



Everyday and Esoteric Reality in the Afro-Brazilian Candomble

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*Sheila S. Walker*

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ESOTERIC REALITY  
IN THE AFRO-  
BRAZILIAN  
CANDOMBLÉ

THE CANDOMBLÉ IN EVERYDAY LIFE

The city of Salvador, capital of the state of Bahia in northeastern Brazil, is the holy city of the Candomblé, the religious system created and evolved by enslaved Africans and their Afro-Brazilian descendants. The Candomblé is the religion that provides the spiritual foundation and superstructure of Bahian life. With regional variations and names such as Macumba, Shango, Casa das Minas, and so on, the Candomblé is also important in other states with significant Afro-Brazilian populations such as Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Maranhão, and Pernambuco. Nowhere, however, is its influence as all-pervasive as in Bahia, where the Candomblé determines the very details of daily existence, from the colors of the clothes people wear to the foods they eat on a given day. It is, in fact, the source of Bahia's gastronomic tradition of true soul food, in which the food people eat is often literally the food of the gods. The Candomblé is also the inspiration for the content and form of much popular culture including the words of songs and the steps of dances, the themes of folkloric performances, and the imagery of the plastic arts as well as being the basis for most of the city's plethora of lively public festivities, including even most of those that are ostensibly Catholic in purpose.

The Candomblé is also an esoteric system that provides philosophical and cosmological explanations for the vagaries of human life, both individual and social. Religious belief is concretized in both ordinary human behaviors and in public and private ceremonial behaviors, the goal of which is to establish closer harmony between the human and spiritual realms. This harmony is symbolized and mediated by the Orishas, the anthropomorphized forces of nature that are the spiritual beings of the Candomblé, and the intermediaries between the Creator and His human creations. The Orishas came to Brazil during the transatlantic slave trade with the Yoruba people from present-day Nigeria and Benin, the African ethnic group whose religious culture has remained most intact and influential in both Brazil and elsewhere in the Americas.

In Salvador, an officially Catholic city of more than a million and a quarter inhabitants, more than 75 percent of the population is of African descent. And even were the 365 churches boasted of by tourist brochures not a much inflated number (almost one hundred would be more accurate), they would still not approach either the number or the influence of the more than fifteen hundred Candomblé houses, the priestesses and priests of which enjoy greater influence over more people than do the priests of the Catholic church. Additionally, the number of Candomblé houses continues to increase as members of established houses segment off to begin their own.

Symbolic evidence of the omnipresence of the Candomblé abounds in Bahia's capital city. Dwellings, humble or expansive but otherwise ordinary in appearance, may actually conceal Candomblé houses or *terreiros*—the ensemble of the sacred space of a Candomblé community. Individuals of differing socioeconomic status and phenotype, not all of obvious African ancestry, may wear simple strings of colored beads that symbolize the Orishas, who are their spiritual guides and guardians, and that are believed to protect them from harm. On Fridays many people dress in white because Friday is the day dedicated to Oshala, the Orisha responsible for the creation of human life, thus the father of humanity, whose color is the white of wisdom and peace.

Many street corners in Salvador are graced by food-vending “Bahianas,” Afro-Bahian women sometimes dressed in the long, full skirts and head ties characteristic of Candomblé members, and sometimes dressed in more ordinary clothes. These women are Candomblé initiates, and the delicious fast food they sell includes the preferred delicacies of some of the Orishas. The most characteristic of their creations is *acarajé*, a black-eyed pea fritter cooked in red palm oil, that is a favorite of Yansan, Orisha of storms, whose symbolic color is dark red.

These Bahianas may sometimes be seen throwing several *acarajés* into the street in front of them as an offering to Eshu, the Orisha of

roads and pathways, appeasing him and requesting him to direct customers their way. And on their trays will often be found a small snake plant, a plant that can also be seen in front of many homes and business establishments. Although the plant grows easily and is decorative, these are not the main reasons for its frequent presence. Known as the “sword of Ogun,” Orisha of iron and war, the plant, with its sharp pointed leaves, is believed to protect its owner from the effects of the evil eye—the harm that can result from the envious looks and malicious thoughts of jealous people.

Details of the daily routines of the people involved with the Candomblé may also be determined by their religion. Each day of the week is associated with a specific Orisha, whose colors people may wear, whose preferred foods they may eat, and whose taboo foods they will most probably avoid. The association of days with particular Orishas may even determine whether people have sexual relations, in that a person may abstain on the day of his or her guardian Orisha so as not to provoke the Orisha’s wrath at such divided attentions. Additionally, individual behaviors and social relations are understood in terms of the Orishas and the interrelationships between them as recounted in Yoruba history, in a way similar to that in which people of astrological bent interpret such social facts via the zodiac.

Even the character and events of years are predicted by the Candomblé. On January 1 newspapers and even nationally televised news programs announce the identity, as determined by Candomblé priestesses and priests, of the Orisha who will reign for the ensuing year. The year is expected to be peaceful when Oshala reigns, the contrary when bellicose Ogun is in charge, and replete with epidemics as punishment for human evil when Omolu, Orisha of disease and pestilence, is in control. From Yansan or Shango, Orisha of thunder, one would expect a literally and figuratively tempestuous year. And from Yemanjá, Orisha of the seas and fertility, a year of great creativity and productivity may be anticipated.

Candomblé themes are a central feature in the shows of the many Bahian folkloric groups that perform in theaters and restaurant nightclubs in Bahia, as well as outside of the state and even abroad. Any Bahian folkloric show, in fact, would be incomplete without scenes from the Candomblé as a major component. This commercialization and, to some believers, profanation of their sacred symbols, music, dances, and costumes further contributes, however, to making them a pervasive part of the everyday reality of nonmembers as well as members of the Candomblé in Bahia.

Salvador also has restaurants named for Orishas, such as the Yemanjá Restaurant appropriately facing the beach. It and other establishments that feature *comida típica* serve the foods of the Orishas that

are the basis of Bahia's African-based gastronomic tradition, such as *xin-xin de galinha*, a chicken dish prepared with palm oil and dried shrimp especially appreciated by Oshun, Orisha of fresh water and maternity. The motivation for the name of a restaurant may be that the owner is a devotee of the Orisha in question, or perhaps belongs to a Candomblé house dedicated to that Orisha. Or the purpose may be purely commercial—the exploitation of a folklorized cultural symbol in a city with a growing tourist industry.

An image of Yemanjá, portrayed in the form of a mermaid, graces the bottom of the seaside swimming pool at the sophisticated Hotel Meridien. A dermatological clinic in an affluent neighborhood has on its facade an image of Omolu, the Orisha responsible for skin disorders. And a large statue of Eshu, the Orisha in charge of all communications, stands in front of the modern, high-rise, central post office building in a fashionable residential area. Thus, Candomblé symbols are, in many different ways, a constant and ordinary part of the everyday experiences of all residents of Salvador.

The Candomblé was initially a religion associated with the economically deprived and socially oppressed descendants of the African slaves who created it, and it was a victim of police harassment until recent years when Brazil's political system became less repressive. Although still rejected by some of the self-consciously upwardly mobile, the religion is currently growing in respectability. This is in part due to the active and avowed membership in major Candomblé houses of members of Salvador's cultural and even political intelligentsia. Leading sociologists, writers, artists, and musicians, some of whom are not phenotypically Afro-Brazilian or even Brazilian by birth, are proud to talk of being officials in Candomblé houses, and even boast of their "spiritual mothers," the Afro-Brazilian priestesses of the *terreiros* of which they are members. The Candomblé furnishes much of the content of their intellectual and artistic creations, their literary works, songs, and films.

Many novels of internationally known Bahian author Jorge Amado, Brazil's best-known novelist, include extensive references to the Candomblé because of its pervasiveness in Bahian life. His books have been translated into various languages for worldwide distribution, and some have been made into films shown beyond the borders of Brazil. Many of the songs of traditional composer-singers of Bahia, such as Dorival Caymmi, are dedicated to the beautiful Orisha of the seas, Yemanjá. And younger Bahian and non-Bahian singers of international repute such as Gilberto Gil, Maria Bethania, Caetano Veloso, and Zeze Motta also sing of the Orishas, especially of their own spiritual guides. Internationally distributed Brazilian films by "new

wave” directors such as the late Glauber Rocha also feature Candomblé themes, such as “The Amulet of Ogun.” There was a daily nationally televised prime-time serial based on a Candomblé theme, and Candomblé imagery has even become somewhat of a cliché in films having to do with Bahian life.

Since the mid-1970s, the Candomblé has acquired a major role in the annual cultural explosion of the Bahian carnival, as young Afro-Brazilians return to their religious roots as a source of both spiritual inspiration and a sense of identity. In the Candomblé they find names, musical styles, dance forms, and themes for their carnival groups. The Afro-theme carnival groups created in the 1970s as a part of the black consciousness movement are often associated with specific Candomblé houses. They usually have a priestess or priest who watches over the spiritual life of the group, and they may include representations of Orishas in their pageantry, or perhaps choose the colors of their costumes based on the symbolic colors of an Orisha. Filhos de Gandhi, “sons of Gandhi,” for example, a group created on the basis of the philosophy of peace of Mahatma Gandhi, dresses predominantly in white for Oshala, Orisha of peace.

Most Afro-theme groups take their names from the Yoruba preserved in Bahia as the ritual language of the Candomblé, and give themselves (with some linguistic poetic license) names such as Ilé Aiyé, the house or temple of our (meaning people of African descent) world, and Badaué, “celestial messengers of happiness.” One of Ilé Aiyé’s carnival songs, “The Divinities of Ilé,” said: “The divinities of Ilé are personifications of the phenomena of nature.” Another group calls itself Filhos de Ode, “children of Ode,” another name for Oshossi, Orisha of hunting and the forest. And Araketu refers to the town of Ketu in the Republic of Benin from which the cult of Oshossi came to Brazil. Ketu is also the term used to designate the most orthodox of Candomblés.

One style of Afro-theme carnival group, known as an *afoxé*, a Yoruba word conveying the idea of “a pronouncement that makes something happen,” is based on the Candomblé rhythm known as Ijesha, associated with Oshun, maternal Orisha of fresh water. The languid rhythm, played on skin drums buttressed by an *agogô*, a metal double gong, contrasts with the samba music and its instruments of Western manufacture previously more characteristic of the Bahian carnival. The *afoxés* have been referred to as the “Candomblé in the streets.” The dance steps of the *afoxés*, as well as of other Afro-theme carnival groups that use Western instruments, and of much nonsamba popular dancing in general, are based on the stylized dances of the Orishas. The first *afoxés*, based on African themes and Candomblé

realities, were created in the 1890s just after Brazil ended slavery in 1888. The current reemergence of *afoxés* is part of the contemporary process of the conscious cultural assertion of their Africanity on the part of many members of Bahia's young Afro-Brazilian population.<sup>1</sup>

A major dynamic in the current growth of the Candomblé is the result of the *prise de conscience* of many young, well-educated, and sophisticated Afro-Brazilians who have come to give greater value to the African heritage that they had once been taught to reject. Although Brazil has been touted as a "racial paradise," progressive Brazilian scholars refer rather to the "myth of racial democracy" in talking about the societal politics of "whitening" in which racial harmony was to be attained by physically breeding out the African phenotype, and transforming elements of Afro-Brazilian culture into generalized Brazilian folklore. On the social level, for an Afro-Brazilian upward mobility involved leaving the Candomblé and embracing Catholicism. Concurrently, the Afro-Brazilian culture that constitutes much of what the outside world knows as Brazilian culture became folklorized and commercialized.

As a result of their increased consciousness of these issues, as well as of their greater knowledge of and pride in their own origins, and influenced by the African-American civil rights and black power movements, the *Roots* phenomenon, and the independence of the Portuguese-speaking countries of Africa, Afro-Brazilians are reaffirming their cultural and spiritual heritage and are returning openly to, or affirming overtly, their former covert participation and belief in the Candomblé. As an example, a well-known Afro-Brazilian priestess of middle-class origins had always been known as a good Catholic, so that her neighbors never suspected her of also dancing for the Orishas in the Candomblé. They were therefore very surprised to read in the newspaper that she had become the supreme spiritual authority of one of the most orthodox and prestigious Candomblé houses in Salvador.

#### AFRICAN ORIGINS AND AFRO-BRAZILIAN ADAPTATIONS

The Candomblé is an Afro-Brazilian creation, a system for worshipping the Orishas, the Yoruba spiritual entities responsible for the elements and dynamics of natural and human reality, on soil distant from the African homeland, and developed within the oppressive social and cultural context of slavery. Yoruba religion took precedence over the other African religious influences in Brazil that preceded it, notably

<sup>1</sup> Sheila S. Walker, "The Bahian Carnival," *Black Art: An International Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (1984): 23–27.

those of Central African origin, largely because of the late arrival, into the mid-nineteenth century, of large numbers of Yoruba people who were then concentrated in the coastal urban areas especially of north-eastern Brazil. In the cohort of these enslaved Yoruba were priests, priestesses, and initiates of the cults of the various Orishas, who had been captured and sold partially as a result of civil wars between Yoruba kingdoms and between the Yoruba and their neighbors. There were, thus, many among the enslaved who were determined as well as competent to maintain their own cultural and spiritual foundations in a new situation in which the meanings and consolations they supplied were sorely needed.

Among the Yoruba, each geographically based subgroup worshiped its own set of Orishas associated with specific environmental and historical phenomena. The Orishas, personifications of the natural forces and phenomena associated with the earth and its waters and atmosphere, as the carnival song said, also represent divinized kings and leaders as well as being related to specific human states, qualities, and activities. In Africa the cults of some Orishas were widespread, whereas others were localized. Oshala, the creator of human life, may be considered pan-Yoruba, as is Ogun, Orisha of iron and patron of iron workers, who taught the people to fashion a product of the earth into tools with which to create civilization, thus adopting elements of nature to meet human needs.

Other Orishas were localized in specific natural phenomena, such as the rivers running through particular areas and towns. Orishas of the same type of natural phenomenon, such as rivers, had different names in different areas, although sharing some similar qualities. Thus, Oshun, associated with bodies of fresh water and the principle of maternity, was worshiped in Ilesha and Ijebu where the river bearing her name flows, and in Oshogbo because of a pact she is said to have made with the first king of the town. Oba was the Orisha of the river bearing her name, and Yansan or Oya was the Orisha of the Odo Oya, the Niger River running through the old kingdom of Oyo.<sup>2</sup>

Yemanja was originally the Orisha of the Yemoja River for the Egba subgroup of the Yoruba, who lived in the area of the towns of Ife and Ibadan. When the Egba were forced by war to relocate to the Abeokuta area, they took with them the objects associated with the river Orisha and established her cult in another river.<sup>3</sup> When brought to the Americas, Yemanja's cult was again relocated, this time in the ocean rather

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Fatumbi Verger, *Orixas: Deuses Iorubás na Africa e no Novo Mundo* (Salvador, Bahia: Editora Corrupio, 1981), pp. 17–18, 174–75, 190.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 18.



than in a river in both coastal Bahia and insular Cuba. In both cases, the sea is a much more significant and obvious natural feature of importance to human life than is any river. In the inland Bahian town of Cachoeira, presents for Yemanjá are offered to her in a river that flows into the ocean. Because she is the mother of all the waters, offerings put into any body of water will ultimately flow to her.

Hence, the fundamental principle of the divinized quality of nature was maintained in the Americas. The devotees of an Orisha of a specific localized feature in Africa, such as a river, if that specific cult were not maintained in the new world, may have found little inconsistency in venerating another river or even ocean deity who represented the same natural principle in a somewhat different form or in the same form with a different name. Thus, for example, several river Orishas from Nigeria may have been coalesced into a few in Brazil. Exhibiting this principle, one Candomblé priest, in talking of an offering he had just put into a stream for Oshun, during which occasion he had also invoked the other water Orishas, said, "When we put an offering into a body of water for one water Orisha, all of the water Orishas share in it."

The presence and specific locations of the religion of the Orishas in the Afro-Americas—the Candomblé in Brazil, the Santería in Cuba, Shango in Trinidad and Grenada, some segments of Haitian Vodun, etc.—are indications of the specific flow of Yoruba people from their home continent to the slave societies of the Western hemisphere. Shango, Orisha of thunder and divinized king of the town of Oyo, who represents the principle of justice, is widely worshiped in the Americas. He is important in Brazil and Cuba and the fact that the African-based religions of Trinidad and Grenada, and an area of Brazil, bear his name clearly attests to his importance there. This fact also indicates that significant numbers of inhabitants of Oyo were sold into slavery in the course of both the wars that that kingdom waged with others, and its own eventual defeat and destruction.

There were also many Orishas worshiped by the Yoruba who are not found in the Western hemisphere, the specific areas in which they were worshiped apparently having been spared the worst ravages of the slave trade so that their initiates did not find themselves in sufficient numbers on the Western shore of the Atlantic to perpetuate their cults.<sup>4</sup>

The slave trade and subsequently colonial Christianity and European schooling diminished in importance the worship of the Orishas among the Yoruba in Africa. The cults of some Orishas died out

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

entirely or were severely diminished as a result of the slave trade because so many of their initiates were enslaved. The cult of Oshossi, Orisha of hunting and divinized leader of the hunters who established the town of Ketu, is a case in point. Ketu was almost completely destroyed in the nineteenth century by the Fon king of Abomey, waging war to capture hostages to sell to European slavers. Oshossi, however, as a direct result became an important Orisha in both Brazil and Cuba.<sup>5</sup>

The slave owners in Brazil would not allow the Africans to practice their own religion, but obliged them to become Catholic. The Africans, to whom their masters' unfamiliar spiritual beings, white and European like their oppressors, could hardly represent sources of spiritual protection, comfort, and guidance, astutely saw them as a source of camouflage for their own spiritual guardians. The characteristics of the Euro-Brazilians' saints and their material representations in pictures and statues allowed the Africans to establish parallels between some of the saints and the Orishas—both responsible for particular areas of life and acting as intermediaries between humans and the supreme being for specific concerns. Having their own concept of a creator of the world in Olorun or Olodumare, the enslaved Yoruba saw in Him the Christian God.

For Oshala, Jesus was found to be the best counterpart because of his structural role as preeminent male figure. Saint George, who is depicted on a horse and slaying a dragon, was seen as comparable to Oshossi, the hunter. Omolu or Obaluaiye, the Orisha of smallpox and pestilence, was compared to Saint Lazarus the leper. Yemanja, considered by some to be the mother of the other Orishas, was syncretized with Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, the mother of Jesus; Nana, the eldest water Orisha, was syncretized with Saint Anne, mother of the Virgin Mary; and other maternal water Orishas such as Oshun and Oba were assimilated to other manifestations of the Virgin Mary.

The Africans could adapt so well to outwardly observing the feast days of the saints as they were required to do because they could perceive the spiritual beings they were honoring not as European saints, symbols of the people who were oppressing them, but as representations of the Orishas whom the saints most closely resembled. Thus, while the whites intended to extirpate the religious beliefs of the Africans by imposing the Catholic religion on them, the Africans were creating their first tactic for assuring the preservation of their own spiritual life in the new world they were helping to create.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

This equivalence of Orisha and saint has continued into the present, the dynamic of the identification evolving over time. The equivalences were established in the nineteenth century by people born in Africa who learned the necessary veneer of Catholicism to maintain a semblance of the spiritual reality that had explained and allowed them to function in relation to the forces of nature and society in Africa, now adjusted, with the help of the newly imposed religious system, to profoundly changed circumstances. The next generations were born into the dual reality—the covert African Candomblé reality and the overt Brazilian Catholic reality.

Following a period of relative tolerance at the beginning of the twentieth century, Brazilian authorities began to persecute Candomblé leaders and members. This situation lessened after World War II, but the Candomblé began to be able to exist with true freedom only in the mid-1970s when the Brazilian government declared its commitment to religious freedom, and Candomblé houses ceased to be obliged to register with the police. This fact has understandably been pertinent in the current open affirmation of and participation in the Candomblé. Many people who were overt Catholics and covert Candomblé members during the period of repression are now able to be spiritually honest without risk.

Nevertheless, it is also true that the two spiritual realities have come to be lived in Bahia as noncontradictory and even complementary. Statues and images of Catholic saints continue to be used in many Candomblé houses as concrete representations of the Orishas, who, as forces of nature and principles of human life, cannot be themselves visually portrayed. Artistic representations of the Orishas take the form of images of humans attired with their symbolic accoutrements. Most Candomblé priestesses and priests and members of their houses have, until the present, been baptized Catholics as well as initiates of the Orishas. The most influential leaders have had church funerals, although the Candomblé ceremonies also held for their deaths have been more fundamental as symbolic statements about the meaning of death within the Candomblé belief system. Some priestesses and priests would not initiate into the cult of the Orishas people who were not baptized Catholics, and some of them required their initiates to attend mass at the Church of Our Lord of Bomfim, a manifestation of Jesus, hence Oshala, on the Friday following their initiation because it is the day of the week sacred to Oshala. During this mass, incidentally, the new initiates often went into a trance and manifested the presence of Oshala in their bodies, much to the displeasure of the Catholic priest officiating.

The major annual public festivities in Bahia are based on the equivalence between Orishas and saints, as feast days for the saints continue to provide opportunities for Afro-Brazilians to pay public homage to the camouflaged Orishas just as their African ancestors did during slavery. The Washing of the Church of Bomfim in January involves a procession of Candomblé priestesses, priests, and initiates who parade to the church with jars of water on their heads with which to wash the steps of the church in reenactment of the important annual Waters of Oshala ceremony performed privately in Candomblé houses.

On February 2 thousands of people throng the beach at Rio Vermelho to give presents to Yemanjá on a feast day of the Virgin Mary. And on August 16, while a Catholic mass is conducted inside the Church of Saint Lazarus, immediately in front of the church Candomblé initiates enter a trance state and their contorted gestures evidence the presence of Omolu in their bodies. In a city having a population three-quarters of which is of African origin, it is not surprising that in the absence of specific repression, the Orishas have taken overt precedence over their saintly counterparts.

The issue of the syncretism between Orishas and saints has, appropriately, been raised recently as some Candomblé leaders, finally free to worship openly the spiritual guardians and guides of their ancestors, and free to affirm and be proud of their African heritage, find no further need for the subterfuges to which they previously had recourse to camouflage in order to perpetuate, or syncretize in order to dignify their religion. Consequently, they are ready to put an end to the idea and manifestations of the equivalences between Orishas and saints.

The second world conference on the Orisha tradition and culture, held in Salvador in July 1983, brought together leaders and members of the Orisha religion from Nigeria and the areas in which it exists in the Americas, including the United States. This gathering, the first of which had been held appropriately in Ile Ife, the place of origin of the Yoruba people in Nigeria, provided the context in which some leaders of the major and most traditional Candomblés of Salvador, led by Ialorisha Stela de Azevedo Santos, priestess Stela of Oshossi of the terreiro Axé Opô Afonjá, issued a manifesto calling for the end of such syncretism and a greater respect for the Candomblé as a valid religion in its own right.

An article on the gathering in the Brazilian weekly news magazine, *Veja*, says:

Saint Barbara is not Yansan, Our Lord of Bomfim is not Oshala, and Ogun is not Saint George or Saint Anthony—this is the new order that is making the

rounds of some Candomblé *terreiros* in Salvador, the most important center of Yoruba faith in Brazil. The association between Catholic saints and Candomblé Orishas, begun by Brazilian slaves to hide the practice of their African religion behind an acceptable Christian facade, eventually became a characteristic generally associated with the Candomblé, and always criticized by the [Catholic] priests. Now, the religious syncretism that unites two cultures and two creeds has begun to receive criticism from where it was least expected—it is the members of the Candomblé themselves who propose the break. “A responsible *babalorisha* [priest] should no longer permit syncretism,” preaches Stela of Oshossi, respected *ialorisha* [priestess] of Ilé Axé Opô Afonjá, one of the traditional *terreiros* of Bahia. According to [Ialorisha] Stela, Catholicism and the religion of the Orishas each have doctrines and liturgies of their own, and very different ones. “Syncretism occurred because the slaves needed it, but now it is no longer necessary,” she affirmed. The priestess does not anticipate an immediate about-face in a system of religious syncretism that has evolved over more than a century, but it is her intention to plant the seed for the next generation.<sup>6</sup>

The holding of the second Orisha tradition conference in Salvador, the secondary center of Yoruba religion outside Nigeria, allowed Bahian Candomblé leaders and members, almost none of whom had been able to attend the previous gathering in Africa or had ever been to Africa, to become aware for the first time of their cultural commonality with so many people of Africa and of African origin in the Americas. They also became cognizant of their own importance in the initial spread and current maintenance and continuing growth and spread of an international religious system African in origin. Grateful to have what for most was an unanticipated opportunity to meet for the first time spiritual authorities from the land of their ancestors, Candomblé leaders acquired a greater sense of the value and impact of their religion both within and beyond the confines of Brazilian society. The encounter furthered the process of affirmation of their Africanity already begun outside of the Candomblé and offered an additional impetus to both their feelings of pride and their desire for increased purism in their religion, which the Brazilian context alone could not have offered them.

Having reestablished the contact with other peoples of African descent that their ancestors had lost in embarking involuntarily on slave ships and disembarking in diverse and distant lands, and having met people with whom they could reestablish severed spiritual links via the religion of their common Yoruba ancestors, some Afro-Brazilian

<sup>6</sup> “O Cisma Bahiano,” *Veja* (August 17, 1983), p. 87 (my translation).

leaders are now finding that the syncretism with Catholicism that their Brazilian ancestors were forced to evolve for the survival of their religion has outlived its usefulness and become socially and culturally anachronistic. At this point in history, as they relink more closely with African spiritual authorities and with other participants in the Orisha tradition in the African diaspora, the continued association of the African Orishas with European Catholic saints, which is an affirmation of the Brazilian cultural melting pot, has come to seem incongruous to many.

Ialorisha Stela of Oshossi, in arguing in a newspaper interview for the autonomy of the Candomblé from Catholicism, and having personally undergone the transition from overt Catholic and covert Orisha initiate, to overt and exclusive Candomblé member, said, "The period in which we had to hide our religion has now passed. Our ancestors were forced to syncretize the religion in order not to be massacred. We want to stop this syncretizing." While acknowledging her respect for Catholicism and for the saints, she insisted that the two religions represent different spiritual systems, and that it made no sense to make an offering designated for the Orisha Yansan before a statue of Saint Barbara. Now that the necessity for such subterfuge has ended, she said, any priest or priestess faithful to the principles of the Candomblé will work to put an end to all manifestations of syncretism. Consequently, serious Candomblé members should cease washing the stairs of the Church of Bomfim, for example, and participate exclusively in the Waters of Oshala ritual in their Candomblé houses. She also called for an end to the profanation, folklorization, and commercialization of the Candomblé and urged that it be accorded greater respect as a religious system equal to others.<sup>7</sup> The *ialorisha* realizes that all Candomblé leaders and members will not follow her lead and that the tourist industry will probably be a major adversary in the struggle. Her position, however, is an appropriate reflection of the current stage of evolution of the consciousness of Afro-Brazilians with respect to their African origins.

A Bahian newspaper article about the annual Feast of Saint Lazarus/Omolú, which occurred a month after the international Orisha gathering, indicated no immediate lessening of the syncretism in response to the *ialorisha's* pronouncement. Many Candomblé initiates attended the Catholic mass for Saint Lazarus inside the church before gathering outside near the large cross in front of the church to receive from Candomblé priestesses showers of popcorn symbolic of flowers

<sup>7</sup> "Candomblé Diz Não Ao Sincretismo," *Jornal da Bahia* (July 29, 1983), p. 3 (my translation).

sacred to Omolu that convey the Orisha's blessings and "wash" away illness and misfortune. Neither did the pronouncement deter the apparently wealthy white women, wearing the beads of Omolu hidden among their gold necklaces, from arriving at the Catholic church in chauffeur-driven vehicles in order to obtain what they apparently hoped would be discrete showers of popcorn from an Afro-Brazilian priestess who bestowed on them the blessings of the African Omolu.<sup>8</sup>

#### CANDOMBLÉ RITUALS AND SPIRITUAL ENERGY

Beyond its very visible manifestations in the daily sights and activities and periodic festivities of Bahia, the major reality of the Candomblé is lived in the *terreiros*, which range in size from small houses to large multibuilding compounds, and contain, whatever their size, altars for the Orishas, a space for secluding initiates, a relatively large room for public ceremonies, and dwelling space for the priestess or priest and perhaps other members of the community. The major activities that relate the *terreiro* and its congregation to the larger community are the annual public ceremonies for the various Orishas who descend on those occasions into the human realm by embodying themselves in the persons of their especially prepared initiates. Thus, each Orisha is honored once a year in a ceremony open to everyone, on which occasion the Orisha manifests his or her presence on earth to bring blessings to all of his or her human children.

There are two levels of members of a Candomblé community—initiates of varying degrees who have different functions, and non-initiates who attend ceremonies and may seek consultations with the priestess or priest, but who are not participants in the intimate and essential manner in which the initiates are. In these consultations people seek to better understand the current events and dynamics of their lives or resolve problems, or they request guidance and assistance for their undertakings from the Orishas.

The priest or priestess, as an intermediary between the human realm and the Orishas, requests information and assistance for the person by throwing sixteen cowrie shells. The configurations in which the cowrie shells fall indicate messages from the Orishas, which the priestess or priest has learned to interpret. The person receiving the consultation may be required to perform certain concrete acts that have symbolic meanings, which reflects a fundamental principle of the Candomblé.

<sup>8</sup> "Sincretismo Não Acabou Na Festa de São Lázaro," *Jornal da Bahia* (August 2, 1983), p. 3.

For example, people wishing to succeed in an undertaking might perform gestures symbolic of removing obstacles from their paths to success, the concrete gestures being translated in the energetic or spiritual realm, and then reacting back upon the empirical realm of human activities.

Initiates are people who have established especially close relationships to the Orishas, implying an interaction of mutual responsibility. According to Candomblé doctrine, everyone has a principal Orisha who acts as a spiritual guide and guardian, and whose identity can be established by a priestess or priest through divination with cowrie shells. The character and historic interactions with the other Orishas of one's spiritual guide, as revealed in the Yoruba history of the spiritual beings, determine the nature of the personality characteristics, activities, social interactions, and general life path of the person. In addition to this Orisha who is the "master or mistress of the person's head," people also have another accompanying Orisha whose characteristics also influence them.

The human characteristics of the Orisha are related to the elements of nature with which they are associated. For example, Ogun, Orisha of iron and the tools and weapons made of iron with which he taught humans to transform nature in his role as patron of blacksmiths, is forceful, bellicose, strong willed, efficacious, and associated with civilization and technology as opposed to nature. His human devotees are expected to manifest such qualities in a variety of ways. Oshun, associated with bodies of fresh water, is a beautiful, maternal, vain, feminine, sensuous woman, and her devotees have similar qualities. Oshossi the hunter is circumspect and a goal-oriented individualist, and Yansan is flighty and inconsistent like the wind. Because interactions between people are often explained by the characteristics and historic interactions of their Orishas, no one should be surprised, for example, when women whose Orishas are Oshun and Oba, two of the three rival co-wives of polygamous Shango, do not get along in human life.

According to Ialorisha Stela of Oshossi:

The Orishas, for me, are forces, spiritual beings superior to us, through whom we receive spiritual force, so I consider them a kind of vital energy. They are identified with the natural phenomena of earth, air, fire, and water. Ossainha, who is in charge of leaves and their curative properties, is associated with the earth, as are Oshossi, Omolu, and Ogun; Yansan is associated with air and Shango with fire; and Yemanja, Oshun, and elderly Nana, who is associated with still or stagnant water and death, also represent water. Oshumare, who is symbolized by the rainbow and represented by waterfalls, is both air and



water, and Logunede, child of Oshun and Oshossi, is related to both the water of his mother and the earth of his father.<sup>9</sup>

According to Yoruba scholar J. Omosade Awolalu, the word *ori*, root of the term Orisha, refers to the physical head as well as to the force responsible for controlling one's being, the physical head representing also the inner head or inner person. The *ori* is the "personality-soul" that rules, controls, and guides the life and activities of a person. The term also describes one's guardian spirit who guides and guards one, wards off evil, and can retaliate against those who have wronged the person.<sup>10</sup> The Orisha represents the true personality of the individual, the person's own deep nature, as opposed to the roles and styles of behavior one has been taught by society. The Orisha represents the full spectrum of life possibilities of the individual, the potentiality of the true self. The proclivities and tastes of the Orisha are those of the person's most fundamental self, which may have been obscured or distorted by conformity to societal conventions.

The process of initiation allows one to identify with certainty one's spiritual guide as well as to become familiar with one's own deep nature and truest impulses. By strengthening the link with this guardian Orisha the individual becomes receptive to and behaves in harmony with him or her, and benefits from the spiritual force the Orisha represents. Initiation, which involves a period of several weeks of seclusion during which the person communes with and learns about his or her Orisha in an intensive training period, thus allows the person to become focused, to get on the right path, to become aligned with her or his own inner and higher source of life energy.

In the Candomblé, problems in people's lives are usually interpreted as being the result of their disharmony with the Orisha who is the source of their spiritual energy, with respect to whom they may be working at cross purposes or in opposition. One may know one's Orisha, but not know how to serve him or her properly. Mental disorders are often interpreted as resulting from a person's neglecting to serve his or her Orisha properly, or from the incorrect identification of the person's Orisha. People who fail to identify their guardian Orisha may be unable to establish harmony with their deep selves or to relate properly to their spiritual guides, and the resultant internal discord may lead to various forms of mental illness.

<sup>9</sup> Maria Stela de Azevedo Santos, Ialorishá Odé Kayodé, Axé Opô Afonjá *terreiro*, personal interview, Salvador, Bahia (January 1983) (my translation).

<sup>10</sup> J. Omosade Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* (London: Longman, 1979), p. 9.

Each Orisha also has an energetic relationship with specific colors, foods, animals, minerals, and days of the week as well as with natural phenomena. Thus, in identifying one's guardian Orisha, and in knowing him or her increasingly well as a result of the progressive process of initiation, an individual learns how to relate properly to these elements and to harness their energy, their manifestations of the spiritual force of the Orishas, to direct one's life more successfully. Depending on one's Orisha, one might eat or avoid eating certain foods, wear copper, silver, or gold jewelry, and/or wear certain colors or perform certain activities on specific propitious days of the week. In initiation, then, one learns the details of the existence of and the means of access to this higher spiritual reality and how it influences both one's personal life and human life in general. Initiates learn to become receptive to their Orishas, who then may provide them with energy and advice where necessary, and may come to them in time of need. The mystical liaison between human and Orisha must remain constant and active in order for people to live most fully.

The first stage of initiation involves, after the correct identification of the master or mistress of the person's head, the acquisition by the person of the colored beads of the Orisha. The beads are no more than ordinary pieces of plastic until they are washed by the priestess or priest in water containing the leaves associated with the Orisha, and perhaps the blood of sacrificial animals sacred to him or her, which convey energy to the beads that protect the individual by bringing him or her closer to the source of spiritual power. Should the beads break when the person is wearing them, the explanation is that they have protected the person from some negative experience and must be restrung and rewashed to regain their power. As accumulators of the spiritual energy of the Orishas, the beads must be treated with respect, only being put on, for example, after bathing. Other objects may also become accumulators of such energy as a result of being washed with the leaves associated with the Orishas. Washing with leaves is fundamental to the Candomblé, and people take leaf baths in order to increase their receptivity to and protection by their Orishas.

At further levels of initiation, the Orisha is "seated" in the person's head, and later the person's "head is made" and the individual is *de cabeça feita* or simply "made" or *feita/o*. Initiates speak often of the number of years since they were "made" as the most significant period of their lives, and mention their years since initiation more frequently than their years since birth. People generally begin the process of initiation, perceived as symbolic rebirth into an improved mode of existence, because problems in their lives evidence spiritual disharmony. By extension, the result of proceeding to higher levels of initiation and

hence of greater spiritual harmony should be manifested in greater success in life.

The period of initiation lasts from several weeks to a few months—each Candomblé house having its own norms—and the terms of the initiation are dictated by the Orishas, who communicate such information through the intermediary of the priest or priestess. During this period of seclusion in a special room, the individual is instructed about the details of the history, activity, character, likes and dislikes of her or his Orisha; is bathed with water in which leaves associated with the Orisha have been soaked; and will have her or his head shaved so that it will be more permeable to substances conveying the energy of the Orisha. The initiate will also learn the drum rhythms that summon the Orisha into her or his head and into the human community, as well as the dance steps that symbolize the Orisha by miming an aspect of the supernatural being's character or role in nature—such as Yemanjá's wavy motion, Ogun's dueling, Oshun's sensuous moves, Ossainha's gathering of medicinal herbs, and the slow, low movements of elderly Nana, Omolu, and Oshala.

Those initiates who will have the privilege of “manifesting” the presence of the Orishas, of “incorporating,” in the literal sense of “giving a body to” these immaterial forces, learn to go into the receptive trance state in which the Orishas will come into their bodies, borrowing them so as to dance/mime their roles in nature and human life and/or reenact the events of their existence as humans, and share their spiritual power, their *ashe*, with the human community.

Since the Orisha represents the deeper, transcendent self of the person, the Orisha is already present in the individual in a latent state. The initiation process serves to teach the person to manifest this level of his or her being, which corresponds to a specific form of higher reality or consciousness, when given the proper stimulus of particular drum rhythms played in the appropriate ceremonial context. When the spiritual presence and energy of the Orisha is manifest, the worldly consciousness and personality of the individual are absent, replaced by the superior presence of the Orisha. The initiate has, in a sense, become the Orisha in manifesting or incorporating him or her and, hence, has no personal recall of the state. People speak of the Orishas they incorporate in the third person, as distinct from themselves, and may claim some possession of, but no responsibility for, the Orisha's behavior. A woman may say, for example, that she had been told her Oshun had danced beautifully during a given ceremony and wished she might have seen her. Everyone's Orisha does not choose to “descend” into the person's body. It is a privilege for those so chosen to be graced with the opportunity to increase their spiritual energy while serving the

rest of the community as the vehicles for the presence of their spiritual caretakers.

The public Candomblé ceremonies for the Orishas, which represent only a small portion of the spiritual activities of a *terreiro*, are cultural pageants reenacting elements of Yoruba spiritual reality and history. Attendees as well as participants in the ceremonies acquire spiritual energy as a result of the presence of the Orishas with whom they enter into closer contact and harmony, and this energy serves to help them improve the quality of their lives. A small quantity of the favorite foods of the feted Orisha is placed on his or her altar for the Orisha to absorb its spiritual essence, and the rest is served to all of the people present at the ceremony. People who share in these feasts with the Orishas thus ingest some of their *ashe*. The relationship between humans and Orishas is one of interdependence. In addition to the humans' need of the Orishas, the latter can only exist to the extent that humans serve them by feeding them and lending them their bodies in which to dance the details of their continuing existence.

Ialorisha Stela of Oshossi described these ceremonies as being like birthday parties in which a Candomblé community honors the Orishas. The Candomblé community expresses its happiness with the blessings it has received from its spiritual guides during the year and shares this happiness with the public. The specific Orishas who "descend" are, in addition to the one being feted, those who have a special relationship to the honored Orisha. In a ceremony for Ogun, for example, one can expect his brother Oshossi to come. And two bellicose Oguns who appear at the same time will dance a symbolic duel and need to be separated by the priest or priestess or an attendant. In a ceremony for Shango, his wives Oshun and Yansan are likely to appear. His third wife Oba usually does not incorporate in her devotees, but if she does, she will fight with Oshun in reenactment of their divine rivalry.

Most of the activities of a *terreiro*, however, are not public, but concern only its initiates and their Orishas. And every public ceremony of several hours is preceded and succeeded by private preparations, ritual acts, and ceremonies internal to the house and its members that may last for several days. The *terreiro's* public ceremonies are, thus, midway between the syncretized mass festivities that have become profanized street fairs, such as the Washing of the Church of Bomfim, the Present for Yemanjá, and the Feast of Saint Lazarus/Omolú, and the private ritual acts that constitute the real core of the religious life of the Candomblé community.

The Washing of the Church of Bomfim, thus, is the public, and syncretized, counterpart of the private Waters of Oshala ceremony, which begins the new year of each Candomblé house and which, since

the calendar of each house is established on spiritual rather than profane criteria, may or may not be held in January. At the Waters of Oshala ceremony internal to the community, initiates gather to wash the ritual objects of Oshala, purifying them and preparing them to begin the new spiritual year. Initiates take purifying herbal baths for the same purpose. A public ceremony is also held to which Oshala comes to be honored and feted in the persons of his initiates.

Ceremonies for Yemanjá in each house also may or may not correspond to the timing of the large citywide public festivities in her honor. Thus, *terreiros* either may give their annual presents to Yemanjá in the ocean as a part of the mass public festivity on February 2 or may do so more privately at a different time. In the latter case, members of the Candomblé community will, depending on proximity, drive to or walk in a procession to the ocean to give presents of flowers, perfume, and other such pretty things to the beautiful Orisha of the seas. They will also hold a ceremony in their *terreiro* beforehand or afterward to which the public may come to honor Yemanjá and to benefit from her presence.

Other rituals internal to the *terreiro* have no public counterparts, having to do only with the relationship between the initiates of the house and their Orishas. Such rituals include those revolving around initiation, for example, which are completely private. The presentation of the new initiates in a public ceremony at the end of the initiation period serves as a “coming out” party reintegrating them into the larger community. Initiates also perform frequent “obligations” to strengthen their relationship with their Orishas during the course of the year, which might involve their staying in the *terreiro* for several days. They additionally undergo further degrees of initiation at specific intervals to increase their degree of knowledge of and participation in the nature of the spiritual force guiding them in life. Only after seven years can one be fully initiated.

One private ceremony that takes place when an individual is determined by the priestess or priest to need it is a *bori*, which involves the energizing of the relationship between a person and the guardian Orisha by purifying and “feeding” the individual’s head in which the Orisha resides. A *bori* may be prescribed when the person will need special strength for an important undertaking or when one’s state of health or general well-being clearly needs a boost. On this occasion, after the person is ritually bathed in water containing the leaves of the Orisha, the foods of the Orisha are literally placed on the individual’s head so that they will transfer their energy, the energy of the Orisha, to the initiate. The “feeding of the head” is thus a concrete act representing a symbolic and spiritual process. The individual should then be able to translate this energy into daily life activities.

The *raison d'être* of the Candomblé and the purpose of all of the rituals, especially the private internal ones, but also the public ones, is to increase human participation in the *ashe*, the spiritual force of the universe. The Orishas represent the principles that allow what is potential to exist—the forces behind all existence that make the vital processes of life occur, become, and evolve. Like other force and energy, *ashe* can be transmitted. It can be conducted by material and symbolic means to people and objects, and it can be accumulated or diminished. It can only be acquired through some sort of contact, either objective or symbolic/energetic, with the Orishas.<sup>11</sup>

Ritual activities put people in touch with the *ashe* of the universe as represented by the Orishas. Through specific and diverse forms of ritual, *ashe* may be freed, canalized, or temporarily accumulated and may be transmitted to people and things, consecrating and empowering them. Each *terreiro* has its own *ashe* that allowed it to be established and that allows it to continue. This *ashe* is concretized and symbolized in a specific ensemble of natural elements representing the Orishas and containing some of their energy that are buried in the earth under the temple into which the Orishas come to dance. These elements are reenergized both by the Orishas' presence during ceremonies and by the human community's veneration of the Orishas at those times. The ritual objects of the *terreiro* are loci and accumulators of *ashe* that must be frequently replenished. They are replenished or reenergized as a result of the offerings made to them by the humans who employ them to strengthen their ties with the Orishas they represent and thus keep the energy flowing through the objects.

The initiates of a *terreiro* are also receptors and retransmitters of *ashe* from the Orishas to the *terreiro*, and the older and more active a Candomblé house is and the more initiates and rituals it has accumulated over its history, the stronger is its *ashe*. During initiation, initiates receive, in addition to the *ashe* of their principal Orisha, some of the *ashe* of the *terreiro*, which is subsequently used on a personal level as well as being shared with the larger community during public ceremonies. The higher the level of an individual's degree of initiation, the more *ashe* she or he has and can accumulate, control, share, and redistribute. Only through initiation does a person learn to have knowledge of and access to this *ashe* and learn how to control and use it. Strong priestesses or priests have, because of their intense and intimate relationship with the Orishas, a good deal of *ashe* that allows them to be efficacious and to transmit this positive energy to the house, to their initiates, and to the larger community. The high level of

<sup>11</sup> Juana Elbein dos Santos, *Os Nagô e a Morte* (Petrópolis, Rio de Janeiro: Editora Vozes, 1977), pp. 36, 39.

dynamism of a Candomblé house is self-perpetuating and is both the source and the proof of its strong *ashe*.<sup>12</sup>

During ritual acts, *ashe* is received, developed, shared, and redistributed. Rituals and ritual activities comprise a range of power and type, and rituals for various Orishas involve different types of energies. The Waters of Oshala ceremony, which essentially renews the life of the *terreiro* and its human congregation for another year, is very powerful, for example. And, because Orishas like Omolu, Ogun, and Oshun represent very different realms of natural and human life, the energies involved in their rituals are different, and are put to use for specific purposes.<sup>13</sup> A ritual for Omolu, for example, might logically be most appropriate for healing, one for Ogun for a business enterprise involving technology, and one for Oshun for seducing a lover or beginning a family.

Ritual acts that involve *ashe* also include bowing to the Orishas before their altars or when they are incorporated in ceremonies, and reciting their *oriki* or praise words. These words themselves contain energy and convey something of the special power of the particular Orisha.<sup>14</sup> The most intimate ritual act is, of course, that of being possessed by the energy—the spiritual force—of an Orisha; of making this energy manifest by incarnating it in one's flesh; of incorporating, lending one's body to it; of having one's head taken over by the superior energy; of being filled with one's own source of vital energy as represented by one's spiritual master or mistress; of dancing for and as the Orisha; of actually becoming the Orisha.

#### LEVELS OF REALITY IN THE CANDOMBLÉ

The doctrine and beliefs of the Candomblé are acted out in the most fundamental gestures of human life as well as within more esoteric public and private ritual activities. The Candomblé has no sacred books. Its theories and principles must be concretized in real life in order to exist. There is no gulf between the natural and supernatural, between the profane and the sacred. The human and the superhuman are not really distinct. They interpenetrate and can become one another. The Orishas have human qualities and some humans lend their bodies to the Orishas in order to allow the spiritual beings to join the human community.

There is also no discontinuity between humans and the natural realm that surrounds them because the forces of nature—of earth, air,

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 39–40, 43.

<sup>13</sup> de Azevedo Santos.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

water, and fire—are anthropomorphized. The spirit of the wind, Yansan, dances in a frenzied manner like the winds of storm, is an emancipated woman, eats *acarajé*, and dresses in red. The spirit of thunder, the divinized king Shango, is a polygamous womanizer, dances very energetically, and likes to eat goat.

Thus, the forces of nature are translated into, distilled down to, manageable human dimensions so that people can interact with and even influence them to be benevolent, to guide and protect them, and to bestow blessings upon them. Because the Orishas, the “personifications of the phenomena of nature,” are associated with specific leaves, animals, foods, minerals, colors, and human activities, social principles, and interactions, people can be constantly in rapport with their spiritual energies via the intermediaries of any of these elements. There is, therefore, continuity between the natural, human, and spiritual realms.

The Candomblé is a system for apprehending and comprehending the entirety of reality—natural and supernatural, human and non-human, individual and social—of interpreting both the way things generally are in the world as well as the details of day-to-day occurrences. The religious system allows people to understand the nature of the forces of the universe and provides specific ways of entering into and maintaining proper contact with them in order to promote social harmony as well as individual well-being. The Candomblé is both a philosophical system that allows for understanding and interpretation and a pragmatic set of corresponding practices—some part of ordinary daily life routines and some specifically ritual acts.

The religion is based on the fundamental assumption that because of the continuity and intimate interaction between the human, super-human, and natural realms of the universe, and because of the possibility for humans to learn through initiation to establish harmony with these other realms, the Orishas who personify them will take care of their human children. The Candomblé, then, is a microcosm of the realms of the universe, which take on human form during ceremonies as people try to influence, through establishing harmonious relationships with them, the powerful forces that ultimately control their lives.

Ialorisha Stela of Oshossi asserts that there are various levels on which the Candomblé must be understood. Different categories of people have access to different levels of understanding because of their varying degrees of preparation and knowledge. The Candomblé, in addition to being a religious system, is also a science, according to the priestess. The African ancestors who created this system of understanding and interacting with the forces of the universe had obviously figured out the complex interrelationships between human beings and



these natural elements and had determined how humans could enter into conscious contact with and influence nature for their own purposes. These ancestors also created both exoteric and esoteric levels of explanation corresponding to the roles and responsibilities of the various actors in the system.<sup>15</sup>

The divine history of the Orishas, for example, may be seen as a symbolic system created by the African ancestors as a simplified explanation, accessible to even the uninitiated, of the workings of the universe. It is a level of explanation satisfactory and functional for the large category of people whose knowledge of the system remains on the most exoteric level, who are content to accept what some may see as mythology as historical fact, and who are satisfied that the Orishas really are supernatural beings who periodically take possession of their bodies to come into the human community to dance the divine events of their lives. These individuals are honored to serve as vehicles for the pleasure of the Orishas, feel ennobled by their roles, and acquire a sense of personal well-being and importance from their function of transmitting the Orishas' supernatural force to their larger social milieu.

Afro-Bahian philosopher Edson Nunes da Silva analyzes the Candomblé as a religious system, the foundation of which is a complex science of life and nature. Most participants in it, however, are aware only of the symbols of the exoteric system, a system that actually revolves around a mythology based on fundamental scientific principles. Comparing the Afro-Brazilian religion to other religious systems, Nunes da Silva concludes that in the Candomblé as in:

Biblical, Brahmanic, Vedic, Taoist, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, and Islamic studies, we perceive that science was seen as divine, and therefore esoteric. Studies concerning the primary elements, substances such as water, earth, air, fire, and ether, were expressed for the common people within a poetic form with divinized symbols, the substances appearing as gods, and worshipped as deities because of their responsibility for creation. Thus, the "unformed" speculated about on the basis of intuitive knowledge was symbolized by the god Chaos by the Greeks . . . ; the sky, that azure amplitude that is still an unknown to present day science, was the god Uranus; the waters were represented by the gods Oceanus, Yemanjá, Olokun, from which life was born; fire, the sparkling and exterminating element of nature, was Agni, Shango, Jupiter, Thor; human activities, the expressions of nature in giving and extinguishing life, also became, among the common people, divine manifestations; nature as manifest in plants, the source of life, was symbolized by the deities Ceres, Orisha Oko; war by Mars, Ogun; illness by Omolu.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Edson Nunes da Silva, *Fontes da Cultura Popular Afro-Brasileira: Yemanjá, Um Símbolo Cosmogônico* (Salvador, Bahia: Secretária Municipal de Educação e Cultura, Prefeitura Municipal da Cidade do Salvador, 1958), pp. 15–16 (my translation).

Nunes da Silva also describes the Orishas as “vibrations,” as energetic frequencies, and as specific forms of individual psychic organization. The specific elements in other categories of life—colors, animals, plants, metals, rocks, or foods—in the animal, vegetable, and mineral worlds to which the Orishas are related are also energetic, also have vibrations, as the “animists” who created the religions of Africa and elsewhere have long known, and as European and American scientists are now discovering through such sophisticated technological processes as Kirlian photography and such concepts as bioplasm.<sup>17</sup>

According to Nunes da Silva, the elements associated with the Orishas are related to one another on the energetic level. The animals sacrificed to them, the leaves used for baths to strengthen the ties between them and their devotees, the vegetable foods offered to them and eaten in spiritual communion by humans, and the material symbols used to represent them are all related to their energetic frequencies. This energy can be accumulated, condensed, reinforced, and transferred from one domain to another. The colored beads worn by devotees, for example, and other objects representing the Orishas, are of no spiritual value until they have been washed by a priestess or priest with leaves associated with the Orishas and put in contact with the other sources of the Orishas’ *ashe*, such as the blood of animals sacrificed to them. These now sacralized objects become accumulators of energy that can help an individual to remain centered, in harmony with the universe, as well as being protected from harm by the energy of the Orisha. The *bori* ceremony involves fortifying the relationship with one’s Orisha through contributions of energy from the animal, vegetable, and human worlds—by increasing the person’s spiritual energy level or *ashe*, which can then be used directly in life undertakings.<sup>18</sup>

It is important, therefore, that people’s Orishas be determined correctly and early in life so that they, as constituents of this world of energetic vibrations, can ascertain with which elements of natural phenomena and of the animal, vegetable, mineral, and human domains they are most closely related, and how to best interact with those and with the others. On the basis of such understanding, people should be able to live their lives in the best way possible by establishing and maintaining harmony with the universe. Human disharmony with the natural elements, based on either ignorance or misdirected choice, is

<sup>17</sup> Edson Nunes da Silva, *Nossa Herança Yorubá: Um Estudo de Antropologia Filosófica* (Salvador, Bahia: Prefeitura Municipal da Cidade do Salvador, 1975), pp. 128, 134–35, 146–47, and *Estrutura do Pensamento Afro-Brasileiro (Eminismo): Sinopse Filosófica* (Salvador, Bahia: Secretária Municipal de Educação e Cultura, Prefeitura Municipal da Cidade do Salvador, 1975), pp. 20–21, 28.

<sup>18</sup> Nunes da Silva, *Nossa Herança Yorubá*, and *Estrutura do Pensamento Afro-Brasileiro (Eminismo)*.

disruptive to both individual lives and community social life and is also, thus, disruptive to the natural harmony of the encompassing universe. The forces of the universe, consequently, unleash disequilibrium on human society in the form of the storms of Shango and Yansan, the tempestuous seas of Yemanjá, and the epidemics of Omolu.

The person charged in Nigeria with the knowledge and responsibility for determining a person's Orisha/vibration and divining his or her life path and process, and who undergoes long years of complex training to learn such skills, is called a *babalawo*, "father of secrets," because he is the major repository of the esoteric knowledge on which the exoteric symbols and behavior of the religion are based. He knows the nature of the universe and the relationships between its constituents. He knows where and how human beings fit into this overall scheme, and how to determine the proper role of each individual in its dynamic harmonic pattern. In Brazil this specialized function has passed into the domain of the *ialorishas* and *babalorishas*. The best of these Candomblé priestesses and priests are those deeply knowledgeable about this esoteric level of the religion that for most initiates mainly involves personally incarnating a spiritual being, and for the uninitiated may appear to represent no more than colorful, and perhaps intriguing, ceremonial pageantry.

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