



REVISTA ESTUDOS
AFRO-BRASILEIROS

**Candomblé and time:
Concepts of time, knowing
and authority, from Africa
to Afro-Brazilian religions¹**

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Different societies and cultures have their own concepts of time, of the passing of life, of past facts and of history. In societies with a mythical culture, ‘without history’, unfamiliar with writing, time is circular and life is believed to be an eternal repetition of happenings in the remote past as narrated by

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the myth. Afro-Brazilian religions, constituted from African traditions brought by slaves, still cultivate a notion of time that is very different from “our” time, that of the West and of capitalism (FABIAN, 1985). Because of its link with the notion of life and death and concepts of this world and the next, the notion of time is essential to the constitution of religion.

Many of the basic concepts undergirding the organisation of the religion of the Yoruba gods orishas in Brazil, in terms of religious authority and clerical hierarchy, depend on a concept of experience of life, learning and knowing which is closely connected to notions of time or associated with them. Thus, many aspects of Afro-Brazilian religions are better understood by considering the notions of African origin that they are based on. Similarly, knowledge of values and ways of behaving amongst followers of these religions is furthered by looking at the original African heritage in opposition to the Western concepts that the religion confronts in Brazil, especially in situations where concepts of different cultural origins come into conflict and provoke or facilitate changes in what the followers themselves regard as the Afro-Brazilian doctrinal or ritual tradition. The notions of time, knowing, learning and authority which underlie priestly power in

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Candomblé, with its initiatory character, can be read in the same register. This register can clarify the contradictions in which a religion originating in a mythical a-historical culture gets involved when it is reconstituted in a society with a predominantly Western culture, in the Americas, where time and knowing have other meanings.

The Candomblé we are speaking of here is the religion of the orishas which developed in Bahia in the nineteenth century, out of Yoruba (or Nagô) traditions, strongly influenced by customs brought by the Fon groups (called Jeje in Brazil) and less so by minority African groups. Yoruba Candomblé, or Jeje-Nagô Candomblé, as it is usually called, brought together from the beginning cultural aspects from diverse Yoruba cities, which in Brazil resulted in different rites (or 'nations') of Candomblé. In each nation the traditions of the city or region by which it came to be known predominated: Ketu, Ijesha, Efan (SILVEIRA, 2000; LIMA, 1984). This Candomblé from Bahia, which spread all over Brazil, has its counterpart in Pernambuco, where it is known as Shango and the Egba nation is its main manifestation; and in Rio Grande do Sul, where it is called Batuque and the main nation is the oió-ijexá (PRANDI 1991). Another Yoru-

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ba variant, heavily influenced by Dahomean voduns, is the Nagô Tambor-de-Mina from Maranhão. In addition to the Yoruba candomblés, there are also those of Bantu origin, especially those known as Angola and Congo candomblés; and those of strongly Fon origins, such as the Bahian Mahim-Jeje and the Dahomean-Jeje from Maranhão.

It was the Bahian Candomblé of the Ketu (Yoruba) and Angola (Bantu) nations which spread most widely in Brazil, being found today almost everywhere. The former of these came to be regarded as a model for all the religions of the orishas, and its rites, pantheon and mythology are now virtually dominant. Angola Candomblé, despite having adopted the orishas (which are Yoruba deities) and absorbed many Yoruba concepts and rites, had a fundamental role in the constitution of Umbanda in the early twentieth century in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Today, all these religions and nations have followers with different rites but who identify all over the country as belonging to the same religious group known as *povo de santo* and having in common beliefs, ritual practices and worldviews, including concepts of life and death. Terreiros (temples, communities of followers) in different regions and cities are linked by webs of lineages, origins and influences,

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most of which come in the last instance from Bahia, and thus (in the case of the Yoruba nations) from ancient and sometimes legendary cities which are now part of Nigeria or Benin (PRANDI 1991, 1996).

The aim of this paper is, initially, to reconstitute this trajectory, re-linking the Africa of the orishas to the *terreiros* of the Yoruba nation now found in Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, the Federal District (Brasília) and other states; and secondly, to seek to understand how and why these ancient religious heritages undergo changes and adaptations in the context of the socio-cultural transformations of modern-day Brazil. Although this text focuses on Yoruba Candomblé, blessed with an ethnography which allows comparisons between Africa and Brazil, many of the conclusions can, to a greater or lesser extent, be applied to all the Afro-Brazilian religions, and even (beyond the strictly religious universe) to other dimensions of Brazilian popular culture.

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II

It is not unusual to find new followers of Candomblé or another traditional Afro-Brazilian religion who have been born and raised outside this religion and have joined it by personal choice (PRANDI, 2000a). Ever since Candomblé was transformed into a religion open to everyone, regardless of racial, ethnic, geographical or social origin, many followers, and even the majority in many regions of Brazil, have joined recently without any previous personal or family contact with its characteristic values and ways of behaving. In most cases, joining a religion also means changing many concepts of the world, life, and death. The recent Candomblé participant, going to the terreiro (the temple) and taking part in numerous collective activities indispensable to worship, is soon confronted with a new way of regarding time. He will have to undergo resocialisation in order to live with things which at first seem strange and uncomfortable. He will have to learn that everything has its time, but a time not determined by the clock but by the fulfillment of certain tasks, which may come before or after others, depending on

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the circumstances (some unforeseeable), which may accelerate or set back the whole chain of activities. But the terms “accelerate” and “set back” are out of place, because in Candomblé everything has its own time, and each activity lasts as long as necessary. The activity defines the time taken, and not the other way round.

The Candomblé festivals, the public celebrations of singing and dancing, during which the orishas manifest themselves through ritual trance, are preceded by a series of propitiatory rituals. These rituals involve animal sacrifice; preparation of meat for the community banquet and of the ritual foods offered to the orishas which are being celebrated; care for the members of the community who are enclloistered to fulfill initiatory obligations; preparation of the public festival; and lastly the carrying out of the festival itself, the so-called *toque*. Preparing the *toque* includes care of clothes, some sown especially for the day, which must be washed, starched, and ironed (the quantity of clothes for starching and ironing is always enormous!); putting the ornaments in order, which includes cleaning and polishing; preparing the food to be served to everyone present, and providing the drinks; decorating the barracão with appropriate leaves and flowers, etc., etc.

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In a Candomblé *terreiro*, practically all the members of the house take part in the preparations, with many of them doing specifically priestly tasks. Everybody eats, bathes and gets dressed in the *terreiro*. Sometimes people sleep in the *terreiros* many nights in a row, with many of the women bringing their small children. There are so many things to do and so many people doing them. There are guidelines to be followed and fixed times for each activity, such as “at sunrise”, “after lunch”, “in the afternoon”, “when the sun is cooling off”, “in the late afternoon”, “in the evening”. It is not customary to refer to or to respect clock time and many unexpected things can happen. In fact, it is common to take watches off in the *terreiros*, since they have no function. While slaughtering animals, the orishas are consulted through oracles to find out if they are satisfied with the offerings, and they may ask for more. So it might be necessary to stop everything and go out to get another kid or chicken or more fruit or whatever. The orishas can manifest themselves at any time, and then it will be necessary to sing for them or even dance with them. In trance the orishas may even alter the ritual. They may stay for hours “on earth” while everybody present pays attention to them and everything else has to wait. During the toque,

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the big public ceremony, the unexpected presence of orishas in trance means extending the ceremonial time, as they too must be dressed and must dance. The arrival of dignitaries from other *terreiros*, with their followers, means additional greetings and song and dance sequences. Although there is a minimum script, the festival does not have a fixed time to end. No-one knows exactly what is going to happen the very next minute, since all planning is upset by the intervention of the gods.

When going to the *terreiro*, it is better not to have other commitments on the same day, because no-one knows when one can leave and how long the visit, the obligations and the festival will last. In fact, Candomblé does not have a fixed time to start either. It starts when everything is “ready”. The guests and sympathisers arrive at a more or less expected time, but can wait for hours on end sitting down. So many prefer to arrive late, which may mean more delays. And one cannot complain, because then someone will say, “Candomblé doesn’t have a fixed time”. Once, after a long wait, I asked what time the candomblé would actually start. The answer was: “After the *mãezinha* (the *mãe de santo*, the high priestess) changes her clothes.” In short, time is always defined by the

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tasks which the group considers necessary, according to the formula: “when things are ready”.

This idea that time depends on events and on fulfilling necessary tasks can be seen also in the daily life of the *terreiros* outside the festivals. Researchers starting field work are surprised at the “lack of punctuality” of the *mães de santo* (*iyalorishas*, high priestesses of Candomblé) and *pais de santo* (*babalorishas*, high priests), having to wait hours, if not days, to do an interview they thought was scheduled for a fixed time. Clients who go to a *terreiro* for the *jogo de búzios* (divination with cowurries) or other magical services may also feel bothered by the way the *povo de santo*, the followers of Candomblé, use their time.

In 1938, American anthropologist Ruth Landes came to Brazil to study race relations and stayed for many months researching the candomblés of Salvador, in Bahia. Her report of her first encounter with the young Mãe Menininha do Gantois, who decades later would become the most famous *mãe de santo* in Brazil, is fascinating. Having arranged a time, Menininha received her and began conversing pleasantly. Then one of her *iyawós* (initiated women) came in and greeted her with all possible reverence, telling her something in a low voice. Menininha asked the anthropologist to excuse her for a moment,

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telling her to make herself comfortable and that she would be right back. The afternoon went by, with a lot of people leaving and entering the house, but the *mãe de santo* did not return to the room. After dark, Ruth Landes discreetly went back to her hotel. Only some time later was she able to continue her conversation with the *iyalorisha*. The anthropologist found out that the woman who had interrupted the interview had problems and that the mother had gone to do the necessary rituals to resolve the daughter's affliction (LANDES, 1994, p. 86-99). Commenting on the episode, Ruth Landes wrote: "Throughout my stay [in Bahia] I remained astonished at the liberties the mothers could take with time. Menininha never did return that day, and I realized subsequently that she was always late, always delaying. It was a privilege of her station, and even taken for granted in a land of aristocracy and slavery. What was time? Time was what you did with it, and she was always occupied" (LANDES 1994: 84). However, what Landes considered a privilege of a land of aristocracy and slavery was in fact the expression of an African concept of time, very different from the one we are used to in our European culture.

For African thinker John Mbiti, while in Western societies time can be thought of as something to be consumed,

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bought and sold as if it were a potential good or service (time is money), in traditional African societies time has to be created or produced. Mbiti says that “the African man is not a slave of time, but rather he makes as much time as he wants”. He comments that, through ignorance of this concept, many Western foreigners judge that Africans are always behind in everything they do, while others say: “Ah! These Africans are always sitting down wasting their time in idleness” (MBITI, 1990, p. 19).

III

Before the imposition of the European calendar, the Yoruba, who are the main source of the cultural matrix of Brazilian Candomblé (PRANDI, 2000b), organised the present in a four-day week. The year was divided by the repetition of the seasons and they did not have months. The duration of each period of time was marked by events which the whole community experienced and recognised. Thus, the day began with sunrise, regardless of whether it was five or seven o'clock by Western counting, and ended when people went to sleep (MBITI, 1990, p. 19), which could be at eight o'clock or mid-

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night our time. These variations, important for us with our days controlled by the clock, were not important for them.

Each one of the four days of the traditional Yoruba week, called *osè*, is dedicated to a deity (Ojo Awo, Ojo Ogun, Ojo Shango, Ojo Obatala; respectively, day of the secret or of Ifá, day of Ogun, etc.), regulating an essential activity of traditional Yoruba life, the market. The market or fair happens in each village and city on one of the weekdays, every week, or every two, three, or four weeks. Even today, women sell their products in the markets of different cities, making this a basic institution for Yoruba sociability and the regulation of everyday life. Traditional Yoruba recognised the lunar month, but gave it little importance; of much more importance were the times of the big religious festivals, determined by the seasons and the agricultural phases of the year which they called *odun*. The day was divided not by hours but by periods which can be translated as “early morning”, “forenoon”, “with the sun overhead”, “late afternoon” etc. The singing of the rooster marked the night.

Days and weeks were calculated with regard to each event, so that women were able to calculate the length of pregnancy and men the development of their crops, although without dates (ELLIS, 1974, p. 142-151). The traditional Yoruba

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knew two great seasons, one rainy and the other dry, separated by a season of strong winds, with the result that each year might last a few days more (or less), depending on the early or late arrival of the seasons; but this was of no consequence, since days were not counted. Years passed as did weeks and days, in a repetitive flow, with no arithmetical counting of each repetition.

In the courts of the Yoruba kings there were functionaries employed to keep alive the memory of the kings, and they were trained to recite the important events that marked the reign of each sovereign. But these episodes were not dated, so the recent reconstruction of the history of the Yoruba does not yield a chronology for the times before the arrival of the Europeans, but operates with myths and memories in a past without dates (JOHNSON, 1921).

Since time is cyclical, unexpected facts are received with surprise. Thus, the cyclical occurrences of nature (such as the phases of the moon and the seasons) are considered normal, but whatever is outside the normal rhythm of time, such as an eclipse or a flood, is regarded with concern and fear. The birth of twins, which contradicts the normal outcome of a pregnancy, is also considered an exceptional fact.

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Afro-descendants assimilated the calendar and the ways of counting time used in Brazilian society, but many reminiscences of the African concept may be found in the day-to-day of Candomblé. The arrival of a new *odun*, new year, is celebrated with oracular rituals to find out which orisha presides over it, because each year the saga of the commanding orisha repeats itself: it will be a year of wars if the orisha is a warrior like Ogun; of abundance, if the orisha is a provider like Os-hossi; of reconciliation, if the orisha has sobriety like Yemoja; and so forth. The *osè* (week) is constituted by a weekly ritual of cleansing and changing of the waters on the altars of the orishas. Each day of the week, now the seven-day week, is dedicated to one or more orishas, with each day being favourable to events narrated by the myths of those orishas (Wednesday, for example, is the day of justice because it is the day of Shango). The big festivals of the African gods have been adapted to the festive calendar of Catholicism through the syncretism which, until very recently, was practically compulsory; but what the *terreiro* festival emphasises is the African myth of the orisha and not that of the Catholic saint.

Although Candomblé and other religions of African origin are recent, having been constituted in Brazil only after the

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first decades of the XIX century, the founding dates of the terreiros, as well as those of the reign of successive *mães de santo* and *pais de santo* in the early days, are unknown. Their names are remembered and their accomplishments are sung and celebrated in the ceremonies that praise the ancient founders (the *padé* in the older Candomblé *terreiros*); but there is no mention of dates. This Brazilian past has also become myth.

IV

■ In the words of Wole Soyinka, “traditional thinking creates a cyclical reality, not a linear timeline” (SOYINKA, 1995, p. 10). A time-scale, measured mathematically, which can be added, subtracted, divided, etc., makes no sense for traditional African thinking. For Westerners, time is a continuous variable, a dimension with its own reality regardless of the facts, so that the facts are juxtaposed to the time scale. It is precise time, oriented to calculation, undergirding projections and rationality; the time of historical science and modernity. In this Western scale of time, occurrences are placed one after the other, allowing their arrangement in linear sequence, some

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as cause and others as effect, building the chain of correlations and causations which we know as history. Among us, the clock and the calendar allow the time between two events to be counted, so that even for the distant past we can know which facts are close to each other and which are further apart. One segment of time may be compared with another, such as the average lifespan of a man. Thus, all relevant facts are dated, described in a sequential calendar with regular intervals (century, year, month, day, hour). This time is projected forwards, so that what is going to happen joins with the present and the past in an unbroken line, with the future being determined by what has already happened, and thus being susceptible to control through action in the present.

For traditional Africans, time is composed of events that have already happened or are about to happen. It is the meeting of what we experience as having taken place. The immediate past is intimately linked to the present of which it is part, while the future is no more than the continuation of what has begun to happen in the present. The idea of the future as a remote happening unconnected to our immediate reality makes no sense at all (MBITI, 1990, p. 16-17). The future, expressed in the cyclical repetition of the facts of nature such

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as the seasons, the coming harvests, the aging of each one, is a repetition of what has already been known, lived, and experimented, and thus is not a future. There is no succession of connected facts in the distant past, nor a projection of the future. The idea of history as we know it in the West does not exist; the idea of making plans for the future, of planning upcoming events, is completely out of place. If the future is that which has not been experimented, it does not make sense and cannot be controlled, since time is lived time, accumulated time, happened time. More than that, the future is the mere return of the past to the present, and therefore does not exist.

For the Yoruba and other African peoples before contact with European culture, the events of the past are alive in the myths which talk of great happenings, heroic acts, discoveries, and all sorts of events of which present life is the continuation. Unlike historical narratives, myths are neither dated nor coherent with each other, and there is no way of judging if one myth is more trustworthy than another. Every myth responds to a need for topical explanation, and justifies facts and beliefs which make up the existence of those who cultivate it; which does not mean there cannot be conflicting versions when the facts and interests to be justified are divergent. Myths talk of a

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remote past which explains life in the present. Mythical time is just the distant past, and facts separated by a long interval of time may be presented in the myths as occurring at the same time. Each myth is autonomous and characters from one may appear in another with other characteristics and even contradictory relations, without their veracity being questioned. The myths are partial narratives, and linking them together does not lead to any sketch of totality. There is no narrative thread in mythology, like that which links the construction of history for Westerners. Mythical time is the time of origins, and there seems to be only empty time between the fact narrated by the myth and the time of the narrator. In the mythical world, events do not fit into a continuous and linear time-scale. The mythology of the orishas, which talks about the creation of the world and the action of the gods in daily life, demonstrates this (PRANDI, 2001).

This remote past of mythical narrative is collective and talks of the people as a whole. Passed on from generation to generation orally, it creates the general feeling of life for everyone and provides group identity and the essential norms and values for action in that particular society, completely intertwined with religion. Cyclical time is the time of nature,

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reversible time, and also the time of memory, which is not lost but only replaced. Time in history, on the other hand, is an irreversible time, not linked to eternity or the eternal return (Prigogine 1991:59). The time of myth and the time of memory describe the same movement of replacement: from the present to the past and back again – there is no future. Religion is the ritualisation of this memory, this cyclical time, that is, the representation in the present, through symbols and ritual enactments, of this past that guarantees group identity – who we are, where we have come from, where we are going to. It is the time of tradition, of non-change, of religion, of religion as a source of identity which reiterates the ancestral memory in daily life. In Candomblé, emblematically, when the *iyawó* goes into a trance and incorporates an orisha, assuming his identity represented by the characteristic dance that recalls the mythical adventures of this deity, it is the remote collective past that comes alive in the present, the ritual trance repeating the past in the present, in a flesh-and- blood representation of collective memory.

V

As a part of life that happens in the present, and in a different dimension from the mythical past, there is a near past formed by events that make up the individual's private existence and depend on his personal memory. The dead, for example, as long as their living relatives remember them, are part of this recent past that is intertwined with the present; and thus they take part in the present experience of the living as long as they live in the memory of the living. They are still part of the family, are praised and fed by them, until one day they come back reincarnated. With reincarnation, everything repeats itself, the cycle goes on. Just as the seasons of the year, the phases of the moon, the reproductive cycles, the sowing and reaping are all repeated, so man's life itself is repeated in reincarnation: nature is cyclical, man's life is cyclical, time is cyclical.

For the Yoruba everything happens on three levels: the *Ayé*, which is our world in the present time; the Orun, which is the other world, where the orisha gods and the ancestors live, the mythical world of the remote past; and the interme-

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diary world of those waiting to be reborn. This world of those awaiting rebirth is close to the here-and-now world, the *Ayé*, and represents the immediate future, bound to the present by the fact that those who are going to be reborn continue to live in the memory of their descendants, participating in their lives and being fed by them, until the day of their rebirth as a new member of their own family. For man, the world of achievements, of happiness, of fullness, is the present world, the *Ayé* (BABATUNDE, 1992, p. 33). There is no prize or punishment in the world of those about to be born; nothing happens there. Men and women pay for their crimes in life and are punished by human agencies. The punishment imposed on humans by the gods and the ancestors because of their bad acts do not affect them after death, but apply to the whole collectivity of which the offender was part, and this also happens in the *Ayé*. It is an ethical concept focused on the collectivity and not on the individual (MBON, 1991, p. 102), where the western Christian notion of salvation in another world and of sin do not exist. The other world inhabited by the dead is temporary, transitory, focused on the present of human beings. Not even spiritual life has an expression in the future.

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It is necessary for relatives not to forget the dead so that they can be born again, for their place is always in the family. There are two conditions for remaining alive in memory, in the present. Firstly, one must have had many children, for a man without offspring has no one to cultivate his memory. A man without offspring does not have a large family into which he can be reborn. For that, he must have many wives and be able to provide for them. Secondly, one must have lived a long life, so that one's memorable acts have been witnessed by children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. Many Yoruba names for a young child refer to the one who is believed to be returning in the child, such as Babatunde, meaning father is back; Iyabo, mother is back; Babatunji, father has woken up again. Memory depends on life together, and it is through this that one knows, loves, and respects the other. Memory is a sentiment of respectful and affectionate veneration. Thus, to be reborn one must live to a ripe age. Woe to those who die young, for they shall have difficulty being reborn. When one dies at a tender age, one may be reborn as another child from the same mother's womb (ODUYOYE, 1996, p. 113). However, this is not a celebrated birth; rather, it is feared because the reborn child does not have any commitment to the present, to the family, to the

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Ayé, and may well want to die young again for the simple degenerate pleasure of being born for the sake of it. These creatures, called *abikus*, which means literally born to die, only make their mothers suffer and frustrate their fathers, who desperately need a line of descendants, since children who have children are the guarantee of eternity celebrated in the present.

When the dead person's memory surpasses the limits of his private family and is praised by the village community, by the city, by a great lineage of families, when this memory is incorporated into the collective memory, the dead person does not have to be reborn among the living to guarantee his cycle of eternity. He goes to *Orun*, becoming an ancestor. This happens with the great kings, heroes, founders and leaders. From *Orun*, the mythical world where he dwells with the orisha gods, he starts to intervene directly in the events of the *Ayé*: he intervenes in the present, helping and punishing humans. The mythical past is a living past, and its inhabitants act and interfere in the present all the time. The ancestors, the *egunguns*, do not refuse to come to the *Ayé* and live among humans, and they do it through their priests in the great masked festivals in which the collective ancestral memory of the community is revered (DREWAL, 1992, chap. 6).

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When, in another dimension, the ancestor conquers the respect of a whole people, when his city imposes its cult on others, when he frees himself from his original community and becomes part of the memory of a whole society, the reverence that he receives expands, his influence in the *Ayé* grows, his power in the present world becomes eternal: he is then an orisha, one amongst the Yoruba gods. His relationship is no longer with his relatives or the members of his community, but with humanity. He can even be revered overseas, where he will become active in the affairs of many other peoples, as happened with the Yoruba diaspora in the Americas through slavery, with the founding of new cults and religions like Candomblé, Tambor-de-Mina, Xangô and Batuque in Brazil, and Santería in Cuba. He is part of the mythical past, and the mythical past responds for the present. The mythical past is what has existed since the beginning of time, what has always been, what is not dated.

The Yoruba believe that the spirit of human beings is made up of many immaterial parts and his soul is not indivisible as in the Judeo-Christian concept. There is a spiritual indivisibility called *Ori* that only exists in the present, that is, while one lives in the *Ayé*. It is responsible for human achievements and contains the destiny of each person. The *Ori* dies and is destroyed

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together with the material body. Another part is constituted by the memory revered by the dead person's family, the *egun*, which returns to the present through reincarnation, which maintains the dead person in the present. And, as a fundamental part, perhaps the most important, there is the private orisha of the person, regarded as his remote ancestor. The private orisha is a tiny portion of the general orisha worshipped by all. It is the human being's link with divinity, the eternal, the mythical past. With the death of the body, the personal orisha returns to the general orisha which has existed since the beginning of time.

■ The *Ori* represents the present of the human being; the *egun* represents the capacity always to return to this present, or to become eternal in the Orun as an *egungun* ancestor; and the personal orisha represents the connection of the present with the myth, with the remote past that acts on the present and receives sacrificial honours from it. The past reproduced in the present by the infinity of humans in which the orishas perpetuate themselves at each birth (since each human being descends from an orisha) closes once again the African cycle of time.

Slavery destroyed the family structures of the Africans brought to America as slaves, submitting them to a rhythm of compulsory and alienated work, imposing new beliefs and a new

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mode of daily life that presupposed a different way of measuring and conceiving time. Thus, when the religion of the orishas was reconstructed in Brazil, many of the aspects and concepts of the ancient African culture lost their meaning or disappeared. But many old ideas and notions were reproduced in the religious culture of the *terreiros* of Candomblé and of other religions dedicated to the Yoruba orishas, Fon voduns, and Bantu inkices; and much was conserved, to a greater or lesser degree, in non-religious aspects of popular culture with African influence.

In modern-day Brazil, Candomblé continues to revere the memory of its illustrious dead, invoked in various ceremonies and remembered from generation to generation, but it was unable to preserve the idea that the dead are reborn within the carnal family, because acceptance of Candomblé is individual and the so-called *familia the santo* (religious family, group of cult) does not necessarily correspond to the biological family. The idea of the *egungun* ancestor came to occupy a secondary and merely complementary place in the religion of the orishas, which in most *terreiros* of recent formation is practised without this reference. As the religion is composed of minority groups, each one belonging to a particular *terreiro* and independent of the others, groups made up of followers

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belonging to a broader society with a predominantly Western and Christian culture, worship of collective ancestors controlling the morality of a whole city (as happened originally in Africa) was not viable for obvious reasons. The Brazilian world outside of the walls of the *terreiro* is not the territory of the ancestors, as it was in traditional Africa.

The Yoruba concept of reincarnation suffered, in America, the influence of the karmic idea of reincarnation from Kardecist Spiritism – a religion of European origin that preaches reincarnation as the mechanism of an ethical system of rewards and punishments for acts practised in life and which allows the spirit of the dead person to perfect itself through many lives (PRANDI, 2000c). Kardecism has a concept of repetitive time in a spiral, which means change, spiritual evolution, and improvement oriented to the future in this and in the other world, all very different from the African vision.

Besides Kardecist influence, African concepts of death blurred in contact with the notions of hegemonic Catholicism during more than a century of syncretism. The funeral rites of the *asesé* (PRANDI, 1999), celebrated to disconnect the dead person from the present life so he can leave and then come back as someone else, a ritual that represents the

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end of all links with the *Ayé*, continues to be practised, but happens more frequently in funerals for the more important leaders of the *terreiro*. It rarely happens when the dead person occupies an inferior place in the religious hierarchy. It is justified today in terms of court etiquette rather than the traditional concept of reincarnation. However, followers of Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian religions do not seem to have decisively incorporated either the Spiritist notion of karma or the Christian salvationist idea of judgement, reward and punishment after death; for the Afro-descendants in the religion, at least to a certain extent, the future following this life, according to the Christian concept, is still a time without meaning: after death, one expects to come back to this world, to the present of the *Ayé*.

VI

For the Yoruba, time is cyclical, everything that happens is a repetition and nothing is new. What happens to us today and what is about to happen in the near future has been experienced before by another human being, by an ancestor, by

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the orishas themselves. The Yoruba oracle, practised by the *babalawos*, who are the priests of Ifá or Orunmilá, the god of divining, is based on knowledge of a large repertoire of myths that speak of all kinds of events from the remote past and that happen again, involving personages from the present. It is always the past that sheds light on the present and the immediate future.

To know the past is to have the formulas for control over events in the life of the living. This mythical past, which is remade at every moment in the present, is narrated by the *odus* of the Ifá oracle. Each *odu* is a collection of myths, and the *babalawo* must find out which one tells the story of what is happening, or is going to happen, in the present life of the consulter who seeks him looking for a solution for his afflictions. When the diviner identifies the myth related to the consulter's present, which he does by using his magical objects of divination, he knows which ritual procedures (such as sacrifices, retreat and purification) should be used to heal the client's afflictions. The prescribed formula is the same one applied in the past, when it was used with success according to the myth. Nothing is new, everything is remade. It is also up to the *babalawo* to identify, when a child is born, the reincarnation of a beloved

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person. One cannot name a child without knowing where it comes from, for a birth is not a *tabula rasa*. It is a return. The *babalawo* is also the guardian of the past and the decoder of the present. He uses the past to decode the present. His long and arduous training obliges him to learn thousands of verses by heart, the poems of Ifá which narrate the mythical past of his people, its gods and its heroes (PRANDI, 1996, chap. 3).

There are no more *babalawos* in Brazil, but the *iyalorishas* and *babalorishas* operate the ancient oracular techniques. They do not learn the poems of Ifá as did the ancient *babalawos*, but their magic still consists in finding out the *odu* that applies to each present situation, as a way of revealing in the present the same causes of events in the past. And of healing them with the same prescriptions.

VII

The African concept of time in Candomblé and in other religious denominations of black African origins is intimately associated with ideas of learning, knowing and competence. For traditional Africans, human knowledge is understood as

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a result of the inexorable elapsing of life, of the benefit of time, of constructing a biography. One knows more because one is old, because one has lived the time necessary to learn. Learning is not an isolated sphere of life, like our school, but a process that occurs from the inside, participatively. One learns while one does, while one lives. As time goes by, older people accumulate knowledge that the younger will only have access to when they have gone through the same experiences. Even for specialised knowledge, learning is by imitation and repetition. The various professional brotherhoods, especially those of a magical and religious kind, divide up responsibilities according to the seniority of members and establish rites of passage that mark the completion of one learning phase and entry into another which implies access to new knowledge, secrets or mysteries of the brotherhood. The importance of rites of passage was emphatically preserved in Afro-Brazilian religions; they are its most notable characteristic. In the initiatory process, each phase of course corresponds to a commitment to new obligations and to the achievement of new privileges. The passage from one phase to another is not determined by a scale of time, nor could it be; rather, it is determined by what the initiate is really capable of doing.

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Once again, what counts is experience. To be older is to know correctly, to do more and better. Many of the different professional attributions, perhaps the most important, are inherited from father to son, mother to daughter, in a clear reaffirmation that life is repetition.

The Yoruba only learned writing with the arrival of the Europeans. Thus, all traditional knowledge is based on orality. Myths, ritual formulas, praise formulas, genealogies, proverbs, medicinal recipes, charms and botanical and zoological classifications are all memorised. Everything is learnt through repetition, and the figure of the master accompanies the apprentices for a long time. The elderly are depositaries of the living culture of the people and the only way to learn what they know is to live with them. The old are the wise, and community life depends on their knowledge and mysteries. The old person holds the secret of tradition. His word is sacred, because it is the only source of truth.

This way of conceiving learning and knowledge enters into crisis in Candomblé *terreiros* when their members who have gone to school use the written formulas that are slowly becoming available in books and other publications. Even more, the followers of the religion of the orishas, voduns, and

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inkices now come from varied origins and social classes, and all or most of them have been through the experience of learning in school. The latter is oriented to quick, rational and impersonal learning, to knowledge squeezed into calendar time. The school, a mechanism of transmission of all the knowledge considered important by society, is an institution for young people. In our society, it is in youth that one acquires knowledge and it is expected that the young should know more than the old. In fact, a young person of twenty today may know more than his parents and much more than his grandparents, because he has learnt in school where knowledge advances quickly. Knowledge is outside the home and the family. And knowledge is never definitive, because it is in permanent expansion and constant reformulation, and each person should become up-to-date and learn about the new discoveries that appear relentlessly.

In our society, old age is considered the age of stagnation, backwardness and retirement, which etymologically means withdrawal to one's quarters and thus abandonment of public and productive life. The young person no longer learns by living with the elderly; he learns from reading and the institutions of the written word, and there is no teacher without a

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book. Knowledge through writing, whose access is amplified through acquiring books, consulting libraries and now navigating on the internet, has no limits, much less any secrets. Everything is within reach of the eyes and there is no need to wait. Phases of apprenticeship can be skipped, and nothing can deter the will to know.

This new way of conceiving apprenticeship, age, and time interferes greatly with notions of religious authority, hierarchy, and religious power, causing contradictions and conflicts within Candomblé, questioning the legitimacy of the power of the elderly and provoking changes in the process of priestly initiation. ■

VIII

Even today in Brazilian candomblés one attempts to teach that experience is the key to knowledge, that everything is learnt by doing, seeing and participating. Everything in its own good time. Thus, the knowledge of the elderly is the legitimate knowledge, acquired throughout one's life. Roger Bastide, who studied Candomblé in the 1950's, wrote "it is the priests who

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have the notion of the value of time; it is time that matures the knowledge of things; the Westerner wants to know everything from the very beginning, which is why he does not really comprehend anything” (BASTIDE, 1978, p. 12).

The whole religious hierarchy is built on the time of initiatory learning, according to the logic that the elderly have lived more and therefore know more. But for the young person of Western mentality, time is pressing and must be overcome. The written word is the route to knowledge and orality no longer makes any sense. It only makes sense when one believes that the formula learnt through orality is the only efficacious way, but that is a religious imposition defended only by the lovers of tradition, whatever that may mean. In a society like ours, in which science has unmasked all secrets, it is hard to believe that everything has its own time, and that it is necessary to wait for the right time, since daily life and the struggle for survival tell us the opposite. In our culture, whoever comes in first receives the accolades.

The members of a *candomblé* are classified basically in two major categories of initiatory age: the *iyawós*, those recently initiated, that form the junior group; and the *egbomis*, those initiated some time ago and who are capable of carrying

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out more complex ritual activities on their own, the senior group. The word Yoruba *egbomi* means precisely “my elder”, and that was how the older wives in the ancient Yoruba polygynous family called each other. *Iyawó*, in this traditional family, was the name given to the younger wives. In Candomblé, while the *egbomis* gain certain autonomy vis-à-vis the supreme authority of the *mães de santo e pais de santo* and are in charge of important ritual tasks which are prestigious within the group, with special privileges and honours, the *iyawós* (the word has long since lost the connotation of wife in Candomblé), the young initiates, just obey, using symbols and cultivating gestures and postures that denote their hierarchical inferiority. Remembering that the structural organisation of Candomblé is a symbolic reproduction of the traditional structure of the Yoruba family, in other ways lost in Brazil, one sees the importance of accumulated experience in the constitution of these groups of authority. The *egbomis* are the ones that know, because they are older, have lived longer and accumulated more experience. Their authority stems from the accumulation of time, which presupposes greater knowledge.

As Candomblé is a religion and in our society religion is

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one of the autonomous spheres of culture (which makes the religion of the orishas in America something very different from what it was in Africa), the notion of accumulated time in the religious sphere tends to be more and more separate from the time that marks the course of life. One can enter Candomblé by free choice, at any moment and at any age. Thus, the biological age of the person is not the same as the initiatory age, so a young person initiated a long time ago may be the *egbomi* of an *iyawó* who was initiated in maturity. The time since initiation has become the time that really matters. Obviously, in the early days of Candomblé, the passage of a junior priestess to the senior category was the natural result of religious knowledge accumulated over the necessary time, however long that might be. The recognition by the group of her capacity and competence in the fulfillment of complex ritual tasks was the natural result of doing these tasks, combined with the religious dedication expressed through continuous ritual obligations to which the devout woman submitted herself. Taking care of her personal orisha, offering him the necessary periodic sacrifices and working autonomously to benefit the group were the conditions that indicated maturity, ritual competence, capacity for leadership, knowledge, and authority.

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At a certain stage in the consolidation of Candomblé, the creation of a specific rite of passage that made recognition of the condition of seniority public became necessary, a rite known today as *deká*, through which an *iyawó* takes up the position of an elder, an *egbomi*. Being part now of a society in which the time that matters is calendar time, of unquestionable objectivity in our culture, Candomblé ended up measuring in years the apprenticeship of an *iyawó*. After submitting to the great rite of passage that makes him a junior priest in Candomblé, the so-called ‘making’ of the orisha, the *iyawó* can, after years of learning and ascending through the intermediary rites, become an *egbomi*, thus achieving seniority. As a senior he may receive the power of ordering, take on prestigious tasks, initiate new followers and even open his own *terreiro* if he wishes. At some point halfway through the twentieth century – and no-one knows how or where the initiative came from – the *lei-do-santo* (Candomblé law), a sort of unwritten consensual code that regulates customs and religious life in the *terreiros*, in permanent flux, established as seven the minimum number of years necessary for receiving the degree of seniority, the time of *deká*, of authority. The *deká* is the crowning of a sequence of obligations that includes, after the ‘making’, the obligation

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of one year, three years, and, finally, seven years, all defined in a Western time scale. Obviously, eventual delays in any phase end up prolonging the total period.

The time of initiation, now calculated in terms of years, months, and days, and in certain cases hours, becomes the key to the hierarchical ordering of the group, what anthropologists call a *pecking order*, a hierarchical structure that can be observed in the chicken-coop. In the coop, one of the chickens, certainly the strongest and undisputed leader, pecks all the others and is not pecked by anyone; a second one is pecked by the first one and pecks the others; a third one is pecked by the first two and pecks the others, and so forth, until the last chicken, which is pecked by all of them and doesn't peck any. This scheme, very characteristic of societies of simpler social structures and initiatory associations, is rigidly observed in the *candomblés*. It may be seen in the order in which the members of a *terreiro* place themselves in the circle of dances, in the order of the requests for blessing – who kisses whose hands – and in almost every moment in which *terreiro* etiquette shows the mark of time.

A much respected motto of the so-called *lei-do-santo* says that an older person knows more and that his truth is un-

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contestable. Knowledge is power, it is greater proximity to the gods and their mysteries, and it is wisdom in the affairs of *ashé*, the mystical force that moves the world and is manipulated by rites. Because of this, the younger person throws himself at the older person's feet and asks his blessing, doesn't talk unless spoken to, asks permission (*Agò egbomi*, excuse me, my elder) to speak in his presence, offers him food before eating himself (*Ajeum*, let's eat, would you like some?), lowers his head when near him, bows when he goes by, greets him by putting his hands together (*Mojuba*, hail!) when singing to the orisha which the older person is devoted to. All this happens in an order in which each one knows his position well, or should do.

However, in the world in which they live, the young people learn that age is not synonymous with wisdom. In Candomblé, they discover that those who have been initiated longest do not always know the most. The young person learns in the *terreiro*, but may enlarge his religious knowledge through other sources, with reading being an open door that takes him to a universe of information about the things of religion that the older person does not even imagine. The young person loses confidence in the older person, contests his wisdom, breaks his loyalty to those that initiated him and may abandon the

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group in search of other leaders who seem more fitting, changing *ashé* (as they say), changing *terreiros*, *famílias de santo* and religious affiliation. Many initiates today in Candomblé have a very clear occupational aspiration: they wish to become high priests and priestesses, seeking in this religion, as happens in others, a means of life and an opportunity for upward social mobility. For them, the earlier they reach seniority the better, often bypassing the seven- year count.

The search for knowledge is thus transformed into a fight against time, completely inverting its original notion, breaking with the idea that time is the sum of life experiences. The *terreiro* is then regarded like a Western school, stipulating periods and finally giving out titles and diplomas that grant rights in the professional marketplace. The place of African time, the time of myth, is taken over by clock time.

IX

Veteran initiates say that in the long-lost days of old-style Candomblé the confinement where initiation occurs had no pre-determined duration. The initiate was confined in the *ter-*

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reiro for as long as was necessary for his priestly apprenticeship and the fulfillment of all the activities involved in the ‘making’ of an orisha. One might stay for many months isolated from the world, totally immersed in one’s initiation. That is now a thing of the past. Today, each initiation, carried out in less than one month, has to be carefully planned so as to fit into vacation from work or the spare moments from one’s commitments in secular life. The time of initiation becomes regulated by the time of the job market. The African time of the *terreiro* is conquered by the time of capitalist society.

In our society of irreversible time, the images and references of circular time are lost more and more: the analogical clock, with its hands going around and always returning to zero, is substituted by the digital watch; 24-hour supermarkets and other businesses essential to consumption in daily life never close; television channels are on the air night and day; work can be done at any time; the internet maintains uninterrupted access to the information archives of computers connected to the worldwide web; even love is made at any time in the full-time motels; electricity long ago put an end to darkness and turned night into day; genetically modified engineering makes us dream of a nature transformed at every

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harvest. If even in nature cyclical time is losing importance, what can one say about the *terreiro*.

The old people of Candomblé talk of the past as a lost time which no longer comes round again, beaten by a present in which haste rules, as does the taste for the new, the lack of respect for cherished traditions and, above all, indifference towards old people. It is said that “Candomblé now lives off commerce, it is pure exhibitionism”; one hears the complaint that “some want to be greater than the others”; it is said that “the ones that are just out of diapers and don’t know anything, already look down their noses at the elders”; it is lamented that “the old *babalorishas* and the old *iyalorishas* (the high priests and high priestesses of the religion of orishas) have no voice any more”; and it is affirmed that “the youngsters just want to take what they can from their elders and then kick their backsides and find another place where they can be in charge”. They talk nostalgically about that ideal world left behind and like to point out that “in my time it wasn’t like this”, repeating that “today nobody has any humility, they want to know more than the old people, these smug kids, these youngsters full of wind”. This sad talk certainly contains nostalgia for their youth, but it is also a true testimony to real losses.

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The present is now rupture, discontinuity. The past no longer explains things nor comes to fruition in the present. The myths are gradually forgotten, the *odus* simplified, the gods are given airs which fit in better with modernity. The young people accuse the old of taking initiatory secrets to the grave without transmitting them to anyone, weakening the mysteries of religion and its force, the *ashé*, but in reality they do not care much about it. They believe less in the existence of the secrets than the old people said they did. They have learnt that tradition is and can be constructed at every instant, since the unwritten *lei-do- santo* which organises Candomblé traditions is only a century old and has several versions and is always changing. And they carry on with their religion, thinking of the future.

X

For the West, the future is an unknown quantity to be deciphered, controlled and planned for better use. Hope is always deposited in a future time in which great achievements must be introduced for the sake of human happiness. One

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invests in the future. One scans the past looking for mistakes made, so they can be avoided in the present for the sake of a better future. History teaches one how to act with wisdom and responsibility in the face of what is to come. An emblematic motto of Karl Marx tells us that history never repeats itself, except as farce. For the traditional African it is the opposite: repetition is desired and right and unquestionable. The new, the unexpected, what does not come from the past, is false and dangerous and undesirable.

Candomblé today is between these opposing concepts of time. Each one is based on divergent concepts of learning, knowledge, and authority. They lead to divergent notions of life and death, reincarnation and deification. In this clash, the religion changes, adapts, finds new formulas and adopts new languages. The orishas win new territories, conquer followers from diverse social classes, racial origins and regions of Brazil and of other countries. What the social reality of religions in Brazil has shown is that the religion of the orishas grows and prospers (PIERUCCI; PRANDI 1996). Above all, it is transformed, becoming more and more Brazilian and less and less African. Even the movement of Africanisation, which seeks to undo the syncretism with Catholicism and recover many

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African doctrinal and ritualistic elements lost in the diaspora, cannot make the religion of the orishas in Brazil return to concepts that have shown themselves to be incompatible with contemporary civilisation. African time loses its greatness and fades away. It remains, however, in the little things, fragmented, manifesting itself more as the ordering principle of a peculiar way of organising daily life in an exotic, extravagant and enigmatic religion.

And little by little the *povo de santo* adjust their watches. They know that Candomblé is no longer an exclusive religion of the descendants of African slaves – a little Africa outside of society, the *terreiro* taking over from the lost African city, as it still was when studied by Roger Bastide almost half a century ago (BASTIDE, 1971, p. 517-518). Instead, it has become a religion for everyone, ready to compete with other religions in the wide and open religious market of Brazil. An institution adjusted to modern times and in a process of change which reformulates tradition and chooses new reference points, for better or for worse. The time is now time for change.

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