

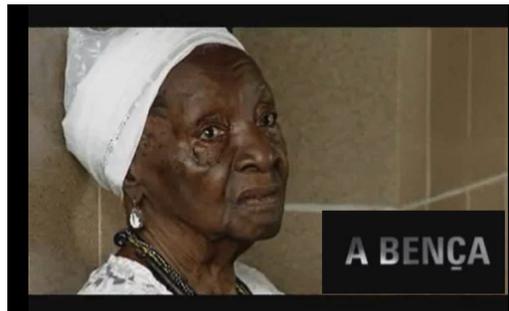
New writings and mediations in health

Life line

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Synopsis

Mother Enedina has just lost her grandson she lived with and now faces the challenge of leaving her house. Mother Maria, 74, divides her attention amongst the activities of raising “iaôs” – beginners in the orisha’s cult initiation – at the Axé Opo Afonjá’s terreiro (Candomble yard), and the life in her community, while saint-mother Mimi’s motto is to live for the Candomble.

The documentary “A Bença”, features the day-to-day of these three Candomble ladies living in Baixada Fluminense, Rio de Janeiro, dealing with themes as aging, the passing time, mutual respect between young and elder people inside Candomble and the belief in Orishas’ worship.

Cast and Crew Credits

Running Time: 52 min.

Release Date: 2007

Direction: Tarcísio Lara Puiati

Co-production: Tarcísio Lara Puiati / Aquarela Filmes / TVE Brasil / Fundação Padre Anchieta - TV Cultura

The day-to-day affairs of three Candomble ladies at Baixada Fluminense, in Rio de Janeiro, are featured in this co-production by Aquarela Filmes / TVE Brasil and Fundação Padre Anchieta - TV Cultura, part of DOCTV III series. The title, an indication of respect, gratitude and hierarchy, refers to the greeting among Candomble priests, priestesses and initiates. The life stories intertwine subjects like matriarchate, dedication, aging, mutual respect and Orisha faith. The characters are old black women from poor neighborhoods. Two of them are over 70 years old and the oldest one is 90 years old. Despite the fact that their age and skin color is

rarely seen on TV, advertisements or movies, their personal and religious paths reveal part of the Candomble history in Rio and depict the important role played by black women in the Brazilian cultural formation.

The Movie

“The idea of telling the story of the Candomble priestesses came out of the desire of knowing the reality of third age women”, says Tarcísio Puiati. He wanted to understand a little of the world they live in, their day-to-day, the way they see the world and existence. The crew visited the sacred

ritual sites during pre-production in search of getting closer to the characters and that interaction can be noticed in the final result. The images bring out a different look at old black women. The narrative type chooses ways of saying, showing and seducing through close-ups of details such as beads and decorations on clothing, faces, working hands and religious symbols inside and outside the sacred ritual sites.

The film presents a collection of simple and discreet images. The camera explores the richness of details in the characters' day-to-day as they are at home, at the doctor's office or at the ritual communities, where sacred and profane moments are shown and through which Orisha faith develops. To the Candomble tradition, day-to-day is the "instance of construction and legitimation of the sacred" (JOAQUIM, 2001)¹, whereby religiosity and connection with the invisible spiritual forces is configured. Ritualistic moments such as those resulting in trance are the climax of this re-ligare. The Orisha cosmogony is connected to elements like earth, fire, wind and air. Nature imposes itself on the rites: that is its essence. The cosmos unites to the world, represented by the sacred forces materialized through ritualistic. A comparison that can be observed in performing daily tasks where the sacred manifests through actions. Spiritual education is present in tasks such as cleaning bathrooms and bedrooms, learning prayers and making offerings to the saints. Day-to-day activities at the ritual site are essential to the educational process of Candomble initiates, specially *iaôs*². It is the place and the social gathering where teaching and learning occur. What we want to emphasize is that the ancestral powers which are manifested at the rites' sacrality conduct life experiences which are configured in and by religion.

To the sound of Gal Costa's beautiful song *Voyeur*, the camera travels everywhere inside the ritual sites; presents important suburban references, such as the train stations; reveals the colors of *Mercadão de Madureira*, a marketplace where initiates stop by for supplies, costumes and material for the offerings. *Baixada Fluminense* is looked from a different angle, apart from the widespread media focus on poverty, violence, drug traffic and lack of material and cultural resources.

"In a sense, every image is a narrative" (BARTHERS, 1990)³. The author evidences the idea of transposing the frozen moment to the field of representation, where history establishes itself. Visual poetics is explored despite of the fact that the film is a documentary that delivers a type of reality. What stands out is the duplicity of documental *versus* artistic. The director chose not to tell the same old story about

Candomble initiates, black women and people from the poor areas of the town. Instead, he tried to present Candomble and demystify religious preconceptions, showing the young and the old in mutual respect coexistence, which is predetermined by religious hierarchy. According to millennial traditions such as **african-origin religions**, elders occupy a privileged position, since time has given them a lot of experience, a respected and revered sort of wisdom.

The director focuses on the cultural richness in poor neighborhoods, where the ritual sites are, and reveals colors, smells and nuances of a lifestyle different from that seen on TV and advertisements, where typical urban medium-class white ladies are the main characters. Old black women are simply not seen and don't exist in social representations about the Brazilian population. They suffer from prejudice for being women, black, poor and old. A blend of gender, race, class and age discrimination. An invisibility that is not compatible to their remarkable participation in the constitution of private and public life in this country⁴.

This choice of esthetical approach, illustrated by a verse in the conducting soundtrack, "I discover beauty as I lay my eyes on you", makes us walk through different territories, different coexistence and aging patterns, different ways of constituting daily life. We follow majestic hands that dignify dance, braid hair, cuddle, cook for the saints and for the people, impose respect, request the blessing and respond.

Who are they? Unique mothers

Mother Enedina is an *equede* Omulu's and responsible for making the clothes and accessories for the *iaôs*, an assignment which grants her prestige in the religious community. She had only one carnal daughter, who has already passed away and gave her three grandchildren. She is very sad because her youngest grandson was murdered and, besides that, a glaucoma has also worsened her health conditions. It was really hard for that small-eyed old lady from Bahia, who had migrated to Rio de Janeiro on a several-day boat trip. Her advanced age did not prevent her from walking by herself, drinking a glass of beer and graciously dancing *samba-de-roda*. What hurts the most is having to leave the apartment where she lived with her family for many years. Due to the health problems, she is going to live with her oldest granddaughter.

Mother Mimi is 75 years old and contemporary with *Seo Caboclo*, who has already passed away. According to the director, "her drive and spontaneity were decisive for her selection". Mother Maria, 74, is a daughter of *Iansan* and

a member of Axé Opô Afonjá. As an ialorixá she dedicates her life to creating iaôs and to the religious site community.

They are not only mothers of Candomblé, but also “national mothers”. Although black women don’t have to “breastfeed” her master’s children anymore, as it was during slavery years, they are still responsible for the housework at urban medium-class homes. They occupy most of the positions as maids, cleaners, cooks and baby sitters. That means subalternity in the class-conscious Brazilian society. Women’s participation differs in Candomblé, where their assignments dignify their self-esteem. They are ialorixás, equedes, mães criadeiras, they sew costumes, cook for the saint. Those women hold positions of religious power, they are “ialorixás, the oldest initiates, who are responsible for mediating sacred and profane⁵”.

Everything suggests that the director was able to fulfill his initial curiosity. As he wanted, he “listened to the voice of experience”, looking at unknown, unveiled bodies, which were revealed by and for the camera. An exchange made possible by those women’s wish of showing their stories and experiences. Prayers, chants, alchemies and myths are stored in their memories. Oral culture is the key of knowledge transmission. When they die, part of Candomblé’s history and memory are also gone. For that reason it is important to hear them and show them, so they can be heard beyond religious sites and become part of religion’s memory and, mostly, part of the country’s history and culture.

Mãe Enedina left Ayiê (Earth) and went to Orum (Heaven) before the movie was released. Maybe she did not (or did) know that would be her last mission: to tell her story, talk about her life and express the strength women, specially the old. Aging (carnal or religious) is a symbol of wisdom here. The oldest members of a community keep memory and tradition alive. All the respect and dignity conquered by these ladies are revealed in the consecration of a period of time on earth, a period of time in religion, a posterior astral time. Time is the master.

The movie was a well deserved gift for Mother Enedina, for Candomblé initiates and admirers and, certainly, for the director, who must have fulfilled his initial curiosity. He met old ladies who happily revive life through the reverence for the Orishas and the credit and respect obtained in the Candomblé tradition. Besides that, his documentary shows another side of the story of African-Brazilian religiosity, giving voice to women living in the present with a part of the past in their memories. Lessons that will be kept for the future. If life was hard on one side⁶, it was rewarding on the other. Up in Orum, that shy, sweet and perseverant lady must be very happy for all the acknowledgment.

Notes

1. JOAQUIM, Maria Salete. O papel da liderança religiosa feminina na construção da identidade negra. Rio de Janeiro: Pallas; São Paulo: Educ, 2001.
2. Initiates having less than seven years of initiation time.
3. BARTHES, R. O Óbvio e o Obtuso: ensaios críticos III. Trad. Lea Novaes. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1990.
4. Black women were the first to go out on the streets to sell goods, fabric and food, in a period of time when white women used to stay indoors, never exposing themselves out on the streets.
5. Idem.
6. Lots of poor black women mourn their dead children, grandchildren, nephews and husbands, all murdered in consequence of violence, which mostly affects young black men between ages 16 –24.

References

- BARTHES, R. **O óbvio e o obtuso: ensaios críticos III**. Tradução Lea Novaes. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1990.
- JOAQUIM, M.S. **O papel da liderança religiosa feminina na construção da identidade negra**. Rio de Janeiro: Pallas, 2001.