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# As Filhas de Oyá: Warriors in the Eye of the Storm

Sheela Bringi  
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*As Filhas de Oyá: Warriors in the Eye of the Storm*

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SIT: Culture, Development and Social Justice  
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### Abstract

This study follows the trail of *Oyá*, a black feminine *Orixá*, or goddess, within the Afro-Brazilian spiritual tradition of *Candomblé*, through her elemental forces as the winds, storms, tornadoes, the river Niger, and buffalo. I unearth the influence of *Oyá* on the lives of three black female followers as she is manifested in the world as a black woman, a mother, a warrior and a lover.

I interviewed three black followers of *Oyá* and found that she is primarily a motherly force which provides protection, guidance and security for her followers. As a warrior, her energy inspires perseverance, determination, and self-protection. As a lover, *Oyá* expresses her values of autonomy and independence, sexual freedom, and she dislocates the traditional roles of women and men. I found that a psycho-spiritual investment in *Oyá* foregrounds a transformed lived reality for the women in this study: *Oyá* prepares her women followers to live in an unstable, unpredictable, harsh world, and expands the space for them to be black women in the world.

## Definition of Terms

*Oyá, Iansã, Yansa, Oiá* – all names for the goddess, the *Orixá*, of the winds and storms within Candomblé.

*Candomblé* – the name given to a variety of African religious traditions established in Brazil during the nineteenth century, also, the name of a dance, and the name of the Candomblé community.

*Orixá* – Gods and goddess within Candomblé, deities. They are external forces to and interior dimensions of human beings. They can be seen as deified ancestors, the very forces of nature, as well as interior dimensions of the human person.

*Filha/Filho* – literally “daughter” and “son,” implies the follower of a particular *Orixá*.

*Filha/Filho de Santos* - a Candomblé practitioner.

*Mãe/Pai de Santos* – the spiritual leader within a Candomblé community, holds the highest authority, and has more than seven years of initiation.

*Terreiro* – literally “house,” the space where the Candomblé community gathers to have ceremonies, the physical space of the Candomblé community.

*Borração* – the main area within the *terreiro* where Candomblé ceremonies take place.

*Festa de Candomblé* – literally “party,” a Candomblé ceremony.

*Xíre* – literally “serious play,” another name for a Candomblé ceremony.

*Iruke* – the Yoruba word for Oyá's flywisk, or implement that she uses to cleanse the air.

*Ifá* – Yoruba divination.

*Yemanjá* – feminine Orixá, goddess of the ocean and of most of the other Orixás.

*Oxum* – feminine Orixá, goddess of sensuality.

*Xango* – masculine Orixá, Oyá's husband, god of justice, lightning and thunder.

*Ogum* – masculine Orixá, another one of Oyá's husbands.

*Oxossi* – masculine Orixá, god of the hunt, animals and plants.

She walks alongside violence  
Ripeness of the afternoon  
Powerful river  
Fire burns; so does the sun.  
She wakes up dancing with fire  
Nine, the flashes of lightning  
Secrecy sees her.

Fly to us, Oyá<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

The black goddess Oyá manifests herself most powerfully in the world through the elements. She is the strong currents of winds lifting the flight of birds in their shifting migrations. Her breezes cool the skin and clear the mind as they sift through invisible spaces of clutter. She heaves storms and circular winds that blow through the earth leveling landscapes, sucking up riches, and spitting out devastation. Yet, always a mother, her protective black waters flow forth and enwomb the island of the self being trampled by destructive forces. Manifested in the world, she is a warrior, always the victorious one, fighting to the death her enemies of injustice, dishonesty, and oppression. Gatekeeper of the cemetery, she ferries spirits between this world and the next. She is also the energy of change, luck, profits and losses within the external and internal marketplace of exchange.

African in origin, Oyá was brought to Brazil by enslaved Africans during the time of slavery. This warrior goddess lives on in the 'New World' as one of the most highly independent, irreverent, and transformational female deities, *Orixás*, worshiped within the Afro-Brazilian religion of *Candomblé*. In this study, I explore Oyá through her

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Verger, *Notes sur le culte des orisa et vodun. Memoires de L'Institute Francais d'Afrique Noire, no. 51* (1957), pp. 414-421 *passim*. As quoted in Gleason, Judith Oyá, *In Praise of the Goddess*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1987, pp. 4.

various natural and cultural manifestations, as well as unearth her influence on the lives of three black *filhas* of Oyá, or female followers of this goddess. Ultimately, I seek to explore how Oyá, and specifically her *black womaness*, influences the lives of three black women followers amidst the persistent legacy of racism, sexism, and colonization in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, more than one century after slavery.

I came upon the following quote in Judith Gleason's work on Oyá demonstrating a social justification, even urgency, for the 'return' of the goddess within Eurocentric culture (as Oyá does not need to return to Afro-centered culture, there she has always dwelled). As these words provide Oyá with an importance within 'Western' culture, I quote them at length:

The Goddess is now returning. Denied and repressed for thousands of years of masculine domination, she comes at a time of dire need. For we walk through the valley of the shadow of nuclear annihilation...Amidst tremendous transition and upheaval, the Goddess is returning. Traditional male and female roles in society are being challenged...Here mythology unexpectedly comes to our aid...The oldest deities of warfare and destruction were feminine, not masculine...These archaic goddesses had dominion over both love *and* war. They were credited with both both chastity and promiscuity, nurturing motherliness and bloodthirsty destructiveness. But they were not at all concerned with conquest and territorial expansion. These were male obsessions. Rather, these goddesses monitored the life cycle throughout its phases: birth, growth, love, death and rebirth...

### **Literature Review**

Gleason's work, *Oyá, In Praise of the Goddess* (1987), bravely attempts to capture the essence of Oyá within the containing walls of the English language, combing European and African thought through part folklore, part ethnography, part mythology, and part cultural journalism. Her work is the first and only substantial published work available on Oyá in both English and Portuguese. Following Oyá's trail from Africa to Brazil, the Caribbean and New York City, Gleason uses poetry and storytelling, cultural



criticism, and autobiographical narrative in a highly unique and experimental fashion, to explore the many manifestations of Oyá. The themes running throughout Gleason's work reflect the main vehicles of Oyá's energy - the elemental forces of the wind, storms, fire, and the river Niger, as well as the realms of the marketplace, the dead, and animals.

Gleason explores each natural force in detail, painstakingly mapping the trajectories of tropical storms in Africa, the physics of lightning, the currents of the rivers, to establish what she terms a "unified field theory" of the goddess (Gleason 1).

Where Gleason's work traverses continents in the pursuit of Oyá, tracking the natural elements through which Oyá manifests herself, equally important in the literature is the exploration of the phenomenon of "incorporation," or possession of Oyá by her disciples, and the symbology of Oyá's dance. Rosa Maria Susanna Barbara's 1995 work in Portuguese, *A Danca do Vento e Da Tempestade*, a master's thesis submitted to the department of Sociology at the Federal University of Bahia, Brazil, fills this gap in the literature. Barbara spent some four years researching the dance of Oyá and possession in the Candomblé "houses," or places of worship, of Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. She describes what she terms the "symbolic universe" of Oyá, through the choreography of her dance and through her rituals. She emphasizes the importance of the body in the African-derived tradition and how the body builds and expresses the divine through the phenomenon of "incorporation," possession by the gods and goddesses. Barbara also includes the life histories of several *filhas*, or followers of Oyá, in an effort to show the goddess's influence on their lives.

Gleason and Barbara's works form the foundation of the literature on Oyá, however, there are other works that mention Oyá in the context of the pantheon of

African-derived gods. In Portuguese, such works include the much cited *Orixás: Deuses Iorubas na Africa e no Novo Mundo* (1981) by scholar and photographer Pierre Fatumbi Verger, describing the main attributes of Oyá and the other major *Orixás*, or African-derived deities. Also, *Mitologia dos Orixás* by Reginaldo Prandi is a notable text, providing numerous traditional stories of Oyá and other *Orixás*. In English, Philip John Neimark has included a chapter on Oyá's qualities within his 1993 work *The Way of the Orixá*, including translations of Oyá's traditional stories.

My research builds on Gleason's and Barbara's works through exploring Oyá's many manifestations and her influence on the lives of her followers; who is Oyá, and how does she affect the lives of her *filhas*? Yet, I push beyond their works by analyzing Oyá's role in a politicized world – how does Oyá affect the social/material survival of three black *filhas* of Oyá amidst the persistent legacy of colonization, slavery and racism in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil? How does a physic, spiritual, or psychological investment in Oyá foreground a transformed social and physical reality? Lastly, I explore how Oyá herself challenges and transforms hegemonic archetypes of femininity and how she, as an *Orixá*, be applied to a redefinition of black womanhood.

### **Theoretical Framework**

During my first few days of the research process, I received a sage warning from Afro-Brazilian scholar and Candomblé practitioner Virginia Pintu not to pay too much attention to only the attributes, stories and dances of the *Orixás*, and neglect the very real, alive, power and meaning that the gods and goddess hold for their mainly African Brazilian female practitioners. Pintu explained to me the deep scars anthropological research has left on Candomblé: the African-derived tradition has become “folklorized,”

commercialized, essentialized, through glossy studies dissecting the 'cultural' aspects of the religion separated from the spiritual power of the tradition. Moreover, anthropologists, spurred by the the colonial era of conquest, studied Candomblé with the intention of proving the inferiority of black people, describing the tradition as 'devil worship' or 'barbaric.'<sup>2</sup> Pintu's caution reflects the views of a large community of social scientists who criticize the legacy of positivism<sup>3</sup> and anthropology on subjugated communities of color throughout the world, especially indigenous peoples and people of African descent. Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains:

It appals us the the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations.<sup>4</sup>

My initial meeting with Valdina Pintu led me do question how a researcher, an outsider – myself – can adequately put into words the goddess and her vast influence on the lives of her followers, without reproducing - but challenging - the power inequalities existent in society? What apparatus can be used to understand Oyá of the nine visible and invisible worlds, who wields her sword high, crashing it down upon the barriers humans build between the dichotomies of masculine/feminine, good/bad, sacred/profane? For centuries, the Yoruba people of West Africa, the first to worship Oyá, have had the words to praise her, invoke her winds to sweep their lives, and transform their inner and outer realities. In order to understand Oyá integrally in a way that does not merely

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<sup>2</sup> See Journal p. 79.

<sup>3</sup>Patricia Hills Collins summarizes positivist methodological approaches as follows: firstly; requiring a distancing of the researcher from her or his “object” of subject by defining the researcher as a “subject” with full human subjectivity and by objectifying the “object” of study, second; the absence of emotions from the research process, and third; ethics and values deemed inappropriate, either as the reason for scientific inquiry or as part of the research process itself (*Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 255.

<sup>4</sup> Tuhiwai Smith, Linda. *Decolonizing Methodologies*. New York: Zed Books, 1999, p. 1.

'folklorize' a sacred tradition – in a context physically and ideologically far removed from the ancient Yoruba thought systems and language - it is necessary to foreground an Afro-centered, woman-centered, theoretical framework. In order to understand Oyá, “The chaotic has to become sequential. Symbols have to be modeled. Containing walls of words must be built.”<sup>5</sup>

Many black social scientists, including Patricia Hills Collins, bell hooks, Molefi Asante, and Julia Sudbury have developed self-consciously anti-oppressive theoretical frameworks and research methodologies in an effort to challenge the power inequalities existent in society<sup>6</sup> and foreground an Afro-centered and woman-centered world-view. My research draws upon several of these methodological considerations in the effort to understand Oyá and her influence on three black Brazilian women.

My first methodological concern lies with the ethical treatment of the women I am researching. This goes much further than the practice of informed consent advocated by many methodological texts, but, as black British sociologist Julia Sudbury advocates, “treating them as knowing subjects of their own realities.”<sup>7</sup> Historically, in North America, African American women have been constructed as “sub-human manual workers and therefore as incapable of abstract reason and independent thought.”<sup>8</sup> In an effort to counter this subjugation of black women's thought, Patricia Hill Collins asserts that “experience as a criterion of meaning with practical images as its symbolic vehicles is a fundamental epistemological tenet in African-American thought systems.”<sup>9</sup> In my

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<sup>5</sup>Gleason, p.1.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview, see Julia Sudbury's. *“Other Kinds of Dreams”: Black Women's Organisations and the Politics of Transformation*. New York: Routledge, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 34

<sup>9</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 258.

research, especially in the realm of the spiritual, 'objective' claims to abstract reason and reality are often non-relevant, and it is essential that women's experiences, feelings and instincts are given validation as knowledge; that the black women in my study are located as “thinkers and knowers” of their realities.<sup>10</sup>

My second methodological concern relates to the critique of objectivism; the traditional social science belief in value-neutrality devoid of emotional attachment, bias and personal involvement of the researcher with the research. African-centered scholars assert that white social scientist's claims to objectivity are problematized:

...on the grounds that the separation of subject from object, knower from known, on which objectivity is predicated, is both a damaging enterprise which has 'allowed European social scientists to immobilize us and to exploit us,'<sup>11</sup> and that it is 'invalid operationally', that is, the subjective decisions, emotions and opinions of the researcher will always be a part of any research<sup>12</sup>.

In my research, I realize that I have myself become a subject in my research, for my “personal history is a part of the process through which ‘understandings’ and ‘conclusions’ are reached.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it is imperative that I examine my own motivations for conducting this research and my own frame of reference through which interpretations and conclusions are reached.

### **Personal Motives and Cross-Cultural Realizations**

During my first week of the research period, I attended a *Candomblé xire* where I felt the splendor of three Oyá's dancing in the *borracao* for the whole community to witness and be renewed by her regenerative winds. Suddenly, as I was watching the

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<sup>10</sup> Sudbury, Julia, p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> Ani, Marimba. *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior*. Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1994. As quoted in Sudbury, Julia, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> Asante, Molefi K. *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990. As quoted in Sudbury, Julia, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> Maynard, Mary and June Purvis, ed. *Researching Women's Lives from the Feminist Perspective*. London : Taylor & Francis, 1994, p. 16.

deified African ancestor, Oyá, hug the audience members sitting around the edge of the room, coming in my direction, the thought struck me that Oyá has been incorporated into thousands of black women throughout the ages. With her hug, I felt only the tip of a vast power that has embodied a tremendous spirit of survival and resistance despite the intense suffering of the African diaspora, the deep tragedy of slavery, and the transplantation of populations. In that moment, I realized that the reason I was studying Oyá was not solely to contribute to the literature on the deity and unearth the stories of her influence on her filhas, but because I wanted to feel her influence in my life. I realized that I wanted an example like Oyá, a black example, a black women's example, a black *goddess's* example of ferocity, of fighting, of conquering, of mothering, side by side with men, playing with gender, refusing to be boxed or confined into roles dictated by patriarchy. I was attracted to the intensely personal, bodily connection with the Orixá in this tradition, compounded by the elemental forces of nature and the animal world.

This research has been an intensely personal – and although I did not realize it when I started – a *cross-cultural* exploration of spirituality and goddess traditions. For the extent that I was able to understand and communicate Oyá, depended very much on my spirituality, my background, culture, beliefs, and apparatus for viewing the world, all of which stem from my location as a Hindu, South Asian American woman. I am not a *filha* of Oyá, I am not of Candomblé, I am an 'outsider.' Therefore, all the conclusions that I have reached are interpretations that are filtered through my frame of reference. Every time learned something new about Oyá, that she carries a sword, for example, I would mentally refer to the goddess *Kali* within my tradition and her sword cutting through the veils of *maya*, illusion, destroying all vestiges of the ego and the individual

self. To me, Oyá is *Kali*, she is *Durga*, she is the energy of *Adi Para-Shakti*, or divine feminine power within the goddess traditions of India. This study is not explicitly a cross-cultural study, something I have reserved for future research, but it is *implicitly* cross-cultural – as are all research studies undertaken by 'outsiders' in any given field.

### **Research Design**

This study was undertaken in the time frame of three weeks in the city of Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. Candomblé was birthed in Salvador da Bahia, and during the period of slavery, abolition, and post-abolition, until the 1920s, the tradition was outlawed and persecuted; Candomblé 'houses' were rightly seen as important cells of revolutionary activity, and a potentially successful way to organize the overthrow slavery.<sup>14</sup> Salvador holds the legacy of being the largest slave port in the Americas, and now exists with a large majority of people of Afro-Brazilian descent and is one of the most celebrated “Africanized” cities in the African diaspora. Presently, Salvador has the oldest, most well-known and 'authentic,' Candomblé *terreiros* in the world, including the Terreiro do Alaketu, where I attended three Candomblé ceremonies during the course of this study.

I used a combination of formal and informal interviews, observations, and participant-observations in this study, as well as a review of literature on Oyá and her legends in English and Portuguese. I interviewed three black women *filhas* of Oyá, one of whom I met through my project adviser, Joaquim Assis, and the other two through my professor, Damiana Miranda. During the time-frame of my study, I lived with my project adviser, Joaquim Assis, a *filho* of Oyá and a *pai-de-santos* in training. Through a social organization he runs entitled 'Eternal Joventude,' Joaquim was my 'gatekeeper' to a

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<sup>14</sup>Murphy, Joseph. *Working with the Spirit*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

community of women over fifty years of age, many of whom are Candomblé practitioners.

The three women in this study were between the ages of forty six and sixty eight, all three unmarried, and all at different stages in their Candomblé initiation. All three are also members of the congregation at the black church, *Nosso Senhora do Rosario dos Pretos* (Our Lady of the Rosary of the Blacks), a church in the historic district of Salvador which served as an important entrance into the community. I attended masses here regularly as a way to get to know the women I would interview, and two of my interviews were held at the church.

One large limitation in this study was a lack of time. Three weeks implied only fourteen days in the field collecting data, which simply was not adequate to establish trusting relationships with the women in my study. I was not able to explore deeply with them their relationship with Oyá, as this relationship is something intensely personal and difficult to communicate through words. Candomblé is a deeply sacred and complicated tradition, and three weeks was not enough time to fully understand the religion, which forms the context of Oyá.

As I am only learning Portuguese, language was another major limitation in my study. Additionally, since Candomblé has its origins in Africa, Yoruba is a major language within the religion which I am not familiar with. With the short time of three weeks, I had to grasp not only Portuguese words and phrases within the tradition, but Yoruba words as well. I was effectively learning about the tradition through two new languages. However, I feel I managed to grasp the main words, phrases, concepts that I needed for my research, and was able to communicate fairly well with my interviewees,



despite occasional misunderstandings which I would try to clear up as soon as possible in during the interview.

Oyá's energy is circular in nature, she is the beginning and the end<sup>15</sup>. She is a holistic energy, non-linear, abstract, encompassing vast patterns of manifestation from air to the human psyche. An understanding of Oyá requires interpretation of the many layers of her signification, the many layers of her nature. Thus, in my attempt to capture Oyá's essence within the confining walls of words, the layout of my paper has taken an unconventional path and themes emerge cyclically. Before I delve into Oyá's nature, I explain briefly the concept of an Orixá within the tradition of Candomblé. I begin in the first section with an interpretation of Oyá's natural forces of the winds, storms, tornadoes, the River Niger and the buffalo, using descriptions of the natural world, secondary source commentary, observations, interview data and traditional stories. These interpretations seek to answer the question - who is Oyá in the natural world? How do her forces in the natural world influence the internal world? After painting a picture of Oyá's natural forces, I move to the specific ways in which she influences the lives of her *filhas* in their own words – who is Oyá to her daughters, how do they feel her? My third section attempts to bring the first two sections together and provide an analysis of Oyá's role in the world and how she may be applied to a redefinition of black womanhood.

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<sup>15</sup>See interview with Joaquim, Int 4:6, 11/05/05.

## Part I: Tracing the Elements

### Wind-Woman

Oyá, in her most awesome, untrammled manifestation, is the wind. She “...expresses the invigoration of the wind<sup>16</sup> ..,” the winds of calm, gentle breezes, that cool and refresh the body, and also the circular winds of tornadoes that tear apart the environment and leave devastation in its path. How do winds invigorate? Sweeping in, shaking, whirling around, lifting up; as long as the wind does not meet a metal wall of resistance, the wind can ventilate the spirit, invigorate the spirit. The spirit rustles like leaves, and Oyá is cleansing, with her *iruke*, her flywisk implement: “To whirl it about with upraised hand...is...to perform a ventilating action. To wield it with a series of down-stroking flicks is to get rid of negative energies clinging to whomever is thus whisked.”<sup>17</sup> With the currents of her element, Oyá is cleansing and carrying away all obstacles, “She lifts all negativity, all things bad...bringing in everything that is good.”

Oyá is also the mighty wind that tumbles tides upon the coasts, whipping waves upon rock formations that after ages and ages of relentless molding, are formed into beautiful landmarks upon the land. For to whirl about the flywisk can also represent Oyá dramatically whipping up a storm<sup>18</sup>, with her dance, she is also this force of the wind, “...and she can also bring in everything bad...”<sup>19</sup>. One night at a Candomblé *xire* for *Xango*, I witnessed the grandeur of three Oyá's dancing together, this dance of the wind:

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<sup>16</sup>“...ao expressar o fortalecimento to do vento...” - Bernardo, Teresinha. *Negras, Mulheres e Maes – Lembranças de Olga De Alaketu*. São Paulo: Educ. 2003, p. 71.

<sup>17</sup>Gleason, p. 45.

<sup>18</sup>Gleason, p. 45.

<sup>19</sup>..e ela também pode trazer tudo ruim....” - Celnesia, Int 3: 7, 15/05/05.

The one male 'cavalo da Oyá' danced continuously with a gentle smile on her<sup>20</sup> face, just the corners of her lips turned upwards, a clam expression, an almost amused, yet satisfied, expression....She had elegant, billowy purple pants, a large purplish headdress, and the implements of Oyá: the sword and the flywish...The dances of Oyá were swift, graceful, precise. During her manifestation in dance as the stormy winds, the arms of the Oyás moved as if gentle breezes and strong gusts of wind were lifting and settling the alternating arms, blowing away all vestiges of negative energy. Their bodies were continuously in motion, their swift feet carrying them in the center of the storm, and then turning around like a tornado before proceeding.<sup>21</sup>

The cyclical winds of Oyá's tornadoes, riding low in the storm ridden sky, are devastatingly selective in their path of destruction. Oyá in this manifestation is so powerful that, "if she sends a storm, everybody has to humble themselves and ask Oyá for mercy. Because if they don't, and if the storm comes in forceful magnitudes, she destroys everything."<sup>22</sup>

There is a way to be saved, however; Judith Gleason writes of the 'pleading mercy' to Oyá in terms of the "wooing" of the tornado, offering sacrifices and homage to the goddess so that she may blow in and out, cleansing, but not destroying us. The following poem-story from the Yoruba oracle, recited by the late diviner Awotunde Aworinde of Oshogbo, as quoted in Gleason's work, portrays the force of Oyá's tornado and the Yoruba way to appease her hungering winds. Because it gives a context to Oyá's storms, I quote it at length:

#### How to Pacify a Tornado (with Snails)

Now we shall explain what it is we call "Oyá,"  
Now we shall praise Oyá  
...Meaning "Swept Clean."

<sup>20</sup>Cavalo de Oyá' refers to the one who is possessed. Also, because Oyá has manifested with the man's body, and according to Candomblé beliefs, during possession, the man's identity is replaced with Oyá, I refer to him as 'her.'

<sup>21</sup>See Journal, p. ??? 15/05/05, Festa for Xango, Casa da Mãe Olga de Alaketu.

<sup>22</sup>"...se Oyá mandar tempestade, todas as pessoas tem que se curvar e pedir misericórdia. Porque se não for assim, se a tempestade vi em fortes dimensões, ela destrói tudo" - Joaquim, Int 4:2, 11/05/05.

Ifa<sup>23</sup>, I say, Let her rip! *Hai! Lo ya!*  
 Twist! Tear! They ask, Where?  
 It tore up the place of our friend Alara,  
 child of Established-wealth,  
 Tore his house to shreds as he sat comfortably,  
 Swept all his money, all his cloths, everything-  
 So that his people wept. 10  
 What sort of thing is this?  
 We looked around.  
 Nothing to be seen.  
 Aha! What sort of invisible housecleaning?

...What sort of thing is this  
 Flailing the air with its cowtail switch<sup>24</sup>  
 Massively, massively?  
 The whole wide world grew conscious of its strength -  
 Heaving things up, stacking them every which way,  
 And everybody was afraid. 20  
 Of being ground up in this terrible mortar.  
 Meanwhile, whatever it was took off...

...Something is coming. And when it arrives  
 It will bring you good fortune  
 If quickly you sacrifices  
 Two kola nuts, four sixpence.  
 Touch each eye, saying:  
 My sight don't go!  
 Sacrifice in addition: snails, shea butter,  
 Palm oil, and plenty of money. 30  
 And let the adepts sing praises on your behalf  
 For whenever whatever this thing is  
 Arrives, it will bring you good fortune.

...Now that Something tore into the house  
 And paralyzed everyone with fright, save Eshu<sup>25</sup>,  
 Who gallantly stepped forward:  
*Hai! Hai!* I greet you for arriving,  
 Oyá, I greet the elegant turbulence of your stride!  
 Then he offered her sixteen snails,  
 A bowl of shea butter, and a flask of palm oil, 40  
 All of which Oyá swallowed in one gulp,  
 Whereupon, with bulging eyes and a walloping sound  
 She began to vomit.  
 What was she throwing up?  
 Everything collected from Alara...  
 Spewed forth upon...floor

<sup>23</sup>Ifa – Yoruba divination

<sup>24</sup>Oyá's *iruke*, flywhisk.

<sup>25</sup>Trickster-mediator between humans and the gods, he is the messenger that carries sacrifices to their proper place in the spiritual realm.

And he became wealthy at once.

...She am I who came down just now  
 And I will never depart from your house  
 If you know how to take care of me. 50  
 Feed me correctly and you will become  
 Richest man in the world.  
 For I am Oyá!  
 Who knows how to calm me down  
 Knows how to prosper.

...And see the blessing of Oyá.  
 On that day Oyá blew into the world she exaggerated.  
 Suddenness means tornado.  
 Swept-clean means Oyá...<sup>26</sup>

As the poem-story suggests, Oyá has the power to whip the currents of the winds into a tornado and spew material riches; heaving up houses and flailing into the air money.

Humans are terrified of this force and call it destructive; everybody was afraid “of being ground up in this terrible mortar” (line 21). Yet, as the narrator of the poem-story reminds us on line 57, “On that day Oyá blew into the world she exaggerated.”

Metaphorically, Oyá is an energy of “swept-clean,” (lines 3 & 59), of “invisible housecleaning” (line 14).

In the Yoruba world-view, existence in the physical world is brief, transitory, and unstable: “The world is a marketplace (we visit), the otherworld is home.” This physical world is viewed as ever-changing, unpredictable, constantly being influenced by powers outside of our control, contrasted with the haven of the afterworld that promises immortality and spiritual existence for eternity. Oyá, through her cleansing powers of the wind, spews up material riches in an effort to remind us of those things which are illusory in this life, which will pass through in this marketplace of life just as money leaves one hand and enters another. As Oyá, in one moment, with one brush of her flywhisk, can

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<sup>26</sup>As quoted in Gleason, p. 39-42.

destroy all the riches in the world. Therefore, the force of her tornado manages to upheave the illusory objects of life and blow forth the 'real': the spiritual energy of sacrifices made to the Orixás, the energy of transformation that comes from taking refuge in the Orixá, in taking care of the Orixá, “who know how to calm me down/knows how to prosper” (line 54). Prosperity and riches, in this case, are interpreted as these human, spiritual benefits one gains from remaining in intimate contact with Oyá, in welcoming her into one's house, “seating” her within the house of one's head. If one knows how to sacrifice properly to Oyá, woo her tornado, one is protected in the eye of the storm amidst the whirling winds of forces – transforming, reshaping environments – and then one is set back down untouched upon the renewed terrain of the land.

### **Mother River, Odo Oyá**

“*O-ya*, meaning “She tore” in Yoruba. It is her simplest name, a verb form conveying her passage as an event with disastrous consequences. She tore. And what happened?...A river overflowed its banks. Whole cloth was ripped into shreds. Barriers were broken down. Tumultuous feeling suddenly destroyed one's peace of mind...<sup>27</sup> Oyá is this river, the black river Niger, and her nine tributaries feeding into the

ocean. Oyá bears the river, Oyá created the river. According to the *Ifa* oracle in the following poem-story, the Niger River was produced in the following manner:

Oiá creates the river through a piece of cloth

The king of the *Nupes* was worried about the security of his people.  
 In fear of an immanent invasion,  
 He went to find diviners, who consulted *Ifá*  
 him to offer a piece of black cloth,  
 that should be torn by a virgin woman.  
 The king chose his daughter for the ritual.  
 The young one tore the cloth, singing “Oiá, she tore”.  
 In front of everybody, the daughter of the king  
 threw on the ground the pieces of the torn black cloth.  
 The rags immediately transformed into black waters,  
 that ran forming the powerful  
 protector, the river of the black waters, Odô Oiá.

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<sup>27</sup>Gleason, p. 12.

The river-Orixá guaranteed the isolation of the land and protected the king.<sup>28</sup> Oyá is a black river that comes into being upon her “protective gesture with the black cloth [that] tears social reality to shreds.”<sup>29</sup> When reality has been shredded and when the island, the nucleus of the Self is in danger, Oyá’s rivers rushes in, lifts up, absorbs, absolves all danger. She is a nurturing river, a protecting river, but not to be confused with *Yemanjá* and *Oxum*; she is not the ocean. She is a river that buoys the Self, protects the Self. When one surrenders to her, Oyá’s currents carries, lifts, in the force of the calming river:

She calms me, because I am a very dynamic person, an insolent person...she is a very calming influence...when I am agitated, the first people I mentalize are my Orixás. When I am in this agitation...I mentalize, request, praise, and everything becomes tranquil. These Orixás for me are all my tranquility, my survival...<sup>30</sup>

Oyá keeps her children warm, floating within the womb of her comfort.

Oyá is also the determined river that creates her own path through rocks and riverbeds, slowly, surely, through the ages, trickling, gushing over the land transforming the landscape. Her waters steadily build up pressure on the dams of a closed heart, until her waters flow forth, providing for all needs; “when she opened my heart, she opened my pathways...today, I acquire everything that I need”<sup>31</sup> Oyá, with her currents, forges through obstacles, she “knows how to navigate situations, how to go around situations;”<sup>32</sup> with her adaptable element she simply flows over them, around them, under them, or pushes them along in her stream. As the goddess that gate-crashes binaries, Oyá

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<sup>28</sup>Prandi, p. 301. Translated by Sheela Bringi

<sup>29</sup>Gleason, p. 49.

<sup>30</sup>“Me acalmada, porque sou a pessoa muito dinâmica, sou a pessoa muito desafortada...Me acalma muito...quando estou agitada as primeiras pessoas que eu mentalizo são as minhas orixás...e quando estou naquela agitação...eu mentalizo, peço, louro, e tudo se tranqüiliza. Essas orixás são para mim toda minha tranqüilidade, minha vivência...” - Jacira, Int 1: 4, 13/05/05.

<sup>31</sup>“...Quando ela abrir meu coracao, ela abrir os caminhos...hoje...eu consegui tudo que eu preciso...” - Joaquim, Int 4: 5, 11/05/05.

<sup>32</sup>“...ela sabe contornar a situação...” - Jacira, Int 1: 7, 13/05/05.

can also violently bore obstacles in the belly with her buffalo horns in her manifestation as a Buffalo-woman.

### **Buffalo-Woman**

Oyá is not contained by the gentle, 'feminine' forces of air and water, she is also the force of the carnal animal, the animal-hunter, and animal-fighter:

Although Oyá has been said to roam the bush as a huntress in the company of a brotherly *Oshossi*, her true part in the hunt is that of Buffalo-woman. As a hunter learns to play the part of the animal he seeks, so the wise animal can transform herself into anything she chooses, notably into a woman who may occasionally wear hunting clothes. Slipping unseen from one molecular structure to another, Oyá is sorcery personified. Hunters learned it from her. She is partial to hunters. She breathes easily in the forest beneath the canopied trees, beneath the ribs of the sleeping animal.<sup>33</sup>

As African mythologies and prohibitions remind us, woman is animal; “Oyá is the goddess who accepts the honor.”<sup>34</sup> She claims, and re-claim this carnality as feminine, as an essential part of a woman. For a woman must also be this animal side when she needs to hunt, rely on instincts and kill like an animal - without thinking, without conscience, just devour. Her energy is not about the violence of man, it is about uncompromising carnality when it comes to illusion, negativity, blocks, obstacles that she just eats up. Traditional legend tells us the following story about Oyá-*Buffalo*, her husband *Ogum*, and her goring buffalo horns:

Oiá transforms herself into a buffalo

Ogum was hunting in the forest when he saw a buffalo.  
On the lookout, he was ready to slaughter the wild beast.  
What was the surprise when he saw, suddenly,  
from under the skin of the buffalo arise a beautiful woman.  
It was Oiá. She did not know she was being observed.  
She hid the skin of the buffalo  
and walked to the market in the city.

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<sup>33</sup>Gleason, p. 165.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.



Having seen everything Ogum took advantage of the situation and stole the skin.  
 Ogum hid Oiá's skin in a room in his house.  
 Later, he went to the market to meet the beautiful woman.  
 Stunned by her beauty, Ogum greeted and flattered Oiá.  
 He asked her hand in marriage.  
 She did not respond and left for the forest.  
 But there, arriving, she did not find her skin.  
 She returned to the market and met Ogum.  
 He waited for her, but pretended to know nothing.  
 He denied having robbed that which was of Iansã.  
 Again, passionately in love, he asked Oiá to marry him.  
 Oiá, cunningly, agreed to marry him.  
 She went to live with Ogum in his house,  
 but made her demands:  
 Nobody in the house could refer to her  
 making any allusion to her animal side.  
 Nobody could use the husk (?) of the dendê to make the fire,  
 Or...(?)  
 Ogum heard these appeals and (?) the family the conditions  
 for everybody to live in peace with his new wife.  
 Their lives at home entered into a routine.  
 Oiá had nine children  
 and for this she is called Iansã, the mother of nine  
 but she never stopped looking for her buffalo skin.

The other wives of Ogum felt jealous.  
 When Ogum left to hunt and cultivate the land,  
 the women planned a way to discover  
 the secret of the origin of Iansã.  
 One of the women inebriated Ogum and he revealed the mystery.  
 In the absence of Ogum, the women started to hum things.  
 Things that suggested the hiding place of Oiá's skin  
 and things that alluded to Oiá's animal side.  
 One day, when Iansã was alone in the house,  
 she looked through every room, until she found her skin.  
 She put on the skin and waited for the women to return.  
 And when they returned, she began puffing, goring everything with horns,  
 opening stomachs.  
 Only her nine children were saved.  
 And they, in desperation, pleaded for her benevolence.  
 The buffalo calmed down, consoled her children, and departed.  
 Before, however, she left with her children her buffalo horns.  
 In the moment of danger or of necessity,  
 her children should rub the horns, one with the other.  
 And Iansã, wherever she may be,  
 will come quickly like a bolt of lightening to their aid.<sup>35</sup>  
 Oyá is the desirous, beautiful, seducing woman, yet she is an animal with teeth and horns

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<sup>35</sup>Prandi, p. 297, translated by Sheela Bringi

to kill. As we will see in the lives of her *filhas*, Oyá is a warrior for herself, and she an example for her daughters to be the warriors for themselves. I imagine Oyá telling her daughters - *allow the urge to be all of yourself to howl, to develop, to be actualized. Realize your full potential! Don't let anything stand in the way, fiercely fight, fiercely have faith, and fiercely gore in the stomach until intestines drop down and blood gushes out – all obstacles, all offensives. Fiercely take advantage of any situation to better your own powers of self-actualization. And in times of need, in times of danger, rub my horns together and I will help you.* These themes of warrior-hood and Oyá's many forms of saving rays will arise again as we explore Oyá's role in the lives of her *filhas*: Mother-Warrior and Lover-Warrior.

## **Part II: Oyá in the Words of her Daughters**

### **Mother-Warrior**

Oyá, in one of her elemental forms is the gentle, calming, nurturing breeze, the wind that carries away all negativity. Oyá, manifested as a woman, is a protective warrior-mother for the three black *filhas* in my study. Legend tells us that Oyá wanted to have children, but was unable to conceive. She consulted a babalao, a diviner, who told her to make an offering of sheep, cowrie shells, and lots of colored clothing. Oyá made the sacrifice, and had nine children with her first husband, Ogum. When Iansa passed in the market, the people would say: “There goes ‘Iansa,’ meaning ‘mother’ nine times.” And there she went, proud, to the market to sell *dende*<sup>36</sup> oil.<sup>37</sup>

Celinesia and Maria Jose feel Oyá as a mother who is always present, protecting, helping, and providing. Celinesia, at age 68, with gleaming eyes, shakes her head in

<sup>36</sup> Bright orange palm oil used in many traditional Afro-Brazilian dishes.

<sup>37</sup> Prandi, Reginaldo. *Mitologia Dos Orixás*. São Paulo: Companhia Das Letras, 2001, p. 294, translated by Sheela Bringi.

admiration as she begins to describe her relationship to Oyá:

...first, a wonderful mother...she is a presence in my life...I feel her always with me, always, always, always with me..whatever may happen in my life, whatever I may feel, I feel her presence...<sup>38</sup>

Celensia tells me that *filhas* of Oyá are never alone, they are always accompanied and provided for. Celensia is a widow, but since her husband separated from her and died, she has never been left alone to live; she could not imagine that her daughter, who has her own house on the beach, would come to live with her, and her nephew would come to live with her, “...daughters of Iansa are never alone. They are always accompanied.”

Celensia had to work extremely hard to raise her children since her husband left her, but she has always been provided for:

...Because my husband separated from me, I worked as a domestic worker, raised my children, I worked...always my children studied in private schools...I have my own house, my work, thank god I am very happy. I am not very rich, but happy. Thanks to her, thank to her [Oyá].<sup>39</sup>

Maria Jose, 58 years of age, similarly feels Oyá as her mother, sister, everything in her life. “She, primarily, is my god, who lives, who is truth, and she who is *Iansa*.”<sup>40</sup> Maria Jose constantly feels the presence of Oyá helping her, relieving her of worries and ill-fate, “She frees me of all enticements, ill-fate, enemies...I feel very secure with her...very secure...when I leave my house, my work, she accompanies me wherever I go.”<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, Maria Jose, who has been widowed three times, feels Oyá helping

<sup>38</sup> “Primeiro, uma mãe maravilhosa...ela e a presença da minha vida...eu sento ela...sempre comigo. Sempre sempre sempre comigo...qualquer coisa que passou, qualquer coisa eu sinto, eu sinto a presença.” – Celensia, Int 3: 1,4,5. 15/5/05.

<sup>39</sup> “...porque meu marido separou de mim, eu trabalhei de domestico, cria meus filhos...eu trabalhava...sempre eles estudavam em colégios particular...Tem minha casa própria...meu trabalho...graças a deus são muito feliz...não são muito rica, mas são feliz. Graças a ela, graças a ela” - Celensia, Int 3:4, 15/05/05.

<sup>40</sup> “...e minha mãe, irmã, toda da minha vida. Ela em primeiro lugar e meu deus, que e algo vivo, verdadeiro, e ela que e *Iansã*.” – Maria Jose, Int 2: 1, 14/05/05.

<sup>41</sup> “Me livra de todas as tentações, os malfadados, dos inimigos, então, eu sinto muito segura com ela. Sinto segura mesmo. Quando eu saio de minha casa, meu emprego, que ela me acompanha nos todos os meus passos” - Maria Jose, Int 2:3, 14/05/05.

her and providing for her in her life:

She helps me, I'm am not missing anything, thank God. When I think that I am missing something, even more arrives in my life. I never in my life hoped to have my own house, and I have my own house...I have everything...she [Oyá] gave it to me...I cannot say that anything is bad for me, everything is good, thank god. When I call her [Oyá], when I praise her, she attends to me. I like very much my saint.<sup>42</sup>  
As Celinesia and Maria Jose feel's Oyá's presence with them always,

accompanying them and providing for their material needs after their husbands passed away, Jacira feels Oyá's presence as a force, she “is everything, she is essential, she is the basis of my day-to-day life...”<sup>43</sup> Jacira leaves everything to Oyá, Oyá is the director of her life: “...I leave everything for her [Oyá] to determine for me...I can be here, I can be in another place, she can take me from here, put me in another place...generally, I put my life in her hand and the hand of Ogum. The two Orixás are the directors of my life...”<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Jacira recognizes that daughters of Oyá also have autonomy in their lives, *filhas* have to put effort in their lives and have faith. The extent that Oyá can help her daughters depends on the state of mind of the *filha*:

...it depends on me, the Orixá is going to employ me? No, if I want to work I have to chase after it, I have to do something. All of this depends on the person. The Orixá protects us, orients us...you also have to do something...My Orixá does not interfere in my life, she helps me.<sup>45</sup>

As the goddess of dichotomies, *Iansã* exists equally as a protective, nurturing, providing mother for her children *and* a warrior. “Oyá is largely mother. She is very

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<sup>42</sup>“Me ajuda, não me falta, graças a deus. Quando penso que estou faltando, é que está chegando mais ainda...Eu nunca na vida esperava ter uma casa própria, e tenho uma casa própria...Tenho tudo, na maneira do como ela me da...Não posso dizer que está mal para mim, está tudo bem para mim, graças a deus. Ela, quanto mais eu chamo, quanto mais eu louvo ela, mais ela me atente. Gosto muito da minha santa” - Maria Jose, Int 2: 4, 14/05/05.

<sup>43</sup>“...ela e tudo, ela e essencial, ela e o base do meu dia-a-dia...” - Jacira, Int 1, 13/05/0.

<sup>44</sup>“...eu deixo que ela determina para me...eu posso estar aqui, posso estar em outro lugar, ela pode me tirar daqui, pode me botar em outro lugar...geralmente coloco a minha vida na mão dela e na mão de Ogum. Os dois são os diretores da minha vida...” - Jacira, Int 1, 13/05/05.

<sup>45</sup>...dependo de mim...o Orixá vai me empregar? Não. Se eu quiser me empregar eu tenho que correr atrás, tenho que fazer alguma coisa. O Orixá...nos protege, nos orientar...você também tem que fazer alguma coisa...meu Orixá não me atrapalha, me ajuda...” - Jacira, Int 1, 13/05/05.

maternal...she is strong *maternity in battle*, in conquest.”<sup>46</sup> Oyá, as a warrior, fights to win a just war, but also to be victorious on behalf of her adopted children (*filhos*).<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, Oyá is a warrior, from within the eye of the storm, Oyá fights, fiercely annihilating all obstacles in her path. Oyá, exclusive among her sisters, enters battle side by side with male Orixás:

“She is the only woman, that rode in front of *Ogum*, in front of *Xango*, and went to war and won the war...Oyá is victorious in war, Oyá does not give up. Nobody commands the period when she will resign from battle, or what she will battle for the cause of justice...The woman, who, when she raises her sword, everyone sees the change...she commands:...this is the end, or the beginning of a new time”<sup>48</sup>

Iansã encompasses the traditional values associated with motherhood - nurturance, protection, patience - and yet expands this space of motherhood to include the warrior, who fiercely protects her own self-identity and the lives of her children.

Celinesia, Maria Jose and Jacira all feel the energy of Oyá as a woman-warrior flowing equally powerfully through her *filhas*. “She is beauty, war, conquest, all her daughters fight and in all the struggles they are victorious. Always they are victorious,”<sup>49</sup> explains Celinesia. Jacira, 46 years of age, feels the warrior-hood of Oyá through the qualities of perseverance and determination of Oyá. Notably, Jacira’s whole manner of speaking changed when she began speaking with me of Oyá’s determination, her body and words were engaged passionately, clearly, and directed towards this communication -

<sup>46</sup> “Oyá e muito mãe. Ela e muito materna. Agora ela e a maternidade forte em luta, em conquista.” – Joaquim, Int 4: 6, 11/5/05.

<sup>47</sup> Maria Jose, Int 2:8, 14/05/05.

<sup>48</sup> “A única mulher, que enfrentou Ogum, enfrentou Xangô, e foi para guerra e venceu a guerra...Oyá venceu a guerra, Oyá não deixou, que ninguém ditasse, as regras ou abdicasse, do se gosto, por lutar por melhorasse por justiça...A mulher que quando levanta espada, todas olham muda...e com se dissesse, assim: e o fim, o inicio de novo tempo.” – Ibid., p.2

<sup>49</sup> “Linda, guerra, luta, todas as filhas de ela ta sinti em guerra e todas as guerras vencem. Sempre vencedora” - Celinesia, Int 3: 1, 15/05/05.

how the energy, inspiration of Oyá's perseverance is the central quality that she identifies with:

[I identify with] Her perseverance, the same perseverance I have, I see in her. Because I am a person who is very persistent, I do not desist at anything. I am a person that chases after my objectives/aims, and this syncretism all happens with her [Oyá].<sup>50</sup> Oyá's warrior-hood and determination has likewise inspired an empowered space

of self-expression for Jacira, through a strengthened voice and identity in Oyá. Jacira, and the other two women in my project, are *filhas* of Oyá, and practitioners of Candomblé at different level of initiation, and at the same time are members of a congregation at the church Nossa Senhora do Rosario dos Pretos (Our Lady of the Rosary of the Blacks). This church was built by enslaved Africans during a highly segregated time within the Catholic Church, when there were strictly “white churches” and “black churches.” Today, many of the people in this congregation are also practitioners of Candomblé, a result of “syncretism,” or the resistance practice blacks developed to continue practicing Candomblé in slavery and post-abolition times, until the 1920s, without persecution, but within Catholic churches. Significantly, the main deity at Nossa Senhora is Saint Barbara, the Saint most commonly assigned syncretism with Oyá. Therefore, many of the members of the congregation are *filhas/os* of Oyá.

Jacira forcefully asserts that although she is a member of the church, her identity lies in Candomblé. She describes this using white clothing and dresses as a sign of a *filha/o de santo*, a Candomblé practitioner.

“If I have to wear my white, I wear it. If I have to wear my dresses, I go to the church, attend the mass, and leave. I go to my house, and in the night if I have Candomblé, I go, if I have to dance in Candomblé, I dance Candomblé, and if I have to return the following day to the church, I return, but everyone knows that the church is not my identity, my

<sup>50</sup> “A perseverança dela, a minha perseverança que eu vejo mesmo nela. Porque eu sou uma pessoa muito perseverante, que não desiste demais. Sou a pessoa quem corre atrás dos meus objetivos, e no sincretismo tudo isso aconteceu com ela” – Jacira, Int 1: 2, 13/05/05.

identity is the Afro-religious cult [Candomblé].<sup>51</sup>

Jacira continues, passionately, to relate to me:

I do not hide anything from anybody. Whoever would like to court me, whoever would like to love me, has to take me how I am, with my posture. I am a daughter of Ogum with Oyá with much pleasure.<sup>52</sup>

Before Jacira's grandfather died, himself a *pai-de-santos*, or Candomblé community leader and authority, his Orixá choose Jacira to continue the family lineage of leaders. Jacira is only waiting for the right time to complete the set of initiations before serving the Orixás in this way. Continuing, Jacira feels that Oyá has given her an identity, a freedom of voice, of spiritual practice, the strength to be who she is – the lineage barer in her family of Candomblé initiates:

In reality, she [Oyá] gives me this freedom, to speak for everyone what I feel, what I want, what I am, what I desire in my day to day life. And the same thing with identity. I am like this: I preserve my origins that my grandfather left some less than 70 years ago. Many people do not have this, and I have it, and I am going to hide? This does not exist.<sup>53</sup>

When I asked Jacira what Oyá's strongest message was for her in her life, she replied to me that Oyá does not have a message for her, she sends a message to Oyá every day of her life:

This is my message: health, a world full of peace, a world with less war, less discrimination, a world with love where a woman can have more options, where a woman can be happier, can realize all of her objectives. We are a minority and we suffer very much to have anything. Thus, except abolition, because this thing still

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<sup>51</sup>“Se eu tiver de colocar meu branco, eu coloco. Se eu tiver de colocar minhas vestes, eu vou na igreja, assisto minha missa, e sair. Vou me embora para casa, e de noite se tiver um candomblé, eu vou, se tiver de dançar um candomblé eu danço candomblé, e se tiver de voltar o dia seguinte na igreja, eu volto, mas todos sabendo que a igreja não é meu perfil, meu perfil é o culto-afro religioso” - Jacira, Int 1, 13/05/05

<sup>52</sup>“Eu não escondo...nenhuma de ninguém. Quem quiser gostar de mim, quem quiser me ter, tem que me assumir como eu sou, com a minha postura. Filha de Ogum com Oiá com muito prazer” - Jacira, Int1, 13/05/05

<sup>53</sup>“Ela realmente me da essa libertarem para que eu possa falar para todo mundo o que eu sinto, o que eu quero, o que eu sou, o que eu desejo no meu dia-a-dia. E a mesma coisa como identidade. Eu sou assim, que eu preservo as origens que a minha avó deixou as 70 poucos anos atras. Muita gente quer e não tem, e eu tenho e vou esconder? Isso não existe.” - Jacira, Int 1, 13/05/05.

exists, I see in this woman [Oyá] as a conqueror, a warrior.<sup>54</sup>

### Warrior-Lover

Oyá's warrior-hood is manifested equally in battle and in her relationships with her many lovers and husbands. "She was a woman that had many husbands...always very much a conqueror...<sup>55</sup>" With the men in her life, "it was Oyá who exploited others, not she who was exploited."<sup>56</sup> As the following story describes, Oyá gained, or stole, various elemental powers from her many lovers and husbands.

"Iansã gains attributes from her lovers"

Iansã used her charms and seduction to acquire powers.  
 For this reason various men entered her life,  
 And from them she always received presents.  
 With *Ogum*, whom she married and had nine children,  
 She acquired the right to use the sword  
 In her defense and two more.  
 With *Oxaguiã*, she acquired the right to use the shield,  
 To protect her against her enemies.  
 With *Exu*, she acquired the rights to use the power of fire and magic,  
 To realize her desires and protect those around her.  
 With *Oxóssi*, she acquired the knowledge of the hunt,  
 To supply meat for her and her children.  
 She perfected the lessons she gained from *Exu*  
 and used her magic to transform herself into a buffalo,  
 when she was defending her children.  
 With *Logum Edé*, she acquired the right to fish  
 And catch from the rivers and waterfalls the creatures living in the water  
 For the survival of her and her children.  
 With *Obaluaê*, Iansã tried to acquire something, however, in vain.  
 With him she did not acquire anything.  
 In the final of her conquests and acquisitions,  
 Iansã shared the reign with *Xangô*,

<sup>54</sup>“A verdade é que nem é a mensagem, que ela deixa para mim. A mensagem que eu peço a ela todos os dias da minha vida. Essa é minha mensagem: saude, um mundo cheio de paz, um mundo com menos guerra, com menos discriminação, um mundo de amor e a mulher possa ter mais opções, onde a mulher possa der mais feliz, possa realizar todas os seus objetivos. Que nos somos a minoria e nos sofremos muito pra ter alguma coisa. Então, isso ai, menos abolição, porque essa coisa ainda existe, e eu vejo nessa mulher uma vencedora, uma guerreira.” - Jacira, Int 1, 13/05/05.

<sup>55</sup> “Foi uma mulher...teve muitos maridos...sempre muito conquistada, pelo objeto dela de ser uma mulher.” - Celinesia, Int 3: 2, 15/05/05.

<sup>56</sup> “Foi ela quem explorou, não foi explorada” – Jacira, Int 1:7, 13/05/02.



Involving him, loving him and living with him for her whole life. With *Xangô*, she acquired the power of enchantments, the staff of justice and dominion over thunderbolts.<sup>57</sup>

Oyá fiercely takes advantage of her relationships to ensure her survival and the survival of her children, and to develop her elemental powers. Like a hummingbird, Oyá flies to the heart of the relationship, extracts the nectar for herself and her loved ones, and then flies away unscathed. Similarly, in relationships, “*filhas* of Oyá are not prisoners...If it’s good, she stays, if it’s not good, she changes.”<sup>58</sup> Oyá raises herself up; she does not spend time with her “head hung low, crying, waiting for him to return. She chases...”<sup>59</sup>

Oyá’s energy of strength and survival within various relationships, and through their beginning and endings, is mirrored in the lives of her *filhas*:

“It is difficult for a daughter of Iansa to marry and live eternally with any man...not because of her, but because of problems in their life. Maybe because of a few problems, he will separate from her, but she will come until another man, her life continues, she is going to have another man...people of Iansa, never will have only one man. Never happy with that first, will have another.”<sup>60</sup>

Jacira identifies strongly with the life of Oyá in this respect:

I, for example, would like very much to be in her life. Only to know that I could have two husbands, that she can have as many as she wants, and us, no. I view personally her life. And for me, this thing of being able to conduct men, to do what she wants, this story of her fight with her father...I am a little bit of her...I have very much in common with her...She is a woman, she had this active life, it is not doubled...she knows what she does and I want in my day-to-day life that she does the same thing [for me]. Where I can know how to navigate situations. Already in our lives it is a little different. Many violent men, things we can pay for, but she knows how to navigate situations. Who knows more than she?<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Prandi, p. 296, translated by Sheela Bringi

<sup>58</sup> “...os filhos de Oyá não ficam presos...se estar bem ela fica, se não estar bem ela muda...” – Joaquim, Int 4:3, 11/05/05.

<sup>59</sup> “Ela levanta ela, não fica o tempo inteiro de cabeça baixa, chorando, esperando, aquela volta. Ela corre atrás.” - Joaquim, Int 4:2, 11/05/05.

<sup>60</sup> “E difícil para uma filha de Iansã casa e viver eternamente com aquele homem, e tem uma vida eternamente. Não por cause dela, por problemas da vida mesmo. Talvez por pouco coisas, ele se separa, e ela vem ate a outra homem, que a vida continua, vai ter outra homem...as pessoas de Iansã, nunca tiver o homem só. Nunca e feliz com aquele primeiro, que outro, tem outra - Celinesia, Int 3: 2, 15/05/05.

<sup>61</sup> Eu por exemplo, gostaria muito estar na vida dela. Só de saber que eu poder ter dois maridos, está que ela pode ter quantos que ela quer, e a gente não, então me veja pessoalmente na vida dela. E para mim, essa

Besides being an example of a strong black woman – within and independent from relationships and men – Oyá assists her daughters in relationship and marriage problems. Jacira, unmarried but with a boyfriend, feels Oyá helping her, “when you have an argument, discussion with your husband, generally, you request her to help you, for a separation, to bring him back to you, and she, she accomplishes this...she helps as much in marriage as in relationships with boyfriends...”<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, two of the women who participated in my project, Maria Jose and Celinesia, are widowed. The women's stories are tragic; many a treacherous storm has passed through their previous lives as married women, but through their strong faith and devotion to Oyá, she has kept her daughters safe and protected in the eye of the storm. Now, they rest on her gentle breezes, allowing life to blow through their ventilated spirits.

Maria Jose, like Jacira, is active within the predominantly Afro-Brazilian church in Salvador, Our Lady of the Rosary of the Blacks. Our interview was held in the reception room of the church. I had never met Maria Jose before, she was introduced to me through the director of my program and one of the assistants. Nevertheless, Maria Jose was extremely willing to speak to me about her personal relationship with Oyá and her previously married life. At age 58, Maria Jose has already been widowed three times in her life:

I don't have a husband. I was widowed three times, and I didn't want any more to marry. My aim is the following: to come to my church, attend my mass. I am of the sisterhood, I

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coisa de poder conduzir homens, de fazer o que ela quer, aquela historia daquela briga entre ela e o pai...eu então eu sou um pouco dela...eu sou um pouco de Oiá...Eu tenho tudo ver com ela. Eu não censura ela, em hora nenhuma. Ela é mulher, tinha essa vida ativa, não é dupla...ela sabe o que é que faz e eu quero que no meu dia-a-dia que faça a mesma coisa. Que onde eu passo sabendo contornar a situação. Já na vida da gente e um pouco diferente. Muitos homens violentos, a coisa pode pegar, mas ela sabe contornar a situação. Quem mais pode é ela, neh?” - Jacira, Int 1, 13/05/05

<sup>62</sup>“Quando você briga, tem uma discussão com seu marido, geralmente, você pede para ela te ajudar, para uma separação, trazer ele de volta, e ela, você consegue isso...Mas, ela ajuda tanto maritalmente, com o namorado, ela ajuda mesmo...” - Jacira, Int 1, 13/05/05

am of three sisterhoods within this house [church], and when there is a *feira* at my *terreiro*, I have to be obedient in all these things...<sup>63</sup>

Maria Jose continues, avoiding my eyes, slightly quieter with a hint of desperation in her quiet voice:

...my husband died, I didn't have anybody anymore, "why, my God?"...I was married, I had my husband, it was over, and I don't need a husband anymore because thank God, she [Oyá] is everything for us. It is a respect very large. Oyá is a mother, everything. She doesn't leave me to be attacked for anything. She is the reason that I live.

Celinesia, in her 60s, is widowed. Her husband separated from her after almost twenty years of marriage:

When I separated from my husband, he said that he wanted to kill me, if he encountered me. Our first encounter was when a cousin of mine died and my husband and I met, after our separation, inside the cemetery during the funeral. I ran into my husband, after he had a way to kill me. I ran into him in the cemetery, did he kill me? [we laugh]. I was within the cemetery, he would have killed me. He didn't kill me, and still, I got inside his car. He took me to where I could catch a bus from the cemetery, which was in Rio de Janeiro. It was a test. He didn't have the strength to kill me. I was scared. In this time my mother [Oyá] was alive. I was scared, very scared, and nothing happened. This, my daughter, is faith. We have to have faith that nothing is going to happen.<sup>64</sup>

While she was relating to me her story, her fear was palpable, yet, still, the immense strength of her spirit was shining through her eyes. She told her story without any vestiges of anger, and could only thank her Oyá for keeping her safe. Oyá was attributed to her safety, at this time, Oyá was alive for Celinesia. Celinesia had faith, and nothing happened. I met Celinesia through my project adviser, Joaquim, and had spent time in

<sup>63</sup>Eu não tenho marido. Fiquei viúva três vezes, não quis mais casar...(MJ, Int 2: 4). Meu objetivo é o seguinte, é vir para minha igreja, assistir a minha missa. Sou da irmandade, sou de três irmandades dentro dessa casa, e como tem festa no meu terreiro, tenho que estar obediente em todas as coisas (MJ, Int 2: 4).

<sup>64</sup>“Quando eu se separei de meu marido, ele disse que ele iria me matar, se me encontrasse. Só no primeiro encontro foi quando morreu um primo...se encontraram, depois da separação dentro do cemitério. Eu encontrei meu marido depois do que ele tinha jeito queria me matar. Encontrei ele no cemitério, ele me matou? Estava dentro do cemitério, ele poderia me matar. Não me matou, e ainda, fui no caro dele. Ele me levou para pegar ônibus do cemitério que era no rio de janeiro. Foi uma prova. E não teve força para me matar. E fiquei com medo. Em nesse tempo minha mãe era viva. Fiquei com medo, muito medo, e não aconteceu nada. E isso, minha filha, a fé. A gente tem que ter fé que não acontece nada” - Celinesia, Int 3: 4, 15/05/05.

her company two times previous to this interview. In all instances, Celinesia was incredibly affectionate towards me; immediately taking my hand and walking me to the bus stop when she met me, and she was dynamic; dancing in the center of the dance floor during Mother's Day bingo, an understated samba, gleefully singing the words, allowing her spirit to ride on the beats of the synthesizer. From my observations of Celinesia, from her manner of interacting and vibrating, from the force in her eyes, I could feel Oyá's gentle breezes carrying Celinesia. Oyá surrounded her that day in the cemetery, like the protective river Niger, and the same warrior-motherly energy surrounds her now.

### **Part III: Pushing Beyond Human Constructions**

#### **Dancing a Transformed Lived Reality**

Through Oyá's natural elements of the winds, the storms, tornadoes, the river, the buffalo, and her manifestations as a woman, Oyá is constantly breaking down obstacles, revealing the untrue, the unjust, the unrighteous, and flowing forth assistance, safety and transformation. Whether with her sword wielded high in the air, crashing down upon human binary constructions; her flywisk gently cleansing negativities or swirling up a storm of transformation; her waters flooding the banks of the closed heart or enveloping the endangered island of the self; or her horns goring the belly of offenders, she is always, in all her manifestations, furthering the growth and well-being of her *filhas*.

Oyá's *filhas* feel Oyá's presence, perhaps most powerfully, during the *xire*, when she manifests herself within the bodies of her daughters, and dances; "communication with her [Oyá] is attained through dance."<sup>65</sup>. Her daughters literally receive Oyá in

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<sup>65</sup>Barbara, Susanna Rosa Marie. *A Dança do Vento e Da Tempestade*. University Federal da Bahia,

trance, in a direct point of contact with the divine, and they know she is living within them. Maria Jose explain to me that when one receives an Orixá, it is as if one is asleep, one does not have memory of what occurred. However, "...when we start to feel that we are floating, singing, feeling anything that she plays, a music that comes, it is then that we begin to feel, ahhh, my mother is here, transforming, together with us."<sup>66</sup> When receiving Oyá, "we are one thing, and we wake up another."<sup>67</sup> This encounter with the divine affirms a sense of human worth. Regardless of what the larger society projects with respect to them, the *filhas* recognize their worth because of their intimate connection with cosmic forces, what is best about the universe is reflected in their very being. "Possession continuously restores a measure of hope and potentiality that interaction with the dominant culture seeks to suffocate if not eradicate."<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, a 'psycho-spiritual' investment in Oyá, represented literally through the "seating" of the Orixá within the head of a *filha* during initiation – when Oyá has truly been incorporated into the body, mind and spirit of the initiate – foregrounds a transformed lived reality for the *filhas* in this study. A faith in Oyá and surrender to elemental internal and external forces, sustains the women in a state of being in which they are prepared to survive and thrive despite the unstable, harsh reality of living as a black woman in Bahia, Brazil:

She prepares me for the world. This vision I have she gave me. I am prepared. Since my infancy, she has been preparing me, and I did not want to accept it. When I came to accept her, it was then that my life changed. I did not have anything, I didn't have a house to live, and I lived in conflict with my children. It has been ten years that I am

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Mestrado em Sociologia, Salvador, 28/09/95 (unpublished thesis).

<sup>66</sup>"...quando a gente começa sentir mesmo que estamos flutuando, cantando, alguma coisa dela que toca, alguma musica que vem...ai a gente começa sentir, ahhh, minha mãe está aqui, está virando, junto da gente..." - Maria Jose, Int 2: 7, 14/05/05.

<sup>67</sup>"...a gente é uma coisa, e a gente acordada é outra" - Maria Jose, Int 2: 7, 14/05/05.

<sup>68</sup>Pinn, Anthony. "Racing" Religion: Reflections on Afro-Brazilian Religion and Globalization" *Macalster International*, Vol. 5, p. 231.

tranquil and happy in my life.<sup>69</sup> Oyá does not only prepare her daughters for the world, but she expands the space for them to exist as black women in the world.

### **Towards a Redefinition of Black Womanhood**

Oyá could be said to embody many modern ‘Western’ feminist struggles: the dislocation of gender roles, sexual freedom, autonomy and independence, yet, Oyá is a black goddess, indigenous to Africa and Afro-Brazilians, “her blackness matters – historically, politically, kinesthetically, even ecologically and psychologically,” writes Judith Gleason. One *filha* asserts, “...black people search more, have more faith...therefore, Oyá is much closer to black people, through faith, through faith.”<sup>70</sup> Oyá’s black *womaness* matters even more. For in all of her manifestation - as a black woman, a warrior woman, a warrior-mother, and a buffalo-woman – she expands the space to be a black woman, she redefines black *womanhood*. Indeed, Candomblé, and Oyá, can provide a lot of support for black women, because “Candomblé is our thing, feminism is a white thing.”<sup>71</sup>

I remember my initial meeting with Afro-Brazilian scholar and *filha-de-santo* Valdina Pintu telling me that women in the feminist movement today think that women in the past were subservient and passive. But they were not, she tells me. Black women in older, ancient times in Africa had their power, their place, their space, their role within their family, they had a place to be a woman, explains Pintu. In modern times, “women

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<sup>69</sup> “Ela me preparou pelo mundo. Esta visão quem me deu foi ela. Sou preparada. Desde a infância ela estava me preparando, e eu não queria aceitar. Quando eu passei a aceitar, foi aí que minha vida modificou. Que não tinha nada, não tinha casa para morar, vivia em conflito com meus filhos. Tem dez anos que sou tranqüila e feliz na minha vida” - Maria Jose, Int 2:5-6, 14/05/05.

<sup>70</sup> “As pessoas negra, busca mais, tem mais fé, tem mais fé...então, eu digo que ela tá mais perto do as pessoas negras, pela fé, pela fé...” – Celinesia, Int 3:6, 15/05/05.

<sup>71</sup> Valdina Pintu, See p. 78, Journal.

should fight for their rights, strive for equal rights, but they should not forget that they are women.”<sup>72</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Although Oyá is a warrior, a fighter, an animal, she does not forget that she is a woman, “always she is very much a conquistador, with her objective to be a woman.”<sup>73</sup> She strives to express herself fully as a woman and survive as a woman, and she precipitates transformation; into the grandeur of all of she can be, encompassing all the vast light and shadow parts of her nature within her being. Oyá is this impulse within women. She is constantly defining and refining *womanhood*, shaking and challenging our ideas of masculine/feminine, sacred/profane, splitting open with her sword the boxes of preconceptions and hegemonic roles that hold women prisoners. Oyá *expands* the space to be a woman. And through this expansion of black woman-hood, this redefinition of black womanhood, Oyá's *filhas* survive and thrive despite the power hierarchies existent in society.

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<sup>72</sup>See pp. 78-79, Journal.

<sup>73</sup>“...sempre muito conquistada, pelo objecto dela de ser uma mulher....” Celnesia, Int 3: 2, 15/05/05.

**Epilogue**

*I am the red of menstrual blood, the brown of animal blood, the purple of blood swellings. I am a blood thirsty warrior. I seek to annihilate all that which is untrue, unjust, illusory, all that which is just part of the 'marketplace.' Indeed, my winds lift the veil of illusion upon the read and non-real worlds, between the world as the marketplace and the true dwelling place of our spirits. I am creative energy, I am instinctual animal energy. I am warrior energy that strives, seeks, survival, as I am represented as a woman on earth. And I am yearning for not just survival, but transformation, domination, and complete expression: I am always wanting to be all of what I can be, all of who I can be, encompass all the vast parts of my being within my being. I am always this. I am this impulse within women, within black women. To be a black woman. I know this!*

*I am a divine feminine force, yet, I am not bound by the term femininity. My femininity is constantly changing, shifting, transforming, adapting. It is a constant energy field, with a distinct vibration, yet it is highly adaptable and malleable. I am not constrained by anything. No box keeps me in my place. I am constantly shifting. I am a unified field theory of the goddess, as I permeate through the elements, the animal realm, and woman.*

*I manifest in this world, primarily, to upheave the unreal and blow forth the real. To surround and protect the nucleus of the self from the erosion of human constructions of divisions, and separations. I am the dominator. I am a dominating force. I sweep in, sweep out. Sweep in, shake up, whirl around, throw about riches until the Self yells, begs me mercy, surrenders to my power, and then - I leave as the storm and carry you always*



*wherever you desire on my gentle breezes. Yes, you need to woo me, with your faith, patience, and perseverance. I can only arrive on the wings of faith to your door. You must trust me, or I will spin you out of the center of my eye of the storm. You must beg, plead me mercy, sacrifice for me, do the proper, and as long as your heart is in the right place, I keep you in the center of my storm. I lift you up through my center, shake up things down below, and then set you back down untouched. This is how I work. To sweep clear landscapes with my winds, raising up all the medicinal herbs for all my brothers and sisters to use. I grow, to greater and greater depths, greater and greater means, a greater and even greater force that moves in swirling motions across the earth. Because sometimes the earth, land needs leveling. Sometimes people's spirits need complete transformation. Sometimes fires need to scatter the ashes of trees upon the soil in order to grow green once again. I come, as the wind, the storms, the ocean, I can come as a force as great as the force through which I was called upon.<sup>74</sup>*

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<sup>74</sup>Interview with the Goddess, See Journal page 181.

### ***Appendix A – Indications for Future Research***

I think it would be interesting to compare Oyá in a cross-culturally explicit manner with similar Hindu deities such as Kali and Durga. I also think it would be interesting to analyze in greater depth other aspects of Oyá that I did not touch upon, such as her role as the commander of the spirits of the dead, and her role as the gatekeeper of the cemetery. For future projects in this area, it would be useful to spend quite a bit of time doing secondary research, getting to know vocabulary in Portuguese and Yoruba, visiting *terreiros*, and speaking informally with initiates before conducting interviews. I think this would help getting into greater layers of Oyá's meaning with the lives of the *filhas*. Also, I would recommend living with a *filha* of Oyá who is an active initiate near a *terreiro*.

### ***Appendix B – Questions***

This project could not have been done in the USA. Candomblé does not exist in the United States. I could have done some secondary research in the United States, but I would not have had any primary data from *filhas* of Oyá. The process of doing the ISP modified my learning style from one based in needing concrete structure and guidance, to one based in uncertainty and abstract thinking. About one half of the final monograph is primary data, one half is secondary sources. I tried to classify my data based on the most important, or imminent themes, and only include that data that supported my themes. The field-based exercises contributed to the process and completion of the ISP through

giving me valuable experience in the field, making contacts, conducting interviews in Portuguese, and dealing with unknown elements. The community projects most significantly influenced my ISP process.

The principal problems I encountered with my ISP had to do with time constraints, language ability – the need to become familiar with both Portuguese and Yoruba terms – and some miscommunications based on timings and locations with my adviser. My adviser was a wonderful person who helped me immensely, but many of the things he said he would do, he never came through on, which caused some delay and anxiety on my part.

My original thesis continually was in the process of change as I discovered different and new resources. My final thesis statement only came about after I wrote down all my themes and finished writing up my data. I went about finding resources through Doctora Damiana, my adviser, Bill Calhoun, CEAO, books. For my methods, I used a combination of interviews, observations, and participant observations. I also reviewed a significant amount of secondary resources. My adviser played an essential role in orienting me to my topic and helping me meet people who were knowledgeable about my subject area.

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## Interviews

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Maria Jose, Int 3, 15/05/05

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