and preside over it. The public was so numerous that it filled the *barracão* of the *terreiro* and overflowed into the street. There were many *mães-de-santo* present, dressed in all their ritual splendor. Salvador, a city of two million inhabitants, has at least 1000 *terreiros*."

"The issue of alliances between "nations" was a central theme of the history of Candomblé in Bahia that Prof. Renato Silveira gave on the second day of the seminar. He described the conflicts that existed in the late 18th and early 19th centuries between the Bantus, who were the first to arrive in Bahia, and the Yorubans, who arrived as slaves in Bahia later than the Bantus, but soon became more numerous. Each of the many ethnic groups that came to Bahia as slaves brought different orishas, which in Africa were worshipped individually. The new social conditions in Bahia facilitated the creation of a cult of many orishas together, a cult that mixed different ritual practices from different "nations". This reality complicates the tendency to idealize Africa as the source of Brazilian Candomblé. Also, it might be that many followers of Candomblé are seeking something in Africa that Africa no longer has (or perhaps never had) to offer."

"For me, as an outsider, one of the most interesting parts of the seminar was the so-called 'questions and answers' period after the lectures each evening. These became intensely emotional debates on the crises facing Afro-Brazilian religions. There are essentially two great threats to Candomblé, according to those who spoke. The first concerns Evangelical Protestants. Until relatively recently, the followers of Candomblé were the victims of police persecution of the most violent kind (according to a recent article by Júlio Braga, the police records in Bahia from 1920's to the 1960's remain closed to the public). Now there is a "holy war" against the followers of Candomblé, and part of the Evangelical Protestants, who have a strong presence in the poorest neighborhoods, actively campaign

against the orishas, saying they are diabolical. One speaker said that in Rio de Janeiro there are Evangelical's who enter the *terreiros* during ceremonies and violently disrupt the proceedings. This battle is unequal in structural terms, since Candomblé, which is an initiatic religion, does not contain the proselytizing and missionary elements of Protestant Evangelism."

"But the general consensus among the speakers was that the gravest danger for Candomblé was its commercialization. In Salvador, 'the Tourist Capital of Brazil', as the T-shirts say, anything that can be sold *is* sold. The process of marketing black culture in an official way through state-run tourism offices has wide-ranging consequences. On the one hand, there are, for example, all the T-shirts, caps, etc. of the musical group Olodum (best known in the United States for their collaboration with Paul Simon in 'Rhythm of the Saints') in the tourism heart of Salvador called do Pelourinho, now in the process of being restored so as to attract more tourist dollars. On the other hand, however, there is also a commercialization of the sacred: people doing the *jogo de búzios* and "dances of the orishas" for foreign and Brazilian tourists in giant shopping malls.<sup>9</sup> Also, the medias's attention to Candomblé can be transforming it into something increasingly more akin to folklore, rather than a vital religion with an angering tradition. There is an ironic side to the discussion. I discovered that an entire exhibit of some sixty exquisite sculptures entitled 'Iyami Oxum' (My mother Oshun, in Yoruba) by Marcos Castro and Adriana Martins (proposed in conjunction with the centenary events and displayed at the Casa do Gantois) was purchased from the artists by Salvador's biggest shopping mall (Shopping Center Barra) and, in turn, donated by the shopping mall to the Casa do Gantois, which has the right to reproduce the figures and sell them. Nevertheless, for Mãe Stella and others who spoke, Candomblé must not be a product to sell to tourists interested in the 'exotic' aspects of the black culture or to surrender to politicians who would exploit Candomblés as a way of getting votes." She called for a general *closed* meeting of *mães-de-santo* and *pais-de-santo* to discuss these and other

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<sup>9</sup> There has always been a hard competition between the *mães-de-santo* and *pais-de-santo* of the different *terreiros* and "nations". In the early times of Candomblé, they used to accuse each other of sorcery, which in Africa was forbidden and severely punished. Over time, being a sorcerer became a kind of virtue and a mean of prestige. Nowadays, the *mães-de-santo* and *pais-de-santo* usually accuse each other of commercialization of Candomblé. In fact, the Candomblé's economy depends strongly on some commercialization and even the most famous *mães* and *pais-de-santo* allow themselves to practice their magic for money. They say that by using this strategy they can afford the Candomblés's rites that are truly expensive. Since São Paulo is the most affluent state of Brazil, branches of almost all the traditional *terreiros* of Bahia can be found there. On the other hand, in our society, commercialization means publicization as well. And many people who work with elements of Candomblé for many non-religious institutions or agencies, such as the *escolas de samba*, motion pictures and the television industry, are followers of Candomblé. (R.P.)

issues currently affecting the fate of Afro-Brazilian religion. Surprisingly at least for me, there was very little mention of a need to continue to 'Africanize' Candomblé by eliminating those parts of its rituals with Catholic origins (Prandi, 1991 a). And Mãe Stella de Oxóssi has been a national leader of the Candomblé's movement against syncretism."

The gods and goddesses, the Yoruban orishas, are syncretized with Catholic saints, Jesus Christ and the Virgin. It is very common for the ritual practices of Candomblé to be accompanied by Catholic rites. For example, if on a particular night there is a ceremony to honour a certain orisha, in the morning the followers attend mass at the church of the saint that is syncretized with that orisha. Equally, after the initiation ceremonies it is common for the newly-initiated person to undertake a pilgrimage to seven Catholic churches.

### **The Ketu Candomblé's initiation**

The priesthood and the organization of rites for the worship of these divinities are quite complex. At the same time, there is one pivotal religious mechanism - the rite of trances that allows the gods to manifest themselves through the bodies of the priests during the ceremonies in order to dance and be admired, praised, worshipped. The initiates, called *filhos-de-santo* or *filhas-de-santo* (*iawo* in ritual language), are also called "horses of the gods" since the trance basically is a means of allowing oneself to be "mounted" and "ridden" by the orisha. But the process of becoming an initiate is a long, expensive and difficult road, the different stages of which in the Ketu "nation" can be summarized as follows:

To begin with, the *mãe-de-santo* (called *Iyalorisha* in the ritual language) needs to ascertain by means of the oracle of the sixteen cowries (the *jogo de búzios*)<sup>10</sup> which orisha is the "owner" of the head of the particular individual. He or she then receives a necklace of beads in the colours that symbolize his or her orisha (see Annex) and begins the apprenticeship. The first private ceremony that the novice (*abian*) will undergo consists of a series of votive sacrifices to the novice's own head (*ebori*), so that the head may be strengthened and prepared to receive one day the orisha in a trance of possession. For the initiation as a horse of the gods, the novice must obtain enough money to cover the cost of offerings (animals and a wide variety of food and objects), ceremonial clothing, ritual

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<sup>10</sup> Prandi, 1996; Bascom, 1969; Braga, 1988.



utensils, and of being unable to work during the initiation period that ends with a festive ceremony in which the novice's orisha is presented to the community.

As part of the initiation, the novice remains in seclusion in the *terreiro* for a minimum apprenticeship of 21 days. During the final days of this period the novice's head is shaved and his body painted. An image of the orisha (*igbá-orisha*) of the novice is washed in a preparation of sacred leaves (*amassi*) and the blood sacrifice (*orô*) takes place. Depending on the orisha (see Annex) the following animals may be offered: goats, kids, sheep, hens or roosters, or ducks and snails. Finally, in a big, public festive ceremony the newly-initiated person is presented. He or she is incorporated into the *terreiro*, and his or her particular orisha utters the name by which the orisha will be praised when the orisha mounts the *filho(a)-de-santo* and then dances. The entire ceremony is sung to the rhythm of the three sacred drums (the three *atabaques*, that are called *run*, *rumpi*, and *lé*).

In Candomblé there is always drumming, singing, dancing and eating (Motta, 1988). At the end there is a great communal banquet (*ajeum*, which means "let us eat") that has been prepared from the meat of the sacrificed animals. This new *filho(a)-de-santo* (*iawo*) will offer sacrifices and festive ceremonies on a more reduced scale on the first, third and seventh anniversaries of his or her initiation. After this seven-year period the person becomes a full priest or priestess (*egbomi*, a person who is a senior), and will offer the festive ceremonies every seven years. When the *egbomi* dies, the funeral rites (*asheshe*) is carried out by the community so that the orisha that resides within that head returns to the parallel world of the gods (*orun*) and the spirit of the dead person (*egun*) is set free, to be born again some day and thereby be able to enjoy the pleasures of this world.

### **Religion, ethics, ritual**

Candomblé works in an ethical context in which the Judeo-Christian notion of sin does not make any sense. The difference between good and evil basically depends upon the relationship between the follower and his or her personal god, the orisha.

As I tried to show briefly, the initiation is endless, gradual and secret. The worship itself demands sacrifices of animal blood, offerings of food and various ingredients. The meat of the animals slaughtered during the ritualistic sacrifices is eaten by the members of the religious community. The blood - as well as certain parts, such as the head, paws, specific internal organs, etc. - are offered to the gods, the orishas. Only initiates have access to the sacrificial ceremonies carried out in the private chambers of the orishas (*quartos-de-*

*santo*), the same space in which the cult's apprenticeship is imparted. Since religious instruction always takes place far from the public gaze, performed during periods of seclusion in rooms open to initiated devotees only, the religion itself is shrouded in mystery.

Nevertheless, all the dances (which are the culminating point of the celebrations) take place in an open area called the *barracão*, and this space is open to the public. As I have already mentioned, these public ceremonies (called *toques*) mark the end of several days of "obligations" that include the sacrifice of animals and food as well as sexual prohibitions for those being initiated and seclusion. A *toque* is a ceremony performed with song and dance to the beat of the sacred drums. One by one each orisha is honoured: his or her sons and daughters fall into trance, "receiving" the divinity in their bodies that are dressed in the proper garments and regalia of their personal gods who then dance and dance and dance. This sequence of songs and dance is called *shirê*, which in Yoruba means "let us play".

### **Gods, followers and clients**

Apart from serving the initiated, Candomblé meets the demand for magical-religious services from a large clientele which does not necessarily take part in the worship ceremonies. The "clients" seek out the *mãe-de-santo* or *pai-de-santo* for the cowries game (*jogo de búzios*), the orishas' Oracle, and through it predictions are made, problems are solved and ritualistic means to manipulate circumstances are prescribed. The client pays for the cowries games and, eventually, for the carrying out of the propitiatory sacrifice (*ebôh*) that is recommended for the client's specific case. The client always finds out which orisha is the "owner" of his or her head and can attend one or more festive celebrations to which the client might make some financial contribution even though he or she has no religious commitment to Candomblé. The client knows next to nothing about the initiation process and does not even participate in it. The client, however, is important in two ways: first of all, his or her demand for services helps to legitimize the *terreiro* and the religious group in social terms. Secondly, it is from this client that a substantial part of the funds necessary for the expenses of the group is derived. In general, the Candomblé priests and priestesses who achieve high levels of prestige have influential members of society as clients.

Devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions may also worship mythical entities other than the orishas from Africa, such as the *encantados* (charmed beings who lived a long time ago) or *caboclos* (spirits of dead Brazilian Indians). During the ritual trance, the *encantados* talk to their followers and friends, offering advice and forms of treatment for all kinds of problems. The order of rank of African divinities and *encantados* in the *terreiros* varies

within each "nation" of Candomblé. *Encantados* or *caboclos* are the center of worship in Umbanda and in Candomblé de Caboclo, where they play a sacred role even more important than the orishas themselves (Santos, 1995).

### **III: Candomblé and Human Behavior as Mythical Heritage**

According to Candomblé, every person belongs to a certain god, "master" of his or her head and mind and from whom physical and personality characteristics are inherited.<sup>11</sup> It is the religious prerogative of the *pai-de-santo* or *mãe-de-santo*, to find out by means of the game of 16 cowries (*jogo de búzios*) to which orisha (god or goddess) one belongs. This knowledge is absolutely imperative to begin the process of initiation of new devotees and even to foresee the future for clients and solve their troubles. Even among non-believers it is a Brazilian custom to know one's orisha.

Despite the approximately 400 orishas worshipped in Africa, only about twenty orishas are revered in Brazil. Each one has his or her own characteristics, elements of nature, symbolic colour, garments, songs, food, drinks, type of personality, desires, faults etc. There is no orisha entirely "good" or "bad". As I mentioned before, the religion of orishas in Brazil has no notion of sin. Followers believe that men and women inherit many of the orishas' attributes, particularly those related to behaviour and personality. People believe that one behaves in ways that resemble the conduct of one's orisha in the same situation. This legitimizes both one's failures and achievements.

Let me briefly present here some of the orishas and the characteristics that their "children", or followers, are believed to receive from them. I have selected those that have been the most popular orishas throughout Brazil and also at the 60 "terreiros" I have studied in the city of São Paulo. (See Annex.)

*Eshu* - Messenger god, a trickster divinity. At any ceremony, always the first god to whom homage is paid in order to avoid his anger and consequent disruption of everything. Overseer of cross-roads and exits to the streets. Syncretism with the Christian devil. His symbol is a clay phallus or iron prongs. Followers believe that people consecrated to Eshu are intelligent, licentious, erotic, and dirty. They like to eat and drink too much. One should never trust a son or a daughter of Eshu. They are the best for sex, but they decide when. They never marry, too reckless and too smart, walking all alone through the streets, drinking and watching over the cross-roads forever. Pay Eshu some money, some food, some attention

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<sup>11</sup> Verger, 1985 (a); Prandi, 1991 (a); Augras, 1983; Lépine, 1981; Ligièro, 1993.

whenever he does you a favor. Eshu's people never do anything for nothing, at least according to ancient African myths and current Brazilian popular uses.

*Ogun* - God of war, iron, metal craft and technology. Syncretism with Saint Anthony or St. George. The orisha which has the power to clear all paths. Stereotypes show Ogun's children as stubborn, passionate, cold and rational. They well fit a workaholic mind. Although they usually do anything for a friend, Ogun's sons and daughters do not know how to love without hurting: they're heartbreakers. Ogun's people are believed to be as good at sex fulfillment as Eshu's. Ogun and Eshu are brothers. People usually say that the "families" of both are particularly well-built and mentally geared to sex. Nonetheless, they also do many other interesting, practical things as well. They are more suitable for blue-collar work than for intellectual jobs. They also perform well as warriors.

*Oshossi* - God of hunting. Young and a warrior. Syncretism with St. George and St. Sebastian. Affluence orisha. His people are slender, and curious. They just can't be monogamous for they have to run around night and day. Yet they make good fathers and good mothers. They are friendly, sometimes a little simple-minded, and very patient. They are known as lonesome people. They know that, so they don't despair if and when they find themselves all alone in the middle of the night. An Oshossi-person looks for and enjoys lovers, but if he or she doesn't have a lover, he or she is satisfied with discreetly masturbating. "Life is just like that," he or she would say. The Oshossi-people are eternal adolescents. Just don't ask the people of the god of hunting to wait for you. They feel free to break commitments; they hardly understand the meaning of making or keeping appointments. So tradition says, so tradition teaches.

*Obaluaye* or *Omulu* - God of small-pox, plagues and of illness in general. Nowadays considered the god of AIDS. Connected to all kinds of illnesses, cures, cemeteries, the soil and subsoil. Syncretism with St. Lazarus. These people seem to be the really depressed and depressive ones. They are negative, pessimistic and spiteful. They look as if they are unfriendly, but in reality they are shy and ashamed of their awful appearance. Be friends with them and you will find out that all they need to be the best people in the world is some attention and a little bit of love. When they get old some become incredibly wise, while others die ordinary idiots.

*Shango* - God of thunder and justice. Syncretism with St. Bartholomew. Appeals to him are made in matters involving business, justice and red-tape. People of Shango are born to be Kings and Queens, but they usually aren't. Children of Shango are stubborn, resolute, glutton for food, money, power and women. A Shango-person likes to have many

lovers even though he or she does not have the sexual potency to maintain more than one relationship for much time. They live to fight, to involve people in their own personal wars. They enjoy warring, in spite of getting fatter and fatter. To be fair, it must be said that a Shango- person is the fairest judge someone could ever wish for. They make good friends and excellent parents.

*Oshun* - Goddess of fresh water, gold, fertility and love. Syncretism with "Nossa Senhora das Candeias" (Our Blessed Virgin of the Candles), among other names given to the Virgin Mary. Mistress of vanity, she is Shango's favorite wife. Oshun's people are attractive, seductive and real flirts. They know how to manage love affairs and they are good at witchcraft; they foresee the future and guess secrets and mysteries. They enjoy the beauty they think they rightly bear. They can be very vain and arrogant. They know everything about love, dating, marriage, having a family and raising children easily, carelessly. They never get poor, never face loneliness. At least this is the appearance a son or a daughter of Oshun always likes to give.

*Yansan* or *Oya* - Goddess of lightning, wind and storms. A woman warrior, she is the orisha who takes the souls of the dead to the other world. Syncretism with St. Barbara. She is Shango's most important wife. Sons and daughters of Yansan like sex too much and have many lovers. Goddess of eroticism, she is a kind of feminist entity. Yansan-people are brave, talkative and brilliant. They dislike running errands for they feel they are Queens or Kings. They are communicative, like to show off and be the center of attention. They can lay down their lives for their beloved, but they never forgive any treason, particularly in matters of love.

*Yemanjá* - Goddess of the seas and oceans. Worshipped as the mother of several orishas. Syncretism with Nossa Senhora da Conceição (Our Mother of Conception), including Nossa Senhora da Conceição Aparecida, patroness of Brazil for Catholic people. Represented by a mermaid, her statue can be seen in almost every town along the coast of Brazil. Sons and daughters of Yemanjá are good mothers and fathers. They protect their children, friends and relatives like lions. Their biggest fault is to talk too much; they can't keep a secret. They like to work and overcome poverty.

*Oshala* - God of creation. Syncretism with Jesus Christ. Followers dress in white on Fridays. Always the last to be praised during Afro-Brazilian religious ceremonies; revered by all the other orishas. As Creator, he molded the first human beings and blew the breath of life into them. When revealing himself via trances at Brazilian Candomblés, Oshala presents himself in two forms. Oshalufan is old, bent and tired, moving slowly and hardly able to

dance; Oshaguiian is in his youth and dances like a warrior. This young god invented the wooden mortar for pounding yam, his favourite food, and is considered the creator of material culture. Oshala is the only divinity who doesn't like sacrifices of warm-blooded animals (goats, sheep, fowl, etc.), preferring the cold blood of mollusks. People of Oshala like power, they appreciate being treated as a King, or at least a boss, preferably *the* boss. Some of those consecrated to the old Oshala are said not to be very good lovers, being too tired to make love. Anyway, these people are brilliant, eager to learn and have a talent for understanding. Challengers, they are a great help to their friends and great foes to people who oppose them. They never give up.

I think this brief illustration is sufficient to provide an understanding of how each orisha can through religion provide his or her human son or daughter with a divine pattern of behaviour, elaborated from Yoruban mythology about the orishas who survived in Brazil.

In fact, the Candomblé followers can either take their orisha's attributes for granted as though they were their own characteristics and try to look like their god or goddess or just recognize, through them, symbols that legitimate their conduct. The patterns of behaviour presented by the orishas' myths may in this way be used as a model to follow or a kind of social validation for what one already is like. An initiated person could turn over a new leaf when he or she is told which orisha his or her head belongs to or could just keep acting as he or she was used to. This, however, does not change or invalidate the meaning of those symbols.

In addition, every initiated person is supposed to have a second orisha who works as an associate (*juntó*) of the first one. For example, one says "I'm a son of Oshala and Yemanja." Therefore, this second divinity also has an important role in this process of constituting behavioural patterns. Besides that, every private orisha has his or her own particularity, depending on what stage of his or her mythical biography a particular legend addresses.

Sometimes, when well-known characteristics of an orisha do not fit at all a person consecrated to the god, it is not uncommon to state that this god is "wrong" for that person. This means that a change of divinity must be ritually performed at once or some "forgotten" myth be found that justifies those discrepancies. At other times the attributes of the orisha itself do not fit the life or the patterns of behaviour in current society. In this case, they must be changed. The social construction of religions, with their divinities, symbols, and meanings is far from being finished.

#### **IV: The religions of the Orishas in Brazilian cities today**

If religions, like sciences and other institutional practices, are organized sources of meaning for life, codes of behaviour, or languages for interpreting the world, for the follower of Candomblé, today, in Brazilian urban centers, what this religion offers is something different from what the religion of the orishas used to offer until some time ago. When Candomblé was established in Northeast Brazil, at the beginning of the 19th century, it enabled black slaves to recover their lost communitarian-tribal world of Africa. This religion represented at the time a mechanism by which black Africans and Brazilians could distance themselves culturally from the world dominated by the white oppressor. The black slaves could count on a black "world" from an symbolical African source of resistance to the adversities of the New World, that was kept alive in the religious life of the *terreiro*, juxtaposed with the white world, which was the world of work, slavery and misery. Roger Bastide comments on this ability of part of the black population during the Colonial period in Brazil to live in two different worlds at the same time and still avoid tensions and conflicts: the conflict of contradictory values as well as the demands of the "two societies" (Bastide, 1978 b).

With the change of Candomblé into a universal religion, it is no longer focused on "racial" differences and on the organization of social and cultural mechanisms of resistance, although Candomblé still continues to serve those purposes for the black population that lives in some of the more traditional regions of Brazil. The new reference changes radically the sociological meaning of this Afro-Brazilian religion, and what was related to "racial" segregation in a traditional society some decades ago, now has the meaning of a personal, free and intentional choice: one joins Candomblé not because he or she is a Negro, but because he or she learns and feels that Candomblé works, making life easier. Of course, the religion's efficacy only can be evaluated by the one who elected it, although the process of religious option and conversion can have some strong social consequences for the whole of society (Prandi, 1992).

The undoing of ethnic ties that transformed Candomblé over the last 25 years into a religion for everyone, also provided a significant expansion in the supply of magical-religious services for the population outside the religious group. This clientele was already used to composing particular world visions from fragments of different sources of interpretations of life, so that it can now use the Candomblé to provide new elements for the construction of a kind of a private, kaleidoscopic world vision. The middle-class client that usually goes to Candomblé seeking magical services is, in general, an eclectic who also goes

to many other non-rational sources that offer solutions for the problems of life. Certainly, for this client Candomblé is quite different from the Candomblé of a initiate, a devotee. But both are non-contradictory parts of the same reality.

Candomblé is a religion in which the ritual process is of primary importance. The differentiation between good and evil in the ethical sense of the Christian religions is of little consequence in Candomblé. As a religions that is not dominated by ethical sermons, Candomblé (and, to a lesser degree, Umbanda, which is heavily influenced by the Christian code of Kardecist Spiritism) is an important religious alternative for different social groups that live in a society in which ethics, moral codes and strict standards of behaviour may have little value or very different ones.

Candomblé is a religion that affirms the world, recognizing its worth, and that also esteems many of the things that other religions consider bad: for example, money, pleasure (including those of the flesh), success and power. The initiate does not have to internalize patterns of morality that indicate a world different from the world in which he or she lives. The initiate learns rites that facilitate living well in *this* world, which is full of opportunities for well-being and pleasure. The follower favors the orishas in a constant search for the best possible balance (even if it is temporary) between that which the initiate is and has as a human being and that which the initiate would like to be and have. In this process, it is extremely important for the follower to completely trust the *mãe-de-santo*. Guided by her or by him, the follower will learn and repeat the ritual formulas *ad aeternum*. One cannot be a follower of Candomblé without constantly repeating the rite, just as one cannot be a Protestant without constantly examining one's conscience in search of guilt that can be exorcised (Souza, 1969). Good Protestants, in order to save themselves from eternal damnation, need to annihilate their most hidden desires; the good *filho(a) the-santo* needs to fulfill his or her desires in order to make the sacred force of the orishas that moves the world (*ashé*) stronger and more dynamic. By accepting the world as it is, Candomblé accepts humanity, and furthermore, situates humanity at the center of the universe, presenting itself as a religion that is quite appropriate for the hedonistic and narcissistic society in which we live.

Because Candomblé does not distinguish between good and evil in the occidental, Christian sense, it tends to attract all kinds of individuals who have been socially marked and marginalized by other religions and non-religious institutions. This also demonstrate Candomblés' acceptance of the world, even when it has to do with the world of the street, the underworld, the vendors of sex, and those who have walked through prison doors. Candomblé possesses a truly exemplary ability to join saints and sinners, the



blemished and the pure, the ugly and the beautiful. But, if Candomblé liberates the individual, it also liberates the world. Candomblé has no message for the world: it would not know what to do with the world if it was given the chance of transforming it. Candomblé is not a religion based on the word and, therefore, will never have salvation as its ultimate goals. The ultimate concerns of Candomblé are the concrete issues of life: illness and pain, unemployment, lack of money, food and shelter... It is, without a doubt, a religion for the urban centers, though only partially, which is also the destiny of the other religions in today's world. Candomblé could be the religion or the magic for the person who is already fed up with the kind of transcendence made up from reason, science and technology, and who stopped believing in the meaning of a thoroughly disenchanting world that has left magic behind in favour of that efficiency of secular, modern thought and technology. Candomblé could be the religion for the person who cannot find in this disenchanting, demagical world any sense of social justice sufficiently strong to solve many of the problems that every individual faces over the course of a lifetime.

As Candomblé affirms and expands itself as a socially legitimized institution of magical practices, it forms part of a civic movement of multiple aspects in which each group of individuals or even each person is able to construct particular sources of transcendence and explanations that enable them to act in this world in a meaningful way. The pragmatic dimension that Candomblé reveals in that it accepts people as they are or imagine themselves, gives it an advantage in the religious market where moralistic religions (such as Catholicism and Protestant denominations) compete for followers, especially in situations where the consumers are not inclined to change their values systems.

Candomblé also provides its initiated and non-initiated followers with a very particular enjoyment of its Afro-Brazilian esthetics, including the fascination provoked by the cowries game and its way to contact the magical universe of the orishas. And a client do not have to be member of the religion to enjoy its practices. He or she just pays for the *jogo de búzios* and its propitiatory offerings in order to get help from the African deities in a way widely accepted as a legitimate part of the Brazilian culture. Candomblé teaches that each person has his or her own god or goddess who can be worshipped. But no orisha can be honoured before the head of the person is given sacrifice. The head of the human being, which means his or her personality, is the only way to get to the gods. An Yoruban proverb frequently heard at the Candomblés says "Ori buruku kossi orisha", which means "there is no orisha if the head is not good". And Candomblé teaches how to make heads good. It makes a great difference in terms of self-esteem.

In the contemporary urban society, if the construction of different systems of meaning increasingly depends on the will of the groups and individuals involved, the relevant religious themes may be chosen according to different private preferences. Religion too, is now a matter of preference. The extreme would be if each individual possessed a personal model of religiosity independent of the great "totalizing" religious system that until quite recently characterized the history of humanity (Luckmann, 1987). For this reason, the tribal African gods appropriated by the South American metropolis are no longer gods of the tribe. They are gods of a civilization in which religious and magical meanings came to depend on the subjective choices that each person makes, either alone or in groups. To the initiate, Candomblé can also mean the possibility of someone, usually poor and socially marginalized, to have a private god that every one in the community has to honour and praise. In those moments in which the person is ridden as the horse of the god, he or she will be in the center of the *barracão*, the Candomblé's stage, to dance alone and be admired and acclaimed by everybody, and sometimes even envied. All night long, the horse of the gods will dance. No one has never seen an orisha as beautiful as this one.

**Annex:**  
**BASIC ATTRIBUTES OF THE ORISHAS IN CANDOMBLÉ**  
**("Nation" Ketu: Bahia and São Paulo)**

<b>Orishas</b>	<b>Attribute</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Natural element</b>	<b>Patronage</b>
Eshu	messenger orisha, guardian of the house's entrance and of crossroads	M	iron ore	communication, transformation. sexuality, sexual potency
Ogun	orisha of metalcraft, agriculture and war	M	wrought iron	open roads, blue collar jobs, soldiers and police
Oshosi	orisha of hunting	M	forests	abundance of food
Osaniyn	orisha of the leaves	M	leaves	effectiveness of cure
Oshumare	orisha of the rainbow	M and F (androgynous)	rain and atmospheric conditions	wealth that comes from harvests (rain)
Obaluaye or Omulu	orisha of plagues, illness	M	earth, soil	cure for physical ailments
Shango	orisha of thunder	M	thunder and stones	justice, white collar jobs
Oya or Yansan	orisha of lightning, master of the spirits of the dead	F	lightning bolts, wind and storms	sensuality, carnal love, atmospheric disasters
Oba	orisha of rivers	F	rivers	domestic work and female power
Oshun	orisha of fresh water and precious metals	F	rivers, lakes and waterfalls	love, gold, fertility, gestation, vanity
Logun-Ede	orisha of rivers that flow through forests	M or F (alternately)	rivers and forests	the same as those of Oshun and Oshossi, of whom he is a son
Ewa	orisha of fountains	F	headwaters and streams	domestic harmony
Yemanja	orisha of great waters	F	sea and great rivers	maternity, mental harmony, family
Nanan	orisha of the bottom of the water	F	swamps, mud	wisdom, seniority and death
Oshaguián( Young Oshala)	orisha of Creation	M	air	material culture
Oshalufan (Old Oshala)	orisha of Creation	M/F (the origins of human beings)	air	creation of humanity, breath of life

<b>Orishas</b>	<b>Fetish/ material representation</b>	<b>Mythical element</b>	<b>Colors of clothing</b>	<b>Colors of beads in necklace</b>
Eshu	laterite, iron prongs	fire and earth	red and black	red and black (alternated)
Ogun	iron agricultural tools (miniature)	earth	blue, green and white	blue or green
Oshosi	iron bow and arrow (miniature)	earth	turquoise blue or green	turquoise blue
Osaniyn	iron rods with a bird and leaves	earth	green and white	green and white (alternated)
Oshumare	two intertwined metal snakes	water	yellow, green and black	yellow, green and black, or cowries
Obaluaye or Omulu	clay bowl with holes	earth	red, white and black; covering of straw	red, white and black
Shango	meteorite in a wooden bowl	fire	red, brown and white	red and white (alternated)
Oya or Yansan	pebble	air, water and fire	brown and dark red, or white	brown or dark red
Oba	pebble	water	red and gold	red and clear yellow
Oshun	pebble	water	yellow or gold and blue	clear yellow
Logun-Ede	pebble and metal bow and arrow	earth and water	gold and turquoise blue	gold and turquoise blue (alternated)
Ewa	iron snake	water	red and yellow	cowries
Yemanja	pebble from the sea	water	blue, white and bright green	clear glass
Nanan	pebble and cowries	water	purple, blue and white	white and cobalt blue
Oshaguiian (Young Oshala)	pebble	air	white	white and royal blue
Oshalufan (Old Oshala)	silver or tin circle	air	white	white

Orishas	Sacrificial animals	Favorite foods	Numbers in the cowries game	Day of the week
Eshu	black goat and black rooster	manioc meal with palm oil	1 7	Monday
Ogun	goat and rooster	black beans boiled with bits of meat, pork, and sausage ( <i>feijoada</i> ); roasted yams	3 7	Tuesday
Oshosi	birds, rabbit, pig	cooked corn with slices of coconut; fruit	3 6	Thursday
Osaniyn	male and female birds; she-goat and goat	cooked yellow corn decorated with tobacco; fruit	1 7	Thursday
Oshumare	goat and she-goat	paste made from cooked sweet potato	3 6 11	Sunday
Obaluaye or Omulu	pig	popcorn with coconut	1 3 11	Monday
Shango	sheep and turtle	shopped okra and dried shrimp cooked in palm oil ( <i>amalá</i> )	4 6 12	Wednesday
Oya or Yansan	female kid and hens	dumplings of cowpeas and shrimps fried in palm oil ( <i>acarejé</i> )	4 9	Wednesday
Oba	female kid and hens	omelette with cowpeas and okra	4 6 9	Wednesday
Oshun	she-goats and hens	cowpeas cooked and kneaded with 5 cooked eggs on top ( <i>omolocun</i> )	5 8	Saturday
Logun-Ede	pair of kids; birds	cooked corn; fish; fruit	6 7 9	Thursday
Ewa	she-goat and hens	black beans with cooked eggs	3 6	Saturday
Yemanja	duck, goat, sheep (all female)	rice covered with egg-white; baked fish	3 9 10	Saturday
Nanan	she-goat and restless cavy	porridge made from manioc	3 8 11	Monday
Oshaguiian (Young Oshala)	snail (periwinkle)	crushed yams	8	Friday
Oshalufan (Old Oshala)	snail (periwinkle)	grits	10	Friday

Orishas	Ritual objects	Catholic Syncretism	Taboos for the initiate
Eshu	phallic staff ( <i>ogó</i> )	Devil	carrying objects on the head
Ogun	sword	St. Anthony St. George	getting drunk
Oshosi	metal bow and arrow ( <i>ofá</i> ); fly-whisk ( <i>eru</i> )	St. George St. Sebastian	eating honey
Osaniyn	spear and three gourds	St. Onofre	whistling
Oshumare	metal snake and sword	St. Bartholomew	crawling
Obaluaye or Omulu	sceptre made of vegetable fiber and cowries ( <i>shashará</i> )	St. Lazarus St. Rocco	going to funerals
Shango	double-edged ax ( <i>oshé</i> ) and metal rattle ( <i>shere</i> )	St. Jerome	having contact with the dead and cemeteries; dressing completely in red
Oya or Yansan	sword and fly-whisk ( <i>eru</i> )	St. Barbara	eating sheep of either sex; eating squash
Oba	round shield and sword	St. Joan of Arc	eating mushrooms; using earrings
Oshun	gold metal fan ( <i>abebê</i> ) and sword	Our Lady of Candles	eating fish that have scales
Logun-Ede	metal bow and arrow ( <i>ofá</i> ) and gold metal fan ( <i>abebê</i> )	St. Michael the Arcangel	wearing brown or red clothing
Ewa	sword and rattle made of vegetable material	St. Lucy	eating hens
Yemanja	silver fan and sword	Our Lady of Conception	eating crabs; killing mice and cockroaches
Nanan	bowed sceptre made of palm tree fibers ( <i>ibiri</i> )	St. Anne	using metal knives
Oshaguiian (Young Oshala)	white or silver pestle and silver sword	Jesus	eating food with palm oil; drinking palm wine; not wearing white clothing on Fridays
Oshalufan (Old Oshala)	silver shepherd's staff with symbols of creation ( <i>opashorô</i> )	Jesus	eating food with palm oil; drinking palm wine; not wearing white clothing on Fridays

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