

Origins

Candomblé and Umbanda are two religious cults that developed when the Portuguese forcibly converted the slaves to Catholicism. In a successful attempt to preserve their own religious traditions, the slaves related the Catholic saints to their own African spirits, called orixás. This process, called syncretism, relates African spirits to the Catholic saints. To maintain their religious beliefs, slaves needed to relate the two because Candomblé was outlawed, and slaves were punished for practicing it.

Candomblé, therefore, draws its religious roots from European, African and Indian Brazilian religious traditions. Currently, over 124 million Brazilians identify themselves as Roman Catholic and about 127 million that say they are Candomblé practitioners. However, the number of Candomblé worshippers is misleadingly low. Because Candomblé was highly persecuted in the past, many Brazilians call themselves as Catholic, yet practice Candomblé. To the average Brazilian, Candomblé is seen as an integral part of Catholicism. As a result, many Candomblé practitioners who identify themselves as Catholic because they were baptized Catholic do not attend Catholic services. Brazilians are easily able to integrate these two seemingly different religions into a cohesive whole.¹

Brazil never had an orthodox form of Catholicism in which ordained priests instructed an organized congregation in the European tradition under strict guidelines from the Vatican. Instead, Brazilian Popular Catholicism is defined by its lack of expert priests and focuses on the practicality of everyday life, instead of rewards of the afterlife. In this form of Popular Catholicism, practitioners rely on a lay person to perform the duties of a trained priest. Prayers are offered to specific patron saints who intercede on the congregant's behalf. For example, problems with finances would be addressed through prayers to St. Jerome for justice regarding a personal issue. Supplicants pray to St. Anne for issues related to life and death, creation, as well as, weather issues. In this way, patron saints became linked with the orixá spirits. The orixás are not seen as people, or gods, but are "natural forces...cosmic vibrations, water, wind, leaves, rainbow." (Landis, p. x)

Candomblé and Umbanda are similar in many regards and share the same religious spirits. However, one defining difference is that Candomblé is practiced in Bahia and Umbanda in Niteroi. In Niteroi, public offerings to the orixás are left on beaches on specific days pertaining to the spirit being honored.

¹ Antonio Gramsci, the Marxist philosopher, addresses this concept of "cognitive dissonance" found with the integration of Catholicism and Candomblé. "Cognitive dissonance" is best illustrated by the Irmandade da Boa Morte (The Sisterhood of The Good Death). The Irmandade da Boa Morte are a religious confraternity that expresses both Catholic and Candomblé beliefs. Please see the lesson plan "Sisterhood of the Good Death": a Secret African Religion.

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In Bahia, the only time offerings are made on the beach is on February 2nd, when the residents of Bahia attend a huge celebration, the Festa de Yemanjá (Festival of Yemanjá), which honors the Yamaniá, the Candomblé spirit and the mother to the other orixás. At this festival, devotees send out boats full of flowers and other gifts being offered to this sea spirit and her realm, the sea. Interestingly, the Festa de Yemanjá is the only festival not connected to Catholicism.

Beginning in 1538 and continuing until the abolition of slavery in 1888, almost four million slaves were brought from Africa to labor in Brazil. The word *banzo*, from the Bantu language, describes the deep sadness and pain the slaves felt when they were torn from their culture, religion, beliefs, customs, family, and friends, without hope of ever returning home to Africa. As a result, some slaves became severely depressed, went mad, or died. (AllExperts) Because the slaves were treated as a disposable commodity, malnourished, and overworked, their average life span in Brazil was five to seven years. To counteract *banzo*, Candomblé became an alternative community, and surrogate family for the slaves who had been separated from their families. In her book *Refuge in Thunder*, Rachel E. Harding describes Candomblé as a religion born out of the Diaspora of dislocated Africans and their descendants in Brazil. Harding interprets Candomblé as a way the slaves could heal their pain caused by the emotional and physical crush of slavery.

Basics of the Candomblé

Today, Candomblé is seen as a parallel universe to the troubled life (including slavery, its residual oppression, and extreme poverty) that Brazilians have endured. At the Candomblé house, the community is not concerned with more worldly concerns such as job status, or traditional roles. Instead the values inside the terreiro revolve around the community value of solidarity.

At one time, there were 200 orixás. Now there are 16 main ones that are worshipped. In Africa, a group of people would only worship one orixá, but in Brazil all 16 are celebrated during a Candomblé ceremony. This is because the slaves came from different areas in Africa, and it made sense to acknowledge each groups deity during the Candomblé ceremony.

Candomblé does not have a formal written form. The religion is not one of knowledge that can be learned from a book. It takes years of training to gain the wisdom of a seasoned practitioner. The information is passed on in a hierarchical manner; as one moves up in the hierarchy, more information is shared. This process results from the fact that many aspects of the religion are secret.

One can find books on Candomblé although practitioners do not view them as authentic. Once at home, a practitioner does not pray in a quiet and

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circumspect way. Instead she continues the dances and songs at her home; these are her enthusiastic prayers. When she talks directly to an orixás, she sings songs, which she has learned, to that spirit.

There are different roles people perform in their Candomblé communities; this structure was already present in Africa. Each *terreiro* has a calendar and celebrates 16 ceremonies each year, usually on Saturday. When a *Yialaxe* (a woman priestess) or *Babalaxe* dies, the house, or *terreiro* closes. The *Yialaxe* and *Babalaxe* from surrounding houses perform a divination using *ifa* to see who the next priest will be for that house. It is significant to note that in Bahia in the 1930's, the majority of Candomblé houses were overseen by women priests. Ruth Landes' Brazilian friend Edison describes "in the world of Candomblé...the shoe is on the other foot here. It is almost as difficult for a man to become great in Candomblé as it is for him to have a baby. And for the same reason: it is believed to be against his nature" (Landes, p. 36).

Candomblé is a pragmatic religion and is not concerned with the afterlife. One purpose of Candomblé is to accumulate *axé* for this life. *Axé* is a living force that is everywhere and is cyclical in nature. When a being dies, it provides *axé* to living beings. Therefore, one is not cremated because cremation would destroy the *axé*; instead, one is buried in the earth.

In addition to not having a written form, it is interesting to note that during a Candomblé ceremony, there is no sermon or homily. Instead, music, dance, drumming, and singing are the foundations of the ceremony and run throughout the "service." A Candomblé house is viewed as legitimate if it can provide the traditional music that is handed down from generation to generation in its original form.

Candomblé requires the followers to practice the moral standards of the group. At one *terreiro*, the *Babalaxe* promoted the concept of shared community with his members. All the gifts he received for himself and the community were evenly distributed among the members. Many of the practitioners are poor and come to the house to be fed physically, as well as, spiritually. In the past the official offices of the *terreiro* were full-time positions; now the members have full time jobs outside the *terreiro* to support themselves.

Candomblé is a religion of attraction. Members do not proselytize or recruit new members. The most common way to enter the religion is to shave grown up in it. Sometimes, though, a person decides to attend a *terreiro* and later becomes a member. For many years Candomblé was severely persecuted by the Catholic Church. It is now under fire from some neo-Pentecostals who misinterpret Candomblé as devil worship. In a show of support for all of Brazil's religions, current President Lula instituted January 21st as the National Day against Religious Intolerance (General Assembly).

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http://www.undemocracy.com/generalassembly_63/meeting_48 (August 11, 2009)

Landes, Ruth. *The City of Women*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1947.

Santos, Willys Prof., (August 2009). Lecture given at ACBEU for Fulbright-Hays Study Tour: Art and Society, Bahia, Brazil.

“Saudade.” AllExperts. <http://en.allexperts.com/e/s/sa/saudade.htm> (August 10, 2009)

Further Reading:

Landes, Ruth. (1947) *The City of Women* New York: Macmillan Company. This landmark book is considered an anthropologic classic about Candomblé.

Northwest University has tapes of the music, songs and hymns of Candomblé.

Tunner, Lorenzo from Indiana University is also a good resource on Candomblé.

Pierre Verger, spent considerable time in Africa and Brazil photographing Candomblé. See for example, www.pierreverger.org.