

# Afro-Brazilian Identity and Memory

*Reginaldo Prandi*

The problem of the construction of memory that faces the Afro-Brazilian population presents itself as more than a simple need for an identity connected to an original past, but in addition as essential, because for historical reasons their social reality has not yet reached the end of its struggle.

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The African influence in the composition of Brazilian culture<sup>1</sup> comprises a whole variety of elements ranging from language to cuisine, through music and all the arts, to social values, mythical representations and religious concepts – elements that have been preserved, based not on a single African source, but from several sources of many origins peculiar to different African peoples. However, aside from the religious area, no African cultural institution has survived as such in Brazil, with its own structures intact; in fact quite the reverse. Each element added is the result of a long slow process of diluting and obliterating ethnic origin. So much so that, though it is possible to recognize in a particular cultural feature a generic African origin, it is difficult if not impossible to identify the specific nation or people it comes from. All the differences and specificities have disappeared. All that remains is the African starting-point. Descendants themselves, unaware of their specific origin apart from the large ethno-linguistic group their ancestors belonged to, are no longer able to identify the sources of the various Afro-Brazilian cultural characteristics. It is as if Brazilian culture as a whole had wiped them out as it appropriated and adapted them. The memory people have of Africa is vague, generic, indefinite.

Up to the end of the 19th century the ethnic identity of blacks, both slaves and free, was preserved above all by those who had recently arrived from Africa and organized themselves into Catholic brotherhoods. But with the formation of a class society under the Republic (proclaimed in 1889), as political and ethnic organizations gradually lost their meaning, certain aspects of African cultures were increasingly

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absorbed by the national culture, which was essentially white, European and Christian. It is true that in the late 19th and early 20th century it is possible to identify in various fields – especially the arts – cultural manifestations that are strictly speaking black. But their very survival was directly linked to their ability to be absorbed into white culture. This is particularly the case with Brazilian popular music, whose rhythms and melodic structures of African origin have survived precisely to the extent that white composers and the consumers of white culture were beginning to be interested in them. Thus the *lundu negro* would open the way for the white *choro*; the music of the poor blacks' *candomblé* would provide the source for the middle classes' national samba. In other words, preservation of an African feature in fact passed through a process of obliterating or disguising its black origin and character, a process of 'whitewashing' that would extend to every area, the *umbanda*<sup>2</sup> being an emblematic example in the religious field. This process was only partially reversed from the 1960s onwards, when difference, cultural pluralism and the promotion of ethnic origins began to influence producers' and consumers' attitudes in the context of a cultural movement that found fairly prominent expression in Brazil.

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Towards the middle of the 19th century, with the presence in the large urban centres of slaves, freed blacks and their descendants, the black population discovered more opportunities for mixing, a greater freedom of movement and an increased organizing ability. For even slaves, whose services – which were now paid for – no longer kept them at their masters' homes, could meet together and live among their peers in hostels concentrated in the areas of towns where they could find work. As traditions and languages from Africa were still alive because of their recent arrival, this was a period of perhaps the most thoroughgoing cultural reconstruction that blacks achieved in Brazil: Afro-Brazilian religion, which has been successfully preserved up to the present day.

The groups that appeared in the various 19th-century Brazilian cities recreated religious cults which, apart from the religions themselves, reproduced other aspects of their original African cultures. The creators of these religions were blacks belonging to Nagô (Yoruba) groups, who came mainly from the towns and regions of Oyó, Lagos, Ketu, Ijexá and Egbá, and also to the Fon peoples, who were called Jejes in Brazil, especially the Mahis and Dahomeyans. These religions flourished in the regions of Bahia, Pernambuco, Alagoas, Maranhão, Rio Grande do Sul and, to a lesser extent, around Rio de Janeiro. A similar religion was introduced and maintained by blacks of Bantu origin. But, as regards both the pantheon of divinities and the ceremonies and initiation procedures, the Bantu version is more like an adaptation of Sudanese religions than the Bantu cults from southern Africa strictly speaking,

Black religion – called *candomblé* in Bahia, *xangó* in Pernambuco and Alagoas, *tambor-de-mina* in Maranhão and *batuque* in Rio Grande do Sul – was organized in groups of 'nations' or '*candomblé* nations'.<sup>3</sup> Each one was identified with the nation from which most of its people originated, even if a fair amount of to-ing and fro-ing

occurred as a result of contacts between nations, both in Brazil and even beforehand, in Africa. The *candomblés ketu*, *ijexá*, and more recently *efã*, all very much Nagô or Yoruba in origin, emerged in Bahia, together with a *candomblé* associated with ancestor cult, the *candomblé d'egungum*, and the *candomblé jeje* or *jeje-mahi*. As far as Maranhão is concerned, the drum called *mina-jeje*, which was related more to the tradition of the Dahomeyan Jejes, also gave rise to a label *mina-nagô* that was mainly Yoruba. In Pernambuco the recreation of the Egbá nation, also called Nagô, has survived, while in Rio Grande do Sul there are the Yoruba Oyó and Ijexá nations. In Alagoas there was created a cult of the Xambá nation, which was also Nagô, but today it has virtually disappeared. Out of three main influences – Angolan, Congolese and Cabinda – were formed, in Bahia and elsewhere, the Bantu *candomblés*, of which only the aspects of ritual language and music seem to bear an ethnic stamp, since their divinities are the *orixás* of the Nagôs and their rites follow those of the Nagô and Jeje *candomblés*.

As I mentioned earlier, black religion in Bahia and elsewhere is a reconstruction not only of African religion but of several other cultural aspects of the African source: it is a cultural memory. Let us take as an example the Ketu *candomblé*, which in any case is a model for the others. The African community that was lost in the diaspora first reconstituted itself within the religious group. With the production of hierarchical relations, of subordination and loyalty, all based on the family and kinship models existing in Africa, the *família-de-santo*, or religious community, became a kind of miniature version symbolizing the Yoruba family.

Traditionally the Yoruba are polygynous. Living in compounds, which are group dwellings comprising sleeping quarters and apartments adjoining one another, each extended family venerates the *orixá*, the divinity specific to the family, the town and the region.<sup>4</sup> The family head lives with his principal wife and her children in the main rooms, and the other wives live with their children, each in a separate room. The communal areas are for the kitchen, spare-time occupations, craft work and stores. The family venerates the male head of family's *orixá*, an ancestral divinity that is inherited patrilineally and is the main *orixá* for all the children. Each wife also venerates the *orixá* of her father's family, which is also her children's second *orixá*: they are thus required to worship their father's *orixá*, which is the same for all of them, as well as their mother's *orixá*, which can be a different god depending on their maternal line. The Yoruba believe they are descended from their *orixás*. For this reason each person's origins are not necessarily the same. And so a compound is a coming together of different cultures, each with its ceremonies, myths and taboos. A general god and particular gods are worshipped in the houses of the various wives. The family also has a common religion in their devotion to Exu, a 'trickster' *orixá* who establishes communication between the different levels and people in this world and the parallel world of gods and spirits. Veneration is given as well to the *orixás* that protect the community, in general those of the king's family, the *orixás* of the town's economic and social centre, the market, and other *orixás* that each individual can freely choose and adopt. The family head is the head of the main *orixá*'s cult, and it is within the family, during a ritual trance in the context of great festive celebrations, that priests are initiated who are to receive the divinity. It is the same procedure in the case of the secondary *orixás* belonging to the wives. The veneration

of the *orixá* of divination, called Orunmilá or Ifá, is practised outside the family circle by a brotherhood of priests called *babalaôs*. They are responsible for reading and interpreting people's future, knowing the gods' intentions, prescribing sacrifices to propitiate the *orixás*, and their divination practice consists of interpreting a large collection of myths. The myths to be interpreted are selected each time the oracle is consulted with the aid of divination instruments. These myths, which are learnt at initiation, give the Yoruba an explanation of the world they live in: life, death, the action of the gods and everything existing. They provide and inspire the values and norms of Yoruba society. Another society, which extends to the whole town and sometimes more than a town, is the one devoted to the cult of the town's ancestors, the *egunguns*. Strictly male, this cult is responsible for the administration of justice in the community relations field. In contrast to this religious organization of a cult devoted to the male founders and human heroes, there is in addition a society known as Geledé that celebrates female ancestors, the 'great' mothers. But everyone's day-to-day religion is the family religion, since religion and family are inseparable in daily life.

*Candomblé*, which is a Brazilian creation, was structured like the Yoruba family. The cult members are led by a head, man or woman, who has supreme authority. The *orixá* of the group's founder is the one that is common to the community and the one the main temple is dedicated to. Secondary temples, called houses or *quartos-de-santo* (saints' rooms), are built for each *orixá* or each of the families of *orixás* venerated by the group. The hierarchy is a copy of the Yoruba family, where the youngest owe respect and obedience to the old. They kneel at their feet to greet them, just as Yoruba children do to the oldest and as every Yoruba does to the authorities. It is assumed that the younger ones must learn from their elders as religious knowledge is transmitted orally. Nowadays hierarchy does not depend on age but length of membership, since belonging to a (religious) family is a matter of free choice and not birth. The oldest women – that is, those who have been members the longest (and in Brazil it is seven years after joining that seniority is achieved) – call each other *egbômi*, which means 'my oldest sister' in Yoruba. This is simply the way the oldest and thus most important wives of the family head address each other. The new member is called *iaô*, young wife or young bride, which is the way the older wives address the latest ones. Of course with the passage of time these forms of address for women have started to be used for new male members as well. Apart from initiation practices, such as shaving the head, which marks girls' entry into puberty, and the use of scarification indicating tribal and family origin (the *aberês* of *candomblé*), customs from everyday African family life have also been incorporated into the religion in Brazil as a sacred foundation that cannot be altered: sleeping on a mat, eating with the hands, kneeling to greet the oldest members, keeping the head bowed before the authorities, dancing barefoot, etc.

The positions of *candomblé* religious dignitaries were inspired by the government of communities. The adviser to the king of Oyó, a town in Xangô, inspired the creation of the council of *obas* or *mogdas* in the *terreiros* (places of *candomblé* worship) of that *orixá*. General *Balogun* became an elevated position in the hierarchy of the cult dedicated to Ogum. The women at the king's court who were responsible for administration and the supply of equipment inspired the *ialodês* in the *candomblés*. The

women responsible for tending to the cult of Xangô in the palace of the king of Oyó (called for this reason *Ekeji Orixá*, that is, 'second person of Orixá') were definitely a model for the position of *equédís*, the women who do not go into a trance and who dress up and dance with the *orixás*, together with their priests and priestesses.

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The *candomblé* that arose in Brazil was thus more than a simple reconstruction of the religion. Since the African religion was not separate from the other spheres making up traditional society, in order to make sense in Brazil many aspects of African society had to be incorporated into it, at least symbolically, once African family and social structures had completely disappeared and been replaced, even among slaves, by Ibero-Brazilian models. This naturally meant many adaptations. With the destruction of the African family in Brazil and the gradual loss of kinship lines and structures, sacred identity could no longer rely on the idea that each human being was descended from a divinity through a biological line. This inheritance based on the consanguineous family was replaced by a conception of lineage that was mythico-spiritual in nature. People continued to believe that each individual was descended from an *orixá*, seen as the father who should be venerated; but now that occurred outside the biological family: each person's *orixá* might be revealed by an oracle in the *jogo* (game) *de búzios*, which in Brazil is the prerogative of the heads of the cult, the *mães*(mothers)-*de-santo* and *pais*(fathers)-*de-santo*. But the idea of a second *orixá*, the *juntó* (associate or partner), has continued. Ruling the individual, the *orixá* that in Africa was the biological mother's is also identified in Brazil by the oracle.

It was through religion, as Roger Bastide<sup>5</sup> has shown, that a symbolic Africa was recreated in Brazil with inevitable adaptations; for black Brazilians it was the most complete cultural reference point over at least a century. As an institution in today's Brazilian society, religion functions as a kind of island where black Brazilians can periodically reflect. A sort of idyllic refuge capable – who knows? – of mitigating the harshness of everyday life in a society that is predominantly white. When the traffic in blacks came to an end, then when slavery was halted, there began a slow process, not yet completed, of integrating blacks into the class society that was forming. *Candomblé* lost its significance as a coming together of blacks from ethnic groups and their descendants, or of specific African nations. Fresh entries of blacks, who had now for the most part been born in Brazil, into the different *candomblé* nations were no longer determined by ethnic origins and began to happen by personal choice; such decisions were influenced by feelings of sympathy towards the group's head, by acquaintance or friendship with other members, by the location of the *terreiro*, etc. In any case, from the early 20th century the *candomblés'* profile was definitely no longer ethnic. Just as blacks had forgotten their origins and their parents' and ancestors' language, *candomblé* had also forgotten the meaning of the words and the grammar of the sacred tongues. It is true that the prayers and hymns had been preserved in their original languages, naturally with changes and differences with each generation, but *candomblé's* various tongues ceased to be vehicles of communication and became untranslatable ritual languages. The myths of origin mentioned in

the sacred hymns have also largely been forgotten; ancestral memory has ceased to reaffirm ancient original truths and raised new questions related to the need to live in a contemporary world that is constantly changing.

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To try to give meaning to the memory and identity of blacks of the diaspora was the aim of the process of reconstruction of African religious culture, and this was of course not achieved without changes and loss. For the Yoruba and other African peoples, before they came into contact with European culture, time was cyclical not linear and historical. For them the present was nothing but a repetition of the past, of something that had already occurred and was already known. These past events are alive in myths, which speak of great adventures, heroic acts, discoveries and all kinds of events, which present life continually repeats. Myth speaks of the distant past, which explains the life of the present. Mythical time is just a far-off past where the truth of present time lies. The time of myth is the time of origins.

This distant past, mythical narrative, is communal and speaks of the people as a whole. Passed down from generation to generation, it gives each individual the general meaning of life and, merging totally with religion, provides the group with its identity and the values and norms it needs for action within society. Cyclical time is nature's time, a reversible time, and memory's time too, that is not lost but regenerates. On the other hand history's time is an irreversible time, a time that is no longer connected to eternity or the everlasting return. The time of myth and the time of memory describe the same movement of repositioning that withdraws from the present, goes into the past and journeys back to the present . . . the future as it is conceived in western societies does not exist. Religion is the ritualization of this memory, this cyclical time, that is, representation in the present through symbols and ritualized performance of the past, that guarantees the identity of the group (who are we, where do we come from, where are we going?). It is the time of tradition, absence of change, the time of religion, a religion as the source of identity that repeats the ancestral memory at the heart of the day-to-day. In *candomblé*, emblematically, when the *fiho-de-santo* ('saint's child', the designation that is common to the members of the Afro-Brazilian religion) goes into a trance, incorporates and assumes the identity of an *orixá*, symbolized by a characteristic dance illustrating the mythical adventures of that divinity, it is myth, the distant communal past, that surfaces in the present and shows it is alive; the ritual trance reproduces the past in the present in an embodied representation of collective memory.

Nowadays myth, as a component part of Afro-Brazilian religion in Brazil, no longer needs to have meaning only for blacks and descendants of Africans, but also for whites who belong to the religion of the *orixás*. People no longer refer, as was the case in Africa, to a familial, consanguineous past that identifies and legitimates each family tree, but each member of the religion is linked spiritually, regardless of ethnic origins, to one of the ancestors in the pantheon of divinities venerated in Brazil, viz. the *orixás* Exu, Ogum, Oxóssi, Ossaim, Omulu, Oxumarê, Euá, Xangô, Obá, Iansã, Oxum, Logum Edé, Iemanjá, Naña, Odudua, Oxagui, Oxalá. *Candomblé*, which is Brazilian, teaches that human beings are descended from one of these gods, regard-

less of their family, ethnic, racial or geographical origins. The *orixás* have now become universal divinities.

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And so *candomblé* has ceased to be a source of memory and identity for blacks. In the second half of the 20th century the opportunity to choose *candomblé* as one's religion was no longer a prerogative of blacks, since the Afro-Brazilian religion was opened up to Brazilians of any ethnic or racial origin. White society, which at the beginning of the century had already created *umbanda*, a 'white' version of *candomblé*, then appropriated, in a further step towards integration, what for a century had been the blacks' religion. We were already in mass society and *candomblé* was to be the great reservoir of Brazilian culture that was closest to Africa.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s a movement to retrieve our cultural roots began to flower and develop within the middle classes, echoing the wider movement in the USA and Europe, then in Brazil, that was starting to question western society's established truths – traditional academic knowledge, the superiority of the dominant bourgeois paradigms, European aesthetic values – and to look back at traditional cultures, especially those of the East, seeking new meanings for old subjectivities, forgotten values and hidden forms of expression. In Brazil Bahia came back into the limelight with the rediscovery of its rhythms, the flavours of its cuisine and all the culture of the *candomblés*. Brazilian arts in general (music, cinema, theatre, literature, plastic arts) took on a new dimension and new references, tourists from the south-east's middle classes began to look towards Salvador and other places in the north-east. As it ceased to be a religion reserved exclusively for blacks, *candomblé* spread rapidly throughout the country, while enthusiasm for the black-inspired music of Bahia became widespread and Bahian cuisine, which is in fact the votive food offered to the *orixás* in the *terreiros*, was to be found on every table.

Though elements of African origin contributed to Brazilian culture in the most varied fields, with the 1960s and 1970s movement there occurred a complete repositioning of the black heritage: what had previously been seen as exotic, different, primitive, became normal, familiar, contemporary. Even popular music has brought into the old samba, which has become increasingly 'white', new rhythms closer to the percussion of the *candomblé terreiros*. The Carnival 'samba schools' never get tired of including *orixás* in their public processions. Television, from news to drama – the *telenovelas* (tv soaps) in particular – constantly refers to the gods of the *terreiros*, the oracle of the *jogo de búzios*, the *pais-de-santo* and *mães-de-santo*, sometimes presenting them as authentic and sometimes exposing them as sham. Henceforth the culture of a minority has entered into the way of life of the whole Brazilian population.

Promotion of black culture in Brazil was paralleled by the development of minority movements, among them the black movement in its most diverse manifestations, rekindling for Afro-Brazilians question of origins and identity. After several centuries of integration, mixing and 'whitening' (both physical and cultural), some black and mixed-race groups are asking and being asked questions about their African and Afro-Brazilian origins. While intellectuals and artists not identified with a black cause are generally trying to incorporate and dissolve Brazilian Africa in a uni-

versalizing type of art and discourse, others are adopting a position that is diametrically opposed, making artistic creation a demonstration of their own identity.

But blacks, who were forced to integrate into a national culture that was European, white and Christian if they wished to survive, have forgotten their origins. The Catholic syncretism of Afro-Brazilian religions is the emblematic proof of this unavoidable requirement to be Brazilian and therefore Catholic, even if they were African and venerated *orixás*, *voduns* and *inquices* (*orixás* in the *candomblés* from Angola and the Congo). Those blacks could no longer say where their ancestors came from, whether they were from this or that tribe or community, what language they spoke.

The numerical superiority of Yoruba blacks in Salvador in the 19th century made their language, Yoruba, a language common to all the blacks living in the town, whether they were slaves or free and regardless of their ethnic origins. When the different groups were organizing their religion in Bahia, it was the Nagô *candomblés*, with many Jeje ritual elements, that were the most successful in dominating as models, so much so that their gods, the *orixás*, finally proved themselves able, first locally then nationally, to win out over the *voduns* of the Jeje and the Bantus' *inquices*. Whereas *orixás* were starting to become recognized as authentic African divinities, especially with the appearance and spread throughout the whole country of *umbanda*, *voduns* remained limited to certain temples in Salvador and towns in the Recôncavo region of Bahia, or completely hidden from the rest of the country in the temples of Maranhão. The Bantu *inquices* had already long been replaced by *orixás* and *encantados caboclos*. It was as if everything black had to come down from the Nagô peoples and all African gods had to be called *orixás*.

The North American essayist and poet Steven White,<sup>6</sup> analysing the work produced over the last 15 years by black Brazilian poets such as Estevão Maya-Maya, Oliveira Silveira, Edmilson de Almeida Pereira, Ricardo Aleixo and Lepe Correia, shows exactly how the search for a black identity originating in Africa finally gave way to the need to reinvent a past via a religion that is practised today and is the Brazilian source *par excellence* of the memory of African origins. Traditional religion, reconstructed on the western shores of the Atlantic, became the source of a memory created in the present for the past in a journey in reverse. The process of elaboration of that mythical past would drink deep from specific current traditions springing from the black religious institutions that were the most prominent on the cultural scene of the country, and identity was defined based on an idealized origin that the poet adopted as his own. The reconstitution of the past that guided the construction of identity was thus achieved on the basis of Brazilian culture, and not the culture of origin, which was genuine but lost, ethnic, familial and, in the final analysis, racial.

Even when blacks express themselves to affirm their negritude, their African character, they can do so only as Brazilians. Though the lost ancestral past is multi-ethnic, multicultural Africa, the retrievable past is the one Brazil has succeeded in integrating into the construction of a new civilization: a past that can only be re-invented, a recreated memory. Between present-day Brazil and old Africa, as well as old Europe and the lost indigenous civilizations, is our own history, which prevents us finding or helps us to find our starting-point in the twists and turns of the civilization that it brought forth. Retrieving the ancestral past, which no longer



has much meaning today, makes us elaborate a memory patched together with the mythical signs that emerge into the present. From today's Brazil we remake the Africa of the past. A symbolic Africa, the possible memory and identity of the Afro-Brazilian people.

Reginaldo Prandi

University of São Paulo

Translated from the Brazilian Portuguese by Francine Marthouret and Frances Albernaz

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

### Notes

1. See *Diogenes* issues 179, 'The Routes and Traces of Slaves' (1997), and 191, 'Brazil, Five Hundred Years of Racial Integration' (2000).
2. *Umbanda*: Afro-Brazilian religion formed in the late 19th century in Rio de Janeiro, from Bantu *candomblé* and French spiritism created by Allan Kardec, with Catholic syncretisms and some ritual elements from indigenous religions.
3. Vivaldo da Costa Lima et al., *Encontro de nações de candomblé*, Salvador, CEO/UFBA and Inamá, 1984.
4. N. A. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, 1970.
5. Roger Bastide, *Les Religions africaines du Brésil*, Paris, PUF, 'Dito', 1995.
6. Steven F. White, 'A reinvenção de um passado sagrado na poesia afro-brasileira contemporânea', *Estudos Afro-Asiáticos*, 35, 1999, pp. 97–110.