

Understanding Mental Health from a Candomblé Perspective

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Fall 2007

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Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank Alzira Costa Silva for taking me under her wing from the first day of my arrival in Cachoeira. She not only opened her home to me, but as one of the most respected members of the community, she also opened many doors for me. I was able to meet and talk with many people who were open to talking with me only because I was “with Alzira.” This project would have been impossible without her.

I would also like to thank Damiana Miranda, my academic director, who has not only served as a source of inspiration because her interests are very similar to mine, but also was a helpful resource at every stage of my project.

Bira, my Portuguese teacher, was the first to mention Cachoeira to me, and strongly encouraged me to conduct my research there, for which I am very grateful. And of course, I would have been lost without our morning Portuguese classes.

And finally, I am thankful to the people of Cachoeira and the *povo-de-santo* there. I learned so much during my time there, far more than is mentioned in this paper. Cachoeira will always be very dear to my heart.

Abstract

Candomblé is an Afro-Brazilian religion that has a strong presence in Brazil as a religious institution as well as a health center. Many turn to the houses of Candomblé (*terreiros*) for healing from not only physical ailments but mental illnesses as well. Candomblé has been very effective in healing mental illnesses even when Western medicine has proved ineffective. I have sought to understand how Candomblé perceives mental health and the treatment of mental illness. I have examined how they diagnose mental illnesses, how they understand the nature of the illness, and their healing methods. I have also explored more general aspects of Candomblé that positively affect the mental health of its practitioners—particularly the role of ritual, one's sense of identity within the religion, and the strong familial community of the *terreiro*.

“Faith is everything. This world that you see is very limited; it doesn’t mean anything. If you think-believe-want...if you have faith, if you put yourself in the hands of the orixás, nothing exists that is impossible. It is because of this that a cure exists and it is more frequent than imagined...”ⁱ

This paper seeks to understand mental health and mental illness from a Candomblé perspective. I am interested in faith, the convergence between the mind and the spirit. One psychologist once told me that we know as much about the mind at this point in time than we did about medicine before the concept of a germ, or pathogen, was discovered. I believe this is especially true concerning the psychology of spirituality, and this is why I am interested in Candomblé. Candomblé holds a unique perspective on mental health, the mind, and the relation between consciousness and the spirit. This knowledge has lent itself to the healing of mental illnesses that has attracted the attention and gained the respect of psychologists and psychiatrists from all over the world.

I am also interested in the religious environment that aids in the maintenance of a mentally sound state of mind. In Candomblé I believe there are three aspects—ritual, sense of identity, and familial understanding--that affect believers everyday lives and mental state.

For people of faith, religious beliefs play a large role in the understanding and healing of illnesses; one can not ignore the role of faith in a person’s recovery. The

power of the mind and belief has already been clearly shown through multiple studies revealing the efficacy of placebo pills. Concerning religion, a person that has faith in Candomblé sees medicine as intimately intertwined with religion. One who turns to Candomblé for healing turns to an outer source—something greater than themselves—to aid in the healing process. E Bolaji Idowu helps describe the role of traditional medicine for a person of faith from an outsider’s perspective:

And it not infrequently happens that African doctors trained in the European methods advice relatives of patients in hospitals, ‘This is not a case for this place’, or, ‘This case, as I see it, cannot be treated successfully in this hospital; why don’t you take the patient home and try “the native way”.’ This they say either because they genuinely believe in the efficacy of ‘the native way’ for certain forms of sickness, or because they believe that the patient would respond psychologically more easily to ‘the native way’ and so assist his own recovery.ⁱⁱ

Even those trained in Western medicine cannot deny the power of traditional methods, whether one believes that the source of healing actually comes from an outside source, or whether one believes the healing is psychologically induced by the context of the treatment.

The definition of mental illness as well as the methods for healing in Candomblé are extremely different than the definitions and practices of Western medicine. Candomblé is a system of healing that is dependent upon religious belief and practice, while Western psychiatry lacks a definite spiritual foundation. I believe that this is an important difference that makes a relevant comparison of the two difficult. Therefore, my goal is to approach this particular field ethnographically and descriptively, without the intention of comparison or an overall judgment of Candomblé’s effectiveness as compared to Western medicine.

Historical Background on Candomblé

Candomblé today represents a unique synthesis of many beliefs, principally African tribal religion and Catholicism. The African *orixá* religion was brought to Brazil during the Atlantic slave trade, which occurred between 1549 and 1850. As the Catholic Church sought to convert the African peoples who were taken as slaves to Brazil, a stronger sense of African identification arose. The African peoples united in their beliefs and disguised their worship of African deities in the recognition of Catholic saints. These syncretistic practices were given the name Candomblé. The first visible signs of Candomblé surfaced as early as the 1750s and the first *terreiros*, or houses of Candomblé, by 1830.ⁱⁱⁱ Even after the end of slavery, the claim that ritual dances of Candomblé were in honor of Catholic saints was often used, by practitioners and authorities alike, as an excuse to avoid confrontation.^{iv} This syncretism occurred by recognizing the fundamental similarities between the deities of the African traditions and the saints of Catholicism. Within the *terreiro* one often will find crucifixes and pictures of Catholic saints along side pictures of *orixás*.



Example of syncretism within Candomblé: Yansã and Santa Barbara

Figure 1 (left)^v: Santa Barbara was martyred by her pagan father after he discovered she was a Christian; as soon as he beheaded her, he was struck by lightning and killed.

Figure 2 (right)^{vi}: A pictorial representation of Yansã, the *orixá* of justice, storms and lightning

There is a rigid matriarchal hierarchy within Candomblé. Within each *terreiro* there exists a family, usually symbolic, yet many times blood-related as well. Usually at the head of the family is the *mãe-de-santo*, literally mother-of-saint, or head priestess. There also may exist a *pai-de-santo*, or male priest, yet he is always below the *mãe-de-santo* if one exists. The *mãe pequena* is the senior assistant to the *mãe-de-santo*. Beneath her are *irmãs-de-santo*. Initiates are called *iaos*, or *filhas-de-santo*. Non-initiated assistants during rituals are referred to as *ekedes*.^{vii} One's place within the *terreiro* depends on the amount of time one has been initiated; each position demands an increasing amount of prestige and respect from the community.

Candomblé is fundamentally the same throughout Brazil, yet some variations exist depending on the respective practitioners. The religious tradition of the *orixá* was different in Africa; each *orixá* was worshiped separately. Each had his or her own “family” and own rituals. There would be one cult of the *orixá* Iemanjá, one for Oxum, etc. However, as these respective groups were forced together as slaves in Brazil and as they sought to unite in their African identity, they combined their beliefs. Now, within each *terreiro*, one can find all of the *orixás* represented beneath one roof. Festivities occur in which many different *orixás* will appear and are celebrated.

There are different “nations” or traditions of Candomblé within Brazil. Some of the most common in the North East of Brazil include Angola, Ketu, Jeje-Nagô, and Jeje Mahi; each of these nations represents the ethnicities of their African origin.

Ketu is the most prominent in Bahia^{viii}, which stems from the Yoruba peoples of southwestern Nigeria.^{ix}

Ketu, along with the Angola tradition, has integrated elements of Native American beliefs. *Caboclos* are a result of Indian influence. *Caboclos* are separate energies that also are capable of arresting mediums into a trance, and they are integrated into the belief system alongside the *orixás*. Alzira Costa, a prominent journalist in Cachoeira and a frequenter of the *terreiro*, described *caboclos* as separate from *orixás*, each having their own personalities, but “more human.” As she described to me, “*caboclos* love cachaça.”^x

In general, however, the principles and beliefs are fundamentally the same from nation to nation. They only differ in names, songs, or aspects of the ritual. For example, one nation uses their hands when playing the drums; another uses long sticks. Many of the variations concerning words and names stem from the lack of a written scripture. The Ketu tradition uses the Yoruba language, whose sacred oral text is called *Ifá*^{xi}. While the utmost emphasis is put on passing on the stories clearly and accurately from generation to generation, variations in spellings and names of various deities is common. For example, there is one God in Candomblé, yet this supreme Deity goes by different names; in the tradition descended from the Yoruba peoples, this supreme Deity is known as Olodumare or Olorun.

The Nature of the Divinities

Julmar, a young pai-de-santo, was wearing a white linen shirt, opened at the top revealing a crucifix dangling from his neck. He was explaining the nature of God: “God is always first, then the orixás.”

It is tempting to label Candomblé as a polytheistic religion at first glance because of the numerous divinities, or *orixás*. I have found a difference in opinion concerning this matter, however. The majority of the literature on Candomblé labels it as a monotheistic religion. Philip Neimark claims that *Ifa*, not only the name of the sacred oral text of the Yoruba tradition but also often used as another name for the original African religion, is the oldest monotheistic religion on earth.^{xii} The Ketu nation of Candomblé is derived from this tradition, and many other nations were influenced by and hold similar beliefs.

Within Candomblé the Supreme Deity, Olodumare, is unique and incomparable, neither male nor female, and far above corporeal existence.^{xiii} Pictures of various *orixás* are abundant, but one will not find a pictorial representation of Olodumare.

In the Yoruba concept of God, God is everything. There is nothing that God made that is not Him. Therefore God is Father, and his is also Mother. This does not mean that He is a hermaphroditic God. It simply means that God is everything.^{xiv}

Orixás are understood in many different ways, but usually always in a tier below the higher Deity that governs all. *Orixás* can be understood as conceptualizations of certain aspects of the higher Deity or as personifications of natural phenomena; on

the other hand, some are merely ancestors or heroes who have become deified.^{xv} E

Bolaji Idowu explains how to best understand the role of the *orixá*:

The correct interpretation of the position of the divinities is that they constitute only a half-way house which is not meant to be the permanent resting place for man's soul. While man may find the divinities 'sufficient' for certain needs, something continues to warn him that 'sufficiency' is only in Deity. Technically, the divinities are only means to an end and not ends in themselves.^{xvi}

Nevertheless, while the supreme Deity may be the "end-all," the actual *orixás* possess a great power in the Candomblé tradition and these living personalities are the focus of almost all ritualistic attention. Unlike the supreme Deity, *orixás* are very personal entities, capable of entering and temporarily occupying practitioner's bodies, sending them into a trance-like state where all of their actions are understood to be the actions of the presiding *orixá*. Candomblé practitioners use repetitive ritual and sacrifice to appease the *orixás* and to respond to their needs.

Like in many other religions, practitioners tend to cling to what is more tangible. The *orixás* are a very real and personal force within Candomblé. They have individual personalities, skills, likes and dislikes, and they make regular appearances in the form of trances. The view of the higher Deity, however, cannot be conceptualized as easily. I have found many people do not pay much attention to the idea of a higher Deity and focus wholly on the appeasement of the *orixás*.

It is worth noting that the majority of those who did not emphasize a higher Deity in Candomblé usually attended Candomblé ceremonies exclusively, while those who adamantly professed their faith in Candomblé as a monotheistic one were usually also regular attendees of the Catholic Church. The syncretism of the two religions and the unyielding proclamation of one God within Catholicism has thus

affected how the practitioners of these two faiths view their respective deities, and the resulting values placed on the supreme God versus the *orixás*.

The number of *orixás* that exist is impossible to know. There are innumerable numbers of *orixás* that originated in Africa, more than are represented within Brazil. However, there are also *orixás* that were conceptualized after the African people's arrival to Brazil. Thus *orixás* stem from different places and different times, and are called different names depending on the respective nation. There are a select few that seem to be most common among the *terreiros* in Bahia.

Iemanjá, the mother of all the *orixás*, known as the “Great Mother,” is an extremely popular *orixá* in Bahia. Iemanjá is responsible for fertility and procreation. She is also the *orixá* of the sea, and sometimes portrayed as a mermaid. Believers regularly make offerings to Iemanjá; these include dolls, perfumes, or other typical female goods that are placed in a shrine as well as placing perfumed flowers into the ocean. She is associated with the Virgin Mary of Catholicism, Our Lady of Conception,^{xvii} both recognized for their strong sense of fertility.

Other common *orixás* include: Oxum, associated with sensuality; Exú, the messenger deity, often associated with the devil; Ogum, the warrior deity; Xangô, associated with thunder; Oxalá, associated with wisdom and creation; Omolu, associated with health; and many others.^{xviii}



Figure 3. A devotional statue to Iemanjá, on a beach in Olivencia, Bahia

Practical Functioning of Candomblé

I sat at a table outside a bar with a friend from my capoeira class. He is thirty-years old, a philosophy major who is working on his masters in philosophy. He went to seminary to become a priest, but left the church after he became disillusioned with organized religion. I noticed he had a string of Candomblé beads around his neck. People wear these as signs of remembrance, each color signifying a particular orixá and often times people will wear the color of the orixá to whom they are most connected. I asked if he went to the terreiro and he said that he frequented the terreiro often. I asked if he had a religion, curious if he would reply Candomblé. “Me? No, I don’t have a religion.”

While it was banned by the Catholic Church and criminalized for quite some time, Brazilians are now allowed to freely practice Candomblé. Some stigma from those of non-African descent and the upper-classes still exists, and more recently a strong denunciation of Candomblé from Evangelical Christians has arisen. In recent surveys, about 2 million Brazilians, or about 1.5% of the population, have declared Candomblé as their religion.^{xix} In reality, many more Brazilians practice Candomblé or attend ceremonies. Because a large amount of syncretism between religions, particularly Catholicism and Candomblé, has occurred in Brazil, often times people declare their religion as Catholic, yet regularly attend Candomblé ceremonies.

Candomblé is not limited to the Afro-Brazilian population; many people of other ethnic backgrounds attend Candomblé ceremonies. Reginaldo Prandi argues that Candomblé is “developing into a magical resource available to all, without any ethnic connotations, in fact competing with other providers in a free and open religious marketplace.”^{xx}

Beyond religious rituals, Candomblé also functions as a health center. Candomblé utilizes traditional medicine for the healing of illnesses. In every *terreiro*, there is a rural or forest space housing the herbs and plants used for medicinal and ritual treatments.^{xxi} A large proportion of the Brazilian population, both initiates and non-initiates, turns to Candomblé for healing. One could argue that Candomblé is “competing” with the public health system as well.

There are a large number of mental health services in Brazil, especially in the metropolitan areas. However, the majority of the poor and black populations have limited access to these official services. Many only turn to psychiatric support when

the illness becomes chronic.^{xxii} A large proportion of this population would turn to Candomblé first when struggling with mental illness.

The medicinal knowledge of the *terreiro* is not sought solely due to a deficiency of adequate public health services, however. The knowledge of the *terreiro* is validated by its own merits, and the fact that its remedies require the convergence of the body, consciousness and spirit makes its therapy unique and highly effective. Various studies have discussed the positive impact of religious practice in general on the treatment and rehabilitation of depressive disorders and other mental disruptions.^{xxiii} Candomblé in particular has proven to have great success in the healing of mental illnesses.

Candomblé's Understanding of the Mind

“You want to know a very important difference about Candomblé?” Fory exclaimed, putting down his fork and looking me straight in the eye. “Many other religions put their emphasis on the heart, but Candomblé...Candomblé puts the significance on the mind.”

Built into and of great emphasis in Candomblé is the *orí*, the “cabeça,” the mind of a person. *Orí* is the vital center of a person; to maintain happiness, to maintain a well balanced life, one must take care of their *orí*. One’s *orixá* is understood to take care of one’s *orí*. Thus, one must take care of their *orixá* because their *orixá* takes care of them.

The *orí* is the place where one has their connection with their *orixá*. When a person enters into a state of trance, the *axê*, or the energy, of the *orixá* enters the

person through their *ori*. Physically, one *mãe-de-santo* pointed to the very top of the head and made small circles with her fingers to demonstrate where it is that the *orixá* enters from the *orun*, the immaterial world of the *orixás*, into the “*cavallo*,” literally “horse,” the medium.

The *ori* is more than a physical point of entrance, however. It is how Candomblé understands the mind. There are two forms of *ori*, the *ori odê* and the *ori inú*. The *ori odê* is the place of the physical mind where thinking and feeling occur; it is more or less the brain. The *ori inú* is inner mind, the transcendental realm where one’s greater identity and ancestry can be found.^{xxiv} It is here that one’s spirit interacts with the mind. When a person suffering from some form of mental illness seeks treatment at the terreiro, the *mãe-de-santo* looks to both forms of the *ori*.^{xxv} “The *ori* is the place where you have a problem...this is where we look for the mental illness”^{xxvi}

The “Diagnosis” of Mental Illness

I walked into a small room, filled with many objects, mostly pots with a set of plates on top of them. In the corner, behind the door, sat Maria do Justo. A small table was set up in front of her. A white lace cloth lay across the top with strings of different colored beads lining the perimeter. A few other objects lay on top of these beads: a small cross, a beach stone, pieces of wood...objects that had obvious significance but I didn’t know what they meant.

I sat down in front of her and she picked up the small crucifix. She crossed the table, me, and herself, kissing the cross before handing it to me to do the same. She began mumbling some words under her breath, then repeating them over and over, as she moved her hands in a very

specific manner over the table. She asked my full name, and then included this into her prayers. Her eyes were closed and she seemed to be in a state of deep concentration. Her words slowly became more intelligible. “Kerilyn, filha de Ogum, filha de Oxum, Kerilyn, filha de Omolu...” She began to list many orixás, calling me the daughter of them all. This lasted for quite some time and I was moved. She rolled several buzios, a type of seashell, in her hands, moving them purposefully before tossing them onto the table and staring intently at them. “I am not going to lie. I cannot read your buzios like this. I think you are not ready...” She picked up a small group of wooden sticks that had been strung together and started waving them gently over the buzios, attempting to read the buzios this way.

When she stopped, she looked up into my eyes, “Everything is well with your family, with your life, with your work. There is nothing very wrong. Your orixá is Nanã, along with Iemanjá, but Nanã is in the front. Do you have any specific questions you’d like to ask?”

I was a bit stunned, having no idea what to ask, so I asked a pretty classic question: “What should I do with my life?”

She took up a few buzios, mumbled some indecipherable words, and tossed them. “Continue what you are doing. School is well for you. Pursue psychology, stay on the course you are on. What else?”

“Can I ask anything?”

“Anything.”

I looked away, then looked back, gave an embarrassed smile and asked, “Should I marry my boyfriend?”

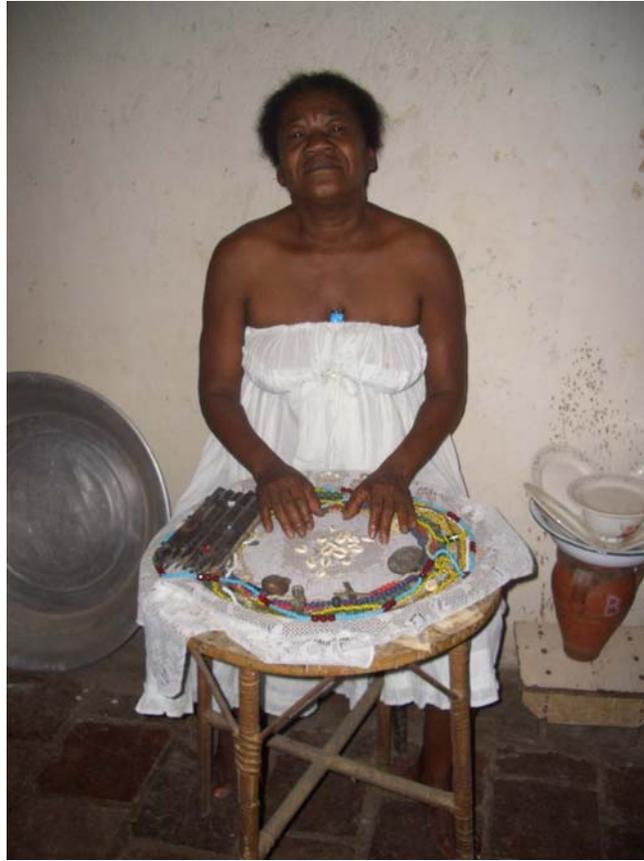


Figure 4. Mario do Justo, after performing the cowrie-shell divinations (*jogo de buzios*)

Within Candomblé, in order to determine the nature of the problem and from where it is coming, each person is treated individually and their problems are seen as unique. People are not categorized or labeled as having one type of mental illness based on their experienced symptoms; these labels do not exist and thus a specific “course of treatment” for certain illnesses is not spelled out either. Each person has their own problems that stem from unique circumstances and require a unique course of treatment.

To begin with, the *mãe-de-santo* always converses with the person, talking about the problem to understand how it is manifested. To gain a certainty about the nature of the problem, the *mãe-de-santo* will then “*jogar de buzios.*” When a *mãe-de-*

santo “*jogas*,” she is speaking directly to the *orixá*. In the case of healing, she may seek to talk to the *orixá* of the individual, the specific *orixá* of the *terreiro*, or perhaps Omolu, the *orixá* that takes care of health in general. The *mãe-de-santo* reads the “*buzios*,” a group of cowrie-shells that she tosses onto the table after a series of specific orations, prayers, and incantations. The process is very ceremonial and is treated with great respect. It is also a very common practice; in general, a *mãe-de-santo* uses the *jogo de buzios* to determine a person’s *orixá* or to answer any question one wants to have answered. When dealing with the problem of mental illness, the *mãe-de-santo* will ask the *orixá* directly what the cause of the problem is and what needs to be done to take care of the individual.

Defining Mental Illness

I sat talking with one friend late one night. He asked me about my research and I explained that I was interested in how Candomblé views mental health and the concept of mental illness. “Mental illness,” he repeated to himself. “But what is a mental illness? How can you define a mental illness?”

“Exactly.” I replied. “What is your opinion?”

He didn’t hesitate in his response: “All problems are spiritual.”

Because Candomblé does not label or categorize those that enter the *terreiro* for healing, it is difficult to know what types of problems are most commonly treated there. People turn to the *terreiro* to seek help for physical ailments more often than

they do for mental problems, “but people do still come [to treat mental illnesses] and we take care of them”^{xxvii}

When speaking with Raimundo Oliveira, a psychologist working at CAPS (Centro de Atenção Psicossocial), a federal program for the assistance of psychosocial problems in the area, he reported that he found the most common psychological disturbance in the area to be anxiety. Next to that is depression and insomnia, two problems he viewed as a side-effect of a greater anxiety problem. “But CAPS sees all other types of problems, too...schizophrenics, chronic depression, bipolar disorders...we have all of these things.”^{xxviii} This suggests that people who go to the *terreiro* probably experience similar ailments, or at least the presence of many mental illnesses that Western medicine has defined and labeled are also present in those who seek help from Candomblé.

When asking one *mãe-de-santo*, Maria Souza de Jesus (more commonly known as Maria do Justo), what type of mental problems were the most common, she replied, “Spiritual problems are the most common problems.”^{xxix} Spiritual problems are understood to be her domain, and these can manifest themselves in a various ways, as very serious mental illnesses to everyday problems with the family or work. Maria do Justo deals with all of these problems, as long as they are in some form related to the spirit. In dealing with the spirit, the *terreiro* can offer help that a psychologist cannot: “At times people need more than a psychologist to help...when the problem is spiritual. Thus, people go to Candomblé and we can help.”^{xxx}

There is an interesting difference in opinion as to what constitutes a spiritual illness. Where is the line drawn between where the spirit is involved in the cause of

the illness and where it is not? One *mãe-de-santo*, Mãe Nilta of the Terreiro Nkosi Mucumbe Dendezeiro, believes that the majority of mental illnesses are spiritual, and that they are a result of negative actions and negative influences on one's life.^{xxxix} Mario do Justo understood the nature of mental illness in a different way. There is a clear line between what she is able to take care of and what she cannot:

Candomblé is very separate from western medicine. We, the *mãe-de-santos*, are going to “*jogar*” and separate one thing from another. We're not going to help if you have a mental problem, an illness...for example, a problem of memory, then you should go to a psychologist. But if you have a mental problem that is spiritual, then we are going to take care of you. If we can't cure it, then it's a different type of problem; it's not for Candomblé.^{xxxix}

Maria do Justo determines where this line is drawn by using the *buzios* and asking the *orixás*. She describes some mental problems as spiritual, but also says that some mental problems come from one's “family”^{xxxix}; while not said explicitly, this suggests an understanding of predisposition for certain mental illnesses that can be passed down genetically. When asked what people can do to avoid mental illnesses, Mario do Justo replied, “Well, at times, people can't avoid these problems. Sometimes a person is normal, and all of the sudden they become sick. You can't avoid it. You never know when it is going to come.”^{xxxix}

Treatment of Mental Illness

Fory came back to the car, arms full of branches.

“What's that?” I asked.

“Leaves from a cinnamon tree. Here, smell.” He crumpled a few leaves in his hands and held them up to my nose. The smell of cinnamon was very strong.

“What are you doing to do with this?”

“I’m going to take a shower with it...I’m going to purify my body and spirit.”

“Can I do this as well?”

“Of course,” he replied, going to pull more branches off of the tree. “It makes great tea as well.”

Recovery is always described as very rapid within the *terreiro*. Some say recovery happens within one month; one *mãe-de-santo* claimed recovery from mental illnesses usually occurs within eight days.^{xxxv} Mãe Nilta described the recovery process, at least on the curative end, as “very tiring.”^{xxxvi}

Once the illness is determined, the following actions depend on the individual, but there are some practices that are used commonly. “Folhas and ervas,” leaves and herbs, are almost always part of the curative process, whether the problem is physical or mental. The knowledge of how to use these plants for curative reasons, inherited from their African ancestors as well as the indigenous people, has been passed down from generation to generation. In this way, the differences and special application of each leaf are known.^{xxxvii} The plants are used to make “chás,” or teas, as well as to concoct purifying herbal showers. Candomblé utilizes only natural remedies in this way:

The difference [between Candomblé and Western medicine] is in the remedy. They use drugs. In Candomblé we don’t use this. It’s more natural. If you have a mental illness today, and when you use a drug, you get worse...at times this is not what the person needs.^{xxxviii}

When one friend complained of a back problem, he was told that he should drink a tea made with “folhas de abacate,” leaves from an avocado tree. For mental illnesses, the types of teas suggested are not as clear cut; it depends on the situation.

In general, however, tea serves as a relaxant, and all kinds of teas are used: camomille, erva doce, and others that, at times, are surprisingly commonplace.

Herbal showers are also used to purify the body and spirit. These can also be used to help purify the *orí*. Mario de Justo, when listing off various treatments, stopped at “banho de folhas,” and emphasized, “these help a lot.”^{xxxix} Specific leaves are ground up and prepared almost as one would prepare tea. This sacred blend is then scooped over one’s entire body, leaving oneself physically cleaner and “*cheiroso*” (smelling good), but also purified spiritually as well.

Another common treatment of “*doenças da cabeça*,” literally illnesses of the head, is the rite of *borí*; this ritual serves only to take care of the *orí*, the mind. Maria do Justo described it as such: “It’s made with lemon and you put it on the head...to cool off someone’s head if it’s hot.” Simply, *borí* is a specific blend of natural elements that is applied to the very top of one’s head, the point where the *orí* is located. *Borí* is far more than a coolant, however. The rite of *borí*, also called “*dar comida á cabeça*” (to feed the mind), is used commonly to reconcile all of the elements of the body. Usually *borí* is accompanied by a rite of purification, the “*ebó*,” aiming for as much as the body as for the vital substance that composes a person, their individual *axé*.^{xl} *Axé* is the essence—the energy—of a person. In this way, *borí* is used to purify the *orí*, while also taking care of and bringing together one’s physical body and one’s *axé*.

Rituals other than *borí* are also used in treating mental illnesses, but these are almost always private, reserved only for the person seeking help and those helping. What occurs during these rituals is kept secret. Sometimes certain animal sacrifices

are made; to which *orixá* varies, but it is usually because a certain *orixá* needs to be taken care of (most likely the *orixá* of the individual seeking help).

During and beyond ritual, prayer is of the utmost importance. Prayers are constantly recited, by the individual themselves, but also by the *mãe-de-santo* and others. People will also wear necklaces that contain a written prayer inside of a pouch with the name of an *orixá* woven on the outside. While the Candomblé tradition has been passed down orally from generation to generation, Mario do Justo referred to a book a prayers to which she refers for specific healing prayers.^{xii}

Simple conversation is also utilized by *mães-de-santo*. The individual is allowed to talk about their problem and work through it with the *mãe-de-santo* over a period of time. Sometimes a group is brought together to talk and to assist the individual – a kind of group therapy.^{xiii}

In cases where the illness is not considered spiritual, or the remedies of the *terreiro* are not proving to be effective, the *mãe-de-santo* will send the patient to the doctor. I have found a difference in opinion as to how often this occurs as well as to how much Western medicine is embraced by the *terreiro*. Many emphasize the difference in environment between the *terreiro* and the hospital. “You can’t mix the two,” one *filho-de-santo* said. “The environment of the hospital is too different. Everyone can go there.”

When talking to a psychologist at CAPS, however, he approximated that eighty percent of the time, *mães* or *pais-de-santo* will send their patients to the doctor. He even said that often times the *mãe* or *pai-de-santo* will accompany the patient to their therapy sessions. In these cases, the support of the *terreiro* extends beyond the

Candomblé setting. Their concern for the patient is to the extent that they truly seek what is best for the recovery of a person, regardless of the fact that this may mean utilizing a foreign system of healing that is very different from the practices of the terreiro.



Figure 5. Terreiro Ogodô Dei, the *terreiro* of Maria do Justo, in Cachoeira, Bahia
The white letters read: “The doors that God open, nobody closes.”

Advantages of the *Terreiro*

It was early Saturday morning. I had gotten up to attend a funeral service for one pai-de-santo who, along with his wife and one of his sons, had died in a tragic car accident on May 14th of this past year. It was now the end of November and this was the first time the terreiro had been opened since. When we arrived, everyone was dressed in white, and I was thankful that at least I was wearing white as well; I stood out enough as it was. People were waiting outside the

terreiro until the drums began to play. They entered the room, one by one, dipping their fingers into a bowl filled with water and leaves and touching their forehead and the back of their neck.

I followed quietly after them, touched the water to my head and neck, and then found my place against the wall, hoping I was on the right side—the woman's side of the terreiro.

The drums were loud and forceful and one by one, people began to go into trances, bending over and shaking, letting out a coarse yell. When they arose, their eyes were closed and their hands crossed neatly in front or behind their back. Then they began to dance to the beat of the drums.

They danced in sync, circling the room in a fluid, rhythmic motion.

Two men stood against the wall next to the drum: his sons. One was crying loud and unabashedly, heaving and yelling uncontrollably. The other was solemn, with tears quietly streaming down his cheeks. There was a younger girl, the granddaughter, sitting with a white lace cloth over her face, rocking back and forth.

The dances continued for quite some time. The drums would stop, everyone would stand straight, eyes closed, tears streaming down their face, hands behind their back, swaying until the next song began, at which time they would begin anew, dancing in sync to the rhythm.

As the ceremony came to a close, many of those in a trance visited the sons and the granddaughter, bowed before them and let out a yell with such raw human emotion that it was impossible not to cry. Each yell was different, yet all were cathartic, full of pain and sympathy for the sons. Then they arose and gave embraced both of the sons and the granddaughter.

They circled around the room, greeting every person and hugging them, with eyes closed and a sincerity that was piercing. All those in a trance quietly left the room one-by-one to be aided out of their trance state. When they re-entered, they appeared to be themselves again. The sons were sitting now, and each person lay down before them, touched their head to the ground at their

feet, and then lifted their hands up to them. The sons would touch their hands, acknowledging their gesture gratefully and allowing them to move on.



Figure 6. A large communal meal that took place after the funeral ceremony. A full plate was placed underneath the table with a lit candle in commemoration of the deceased.

Candomblé as a religious system in general includes certain elements that naturally aid in one's recovery from mental illnesses. They are also advantageous in maintaining a healthy state of mind for the believers. I have come to the conclusion that there are three aspects that function in reinforcing one's sense of self in a positive way: the role of ritual, the unique sense of identity that Candomblé asserts, and the sense of family within the *terreiro*.

Ritual

Ritual in Candomblé serves to appease the *orixás*. However, for those performing, the religious rituals take on extraordinary symbolic significance as well.

Through religious ritual, particularly “possession” by an *orixá*, devotees experience an intimate connection with cosmic forces. They recognize their worth in that “what is best about the universe is reflected in their very being.”^{xliii} This understanding plays a large role in maintaining a healthy state of mind in that one’s self-esteem and self-concept is constantly reinforced.

The unique “context” for religious ritual is irreproducible. The *terreiro* is sacred space, and the utilization of drums, dance, and dress all provide a unique spiritual context to deal with and understand their illness in a manner that feels good to the individual. There is a transformative effect galvanized by the ceremony, as one’s position within the universe is reinforced, and the disorganization caused by the illness is countered by the organization of ritual.^{xliv}

The religious ritual also puts the day-to-day stresses of life as well as more serious mental illnesses into context. Those suffering from mental disruptions are able to change their perception of the “affliction” by placing it within the context of Candomblé; they are able to understand and deal with their affliction with the understanding and faith that they can be cured by something greater than themselves, and the religious ritual is an active manifestation of this belief.

Identity

Once initiated into the faith, the *iaos* acquire new identities: a sacred identity that corresponds to the specific *orixá* that possesses them as well as a new social identity, a personal rebirth into the Candomblé community.^{xlv} A fresh start is given and one’s place and purpose in the world is reasserted.

Recognition of one's spiritual identity affects a person by reiterating their self-worth in that they recognize a part of themselves that is sacred and is capable of communing with that which is most valuable in the world, the divine. At the same time, their concept of self is put into perspective such that one recognizes that there is more beyond themselves. For many, day-to-day stresses and anxieties become less significant when understood from this perspective. More specifically, the likelihood of developing an anxiety disorder (what the psychologist at CAPS said is the most common psychological disruption in the area) is diminished when one perceives the world in this way.

The identity of an initiate within the *terreiro* is reaffirmed over time as he or she climbs the religious hierarchy of the *terreiro*. One's status within the *terreiro* and the social prestige that follows strengthens the self-esteem of those involved. It also provides a strong self-concept, giving the person a sense of purpose within a religious context, a context that is often viewed as more important than the duties of work or other everyday responsibilities.

Family

The *terreiro* functions as a complex familial network, allowing for a sense of inclusion and support that is fundamental in not only preventing the onset of mental illnesses but also in treating them. Clinically, it is known that the chronic exposure of people to stressful events increases the risk of the appearance of mental illness. The familial support available at the *terreiro*, along with the access to a network of social

support, diminishes this risk.^{xlvi} For many of the faithful, the *terreiro* is the primary source of psycho-social support.

The familial nature of the houses, reflected in the names of the members (*mãe-de-santo, pai-de-santo, filhas-de-santo...* “mother, father, daughters”), testifies to the value Candomblé places on community. Regardless of blood relation or ethnicity, each member of the *terreiro* is seen as part of one Candomblé family. Often times, people will refer to their *mãe-de-santo* as their mother or grandmother even outside of the Candomblé context.

This familial interaction affects every-day life. The *terreiro* occupies not only the spiritual, but also the social and economic lives of its members.^{xlvii} The *terreiro* acts as a social center of its respective community. Ceremonies are frequent, providing many opportunities for social interaction before and afterwards. After many ceremonies, there is a grand banquet, with tables full of food that people partake of communally.

The financial burden of providing such an abundance of food is shared by the members. It is within this “family circle” that personal financial decisions are made as well: about one’s job, the question of moving to different house, or making a big purchase. Everything, from the small personal decisions to greater changes that affect the community, is shared.

Most importantly, the Candomblé family provides a strong support network in times of need. This includes times when one is struggling with mental illness. Social support is virtually always a positive factor in mental health, regardless of the stage of mental illness. Concerning the common mental illness of depression, social

support is understood to prevent its onset, to lessen the intensity of its symptoms, as well as to aid in one's recovery.

Conclusion

Whenever I asked those within Candomblé if a person needs to have faith in order to be healed, the answer was always yes. Faith is what connects the mind to the spirit, what allows a clear passageway between the two. Thus, when healing a spiritual illness, one must have faith to allow healing to occur, to work with both forms of the *orí* – not only the physical mind, but also the transcendental *orí inú*. When asked why Candomblé is so affective at curing mental illnesses, Mãe Nilta told me, “The flow of spiritual energy is fluid.”^{xlviii} Understanding mental illnesses as spiritual illnesses requires a spiritual remedy.

Not all mental illnesses can be cured within the *terreiro*, and this is recognized by the *mães-de-santo*. In these cases, other forms of treatment are sought. But there is value in understanding the majority of problems as spiritual problems and approaching them as such. It has proven to be highly effective; people continue to look to the *terreiro* for healing and the *terreiro* more often than not helps. For people of faith, spirituality is a central part of their lives. When struggling with mental illness, people seek a remedy that takes their values into account; people are more receptive to the treatment when the remedy coincides with and reiterates their understanding of the world.

There is still much to be learned about the psychology of spirituality and the effectiveness of religious practice in maintaining a mentally sound state of mind as

well as in curing mental illness. Candomblé provides a glimpse into one way of understanding the mind and its relation to the spirit, and this understanding has proven to be effective and thus note-worthy in working with and curing mental illnesses.

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- ⁱ Egbomi Cidália, as cited by Damiana Miranda, Projecto Ató-ire, p. N/A
- ⁱⁱ E Bolaji Idowu, p. 201
- ⁱⁱⁱ Pinn, Anthony, p. 227
- ^{iv} <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Candomble>
- ^v Pau Brasilis. *Yansã*. Retrieved 11 December 2007 from www.paubrasilis.com/Paginas/Orixas/1yansa.htm
- ^{vi} Santa Barbara. Retrieved 11 December 2007 from www.catholic-forum.com/saints/saintb01.htm
- ^{vii} Agier, Michel, p. 139
- ^{viii} Carlos Alberto Dias do Nascimento, 15.11.07
- ^{ix} Weaver and Egbelade, Introduction, xiii.
- ^x Cachaça is a popular form of alcohol here, resembling grain alcohol in its potency
- ^{xi} Weaver and Egbelade, Introduction, xiii.
- ^{xii} Neimark, Philip, p. 2
- ^{xiii} Idowu, E Bolaji. p. 150
- ^{xiv} Weaver and Egbelade, Introduction: xvi
- ^{xv} Idowu, E Bolaji, p. 172
- ^{xvi} Idowu, E Bolaji, p. 171
- ^{xvii} Gondim, p. 31-35
- ^{xviii} Pinn, Anthony, p. 229
- ^{xix} <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Candomble>
- ^{xx} as cited by Agier, p. 138
- ^{xxi} Pinn, Anthony, p. 228
- ^{xxii} Damiana Miranda, Projecto Ató-ire, p. N/A
- ^{xxiii} Damiana Miranda, Projecto Ató-ire, p. N/A
- ^{xxiv} Robson Rogério Cruz, Projecto Ató-ire, p. N/A
- ^{xxv} I will be commonly using “mãe-de-santo” when talking about the person who does the majority of the healing; this is because terreiros are more commonly run by mães-de-santo than pais-de-santo. However, pais-de-santo could be used in all instances where I discuss the role of the mãe-de-santo.
- ^{xxvi} Mario do Justo, 27.11.07
- ^{xxvii} Mario do Justo, 27.11.07
- ^{xxviii} Raimundo Oliveira, 16.11.07
- ^{xxix} Mario do Justo, 27.11.07
- ^{xxx} Mario do Justo, 27.11.07
- ^{xxxi} Dona Nilta, 05.12.07
- ^{xxxii} Mario do Justo, 27.11.07
- ^{xxxiii} Mario do Justo, 18.11.07
- ^{xxxiv} Mario do Justo, 27.11.07
- ^{xxxv} Dona Nilta, 05.12.07
- ^{xxxvi} Dona Nilta, 05.12.07
- ^{xxxvii} Mariano de Ossãe, Projecto Ató-ire, p. N/A
- ^{xxxviii} Mario do Justo, 27.11.07
- ^{xxxix} Mario do Justo, 27.11.07
- ^{xl} Robson Rogério Cruz, Projecto Ató-ire, p. N/A
- ^{xli} Mario do Justo, 18.11.07
- ^{xlii} Mario do Justo, 18.11.07
- ^{xliiii} Pinn, Anthony, p. 231
- ^{xliv} Damiana Miranda, Projecto Ató-ire, p. N/A
- ^{xlv} Agier, Michel, p. 141
- ^{xlvi} Damiana Miranda, Projecto Ató-ire, p. N/A
- ^{xlvii} Damiana Miranda, Projecto Ató-ire, p. N/A
- ^{xlviii} Mãe Nilta, 09.12.07

Methodology

I used an ethnographic approach, trying to understand Candomblé and mental health in a qualitative way. I had a few key actors, or mães-de-santo with whom I collected the bulk of my material. I began with unstructured and informal interviews in order to try and gain a basic understanding of how Candomblé understands the mind and mental illness: certain terms, how much people are willing to say, etc. After gaining this foundation, my interviews became more structured, formal and direct. I also visited many of the Candomblé ceremonies that were open to the public. However, during my whole time, I capitalized on everyday conversation, thankful that Candomblé is the topic of much conversation and people were willing and excited to share their opinions with me.

I conducted my research in Cachoeira, Brazil. Cachoeira is city of about 15,000 people, rich in culture and known for its contagious, positive energy. Many attribute their positive energy to the prevalence of Candomblé—the strong *axé* in the area. Some say Cachoeira was the birthing place of Candomblé. No one could ever tell me how many terreiros there are in the area because there are so many. It was a wonderful place to conduct my research.

Limitations

I was limited by a number of factors while conducting my research. Primarily, my knowledge of Portuguese was enough to communicate but fluid conversation never came easily and whatever was said subtly unfortunately fell on ears incapable of understanding. This is where more direct interviews planned out beforehand were most helpful.

Not being initiated into the faith was an obvious limitation, as there is much knowledge reserved solely for those initiated into the faith. The fact that I was so obviously a foreigner, or “gringa,” was another limitation. Having Alzira as my project advisor was wonderful because arriving at a terreiro with one of “their own” caused them to view me as one of their own as well. There are many people who have come before me, looking to conduct research about some aspect of Candomblé. I often felt like “just another researcher” and rightly so. I am, and I learned that it is extremely important to recognize this fact while conducting research. The times when people did truly give me their time to share their knowledge and to include me in their ceremonies were much more meaningful after having recognized this.

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