

## ***Unit of Study on Candomblé***

Designed by Brenda Guevara; brendagvr@yahoo.com

### Day One Objectives

*The student will understand*

- that Candomblé is an Afro-based religion practiced in Brazil.
- the historical narrative that gave birth to Candomblé.
- the creation myth of the religion. (Introduced as a homework assignment.)

### Day Two Objectives

*The student will understand*

- the significance of the creation myth as it relates to Candomblé.
- and identify the primary orixás of Candomblé.
- that each orixá is connected to an aspect of nature, color(s), a day of the week, food, etc.
- the connection between orixás and Christian saints. (Continued as homework.)

### Day Three Objectives

*The student will understand*

- the social and physical structure of terreiros (centers of Candomblé worship).
- the role of women within the religion.
- the various rituals and ceremonies that embody the practice of Candomblé.

### Day Four Objectives

*The student will understand*

- the role of ancestors in the religion.
- the contents of an ancestral altar.
- why Afro-Brazilians were able to preserve the Egungun masquerades as practiced in Africa.

### Handouts

- Maps of Brazil and West Africa (Nigeria)
- Candomblé Unit of Study Glossary
- Candomblé Historical Fact Sheet
- Candomblé Creation Myth
- Orixá Grid
- Primary Orixás of Candomblé
- Orixá Images
- Terreiros, Women & Ceremony
- Terreiros, Gender, Ceremony & Rituals Graphic Organizer
- Origin of Egungun

## ***Lesson Plan: Day One***

### **Introduction: Slavery and Candomblé**

- Ask students to discuss the following questions:
  - What do they know about the African slave trade?*
  - What European countries were involved in slave economy?*
  - What regions of the Americas outside of the United States relied on slave labor?*Record student responses on the board
- Distribute **maps of Brazil and Africa**.
- Share with students that Brazil, colonized by the Portuguese, was one of the largest importers of African slaves and the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery. Most of the slaves brought to Brazil were from the region of Africa now called Nigeria. Have students identify Nigeria on the map. Explain that enslaved Africans were typically stripped of their clothing, and any ornamentation that connected them to their African identity before embarking on the journey from Africa to the “New World.”
- Ask students to speculate on why the European captors did this;
  - What could possibly be the psychological and spiritual impact on the Africans?*
  - Why might the captors view cultural preservation as a threat?*Ask students to write a five-minute, first-person journal entry from the perspective of an enslaved African. Imagine what aspects of his/her culture the African person might want to hold onto in spite of his/her external conditions. Select students to share their written entries.
- Explain that many Africans brought their spiritual belief systems (religion) with them to the Americas. In order to observe their religion they had to keep their practices hidden. In Brazil, the slaves used the images of Christian saints revered by the Portuguese to pay homage to their own orixás (gods and goddesses). That is how the orixá tradition became Candomblé in Brazil.
- Distribute **Candomblé Unit of Study Glossary** and **Candomblé Historical Fact Sheet**. Explain that some of the words in the glossary will appear in the fact sheet, and remaining ones will be introduced and used throughout the unit. Have successive student volunteers read vocabulary words and their meaning. Ask students if they need clarification before reading the text.
- Have students read the text aloud. It’s a good idea to intermittently interrupt reading to ask relevant questions. For example, after reading paragraph two, ask students to speculate why oral tradition would benefit slaves observing Candomblé secretly in Brazil (i.e., they could continue to pass down cultural information to the next generation while keeping its practice hidden from slave owners).

### Homework

#### Read **Candomblé Creation Myth**

Respond to the following questions in writing:

1. What kind of God is Olodumaré? Choose three adjectives that describe Olodumaré. Explain and support your choices.

2. What animals appear in the myth? What is their role? Describe their relationship to Olodumaré and Oshalá.
3. How would you describe the relationship between nature (the earth) and the spiritual realm?
4. Why would a feminine orixá be associated with water? What properties of water/the ocean could be compared to the qualities of a woman?
5. The myth says, “Oshalá returned to Earth and created our ancestors, endowing them with his own divine power.” What do you imagine is the divine power that Oshalá gave to human beings?

## ***Lesson Plan: Day Two***

### **Creation, Orixás, their Christian Counterparts**

- Homework review: Explain that creation myths are part of the human experience. Every group (religious, ethnic) across time and space has created stories that explain the origins of life. These stories give us clues about the people that produced them and their relationship to the earth and spiritual world. Ask students if other creation myths come to mind. Share. Review homework questions and responses. Ask students to look at the text closely and to identify the three things that are described as sacred in the myth (1. Olodumaré's powers=ache; 2. Oshalá's power to create human life; 3. The city Ile Ife which is found in present day Nigeria). Engage students in a conversation about the meaning of the word sacred. Why are these three things identified as sacred? Again looking closely at the myth, asks students to identify who the first ancestors are considered to be. Have students speculate on the importance of ancestral respect within the Candomblé religion.
- Explain that each orixá, like Yemanjá is associated with an aspect of nature. It is this aspect of nature that gives the orixá his/her ache and personality traits. Likewise each orixá has an association to a specific color, day of the week, and food. Have students speculate what colors might be associated with Yemanjá? What food might the orixá of the ocean like? What personality traits might she have (consider the properties of the ocean)? And what day of the week might represent her? Record answers on the board.
- Distribute **Orixá Grid** to students. Have them record the Yemanjá/ocean info onto the grid. Students are to fill out the grid thoughtfully using the natural element clue as the springboard for creative thinking (they should leave the first column, which is reserved for the orixá's name, blank). Have them work in groups or pairs for approximately 7-10 minutes. Explain that in Candomblé there are many orixás but that we will focus on seven primary orixás, including Yemanjá.
- Have students share their hypothetical responses for each natural element. They should explain their reasoning.
- Hand-out the **Primary Orixás of Candomblé, Orixá Images** and a blank **Orixá Grid** to students. Have selected students read aloud the name of each orixá and his/her descriptions. They should record the correct answers in pen on their grid. Some orixá images are provided for visual aid. Notice that the orixás are dressed in the colors associated with them.
- Of the four orixá images provided, ask students:
  - Which one looks different from the rest? (Yemanjá).  
Have them discuss and define the differences between the visual depiction of her and the other orixás. Remind students that Candomblé followers worshipped their deities secretly and used Christian images to represent each orixá.
  - Who does the Yemanjá image recall?  
Yemanjá, the goddess of the sea, is also likened to the Virgin Mary.

*-Given what students know about the Virgin Mary, why would it makes sense that Yemanjá and she were syncretized? (Yemanjá is considered the mother of the orixás and is considered the womb of the earth). Remind students that there are other images of Yemanjá as there are of the other orixás.*

#### Homework

Choose two orixás (not Yemanjá) of the primary orixás to research on the Internet.

1. Find an image of the orixá, and an image of the Christian saint associated with that orixá. (Two images total. Bring both in.)
2. Write a brief explanation speculating thoughtfully why the orixá and saint were associated. Be prepared to share the following day.

## ***Lesson Plan: Day Three*** **Terreiros, Gender, Rituals & Ceremonies**

- Homework Review: Have students share the orixá and saint image that they found were associated with one another, along with their written reflections. If possible, collect and display images and text. Explain that today there are Candomblé priestesses in Bahia who reject the idea of syncretism. They recognize that it was a necessity for their enslaved African ancestors but that it is no longer necessary to associate orixás with saints.
- Distribute handouts: **Terreiros, Women & Ceremony** and **Graphic Organizer**. Explain that they will be reading a description of a ceremony taking place in a room in a terreiro (sacred worshipping space). They are to read carefully and take note (on the graphic organizer) of the various rituals taking place in the ceremony, and the roles that men and women perform during the ceremony. As they continue to read, another ceremony connected with Yemanjá will be described and further historical/factual information will be provided.
- Students should read independently and fill out the graphic organizer (20 minutes approximately).
- Ask students:
  - What is the role of women in the religion? What role do men play? How do the students know this?*
  - What two ceremonies are described in the text?*
  - What are some of the rituals performed during each of these ceremonies?*
  - What is the significance of music in the ceremony?*
  - Additionally, in what ways has the religion been persecuted? Why would Candomblé be considered a threat? (Discuss.)*

### Homework

Explain to students that another important component of the Candomblé religion is having a relationship with one's ancestors. In preparation, students should interview an adult in the family (parent, grandparent, older sibling, etc.) to identify and learn about a family relative who has passed away.

The student needs to:

1. Identify a family member who has passed on. (Full name)
2. Collect one or two anecdotes (stories) about this family member. If the student had a relationship with the ancestor, describe that relationship by sharing an anecdote.
3. Collect any information about this person's interests: hobbies, favorite foods/meals, colors, etc. (Specific information is crucial.)
4. If possible bring in a picture of the ancestor and/or an item associated with him/her.
5. Finally each student should write a five-minute reflective entry about his/her experience conducting this research. For example, what was surprising? What questions were left unanswered? Did anything strike the student as similar to his/her own personal interests? etc.

## ***Lesson Plan: Day Four***

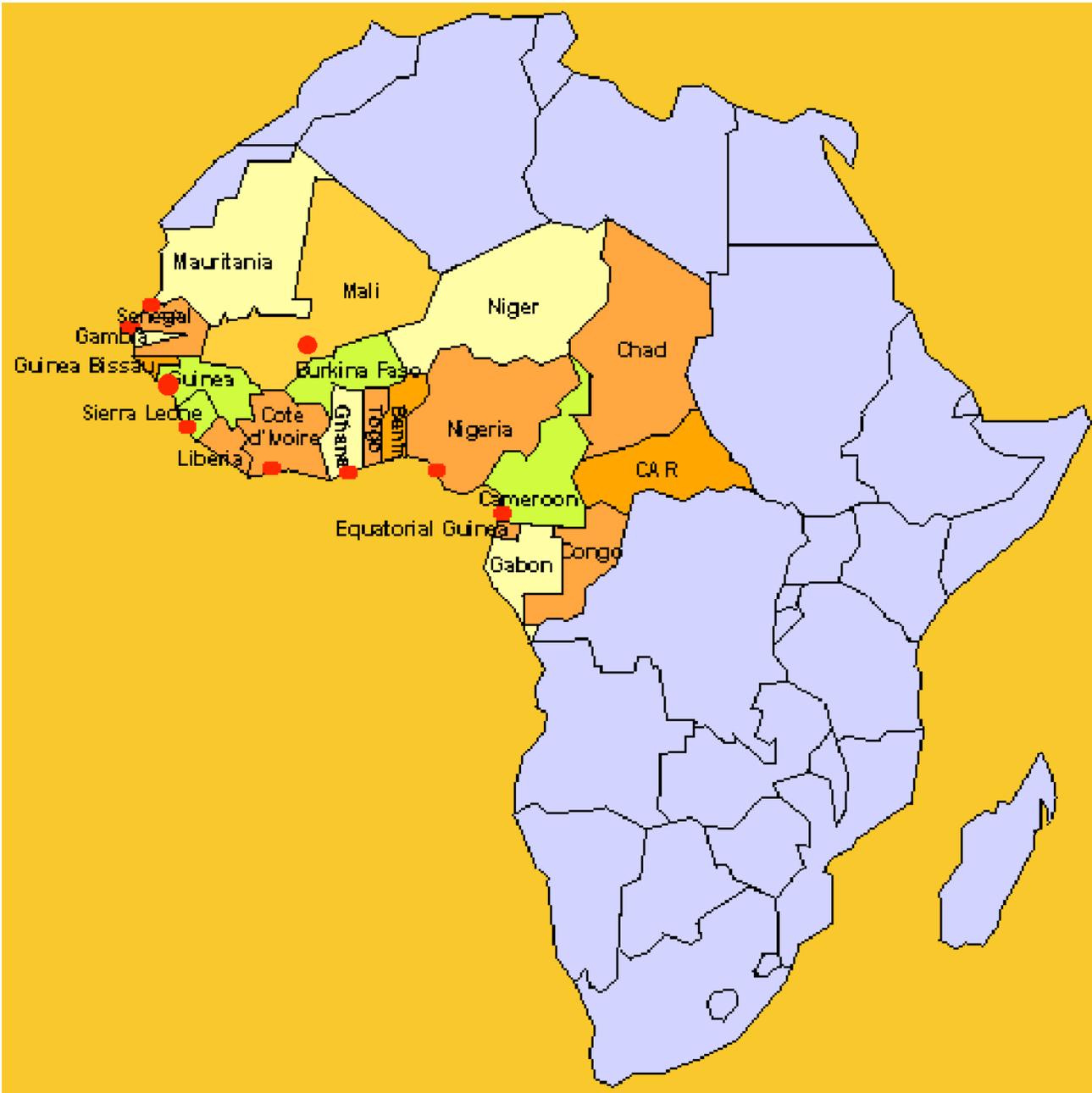
### **Egungun**

- Homework Review: Ask students to verbally share what the experience of conducting family research was like for them.
  - Was it moving in any way for any of the students? How so?*
  - Did anyone discover that they had shared interests with his/her ancestor?*  
Ask students volunteers to stand up and share the information that they gathered about their ancestor: picture and/or item, and written anecdote.  
Finally ask student volunteers to share their reflective entries.
    - What significance might ancestral connection have for an individual? Does the act of preserving memory have importance? (Discuss.)*
- Explain that ancestors play a very important role in Candomblé religion. They help to protect and guide the descendants who take care to maintain connection with them. The Yoruban word for ancestors is Egungun.
- Distribute **Egungun** handout. Read aloud. Ask students to read for understanding.
  - What is the role of ancestors in the religion?*
  - What are the various items that make up an ancestral altar? Ask students to speculate on the purpose of food offerings.*
  - Why was Brazil able to preserve the ceremony and rituals of Egungun worship?*

### Interdisciplinary Activities/Projects (with Art Department)

- Have students construct altars using the images and items they collected for their family member.
- Organize a Living Wax Museum–Role play. Students dress as an orixá and take on the first person voice of that orixá. Students should research the orixá, find out his/her color, the saint it is associated with, the natural aspects it embodies, etc.





## *Candomble Unit of Study Glossary*

Ache (ah-SHAY, also spelled axé) – Sacred powers. The invisible life force of Olodumaré that was distributed to the orixás. Ache is the life force present in nature.

Ancestors – Someone from whom one is descended; a forefather. Individuals who have entered the spirit realm. Friends and family members who have made their spiritual transformation.

Candomblé (can-dom-BLAY) – A religion based on African traditions with elements derived from Christianity, practiced chiefly in Brazil. Practitioners worship a number of gods or spirits, derived from African deities.

Deities – Gods or goddesses.

Egungun (eh-goon-GOON) – The "collective spirit" of the Ancestors.

Orixá (oh-ree-SHAH, also spelled Orisa and Orisha) – A spirit that reflects one of the manifestations of Olodumaré in the Yoruba religion. Each orixá has an individual personality, skills and ritual preferences, and is connected to an aspect of nature.

Olodumaré (ol-oh-doo-mah-RAY)– The Supreme God, creator of Earth.

Pantheon – The gods of a people.

Ritual – The form for conducting a ceremony. A procedure repeated customarily.

Syncretism – The merging of two or more cultural practices or perspectives.

Terreiros (teh-heh-ROWS) – Centers of worship in the Candomblé religion.

Trans-Atlantic slave trade – The capture of black Africans from Africa, the transport of them across the Atlantic Ocean and their sale into servitude in the Americas. The slaves were one element of a three-part economic cycle—the Triangular Trade and its infamous Middle Passage—which ultimately involved four continents, four centuries and the lives and fortunes of millions of people.

Yoruba (yo-roo-BAH) – A member of a West African people living chiefly in southwest Nigeria.

## *Candomblé Historical Fact Sheet*

### The Africans in Brazil

The first recorded importation of Africans into Brazil occurred in 1538. From that year until the Trans-Atlantic slave trade ended in 1850, historians estimate that four million to five million Africans survived the crossing of the Atlantic to Brazil. (Hundreds of thousands died in route.) This was many times more than were taken to North America. The institution of slavery continued until the Brazilian abolition of 1888.

The enslaved Yoruba (from Nigeria), Ewe and other peoples brought their...beliefs from Africa to the *New World*. Their belief systems were maintained for millennia as living oral traditions in ritual and music handed down from generation to generation. The Yoruba, who had the greatest influence on Afro-Brazilian religion, came primarily from what is now Nigeria.

Their *orixá* tradition, carried across the Atlantic Ocean, was transformed in Brazil into Candomblé. It became Santería in Cuba and Shango in Trinidad. The Yoruba deities, the *orisa*, are called *orixás* in Brazil and *orishas* in Cuba....

Candomblé is the closest to the old West African practices.

The Afro-Brazilian religions began to take an organized form in the nineteenth century, and *terreiros* (centers of worship) were first reported around 1830 in Salvador da Bahia and 1850 in Recife. The religions were *syncretized* in Brazil into new forms by their followers because of government and Roman Catholic repression that persisted into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Devotees secretly worshipped their West African gods during Catholic ceremonies. Blacks who prayed to a statue of the Virgin Mary often were actually thinking of Yemanjá, the goddess of the sea. Saint Jerome could stand in for Xangô, god of fire, thunder and justice; and Jesus Christ might signify Oxalá (Obatalá), *orixá* of the sky and universe. Catholicism with its abundance of saints, meshed well with the *orixá* tradition and sheltered it.

In the Afro-Brazilian religions, a follower always has two different *orixás*, a male and a female that “rule your head” and are seen as your spiritual parents. For example, you might have Xangô and Yemanjá as the “masters of your head.” The head priestess...typically discovers this and asserts that these two *orixás*, because of their specific personalities and powers, are the natural guides for you and your life. During the ceremonies, the drums and singing call down the *orixás*, and they or their intermediary spirits “possess” the bodies of the initiated sons and daughters.

Source: excerpts from *Five Centuries of Music*, Chapter One.

## *Candomblé Creation Myth*

The *orixá* Olodumaré, the Supreme God, originally lived in the lower part of heaven, overlooking endless stretches of water. One day, Olodumaré decided to create Earth, and sent an emissary, the *orixá* Oshalá, to perform this task. Olodumaré gave Oshalá the materials he needed to create the world: a small bag of loose earth, a gold chain, and a five-toed hen.

Oshalá was instructed to use the chain to descend from heaven. When he reached the last link, he piled the loose earth on top of the water. Next, he placed the hen on the pile of earth, and ordered her to scatter the earth with her toes across the surface of the water.

When this was finished, Oshalá climbed the chain to heaven to report his success to Olodumaré. Olodumaré then sent his trusted assistant, the chameleon, to verify that the earth was dry. When his helper had assured him that the Earth was solid, Olodumaré named Earth “Ile Ife,” the sacred house.

Before he retired to the uppermost level of heaven, Olodumaré decided to distribute his sacred powers—*ache*. He united Oshalá, the *orixá* of creation, and Yemanjá, the *orixá* of the ocean, who gave birth to a pantheon of *orixás*, each possessing a share of Olodumaré’s sacred power. At last, the divine power of Olodumaré was dispersed. Then one day, Olodumaré called them all from Earth to heaven and gave Oshalá the sacred power to create human life. Oshalá returned to Earth and created our ancestors, endowing them with his own divine power. We are all descendants from the first people of the sacred city of Ile Ife; we are all children of Olodumaré, the sacred *orixá* who created the world.

Source: *The Altar of My Soul* by Marta Moreno Vega.

### *Orixá Grid*

Orixá	Natural Element	Presides Over...	Personality Traits	Color	Day of the Week	Food
	Ocean					
	Air					
	Dirt Roads & Pathways					
	Sweet Water (rivers, waterfalls)					
	Wind & Storms					
	Fire, Thunder & Lightning					
	Forest					

## ***Primary Orixás of Candomblé***

**Olodumaré** – The Supreme God.

**Yemanjá** – *No one knows what tomorrow will bring.* She is highly honored. The mother of creation. She resides in the ocean, her colors are blue and white, like the rolling waves. From the depths of the sea, she possesses secret treasures known only to her. Wise and daring, she is both gentle and fierce. Her day of the week is Saturday. She enjoys all types of melons, especially watermelons, and molasses. She is associated with mermaids.

**Oshalá (also spelled Oxalá)** – *Power resides in a cool head.* Oshalá is the orixá of the wisdom of two worlds: heaven and earth. His element is air. He is the divine artist and teacher, teaching believers to be creative in seeking solutions. Oshalá teaches the importance of persistence and inventiveness in achieving goals. He embodies patience and coolness in the face of all obstacles. He is associated with the color white, the symbol of peace. He eats white corn, and yams. He is worshipped on Fridays.

**Eshu (also spelled Exú)** – *The obvious is not always the correct answer.* He is the orixá who opens and closes roads. He is the master of roads and pathways. He is everywhere, and speaks every language. He is mischievous, playful and strict. He is wise, youthful and the messenger of Olodumaré. All ceremonies begin and end with a tribute to Eshu to ensure that his blessings allow the ceremony to be a success. His day is Monday. Eshu eats everything that is edible. His colors are red and black

**Oshun (also spelled Oxum)** – *The goddess of honey.* Oshun is one of the powerful female orixás. She lives in sweet water (rivers, springs, lagoons, and waterfalls). Gold, copper, fertility, beauty, and love are all her domain. She is associated with the color yellow. Oshun teaches us that the world will be in disorder as long as women and children are neglected, disrespected, and abused. She is worshipped on Saturdays, along with her mother Yemanjá. Oshun loves rich, savory foods, like black-eyed peas cooked with shrimp and palm oil.

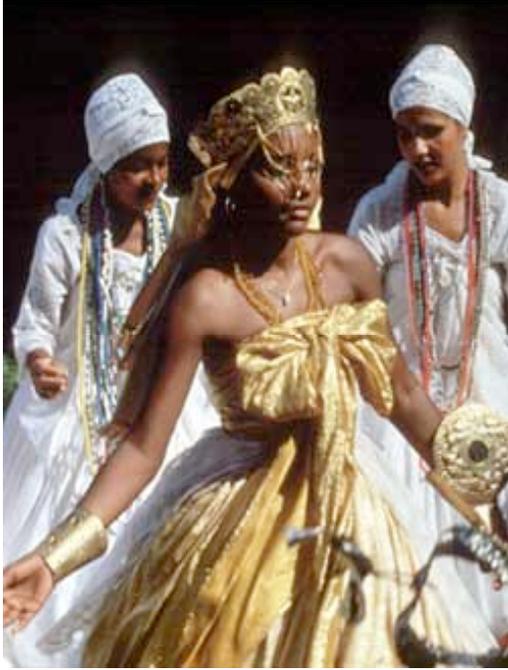
**Yansan** – *In order to live you must die.* Yansan is the queen of joy. She is the orixá of partnership, loyalty, passion and adventure. She is a warrior, sensual and clever. She is the goddess of winds and storms. Her element is the air. She takes the dead from Earth to heaven so that they are reborn into another life. She hates injustice, prejudice, and mediocrity. Her day is Wednesday, which she shares with Xangô. Her favorite food is bean fritters. She loves honey. Yansan is gracious when happy, but when angered she is as strong as Xangô. She is a female warrior who manifests herself in the whirlwind. She is associated with the colors red and black.

**Xangô** – *Born to make war.* Xangô is a warrior spirit and represents the exercise of power. He is handsome, powerful, charming, sensual and intelligent. He loves parties, spicy food, drink, action, and life. He teaches that we must learn to control and direct our tempers effectively in order to win our personal wars. He is associated with fire and

the color red and white. To make fire, Xangô must be joined with Yansan. He is the masculine part and she the feminine. He is the master of thunder and lightning. He is worshipped on Wednesday

**Oxóssi** – *In unity there is power.* Oxóssi is the king of the forest and master of animals and plants. He is worshipped on Thursday and his colors are green or turquoise blue (like the morning sky). He is a hunter and his symbol is the bow and arrow. He is always vigilant, watching and analyzing the best path to take. With his bow and arrow, he eliminates any obstacles in his way. He teaches that we must always be aware of our surroundings. Working cooperatively requires that we become fully aware of our responsibilities in the partnership with our community. He is associated with nature, especially forests. He hates irresponsible hunters who don't kill for food. He represents harmony. He loves to eat toasted black-eyed peas, corn, and yams.

Source: definitions and interpretations are taken primarily from *The Altar of My Soul* by Marta Moreno Vega and the "Orishas of Bahia."



Oxum



Yemanjá



Yansan



Oshalá

## *Terreiros, Women & Ceremony*

*Candomblé—reconciling the gods in music*

By Iain Harris

The percussionists dripped with sweat. Some of the dancers fainted. We crowded into the tiny front room, men on the left, women on the right. Everyone sat in silence. To the left of the men's seats, on a slightly raised platform, two teenagers and an older man in a Hawaiian shirt sat behind a set of three different sized *atabaque* drums—the Brazilian version of the conga—waiting for the start. On the floor in the centre of the room was a bowl of manioc flour and a glass of water.

Three women dressed all in white and adorned in jewelery entered from another room. One of them—the host of the ceremony—took the glass of water and splashed herself and each of the others over the head, and then each of them in turn lay prostrate on the floor, kissing it in a sign of respect and greeting.

The host started singing, and the man in the Hawaiian shirt began a rhythm on the biggest *atabaque* with one hand and a stick, joined by the two other *atabaques* and a man in the audience playing the cowbell. It was a slow rhythm, moving the women around the bowl in a very simple dance while they sang in an ancient language based on Yoruba. The rhythms gradually became faster and faster and more complex, culminating in a frantic trance-like pace that compelled the women into a furious dance, their eyes closing them into another world, their movements unrestricted and progressively wilder until suddenly, one by one, the spirits that they were dancing to invoke entered their bodies. The percussionists dripped with sweat. Some of the dancers fainted. Some of them screamed. Some laughed. The music carried on, and a few chairs down from me my French companion's head was thrown back, his eyes closed and his arms keeping up the frantic pace on his legs. Other people looked on with wide eyes, absolutely focused on this spectacle of rhythm, dance and spiritual enlightenment. Some stood and danced next to their seats. The possessed women danced quietly on the spot as the drumming continued, their bodies breaking spontaneously into energetic dance. It was an electrifying scene.

And looking down on this ritual of trance and possession from the bright whitewashed walls were images of a mermaid, the virgin Mary, Noah and his ark, and Jesus Christ. All important icons in this Candomblé ceremony, but hanging on the wall in stark and ironic contrast—a white Jesus, a white Noah, a white Mary and a white mermaid presiding over the ritual of a black religion.

Such is the nature of Candomblé that these ironies are an integral and fundamental part of the religion. It's not odd, for example, for followers to attend Catholic mass before going into a trance during a Candomblé ritual. In fact it makes sense, because Candomblé—a distinctly black Afro-Brazilian form of religious expression—and Catholicism are strongly bound through syncretism. Candomblé, as practiced in its original form by African slaves, was banned by Portuguese slavemasters, and subsequently syncretised with Catholicism to give it a more acceptable aesthetic. If the slaves were seen to be

dancing and singing for a Catholic saint instead of one of their own orixás (Candomblé gods), their religious practice could continue. Hence Candomblé is full of the Catholic imagery of white saints.

The orixás are a part of Brazilian folk-lore and pop culture, recognized everytime somebody enters a Catholic church, and deified in songs by some of Brazil's most legendary musicians such as Gilberto Gil and Tom Jobim. Major celebrations such as the new year's day tribute to Yemanjá, the goddess of the sea who is worshipped as the virgin Mary, draw more than a million celebrants to beaches across the country, where small wooden boats are decorated with candles, white flowers and figurines of the saints, and launched into the waves at midnight. If the boat sinks, Yemanjá accepts her children's offering and promises to help and guide them for another year.

Events such as this, which receive major television coverage, keep Candomblé firmly in mass consciousness. But nowhere is it more an integral part of daily life than in the town of Cachoeira in the interior of Bahia. Cachoeira is the centre of Candomblé in Brazil, home to many of the oldest and most significant terreiros—ceremonial spaces—but more importantly the home of pioneering Candomblé thought and practice. The *Casa dos Negros*, for instance, is just one of many houses in Cachoeira where a *mãe de santo*, a priestess..., will use the jogo de buzios—the throwing of the sacred shells—for healing and prophesy. The Sisterhood of the Good Death, which has its roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the first Candomblé group for women, is still based in Cachoeira, preserving and promoting the work of the original group, and still concerned with women's issues, within and outside of religion.

And this is where Candomblé shows itself to be one of the most progressive forces in Brazilian society, standing in stark contrast to both Catholicism and Brazilian society in general for its matriarchal nature. In my three visits to Cachoeira exploring Candomblé, the gender roles struck me most forcibly. Men were at the bottom of the Candomblé chain as administrators and disseminators of information. They lead me to the women—the *mães de santos*—who hosted all the ceremonies I saw. It's women who fulfill the prominent roles as spiritual leaders and healers, and women working to preserve Candomblé tradition and custom.

In spite of continual attacks from both the Catholic church and radical protestant churches like the Universal Church of the Reign of the Lord Jesus Christ that brand Candomblé as a...demon invoking practice of primitive heathens, the religion is growing. The ultimate concerns of Candomblé are the concrete issues of life—such as pain, poverty, unemployment and happiness—and its pragmatic acceptance of people as they see or imagine themselves and affirmation of people's own individual power, reinforces its place at the heart of Brazilian culture.

Source: [http://home.worldonline.co.za/~afribeat/dance\\_brazcandomble.html](http://home.worldonline.co.za/~afribeat/dance_brazcandomble.html).



## *Origin of Egungun*



EGUNGUN MASQUERADE

Egungun is regarded as the collective spirits of ancestors who occupy space in Heaven. Hence, they are called Ara Orun (Dwellers of Heaven). These ancestral spirits are believed to be in constant watch of their survivors on Earth. They bless, protect, warn, and punish their Earth relatives, depending on how their relatives neglect or remember them. Their collective functions cut across lineage and family loyalty. They protect the community against evil spirits, epidemics and evil doers, ensuring their well-being. The spirits could be evoked collectively or individually, in time of need. The “place of call” is either on the graves of ancestors, the family shrine, or the community grove.

The ancestral spirits may be invited to the Earth physically in masquerade, and such masquerades are referred to as Egungun or Ara Orun. The supernatural powers the ancestor have over the community become real as the different Egungun perform their religious, political and social function. Egungun appearances resemble the Yoruba view of life after death. The coming out of Egungun is a time of festivity and entertainment. A time of deep belief in divine guidance and protection also a way of immortalizing one’s name.

It is believed that everyone has the power and ability to communicate with those who have passed beyond this life. This communication can simply involve remembering a revered ancestor and making use of that memory as a role model for life decisions and through the use of dreams...There are a number of traditional African ways for building an ancestor altar. Clean the room or space by smudging (smoke from burning leaves) Ewe, herbs, saying a prayer to the water, light a candle, also placing food, water, fruit, incense, names of ancestor/relative you wish to honor. A offering of food, in small portions on a small, preferably chipped, white plate, should be placed at the altar prior to your family sitting down for a meal. You can also place a cup of coffee or tea, some flowers and cigars. Once you are in communication with your ancestors, they will make specific requests for the kind of offering they want...

Even the trauma of the slave trade and the horrors of the middle passage did not erase the long history and rich lore associated with ancestral devotion, from the African’s mind. In Cuba, most if not all, of the public performances of Egungun masquerade had passed out of use by the early 1900s. This was not the case for the Yoruba taken to Brazil. They were able to continue and maintain most of the customs of their homeland. This was due, in part, to Brazil’s proximity to West Africa, also to easy movement back and forth of free Yoruba. Today Brazil can boast of the largest Yoruba population. One sees Egungun masqueraders maintaining their Yoruba heritage in much the same way their African counterparts do.

Source: Roots & Rooted, <http://rootsandrooted.org/egungun.htm>.