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The market: A dive into the Afro-Brazilian sacred universe?¹

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Abstract

Candomblé terreiros (plots of land) are intended as spaces to preserve African religious traditions within the Brazilian diaspora. In addition, they serve as multifunctional spaces for the purpose of integrating, autonomously or by means of governmental or international partnerships, the agenda of social actions aimed at developing a model of health care structured on values and norms. The aim is to rationally engage the conventional medical system, thus setting the stage for health care possibilities based on different cultural models. This model is associated with an understanding of the knowledge and practices developed and performed by Candomblé as a therapeutic system that might enable collaboration with local health systems and their specificities based on the system's significant use of plants for therapeutic purposes. Therefore, these religious therapeutic practices are addressed as a mechanism for opening communication channels with social spaces, particularly the public market, which is the preferred locus for Afro-Brazilian sacred consumption and presents an issue related to public policies and programs for natural and complementary medicines and/or medicinal plants and phytotherapeutic agents.

Keywords: Candomblé; public market; phytotherapy; health-disease process

According to Bastide (2001), Costa and Silva (1992), Dos Santos (1988) and Verger (1981), Candomblé can be defined as a religious manifestation resulting from the re-elaboration of several worldviews arising from multiple African ethnic groups brought to Brazil since the 16th century. This designation was applied to organized and spatially defined groups only in the 18th century. However, Verger (1981) found that the earliest mentions of African religions in Brazil appear in annotations made by members of the Inquisition in 1760.

According to Dos Santos (1988), the first group of slaves from the Ketu area probably arrived in Brazil circa 1789. This statement should be taken with a degree of caution because more rigorous corroboration is hindered by the scarcity of official materials. This large group of slaves was native to a vast area and became known in Brazil by the generic name *nagô*. The *nagô* preserved a tradition with a richness derived from the individual cultures of the many kingdoms from which these people came.

On the predominance of *nagô* rites in Candomblés at Salvador, Pierre Verger (1987, 1980, p. 67) observes that

[...] the reasons for this spiritual predominance might be explained by the wars between the Dahomey and Ioruba and the consequent weakening of the latter at the beginning of the 19th century. The city of Ketu, more exposed to Dahomey attacks, touched and devastated by successive wars, watched its residents be sold to slave traders of the Coast. Many priests of orixás were, thus, taken from this area to Bahia, even when the traffic of slaves had virtually ended. Elements from the various Ioruba and Dahomey nations close to Ketu, who were a minority in Bahia, joined these newcomers who exhibited a deeper knowledge of the rituals of their religion. For this reason, the word ketu acquired the meaning of reunion, agreement, group, among the descendants of Africans in Bahia.

The latest historiography indicates a date before 1830 (LIMA, 1977; DOS SANTOS, 1988; VERGER, 1981) for the foundation of the first Candomblé *terreiro* in Brazil, *Ilê Axé Yjá Nassô Oká* or *Terreiro da Casa Branca do Engenho Velho* (Yard of the White House of the Old Mill), located in the city of Salvador. According to SILVEIRA (2006, p. 395), the first house devoted to the cult of *orixás* (African gods) might have been the one attributed to the establishment and settlement of the *orixá Odé Oni Popô* in 1789 by Iyá Adetá, who was from the city of Ketu, in his home in the Barroquinha neighborhood after his enfranchisement. This might explain why all self-denominated *jeje-nagô* Candomblés attributed the supreme dignity of "the king of Ketu" or "the king of the Ketu nation" to the *orixá* Oxóssi. This title is a clear allusion to the fact that, in addition to being the first *orixá* established in Brazil, the new land where Iyá Adetá was to be revered was dedicated to him.

According to Verger (1981), a Brazilian Candomblé developed from several "energetic and willful" women from Ketu, enfranchised slaves who "had the initiative to create a candomblé *terreiro* called Yjá Omi Axé Airá Intilé" (SILVEIRA, 2006, p. 391). This *terreiro* was later known as *Ilê Axé Yjá Akalá Magbô* before acquiring its final name, *Ilê Axé Yjá Nassô Oká*, when it was moved from Barroquinha to Vasco da Gama Avenue, where it remains to this day.

Considered the birthplace of Bahian Candomblé, *Ilê Axé Yjá Nassô Oká* also gave rise to two other seminal *terreiros*, which thus share its supremacy in the *jeje-nagô* cult: *Yjá Omi Axé Yiamasé*, founded by Maria Júlia da Conceição in 1849, which became more widely known as *Candomblé do Gantois*, and *Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá*, founded by Eugênia Ana dos Santos, or Mãe (Mother) Aninha, in 1910; both *terreiros* resulted from schisms caused by fights over succession.

Although it is not mentioned in the latest studies, *Ilê Maro Iyaláji* or *Alaketu*, located in Matatu de Brotas, is not linked to the houses mentioned above but played a significant role in the foundation of traditional *terreiros*. According to extant documents, *Ilê Maro Iyaláji* was founded in 1867. However, Lima (1977) claimed that an oral tradition dated it to "more than two hundred years ago." This date was later corroborated by Silveira (2006), who indicated a date near the turn of the 18th century for its actual foundation and 1867 as the year when the property deeds were registered.

Therefore, *terreiros* (plots of land), *roças* (fields), *abaçás* (temples) and *casas de santo* (saint's houses) are all common names for the spaces and groups that revere African gods, variously called *Orixás*, *Inquices* or *Voduns*, and have historically represented spaces of cultural resistance and social cohesion. They have been simultaneously incubators of insurrections and uprisings; many rebellions occurring in the 19th

century were reportedly associated with the faith professed by the rebels (RODRIGUES, 1988). It should be noted that Nina Rodrigues had only the origin and the faith of the rebels in mind when discussing the rebellions, forgetting that the rebels lived in "subhuman" conditions, which is enough to explain the rebellions and uprisings.

The forms adopted by African religious expressions in Brazil can be considered critical to the formation of institutionalized regroupings of Africans, their descendants and both fugitive and enfranchised slaves. The *quilombos* (hinterland settlements of runaway slaves) developed as a form of political resistance that was typically associated with African religious practices during the time of slavery alongside official religious associations including the *terreiros*, Catholic Brotherhoods and later the Federations (MANDARINO, 2003; CONCONE, 1987; TRINDADE, 1982).

Religious associations were an important component in the organization of groups specifically formed to promote the preservation of cultural and religious heritage. These associations also provided resources for securing the freedom of several slaves whose families had links to them. The fact that prominent Brazilian-born enfranchised slaves were affiliated with these associations provided them the legitimacy required to act with a certain degree of freedom without arousing suspicion and thus to continue conducting their activities.

Two associations were extremely important for the subsequent establishment and maintenance of Candomblé in Bahia. One of them, associated with the Africans from Dahomey or *jejés*, was

[...] the Ordem de Nosso Senhor do Bom Jesus das Necessidades e Redenção dos Homens Pretos (Order of Our Lord of Good Jesus of the Needs and Redemption of the Negro Men), at the Capela do Corpo Santo (Chapel of the Sacred Body) in the Cidade Baixa (the port district of Salvador, Bahia). Nagôs composed two fraternities: a male one named Nosso Senhor dos Martírios (Our Lord of the Martyrs) and a female one named Nossa Senhora da Boa Morte (Our Lady of the Good Death) of the Igreja da Barroquinha (Church of Barroquinha). (VERGER, 1981, p. 28)

The Candomblé religion can be considered to be a major factor responsible for the institutionalized regrouping of Africans and their descendants. From this perspective, religion gave rise to associations, whose systems of beliefs promoted particular types of interpersonal relationships, rules and specific values that came to define the houses of worship and the communities belonging to them (BARROS, 1993).

It should be noted that in Africa, worshipped deities were originally related to a family, town or area. This system promoted group-based and regional cults, and the occasional nationwide cult. In Brazil, the *Orixás*, *Inquices* and *Voduns* developed a distinct character because of the black diaspora. Enmeshed in the misery of the slave quarters, the deities began to manifest indiscriminately and were then no longer associated with family clans or royal lineages. Instead, the deities were open to anyone who needed and still remembered them.

Thus, the spread of cults that originated in Africa, now generically known as Afro-Brazilian religions or more recently as religions of the African matrix, was recorded in different areas of Brazil through the course of history.

According to Gilroy (2001), the diaspora experience is a dynamic process of (re)invention of practices and knowledge that affirms bonds and alliances, in which several social mechanisms are used to express identities – including the religious one – with an African matrix encompassing the local and global levels.

Thus, as a religion, Candomblé was and remains a system associated with processes of (re)invention over many historical periods and in many parts of the country. Such processes evoke a mythical Africa (SODRÉ, 1998) as the foundation and common element of several nations that consider themselves to have originated from this cultural complex. The *terreiro* is conceived of as a space that strengthens the feeling of belonging and manifests its particularities, and its worldview, by defining the outlines of "qualitative space" that contain a "great affective and emotional load, and exceptional imaginary and symbolic power" (ELHAJJI, 2010).

As DA MATTA (1987, p. 117) noted, one of the hallmarks of Brazilian society might translate into its relationship with similar everyday events:

[...] A system where the essential, the fundamental value is to relate, to mix, join, confound, reconcile. To be in the middle-point, to discover mediation and establish gradation, to include (and never to exclude). The synthesis of models and positions seems to be a central feature of the dominant Brazilian ideology.

In this way, the formation of the religious corpus of divinities, liturgical rituals, holidays, linguistic processes and objects established the dominance of the African religions in the Brazilian territory, where they appear as an example of "mixing" the remaining religious systems. The status of Afro-Brazilian religions can be defined as an amalgamation of a popular religious imaginary that either obscures the religion's mythical origins or celebrates its religious nature. A remarkable example of the practices of this religious modality is the popular use of the plant *Dieffenbachia* sp. (*dumb cane*) in some households and workplaces. The indiscriminate use of this "amulet" by a large portion of the population is a testament to the belief in evil spirits and witchcraft. According to the popular imagination, this plant is used in workplaces and households specifically to "repel the evil eye," regardless of the user's religious affiliation.

To summarize, the mythical Africa is (re)elaborated in the flora, fauna, material elements, images and crystallized values through the synthesis of religious rites and cults by the different groups that arrived in Brazil. Therefore, throughout the history of the establishment of cities in the country, the Candomblé *terreiros* and other spaces of African matrix religions did not remain alien to these sociocultural manifestations and practices of towns. During the formation and solidification of the various segments of Afro-Brazilian religions, we find a history marked in most periods by persecution, discrimination, different mentalities and patterns of "social invisibility," as well as by solicitations and alliances between different social orders (DANTAS, 1984; LÜHNING, 1997; MANDARINO, 2003).

Extending the space of the *terreiro*, the corners and other city spaces (cemeteries, hospitals, squares, beaches) began to be used as "sacred" and "therapeutic" spaces. The urbanization and industrialization of towns made the places of worship of several divinities of the Afro-Brazilian religions scarce. The spaces described above became true "ritual" spaces (SILVA, 1996); in other words, the town itself serves as a place for offerings and assumes the role of the sacred forest in some contexts.

In this sense, it is worth understanding the worldviews and strategies launched by Candomblé *terreiros* to establish them as a therapeutic option for society at large. This process involves an understanding of how Candomblé speaks to and fights for customers in the "official health system." Moreover, understanding Candomblé requires an awareness of its particular concepts regarding the meanings of the body that created an important space for liturgical and therapeutic practices and knowledge and extended the physiological characteristics inherent to human beings as described by conventional medicine.

The magic-religious phytotherapy practiced at the *terreiros* was a strong ally of religious therapeutics for the unveiling of states of unbalance and disease because plants are essential elements used in both liturgical and therapeutic activities in Candomblé. Plants occupy a unique and structuring role in the activities of Candomblé and represent a communication link between human beings and deities. Chants and certain combinations of spoken words cast a spell on plants and transform them into sacred elements ready to act on people (GOMBERG, 2008; BARROS; TEIXEIRA, 1989).

Thus, Verger (1995) emphasizes the importance of knowing the *ofô*, evocative chants that should be pronounced during the harvest, preparation and application of plants. The meaning and significance of these chants become effective to the extent that people's wishes are fulfilled. In the Candomblé worldview, the importance of plants is amplified by their botanical and pharmacological qualities. These qualities are combined with knowledge of the sacred and the abilities of the practitioner, and the three elements together can activate the mechanisms that initiate the transmission of *axé* (vital energy).

The *babalossaim* – literally, the “father of leaves” – was a specific role in Candomblé *terreiros* that can no longer be found. This figure was situated among the hierarchical and functional positions but was eventually cast aside because the position required specific learning and its meaning and practice were only known by very few. The knowledge of the *babalossaim* demanded considerable time to acquire and represented a status of power. Currently, the *ialorixás* and *babalorixás* (female and male priests, respectively) accumulate the knowledge of leaves. Therefore, they now play the role formerly attributed to the *babalossaim*.

The Candomblé *terreiros* have a particular understanding of the social categories of disease and illness in people. Thus, for the groups, the diagnosis, perception and treatment of disease must come from a religious cosmology that, in effect, signals their social relationships and their connections to society at large. Consequently, diagnosis is not dissociated from cosmology and the magic-religious concept but reflects the set of social relationships and basic principles of that universe that should therefore be understood in terms of their social complexity (LAPLANTINE, 1989).

One mode of communication between *terreiros* and society at large consists of the acquisition and therapeutic indication of plants at the public markets. These markets merit further study, given the importance, as indicated by Gama (2011), of Afro-Brazilian religious consumption in this setting, which is described as a “fertile and deep ground for both marketers and consumers” (Souza, 2001). A further area of interest is to understand the differentiation among the customers who visit the stands at the markets that offer plants and phytotherapeutic products for either religious or therapeutic purposes, as in the study by Maioli-Azevedo and Fonseca-Krue (2007) of markets and open fairs in Rio de Janeiro and Aracaju, Sergipe. Thus, it was possible to establish that it is primarily people who are marginalized by the local health system who resort to phytotherapy as a therapeutic option. The people who visit stands for religious objects usually bring along a shopping list that was obtained at an oracular consultation (MANDARINO; GOMBERG, 2009).

The public market is, thus, a space with its own multifaceted temporal dynamics, and it exhibits a natural polyphony, with practices and identities that people communicate and re-signify among one another and where people exchange feelings, ideas, objects and values that describe this polyphonic experience (Bakhtin 1992). A visit to the market represents the introduction of a Candomblé neophyte/consultee into the Afro-Brazilian world and its many possibilities in the attempt to integrate the individual within a new world that is intermediary to the sacred and the profane.

The seduction and the power of the market, however, do not only derive from the social control and the acquisitive impositions of a religion of consumption. Its roots go deep into the African tradition because, although there are markets everywhere with their tumultuous and picturesque existence, certain African societies attributed to them the status of a domain with a cosmological, as well as sociological, value. (VOGEL et al., 1993, p. 14)

The sacred and the profane represent two possibilities for translating reality, which we address, for example, in the religious therapeutics that aim to intervene between the individual and his health/disease process. According to Eliade (1999), these possibilities consist of the two “times” that exist for a religious man. Profane time lacks religious meaning and has ordinary temporality. Sacred time, in contrast, comprises episodes primarily represented by festivities and ritual moments.

“Between these two species of Time there is, to be sure, a solution of continuity: nevertheless, by means of rites man may pass without any danger from ordinary temporal duration to sacred Time.” (ELIADE, 1999, p. 64)

Therefore, it is worth focusing on their resources to collect data and the contexts proper for this goal, aiming at recording that which is relevant for the established purposes, where the sacred might manifest with different natures. Thus, the experience acquired in a visit to the market causes individuals to perceive the existence of a different world, where smells, colors, materials and people intermingle in the daily expectation of providing the required materials to transport people to another world.

It is possible to state that the market is the gate to the world of Afro-Brazilian religions, with their various customs and beliefs, where what matters is the valorization of the person based on his or her relationship to the sacred or the self-knowledge the person acquires that was dispersed among the several ingredients of the list describing the therapeutic prescriptions required to recover health and balance. That is, to an attentive observer initiated in the mysteries of Afro-Brazilian religions, these various ingredients reveal certain traits of the individual’s personality. Reciprocally, the individual is given the opportunity to redefine himself as a person and in his social relationships, to the extent that the individual discovers his real identity.

To some people, a visit to the public market is a moment of extreme angst because it implies public exposure with no disguise, which might provoke discriminatory comments if the beliefs of the group to which the individual belongs are contrary to the expressions of Afro-Brazilian religiousness. On escorting some individuals carrying their lists of prescriptions on their first visit to the market, we realized how much they strived not only to shop but to keep their friends and relatives ignorant of their possible religious devotion, even as a client. This behavior was the case of Nilma de Oxóssi, who told no one, not even her husband, about her visit to the *terreiro* throughout the time preceding the visit or during a subsequent visit to the market to buy the ingredients required to fill her “prescription” or “*ebó*.”

Because of her fear of being discovered, the consultee created some amusing scenes in her attempts to remain hidden. Believing that a parked car was following her on her husband’s orders, she asked an *ebomim* from the abovementioned religious site to escort her as she went to buy the items on her list. This action caused some tension in the group because, through internal discussions, they rated this behavior as indicative of the attitude of a “problematic” or “problem-causing” person. Because Nilma de Oxóssi is a massage therapist, she told her husband she would be attending a course on holistic therapies to avoid domestic conflict; she revealed that her husband “had been often cheated and lost a lot of money at the Nagô before meeting her.”

The outward expression of Nilma de Oxóssi’s worldview elicits two principal lines of reflection. One concerns the recurrent situations caused by improper conduct in the healing processes of some religious leaders regarding the vulnerability of their customers, who become involved in nefarious religious practices resulting in dissatisfaction, disappointment and the solidification of the social image of African matrix religions as “evil religions” or “evil practices.” This situation is not exclusive to these religions, but it commonly appears in many emergent ones, even in the digital realm, as shown by the study by Vasconcellos et al. (2011) on the use of the Internet as a tool for fraudulent propagation of therapeutic practices.

Nilma’s attempt to alter the prescriptions because of a particular conflict initially reflects the opinion of her husband regarding African matrix religions, echoing the stereotypical image depicting them as mere “evil” and “cheating” religions based on his own experience of having been robbed and not achieving the expected results. These ideas reflect our attempts to grasp the logic of assistance in Candomblé therapeutic practices, in which the process must result in customer satisfaction, primarily based on the faith of performing the prescribed therapeutic procedures in an environment in which the supernatural has the upper hand: the supernatural dictates the therapeutic measures with no room for question.

Thus, we observe the presence of a supernatural logic that invades the individual’s perception and warns him regarding a matter that he or she had already identified on his own as essential and that motivated the consultation. The individual attributes reality to the matter without questioning the truth about the therapeutic knowledge on which he or she is depending. This is the case even though this knowledge is nonscientific, consequently placing it in a marginal position relative to mainstream knowledge.

[...] ... what kind of knowledge do you want to discredit the moment you say, “it is a science”? What speaking subject, what subject of experience or knowledge do you want to “demean” when you say, “I, who formulates this discourse, formulate a scientific discourse and am a scientist?” What theoretical-political vanguard do you want to enshrine to separate it from all of the

According to Foucault (1988), knowledge is understood as materiality and events. Knowledge has political implications with different social formations, and thus it places itself in people's political positions. One may, thus, say that there is no such thing as neutral knowledge: all knowledge is political. Thus, a dimension of analysis of power is required when one seeks to understand knowledge and its actions in forming new power relationships. Because every social formation has its own regime of truth according to its specific historical contexts, Foucault (1988) argues that different types of knowledge expressed in the same society are not necessarily linked by affinity bonds. Conversely, a process of mutual disqualification unfolds, led by a scientific field that postulates the truth of the field of knowledge.

Thus, therapeutic knowledge arising from consultations with the oracular *jogo de búzios* (a divinatory practice performed with cowrie shells) will suffer attempts to discredit it as quackery and opportunism by the scientific field, along with the long-standing forms of discrimination against the African matrix religions in Brazil. Nevertheless, a group of people adopt an indifferent attitude toward this competition for hegemony based on different types of therapeutic knowledge and deal with differences based on a spirit of complementarity.

An experience different from Nilma's is exemplified by the behavior of Márcio of Oxossi, an undergraduate student in health. His professor, who knew the religious leader, suggested that he visit the *terreiro*, which he did on the same day as Nilma. Thus, they visited the public market and performed the *ebó* together. Márcio went to the market escorted by an *iaô*/neophyte to buy the items on his list of ingredients required to perform the three *ebós* prescribed. Following the initiate's advice, he bought the ingredients for the first and second *ebós*. However, on arriving at the *terreiro*, he was told by the religious leader that on that particular Saturday, only the first *ebó* could be performed, according to the instruction given by the deity. Márcio inquired about the possibility of also performing the second *ebó* because he had already bought the required elements. The *pai de santo* stated that

[...]ebó is like a medicine, it requires some time to take effect. He [Márcio] will need at least one week to start feeling the effects of the ebó, only then can the second and third ebós be performed, and they may be performed together.

Unlike Nilma, Márcio was never embarrassed about being in the market buying "macumba" (religious stuff). A middle-class youth who had never even "come close to a macumba," he completed all of the stages of the process prescribed to re-establish his balance without question. The perception of his and his family's unbalance was triggered by a series of events. Within just two days, he had broken up with his fiancée and his mother had expelled him and his sister from the home, which caused his parents' separation. Next, he crashed both of their cars at exactly the same time; his sister was not injured, but her car was damaged beyond repair. This series of negative events made Márcio conclude that it must be a matter of "macumba" (witchcraft). This is the reason for the lack of questioning: although he had never before had this type of experience, somehow he had an "intuitive" feeling that things could only be explained on a different level.

We should emphasize Márcio's joy on learning that his offerings had been accepted and that the *orixás* would protect him from that point on. On being diplomatically informed that he would need to perform more procedures in the future, once again he did not question the requirement, as if he already knew that this was a possibility. We found that individuals who are caught by surprise when they learn that initiation will be necessary in the future usually argue that this is not part of their lives, and they are concerned about the opinions of their relatives, colleagues at work, etc. In contrast, Márcio reacted quietly, which made us believe that he would not be averse to full initiation in the future.

Different from the previous stories, Márcio's case is not strictly related to a health problem but to collective unbalance. This example illustrates the importance that Afro-Brazilian religions attribute to the overall state of individuals because unbalance is thought to be a state of disease and should be treated as such. We subsequently talked to Márcio's sister, who escorted him to a session of *jogo de búzios*. She told us that their mother had always been "difficult, problematic" and treated her children disdainfully. She was described as an extremely vain, upper-middle-class woman who had always viewed her children as an obstacle to a "much freer life." The mother was extremely jealous and considered her daughter a rival who could steal her husband's attention. She therefore resented her own daughter. According to Márcio's sister, their mother was the one who needed treatment, and she had been warned that she needed to treat her spirituality a few years earlier.

The concern with confidentiality is evident in the report of an initiate, a university professor, who needed to perform *ebó* in a bamboo grove at a time when "money was tight and all doors were closed." Because he was a friend of the herb sellers at the public market, they allowed him to "take the *ebó* stuff and pay later," including the taxi fare, according to one of these herb seller friends. Because all doors were "closed," the professor first went to the city park to "break down the *ebó* and perform the shaking," unaware that the park was closed for maintenance on Mondays. The university was the only alternative available because it was the only other place he knew where there was a bamboo grove. His major concern was not to be seen by his colleagues because it was at 6:15 pm, the time with the most traffic, and therefore someone might see him. "Imagine! I was rubbing hominy over my body and releasing doves in front of the Dean's office," the professor exclaimed. Another problem was that his circle at the Dean's office comprised mostly "[e]vangelicals ... what would they think of me ..., they'd think I was going to kill somebody!"

Because of the lack of spaces appropriate for performing these rituals and religious duties, and the difficulty in accessing them, corners and other places in towns (cemeteries, hospitals, squares, crossroads) began to be used as "sacred" and "therapeutic" spaces. Urbanization and industrialization in the country resulted in a lack of natural locations to revere the several deities of Afro-Brazilian religions, which led their practitioners to seek out, define and re-signify spaces that are increasingly being used as healing sites. Nevertheless, sometimes the offerings placed at these sites help strengthen the image that has become crystallized in the common imagination depicting these religions as "evil" (SILVA, 1996).

It is important to understand the network of social solidarity that is established among the several actors involved, internally and externally, in a *terreiro*, particularly while escorting a consultee to the market to shop for the items on a list of ingredients. Typically, *filhos de santos* (people formally committed to an *orixá*) volunteer as escorts to the market because they are aware of how difficult it might be to buy the requested items. Some basic knowledge is required to recognize the quality of products. This knowledge can be gained only through the experience of initiation and everyday practice in the *terreiros*.

It should be stressed that "the newest ones," i.e., the inexperienced consultees, are instructed by the religious leader to find "beautiful and perfect" animals when looking for those to be included in their offerings. It is emphasized that the results of the procedure depend on this factor, with people making comments such as, "If I'm ill, I cannot offer the *saint* an ill animal, or else how can I expect to receive health in exchange?"

Unsuccessful cases are the subject of jokes but also serve as regulating and learning tools. A story told at one of the investigated *terreiros* is about the "hen with a tracheostomy" or "the cut hen." One *iaô* went to the public market to buy a hen for his partner's *ebó*, but he was cheated by the vendor, who knowing the intended purpose, skillfully covered a part of the animal's chest with her hand. When the consultee arrived at the *terreiro* after completing all of the preparations for the *ebó*, the *ogã* (the assistant in *terreiro* rituals) noticed a one-inch-deep cut below the feathers. Therefore, the hen was improper for ritual use. The participants ran back to the open market next to the *terreiro* to buy a hen in a perfect "state of health" that could be used as the offering.

This episode illustrates that people needing to perform an *ebó* must obtain the required materials themselves. In fact, the *ebó* begins when these materials are acquired, which is why so many people complain of the difficulty in obtaining these objects. Sacrifice and offering begin with the willingness of individuals to perform these rituals, hence the requirement for participating in all of the phases.

A skillful and attentive *filho de santo* can infer the possible problems or unbalances of the customer from the items on the list. Nevertheless,

his sensibility and respect for the group's norms will make him discrete, thus preserving the intimacy/privacy of the consultee. When necessary, the religious leader may call *filhos de santo* to assist with performing the liturgical actions, which unfold following a series of norms established by the group's tradition and factors such as gender, seniority and the *eledá* (main *orixá*). Some actions are gender related, whereas others are forbidden, depending on the *eledá* of the *filho de santo*.

Final remarks

From a symbolic point of view, Candomblé *terreiros* seek to reproduce the flora, fauna, symbols and mythical relationships of Africa through a logic based on social mechanisms and processes that evoke and revere deities in private and public rituals. The delimitation of this space is a strategic action to preserve and reproduce the group's worldview in traditional and modern formats, thus manifesting and asserting the predominance of the sacred before society at large.

The perception of this "sacred forest" in present-day *terreiros* as a reproduction of mythical Africa required for the liturgical practices has increasingly diminished, along with the growth and development of cities. Consequently, the religious spaces that managed to survive this expansion were appropriated and re-signified for liturgical purposes. The *terreiros* that could not succeed in urban areas were eventually pushed to the periphery (slums), where the practitioners attempted to recreate a minimal space that would be appropriate for the performance of rituals.

The history of the organization of the Candomblé *terreiros* and other modalities of African matrix religions in Brazil has been marked by episodes of discrimination, persecution and stigmatization in several social spaces while alliances with the public powers and social movements were secured to seek the legitimacy and visibility necessary to ensure their continued operation.

However, the interaction of assistants and religious groups during consultations does not require religious conversion. This process is currently observed when social actors have interests in common and identify with particular religions or religious sects, whereupon they maintain the social role of a customer during consultations and of assistant in volunteer activities. Thus, the phenomenon of religious transcendence is revealed as the movement of individuals through several sacred events and in the joining of several religions simultaneously.

Similarly, at first sight, the *terreiro* seems to exhibit a basic spatial duality between profane space and sacred space. Nevertheless, all of these places have *axé* and a religious functionality expressed in the buildings, plants and atmosphere. Together with the experience and the gradual acquisition of a hierarchical status, the neophyte/initiate learns the purposes of these spaces, thus translating the secrets that structure religious knowledge and showing that acquisition of knowledge is experiential and gradual, according to the social positions occupied along the religious trajectory.

Phytotherapy has an important place among therapeutic options and complements other approaches. Phytotherapy emerges both within and outside the *terreiro* as another possible choice, depending on the interests and possibilities of access of the members to this space. From the actions of the consultees, whether adherents of Afro-Brazilian religions or not, it may be inferred that they seek a further therapeutic option in this modality because it is able to explain the causes of diseases, diagnoses and treatments by referring to the supernatural realm.

This situation is not exclusive to these religions; however, we believe that the choice of such religions derives from the ability of Afro-Brazilian religions to present themselves as a space for transcending religions, in which the practitioner finds a long-lasting and more efficient form of support than the one provided in the "official health system." In this sacred place, bonds of fraternity and solidarity are established among participants, possibly resulting in greater efficiency and efficacy of treatments and support. When someone is perceived as ill or unbalanced, community mechanisms of solidarity and belonging are set in motion within a context of dialog with several spaces in the town, including the public market, which is the preferred site for consuming knowledge and practices from the Afro-Brazilian sacred universe.

A fact that attracted our attention was that the interviewees, including those belonging to the highest social class, had encountered something along their life trajectory that somehow linked them to the religious path. When they enter this religious-therapeutic system, they experience a series of innovations in everyday life: new behaviors, new feelings and new modes of thinking, and they become particularly aware that one cause of their disease is directly related to their main *eledá/orixá*. Thus, the concept of the subject is expanded beyond the body and the mind because from that moment forward it becomes body, mind and *orixá*. On this new path, the individual will learn to connect with the sacred/supernatural in the *terreiro* and in the various spaces of the city that represent liturgical and therapeutic values.

Thus, facing the religious plurality presented by modernity, especially in the case of Brazilian society, Candomblé or its knowledge fills in aspects of the everyday lives of individuals who are fragmented or at a crossroads.

Finally, it is important to realize that the practices and knowledge conceived of and performed by Candomblé as a therapeutic system might play a collaborative role with local health systems and their specificities, particularly because of their heavy reliance on medicinal plants. Therefore, these religious practices must be considered among the policies and programs for natural and complementary medicines and/or medicinal plants and phytotherapeutic agents.

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