Dances of the Orixas in Brazil, History and Actuality

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Orixas are entities worshipped in Candomble, a religion of Brazil with roots in Africa. One explanation of the word Orixas is that it equals ori (head) plus axe (force, magic) in Yoruban language and that orixas are personifications of mental techniques used to communicate with oludumaré, the supreme god, each with dominion over a particular element of nature (Santos 16). In candomble ceremonies, there is a secret rite open only to initiates, followed by public feasting and dancing, at which dances of the orixas are performed by dancers in a state of trance. All candomble rituals, including the dances, were prohibited and persecuted for many years in Brazil, both as un-Christian (95% of Brazilians consider themselves Roman Catholics) and as barbarous: Slavery and imperialism were only possible with theories rationalising them as the domination of inferior groups by superior ones, and thus denying any positive values in the cultures of the oppressed; even after slavery was abolished in 1888, the Brazilian government sought to deny the African component of its religion and to “bleach” the population by encouraging European immigration. However, ever since Gilberto Freyre published his influential analysis of Brazil as a “Racial Democracy” in the 1930s, there has been increasing official and other interest within Brazil in valorizing African components of its civilization, and this has even gone so far as “Re-Africanization”, tracing
traditions to their African roots and "purifying" them of non-African elements.

Since over half the population of Brazil was of African descent in the middle of the nineteenth century, and the population of Salvador, Bahia, the first capital, is now 70-80% self-identified as being African to some degree, it is obvious that African culture has long been a majority force in Brazil, especially in the province of Bahia. (Due to the fact that intermarriage and concubinage between Portuguese colonists, who were mostly single men, Indians, and slaves was never effectively legally prohibited and that their children were not considered black, but mulatto, in Brazil a "black" person usually means only a jet-black person. I will use the word "Afro-brazilian" in most contexts below to mean any person who would consider himself to have some African ancestry). Indeed, the transfer of West African, especially Yoruban, culture was so large it has lately been described by Orlando Santos as an involuntary civilizing mission of the African slaves who thus mitigated the poverty of Portuguese culture.

The current Brazilian constitution guarantees the right of religious freedom, and Candomble has become much more visible in recent decades. Many Brazilians of all ethnicities participate in or pay for Candomble rites as well as being Roman Catholics. The fact that Portuguese Christianity in the new world was less militant than that of the Spaniards, with the Portuguese court eager to limit the power of the church in its colonies and thus not permitting many clerics to immigrate, left a great deal of room through the centuries for people in Brazil to make up their own interpretations of what might or might not be consonant with Christianity. On the one hand, Candomble flourished while hidden; on the other, Christianity itself mutated into messianic
cults. Since Candomble is no longer clandestine, and is even valorized as a source of Brazilian pride, being an example of a syncretic cultural vitality which is currently seen as Brazil at its best, many people have been exposed to the ritual dances of the orixas.

Now, the dances of Candomble are forming an important basis of the new art-form of Afro-Brazilian dance, a performance art incorporating both movements from dances of the orixas and techniques ranging from ballet to street dance. Of course, many kinds of dance in Brazil have African influence, but the performance art labelled as “Afro-Brazilian Dance” is relatively new. This is totally separate from Candomble dances per se, which may only be performed by initiates after entering into trance. Many people whom I met in Brazil were interested in this dance, and wanted to know more about the orixas in order to understand the dance better. Neither they nor I could find much material in English about the individual orixas, which each have identifying colors, gestures, and stories to identify them. This paper began as an effort to educate myself on the matter, and should also be interesting to anyone else interested in the rich contemporary dance scene in Brazil. The paper contains three sections: First, background on Candomble and orixas in general; second, a brief summary of the beginning of Afro-Brazilian dance since the 1960's and a couple of examples of it now, including a dance class and a performance; third, descriptions of some of the major orixas. All citations and quotes are my translations from Portuguese, and the sources are listed in the bibliography. The English-language sources in the bibliography are not quoted, but they served as general background when I read them some time before beginning work on this paper.

Finally, a note on pronunciation: vowels in Brazilian words in-
including Candomble, orixa etc. are pronounced as in romance languages. X is pronounced like the English “Sh”. I have omitted portuguese diacritics, but both orixa and axe are pronounced with stress on the last syllable as “oriSHA” and “aSHE” respectively. The names of the orixas are spelled in various ways in different sources, because the Candomble tradition has been until recently oral, without codified spellings. I shall use the spellings given by Aflalo and Verger.

**Background: What is Candomble and What are Orixas?**

Prandi defines two kinds of religions, ethical religions oriented toward right conduct to be rewarded in the afterlife, and magical ones concerned with affecting events in the present life. By his definition, Candomble is a magical religion and not competing in the same sphere as Christianity, which is an ethical religion. Thus, there is no contradiction in practicing Christians being clients of candomble. To Aflalo, Candomble is not a religion at all because it does not have ethical or afterlife dimensions. These are two ways to explain Candomble so that it can co-exist with Roman Catholicism. Santos, however, enthusiastically describes ethical dimensions of Candomble contributing to communitarian ideals exemplified in quilombos (settlements of runaway slaves) and superior to the materialism and exploitativeness of Portuguese culture. He also considers Candomble linked to the future as well as the past through the continuity of ancestor worship. Obviously, Candomble is different things to different people. Texeira cautions against over-generalizing about things African since there is great cultural diversity within Africa. It appears that Santos uses “African” to mean west African, especially Yoruban culture, and I will continue his
usage in this paper, since of the West African groups enslaved by the Portuguese (principally Bantu and Yoruban groups, though also some Islamic Africans) the Yorubas have been most influential in Candomble. Most Orixas come from Yoruba tradition, although Candomble also includes worship of ancestors, a Bantu religion, and there is also Angolan Candomble with different deities.

Candomble has coexisted and syncretized with Roman Catholicism to such an extent that Santos calls Catholicism the Trojan horse that bore African religions into the new world. This syncretization began in Africa, where missionary efforts meant that some slaves were baptised before being enslaved. Worship of the orixas has many features in common with worship of saints in parts of Europe, including Portugal, with each orixa or saint being especially efficacious to solve particular problems, and also each person having a guardian saint or angel (or being, in candomble, the child of a particular orixa).

Candomble is a religion that seeks to influence current reality through rituals and sacrifices, at which ritual adepts enter trance and become the “horse” of the spirit who descends upon them. There is a supreme deity, Oludumare, who is reached by messenger spirits or orixas. Exu is the agent of change. Each human being is the child of a particular orixa, and this influences the person’s character and destiny. Yoruba language is still used in Candomble ceremonies and recent scholarly interchanges between Brazil, Cuba, and African nations have focussed on both the rediscovery of “pure” traditions in Africa and in the preservation of archaic features (lost in Africa) in the new world. Candomble is related to other new-world African religions including Cuban Santeria, Gullah in the Carolinas, and Vodun in the Caribbean. Texeira notes that it is the uprooting of Candomble from its geograph-
ical context that has enabled it to become universal, permitting the offer of magical services to people from other religions and to people not accepted in other communities (for example homosexuals, as Prandi notes in the website Candomble.com). This universal availability has in turn resulted in Candomble as spectacle, with Maes de Santo (Candomble Priestesses) appearing on television to make predictions and industrialized production of items used in ceremonies. (Texeira 137)

Brazil had an extractive economy, first of Brazil dyewood, then of sugar, gold, and finally coffee before finally industrializing and diversifying. All the extractive economic cycles were heavily dependent on slave labor, to the extent that a majority of the population (especially in the sugar region in the Northeast, home of Salvador the first capital and the slave market to the nation) were slaves or freed slaves. The Pelhourinho district of Salvador is now a Unesco world heritage site, due to its concentration of baroque architecture. However, pelhourinho means pillory in portuguese; the pelhourinho is where slaves were punished publically. It is also close to very poor areas of Salvador, and despite the fact that Brazil does not suffer rigidly bipolar racism as the United States does, most people in the poor areas are dark-skinned. It is in Salvador today that Candomble most flourishes, and interest in it and other African traditions is a way of validating the majority of the population there, the poor majority in the Northeast, poorest region of Brazil, a country where about sixty percent of citizens are at or below the official poverty line. People in other areas of Brazil, as well as tourists from all over the world, go to Salvador these days to learn about its distinctive culture. There is debate over how to preserve good features of this interest from outsiders—validation of Afro-Brazilian culture, revenues from tourism—and not suffer negative consequences,
such as a loss of artistic and religious authenticity due to too much commercial exploitation.

Since Africans have been the majority in some areas of Brazil, it was always possible for them to maintain social cohesion and cultural continuity there even though their traditions were in theory banned. The average lifespan of a slave after arrival in Brazil was a mere seven years. Most slaves were men; the birth rate did not replace those that died, and so there was constant new forced immigration. Hence, into the middle of the nineteenth century, a large proportion of the population in the Northeast was African born, and reinforcing African traditions. Slaves were baptised upon arrival, but not allowed to enter churches; some were, as noted above, Christian prior to arrival in Brazil. Of the more than 500 orixas worshipped in west Africa, only about 50 survived the middle passage, and twelve or so are the most important in Candomble now. Reasons why the number of orixas decreased include that facilities did not allow the maintenance of separate temples, and that orixas not relevant to slaves' needs were dropped. For example, in Africa orixas of agricultural fertility were important, but, in Brazil, agriculture benefited only the slave masters, so these orixas lost importance. On the other hand, Ogum, the orixa of war, gained importance as the militant protector of his followers, as did Ossain, god of herbs and healing. The Yoruba used in Brazil mutated and retained some archaic features, like vulgate Latin in medieval Europe (Ferretti 119).

Forbidden from open worship of orixas, slaves would pray to images of saints, and each orixa became identified with a Christian saint or deity. However, identifications differ from region to region.

Ferretti notes that syncretism is often viewed with disparagement,
as a kind of bastardization, but that the original meaning of the word is positive: the unification of forces in the face of a common enemy. He also stresses that all religions change, incorporating alien elements as they spread through time and space, and that concerns of religious purity or correctness are marks of stagnation. Brazilian evangelicals denounce syncretism of Christianity with African religions, and recently, especially since the 1980s, some practitioners of Candomblé have tried to cleanse it of Christian elements. Ferretti writes that these attempts at purity are misguided, since in fact Candomblé believers never actually confuse Christian with African religious entities, but worship both. Moreover, it is impractical now to change Brazilian Candomblé into a religion with no relation to Christianity; the liturgical calendar of Candomblé follows that of the Catholic church, and the iconography, such as Ogun's roman-style helmet, is entrenched. Also, a fanatic exclusion of foreign elements would run counter to the spirit of religious toleration in African religions; religious syncretism was a strategy of survival that Africans brought to the new world. In Africa, it was common for conquered and conquering peoples to incorporate each other's divinities into their pantheons, and for Africans to incorporate Christian divinities was an act of syncretism in the original meaning of self-defense. (Ferretti 120)

There was Christian influence in Africa even before slavery began and after, for example when the 1657 treaty which guaranteed Angola's independence and the end of the slave trade there had as a concomittant permission for Capuchin missionaries to be active in Angola. (Luz 58)

Both Luz and Ferretti compare the interactions of Quilombos (Communities of runaway slaves) with other groups in Brazilian society of the time as examples of syncretism of social systems that enabled
oppressed to incorporate elements from the oppressors' culture into their own as self-defense while maintaining an autonomous identity, analogous to religious syncretism.

**Afro-Brazilian Dance as Performance Art:**
**Brief History and some Examples**

Afro-Brazilian dance as a performance art is worthy of note because of its high level of artistic achievement and its function of making visible African heritage in Brazil, particularly in Salvador, Bahia. Riserio points out that "re-africanization" as term describing current cultural trends in Brazil is accurate, since there was an earlier Africanization denied and reversed by Brazilian governments in the early decades of this century, as the small elite of rich, white people did its best to keep African music and dance invisible. What does it matter who is dancing on stage? It matters because "Bahia is essentially a region of culture [not political boundaries]. For example, until today, no politician has enjoyed the ascendance or leadership held there by artists, intellectuals, and religious leaders. These in fact have been the true formers of Bahian conscience and sensibility, from Jorge Amado [author] to Meninha do Gantois [Candomble priestess]." (Riserio 21) Thus, who is dancing, writing, singing and preaching in the region of Bahia, centered in Salvador, is who leads the region's life. For the dances of the orixas to come to the secular stage is a widening of African presence, and a step to putting Afro-brazilians in leadership positions, though the majority of them have long been forced into marginalization. The arts are not beside the point in Bahia, and for people of color to become prominent by expressing their own art is significant.
Nobrega, too, writes that dance is important because “for Africans, the transmission of knowledge occurs also through dance.” (Nobrega 31). She notes that the choreography of candomble dances is a symbolic code. As far as the movement of this code, the key to cultural traditions not otherwise visible (since not written until recently) from sacred to secular arenas, there are conflicting opinions. Riserio, for instance, complains both if African forms of music and dance are ignored, or if they are valued, because when they are ignored that is disparaging, but when valued, he argues they are co-opted by entities such as the tourism authority of Bahia.

In any case, how did Afro-Brazilian dance come to be what it is today?

Mercedes Baptista was the first Brazilian dancer to develop “black dances” as a theatre partaking of the same charisma as ballet or modern dance. She went to the United States to study with Katherine Dunham, who was the first U.S. dancer to develop a system of modern dance based on African music and the body-types of black Americans (who are still rare in most modern dance and ballet companies in the U.S.). Mercedes Baptista returned to Brazil to teach many other dancers including Carlos Moraes, of whom a brief professional biography is given below. At the same time as Afro-Brazilian dance was becoming “high culture” on stage, music groups in Bahia (Viva Bahia and Olodum) formed in the 1960’s to reclaim the street and commercial music scene from an elite that watered down all African elements. These musical groups in Brazil have been encouraged by black power and soul music in the U.S., and Reggae in Jamaica, which they interpret as part of the same Pan-Africanism in which they themselves participate. For example, Olodum’s website details how Olodum members were inspired
to start some of their publicity efforts after visiting Spike Lee's boutique in Brooklyn, and Ile Aiye, the first Carnaval group that does not permit white participation, often uses lyrics praising the beauty of blackness, reminiscent of the "black is beautiful" slogan from the U. S. Carnaval in Brazil, originally much influenced by African music and dance, had become dominated by "blocos" who would practice all year to parade—and who excluded dark skinned people. Since Brazilian society has never been as simply bipolar as the U. S., it has been difficult for Afro-Brazilians to have a cohesive sense of cultural identity, but, while maintaining their Brazilianness, some groups have been moving more in that direction. Luz, in his analysis of the re-africanization of Bahia's carnaval, refers repeatedly to Jackson Brown and Bob Marley as being especially significant to many Brazilians of color.

While Olodum, Ile Aiye and other groups changed forever the popular music of Brazil, the high culture side of African dance was influenced in the 1970s by the incorporation of dancers with formal ballet and modern dance training in folkloric troupes. ("folkorico" in Portuguese apparently does not have the kitschy nuance folkloric does in English.). Two men, Raimundo Bispo dos Santos (nicknamed King) and Carlos Moraes, both still active with FUNCEB (Fundacao Cultural do Estado da Bahia) have been especially prominent in the history of the resultant Afro-Brazilian dance. King has been active in bringing dance rooted in African traditions to world attention, and Moraes has brought African-Brazilians into classic ballet classes where they may either strengthen their technique for use in Afro-brazilian dance, or become dancers of classic ballet, a career which was not hitherto open to them. Both men have contributed to the fusion of African and other dance
traditions in a new and vital art form, and to the prestige of African-brazilian dancers as artistic equals to any dance professional in the world.

In 1964, King was a student at the Colegio Estadual da Bahia. He was invited to join a folkoric performance because he was known as a good dancer. Later he entered the UFBA (Universidade Federal do Estado da Bahia) dance school for formal training and in 1973 began to choreograph dance labelled variously as danca afro-brasileira, danca afro contemporanea, danca afro etc. Also, he has been a member of a candomble terreiro (temple) for many years, observing dances of the orixas and taking part in ceremonies as a percussionist. He is probably the most famous teacher of Afro-Brazilian dance now and many of his students have gone on to become professionals in Brazil or Europe. In an interview with Nobrega, he stated that his major goal was to prepare students for University or FUNCEB courses.

On New Year's Eve 1998, King and other FUNCEB teachers gave an open class in the cobbled square outside the Mercado Modelo (government-sponsored artisan and crafts market). It was free. Anybody could attend, and I did. The dancing went on for hours under the hot sun, accompanied by live percussion. People wore anything they could move in comfortably, and footwear ranged from sneakers to sandals and bare feet. Each class began with the teacher doing stretching and breathing warm-up exercises with the students. Then the teacher would demonstrate a movement, and students in lines would move forward doing it until the teacher stepped in with a new movement. King was the second teacher. When a movement proved too hard for many participants, he would modify it. This open class is an example of his community activities.
King is the teacher of Marineza, whose class I took at Dida (more on that below); that is, he is a teacher of teachers. Also, he is active working for tourist revenues. On my second visit, in August 1999, I met a tour group, from San Francisco, of percussionists and dancers. One of them told me they had been taken for a class at FUNCEB with King.

Also, on my second trip, I saw a performance by the Bale Folclorico, doing dances based on Candomble, Capoeira, and other African influenced forms, with superbly trained dancers doing a range of movements it would be hard to find elsewhere. That is, the extreme lower-body strength and flexibility of ballet dancers was combined with ability to isolate and use strongly hips, abdominals, and neck; the men’s dances also included movements as in acrobatics or Peking Opera such as extended handstands and backflips. King has also been important in this troupe.

Hence King is major presence in Afro-Brazilian dance, whether as performer, teacher to the local and international community.

Carlos Moraes had been a student at Mercedes Baptista’s school of Dancas Africanas, and also had studied classic ballet, before dancing in the Municipal Ballet of Rio de Janeiro. He became the ballet master and choreographer of the BTCA (Bale Teatro Castro Alves, named for the nineteenth century poet who was the first Brazilian author to write against slavery). When Moraes was invited to work at BCTA, he was surprised at the absence of Afro-brazilian students there. In 1970 he began his career as dancer and choreographer at BBB (Bale Brasileiro da Bahia) and hired outside Afro-brazilian dancers to participate in his production of Visao da Bahia (Vision of Bahia) with music by Carlos Gomes. That is, within the context of a classic ballet company, he recognized and used the flexibility and ability to do impressive jumps,
turns, etc. of dancers familiar with capoeira, and thus opened the elite art ballet to participation from a wider segment of Bahia's population, as well as bringing capoeira to world attention. (Although this paper is mostly about dances rooted in Candomble, capoeira is another major genre of Afro-Brazilian dance.)

The then-president of Brasil, Medici, was present at a performance of Visao and praised it highly. This favourable publicity encouraged more dancers of capoeira to join Moraes' classes. Many of his students have gone on to be professional dancers. In an interview with Nobrega, Moraes states that his major goal is to create a movement vocabulary appropriate to Bahian dance.

At the open class New Year's Eve 1998 mentioned above, leaflets were distributed advertising a special year-end event at the FUNCEB school, where anyone could take classes of dance in many genres over three days for a fee of twenty-one reais (about twenty U.S. dollars at that time, coming to seven reais a class, as opposed to the usual cost then of eight reais). I participated in this as well, and took classes with Moraes, and also Jazz dance with Ajax Viera.

The dance studios of FUNCEB are housed in one of the historic building of the Pelhourinho area, with spacious wood floors, large windows, walls of mirror, big changing rooms, showers, and every possible amenity for dance students. The classes were of a high professional level, but anyone could try to keep up. Usually, courses at FUNCEB are taught over a several-month period, and are not open classes as these were; it was a special event. As well as ballet and jazz, Afro (by two teachers, King and Kenno), Brazilian, Flamenco, contemporary-improvisation, and belly dance were all offered. When I was looking for the FUNCEB, and passed in front of the Stern flagship
jewelry store, a young white man in a suit and white shirt, who was trying to interest passers-by in Stern's gem museum, offered to help me read my map; when he heard the address, he told me not to go there because it was a dangerous area, full of drug-takers. In fact, FUNCEB was only a half-block away, and, although potential danger was implied by the presence of a guard at the door, I cannot help but think that the young man's warning showed a racist or ethnocentric prejudice still present even in the Pelhourinho, where Brazil's African heritage is a major attraction.

Although FUNCEB has such excellent facilities and teachers, and despite the prestige of figures like Moraes and King, most professionals in Afro-brazilian dance receive little or no remuneration for performances. Only two groups are government sponsored and reimburse their dancers as government employees (Nobrega 39). Nobrega then poses the question "Can Afro-brazilian dance, without trying to flee its roots, survive in this society?" That is, without becoming a mere sub-category of ballet or other forms longer part of elite high-culture, can Afro-brazilian dance become prestigious enough to attract revenues to support professional schools and companies, besides FUNCEB? Certainly, there are many dance schools and companies active, and below I will describe my experience at one of the ones not receiving government support. Carnaval, the preparation of and participation in which govern the rhythm of life in much of Bahia, may be one reason for their continued vitality.

During both of my visits to Brazil, I took dance classes at Dida, and all-female dance and percussion group in the Pelhourinho, with Profesora Marineza. Near the end of my stay in January 1999, Marineza told all of us in the class to be sure not to miss any classes because they
would be working on new choreography for Carnaval. I only wished that I could be there that long! Classes were eight reais each, but less if one signed up for a full month. When I was first searching for the Dida school, I asked several people on near-by streets where it was; everyone knew it well and became especially friendly upon hearing I wanted to study dance there. The school opened onto a narrow hall, painted lilac. A receptionist sat well inside and told students when they could go upstairs to class. Many little boys in Dida tee-shirts raced around (all teen-ager and older students I saw were women). Usually a group of ten or so of us would be waiting to go upstairs; the narrowness of the stairwell and the fact that the studio was occupied non-stop precluded going in early. Sometimes the toilet-changing room’s light was broken, so I learned to go with dance clothes under street clothes. Most students were Afro-brazilian teenagers. Exceptions were: one white Brazilian teen-aged girl, one Afro-brazilian woman, and a few foreigner women of various ethnicities (never more than three).

The following is a description of one class, Thursday, August 12, at 6:30 p.m. Waiting for the class to begin, I sat on the bench in the hall and began to look at the book, *Lendas Africanas dos Orixas* by Pierre Verger, which I had bought at the Casa Jorge Amado around the corner. One of the other students sat down beside me, and began to read parts of the book out loud while I held the book. When the hall got crowded, we closed the book; another student went out to buy an acaraje (a fried bean savoury, popular snack in Salvador and also sacramental food offered to the orixa Yansan) and offered me some, but I declined since the dance classes always include a great deal of work on the abdominals and it is better not to have a full stomach. Finally we got the signal to go up, and piled up the stairs while a bunch of little boys piled out of the
studio, a wood floored room that would have been very pleasant to
dance in except that it was too small for our numbers (over twenty), and
the windows had to be kept shut because once a thief had jumped in and
stolen students’ bags. It was hot and stuffy. Three people came in to
play percussion for our lesson.

Students continued to talk animatedly when Marineza began class,
but the talk died away as she showed the first warm-up sequence. The
first two-thirds or so of the class were exercises aimed at strentthening
and stretching the whole body, but especially upper body. Each class of
Marineza’s I attended was different, all strenuous, and each leaving sore
muscles in different parts of the body. She walked around and corrected
students’ posture incessantly—the ideal posture was with the chest
expanded, as in Flamenco dance, and the abdominals firmly clenched,
but, of course, relaxed shoulders, and hips in a straight line with
shoulders, except when moving on purpose in some direction; arms,
neck, and hips should all be able to move independently. The sequences
of movements were long and complicated, and most of us made
mistakes. When she demonstrated the exercises, Marineza told us which
muscles should be used, identifying them by their latin names. As well
as sequences being long, individual poses were held interminably while
Marineza shouted “Fica la” (STAY there). She had to be fierce, because
many students collapsed out of the poses the instant she stopped paying
attention to them.

After the warm-up, Marineza suddenly spun in a circle and
screamed “aaa-ii!”. Everyone imitated her. Then she told us we would
study a dance of the orixa Yansan and asked if anyone knew any stories
about Yansan. By coincidence, one the stories we had been reading from
Verger’s book was about Yansan. The student who had been reading
out loud raised her hand, and turned to say to me "From the book!".

To briefly summarize the story, Ogum, orixa of metal and war, was hunting in the mountains. He saw an ox and was going to shoot it, when a beautiful woman stepped out of the ox-skin and hid it beneath an ant-hill. The woman was Yansan, orixa of tempests. Ogum, as soon as her back was turned, followed her and coerced her into being his wife, by withholding the ox-skin from her. This was how Yansan became one of Ogum's wives.

The student recounted the story with much more detail than is given here, and we all clapped when she finished. This shows how written researches are now becoming part of the previously completely oral transmission of Orixas' legends.

Next, Marineza explained the characteristics of Yansan, who combines sensuality with defiant aggression. Yansan always dances with her head held arrogantly high, and characteristic movements of hers include widely swaying hips, ecstatic contemplation of jewelry on her hands, and a pushing motion of the hands symbolizing Yansan raising the winds. Marineza told us that we would learn a folkloric dance, which was completely different from dances in candomble ceremonies. One student asked how it was different, and Marineza told her that none of us students would know the first thing about how to dance in such a religious ceremony, that Candomble is a religion to be respected, and that what we were learning was not religious.

The last part of the class proceeded rapidly and a bit hysterically as we twirled and bounced around in lines going forward, imitating Marineza. Due to the lack of space, one girl banged her elbow on a wall and began to cry, but overall everyone was exhilarated by the end and clapped. This day we did not end with a samba da roda, although on
other days we did.

Marineza's classes were outstanding as exercise, as intellectual explanation of how to use the body, and as education in Afro-brazilian traditions transformed into art. Marineza is a student of King, and exemplifies the vitality of Afro-brazilian dance as non-religious performance art, now in its second generation of teachers and performers.

**The Orixas**

In a Candomble ceremony, or in stage performances of Afro-Brazilian dance, an orixa is identified by his or her characteristic dance, color of costume, and emblems carried by the dancer. Below, sex, color, day, habitat, and emblem for each of some of the major orixas is listed along with information on what each orixa controls, his or her personality, and sometimes a brief summary of a famous story about the orixa. I have given the colors given in my three sources, Aflalo, Santos, and Verger, but there may be variations. All the written sources I had said that Oxum would wear yellow, but she wore pink in the exhibit at the Museu da Cidade. Postcards sold at the Museu showed Oxum in yellow. I asked museum staff about that and was told the color depends on the nation (ethnicity) of a candomble terreiro (temple). Readers should note that although each "child" of an orixa is said to have certain qualities, these are modified by each person having a secondary orixa, and many other circumstances can be invoked to explain a lack of confirmation to the orixa's archetype, so that this system does not become rigidly deterministic. Prandi, of the University of Sao Paulo, writes about this at length in the website candomble.com., which has an English version.
In all sources that described orixas, Exu came first, followed by the male orixas Ogum, Oxossi, and Ossain; after that the order varied except that most male orixas came before most female orixas, with Yemanja as the last female orixa, and Oxala, the male orixa considered the most important of all, very last.

Exu
Sex: male
Colors: red and black
Day: Monday
Habitat: crossroads, especially intersections of three roads
Emblems: club, calabash

Exu is qualitatively different from the other orixas. He is the messenger between Oludumare (supreme deity) and the orixas. He is also the agent of change, both in the sense of vitality and in the sense of disruption of order. As well as Exu in the pantheon, there is an individual Exu for each person, his life force. For example, if a person’s hands and feet get cold, it is said that Exu is leaving him. Because Exu is the principle of volatility, he is apt to upset any equilibrium, and he is easily offended. If offerings are not made to him, he will make trouble. All candomble ceremonies start with a propitiation to Exu, and his peji (shrine) is the first in the temple. It is considered inauspicious to wear his colors, black and red, to candomble ceremonies. In Brazil he has been syncretized with Satan, but in Cuba he has been syncretized with the baby Jesus. This shows how hard it is to make one-to-one correspondences between orixas and Christian deities.

Exu is omnipresent and moves freely through time and space. He
breathes through his pores, not his nose. He is an orixa of hidden bodily fluids associated with vitality, including blood and placenta.

There are many stories of how Exu caused mischief because people did not make him offerings, but “there is an easy way to gain Exu's favor” ... it is to trick him more cleverly than he tricks others” (Verger 13).

Santos relates Exu to the energy of electrons.

Few people are children of Exu, but those who are have the following characteristics: strength, bravery, quarrelsomeness, success in politics and disputes, love of food and drink, and liability to extremes of both good and bad behaviour.

Ogum

Sex: male
Colors: dark blue or green
Day: Tuesday
Habitat/domain: iron deposits, roads, jungles
Emblem: two sabers

Ogum is an orixa of war, iron and work. He is the eldest son of Oduduwa, King of Ife and brother to Oxossi and Exu (Aflalo). Other sources give Oxossi as his son (Verger). His shrine is the second in each terreiro. The dancer representing Ogum, the warrior, is the first to enter the performance area, as the songs to Ogum follow immediately upon the propitiation of Exu.

Verger recounts a legend that Ogum ruled Ife when Oduduwa's vision failed. Ogum conducted many battles and brought back much booty and many slaves. He also had many love affairs, including with Yansan, Oxum, and Oba, all three of whom he lost to Xango. After one
lengthy campaign, he returned home and was offended because nobody would speak to him. He did not know that a ceremony requiring silence had been performed that day. He got so angry that he smashed all the jars of palm wine. At the end of the day, when the silence could be broken, his sons came to him, explained, and gave him his favorite foods. He was so ashamed of his bad behaviour that he declared he had lived long enough and disappeared beneath the earth, thus becoming a divinity.

Children of Ogum are muscular, tall and plain. They fall in love frequently but rarely maintain relationships well. They never desist from a fight. They are intelligent and ingenious and succeed through perseverance, although they are not lucky. They are not diplomatic and often offend others by their tactlessness. However, their bluntness also means they are candid and faithful with their friends.

Santos identifies Ogum with ferrous sulfate and the liver.

Oxossi
Sex: male
Colors: turquoise, and blue with gold
Day: Thursday
Habitat/domain: forests, trees
Emblem: bow and arrow, oxtail switch

Given in most sources as brother to Ogum. Oxossi, the hunter, is the third to enter the dance and his shrine is third in a terreiro. Oxossi is the orixa of cold, clouds, and vegetation. He is said to have been the king of Ketu, and to have lived in the forest with Ossain, the orixa of herbal remedies. His name comes from “Oxowusi” which means hunter of the
people. The story goes that when Oduduwa, king of Ife, was presiding over the Festival of Fresh Yams, a huge bird (an incarnation of a witch) landed on the palace, throwing everything in shade and screaming horribly. Several famous hunters tried to shoot it, but Oxossi succeeded with a single arrow. In gratitude, the people called him Oxowusi.

Children of Oxossi are rare in Africa but numerous in Brazil. They are good-looking and vain, and always on the move, both in residence and profession. They are possessive of things and people. They require constant change, so they become lazy in routine jobs. Although they love animals, they are hunters and fishers.

Santos relates Oxossi to photosynthesis.

Ossain
Sex: male
Colors: green
Day: Thursday
Habitat/domain: forest, leaves, roots
Emblem: coffee branch with berries (Santos); Iron scepter with bird ornament (Aflalo)

Ossain is the orixa of herbs and healing. He grew like a plant, with no parents. He never married. In the forest, he is friends with Ogum and Oxossi. Ogum learned some of the secrets of herbs from him, so Ogum is also known as a healer. Xango, orixa of thunder, was jealous of Ossain's special knowledge and stole some of it. Herbs are important in candomble ceremonies and related traditional medicine, and are all under the aegis of Ossain. Ossain is called upon to cure illnesses.

The children of Ossain do not have a clear notion of right and
wrong. They are thin and often ugly. They are anti-social and conceal their emotions. Passive-aggressive, they have few friends and little amorous success. On the other hand, they are open-minded, efficient and objective. They like the open air, but not sports.

Omulu
Sex: male
Day: Wednesday
Colors: black, red and white
Day: Monday
Habitat/domain: Sun, earth
Emblem: scepter and gourd

Omulu, the orixa of pestilence, is associated with preventative medicine, in contrast to Ossain, the orixa of healing. Omulu is also an orixa of contagion, illness and death and as such is feared. It is easy to identify the dancer representing Omulu: he will usually wear a headress of straw that covers his whole body down to the knees. He is said to have as many pox marks as there are stars in the sky, and to cover them with this grament.

Omulu is a son of Nana, the oldest female orixa, and antedates the founding of Ife. Oxumare is his brother. Omulu was the king of the realm of Mahi. Nana, Omulu, and Oxumare are considered orixas of Mahi. Their shrines are close together, but distant from those of other orixas, and situated outside the terreiro.

Despite some authors' denial of an ethical dimension in Candomble, both Verger and Santos record the idea that illnesses are sent by Omulu to punish moral turpitude.
There are not many children of Omulu is Brazil. They are thin, ugly, and pessimistic. However, they are altruistic. The men enjoy sex, but not food and drink. Despite their disagreeable exteriors, children of Omulu are prized as friends because they value friendship. The festival Olubaje, for Omulu, is an important event in all terreiros, because people are always afraid of illness.

Xango
Sex : male
Colors : red and white
Habitat/domain : lightning, thunder, meteors, quarries
Emblem : Axe, gourd with elongated neck that makes a sound like rain when shook

Xango is the orixa of fire and justice. There are many children of Xango in Brazil. In fact, in the city of Recife “Xango” is the word used to designate Afro-brazilian religion. There are two versions of his parentage. One, based on a historic personage, is that he was the son of the King of Oyo and the princess of Tapas, the first kingdom to use cavalry. Later, Xango became king of Oyo and conquered surrounding areas. Aflalo refers to the book *Histoire de l’Afrique Noire* by Joseph Kiserbo for more information on Xango’s historic antecedents. Alternatively, Xango is said to be the son of Yemanja, orixa of the ocean, and Oranyan, king of Oyo, but raised by Oxala, the orixa who created humans.

Xango is the warrior who re-establishes equilibrium by cleansing fire. He is considered an agent of rough justice who fiercely castigates thieves and liars. Thus, death by lightning means that the victim was
probably a thief or liar.

Xango had three wives, Oxum, Yansan, and Oba, all of who he stole from Ogum is one way or another. Ogum fought Xango furiously over Yansan, but later they made up at the instigation of Oludumare, the supreme being, who told Ogum, as the elder, to be indulgent to impulsive Xango.

Children of Xango are said to be large, vigorous, attractive, and plump. They may be tactless and arrogant. Though basically lethargic, once aroused they summon impressive energy. If they can be interested in a project, they will be useful members of a group. They love women and are naturally polygamous. They are not jealous. Justice is their main concern, and though they can be magnanimous, they can also be vindictive in its name.

Oxumare:
Sex: hermaphrodite
Colors: green and yellow
Habitat/domain: rainbow
Day of week: Tuesday
Emblem: Two serpents of bronze (Santos) or iron (Aflalo)

Oxumare is the orixa of the rainbow, of the peace after a tempest. He is male half of the year and female for half of the year. Xango and Yansan are his friends. A cobra is his symbol both as the cobra in the sky (rainbow) and cobra on the earth (riverbeds).

He is also the orixa of wealth. According to legend, he was a diviner at the court of Olofin. When he cured the illness of a neighbouring queen's son, she rewarded him with many gifts. Olofin was humiliated
that "his" diviner had been so distinguished elsewhere, and, in the spirit of emulation rushed to give Oxumare even more wealth. Finally, when Oludumare was suffering from a loss of vision, Oxumare cured him and was taken to the sky to be an orixa.

Children of Oxumare are rare in Brazil, but when present they are beautiful, not tall, graceful, and ambitious. Despite Oxumare's sexual ambiguity, his children are not usually homosexual. As their symbol, the serpent, they can be treacherous in their pursuit of wealth, but after they become rich, they are generous. They have a weakness for flattery.

Logun Ede
Sex: hermaphrodite
Colors: pale blue and golden yellow
Days: Thursday and Saturday
Habitat: rivers and forests:
Emblem: Spear and abebe (combination fan and mirror)

Logun Ede is the child of Oxossi (the hunter) and Oxum (vain orixa of rivers) and mixes their characteristics. He is considered a good hunter who can also live underwater on fish. He has the power of mutation and can change himself into anything he wishes. Although Logun Ede's costume is displayed at the Museu da Cidade in Salvador, and he is mentioned in Voek (Voek 57), there was very little information about him in the books of Verger, Aflalo, and Santos listed in the bibliography.

Yansan
Sex: female
Colors: Red (Aflalo, Museu da Cidade) or white with rose
Yansan, or Oya-Yansan, is the first wife of Xango and the orixa of tempests who complements his powers as the god of lightning. She combines sensuality with aggression and always dances with her head held arrogantly high. In particular, when a dancer of Yansan's dances meets a dancer of Ogum's, she will become aggressive and try to fight him. If she meets a dancer of Xango's, she will gyrate her hips seductively. This is because of the legend that when Yansan left Ogum for Xango, Ogum pursued her with vengeful fury and even cut her into seven parts (identified with the seven branches of the River Niger). Ogum then imprisoned Xango under seven locks, but Yansan opened them with lightning. Xango went to Oludumare to ask counsel; Oludumare told Ogum, as the elder, to forgive Xango's amorous impetuosity. Ogum did, and his good relations with Xango. However, Yansan never forgave Ogum.

Another legend recounts that Yansan left Ogum when his other wives, jealous of her, revealed the location of her magic ox-skin which he had hidden to keep her in his power. An ox again, Yansan departed, but felt sorry for the nine children she had born with Ogum. She left the ox-horns for them, and told them to beat the horns together if they needed her. This is why ox-horns are displayed in festivals for Yansan.

Children of Yansan may be male or female. They are beautiful, authoritarian, violent and powerful. They are voluptuous and attract all
men. (male Yansans are often homosexual), but they are loyal to one man if he never gives them any cause for jealousy. They are agil and graceful. They are usually not rich, but may help their husbands succeed in every field.

Oxum
Sex: female
Days: Thursday and Saturday
Habitat/domain: freshwater (rivers, lakes and waterfalls)
Colors: golden yellow (all sources) or grey (Santos)
Emblem: abebe (combination mirror/fan) of yellow metal

Oxum is the goddess of rivers, love and fertility. Her distinguishing trait is coquetry. She is the second wife of Xango. Ogum was in love with her, and chased her; she, in love with Xango, fled to Yemanja, orixa of the ocean, who protected her and gave her jewels and adornments that helped her seduce Xango.

Oxum will not tolerate insults. In one story, Oxum was offended because the king of Ife would not allow women, including herself, at social functions. In revenge, she made all the women of Ife sterile. Only when she was invited to court did she allow fertility to return.

Children of Oxum are usually women. There are many in Brazil. They are beautiful and love to dance. They have harmonious voices. Although they are vain, passionate, and liable to pursue luxury, they can be decisive and energetic when necessary. They love presents. They are always clean and perfumed. They flirt with many men, but rarely fall deeply in love. They live well, though usually are not rich. Whatever their economic status, they dress with innate chic.
Oba

Sex : female
Day : Thursday
Distinguishing gesture : dances with hand held to ear
Habitat/domain : rivers
In my sources, I did not find Oba’s color and emblem
Characteristic pose : hand on ear

Oba is the third wife of Xango. She is a woman warrior, and defeated many orixas in battle. Ogum tricked her by spreading a paste of grains on the ground, so that she would slip and fall when she fought him. When she fell, Ogum possessed her physically. Later, however, she left him for Xango.

There was intense rivalry between Oba and Oxum for Xango’s love. One day, Oxum appeared in a turban that covered her ears and told Oba that Xango loved her (Oxum) because she had enchanted him by cutting off her ear and putting it in his food. When it was Oba’s turn to cook for Xango, Oba cut off her ear and put it in his food. He was disgusted. Oba and Oxum began to fight, until Xango got so enfuriated at the domestic discord that the two women ran away to be transformed into rivers.

Children of Oba may be male or female. They usually have characteristics of the opposite sex, but are rarely homosexual. They are strong and seductive. They love good food and drink to excess. They rarely have luck in love, being so jealous as to alienate their partners. In compensation, they throw themselves into work and often have success there.
Nana is the orixa of still waters and mud, out of which people were created by Oxala. She represents the collective memory of humankind, the continuity of life, and death. She is one of the oldest orixas and lived in Ife with her son Omulu before the arrival of the other orixas. Because she is older than Ogun and Xango, no metals are used in her rites. Her cult is from the Ashanti culture and migrated to the Yoruban peoples (Aflalo 71).

Children of Nana are rare in Brasil. They seem weak and have an old person’s sense of long perspective, whatever their actual age. They are wise and often use their wisdom for innovation. Justice and dignity are their outstanding characteristics. They are also benevolent, calm, and well-mannered. They are frequently ill, and always complaining, yet they are kind to others—so much so that they are not effective teachers.

Yemanja

Sex: female
Colors: silver and pale blue
Day: Saturday
Habitat/domain: Oceans, bays, estuaries
Emblem: silver abebe (combination mirror-fan)
Yemanja, orixa of the sea is the most famous of the female orixas. She is syncretized with the Virgin Mary. Celebrations to her around the New Year attract Brazilians of all geographic areas. In Bahia, these happen February second, and in the south, on New Year's Eve.

She is the orixa of fish, curative powers, and maternity. As a mother figure, she is the one who determines the functions of the other orixas. Her colors of white or silver and pale blue, are considered the most auspicious to be worn to Candomble ceremonies. She is the last female orixa to appear in Candomble ceremonies. According to a legend recounted by Verger, she was the wife of Olofin-Odudua, whom she left after bearing ten children, including Xango, Oxala, and Oxumare. Other sources report that Nana was Oxumare's mother. (Sometimes Odudua is given as Oxala's rival both for the crown of Ife and for the creation of the world, not Oxala's father.) All sources I read concurred that Yemanja was the daughter of Olokum, goddess of the sea, from who she received a magic flask. Fleeing her husband, Yemanji broke the flask, which formed a river that bore her to her mother's realm. According to Aflalo, she was being chased by the armies of her first husband, but according to Verger, she was running away from her second husband, who had insulted her. The fact that there are so many contradictions between stories about Yemanja shows that belief in her has been widespread, developing independently in many areas.

A typical child of Yemanja is a plump, vigorous woman with large breasts. She is languid and gentle, and an excellent mother. She is serious and will not brook insults. She is prone to headaches and mental problems. She eats a great deal. She respects her spouse and is monogamous by nature. She can be misled by her love of luxury.
Oxala
Sex: male
Day: Friday
Color: white
Habitat/domain
Emblem: white metal crook or stick with five round discs and surmounted by a bird ornament

Oxala is also known as his avatars Obatala (the king in white), Orixala (the great orixa), Oxaguian (the young warrior) and Oxalufa (the wise old man).

Obatala was the king of Igbo, dethroned by Oduduwa, who took his crown. The crown of Oxala exists today in the palace of the King of Ife (Nigeria) and it is the priests of Oxala who consecrate the descendents of Oduduwa. (Aflalo 92)

According to another legend Oludumare told Oxala to create the world, and gave him a magic sack of earth to use. Oxala, however, got drunk on palm wine, and as he was asleep Oduduwa stole the sack and created the world. Oxala complained to Oludumare, who then told him to create humans out of mud and bake them, and not to drink any more palm wine. However, Oxala got drunk again, with the result that some people are badly made, including albinos, who were not baked enough.

The festivals of Oxala open the Candomble calendar. In January, the festival of the waters of Oxala includes the ritual washing by Maes de Santo of the steps of the church of Senhor do Bonfim in Salvador. This is famous, and a major tourist attraction. There are also Candomble rites not open to the public. This festival relates to the legend that Oxala as Oxolufa was mistakenly imprisoned for alleged
horse-stealing for seven years by servants of Xango. From his prison, he caused a drought. When Xango realized the error he told everyone to be silent and get water to bathe Oxala. Next comes the festival of Oxala's pestle based on the legend that Oxala as Oxaguian loved ground yams so much that he invented the pestle. His old friend Awoledje called him by his nick-name “yam-eater” in front of servants who did not know Awoledje’s identity and who arrested him for disrespect to the king. Awoledje was mistakenly imprisoned for seven years and caused a drought from his prison. When the mistake was cleared up, Oxaguian freed Awoledje, who required the people of the realm to cut branches and beat each other. Now, at the festival of Oxaguian in Bahia, people strike each other lightly with small whips and receive a portion of ground yam in exchange. This festival occurs either the day after or a week after the festival of the waters of Oxala, depending on the terreiro.

Children of Oxala are usually physically weak and may be sickly. They are calm, introverted, strong-willed and stubborn. They act slowly, but, when aroused, can be violent. They are trustworthy in the main, but can be vindictive. Being careful and accurate observers, they are suited to artistic careers. They refuse to be influenced by others and to act as part of a group.

They have few friends, are not amorous, and are usually monogamous. They are chaste and moralistic. They tend to get drunk, but do not care much about food. They are usually financially stable, though not rich. Palm wine is tabu for them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

General Background


**Works Quoted**