



## From Shango to Candomblé: transformations in the Afro-Pernambucan world

De xangô a candomblé:  
transformações no mundo afro-pernambucano

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### Abstract

The diversity of Afro-Brazilian cults and religious practices and the resulting multiplicity of their experiences have already been highlighted by researchers of this phenomenon, especially at the turn of the millennium. This article aims to discuss the way how these religions were able to preserve striking features of cultures and beliefs passed on through generations and, at the same time, modernize their practices and ways of enjoying the religious experience, once they need to adapt to new times and, therefore, to new expectations and aspirations of believers. The scenario where we establish this debate is Pernambuco, particularly the Afro-Brazilian religions in this state. The methodological exercise performed starts from our field experiences, alongside with interviews, added to the theoretical reflections through which we arrive to the understanding that “Candomblé” in Pernambuco modernizes itself by preserving its traditions. Religious practices are more open, more spectacularized, and now they are also a part of society’s historical heritage.

**Keywords:** Modernization; religious phenomenon; spectacularization; culture; Candomblé.

### Resumo

A diversidade dos cultos e práticas religiosas afro-brasileiras e a conseqüente multiplicidade das suas experiências já foram ressaltadas pelos estudiosos desse fenômeno, principalmente na virada do milênio. Este artigo visa a discutir de que forma essas religiões conseguiram preservar traços marcantes das culturas e crenças passadas de geração em geração e, ao mesmo tempo, modernizar suas práticas e modos de vivenciar a experiência religiosa, uma vez que precisam adaptar-se aos novos tempos e, portanto, a novas expectativas e anseios dos praticantes. O cenário em que estabelecemos esse debate é Pernambuco, particularmente as religiões afro-brasileiras nesse estado. O exercício metodológico realizado parte das nossas experiências de campo, juntamente com entrevistas, somadas às reflexões teóricas a partir das quais chegamos à compreensão que o “Candomblé” em Pernambuco se moderniza tentando conservar as suas tradições. As práticas religiosas estão mais abertas, mais espetacularizadas, e agora também fazem parte do patrimônio histórico da sociedade.

**Palavras-chave:** Modernização; fenômeno religioso; espetacularização; cultura; Candomblé.

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## Introduction

This paper aims to think through the Afro-Pernambucan religious experience by making a parallel between its attachment to tradition along with new ways of experiencing the religious phenomenon that have been processed. We began noticing a strong presence of a modernization movement in the rituals, events, dresses, physical aspect of the yards. Learning the religious foundations of African ancestors also starts through writing and image. It is about these new practices, the modernization processes of Shangos in Pernambuco, now also named Candomblé, that this article is developed.

Working on historical (ethnographic) invention, based only on testimonies and remembrances of those who experienced and helped constructing this history is not among the easiest tasks. They contain the individual experiences and the way how the narrator lived and understood that time, as well as the overlapping of an official history and the collective memory of the group being addressed.

According to Michel Pollak (1992), history has turned into partial and plural stories, even from the viewpoint of chronology. For the author, we cannot distinguish fake and genuine chronologies, there are plural chronologies due to a construction mode. Thus, the narrative exposed here takes place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century without major allusions to a more rigid temporality, since most of the information derives from little more than two decades of observation.

The rapid transformations the Afro-Brazilian religions experience<sup>1</sup> in Brazil as a whole have led us to think through their transformations in Recife, the capital city of Pernambuco. We noticed a strong attachment to traditions by exalting the originality of cults, dresses, and rituals, in order to preserve and perpetuate through oral tradition, passed down from older to younger generations, the teachings brought to

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<sup>1</sup> Process that also occurs in several other forms of religion, which are derived from the transformations that societies have experienced since the last decades of the past century.

Brazil by their African ancestors. Along with the attachment to tradition, new ways of enjoying the religious have been processed.

The debates established in the 1920s, mainly by intellectuals who surrounded Gilberto Freyre with the “Modernist [movement] in its traditionalist mode”, reinforced the tradition. The “Regionalist manifesto” written by Freyre in 1926 demonstrates these ideas well.

Over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the studies on these religions of African origin, best known since the 1930s as Shangos, took such an importance in anthropology that it formed a school specialized in these studies. Ulysses Pernambucano (1932), Gilberto Freyre (1988), Waldemar Valente (1955), Gonçalves Fernandes (1937), Vicente Lima (1937), René Ribeiro (1952), Roberto Motta (1977-1978), and Maria do Carmo Brandão (1986) are some names we may cite as constructors, let us say, of an Afro-Pernambucan anthropology.

Papers by these authors surrounded and still surround (Motta and Brandão keep producing researches) a tradition established in the state and named Nagô tradition. This tradition may be understood through the so-called headquarters of the Pernambucan Shango, i.e. Sítio do Pai Adão, founded around the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Also part of this “religious complex”, grounded on tradition, the house of Tias do Pátio do Terço and of the image of Badia, successor of Tias, all now deceased. Added to both there is a Xambá yard, which migrated to Recife in the 1910s, by means of a pai-de-santo named Artur Rosendo, who settled in the city fleeing from police harassment to his religion in the state of Alagoas within this period.

This attachment to tradition is also observed in the speech of practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions. The group’s collective memory also exalts the sites of greatest tradition. Places where rituals, chants, dresses are closer to those taught by older people, thus, they are bearers of a more intense tradition.

According to Stuart Hall, transformations in the social force relationships throughout history unfold in the struggles concerning the popular classes' culture, traditions, and ways of life. For the author, traditionalism must be understood as struggle and resistance, appropriation and expropriation. In this sense, cultural struggle takes the form of incorporation, distortion, negotiation, resumption. It arises more intensely at that point where different traditions meet and intersect. They seek highlighting a cultural form of their insertion into a tradition, providing it with a new resonance or validity. Thus, the author states that: "Traditions are not fixed forever; certainly not in terms of a universal position with regard to a single class" (HALL, 2003, p. 260).

### **I am from Candomblé!**

The discussions on the process for re-Africanization, anti-syncretism, and intellectualization of the yards, priests, and priestesses have already been well explored in the academy, in Bahia (TEIXEIRA, 2006), Rio de Janeiro (RIOS, 2000), and São Paulo (SILVA, 1995). In Pernambuco, these discussions are starting. One of the first works addressing the subject is the dissertation by Luiz Claudio B. da Silva (2010), titled, *Santo não é orixá: um estudo do discurso antissincretismo em integrantes de religiões de matriz africana* [Saint is not Orisha: a study of the anti-syncretism discourse in believers of religions of African origin].

This process is strongly marked in memory since the late 1980s, time at which the Unified Black Movement was organized in the state in a more effective way and went to the yards in search of its ancestry. Along with this political process, the transformations in culture, economy, and society led the Shango yards in Pernambuco to rethink their practices, rituals, dresses, getting in tune with the events of the Afro-religious Brazilian world.

Within this context, there was a need for modernization, but how did these transformations happen in these decades? The speech of a pai-de-santo we interviewed translates the concern of the religious community to search for a common denominator between modernization and tradition:

Thus, my struggle was to find out why the yards of Candomblé only looked inwards. Because there was no light, an exit, something that shows the society outwards. So that there was this worldview of society outwards and allowed the society to get into Sítio or within the yards. (M. P., 2010)

It is according to this concern that the physical spaces of those yards regarded as more traditional or more respected due to their operation time have been renovated. The yard of Xambá builds a museum in honor of its matriarch, mother Biu. It turns into a cultural point and an urban Quilombo. In the internet, it has a website telling its history and publicizes the activities of the yard and community. At the same time, it preserves the dresses of their female believers, similar to those used since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It adds to learning through oral presentation a primer narrating the yard's history.

We agree with Mundicarmo Ferretti (2009, p. 123), in her text “Oralidade e transmissão do saber nas religiões afro-brasileiras” [Orality and knowledge transmission in the Afro-Brazilian religions], when she states that:

The Afro-Brazilian religions have been presented, since Nina Rodrigues, as initiatory, through oral transmission, and orality has been seen as faithfulness to African traditions and as something that should be perpetuated by all religious denominations.

Later on, the author claims that the wider access of believers to higher education levels, to the use of magnetic media and internet, in the practices of power and authority by pais-de-santo unfolded changes in knowledge transmission. These changes are strongly perceived in the yards of Pernambuco.

According to Renato Ortiz (2002, p. 89):

Despite the flourishing of new religious beliefs, the intensification of an individualized religiosity, the vitality of religions that seemed to be extinct, a finding imposes itself: the place occupied by the religious universe in traditional societies was definitely reshaped by modernity. However, we cannot fail to understand that the action of religions in the globalized world takes another configuration.

In the case of Afro-Brazilian religions, the new configurations are quite clear with regard to the use of technological resources and, in some cases, the use of written text to the detriment of knowledge perpetuated through the spoken word. As Mundicarmo Ferretti (2009, p. 123) states:

One change that occurred in this field, which leaps out, is the use by pais and mães-de-santo of graphic and audiovisual resources to convey knowledge and prepare new members. Currently, those who get close to the yards of several Afro-Brazilian religious denominations (Candomblé, Mina, and others) observe, not infrequently, the use, by the priests, of records, K7 recordings, and texts to convey traditional knowledge to those initiated: prayers, chants, Oríkis<sup>2</sup>, African vocabulary, etc.

Changes also occur in the policies and identity practices of the yards. The devotee now prides her/himself of having Candomblé as a religion. The nomenclature changes. Discussions on anti-syncretism, re-Africanization, and intellectualization reach the yards of Pernambuco a decade after being debated in Salvador. And it is within this context that Candomblé in Bahia will serve as an identity parameter so that the yards of Pernambuco abandon the denomination “Shango”<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, they reached the 21<sup>st</sup> century *translated* into performances that, in many cases, are distant from those practices previously appreciated.

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<sup>2</sup> Chant of praise that narrates the attributes and deeds of an Orisha. It is used by older people to address the younger ones or by the husband with regard to his wife (CACCIATORE, 1988, p. 196).

<sup>3</sup> The socioeconomic and cultural survey of traditional peoples and communities of yards conducted by the Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger points out that out of the yards surveyed in Recife, 703 name themselves as Candomblé and only 10 as Shango.

This way, we can establish theoretically the discussion launched by Stuart Hall between *translation* and *tradition*, since we understand the identities of Afro-descended populations and their religions as plural phenomena. We use, here, the concept of translation coined by Kevin Hobins, discussed by Stuart Hall as being:

[...] those identity formations that cross and intersect with natural borders, consisting of people who were *scattered* forever from their homeland. [...] They are obliged to negotiate with the new cultures in which they live, instead of being simply assimilated by them [...]. The difference is that they are not and they will never be *unified* in the old sense, because they are, irrevocably, the product of several interconnected stories and cultures, they belong to one and, at the same time, many “houses” (and not to a private house) (HOBINS apud HALL, 2004, p. 88-89).

From this perspective, Salman Rushdie adds that translation “comes, etymologically, from Latin, meaning ‘transfer’; ‘transport across borders’” (RUSHDIE apud HALL, 2004, p. 89). Thus, the religions of Afro-descendants in Brazil have been *translated*. They are plural, products from various histories. To survive, they were forced to negotiate and translate.

Hall (2003) further states that the concept of tradition has dissolved. We regard as a tradition, in the broadest sense, everything that a generation inherits from its precedents. The elements of tradition organize and reorganize themselves acquiring new meanings and relevance. The re-invented senses and meanings are multiple.

The religion of Afro-descendants emerges, in Brazil, through a syncretic process derived from a clash of Portuguese and Afro-Brazilian values and not as a fusion of different elements. It is a creation, a construction of the new (SIQUEIRA, 2009).

This way, we prefer explaining these transformations through the concept of hybridization coined by Nestor Garcia Canclini, since it involves a wider cultural

universe that includes syncretism, miscegenation, and other intercultural mixtures. According to the author, the hybrid cultures constitute modernity and provide it with its specific profile. There is a need to gather partial knowledge from the disciplines dealing with culture to prepare a more plausible interpretation of contradictions (CANCLINI, 1998).

Canclini (1996) admits that the term hybridization is meaningless by itself, but it takes a meaning along with a constellation of concepts such as modernity, modernization, modernism, difference, inequality, multitemporal heterogeneity, re-conversion, among others. Hybridization occurs in an unplanned way, or it is the unexpected result of migration, tourism, and economic exchange or communication processes. Often, there arises in the attempt to re-convert a patrimony to reintegrate it under new production and market conditions. The term re-conversion (borrowed from economics) allows proposing a joint view of the hybridization strategies of the educated and popular classes.

These transformations are observed in these religious practices by adopting a hybrid and re-converted nature. Inside, there are also discourses of laws against social inequality, governmental reparation programs aimed at Afro-descended populations, fomentation institutions, safeguarding of the material and nonmaterial culture put into action in the municipal, state, and federal spheres for fundraising, as well as politicians related to the Afro-descended cause.

Rodrigues (2010), when analyzing the concept of re-conversion used by Canclini, made it clearer for our purpose, in this analysis, by clarifying that cultural re-conversion is hybridization systematization. The structuring of cultural re-conversion is ratified by cultural re-conversion as a result of multiple encounters:

Through the related contexts, cultural re-conversions are phenomena intrinsic to the process of post-modern environments, i.e. for accessing the globalizing consumption, individuals, groups, societies need contacts, partnerships, be interconnected to survive (RODRIGUES, 2010, p. 39).



The dispersion of people worldwide, according to Woodward (2009, p. 22), “produces identities that are shaped and located at different places and by different places. These new identities can be undermined, but also destabilizing”.

Also according to the author, the term diaspora, used by Paul Gilroy, is among the concepts able to understand some of these identities that have no homeland, and they are not coming from a single source (GILROY apud WOODWARD, 2009).

According to Hall (2009, p. 109), we need to understand the identities as a construction inside and not outside the discourse, “produced in specific historical and institutional sites, within specific formations and discursive practices, by specific strategies and initiatives”.

Transformations and re-inventions are also found in the hierarchy of the yards and in rituals. René Ribeiro (1978) provides a careful description of the organization of a traditional yard in Recife in the 1950s. In general, the heads of yards are respectively named *babalorixá* (priest) and *yalorixá* (priestess). They are treated with the same respect, but they do not have the same functions. *Babalorixá* is in charge of making offerings to the gods, scheduling the days of public or private ceremonies, organizing the divination game, and providing the general direction of rituals and cult. In turn, *yalorixá* is in charge of parts of the initiation ceremonies and the discipline of those who are inferior to her in the hierarchy. *Mãe pequena* is the highest position after *yalorixá*. It is responsible for watching the preparation of food to be offered to deities, helping *yalorixá* in initiation ceremonies, and checking the behavior of *filhas-de-santo* during ritual dances. Subordinate to *mãe pequena* there are *iabás*, initiated women, whose function is taking care of daughters under possession. To check the behavior of possessed men, initiated men are also designated to play a role similar to that of *iabás*. The hierarchical position of *tiradores de toadas* does not seem to be fixed. In general, the heads of these groups are responsible for this function, taking turns with their assistants. The drummers, or *ilús*, have a

hierarchical position equivalent to that of the priest's assistants, and their degree of prestige varies according to their skills. The ordinary believers emerged classified into several categories, depending on the time of their initiation and the various stages which they have already went through. The set of these hierarchical positions establishes the structure of a Shango yard, where all these relationships are expressed under the form of sacred kinship.

Currently, this organizational structure became more complex. New functions were created, new rituals started being practiced. Rituals and hierarchical structure are intertwined. Some people allude that the new condition results from a more intimate connection to “Mother Africa”, travels to the African continent aiming at a better understanding of religion. Other individuals attribute the new condition to the fact that their yard has originated in Salvador, Bahia, so that the hierarchy and rituals are more complex than those practiced by the ancients in Pernambuco.

Thus, we believe that our observations, and the data we have collected to construct this text, say more about the present than about the past regarded as oral tradition. Now, tradition and modernization go together to re-invent new ways of enjoying the religious experience.

Peter Burke (2000, p. 73) states that:

The social history of recalling is an attempt to answer to three main questions. What are the transmission modes of public memories and how have these modes changed over time? Conversely, what are the uses of forgetfulness?

Later on the author, when discussing the “transmission of social memory”, being influenced by various communication media employed, recalls Maurice Halbwachs with regard to the social structure of memory having “space” as a reference (BURKE, 2000).

Here, we may draw an analogy to Shango yards in Recife, or, rather, to Candomblés in Recife: we think they are images of a text under construction that communicates scenes of the past mixed with a present by means of various performances.

## Conclusion

Burke evidences the extreme example of uprooting and transplantation that under certain circumstances, such as the case of the black slaves who came to Brazil, managed to hold on to a portion of their cultures and their memories and re-construct them. This is remembered by the French sociologist Roger Bastide, who uses the Afro-American religious practices to criticize and improve Halbwachs' ideas. According to the author, the loss of local roots was partly compensated by a rather general African consciousness. The legitimizations written at the expense of memory constitute attitudinal changes (BURKE, 2008). In our opinion, in the case of Pernambuco, introducing the affirmation policy of a religion also becomes apparent.

New traditions were re-invented, the past was re-interpreted. We believe that this new strategy results in a coexistence effort, blending tradition and modernization. This points out an action open to exchange with society as a whole. At the same time, it enhances computerization and electronic communication as a channel for dialogue, knowledge democratization, and construction of processes to incorporate new believers, writing, and continued re-invention of the past.

Alessandro Portelli (1993), in his article “Sonhos ucrônicos: memórias e possíveis mundos dos trabalhadores” [Uchronic dreams: memories and possible workers' worlds], claims the narrative depends on social and collective factors. Often, the testimony derives less from an imperfect recollection than from a creative imagination. This is the narrative form of the dream of a personal life and a different collective history. According to the author, the uchronic imagination protects the

precious awareness of injustice in the current world, but it provides the means for resignation and reconciliation. Uchronia is defined in Portelli's text as a kind of parallel universe where the unfolding of a historical event that has not occurred is pondered. More than that, we could say that the information provided by members of the Afro-religious community in Recife, for preparing this text, always attentive to our questions and observations, re-construct their experiences, in face of the authority they conquered, in each of the said yards. So, uchronic dreams are used in the invention of these new traditions.

Vagner Silva (1995, p. 244) states that:

In Candomblé, the oral transmission tradition leads speaking to be the vehicle not only of objective knowledge, but it acts as a regulator of power relations and reciprocity observed within the religious group.

As subsequently explained, it is a source of axé, of strength. The word is knowledge, wisdom, power. According to Ong (1987), nowadays, oral cultures appreciate their traditions stemming from orality and get disturbed by losing them. According to the author, orality can produce creations beyond the reach of those who know writing. However, orality is not an ideal. Exalting it in a positive way does not mean exalting it as a permanent state for the whole culture. Knowing the written word opens up possibilities for the word and human experience that would be unimaginable without its existence (ONG, 1987, p. 169).

Pordeus Jr. (1997), by reading the textualization of the Portuguese-Afro-Brazilian memory, at an Umbanda yard in Lisbon, through the discourse of the writer, claims to face a multitude of complex narrative structures, overlapping or chained to each other, which are simultaneously strange, irregular, and explicit, since they are both traditional, oral, body languages "lying" on writing. For the author, more than a break, the passage from oral to written goes through tensions and conflicts that, as time goes by, emerge as contradictory.

Remembering the past implies re-constructing the contradictory nature of memory, in the sense that this reflects human experiences that were enjoyed and internalized. Remembering also sheds light on the strength of the brands of histories that have become hegemonic, as well as re-invent new histories, new concepts, traditions, and translations. As Peter Burke (2000, p. 70) recalls:

Remembering the past and writing about it do not seem to be the innocent activities they once were thought to be. Neither memories nor histories seem to be objective anymore. In both cases, historians learn to take into account the conscious or unconscious selection, the interpretation and distortion.

Thus, we agree with Hervieu-Léger (2005), when she states that religion, today, started being regarded as a cultural heritage respected for its historical meaning and its prominent place among the collective meanings of society. In the case of the now called Candomblé from Pernambuco, they have become more open, more public, and more spectacularized religions.

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