

Bettina E. Schmidt, University of Wales Trinity Saint David

**The 'Re-Africanisation' of the Brazilian Religion Candomblé and the Holy War
against the African Orixás (gods) in Brazil**

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Brazil is confronted with radical transformations, not only in the social and political sectors but also in the religious. Though the majority of Brazilians (73.89% according to the 2000 national census) still declare their belonging to Roman Catholicism, the number declines. The national statistics (2000) indicate that a growing number of Brazilians belong to one of the numerous Protestant churches (already 15.4% in 2000 with a rising tendency). Both groups together come to nearly 90% of Brazilians. The remaining 10% are divided between spiritists (1.3%), adherents of an Afro-Brazilian religion (0.3%), agnostics or atheists (7.4%), and members of another religion such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism (1.7%).

These numbers, however, do not cover all practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions because many still avoid being identified with an Afro-Brazilian tradition. Often they will declare being Roman Catholic or even Atheist instead of a member of an Afro-Brazilian community. Sometimes, the term Spiritism is used as an umbrella term to avoid discrimination; hence the number of adherents of Afro-Brazilian religions is probably larger. Nonetheless, even if we take Spiritism and Afro-Brazilian religions together, only 3% of Brazilians declared practising a religion in this category in 2000 though when one reads the novels by Jorge Amado and other artists one assume that the worship of the Orixas is the core of Brazil.

However, sociologists are more puzzled by the incredible demographic shift from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism and in particular to Pentecostalism, which also affects Afro-Brazilian religions. While mainstream, mission-related churches have been relatively tolerant towards local traditions, the Pentecostal movement usually does not accommodate them. The Brazilian form of Pentecostalism, labelled neo-Pentecostalism by Ricardo Mariano (in his MPhil thesis in 1995, published in 1999), is even on a crusade against Afro-Brazilian religions, Spiritism and related religions.

This shift towards neo-Pentecostal churches affects the Afro-Brazilian religions in their heart and some communities have begun to develop coping strategies. For some communities the answer is an increasing institutionalization. By building joint federations and simultaneously

improving the public image of Afro-Brazilian religions they hope to counter the decline of members. However, an outcome of this strategy is a shift in the discourse about authenticity and origin.

Candomblé is still the most highly regarded Afro-Brazilian religion today. It represents a conglomerate of African traditions that were transformed into Brazilian ones during the 19th century. When enslaved Africans arrived in Brazil, they continued – despite prohibition – to practise African customs and developed in a relatively unorganized way ‘culto africano’ (African cult). This was already a creolized form because it combined the traditions of various African ethnic groups. During the 19th century ‘casas de candomblé’ (candomblé houses) were established which became the birthplace of the tradition combined today under the term Candomblé (or better Candomblés) in order to honour local variations.

The Bahian version of Candomblé emphasizes the Nago nation which derived from the Yoruba tradition. Candomblé Jêje derived mainly from the Ewe-Fon tradition and Candomblé Angola or Congo from a group of traditions usually labelled Bantu. Another tradition is called Xangô, after the Yoruba deity with the same name, hence it resembles Candomblé Nago. And in addition there is Tambor de Mina that has a strong influence from Dahomey (today’s Benin) and many similarities with the Haitian religion Vodou. Reginaldo Prandi categorizes the different forms of Candomblé and the other Afro-Brazilian religions as ethnic religions (2005, 13-14). They all developed in certain areas of Brazil: Tambor de Mina, for instance, in the state of Maranhão, Batuque in Rio Grande do Sul and in the Amazonian region, Macumba in Rio de Janeiro, and Xangô in Recife (Harding 2005, 120) – each region with a strong historical link to slavery (e.g. slave market or large sugar plantations).

After the final abolition of slavery in 1888, the constitution of the new republic, in 1889, declared freedom of religion and abolished Roman Catholicism as the official religion of Brazil. However, Afro-Brazilian religions were still prosecuted throughout the 20th century and Catholicism remained the ‘almost official’ religion (Mariano 2001, 145, quoted by Oro 2006a, 9), despite the constitutional separation of state and church. Only in 1965 it became possible to legalize Afro-Brazilian places of worship by civil registration and for religious communities to apply for tax exempt status as non-profit, charitable institutions (Brown 1986, 3). In particular animal sacrifice, which is an important obligation in all Afro-Brazilian

religions and a crucial part of many rituals, was the target of legal prosecution – and is still the target of campaigns against Afro-Brazilian religions, despite all efforts of some outstanding priests and priestesses of Afro-Brazilian religions to increase the visibility and acceptance of their religions. The result is the lack of nationwide institutionalization, which, as Prandi complains, affects the growth of Afro-Brazilian religions (Prandi 2005, 223-32, quoted in Malandrino 2006, 40). It also supports the persistent identification of Afro-Brazilian traditions with local regions.

However, due to the growing internal migration within Brazil, these local religions migrate, too, especially now that the practice of Afro-Brazilian traditions can be legalized in Brazil. Consequently, one can find different forms of Candomblé in every large city of Brazil. This process increases competition: for membership between different terreiros, for authority between different priests and priestesses, and about the ‘purest’ African tradition. Pressure is even enforced by the recent spread of a so-called ‘Yoruba tradition’ in Brazil. Initiated by Nigerian immigrants who establish and then lead the communities, it is meant to (re)introduce the ‘correct’ Yoruba tradition and in particular the cult of ifá.

The consequence of this competition is a growing demarcation between terreiros and less willingness to cooperate. Even when priests and priestesses attend ceremonies in other terreiros, they will always insist, to members of their own community, that their own way to conduct the rituals is the best, the only effective or the ‘true’ African way. However, the ‘ordinary’ adherent is often ‘shopping around’ and open-minded towards new ‘offers’ on the market of religious traditions. The result of this increasing mobility is an ongoing interaction between different religious communities and different traditions.

The belief system of these religions is based around the worship of the African deities who can incorporate a human being. The incorporation or possession is the core of the religious practice, crucial to most rituals. However, it is also reason for many misconceptions held by devotees of other religions against the Afro-Brazilian traditions. Equally important is the consultation of one’s fate through oracle reading by the priest (jogo de búzios) and the sacrifices to the orixás, another highly controversy aspect and highly criticised by outsiders. The devotion of the orixás comprises lifelong obligations and the fulfilment of extensive rituals.

The term neo-Pentecostalism was coined by Ricardo Mariano to highlight the fundamental differences between 'traditional' Pentecostalism and the 'modern' form (in his MPhil thesis in 1995, in 1999 published). This term is used today to describe the Brazilian form of Pentecostalism that is quite different from the one introduced early in the 20th century by mostly North American missionaries. The Assembly of God, for instance, one of the 'traditional' Pentecostal movements, vehemently rejects any comparison between Umbanda and Pentecostalism in general (quoted in Alencar 2005, 101).

The largest organisation is the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, short form: UCKG). Though the relationship between the neo-Pentecostal groups and the Afro-Brazilian religions was never good, it worsened in 1994/1995 when the UCKG declared a Holy War against them. Despite – or perhaps because of – constant attacks against the Afro-Brazilian religions, it is obvious that people who have practised Umbanda join the Pentecostal churches in great numbers, in particular the UCKG.

The UCKG was founded in Rio de Janeiro in 1977 by Edir Macedo Bezerra who still leads the church as bishop in a quite authoritarian manner. Macedo, born into a Catholic family, attended umbanda terreiros until he converted to the New Life Pentecostal Church in the 1960s. For ten years he worked with Walter Robert McAlister, the Canadian founder of the church, in Rio de Janeiro until he decided to found his own church, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. In just few years the UCKG outnumbered the New Life Pentecostal Church in membership and national significance. The UCKG today owns in Brazil TV and radio stations, several newspapers and journals and has more than three million members in Brazil alone (Oliva 1995, 2-3). After it entered Brazilian politics in 1986 it has soon managed to get several delegates elected to the Federal Congress, the Constituent National Assembly and other legislative assemblies on national and local level (see Oro 2005). Some even say that President Lula won his election only with the support of the UCKG. However, it is no longer only a Brazilian phenomenon but present today in more than thirty countries. The UCKG is probably the largest and most important new church in the so-called developing world (Corten, Dozer & Oro 2003, 13).

In the centre of the UCKG theology is the demonic possession with the liberation ceremony on Fridays as the core function. Satan and the demons are regarded as inferior spirits (Oliva 1995, 99) who constantly disturb 'the mental, physical and spiritual order', according to

Macedo the main problem (Oliveria 1998, 112). Satan and the demons are responsible for all the misery and evil in the world. It is the responsibility of everyone to intervene and to 'liberate' the world – and oneself – from demons. The other religions but in particular the Afro-Brazilian religions, are guilty for bringing demons into the world while the UCKD frees the world of demons.

For the UCKG Satan and the demons exist as personified beings and not only in a symbolic manner. Demons were created by Satan who is their leader while Satan was created by God but was expelled from heaven. Demons can manifest themselves as spirits without body or heart who bring evil into the world. Salvation can bring only God's word. Pimentel interprets the figure of Satan in the UCKG as the result of syncretism between the perception of Satan in US-Pentecostalism and aspects of Afro-Brazilian traditions, in particular umbanda in Rio de Janeiro (2005, 38). However, demons are also the gods of the Greek and Roman Antique, Egypt, Mesopotamia as well as from the African cosmologies, Asian religions and so on.

The UCKD distinguishes sharply between the divine inspiration by the Holy Spirit, since the end of the 19th century a central aspect of the Pentecostal movement, and the demonic possession and rejects any attempt to compare both. According to the UCKG theology demons cannot really incorporate a body or possess the soul; both make a substantial unity and cannot be controlled by demons.

The relationship between Pentecostalism and the Afro-Brazilian religions and espiritismo was never good when one considers the classification of the African deities, umbanda guías and spirits of the dead as demons within Pentecostal theology. Walter Robert McAlister of the New Life Pentecostal Church in Rio de Janeiro published in 1968 a hugely popular manifest with a verbal attack of the Afro-Brazilian religions, *Mãe de Santo*. In this book he describes the life story of a candomblé priestess (mãe de santo), Georgina Aragão dos Santos, and her conversion to Pentecostalism. This biography outlines McAlister's strategies of the spiritual battle against Afro-Brazilian demons that later inspired Macedo and other to follow him on this path. In the 1980s the aggression of neo-Pentecostalism towards the Afro-Brazilian religions increased slowly until in the 1990s open hostility broke out (Mariano 1995, 99).

Following McAlister's example Macedo, too, published a book in which he attacked the Afro-Brazilian religious experience in such a way that legal actions were taken against the

book and later editions had to be revised. In *Orixás, caboclos & guías: deuses ou demônios?* (1988) he outlines his doctrine and states that anyone who attends terreiros or spiritist centros is an 'easy target' for demonic attacks. Even family members or friends can become targets of these demons as he explains with several testimonies of converts who have attended Afro-Brazilian ceremonies before converting to the UCKG. However, the book's biggest impact came from the many photos of Afro-Brazilian rituals, in particular the ones showing a blood sacrifice, the 'Achilles heel' of Afro-Brazilian religions as Gonçalves da Silva states (2007, 214). Taken out of context they confirm the prejudices against Afro-Brazilian religions for being 'bloody' and 'primitive'. And not only animals are being sacrificed but humans as well as Macedo writes in his book.

Then, in 1994/1995, the UCKG declared the Holy War against macumba, a bit later against all Afro-Brazilian religions and espiritismo. Despite religious freedom and an increasing visibility of Afro-Brazilian culture the UCKD attacked increasingly aggressive aspects of the religious practice of Afro-Brazilian religions. In particular the incorporation and spirit mediumship became the target of Neo-Pentecostal pastors who demonized and even ridiculed the practice on national TV. It also became custom to encourage their congregation to confront the members of terreiros in their neighbourhood. These 'confrontation' often had (and still have) violent character as Gonçalves da Silva reports. He collected from newspaper articles numerous reports about Neo-Pentecostals invading terreiros with the intent of destroying altars and other religious symbols and exorcising everyone they encounter. He even found cases where members of a UCKG attacked umbandistas with stones or where they kidnapped a woman in order to convert her (2007, 217). However, more common is the organization of marches around a terreiro or the broadcasting of hymns via loudspeaker. The aim is to intimidate the visitors of a terreiro and prevent them from entering or to disturb rituals inside the terreiro. Gonçalves da Silva also mentions distributing leaflets and preaching (with loudspeaker) during public ceremonies such as the festival for Iemanjá in Rio de Janeiro (2007, 218).

Almeida describes the attack against the wide range of 'catholic-afro-kardecist' religions as the 'war of the possessions' (title of the article published in 2003). But also Roman Catholicism and some aspects of popular Catholicism such as the worship of saints were

targeted by the UCKG who sees a demon behind every image of a saint (Oliva 1995, 45, Pimentel 2005, 61). However, the UCKG had to learn that certain Catholic icons are too powerful. In 1996 a pastor dared to kick the statue of the National Patron of Brazil, Nossa Senhora Aparecida, in a service that was broadcast on TV. This (infamous) 'kicking the saint'-incident hit back and the UCKG, including Macedo himself, had to apologise - in public – against this attack against the Virgin Mary (Almeida 2003, 321, Birman/Lehmann 1999:150).

Unfortunately the attacks against the Afro-Brazilian religions continue until today as I could observe in 2010 in São Paulo. Though the late pai Francelino won a court case against the UCKG that would have forced them to broadcast daily for a week a one-hour documentary with a statement of afro-Brazilian religious leaders on the UCKG TV station (nationwide), the decision was overruled before the first broadcast (personal information in May 2010 in São Paulo). However, it has demonstrated the power of legal resistance and encouraged other mães and pais de santo to pursue Pentecostal pastors in court (see Gonçalves da Silva 2007, 221-222). And there are other ways to show resistance, for instance by organizing a peaceful march around the neighbourhood in order to show their commitment and solidarity. In March 2010 mãe Marcia in São Paulo organised a procession in her neighbourhood that led from a terreiro nearby to her terreiro where she conducted together with the pai de santo of the other terreiro a public ceremony to celebrate the beginning of the new ritual year. Another way to resist against the constant attacks is wearing demonstratively 'African' dresses and colours even when going to the supermarket. Pai Francisco told me that it is not enough to dress in special African-style dresses during festivals; it is more important to show in everyday life situation one's commitment to an Afro-Brazilian religion (during an interview on 21st of May 2010 in São Paulo). Another contribution in this struggle is the growing number of African culture cultural centres and initiatives against religious intolerance. At the inauguration of a Centro Cultural Africana in Barra Funda, São Paulo, several of the speakers mentioned the significance of the mães and pais de santo for the Afro-Brazilian heritage and special prepared certificates were handed out to some of the priests and priestesses (on 18th May 2010).

Hence, another way to 'fight back' is to highlight the impact Afro-Brazilian traditions have had on the Brazilian national culture. Brazilian art is inspired by the stories of the African

deities. Brazilian novels, songs and even the visual art are enriched by Candomble and the other Afro-Brazilian religions. The result is that Candomblé is regarded today as being at the centre of the national culture. While Roger Sansi criticises the ‘dialectic process of exchange between the leaders of Candomblé and a cultural elite of writers, artists and anthropologists in Bahia’ (2007:2) because it generated an ‘unprecedented objectification’ of the Afro-Brazilian culture, I see it also as a chance for the Afro-Brazilian religions.

It is undoubted that the re-Africanisation of Candomble has indeed reduced the religious pantheon by excluding some spiritual entities and practices. In becoming part of the national culture Candomblé had to stress its ‘African’ heritage by purifying its pantheon from every Brazilian (hence, syncretic) element such as the devotion of Saints as well as the inclusion of the caboclos, the spirits of the Amerindians. The process can be seen as a result of the influence of intellectuals (as well as anthropologists) on the Afro-Brazilian religious communities. However, I argue that an even stronger influence can be traced back to the religious transformation process that changes Brazilian society, in particular the growing Pentecostal presence in Brazil.

Hence, I regard the re-Africanisation of Candomblé as an (unexpected) outcome of the increasing public hostility towards its African spirits. By highlighting the very aspects that the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God declares to be demonic, devotees of Candomblé and the other Afro-Brazilian religions demonstrate an incredible strength of resistance as well as reliance in the power of the orixás. The outcome is an ambiguous picture of Brazil. While the new census will show – as academics predict already – an even further decline of people declaring openly their belonging to an Afro-Brazilian religion, the Brazilian national folklore is filled with images of African deities and their stories. The victims of this process are the marginal religious entities that have enriched Afro-Brazilian religions in the past.

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