Original article

African-derived religions on the Web: Cyber "terreiros" (places where Afro-Brazilian fetichism is practiced) and Global African Diaspora

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Abstract

Through websites, mailing lists, social networking and blogs, which discuss issues associated with African-based religiosity, I evaluate the contribution of the Internet for the creation of a new social network that is being built, once the real terreiro is being replaced by the virtual terreiro. Also evaluate its contribution for the transformation of traditionally oral-centered religions into hypertext religions, as they are being reconfigured virtually, in an image-text space, hypertext space. Such facts show that there is a new reality: the democratization of knowledge (even the secret knowledge, liturgics), and the new path to establish the diasporal African-derived religious field as a space to globally forecast African-derived religions, with magic-religious services available or as a self resource — when the Internet transforms the so-called minority religions in global religions, and they become, therefore, socially inclusive religions.

Keywords

Internet; Afro-Brazilian religions; new communication technologies; media activism

The data of this work concern the updated results of the PhD dissertation, I have defended in 2002 at the UFRJ Communication Post-Graduation Program in which I had gathered data from the research carried out from March 1998 to December 2001. Considering the transformations that have occurred with new technologies in computer systems interfaces, and considering the increasing number of sites (Brazilians sites, especially) that relate to African-based religions on the Internet, I understand that reviewing such data nowadays and reconsidering data previously gathered is essential, because of contemporary demands. It is also important to consider that the short and quick passage of the period of research, which began in the XX century, to the date of the publication of this article, in the XXI century, presented considerable transformations regarding the use of the Internet

in Brazil. Therefore, this article contributes to recent studies concerning the use of the Internet as a tool to diminish time and space, and as a tool to allow the emergence of communities with members that are geographically far from each other.

Considering the transformations that have occurred with the emergence of virtual communities created to discuss issues related to the construction of an information exchange network (where magic-religious service, cure of afflictions, and health care are provided) - more objectively related to the foment of cultural expressions, and to the preservation of the Afro-Brazilian symbolic and material patrimony, and frequently in direct association with other forms of African-descend religiosity in diaspora - I intend to investigate the use of the Internet, through mailing lists, as means of communication

and exchange by communities of Afro-Brazilian or African-derived religion practitioners, whether in Brazil, in Europe, or in the U.S.[1], considering the dynamics of the process of globalization as a complex dialogism between the local and the global, which cannot be simply summarized as an exchange of information or a search for services and benefits.

The focus of my work is, however, the manner of how a new form of media activism is built through the creation of virtual communities related to Afro-Brazilian and African-derived religions, on which the main discussion is that of democratization *versus* gentrification of information — proportioned by the access or non-access to the technologies of information and communication as element of visibility, in and out of the universe of digital medias, and is, therefore, an instrument that promotes the insertion in the political public space, which has on the search for magic-religious services, including the cure for afflictions, which is an important component.

It is important to note that, despite the concern with the care for health and illnesses, which I hereby have called "cure of afflictions through magic-religious services available", the Internet, nowadays, has not yet been used as an explicit mean of publishing such services, once such offer involves certain taboos concerning the boundaries among volunteering, assistance ("Do good unto others regardless of who they are"), and the market of faith, the religious market. That is why every reference to the treatment of health issues and situations of distress are subliminally within the category of field, which is, according to Pierre Bourdieu

> *a network of objective relations (of domination or subordination, of complementarity or antagonism) among positions. Each positions is objectively defined by its objective relation with other positions, or, in other words, by the system of pertinent properties, meaning, efficient, that allow to situate them in relation to all the others in the structure of global distribution* (BOURDIEU, 1996).

Accordingly, health care, included in the notion of African-Brazilian religious field, is implicitly sanctioned, even in times when the debate about identity (rescued) or property (intangible) prevail, that is, even at times when the subject of health is not explicitly described, but which is related, above all, to the ways and to world views that characterize the African-derived or Afro-Brazilian religious universe, and that will determine the relationship between advisers and consultants, "healers" and afflicted ones, priests and faithful followers.

Thus, the Internet, through the listings, serves to heal disorders, more objectively, pathological disorders, as much as to heal the spiritual and emotional disorders, which include "missing" someone or something, and being homesick (immigration).

Virtual terreiros as active media

If the beginning of the twenty-first century marked the intensification of the debate on digital inclusion in Brazil, especially due to the dissemination of the research conducted by Fundação Getúlio Vargas and Comitê de Democratização da Informática[2], for Brazilians living in the U.S., this same period, maybe a milestone concerning the debate about the digital exclusion, but it certainly represented the consolidation of the lists and discussion[3] groups on the Internet about Afro-Brazilian religions. Moderated by Brazilian immigrants, quite apart from the socioeconomic reality in Brazil, such lists suffer striking transformations, from Internet access growing more regular with followers of Afro-Brazilian religions residing in Brazil, due to a so-called democratization of access to worldwide computer network, provided by the phenomenon of the popularization of the Internet in Brazil. And that was caused by an increasing number of Internet providers, market competition, with the reduction of monthly payments; significant sales of conventional computers, provided by the implementation of policies to increase the use of personal computers; the opening of several places with Internet access, including commercial, with the proliferation of Internet cafes in areas inhabited by disadvantaged communities and so on.

The contact between Brazilian migrants settled in the U.S. and in Europe, and customers/followers settled in Brazil depended, at first, almost exclusively on the possibility of Internet access in the workplace. Accordingly, mailing lists in the form of groups, characterized as virtual communities, served the community of followers of Afro-Brazilian religions more effectively than using chats. Chats were widely used at that time and that demanded real-time chat (IRC or instant messengers). Mailing lists enabled participation without the need for immediate response. So, Brazilians that were living in the Brazil would access the lists during commercial hours, and Brazilians that were living in the U.S. would access it throughout the night, when users were sleeping. Because of the difference in time zones, the routing of the messages eventually coincided, giving significant momentum to the lists, when it came to messaging and participatory interaction between users residing in Brazil and users residing in the U.S..

Considering the high percentage of supporters that were unemployed or working for the informal market, Brazilian users

living in Brazil were mostly of privileged classes (economically, socially, and culturally), which, besides the fact that they could easily access the web, had read specialized bibliography (anthropology of Afro-Brazilian religion) and foreign language (more specifically, English) which were fundamental factors for their good performance, regarding their participation in mailing lists at the end of the 90's.

This fact brought to light an important question: even if the community of Brazilian immigrants in the U.S. had not experimented digital exclusion in their lives, outside the virtual environment most of the lists of users were still facing traces of legitimizing exclusionary and discriminatory actions, because of their color, race and ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, and, especially, religion. And that characterized the set of users of the lists as a minority group ideologically and legally vulnerable (in addition, many were illegal immigrants) and, finally, it was a group of excluded people (if not on the digital realm, at least going through the whole process for citizenship and recognition in U.S. reality).

Considering the purchasing power of the members, to the Brazilian religious leaders, the Internet could serve as important means for the growing of customers interested in the provision of magic-religious services. As for the faithful members, the Internet allowed quick contact with the suppliers of such types of services, without any need of going to the real location where the suppliers were. However, there were just a few Brazilian religious entities that had access to such technologies. These few entities, however, even when in higher social classes, found the Internet an important financial resource, some started to make a living exclusively out of it.

The consultation for the cure of afflictions (cure of diseases, caring for health issues, love affairs, unemployment issues, visas, and marriage issues, especially) was almost never witnessed. When a consultation came up, the client was immediately redirected to a private email of some *babalorixá* or *ialorixá*.

As a religion of distress or "practice for the poor"[4], Candomblé found on the Internet effective means for expanding the supply of welfare services offered by the real "yards" (*terreiros*), considering the difficulties for Internet access by members and supporters with less purchasing power, in the first instant.

This fact allows us to categorize the use of mailing lists, concerning African related religions, on the Internet by followers of those religions, whether in Brazil or abroad, as a type of media activism, since they are making use of media resources (in this case, computers with Internet access) to promote some type of social activism, even if camouflaged by the content of messages, which are of religious nature. A good way to illustrate that is the fact that virtual communities can also serve as space for many immigrants (some illegal and almost all of them considered to be minority) share of legal support initiatives on issues relating to discriminatory actions inflicted, beyond the demand and supply of jobs, critical observations on travel (legal and illegal) of obtaining and sending material worship.

For that reason, even if the religious and magical features of the network meetings had been acknowledge, virtual communities were characterized mainly as some type of radical media alternative to the forms of exclusion, which existed and were witnessed in Brazil.

John Downing (2002) depicts the radical alternative media as being the use of resources and media as agents of old and new social movements, articulating and mediating forms of political actions. According to the author, the "radical alternative media" are types of hegemonic counter-information, which intertwine commercialized mass culture, popular culture, local and regional cultures, and cultures of opposition illustrated by graffitism, internet, hip-hop, TV and community radio, street and popular theater, clothing, among others. (cf. DOWNING, 2002). Therefore, whether in Brazil, whether in the U.S., access to computers and to the Internet worked as an effective instrument for the insertion of groups and people without power, privilege or prestige, even in societies where digital inclusion already existed (that is the case of the U.S.), it worked as a counter-hegemonic way of developing social network, both in the "new land" and in the homeland.

The mailing lists and discussion groups on the Internet concerning Afro-Brazilian religions (at first) and (soon after) African-derived religions, which were being moderated from the U.S., ended up gathering a significant number of migrants of other nationalities, supporters and sympathizers of other African-based religious traditions and, not by chance, excluded people as well, such as Cuban, Haitian, Nigerian, Puerto Rican, Trinidadian-Tobaguians, among others. There was also a significant number of African Americans and Europeans that would add to the number of users. Thus, what once seemed to be turning into a place to discuss about Afro-Brazilian religious traditions, eventually became an [African] ecumenical place of discussion, to talk about a diversity of African-derived religious traditions, or Furthermore, it became a place of African-derived traditions, whether religious or not, besides serving as a clinic for the cure of afflictions - including issues around health and body care.

This finding renders the belief that new communication technologies seem to lead to forms of solo sociability,

more individualized, lonely and isolated. On the contrary, as established communication space for citizenship, a plurivocal space that contributes to the emergence of forms of sociability increasingly more community and group oriented, even if the interactions are not made in face to face relations, the manner of public displays of street theater or community TV. Moreover, it also contributes to the democratization of relations among the various actors and agents, both with regard to instances of religious participation on the processes of care, help, and cooperation within the health and well-being of people. The African-ecumenism networking is greater proof of this.

From oral performance to hypertext

Every sort of African-based religion spread around the New World is of oral tradition. Thus, the African-derived religions, no matter what kind, have not seen a book revelation that entails liturgic or sacred texts that determine orthodoxies. For that reason, the mailing lists and discussion groups on the Internet transform religions that have no text in hypertext religions. [Hyper] text works, therefore, as an flocculating element of empiric experiences they have experienced on their homelands. The text is saved with dates, and filed, so that it becomes a historical document for religions practiced in diaspora by populations which are mostly not very familiarized with texts – and that is mainly due to the illiterateness (functional or digital) caused by situations of difference of social classes and social exclusion since the colonialist period. However, in the U.S., besides knowing how to deal with computer and communication technologies, the users are also used to reading and writing texts in their mother tongue, and in the "new" language (once the big majority of the mailing lists receives posts in English).

Accordingly, the mailing lists on the Internet enroll African-derived religions and its users not only onto the technological advances of the world, but especially, onto groups and communities that use media resources to insert themselves in public visibility, as well as to engage in the political public scope.[5]

Some characteristics of the mailing lists diverge from the media activist prospective. To begin with, the fact that they are moderated by someone — which means that being approved as a new member depends upon the rules of the moderator. Besides, it has been noted that new members that have not yet adopted these religions are being halted, which may prove that the real interest is not to reach the outer scope. The themes relate to issues of religious imprint of secrecy and seem to focus on a universe of interest much more micro, particular, than properly macro, and universal.

This fact suggests that the lists' followers do not use the Internet for the development of civic action, neither of the macropolitics, but instead for the development of initiatives that are almost private. Moreover, considering the access to computers and to the Internet as a hegemonic manner of relating to the communication and information tools, its features of counter-hegemony lost their intensity.

Such findings are not determinative, but provocative. The paradox lies in the fact that actions that take place in a nearly private context (even on a network) do not rely on the visibility of the public any less. After all, the micropolitics are structured based on the democratization of information and access to an infinite network of users.[6] In addition, considering that counter-hegemony inhabits in hegemony (the latter is edifying of the other), the use of resources from the media, experienced by privileged groups, is still counter-hegemonic, once it promotes issues related to the universe of migrants seen as people who have peripheral type of culture.[7] Moreover, besides religious affiliation and the fact of being immigrants in the U.S., mailing list users share the experience of being non-whites in a nation that values the WASP[8] culture over other cultures. Therefore, Brazilians, Cubans, Dominicans, Haitians, Trinidadians-Tobaguians, and so many other African-descent immigrants, once they consider themselves constituents of an African Diaspora in the New World, they form, from the moment they migrate to the U.S., an African meta-Diaspora in the New World - in other words, a diaspora of the diaspora. Finally, by leaving the place they live in their home countries, African descent immigrants in the U.S. no longer occupy the periphery of the periphery, they are finally able to live in the periphery of the center. But to feed further provocation, it is worth remembering that if we consider that only those with Internet access can join the virtual terreiros and interact with the web-diaspora, such religions and virtual communities, regarded before as religions and communities of inclusion for all, for the world, become, therefore, religions and communities of exclusion. It also contributes to corroborate this datum, some type of "intellectualization" and the gentrification of the debate in the virtual space, which does not allow participation regardless of the level achieved in the hierarchy of the cult (in some lists, the uninitiated may not have active participation in virtual discussions). Considering the high cost of phone bills, equipment, payment for Internet providers, and the need to learn a foreign language, the composing mailing lists in Brazil (and even abroad) differ, so the users of the real terreiros, because they form a "safe" social network, which has both economic and intellectual (or informational) characteristics.

Cyber informatization of Candomblé

Mailing lists are mostly informal, with questions and answers, such as those discussions that take place after conferences about Orixá religions. On these conferences, congresses, mailing lists, and so on, what happens is that there is a contact network that often take to a real ritual of the religion. [...] Candomblé, terreiro, is all about experiencing things, praying, possessing, feeling axé in your body, having parties, music, cooking, people, gossiping, it is religion... Religion is really about experiencing... It is not about typing... (Obalaná, sic).[9]

Forums, lists, sites and chats about Afro-Brazilian religions (especially Umbanda and Candomblé) are responsible for several things. In other countries, they work as a meeting place for "isolated" Brazilians, who live in cities that are far from the terreiros. In this case they also work as a meeting place for foreigners that miss Brazil and Brazilians, besides being a space for consultation among people that are being consulted[10] and outsiders, and also Brazilian virtual counselor. When I say consultation, I mean every type of magic-religious service provided, including the cure for diseases through electronic-digital prescriptions (on line, virtually) or possibly a real meeting with the counselor. Moreover, regarding health care, once someone is motivated to search for care, they find it faster and they do not have to go far, because the Internet, which is an important ally, has it right there.

In Brazil, it will be characterized as a space for discussion on liturgical knowledge, forbidden in the objective reality of the terraces, as well as serve to the same people that search for the cure of afflictions, in the case of foreigners.

Regarding those who are looking for the cure of afflictions, normally, they will have the counselor tell them that they should talk in PVT (private). That way, issues related to the intimacy of the client and particularities of the counselor are kept secret, for instance, the prescription given to solve the case, which may contain the name of herbs for baths, types of animals in case of sacrifices, food preparation, and its respective cooking material, among others.

And if the solution for the problem is not available in the list, even in PVT, the Internet is frequently configured as the means of distribution over the meeting in the real terreiro (physical).

Therefore, the network also works as a place where people can meet as an extension for the terreiros (the online meeting, off terreiro, even if virtually) which in a even more remote past was destined to the Afro-Brazilian brotherhoods and fellowships.

Thus, the absence of real communities (in terreiros) seems to be the biggest motivation for the creation of virtual communities (of online terreiros, or web terreiros). But it just seems, since Brazilian people's interest in the virtual world relates more to the democratization of information regarding the secrets of the cult, and providing and demanding magic-religious services, besides the interest in resources and technological innovations, which, properly, the need to have people coming to religious settings — there is, perhaps, a greater demand of "gringos and outsiders, than actually Brazilians who live in Brazil. Because, actually, on the dates scheduled for the meetings of users in discussion forums, in honor to some divinity (orixá), only a few users entered in the discussion groups. During the time of the research, there were two great online parties of the forum that had the greatest number of visitations and people participating: the Xangô[11] party, called *Fogueira de Xangô*, the party to honor Omolu[12], called *Olubajé* (the party for the cure of the "doctor of the poor"). The idea was to have the participants contribute with files of images (photos and videos) and audio (songs). Besides that, a great number of gifs (still images and animations) was posted. Many links about the honored divinities were broadcast. Many users talked about their life experiences in real Brazilian terreiros, at the time of the parties in honor to the divinities on the list. Even so, only a few participated, compared to the number of people that were on that virtual community.

It is important to note that in Brazil the terreiros are called communities, terreiro-communities, *ilê egbé*. That is why virtual communities, besides contributing to reducing the space between people (and their feeling of homesickness), provide a close relation of the religious space, even virtually, for "isolated" users, far from the real terreiros (especially those living abroad). Virtual communities take on the contemporary role of being that space, that used to be the space reserved for academic research (anthropology of Afro-Brazilian religions, especially), even today, fairly frequent among followers of religions of African origin. If the relevant literature and audiovisual resources allowed the exchange of information reduced to the sender-message-receiver unilateral classical logic, discussion forums will allow the emergence of more effective participatory debate, which will substitute the conference online, place of various lifestyles, worldviews, forms of religion and cultures. Hence a plurivocal space of circularity.

The discussions deal with a variety of issues related to religious life or not. The dynamics of the forums is divided into: tasks, messages, and discussions. Tasks are issues to

be surveyed for one month, and shared among all users in the forum. In forum D, one of the tasks was about the characterization of the orixá Ogum in Angola, Jeje and Ketu. The discussions are posts regarding a particular subject, that multiply in in replies, indefinitely, but that do not last more than a month. In forum A, characterizations of Aganju were discussed in the Brazilian Candomblé, in the Nigerian worship, and in the American and Cuban Lukumi. Messages relate to more general issues: birthdays, service cards, issues about spirituality, use of software, comments, and invitations to Candomblé parties, etc. Finally, there are messages of people looking for help, always related to providing and demanding magic-religious services.

Another important point concerns the level of the debates on mailing lists. This fact is noted in the discussion about themes that should be kept secret, they refer to secrets, prohibitions, orthodoxies of the cult, to the *orôs*. The recurrence to the bibliography (important instrumentation for gathering followers) and audiovisual material are continuously being used and constantly updated. There are many discussions and posts that allude to a particular book, film or video.

In addition to the insiders, we find these spaces a significant number of people interested in the subject, and supporters of Afro-Brazilian religions, who use the lists to choose the house they should attend (in which they want to start), to clarify questions about rules of behavior (which shall be entitled "redetiquetas" or "netetiquette" of the saint)[13], and even some "fundamentals" (worship orthodoxies and liturgies). And the forum is intended for those clients.

[14]In the lists, they even try to keep some rules of behavior, especially those related to religious hierarchies (to talk or not about such and such matter, *orô* and *ewò*[14]; forum for the uninitiated; forum for beginners etc...) However, the trend of cyber culture to allow its participants to assume various roles dismantles, paradoxically, the boundaries between public and private, secretive and democratized, hierarchy and equality, online and offline. After all, these roles have, in advance, two types of identification: religious belonging and virtual contact.

It is interesting, therefore, to understand the way the virtual space will create new social networks among followers of Candomblé and African-derived religions, both in Brazil and abroad, uniting world views, lifestyles, different cultures, by creating a cyber network for cyber "people of saint". After all, the only common bonds of the surfers is the accessibility to Internet, and their connection to African religions in diaspora.

Invitations are constantly being sent to orixá parties in Brazil or in the U.S., and everyone in the forum are welcome to go and, therefore, they have the opportunity to meet some place other then virtually. There was also an offline meeting for a certain month of the year (face to face meeting) for users of a forum from the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro. Foreigners, of course, planned an international offline meeting (face to face).

Many foreigners have heard about the orixá religion, by going to African dancing classes, capoeira, or even watching videos or movies about it. Coming to Brazil and spending money with traveling and buying the material they will need for the rituals does not seem to be a problem at all for these foreigners, and that depicts the social and economic profile of the people that are building this cyber network of the Candomblé, both inside and outside of Brazil. After all, as previously mentioned, only those with access to new technologies of communication, the global network of computers, can participate in such communities. This is clarified by the users of the lists, which usually differ from other fans by their access / non-access to information technology, realizing that there is part of an elite and privileged category — thus constituting a differentiator that is not necessarily decoupled from the relations of race and class that solidify social relations in Brazil. Therefore, cyber informatization of African-Brazilian religions is closely related to intellectual training, to the occupation of the supporters (who already had contact with many technological innovations in their workplace), but also the race and class inequality issues that feed, excessively, the social, cultural, political, and economical reality – key to migration flow. It is also worth noting that, for those who are abroad, particularly in the United States, the instrumentalization of cybernetics, and, therefore, the use of the network, becomes almost an essential instrument of socialization. Another fact is that the cost of phone bills and providers there are infinitely smaller than in Brazil, besides the fact that in any office you can find equipment available for consultation.

Obaloná is a good example for that. She began in Brazil in 1981, then moved on that same decade to the U.S., looking for better job opportunities. Obaloná, after some years living in the U.S., starts to search for her Brazilian babalorixá[15], for him to complete her obligations.[16] After returning from the babalorixá's, Obaloná starts to assist Brazilian friends and foreigners that have recently started with it, in nearby cities. At least once a month, these friends will start to meet at Obaloná's place to have small rituals. She will choose them from her circle of friends (real one) and computer as well, friends from the forum (that used to be only virtual friends).

> *When I lived in Sao Jose, I used to help Mãe Obaloná, and I also participated in boris, parties, meetings, etc. She moved, and we as well, to the south of California. I*

miss the terreiro parties, but the routine at the terreiros, the talks, the kitchen, that I miss the most. (Nananci, sic).[17]

Internet helps soften that feeling of missing all of that. Nananci is one of the users of the forum that is moderated by Obaloná. This forum has many Brazilians that are living in the U.S., and some foreigners that have started other forms of African-derived worships, and that situation generally raises issues concerning the comparison between Candomblé and these other religions. Obaloná also invites some of the sons and the clients from this same forum. Obaloná does not have an open place for that. She uses her house as much as she can: doing cowrie shells consullations and small ritual obligations, but just "does not iniciate" (sic)[18] followers. However[19], she has a *mariwô*[20] on her door and a permanent calendar of parties etc. — something like a real terreiro. She has done a *xirê*[21] and a gift to Iemanjá, touched by an ogã of a traditional Brazilian terreiro, who is the former drummer of Oba-Oba[22], and because of the concerts, he ended up going to the U.S. to live. Obaloná spends good part of her time in the U.S. on the Internet; researching about the religion, and managing and moderating the mailing lists. She also does cowrie shells[23], and she has to travel around the U.S. for that. She has been all over the country because there are lot of *boris* there, gifts (food, flowers, sacrifice offerings for the divinities) and *ebós* (body cleaning). Obaloná is requested for consultations with cowrie shells, because she became well-known by the Brazilian community that migrated there, especially by the people that participate on the forum.

Obaloná is not an isolated case of Brazilian counselors that provide magic-religious services abroad.[24] The thesis on which this text is based upon, I opted to call them "traveled ones", because they do not necessarily live abroad. In most of the cases, they traveled regularly abroad, but were living in Brazil. I called the Brazilian migrants "travelers". Those were the ones that lived abroad and were searching for these services on the Internet.

Both the Brazilian counselors living in the U.S. or Europe, and the Brazilian counselors living in Brazil have traveling reports that are very similar.

It takes at least two luggages: one with personal items, and another with material used for the practice of rituals - for instance, clothing, herbs, cooking condiments, tools, images and, of course, cowrie shells. The consultation takes place in an accessible apartment or house, where the trip sponsor should able to pay for it. Usually, the client hosts the counselor, and is responsible for telling other people ("sons" and friends that might be interested in the services) about the passage and staying of the counselor. If the plan is to travel to one single city, then the "sons" or clients that may be interested in the services will have to go to that particular city for the consultation. However, it might happen that in a single trip the babalorixá or ialorixá[25] travels to more than one country. Some may cross to five different countries in one trip. It will depend on the expenses or on the financial return that will occur (for the displacement to happen). The issues of those that search for these services are similar to those of the Brazilian clients: love, work, health — those are the most common cases. There are also new demands for entry which, not coincidentally, have also been witnessed in Brazil. Among these, we can cite: the reunion with blackness and the search to find the cure for existential, and psychoanalytic issues — which are not so common, trying to resolve the afflictions which are more materialistic.

In case you need to perform a "more serious" obligation, which is called "making the saint" (iniciate), the asker has to travel to Brazil, since in Europe "has no appropriate place for that requirement" [according to babalorixa from Pernambuco, sic.].

Pamella's[26] case can serve as illustration for that. She is Italian and interested in Afro-Brazilian religions. Pamella has been to Brazil twice. Every time she went, she spent more than a year conducting interviews, filming, photographing, recording, collecting material for video production (documentaries for German TV, and Italian TV) and the publication of articles in Italian newspapers and magazines (one of her articles can be found in a Brazilian scientific journal). She also conducted many interviews for Italian radio stations. In summary, she collected a significant amount of material about the different manifestations of the Brazilian culture, among which, the Candomble. The last time she went to Brazil, she had a *bori* in a traditional terreiro in Rio. Pamella has plenty of faith on the orixa religion. She was extremely weak, but believed that the orixas would be able to cure her. Pamella was indeed very mystic, even before she came to Brazil" (sic). In Italy, she had already made some inroads into the rituals of shamanism. When she returned to Italy, she took an Ogum bead[27] thread with her, which she had gotten while staying in the terreiro for the *bori*. One day her bead thread broke open. The following day, she was walking down a street in Rome, when she noticed a bead thread on the ground, it had been dedicated to that same orixa, and it looked just as hers. For Pamella, that was the sign she needed. She does not know why, but she misses Brazil a lot. She thinks that she has found something here that she might have lived in the past. Part of this missing feeling is related to her connection

with Candomble. She misses Candomble, and she knows that in order to have it back she has to return to Brazil. But she does not have the money for that yet, that is why she started to go to a terreiro in Rome. This terreiro was created by a Brazilian babalorixá that travels to Italy twice a year. In Brazil, babalorixá lives close to Belo Horizonte in Minas Gerais. The terreiro is 20km far from Rome. It is a mix of Angola and Umbanda. Another Brazilian who assists on the rituals, a kind of of *pai-pequeno* in the *terreiro*, also works with shaman rituals. When they return to Brazil, the terreiro is taken care by an Italian girl, daughter of Oxum, who was initiated eight years ago by them, and according to Pamella she is being prepared to become a mãe-de-santo. This terreiro has many young people. The three of them work together, "mixing knowledge and experiences". They believe that Umbanda is closer to solving materialistic issues compared to Candomble. Therefore, the strength of the *terreiro* is when the Umbanda sessions take place. Pamella does the fruit offerings in the terreiro, she takes special baths and feels like she did "after the bori in Brazil". "I heard Brazilian voices and singing and drums. I was thrilled that most of them are Italian. I met one single Brazilian woman there, and another one in Chile"[sic.]

Before coming to Brazil, Pamella had visited another Brazilian terreiro in Italy — some type of Brazilian association managed by a Brazilian woman. Pamella did not really like the works she witnessed there. On a Afro-Brazilian cult material store called Bagunça, Pamella met other people that shared the same opinion about the cults of that Brazilian woman. However, she felt well in the terreiro from Minas Gerais in Italy. A little after a year going to the *terreiro*, the babalorixá suggested that Pamella should go through a "more serious" ceremony to strengthen her connection with the *terreiro*, but she felt threatened by his suggestion. She felt that such situation could break her relation with the terreiro from Rio; a place that, according to her, had given her much comfort and easiness. For that reason, she decided not to accept his suggestion. And Pamella keeps on being just a client at the *terreiro* in Italy.

Pamella is not interested in Africa, nor in African-Brazilian relations. Her connection with religion is exclusively about the magic and spiritual acts that Afro-Brazilian religions provide. However, the Brazilian way of life, that in Pamella's opinion can be found in terreiros, serves as motivation for her to continue attending Candomblé outside Brazil. For Pamella, being Brazilian is a synonym for joy, real friendship, and energy — things that for a weak, very sensitive, and emotionally afflicted woman seem to be the great cure after all.

In two investigated forums, there were issues regarding what kind of discussions should be carried on. The first moderator posted that this concern was not so relevant, once the Internet was now able to connect people from several nations and terreiros, and it provided the opportunity to avoid future controversies about things "of saint". It is a space to learn in a group. The moderator reminded us that in the cyber network no one talked about fundamental issues.[28] They only talked about routines, every day life in the terreiros, religious things, common and unusual habits that are practiced without a purpose. Right there in the forums, she believes that people get answers, and that in the terreiros these answers are not always there.

It seems like the saving of time ou learning, and ou the resolution of materialistic and symbolic issues are the biggest motivations for the existence of forums. In terreiros, learning seems to be strictly related to experiencing, being inside a *"casa de santo"*[29], which could take long years of participation. In the cyber space, learning is immediate, it saves time and you do not have to displace yourself anywhere, sometimes the terreiro is too far to go. The same may be observed in relation to the services provided, when problems are solved through the Internet, it happens almost instantly. However, the moderator is also an *ialorixá*[30], who seems to be replacing the real ialorixá of the users by a virtual *ialorixá*.

If time and space are radically abolished in the issues of learning and assisting, on the contrary, the space of the terreiro (real life) seems to not have been abolished in the cyber space (virtual). After all, the invitations to real parties and to cowrie shell practices are still very common posts, which proves this is right.

The diaspora of the plugged diaspora

Even though issues related to racial issues are not the highlight of the lists, the fact that there they are discussed regarding the issues of African religions practiced in Brazil and abroad, they always welcome discussions about a so-called "rescue" of blackness or Africanness by the insertion of religion, which creates a network of solidarity and common units (communities) between fans and supporters scattered throughout the New World and the "new land". This fact proves that, in addition to the demand for providing magic-religious services, the lists work as agglutinating supporters concerned about issues of identity, preservation of liturgical tradition of worship, or to maintain the search for Africanism as well as, blackness, through the worship of African divinities. After all, even the search for healing through the magical and religious

experiences of African origin contributes to the promotion of lifestyles and worldviews, which will set the field of African descent identity, more precisely, African-Brazilian. After all, the terreiros work as

> traditional forms of mutual assistance, which in Brazil have contributed, through the exercise of religious and faith, for the questioning between traditional and modern forms of cooperation, and to the decimation of the afflictions and distress that characterize the philanthropic and nonprofit organizations for, or to, the Brazilian popular classes through magic and religious services. (FREITAS, 2009).

Rubem César Fernandes (2002) reminds us that healers and spiritual counselors, syndicates, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), associations etc.. constitutes a "reserve of social action parallel to existing institutions typically modern" (FERNANDES, 2002). Therefore it focuses on the need not to overlook the importance of these participants and institutions for the characterization of a specific cultural structure, outside the official abstract of the law, acquire the moral authority to compose an ideal of citizenship that arises above the legal connotations and policies of the universal language of citizenship. (cf. FERNANDES, 2002).

In this sense, the Internet works as an important platform for building a network of political strength, more specifically related to social movements, civil rights, and citizenship issues; it allows the building of a network directly related to the promotion of cultural expressions and preservation of materialistic and symbolic African-Brazilian heritage, often directly associated with other forms of African-descent in diaspora; it also helps save time and avoid going out to far terreiros (for both Brazilian migrants and Brazilians living in regions that are distant from the terreiros), annulling the geographic and spiritual distance; it acts as a venue for exchanging experiences and knowledge, in most cases barred to followers in the terreiros, because of confidentiality, secrecy, hierarchy and, the manner on which knowledge is passed on (in this case orally-centered, instead of on writing); and, finally, the Internet also serves as a clinic for the helpless, considering that the lists are sought by both lower and higher social classes, it has the same characteristics of the real terreiro, a space for healing the afflictions, "hospital", "clinic", that shelters people with distressing disorders — which allowed the Afro-Brazilian religious expression names like tambor-de-cura (healing drum) and pajelança (in clear reference to cure), and appoint authorities such as Seu Sete Sara Cura, Caboclo Cura Demanda etc.

Estélio Gomberg, when he analyzed the use of therapeutical resources by followers and clients of a northeastern terreiro in Brazil, recalls that Candomblé

> concerns the individuals pursuit in a comprehensive manner, allowing not only that someone will take care of their health / disease issues, but also might reconfigure themselves as individuals, through their integration into a new reality […]. By entering this religious system of therapy, the subject will try and confront a series of innovations in their daily lives, broadening their views and perceptions about the causalities of the disease, which will be reflected in the consideration that this will have on the relationship between "body/mind/ deity," thus opening a new perspective of how it relates to the various options of treatment available to individuals. (GOMBERG, 2008).

Finally, it is important to recall that at the time of the research, voice programs did not exist, and that the speed of the connections did not allow voice data exchange in real time. Therefore, the written text (digital) was greatly used in such communication. A non-written religion was being transformed in a written religion, a religion that does not have a revealing book in a projecting religion.

Significant changes happened from the period of the research up to today. At that time social networks did not exist yet; however, nowadays, they are the most popular applications used especially in Brazil. Rather, digital communication in collectivity worked through the mailing lists and chats, nowadays, especially among followers in Brazil, to social networks like Orkut, presented as an important tool to make festivity arrangements, for magic-religious services (cowrie shell game, ebós etc..), disclose events that have already occurred (photographs and videos of celebrations in honor of the divinities), turn myths concerning the gods public, and locate *terreiros* and counselors.

The advertising and publicity of magic-religious services, even today, are not common on the Internet as opposed to the production of printed materials (magazine, newspapers, pamphlets and posters) where this type of exposure and publicity has grown.

It is also important to recall the rescue of blackness or Africanness provided by the web between Brazilians and foreigners (mostly black and mestizos) who consider the lists as effective tools to achieve an identity encounter, and marking the difference in the "welcoming" new land — which, in times of globalization, appears to be at the top of the debate. A feeling of rescuing blackness and africanness that turns Brazil into Africa.

A new religious expression is then created. No more an African-Brazilian, but instead, an Afro-Brazilian-diasporic (or universal), which shows the construction of a new network of sociability articulated among foreigners (Americans and Europeans) and minorities (Brazilians, Cubans, Nigerians, Haitians ...), African-Brazilian religions and african-derived religions (Candomble, Umbanda, Lukumi) santeria, palo, Voodoo, Ifa, center vs. periphery, global vs. local, media and identity, tradition and modernity, new technologies of communication and transnationalism.

Thus, the dynamics of ecumenism that has oscillated between African-derived religions in Brazil, United States, and Europe through the web, begin to be prepared, even before the virtual space, in the space of the terreiro itself. A real space, it is.

Notes

1. I will use the abbreviation U.S. for United States of America. Since the studied lists were moderated mostly from the U.S., I gave emphasis to the American case to depict an overseas illustration for this text.

2. Map of Digital Exclusion Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas (Getúlio Vargas Foundation) and Comitê de Democratização da Informática (Computer Democratization Committee). April 2003.

3. Terms such as lists, forums, and groups of discussion on the Internet, as well as, communities, and virtual groups, are shown indistinctly in this present work. While acknowledging the specificity of each of these terms, and also considering that there is a common motivation of bringing people that are geographically and physically distant close together, with exceptionally common interests, which can be shared through messages via email, I give up the particularities of each term. I must stress also that on the first two years of research (1998-2000) eGroups was the most popular email list management web site on the Internet. Right after that, new management sites came up (for instance, Grupos.com.br). Finally, after being bought by Yahoo, eGroups became part of Yahoo.com.br.

4. Regarding the concept of religion for the poor, see Pierucci and Prandi, 1996; Fernandes, 2002; Ortiz, 1978.

5. Regarding the concept of the political public scope, refer to Habermas, 2003.

6. Cf. Foucault, 2008.

7. Cf. Gramsci, 1999.

8. White, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant.

9. Interview with mailing list moderator on the Internet.

10. Pai-de-santo or mãe-de-santo, babalorixá or ialorixá.

11. African Divinity.

12. Likewise.

13. The terms "do santo" or "de santo" (of saint) is commonly used by the followers of African-based religions. Thus, they have been commonly named "people of saint" by the Afro-Brazilian religion anthropology. "People of saint" is, however, a native category.

14. Secret and forbidden rituals, respectively.

15. Priest.

16. Religious Rituals.

17. Interview with mailing list moderator on the Internet.

18. The iniciation known as "workmanship of saint", which is a very complex ritual, and it also demands that one stays almost three months in the terreiro.

19. Jar with water. Insignia of a terreiro.

20. Leaf from an African Oil Palm (Elaeis guineensis) It is placed on the door to avoid the entrance of dead spirits. It is also one of the insignias of the Candomble terreiro.

21. Parties with atabaque drums.

22. House for shows, that belongs to the radio announcer Oswaldo Sargentelli, who was very popular in the 70's and 80's.

23. Oracle. Guseeing game.

24. I decided to report only Obaloná's experience, because I had limited format space for this article. To learn more about other experiences, refer to FREITAS, 2002.

25. Mãe-de-santo.

26. I decided to report Pamella's experience for the same reason I have mentioned before about choosing only one counselor's experience to report. To learn more about other experiences, refer to FREITAS, 2002.

27. Collars, beads on a thread.

28. Native term to designate the secret part, the secret, of some religious ritual.

29. Another term for terreiro, the church.

30. Priestess.

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