



“O old black one, you never deceive me”: An Aspect of Afro-Brazilian Religion

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SLAVES WERE OFFICIALLY LIBERATED IN BRAZIL ON MAY 13, 1888. BRAZIL WAS THE last nation to abolish the trading of African men, women, and children for forced labor. The trade was abolished by a mandate from the Empress Leopoldina. Afro-Brazilians in the *Movimento Negro* generally do not mark the formal celebration of the end of slavery. They commemorate their struggle for self-determination on the anniversary of the death of the first independent nation in the new world, November 20, 1695, when Zumbi, the former slave and head of the inland nation of Palmares, was murdered by bounty hunters contracted to end the 99-year-old challenge to Portuguese authority.

I. A DESCRIPTION OF THE FESTIVAL

As in the United States, however, the search for black self-determination has

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In the annual commemoration of the end of slavery in Brazil, the Afro-Brazilian religion of Umbanda celebrates the return of “the old blacks,” the ancestors who offer counsel and guidance. The syncretistic participation of Christians in this festival raises important questions about cultural and religious particularity and relativism.

many voices. The May 13 Umbanda festival reveals another face of Afro-Brazilian culture. On this night, the *pretos velhos* (the “old blacks”—those who lived through and remember slavery) are reborn to dance and feast; they celebrate their freedom by giving counsel and granting blessings to those who have come to pay them homage and remember their own heritage as children of their slave ancestors.

The *feira* that I describe here takes place in the home of *mãe* (mother) Aida and *pai* (father) Antonio. It is a modest home in Canoas, a small community that abuts Pôrto Alegre, the capital of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil’s most technologically developed state. Rio Grande do Sul is also the center of German colonization in Brazil and therefore the most Lutheran area in the country. *Mãe* Aida’s house and cultic hub is 15 minutes by car from the two major Lutheran theological centers in Brazil. On this May 13, there are a dozen students present from Escola Superior de Teologia, the Lutheran World Federation’s second largest theological education center and the largest in Latin America.

The worshipers present a collection of faces that dazzles. Save the visitors, there are no faces that would be regarded as white in the United States, although a census taker might choose to mark the white Hispanic box for some. Brazil includes a variety of classifications that befuddle the U.S. imagination. Even though this is a *terreiro* (cultic center) of an Afro-Brazilian religion, only about one-fourth of the faithful are considered black in Brazil. *Preto* (black) is reserved only for those who have no visible mixing of their African ethnic stock. People who are various shades of brown are *mulato*, *mestiço*, *moreno*, or one of more than a dozen of the commonly used terms to indicate individuals with some African ancestry.

Half an hour before the *feira* begins, *Mãe* Aida breaks her preparation routine, excuses herself from her faithful, walks from the living room through the kitchen into the back room of the house that is the sanctuary for two of the three rites she practices, and greets every one of her visitors individually. She takes each hand, smiles, and invites the students to be at home. As she enters, only her own sense of ownership distinguishes her from any other sexagenarian carrying too much weight. She moves slowly, as if it requires a conscious effort to move each part of her substantial body. It is evening and she looks tired. If one saw her at the metro station, one might think she was coming home from cleaning or cooking for an upper-class family in the city.

The *filhos dos santos* (children of the saints—the male initiates of Umbanda) are dressed in white slacks and T-shirts. The *filhas* (daughters) are dressed in blue flower-print dresses with white handkerchiefs folded in triangles tied with the straight part across the top of their heads and knotted at the base of the neck. The women look as if they had all made their dresses from the same bolt of fabric and are ready for parts in *Gone with the Wind*. Most of the daughters are in the kitchen, because no festival of Umbanda passes without a meal. The sons are occupying themselves with the worship space. Those with higher standing are attending to the donations and the items that *Mãe* Aida will use during the *feira*.

The young children of the faithful are milling about. Four children playing a series of hand jives break into peals of laughter when one or more of them misses

a beat or a movement. Two pre-adolescent girls, who will soon make their own commitments to the cult, are cooing over a 20-month-old baby while her mother changes from her everyday clothes to her blue print worship dress and white kerchief. When she comes out of the bathroom, eight-months pregnant and ready to burst, she looks like a house slave, holding her aching back and pushing her already swelling belly even further forward.

The four hand jivers end their games for a moment and look to the corner of the room where there is a one-by-two-meter stage where the musicians will play. They know that a few of them will have a chance to play some of the half-dozen rhythm instruments because tonight there will be a shortage of regular musicians. They look to the triangle, the bell, and the rattle as their best options. They stand over them transfixed, as if they are looking at the secret of life itself, like Niels Bohr as he finished his model of the atom. In a sense they are; they know that within the hour the rhythms emitting from these instruments will bring the *pretos velhos* and this whole community to life.

Mãe Aida enters the sanctuary from the kitchen. She greets the gathered saints and the guests. Now she is not the weary woman with crooked glasses in a bright green dress with enormous yellow daisies. She is in full liturgical garb: a white hoop dress that widens to a diameter of a meter-and-a-half where it reaches the brown cement floor. Her doggedly dignified appearance is now radiant. After the welcome, she confers with the elder saints to make sure all is ready. She arranges the faithful sons and daughters in a circle or oval with her back to the altar and then addresses the musicians. She chants a line to indicate the song and pace and the service begins. The first hymn has only three or four lines, extolling the virtues of Umbanda. She sings a line, and the faithful return it. It is a rather typical opening hymn: "We come here because it is good, Umbanda is a true way to be happy." It is not unique to this celebration.

The music continues and the room literally warms up. The circle of the faithful sways back and forth holding hands and singing until an *orixá* (a spirit or a divine entity) descends and enters one of them. There will be only two types of spirits tonight,¹ the *pretos velhos*, who will enter some of the sons and daughters, and the spirit of princess Anastasia, an African princess who was enslaved in Brazil in the sixteenth century. Anastasia will enter *Mãe Aida*. For the next three to four hours, the *mãe* or princess will direct the worship, give advice, deliver a short sermon, and dance and drink and celebrate.

Thirty to forty minutes into the celebration, the first of the saints is overcome by a *preta velha*. A tall lean woman in her fifties stoops over and bends at the knees and she nearly touches the floor. She is no longer Dona Rosa, she is a nameless Afro-Brazilian slave. She totters around the room dancing, but she will not straighten her back and stand up for more than an hour. She moves her lips like an old woman with no teeth. She dances her way to the exterior door. Someone

¹In most *festas*, various *orixás* will descend according to the patron/matron of the devotee who is overcome. The *orixá* is recognized by the initiated by distinctive movements.

standing by the door opens it, and she stands hunched at the doorway for a few seconds before yelling to greet the spirits who might be outside. It would be a great lack of manners for a spirit to arrive and fail to greet those already present. This scene will be repeated by four other saints: two women and two men. *Mãe Aida* looks to the elders and asks for thrones. They produce eight stools, guide the *preta velha* to her place, and offer her a glass of *cachaça*.²

Anastasia is the next to arrive. From the altar, directly across the room from the exterior door, Aida is overtaken by Anastasia. Suddenly Aida begins to spin like an inverted white and brown top. The circle of the saints opens as Anastasia twirls toward the door to greet her peers. The princess pirouettes back into the circle and begins to give counsel, greeting those assembled. Soon there is a group of six, dancing or seated on their thrones. All except Anastasia are old. About one hour after the first *preta velha* arrived, the honored guests are fed. The menu is traditional: beans, rice, greens, *farofa*, and *cachaça*. Next the observers are fed. Typical of Brazilian hospitality, the faithful who have not been entered by a *preto velho* will wait to see if there is enough food before they eat. Plates appear from the kitchen in the hands of the faithful; even Anastasia is serving.

Mealtime is the hour to seek counsel of the old ones. One by one, people draw close to one or another of the *pretos velhos*. In the middle of the meal, Anastasia gives a short sermon reminding the faithful to fulfill their obligations to the faith in their actions, and to the *terreiro* by their gifts. One man, who is having marital problems, seeks her counsel in a semiprivate conversation on the side of the room. Once everyone has eaten, the drums begin again and the dancing resumes. One by one, the old ones find their way to the door, say goodbye to their equals, and exit the bodies of the faithful. *Mãe* returns and directs the closing down of the miracle. She spins out of her trance surrounded by the men in white, who stand ready to catch her should she fall. She makes some announcements, and everyone lines up to be blessed, pay their respects, and kiss her hands. The party is over except for washing the dishes. Slowly the crowd dwindles. It is nearly midnight. Four hours have passed.

This is one aspect of Umbanda, one of the two major Afro-Brazilian religions. The other is Candomblé or Macumba.³ Each has its place in the life of Brazil at the turn of the millennium. While they are religions with deep roots in the Afro-Brazilian cultures, they are practiced in all parts of Brazil within all classes and all ethnic backgrounds.

²A popular distilled spirit made from sugar cane.

³Umbanda and Candomblé are different religions with many apparent similarities. The *terreiro* described here, *Casa Africana de Nossa Senhora da Conceição*, is one of the houses that practices both religions. The charge has been made that Umbanda is a re-enslavement of black Brazilians by whites of the spiritualist movement of Allan Kardec. See Dilson Bento, *Malungo—Decodificação da Umbanda* (Malungo: The Decodification of Umbanda) (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1979), and Renato Ortiz, *A Morte Branca do Feiticeiro Negro* (The White Death of Black Fetishism) (São Paulo: Vozes, 1978). After more than a dozen visits to this *terreiro*, I am unconvinced that it is so influenced.

II. QUESTIONS OF CULTURE AND FAITH

An interesting aspect of the Brazilian sociological and religious landscape is the lack of bipolar (either/or) thinking. A joke among Brazilians is that everyone is so religious here that a Gallup-style survey would show that nearly 180 percent of all Brazilians had deeply held religious convictions. A person can be both Roman Catholic and *Umbandista*, and such a person is likely to be a *Candomblista* as well. Additionally there are various indigenous religions and traditions that have mixed and melded with the religions brought by the Europeans, as well as the *nova era* (new age) religions that mark the North American landscape.

Candomblé and Umbanda are the attempts of African slaves and their descendants to maintain their religious heritage. Like North American slaves, in their new surroundings they were prevented from practicing their own rituals, which their oppressors regarded as demonic or worse, yet were capable of nurturing memories and dreams of freedom. They were offered instead a gospel to heal the holes in their hearts and the wounds on their backs. Of course, it was not the true Christian gospel, but a version that promised future redemption at the price of present submission—submission not to God but to the slaveholder. The slaves understood that if they were to survive physically, they would have to become Catholics. They believed that if they were to survive emotionally and morally, they would have to hide their actual faith from the evangelistic owner. The slaves made analogies between the faiths they had learned from their forebears and the faith that was introduced to them by brute force and deprivation. They then fused the two forms of worship, using the principal figures of the Christian faith to represent the *orixás* they believed guided their lives in their homelands, old and new. Saint Barbara and Iansã are one; Saint Anthony and Ogum are one; Imanja and Mary are one; Jesus and Oxalá are the same redemptive force; God the Creator and Olorum have the same meaning in their lives. In this way, slaves were free to worship traditional entities without suffering the castigation of the enslaving society. The captive Africans were free to continue many of their daily rituals unimpeded by their kidnappers.

For most Brazilians many things are true at once, even if they seem contradictory to North Americans. This is an important distinction between the two cultures. Where North Americans require a level of certitude in almost all areas of life, Brazilians live in a more provisional world. An example from popular sports culture: In Chicago, one can obtain seasonal schedules for Bulls, Bears, Cubs, or Sox games and buy tickets in advance. In Brazil, where soccer is often considered to have religious import, games are negotiated on a weekly or monthly basis. One never really can plan to attend a game more than a week in advance, because schedules depend on who wins and who loses. This affects the whole social and entertainment matrix of the country.

The closest most North Americans will come to Candomblé is the occasional sensationalistic news report that announces a satanic cult or violent animal sacrifice in the otherwise tranquil suburbs of Chicago, New York, or even Minneapolis.

Often, these involve a Cuban, Puerto Rican, or Haitian neighbor who has continued to practice his or her native religion after moving to the United States, perhaps even after joining a local Christian congregation.

Santaria is the name of the Afro-Caribbean religion practiced in Puerto Rico and Cuba. In Brazil, it is known as Candomblé. *Vodun* (often called voodoo) is the Haitian expression of this faith. These folks practice a religion that remains much closer to its rural and sacrificial roots than our own. The adherents are often no more than a generation away from the necessity of killing a chicken or rabbit in order to eat. They have vivid memories of grandmother or grandfather using the entire animal for the meal or some type of curative or perhaps for good luck. Many North Americans have forgotten that their parents or ancestors had similar practices, perhaps less tied to their religious life but, nevertheless, practical ways to take full advantage of the livestock. Even in the urban centers of Brazil it is still common to find families who raise chickens in the yard. One may even find a young sheep or goat in the weeks preceding festivals (Christian or otherwise).

A modern postenlightenment culture, still steeped in a neoplatonic separation of the divine from the material, is bound to misunderstand those cultures that combine elements of postmodernity with the premodern aspects of their tradition. This is precisely what the cellular-phone-toting *Umbandista* does. Our core religious question is often, "What is transcendent?" But for the *Umbandista* the question is absurd. He or she would respond that the transcendent is all around us. Elements of the *orixás* are all around us and in us. That he or she is somehow irreparably separated from the divine is incomprehensible.

III. AQUI VOCÊ TEM LUGAR(?)

This analysis raises several questions: Can moderns and premoderns live in the same religious community? Does it make sense to evangelize in Afro-Brazilian communities? (For that matter, does it make sense to evangelize African-American communities in the United States?) The theme for 1997-98 of the Igreja Evangelica de Confissão Luterana no Brasil (IECLB), a partner church of the ELCA, is *Aqui Você Tem Lugar* ("There Is A Place For You Here"). This still mostly German immigrant church struggles with the issue of diversity and identity: "Can we preserve our theological identity and open our doors to those whose ideas about ordering the world are different?" The answer is either very complex or it is very simple.

If the answer is "we cannot," it rests on the conviction, either conscious or unconscious, that the gospel is so intertwined with particular cultural roots that it is impossible to "recognize" the gospel when it is separated from that culture. This is often interpreted as racism, though I believe it is simply ethnocentrism. Combined with power to determine the fates of others, ethnocentrism can become brutal and racist.

If the answer is "we can," it becomes quite complex. This answer requires genuine openness to other cultures. It requires a healthy self-understanding that allows one not to be threatened by the other. It also requires an ability to recognize

that everything in one's own religious culture is not necessarily sacred, while some things in another religious culture may be. Knowing oneself is futile if the self is all that one knows. Being overly respectful of the cultures and truths of others without appropriate self-knowledge leads to self-negation at worst and cultural relativism at best.

Self-negation on the part of one element in a society robs the larger cultural milieu of the potential contributions of that element. Its adherents become invisible in the culture, adopting the norms of others. Self-negation kills individual and communal creativity.

Cultural relativism, on the other hand, insists that a particular culture has no value. Though relativism may prevent cultural imperialism, it does so at the cost of a dull politically correct truce that prevents genuine conversation and the possibility of particular truth claims.

One of the accidental strokes of genius that marks Brazil is the preservation of many cultures. Clearly the Portuguese and Spanish cultures lie atop the oft denied cultural hierarchy. Often the North American pop culture of music videos, Disneyland, and Star Wars is a close second. Different, however, is the fierce retention of their own heritage by the several immigrant and slave groups and even the nearly eradicated indigenous peoples. Most have maintained their own identities in a rejection of the dominant culture. German immigrant communities in southern Brazil continue to hold worship services in German alongside their Portuguese services. Italian and Japanese communities also have preserved their cultures. Africans have done the same. This is a major distinction in immigration patterns that are otherwise broadly similar to those of the United States.

What occurs in Brazil is a mixing without melding of the cultural groups. A German participates in Umbanda because, in his memory, the herbs and chants and dances of the faith relieved his pains and healed his childhood illness. An Italian catches a bus to Blumenau every year for Oktoberfest because she likes the music, the beer, and the wurst better than the wine and *copa* in her hometown. An Afro-Brazilian speaks Portuguese, drinks wine from an Italo-Brazilian winery, and eats wursts. He worships at the local Catholic parish *and* (not but), when his mother is ill, he goes to her *mãe dos santos* to ask for prayers and to learn which herbs should be used to ease her discomfort and speed her recovery. Only rarely is he asked to choose one over the other. All of these elements bring joy and meaning to life. Brazilians are convinced that they should not have to choose.

Perhaps a citation from one of Brazil's best known modern novelists can best say what happens in Umbanda. A medical professor is arguing with his friend, the protagonist—a poor school messenger—about the merits of reason and materialism, and the foolishness of superstition and religion, especially one based on dancing, hypnotic drum beats, and possession by friendly spirits.

"At least I am consistent, and you're not!" exploded Frago Neto. "If you don't believe in it anymore, don't you think it is dishonest to take part in a farce as if you do believe in it?"

"No. First, I have already told you, I love to dance and sing.... Besides, we are

engaged in a hard and cruel struggle. Look at how violently they are trying to destroy everything that belongs to Negroes and mulattoes, our goods and even our very features.”⁴

The *pretos velhos* have spoken for their one evening of the year. The *filhos* and *filhas dos santos* clean the worship space, wash the dishes, and change back into their everyday clothes. As they do so, they arrange rides home and listen to the successes and failures of the week past and the hopes for the weeks to come. In the morning they will return to their jobs and their lives in the workaday world. They will wend their way through Brazil’s racism and even stronger classism, and struggle to find or maintain their dignity. These people will continue on their journey through life with hope, meaning, and a sense of extended family and rootedness. From their collective past, they create collective and individual futures. They struggle to maintain a level of choice regarding the rate at which they will participate in the ever greater demands of the broader culture. ⊕

⁴Jorge Amado, *Tent of Miracles*, trans. Barbara Shelby (New York: Avon, 1971) 331.