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**THINGS OF AFRICA:
RETHINKING
CANDOMBLÉ IN
BRAZIL**

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Things of Africa: Rethinking Candomblé in Brazil

ABSTRACT

Candomblé is the most well known of the Afro-Brazilian religions. The question of the relationship of Africa to the Afro-Brazilian religions has been the subject of a considerable amount of attention from anthropology, yet the manner of this relationship has traditionally been seen in terms either historical – i.e. Africa simply as the origin of these religions – or political – Africa used as a tool for various means by practitioners of Candomblé. A new interpretation of Candomblé should be considered; one that focuses attention on to the question of ritual efficacy and ritual production. Given such an interpretation, the question of Africa can be cast in a new light. Following an overview of anthropological approaches to Candomblé, including such a new interpretation, existing ethnographic examples will be analysed in order to examine just what the notion of Africa could entail to the adepts of Candomblé themselves.

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INTRODUCTION

A major concern of my argument is to analyze human motivation at a radical level – one that cuts deeper than the very fashionable clichés about the “interests” of corporations, political players, classes, “calculating man”, and so forth. This does not mean that I am blissfully and naïvely unaware that such interests exist, or unconscious of the practical and ideological force of “interest” in the modern world. It means that I would like to consider such interests as a subset, or surface phenomenon, of more elemental questions.

Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*

The argument here developed out of an interest in the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé, and a sense that much of the anthropology of Candomblé fails to take account of certain aspects which are fundamental to the people involved. My interest is in the question of the ongoing relationship with Africa, and with so-called processes of Africanization. These issues are not exclusive to Brazil, but reach the other Afro-diasporic sites of Cuba, the United States, and indeed the rest of the Caribbean. One starting point that I began from is the premise that approaches to this question of Africanization always begin with predetermined, even prejudiced, interpretations of Candomblé practice. Thus I saw, and still see, the possibility of looking at this question in an alternative manner; as an example of native concerns.

This argument is a sketch, an outline of a possible alternative, made precisely because this alternative does not exist. This alternative would rely on a thorough ethnography, albeit one that did not impose existing assumptions on to the encounter with Candomblé. I did not have the time or

resources for such a project, and hence this paper is not based on direct fieldwork, but instead on ethnography by other people. This ethnography has been taken as a resource, from which I am suggesting certain possibilities and avenues to pursue. No apologies are made for the tentative nature of this sketch, principally because I believe that this demonstrates the need for a future project of Candomblé, one that will begin with the understanding that these are real indigenous concerns, and should be tackled as such. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro said, “the art of anthropology is the art of determining the problems posed by each culture, not the art of finding solutions to those problems posed by our own” (2003: 9). This being the case, it is perhaps time to state in more detail the nature of the problem(s) - and the culture – are that I wish to discuss here.

CANDOMBLÉ, BRAZIL, AFRICA

Afro-Brazilian religion is a subject that has occupied the attention of anthropology for well over a hundred years, back to the early inceptions of the discipline itself. The early social scientists of Brazil (principally Nina Rodrigues, and followed by Arthur Ramos and Edison Carneiro) focused their attention upon these religions, working from the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the opening decades of the twentieth. Seen variously as ongoing survivals from Africa, a result of the legacy of Brazilian slavery, vestiges of ‘African’ culture still surviving in the New World, or as vital and dynamic contributions to the identity of Brazil, these religions were studied and researched continuously. This was mainly by Brazilian anthropologists (Gilberto Freyre, Pedro Calvacanti, Gonçalves Fernandes, and Manuel Querino) and also significantly by French (notably Roger Bastide and Pierre Verger) and American (including work by Melville Herskovits and Ruth Landes) anthropologists.¹

Existing in diverging forms in different parts of the country, the Afro-Brazilian religions are by no means uniform, although here the concern is with what is generally referred to as Candomblé. This is characterized by the presence of divinities called Orixás that possess the followers of Candomblé during ceremonies and rituals, such as in initiation. Candomblé is loosely divided into diverging models of practice, described as nations (*nações*); the predominant ones in modern Brazil being *Nagô*, *Ketu*, *Jeje*, *Angola*, and *Congo*. The word *Candomblé* itself can also refer to the house or temple in which it is practised, more commonly called a *terreiro*. There exist various names for the Afro-Brazilian religions, thus what is understood as *Candomblé* in Bahia (and also in other large urban centres, such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo), is known as *Xangô* in Pernambuco, *Tambor de Mina* in Maranhão and other states of Amazonia, and *Batuque* in southern Brazil (Pierucci and Prandi, 2000: 633). While these various Afro-Brazilian religions have various configurations, they can also be considered as variants of a single religion which can be signified collectively as *Candomblé* (Motta, 1998: 53).

Even the denomination of ‘Afro-Brazilian’ is not without its problems², but it works at least on a simple level of pointing to the African religious practices from which these Brazilian religions derive. The complex history behind the formation and development of these religions does not need to be recounted here (see Bastide, 1978 for a thorough starting point or Matory, 2005). Rather, what I am concerned with is the question and role (maybe the ‘problem’ in de Castro’s terms) of ‘Africa’ within Candomblé. Understood ‘traditionally’, or ‘historically’, often the problem becomes one of trying to discover the origins, African or otherwise, of various aspects of Candomblé. With some notable exceptions, much of the anthropology that has stepped beyond this still clings on to an interpretative model that neglects certain fundamental questions. Marcio Goldman (2005) calls for a ‘new interpretation’ of Candomblé in order to overcome the dominant understandings of this religion that have been in existence for more than a century. Very often anthropological interpretations of Candomblé focus on the cosmology, mythology, or sophisticated classificatory systems, that, while occupying a central role within Candomblé, are perhaps best understood as serving a different aspect.

¹ For a comprehensive bibliography of important works on the Afro-Brazilian religions, see Reginaldo Prandi’s *O que você precisa ler para saber quase tudo sobre as religiões afro-brasileiras* (2006).

² Marcio Goldman (2005) mentions the ‘inconveniences and imprecisions’ of this term.

INVENTION & TRADITION

Candomblé has often found itself subject to criticism relating to notions of authenticity. As an Afro-American religion, with a history bound up with syncretic processes, the issue of legitimacy is a central concern due to motivations from all sides as to the imposition of a model of authenticity. There are, in Brazil, assertions of *authentic* practice (cf. Dantas, 1988; Matory 2005), from both people within the terreiros and also from the anthropologists of Candomblé (cf. Carneiro 1981; Bastide, 1978), and beyond this there is a motivation from Africa to unite and legitimise the various Afro-American religions (cf. Abimbola, 1979; 1997), or more specifically the Yoruba-centric model that has traditionally dominated the interpretations of the Afro-Brazilian religions (Dantas, 1988; Matory, 1999, 2005). Therefore the issue of legitimacy and authenticity is a predominant one within Candomblé, though this can be interpreted in varying ways:

Although Orisha religions offer textbook examples of ‘invented traditions’, tied to globalization and the emergence of new collective identities, one should not be content to simply identify them as such. What is required is the careful delineation of the specific historical processes by which these traditions were both maintained and reconfigured over time by actors making choices in novel situations.

(Cohen, 2002: 32)

If traditions are seen as inventions then the anthropological search is one for reasons that lie behind these constructions. Africa is invoked as the source of the ritual tradition of Candomblé, but this same Africa is also placed under suspicion, transformed into a political tool of dubious legitimacy (Capone, 2004; Dantas, 1988). Cohen calls for the delineation of specific historical processes, and this is exactly the approach of Matory (1999, 2005, 2005b). However, I would suggest that something further than this is called for - recognition that sometimes these ‘historical processes’ do not offer the only possible means towards understanding the subject. A historically-minded approach to the subject often still makes use of certain preconceived assumptions, and if the overall interpretation of Candomblé is revised then these same historical processes may begin to take on a revised significance. If we can move beyond the very question of the construction or invention of Africa within Candomblé (whether we understand this as ‘authentic’ or not), then perhaps we can begin to really understand what the role - and question - of Africa is.³

FROM TRADITION TO HISTORY

The story of the African diaspora is an important one and is, of course, pivotal to the history of the Afro-Brazilian religions. Interpretations that prioritise this history however, tend to privilege political motivations, at the expense of an understanding of human action and motivation that operates on a more fundamental level - a level whereby the primary consideration for the followers of Candomblé is not political, economical, or structural, but instead is operating on a level centred on practice of ritual. Ritual production which is integral to the structure of Candomblé, but moreover which is the very sphere of action through which the other intellectual systems (mythology, cosmology, etc) operate. This idea will be developed in more detail in the subsequent section, but here I wish to see in what context these historically-orientated interpretations are presented.

Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993) rethought the position of the African diaspora, obviating the need to consider ‘origins’ and ‘homelands’, and instead replacing the centre of

³ Also see the view put forward by Bruno Latour, who claims the “notion of construction... is usually associated with social construction and with the vocabulary of criticism. When we say that nature is ‘constructed’, that God must be ‘produced’, that the person must be ‘fabricated’, it is immediately assumed we are attacking, undermining, criticizing their supposed solidity. [...] For the others (the former ‘others’), construction rhymes with production, authentication and qualification” (2002: 40).

understanding on the geographical space that was crucial to the movement of these people: the eponymous ocean which he saw as critical to not just past but also present conceptions of what it was to be Black, or African. This radical re-thinking of diaspora was influential on the anthropologists of Afro-Brazil, despite Gilroy not focusing on the South American continent. Gilroy was, in the words of James Clifford, “arguing against both modernist linear progressivism and current projections of a continuous connection with Africanity” (1994: 317)⁴.

J. Lorand Matory (1999, 2005, 2005b) explores the world of Candomblé through a historically minded exposé of the cross-Atlantic movements that he sees as being neglected in the story of this religion. Matory is keen to reclaim a sense of agency for the Afro-Brazilians who, he argues, have too often been neglected at the expense of the (predominantly white) Europeans, North Americans or Brazilians, as seen in the exaggerated role given by anthropologists to other anthropologists (cf. Dantas 1988, Motta, 1998). Matory’s account of significant historical traders and merchants, and the idea of a Lagosian Cultural Renaissance (2005: 97, 120) as instrumental in the creation of a Yoruba ethnicity and hence religious dominance are well argued, researched, and explained. It is not my intention to argue with his conclusions, but rather to sidestep them.

Matory is attentive to many of the underlying aspects of Candomblé that were glossed over by other anthropologists of the Afro-Brazilian religions. He utilises Gilroy’s suggestion that what are often thought of as essentially modern world systems (cultural and economic) are in fact much older and have been playing a central role far longer than is sometimes assumed, and also points out that “both African culture and the cultural heterogeneity of American slave populations encouraged ‘additivity’, or the tendency to borrow creatively from numerous cultural traditions rather than to preserve any particular cultural traditions exclusively or purely” (2005: 13). This idea of the essentially incorporative aspect of (West) African religious traditions is endorsed by anthropologists on the African side of the Atlantic (cf. Peel, 1990), and is an aspect of these religions that is sometimes neglected.

In this approach, Africa is understood in a more sophisticated way than it had been previously - Africa is not presented as the putatively distant ‘origin’ for New World religious practice, but is regarded as a site of ongoing importance, bound up with complex transatlantic journeys. It is seen as a site of conflicting and diverging practices and traditions. Yet, I still think that these kind of approaches to Candomblé are not sufficient in regard to the kind of ‘new interpretation’ of Candomblé that has been called for. Thus Matory’s account of the genesis of Yoruba practice and purity focuses on the actions of influential merchants and traders who brought African products and artefacts across the Atlantic, and took ideas and ideologies back and forth with them. This undoubtedly happened. However, does this adequately explain the motivations behind the people who follow Candomblé, and their need, for example, for African herbs, clothes, and other religious paraphernalia? I would suggest that some of the *a priori* assumptions about Candomblé are in need of re-examination and reevaluation. If this is so, then the question that demands to be asked is, firstly, what kind of interpretation of Candomblé *could* make sense of the question of Africa, and secondly, what actually *is* Africa, given this interpretation?

WORKING, MAKING, CRAFTING: AN ALTERNATIVE PICTURE

What if the important aspect of ritual practice for the people that partake – and create – in Candomblé is to be found not in mythology, cosmology or, complex classificatory systems, but instead in the actual *work* that is, in a literal way, being carried out? I use the word *work* here very deliberately, in the sense of craft; an action designed to essentially *make* something. Mythology is important, as is mythological knowledge; of secrets, songs, rhythms, and importantly knowledge of

⁴ Clifford is discussing *diaspora* in general, and insists “on the routing of diaspora discourses in specific maps/histories” (319). However, while this specificity may be desirable in a historical interpretation of diaspora itself, I would question whether this model can be used as a means towards an anthropological understanding of related phenomena, such as Candomblé, without a consideration of certain aspects of this religion that are not understandable solely in terms of political and economic ‘interests’.

how to carry out ritual operations. For knowledge by itself is in a sense incomplete, or rather it is *the potential* for action.

Candomblé is often described as a religion of spirit possession, divination, healing, animal sacrifice, and music. The suggestion here is that these features of the system of Candomblé are subservient to an aspect that operates on a different level; the level of ritual efficacy - the capacity of this religion to effect *transformative* action upon the lives and worlds of its followers. Within anthropology this emphasis is not always stressed, particularly in much of the anthropological literature that takes its cues from the critical models discussed above. The approach here, drawn principally from the work of Marcio Goldman, suggests that the position, and problem, of Africa can be seen in a new light, and that often the ethnography that could reveal these same conclusions has been misinterpreted.

An elaboration of Candomblé cosmology can not omit the importance of *axé*, described by Goldman in the following passage:

[Candomblé cosmology – or even ontology -] involves a kind of monism that supposes the existence of a single essence that diversifies into various modalities that constitute all that exists and that can exist in the universe. This essence, which is clearly similar to the Melanesian notion of *mana* [...], is referred to in Candomblé as *axé*. The diversification of *axé* is initially manifested in the divinities themselves, the Orixás, since each of them incarnates a specific modality of the general essence. In turn, each thing or being that exists in the world – stones, plants, animals, human beings, etc – ‘belongs’ to one of these Orixás to the extent that they share with them this essence, simultaneously general and individual.

(Goldman, 2003, 134)⁵

This concept is central to the idea of ritual efficacy within Candomblé, for ritual is bound up with the movement and distribution of *axé*.⁶ The mention by Goldman of ‘ontology’ is also important, hinting at the kind of ‘ontological’ approach that has been suggested by certain recent anthropologists (Holbraad, 2007; Viveiros de Castro, 2003).

For Goldman, it is within the realm of work and efficacy that the fundamental aspect of Candomblé should be looked for, rather than in cosmology or mythology (2003: 132). So just what is this efficacy? What, exactly, is made? Ritual in Candomblé is typically focused on the initiation of adepts, and further characterised by the possession of followers by their Orixá. The (often elaborate) preparations of a ritual, including music, singing, dancing, decorative costumes and offerings, are part of a process of calling forth the Orixás, but also part of a process of *making*. Goldman states:

‘*Fazer a cabeça*’ and ‘*fazer o santo*’ are the central points of Candomblé and correspond to the ritual production of two entities individualized from a generic substrate, the ‘general Orixá’ [*orixá geral*] and an individual who can be considered still undifferentiated and only potentially destined to be converted into a person.

(2003: 135)⁷

The idea of the construction of the person, realized in initiation, will be picked up later (cf. Goldman 1984), but here what is noted is the emphasis in Candomblé upon construction, for *fazer a cabeça* (to make the head) and *fazer o santo* (to make the saint) are not terms invented by Goldman, but rather the language that Candomblé adepts use themselves.

Goldman sees in all of this a need to refocus the attention that anthropology gives to Candomblé, so that it can be shown how “cosmology, mythology, systems of classification... are in the service of ritual operations” (2003, 8). This kind of ‘praxeological’ approach to Candomblé would thus understand that the fundamental question for followers and practitioners is one of efficacy: ‘does it work?’ We are not just talking about initiation here, but also divination, healing, protection and

⁵ This passage is translated and used by Holbraad, 2007.

⁶ Also see Holbraad, 2007 for a discussion of the Cuban equivalent *ache*.

⁷ Translation from the original Portuguese is mine, as are all subsequent references, unless otherwise indicated.

affliction. In Portuguese this is best described as *feitiçaria*, translatable into English as *magic*, *witchcraft*, or *sorcery*, all of which are potentially problematic terms:

If the qualification of ‘magic’ [*mágico*] could be emptied of its ethnocentric contents that, in the nineteenth century and even today, deny the Afro-Brazilian cults their religious condition, maybe it could be the best designation for this aspect of the system. *Magic* almost in the sense of classic social anthropology: the composition of human will (more than its imposition) with natural and supernatural forces.

(Goldman, 2003: 8)

This placing of efficacy at the centre of Candomblé, with cosmology, mythology, and everything else being somehow in service to this ritual production, casts much of the traditional anthropology of Candomblé in a different light. What we can call witchcraft, or magic, is a very real consideration for those people within the environment of Candomblé. The principal concern then is with the very real power that a *mãe-de-santo* or *pai-de-santo* possesses, capable of producing effects upon the world and life of the initiate (or non-initiate).⁸

This aspect of Candomblé has not gone unnoticed by the anthropologists who have directed their attention here, as Goldman notes. But in this ‘new interpretation’ this *magic* (Goldman’s call for the reconsideration of this term is a valid one) is not a phenomenon to be ‘explained away’. Instead, it is something that, if it strikes the anthropologist as unfamiliar and illogical, must be negotiated precisely *because* of this unfamiliarity (cf. Henare et al, 2007)⁹. What would *we* have to do, in order to arrive at an understanding of this that was not illogical?

Such an interpretation of Candomblé must be grounded in the guiding principle of anthropology itself: the ethnography. It must be shown through close analysis of the ethnographic data, of the material seen, heard, and found in the world of the *terreiro* and in the words and actions of the people who themselves are part of this world. Given that this model proposes the locus of interpretation should be the ritualistic aspect of Candomblé, it is here that any investigation must root itself. Goldman does just this in his analysis of the process of initiation within Candomblé (1984, 2003, 2005). His position is that initiation is essentially the ‘construction’ of the person, and importantly this also entails the construction of the Orixá¹⁰. Goldman writes of the initiatory process:

The most important thing is that the person is not born ready, but is constructed at the end of a process of initiation by way of a series of rituals or ‘obligations’. The person is, therefore, *made*, and initiation, in Candomblé, is called the ‘making of the head’ [*fazer a cabeça*]. There is more. The ‘making of the head’ is, in truth, the counterpart of what is called ‘making of the saint’ [*feitura do santo*] [...]. What is significant is that not only the person, but also the Orixá is constructed in the process of initiation.

(Goldman, 2005: 111, emphasis in original)

This interpretation suggests a revision of how anthropology approaches the matter of what ritual, in these kinds of circumstances, is doing. Following Goldman, Holbraad writes that:

⁸ It must also be noted that within Candomblé there is a distinction between those who are initiated within the religion, who take part in ritual and ‘belong’ to a *terreiro* [*filho-de-santo*], and also those people (clients) who are not strongly affiliated with a *terreiro* but who use the services of the *mãe-de-santo*. Thus they may have a consultation with her (for which they are typically charged), and ask for her services, which could include divination [*jogo os buzios*], protection, or other actions. This is not a rigid distinction, but an indication of the various degrees to which people are involved in Candomblé within Brazil. For both sets of people, although perhaps in different ways, the principal concern, I suggest, is one of efficacy.

⁹ See also Holbraad: “Anthropological analysis, then, becomes a search for concepts that may be adequate to make sense of alien and therefore surprising data.” (2007, 2)

¹⁰ This understanding of what exactly constitutes an Orixá is also found in some of the ethnography focused on West Africa (cf. Karin Barber, 1981). Barber’s elaboration of how “the *òrisà* (‘gods’) are, according to Yoruba traditional thought, maintained and kept in existence by the attention of humans” is particularly relevant to this discussion of ‘cultural invention’

[As] soon as one takes into account the focal significance of witchcraft in the practice of Candomblé, one is forced to conclude that the intellectual stipulations of Candomblé cosmology and anthropology are only posited in order to be transformed... or indeed *transgressed*... in the pragmatics of witchcraft.

(Holbraad, 2007; 252, emphasis in original)

What I will attempt to sketch out in the section that follows is the praxeological importance of Africa to practitioners of Candomblé, taking into account the importance of ‘witchcraft’. Thus, while it can be understood in terms of claims to authenticity, prestige, or as tool towards political or economic power, I would argue that fundamentally it is conceptualized by those who invoke it as an integral source of *axé*, which, as seen above, is a necessary component of ritual, aiming at production, work, or invention.

“Reducing the Afro-Brazilian religions to an intellectual and cognitive system is a grave error” writes Goldman (2003: 8), and this paper aims to avoid that particular pitfall. Understanding Candomblé in the manner proposed above, the role of Africa can be seen not anti-historically, but perhaps *ahistorically*. The complex and detailed history of the Afro-Brazilian religions would not be ignored, but could perhaps be seen as in service to the ‘living aspect’ of the religion, rather than the other way around.

A RETURN TO AFRICA

Extensive reference has been made above to the ‘question’ or ‘problem’ of Africa within Candomblé, yet what we are talking about here is a ‘return’, both literal and symbolic. It is fundamental that we understand this ‘Africanization’ as an ongoing process, a movement, and not a historical event. If there is an ‘ideology’ of *Africanization*, we should perhaps be wary of interpreting this as a homogenous term, understood and used in the same sense by different people.

As others have pointed out (Matory 1999, 2005, 2005b, Gilroy 1993, Cohen 2002), there has been a constant movement of people, goods, and ideas, between Africa and the New World, operating in both directions, long influencing lives and cultures on both sides of the Atlantic. This is not a new phenomenon, nor, contrary perhaps to some common misconceptions, is this a new discovery. The early social scientists who studied Afro-American religions were aware of the links between the two continents. Thus even Edison Carneiro, in the 1930s, found himself perplexed with the ‘movement of return to Africa’ (quoted in Serra, 1995: 59, and a point to which we will return).

So who were these people travelling between Africa and Brazil? They can be divided into some key categories. There were influential traders, identifying themselves as ‘Brazilian’, and as ‘African’, who operated in the movement across these waters, bringing goods to the New World, and exports back to Africa. Many of these were merchants, as Matory shows (1999; 2005: 65, 95, 100, 118-119), or even freed slaves. There were also those in the New World who sent back their children for reasons of (predominantly religious) education to Africa (Serra, 1995: 55; Matory, 2005: 88¹¹), and again, it must be stressed that this was happening long before current attention directed itself on so-called ‘Africanization’. Prandi (1990) reports evidence of this from one of the early chroniclers of Candomblé outside of Bahia, João do Rio, who gave the following statement in 1906:

“Some of the wealthy send their Brazilian descendants to Africa to study religion, others leave their mysteries and sorcery [*feitiçarias*] as a gift to their children who travelled here”

(cited by Prandi, 1990: 49)

Unlike in many other aspects of Candomblé, there does appear to be some universal agreement amongst social scientists that *something* has happened of significance, regarding the role of Africa, in recent times. By ‘Africanization’ I understand *processes* by which Africa takes on an increased role, a

¹¹ “...going back and forth on business and pilgrimage.” Matory certainly emphasises the trade aspect of this trans-Atlantic travel, but equally importantly much of this movement surely had religious motivations.

prominence that it did not have before. The term is used widely and in different contexts, but principally I am interested in what Africa is, or does, for practitioners of Candomblé.

There are sometimes presented two separate phenomena under the name of Africanization, albeit often linked to the same motivations and social movements. The first is perhaps what is best understood as an ‘anti-syncretic’ movement, propagated by leaders of several notable terreiros, including Mãe Stella, of the influential terreiro *Ilê Axé Opó Afonjá* in Salvador, Bahia, considered the heartland of Candomblé in Brazil. They propose, and practice, a form of Candomblé that rids itself of Catholic (or ‘syncretic’) tendencies, in the name of following a purer African form of the religion.

A related phenomenon also scrutinised by many such as Prandi and Frigerio is the process by which adepts of the Afro-Brazilian religions, mainly in the South of Brazil, are turning away from forms of religion such as Umbanda, that previously actively sought the incorporation of diverse elements, from Christianity, indigenous belief systems, and Kardecist spiritism, towards a more ‘purely African’ form of belief, primarily Candomblé. Prandi (1990) looks to understand this movement firstly by analysing the reverse process that preceded it, i.e. how Candomblé became Umbanda in the first place. Prandi sees this as essentially the ‘cleaning of the religion’, through the adoption of a vernacular language, the simplification of initiation procedures, and the almost total elimination of blood sacrifice. Candomblé really only arrived in São Paulo from the 1960s onwards, which at the time was a rapidly changing city.¹² However, the reasons for this influx were, according to Prandi, largely the result of new social movements (1990: 66-67), caused by large internal migration within Brazil that brought huge numbers of workers from the poor Northeast (and, importantly, Bahia) to the developing South. Prandi attaches to this to what he also sees as the ‘profound changes in relation to modes of life and intellectual codes’ (1990: 66) that were affecting not just the youth in Brazil, but in the US and Europe as well, whereby, supposedly, the culture of ‘the other’ is given high value, as the new generation goes in search of its ‘roots’. In Brazil, this results in a looking back towards their own roots, which for many of these Bahians is Africa, or Candomblé.

These economic, social, and cultural factors no doubt played a part in the often rapid movements within the religious demographics of Southern Brazil, but this still leaves many questions unanswered. To reduce the motivations for large numbers of people adopting a radically distinct religious practice as being principally bound up with a search for ‘an alternative culture’ appears far too reductionist.

In a more recent paper, Alejandro Frigerio examines the process that he labels *reafricanization*, and this subtle alteration to the term is important. Principally concerned with movement of Afro-American religions across ethnic and national barriers, Frigerio looks at the manner in which these religions undergo development in settings that he labels ‘secondary religious diaspora’, understood as the “regions and cities towards which [the Afro-American religions] migrated” (2004: 41), which, under his criteria, would then include Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and even New York.

I will stick to the one term of *Africanization*, rather than following Frigerio’s classification, for reasons of clarity. How should we classify the movement, often led by those in *primary diaspora settings*, that several researchers have called attention to, of a movement towards a kind of ‘African Orthodoxy’ that is taking place? Referred to above as an ‘anti-syncretic’ movement, this is not so much a move towards Africa as a ‘source of true theological knowledge’, but rather a rejection of non-African elements with the aim of achieving a more recognisably ‘African’ practice.

Ordep Serra makes the following statement:

“Anyway, one thing is certain: since the 1970s, a segment of the vanguard of the *ilê axé* [the terreiros of Candomblé], some of the scholars of the Afro-Brazilian rituals, and the black militancy have denounced ‘Afro-Catholic’ syncretism and proposed an ‘ecumenical’ union of the religions [cultos] of African origin.”

(Serra, 1995: 151)

This is further backed up by Roberto Motta (1998) who argues for the important role social scientists have played in certain developments within the Afro-Brazilian religions. Africanization is happening,

¹² For a thorough and pioneering study of Candomblé in this city see Prandi’s *Os Candomblés de São Paulo*, (1991)

whether understood as legitimation, canonization, or a search for knowledge, authenticity, ‘cultural roots’, or purity. On this, at least, the anthropologists seem to concur.

THE USE OF AFRICA: A CRITIQUE

The ethnography that I am using in this paper is mainly that of Beatriz Gois Dantas, whose *Vovó Nagô e Papai Branco* (1988) was influential in presenting a theory of how Africa was ‘used and abused’ in Brazil, to refer to the subtitle of the book. This ethnography was principally collected from the terreiros in the town of Laranjeiras, in the state of Sergipe, mainly, although not exclusively, from Mãe Bilina, who is the mãe-de-santo of a Nagô Terreiro in this town. This ethnography is useful here because not only is the question of Africa central to the argument of the book, but because it is used toward an argument regarding prestige, legitimacy, and authenticity. In her appeal to the ‘configuration of prestige’ within the terreiros of Laranjeiras, Dantas records the opinions of people, from both inside and outside the terreiros, of the various competing mãe-de-santos and their houses of Candomblé. Thus, referring to Mãe Bilina, a fortune-teller [*cartomante*] says:

That woman is a nuisance [*danada*]. I don’t know how many of my clients [*consulentas*] she already took. She has much power [*força*] and divines the future of them. She can. They say that she is African.

(Dantas, 1988: 48)

In an interpretation of Candomblé that gives precedence to the idea that the important factor is competition for prestige and legitimacy, a statement such as this serves to reinforce the argument, but crucially, only because the idea of what Africa is (i.e. a ‘tool’) is *already* taken as an assumption. Prestige and competition are not absent among the world of Candomblé, but the suggestion that these are the filters through which other aspects (such as Africa) must be viewed is one that is open to question.

Dantas’ argument (1988) was that Africa was fundamentally deployed as a strategy to invoke purity and legitimation, thus granting political, social, and economic power to the terreiro (or mãe-de-santo) who invoked this heritage. The Nagô terreiros have traditionally claimed an affinity to ‘true African practice’, and thus this is the specific purity that is often explored. Through an examination of the poles of purity [*pureza*] and ‘mixing’ [*mistura*], Dantas showed how the terreiro of Santa Bárbara, under the leadership of Mãe Bilina, claimed a true ‘African’ form of practice, sharply contrasted to the Bahian terreiros more usually thought of as representing a purer African form. The importance here is not which terreiro genuinely *was* representative of a direct link with Africa, but rather how the notion of purity, and hence ‘Africanness’, was used as a differentiating factor, used to mark out cultural difference and hence lay claim to a powerful position with a religious market in which different religions, forms, and terreiros compete for prestige, power, and followers (1988: 91). Dantas illustrates how certain phenomena are used to justify a close relationship with Africa, and these phenomena can be entirely contradictory (1988: also see Goldman, 2003: 5).

The ethnography does appear to point towards how Africa is referred to as a differentiating factor with the other terreiros of Laranjeiras. Discussing the practice of initiation, Mãe Bilina makes the following statement:

Here the person who ‘makes the saint’ [*fazer o santo*] does not have this business of staying imprisoned in the room, nor ‘scratching the head’ [*raspar a cabeça*]. Here we take the brotherhood [*irmandade*] like in the church. You only go to the room of the saint when you’re going to receive. It is only in that time. This story of staying imprisoned in the little chamber, scratching the head, dirtying everything with the blood of a chicken, this is the invention of Alexandre [a rival pai-de-santo] and those from Bahia. But Nagô isn’t like this. We make it a baptism: give the account and candle. The things of Africa are like this.

(Dantas, 1988: 93)

This particular example gives credence to the idea that Africa can be utilized as a differentiating factor and claim towards authentic practice. However, as Serra indicates (1995: 158), this is not universally

the case throughout Brazil. Further to this, I would suggest that even in the passage quoted above, we can understand Africa in a different sense.

It is undeniable that in the discourse of Mãe Bilina, the true African practice and heritage of her terreiro is often invoked. It follows that this aspect is important to Mãe Bilina, and is important when discussing the other terreiros within Laranjeiras which are her rivals. However, what I am less sure of is that the importance, at a level of practice and action, is to present a picture of ‘African’ purity in order to differentiate herself, and gain prestige. There is a danger of overstating the importance of ‘attributed prestige’ to the individual terreiros within the world of Candomblé. A terreiro needs a certain number of filhos-de-santo, and the actual presence of people to attend ceremonies and rituals, for without this, in a certain sense, the terreiro can not function. Yet, a terreiro does not simply aim to attract filhos-de-santo in order for it to be the most successful terreiro. This circular argument can not account for the more fundamental reasons of why people go to the terreiro in the first place.

Dantas argues for the construction of an ideology of ‘legitimacy’, which subsequently plays an important part in the development of the religion in question. Part of her argument is that the construction of this purity was due to the influence of the early anthropologists and social scientists of Candomblé:

It is important to analyse the genesis of the ideology of purity in Candomblé, the moment in which it appears, the manner in which it is constructed and the role of the intellectuals in this construction.

(Dantas, 1988: 148)

An interpretation that privileges the use of Africa as a tool to display authenticity and prestige and to compete in the ‘religious market’ embarks from a premise that this legitimacy is an important criterion for those within the terreiro. Further to this, it supposes that this ideal of legitimacy was – at least in part – an invention of the anthropologists who studied Candomblé. This issue of anthropological influence upon the world of Candomblé is highly relevant to the question of Africa, because I would suggest that by overcoming this interpretation we can see that the ‘problem’ – in the best sense – of Africa remains.

Dantas, in examining the religious climate of the 1930s, makes the claim that Nagô purity, and hence, ‘fidelity to Africa’, was used as a tool to fight off political repression, as this appeal to authenticity agreed with the model of ‘African practice’ which was propagated by the influential anthropologists who could, in turn, protect these terreiros:

The language of Africa was efficient in the search for a space of survival, or at least a survival without the fear of police repression

(Dantas, 1988: 238)

However, if, as Serra maintains, this escape from police repression was only really granted much later (as late as the 1970s, see Serra, 1995: 151), then this ‘use’ of Africa as a tool does not appear to be valid. We can now see how these two separate issues, of Africanization and anthropological influence, can be best understood and analysed as two sides of the same (mis)interpretation of Candomblé.

Anthropologists *have* played a part in certain developments of the organisation of Afro-Brazilian religions in Brazil, from the role played by Edison Carneiro and Gilberto Freyre in the organisation of the early *União das Seitas Afro-Brasileiras*, and their close friendship with Mãe Aninha, to the continuing close ties between the terreiros and those normally referred to as the ‘intellectuals’ (see Carneiro, 1940: 278; Serra, 1995: 126-153; Matory, 2005: 222; Motta, 1998: 49-53). However, what is not well known is exactly what the nature of this relationship was. Edison Carneiro commented that Mãe Aninha was an “intelligent woman, who went along with and understood our purpose, who read our studies and loved our work” (Carneiro, 1968: 208, also quoted by Dantas, 1988: 202). The anthropologists are seen as initiating the construction of a Jeje-Nagô model of authenticity, which influences the way that the terreiros present themselves. The terreiros are reputed to subscribe to this model of purity in order to gain legitimation in the eyes of the anthropologists and the state. However, this view is contested (Serra 1995). Edison Carneiro did say these words, and Mãe Stella certainly did welcome him and others into her terreiro. Yet this “does not constitute proof that the ethnologist has ‘made the head’ [*feito a cabeça*] of the *Ialorixá* (Mãe Aninha)” (Serra, 1995: 54).

Many terreiros will possess works of anthropologists and social scientists. They may also welcome them into their terreiro, and this kind of recognition does grant a certain prestige to the terreiro itself. Yet the doubt persists – the existence of ethnographic works can not by itself provide evidence for their interpretation by the mãe-de-santo or others within the terreiro. To suppose that these works are read in the same manner by a mãe-de-santo as by an anthropologist, or that these books are used as means of understanding a ‘pure’ model of their religion, is, as Serra maintains, surely not a straightforward assumption (Serra, 1995: 55).

The anthropology of Candomblé has often focused on the question of construction and fabrication, which understands “myths as political recourse” (Dantas, 1988: 61), and traditions as invented, either by those to who the traditions belong, or even to the anthropologists who studied those traditions. Myths *can* be used as political recourse, as they markedly are. Yet, this leaves unresolved the question of why this or that *particular* myth, or tradition, was used, in that time, for those reasons.

A further clue to the idea that Africa is not so much ‘used as a tool’ is the important non-exclusivity of Candomblé. The fact that other religions can be incorporated within the system of Candomblé can also provide evidence that Africa is principally not used, and indeed *can not be used*, to denigrate other practices. Serra mentions an event that took place in the Terreiro of Engenho Velho. The terreiro welcomes a visit from the deputy, and important political figure, Roberto Freire (Serra, 1995: 15). This visit is interrupted by an individual who has come to ask Mãe Tatá, the mãe-de-santo, for advice, and after the deputy has left, Mãe Tatá welcomes the individual in. This person had spent some time in India, and whilst there, being involved in a ‘very difficult situation’, had made an offering to an “entity” [*entidade*], in a temple. After returning to São Paulo where he lived, he felt he should make another offering to this same entity, although he didn’t know how, as there were no temples for this in São Paulo. Hence he decided to visit the Terreiro of Casa Branca do Engenho Velho, because he thought he might find a solution to his religious problem (Serra, 1995: 17). Contrary to Serra’s expectations, Mãe Tatá did not recourse to play the buzios [*jogo os buzios*] and delay answering, in order to properly understand the situation and the matter at hand. Instead, she asked who the entity was who had helped, to which the man replied with a description. Mãe Tatá then asked if he had an offering with him, which he had. She then instructed him:

“This is good. Say the name of the saint for him. Open the House of Exu, take the package of the boy [the ‘entity’] and entrust it [to him]. Give the name of the saint that he spoke. You know how to do this...”

(Serra, 1995: 17-18)

Serra sees this as interesting, precisely because he sees this as not an arbitrary solution – it has logic. Mãe Tatá doesn’t look to teach the man about Candomblé, or initiate him, and instead she desires to help, but shows respect to this ‘other saint’ (Serra, 1995: 18). Exu is chosen precisely because his position, as messenger [*mensageiro*], allows him, uniquely, to encounter a strange or foreign saint. He can communicate between *distinct religious universes* (Serra, 1995: 20).

Candomblé is an example of an incorporative non-exclusive religion. Serra understands the religion as essentially co-existent and incorporative of diverse forms of religious belief and practice, whether they are of a similar form (such as the various *nações* of Candomblé, or Umbanda), or radically different (such as Catholicism, Islam, or beliefs and entities from India). What is interesting about this is that, despite an apparent trend towards a ‘churchification’ (in both the sense described by Motta, 1998 and Serra 1995), this does not necessary entail an aggressive orthodoxy. Rather, as Serra asserts:

I believe that the constitution of a common ‘depth’ of beliefs, ritual practices, etc, did not inhibit, but on the contrary, favoured the flourishing of religious forms that more or less diversified from this common base.

(Serra, 1995: 30)

Ethnographic examples such as this appear incompatible with a model of a religion that deployed the notion of Africa strictly as a means towards legitimising itself in the face of rival alternatives. If this is indeed the case, then what is demanded is a reconsideration of what Africa *is*, or what Africa *does*, for the adepts of Candomblé.

LEGITIMATE AFRICAN PRODUCTS

Africa is not simply *used* as a representation for something else. Rather, it *is* a thing of fundamental importance for the ritual performance that is so central to Candomblé. In the 1930s, Edison Carneiro found himself *perplexed* with the ‘movement of return to Africa’ (Serra, 1995: 59 referring to Carneiro, 1967). Perhaps this should be the very starting point of any such investigation into this return; not so much the movement, but the actual perplexity itself. Anthropological confusion is often the best way in to the subject, for it is through such ‘misunderstandings’ that analysis can be most fruitful. Often the tendency is to interpret the phenomena as being motivated by a particular explanatory cause, and hence understandable in terms of a causal interest. This ‘explanation by way of elimination’ makes something understandable through placing it into other contexts which ‘we’ find easy to grasp. However, the problem with this approach is that it effectively makes the thing disappear that made the phenomena so interesting in the first place: alterity.

In order for this ‘movement of return to Africa’ to not appear perplexing, perhaps the best solution is to re-think the model of Candomblé, and by extension rethink what, exactly, Africa *is* for this religion. If ‘Africa’ is no longer an ideological construction – or an abstraction – used to mark difference and assert authenticity, it can be seen to be something different entirely.

The ethnography of Candomblé always points to the importance of products from Africa (Verger, 1980; Cohen, 2002; Matory, 1999, 2005). Matory mentions the “goods and services uniquely authenticated by their African origin” (1999: 96), and the importance that this had to the practitioners of Candomblé in the 19th century, and this importance is still present in Brazil today. The question then becomes about why Africa, and ‘things’ of Africa (herbs, figures, clothes, shells) possesses a power that things of elsewhere do not. In the large Orixá market in Madureira on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, the stalls selling figures, herbs, CDs, DVDs, and many other religious paraphernalia proudly declare “*Produtos Africanos Legítimos*” (‘legitimate African products’). Many of these same shops display Catholic iconography and statues, yet this does not appear problematic to those selling or buying in this religious market. What, therefore, do *produtos Africanos legítimos* really consist of? If it is products from Africa that are important for practitioners of Candomblé, then the ideology of ‘African legitimacy’ is not a merely political or economic construct. If products from Africa are more powerful than those that are not, this should be understood in terms of what the products are, and how they are used. The question is not simply one of legitimacy, but rather one of efficacy.

The debate between religious practitioners of Africa and those of the New World is not one that considers how ‘Africa’ is used or deployed, but rather how the actual religion is *practised*. Wande Abimbola, World Spokesperson for Ifá and Yoruba Religion, comments extensively on Yoruba religion and how it has been adapted in Cuba and Brazil (1976, 1979, 1997). His criticism of the New World manifestations is entirely at the level of practice:

There is an over emphasis on blood in the Diaspora. The emphasis of the religion in the Diaspora is mainly on rituals, and on the visual aspects, such as beads and clothes. Little attention is paid to literature or philosophy.

(Abimbola, 1997: 84)

The fact that ritual efficacy is the space within which the debate occurs serves as further evidence that this is the space through which the other systems operate. It is ‘works’ [*trabalhos*] which are the item of importance:

Today the most famous terreiros is the terreiro Neuza [Ogum de Ronda]. They do a lot of work. She works ‘directly’...

(Dantas, 1988: 53)

The followers of Candomblé discuss the terreiros not in terms of prestige, but in terms of *work*. Earlier, I have attempted to sketch a picture of Candomblé that shifts the focus of the researcher to a mode of critical thought that would emphasise this praxeological approach and the importance of ritual production within the terreiro. In the light of this interpretation, what does Africa do, praxeologically?

The concept of *axé* is central to this interpretation, which assumes an ontology, rather than a cosmology of Candomblé:

This ontology holds a metaphysics and philosophy of nature and society. The myths present, above all, the polyvocal character of the divinities: simultaneously immovable essences, forces of nature (sunrays, thunder, rivers, etc), cultural institutions (war, justice...), individuals who lived in the past (kings, queens, warriors...). And these should not be treated only as representations (the sunray representing the Orixá Iansã), relations of ownership (the sea belongs to the Orixá Iemanjá) or control (sickness being provoked and controlled by Omolu), but a very complex form of negotiation. In a certain sense, the sea *is* Iemanjá, the ray and the wind *are* Iansã, and sickness *is* Omolu. Nature, culture, human beings and the cosmos, all appear articulated in this system. The components of these different planes can, therefore, be grouped in classes that agree with the Orixá to which they belong, or, in accord with the modulation of *axé* that they constitute.

(Goldman 2005: 109 and also see discussion above)

Within this understanding of what *axé* is, and how this works within Candomblé (ontologically speaking), the role of Africa can be re-interpreted. This would also entail a certain acceptance, rather than a critique, of the native mode of thinking – to take the indigenous point seriously. If the issue of Africanization is an indigenous concern, and not simply an anthropological one, what is the importance of ‘things’ of Africa, in terms of ritual production within the terreiro?

Consider the passage cited earlier, which was then used to promote a model of prestige and authenticity:

That woman is a nuisance [*danada*]. I don't know how many of my clients [*consulentes*] she already took. She has much power [*força*] and divines the future of them. She can. They say that she is African.

(Dantas, 1988: 48)

The equivocation of someone who is reputedly ‘African’ and who has much power should be noted. This power [*força*] should be understood in terms of *axé*, as elaborated above, and hence as the vital source for the efficacy of ritual production. Mãe Bilina may well invoke her African ancestry (Dantas, 1988: 48), and repeatedly stress the African practice of her terreiro (1988: 93) but she does not actually claim her ‘identity’ as African. This isn't important for her, or certainly is subservient to the idea that her terreiro is tied very strongly to Africa. However, for the informant quoted above, it is important that “they say she is African”, but perhaps this should not be taken as a statement of identity or ethnicity.

It is a statement of her capacity to *do* things. Her reputation as an important mãe-de-santo relies not so much on her ancestry, as her genuine ability to perform ritual operations. It *is* important that these rituals are African, and that the products are African, and the specificity of Africa should not be glossed over. For the fortune-teller who lost her clientele, she recognises that the mãe-de-santo possesses a very real power, inherently tied to her links to Africa.

Mãe Bilina talks about her understanding of Africans in Brazil, claiming that “in Brazil even, the Africans were the people who knew how to work” (Dantas, 1988: 76). The context of this claim is not specifically related to magic efficacy [*feitiçaria*], but given the manner in which the same word for work (*trabalhar*) is used in those contexts, the connection of ‘the African’ with the ability to perform ‘work’ is more than incidental. Mãe Bilina also discusses Africa itself:

“Africa is big and rich. Shells [*buzo*], yam, and all these things of Brazil, they were from there. And the Africans knew where they had pearls, and gold. And who knew and discovered these things were in Africa. Why is it that they don't have more gold than they had? Because who would discover all were the Africans (...) Pearls, gold, diamonds, all they knew. There were people who had a lot of gold. These shells [*buzos*] of the coast there are money”

(Dantas, 1988: 75-76)

The description of Africa is not merely an economic one, as it may first appear. Africa is described as ‘big and rich’, but rich perhaps not in a strictly financial sense. The specific items first mentioned as evidence of this richness are shells and yam, two things that are both very significant in terms of important ritual within Candomblé. The use of shells, particularly in divination, but also worn, is well documented, as is the role of yam, which is important mythologically (cf. Prandi 2001; 2005: 45; 2006b: 37; Bascom, 1980). Ritual products from Africa are *worth* something, and they are also worth more than equivalent products from Brazil. Africa is rich in the products that are needed for the processes of exchange central to worship and ritual.

Mãe Bilina’s description of Africa offers us is an image that places primary importance upon powerful ritual objects. It is a conception of Africa as a site of important ritual power, essential for the production of ritual transformation, principally in initiation and divination. The traffic of these objects has been remarked upon by several other recent studies of West African and Brazil, and these accounts tend to focus on discovering some of these stories of travel (Matory 1999, 2005, 2005b; Cohen, 2002). This new evidence for the important interconnecting ways that the two continents have contributed to each other’s development, and to the cultural practices of both, is a highly suggestive source for any anthropology that looks at Candomblé. Cohen (2002) points to not just the fact of transatlantic crossing, but also to the religious implications and motivations:

Such stories of 19th century Candomblé adepts making the transatlantic trip for specifically religious purposes, while difficult to verify, are by no means impossible.
(Cohen, 2002: 29)

It is difficult to verify the motivations of such historical journeys, but the evidence for the trade of ritual objects from Africa points to a value of these goods beyond a purely ‘economic’ importance:

The articles imported to Bahia underscore the strong relationship of this trade to the practice of Candomblé. [...] These articles typically included (and still include) kola nuts, palm oil, black soap, pepper, beads, baskets, straw, dippers, parrot feathers, beans, skin cream, mats, cowries, drums, and ornamental cloth...
(Cohen, 2002: 27, including footnote 41)

As we saw above, the important objects to be traded are exclusively ritual objects, and it is important that these articles are *still being traded*. While Matory and Cohen rightly identify such transatlantic travel as instrumental in the development of Candomblé, what is equally relevant is the continuing traffic of goods, ideas, and people between the West coast of Africa and Brazil.

It is not just artefacts that are evoked as African however. One of Ordep Serra’s informants tells him: “Who makes the saint, keeps/fixes the navel in Africa” (Serra, 1995: 173)¹³. Beyond an identification of a person with Africa, is an identification of *people*:

The terreiros of Jeje, Ketu, Ijexá, Congo and Angola, in Bahia, define themselves as ‘of African nation’. The expression is their own.
(Serra, 1995: 173)

The identification is not simply with an ethnicity. Describing a terreiro, an old pai-de-santo declared “this here is an African territory” (Serra, 1995: 173) - Africa is not evoked here as simply a badge of ethnic origin – the importance is that the space of the terreiro itself is thought of as African. The space is conceptualized as an African territory because, as a terreiro, it is a site of ritual operation, and the importance of Africa can be understood as bound up with the need for powerful ritual production within this space.

One of the terreiros mentioned in Dantas’ ethnography is the Terreiro de São José. This terreiro, originally ‘pure Nagô’, underwent a process of *misturado*, to become mixed with *Caboclo* practice. However, later on, the pai-de-santo of the terreiro, “under the pretext that the African saints

¹³ The sense is retained more clearly in the original Portuguese: “*Quem faz santo, prende o umbigo na África.*”

[*santos africanos*] were angry and punishing them, undertook a ‘return to the origins’” (Dantas, 1988: 38). Against the interpretation outlined in the previous chapter, that this return was under the ‘pretext’ of legitimising the practice of the terreiro, this return to the origins can be seen in a different way. Taking the statement of the pai-de-santo seriously, the question is one of why the African gods were angry, and why the gods demanded a ‘return to the origins’.

This reference to ‘origins’ should serve as a clue towards one possible understanding of the subject. While the cosmological and mythological systems may, following Goldman, be subservient to ritual production, this mythology is still pivotal to how Candomblé operates. Within the rituals of divination or initiation, it is mythology that is drawn upon, and hence here too the suggestion is that the mythology may contain a clue towards understanding the ritual power of Africa. Fundamental to Candomblé are the myths that pertain to origins: of the Orixás, of men, and of the world. These myths are not arbitrarily located, but are specifically tied to the continent of Africa (cf. Prandi 2001, 2004b, 2005, 2006b). The origin of mankind itself is held up, as it is in Yoruba religion, as the city of Ifè (also *Ilé-Ifè* in Yoruban) in modern-day Nigeria. The Orixás themselves are taken to be specific locations, mountains or rivers (and not merely ‘representations’, cf. Goldman above).

The point is to take these indigenous invocations of Africa and African importance seriously. Accepting the necessity of *feitiçaria*/magic to the practice of Candomblé restores the way in which Africa is conceptualised. If myth is the guiding principle in divination (Holbraad, 2007b) and if ritual practice such as divination or initiation (or other aspects, such as protection or affliction through witchcraft) are the fundamental components of Candomblé (cf. Goldman, 2005), then what we should be concerned with is the way in which Africa is used in these terms. Products from Africa have more power because this is in agreement with the mythology of Candomblé. People who have more power are thought of as African, as this follows the logic inherent to the cosmological system of Candomblé. Africa is a catalyst for ritual production, for the distribution of *axé*, and for the services that the mãe-de-santo or pai-de-santo performs.

A PERPLEXING CONCLUSION

Why then, to return to an earlier point, was Carneiro so perplexed? Africa was *always* returned to, both physically, and ideologically. Africa is a source of power, a vital and necessary component within this living religion. This interpretation of Candomblé has perhaps been neglected because to invoke this ‘magic’ at the centre of it all can be a dangerous position to take (Goldman, 2003: 8). Yet this is not a wilfully exoticist interpretation of Candomblé. This is an interpretation that is borne out of the encounter with genuine difference. This emphasis on the importance of *axé* and *feitiçaria* should not entail an interpretation of ‘our superiority’ in the face of ‘their irrationality’, but rather, through examining these ‘alien’ concepts, a new picture of Candomblé can emerge, in which these seeming peculiarities are seen to exhibit a certain logic.¹⁴ In this way the seeming peculiarity of the ‘return to Africa’ is not *resolved*, but it no longer exhibits the perplexing quality that it once did. The logic of Candomblé cosmology, as evident in divination, suggests that Africa is the source of original time and original myth. This mythology holds the key toward understanding the present and the future, and so it is no surprise that Africa, and things of Africa, are held in such regard. It is *through* Africa that things happen, and so the ‘movement of return’ should appear as a movement entirely in agreement with this logic.

As the Afro-Brazilian religions are given a more public acceptance certain aspects are able to disseminate with more openness and ease.¹⁵ Books and manuscripts are published with highly important, and often secret, ritual and magic knowledge (Holbraad, (pers. com.) mentions this occurring in Cuba), and these become highly contested sources of knowledge. Increasing possibilities of communication (Freitas, 2002) allow increasing possibilities of acquiring, transmitting, and guarding knowledge. Not simply theological or cosmological knowledge, but practical knowledge. This entails therefore a desire, on the part of the terreiros, to compete, not for prestige (cf. Dantas), but

¹⁴ See also Stephan Palmié’s *Wizards & Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (2002)

¹⁵ This ‘tolerance’ is not clear cut however, and (often brutal) repression is still recent enough for it to exist in the memory of adepts of Candomblé. Serra points to how it was only in 1970 that Candomblé was officially recognized in Salvador (1995: 121), much later than the supposed anthropologist-derived endorsement that Dantas claims from “the 19th century” (1988: 150-160).

at the level of *saber fazer* (Goldman, 2002). In this space, Africa is, as it surely always was, a genuine, rather than mythical, site of *axé*, power, and knowledge.

Any conclusions drawn here are suggestive, for this would need a thorough ethnography to provide further evidence. By restoring to Candomblé certain phenomena that are deemed most 'difficult' (*axé*, *feitiçaria*, *fazer a cabeça*, *fazer o santo*), and hence not reducible to our own understandings, a space will be opened up to conceive of the Afro-Brazilian religions in a manner that does not neglect their indigenous logic. Continuing trade and traffic between Brazil and Africa ensures that Africa remains a potent and important site of *axé*, as much as the importance of *axé* guarantees the continuing necessity for things of Africa. The ethnography demonstrates that this importance is genuine and should not be interpreted as the subtext to political claims of power or prestige. It should be understood on its own terms, a product, perhaps, of African legitimacy.

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