



On Afro-Brazilian religions

Sobre religiões afro-brasileiras

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Afro-Brazilian religions occupy a reduced space in the set of Brazilians who declare themselves as followers of some religion. Their declared believers total only 0.3% in Census 2010. They reached higher figures in the past, but, for at least twenty years, their number has declined. Whereas we have never breathed so much religious freedom in the country and having in mind that affirmative action policies aimed at black Brazilians have greatly contributed to reaffirm the origin identity of Afro-descendants, it could be expected that believers, above all black people from religions of African origin, who still retain the mark of negritude, increasingly declared themselves as such, without resorting to disguise a Catholic or Spiritualist identity, which has long been practiced among us due to religious syncretism and, on the other hand, to ethnic prejudice. In fact, this may be happening, but, even so, the number of Afro-Brazilians has fallen systematically when it comes to say which religion is practiced. If Afro-Brazilian religious believers have today greater motivation to openly declare their religion to census agents, the actual drop that occurred in the last two decades is even greater than that shown by censuses. It can be difficult to face, but this is a fact: these religions suffer a proven decline. And these are precisely the religions that were seen by scholars, forty years ago, as the main, perhaps the only, alternative to Pentecostalism, which today has more than

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1/5 of the Brazilian population. The success of Pentecostal growth undoubtedly tends to reduce, in a dramatic way, the role of Afro-Brazilian religions in the map of conversions.

Despite their small and declining representation in demographic terms, Afro-Brazilian religions occupy an extremely important place in the ongoing construction of the non-religious Brazilian culture. When compared to the cultural contribution of Afro-Brazilian religions, the portion represented by Protestant religions is nothing, it is insignificant. Maybe when gospel music ceases to be merely an expression of some religious identity and achieve a quality standard compatible with the universal recognition of Brazilian popular music, largely grounded on Afro-Brazilian tradition, the Evangelical contribution may be reevaluated. Still, it will have a long way to go in order to equate the cultural influences provided by religions of the Orishas, established not only in music, rhythms, dances, and carnival, but also in literature, theater, poetry, film, in the aesthetics of colors and movements, in cooking, mythic imagination, in the Brazilian way of life. Not to mention the values of tolerance and pluralism characterizing the black religions from Africa, in their polytheistic womb.

It may be said that Afro-Brazilian religions have a relatively shy reach in terms of the number of their believers, but what goes beyond them to compose, remodel, flavor, and contaminate the Brazilian culture made them great religious expressions, which, in addition to traditional Catholicism, still account for our national identity.

All this explains the huge interest of researchers in Afro-Brazilian religions. The number of studies on Candomblé, Xangô, Tambor de Mina, Batuque, Umbanda, and other less widespread methods is constantly increasing. There is always an aspect to discover, a nuance to consider, a new interpretation to offer. It seems that their complexity and mythic and ritual wealth have no end.

This is demonstrated by what lies ahead, in this journal.

Starting with the notion of person, which implies the integration of different souls: Orisha, which binds us to nature; the reincarnated spirit, or Egum, which binds us to family, social group, society, in a circular time that leads the world to replace and repeat indefinitely; and Ori, or head, which contains individuality and carries the destiny of every man and woman, which makes each one what she/he is. The importance of Ori requires rite, sacrifice, ceremony, situating the individual in the eye of religious attention. And this is just a beginning.

From the human being as an individual to society, the religious construction draws another world conception, with the demarcation of sacred spaces and mechanisms for social inclusion, promoting unholy rituals and festivities that celebrate the world.

Despite this social fertility, Afro-Brazilian religions are not stopped in time, they change just as other religions change. Religions like showing up as immutable, claiming to be now the way how they were at the very beginning, *per omnia saecula saeculorum*. Here and where they came from, or where they went. Fortunately, researchers do not believe this, thus, they can show the making of in religion at every moment, under every social and historical circumstances. It is revealed religion as the creation of man and woman. By those who need gods to see themselves as humans. But that is another story. What is up to us now is learning, through what is shown in the following pages, a bit more on Afro-Brazilian religions.