JOHN RYLE

MIRACLES OF THE PEOPLE:
ATTITUDES TO CATHOLICISM
IN AN AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIOUS CENTRE
IN SALVADOR DA BAHIA

Quem é teu e viu milagres como eu
Sabe que os deuses vem Deus
Não cessam de brotar
Nem cessam de tocar e o coração
Que é soberano e que é senhor
Não cabe na escravidão,
Não cabe no seu não
Não cabe em si de tanto sim
E pura dança / E sexo / E glória
E pares para além da história
Ojubá ia / Lá e via

Quem descobriu o Brasil / Foi o negro que viu
A crueldade bem de frente
E ainda produz milagres
Dei-e no extenso ocidente.

Atheists who have seen miracles as I have done
Know that where God is not, the gods
Don't disappear; they multiply.
The gods don't give up, for the sovereign heart,
Cannot be confided by slavery,
Cannot be confined by 'No'.
So much 'Yes' can never be confined
The yes of dance / The yes of sex / The glorious yes
That arches across our history
Ojubá came here / And saw this

Candomblé, the Afro-Brazilian religion of Salvador da Bahia, has for many years been the main focus of anthropological research into the African-derived religions of the new world. The analyses of the ritual and cosmology of the religion by Rodrigues and Bastide and accounts of life in the terreiros, or temples, of Candomblé by Landes, Carneiro and others1 stress its African roots, its fidelity to sub-Saharan old-world traditions and its preservation of African tribal divinities, of a liturgy in the Yoruba language and of dances, systems of divination, animal sacrifice and herbal lore all directly traceable to an African origin. Historical and ethnographic researches by Verger in West Africa have established precise linkages for many of these features of Afro-Brazilian religious practice.2 Later studies, for instance by Elbein,3 have continued to interpret Candomblé as a transformation of African cosmology 'encycled', in Bastide's phrase, in modern Brazilian culture, rather than as a Brazilian form of spirituality, one among a number of other Afro-Brazilian cults.

The stress these authors put on the distinctly African character of Candomblé is the subject of critical discussion among contemporary scholars and adherents of Afro-Brazilian religions. The concern with Africulturism, it is argued, led the earlier researchers to rely on data drawn from the minority of terreiros (cult houses) in Bahia that follow the Nagô and Jeje rites (which preserve Yoruba and Fon divinities and incantations in the Yoruba language) at the expense of other Afro-Bahian traditions derived from Bantu cultures which, generally speaking, incorporate a greater number of elements from popular Catholicism and Amerindian cultures. These traditions (Angola, Congo, Cabo) are numerically better represented in contemporary Bahian religious practice, as Carneiro, at least, recognized.4 The bias in the literature

towards the Nagô tradition and the consequent enhancement of the prestige of terreiros following this rite has been characterized by a Brazilian commentator as *yorùbá*. Candomblé, such critics maintain, is both more syncrétic and more varied in its manifestations than the existing ethnography would suggest. The Jeje-Nagô houses, moreover, may themselves be more eclectic than has generally been described. In this paper I present some background to the current situation in Bahia and some observations from a traditionalist terreiro concerning the relations between Candomblé and Catholicism. These are not intended to support one or other interpretation of Candomblé, but they serve to illustrate what may be called the creative ambiguity of the Brazilian religious imagination, a feature that has both preserved and transformed elements of each religion.

A system of correspondences with popular Catholicism is a time-honoured feature of Afro-Brazilian cults. Images of saints are found in most terreiros in Bahia. Jeje-Nagô included, alongside symbols of the orixás: St Lazarus with Omole, the black-purple divinity; St George with Oxóssi, the patron of hunters; St Anthony with Ogum, god of war and iron; and the Virgin Mary, in her manifestation as Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of the Beach, with Iemanjá, goddess of the sea and mother of the orixás. The equation of individual orixás with Catholic saints is reflected in the basic terminology of the terreiros, where initiates are known as *filhos-de-santo*, literally 'children of the saint', and priests and priestesses as *pai-de-santo* or *made-de-santo*, 'father' or 'mother' of the saint (there are Yoruba synonyms for the last two terms, namely *báa* and *báa* and *báa* and *báa*, and one for the daughter of a saint, *Nalu*). However, in Bahia, Oxalá, the most revered deity of the Candomblé pantheon, is popularly identified with Nosso Senhor do Bomfim, and the church of this name is the site of devotions by cult-followers each Friday, Oxalá's day in the Candomblé calendar. The cult of saints in popular Catholicism, particularly the practice of *promessas*, offerings in return for favours received, has a parallel, though not an exact one, in the offerings made by *filhos-de-santo* to their orixás. This cross-mapping of mythology and ritual, documented in detail for various Afro-Brazilian religions by Bastide, seems to have its origin in a stratagem adopted by slaves in the face of prohibitions on African religions, and it can be explained, in the case of Candomblé, simply as a way of worshipping African gods under a Christian guise. The legal persecution of Afro-Brazilian cults, which continued until the 1960s, prolonged this stratagem, but it did not, in the opinion of Bastide, affect the fundamentally African metaphysic of Candomblé. His principle of compartmentalization, whereby the devotee of Candomblé could move

between a hermetic world of African religion and the wider context of Brazilian urban life without a blurring of categories, encouraged a view of Candomblé as pure and unchanging, whereas other cults, particularly those cults of more recent formation such as Umbanda, the most widespread and eclectic Afro-Brazilian religion, which incorporates elements of Kardecist spiritism as well as popular Catholicism, were seen as degraded and culturally compromised.

In recent years Umbanda has been the subject of more sustained attention on the part of researchers. Their work represents a recognition that the common features of historically distinct religions may also form a metaphysical system, a lingua franca of the spirit. The complexity of religious practice in Brazil and the ambiguity of belief, where believers are moving between one set of religious symbols and another, makes the workings of this system hard to discern. However, in the case of popular Catholicism, spiritism and Afro-Brazilian cults, the key feature these religions have in common is the principle of mediation, a belief in the control of events in this world by transactions with supernatural entities (saints, spirits or orixás). Although there are important differences in the kinds of religious experience offered by these traditions—the role of prayer in Catholicism is eclipsed by trance in spiritism and Afro-Brazilian religions—it seems to be the principle of mediation that enables adherents to translate between belief systems, to change their allegiance or subsume their experience of one religion under the precepts of another.

In the case of Candomblé, there is no doubt that African features are preserved in a more striking form in the Jeje-Nagô rite than in other Afro-Brazilian religions. To what extent this means that Jeje-Nagô terreiros still enshrine a sensibility, a world-view or metaphysical system that is usefully categorized as African (or West African, or Yoruba), and to what extent the outward African forms are animated by a religious experience that remains distinct from Christianity or Spiritism are questions that are most appropriately examined at the level of particular terreiros and in the experience of individual devotees of the religion. Despite the existence of a Federación of Afro-Brazilian Cults (Federação dos Cultos Afro-Brasileiros) and the recent creation of a new central council (the Conselho Religioso do Candomblé, or Religious Council of Candomblé), Candomblé has not developed a central organization of any authority; its sacred texts are orally transmitted, and ritual orthodoxy is maintained only by the lengthy initiation necessary to become a *made-de-santo*. The legitimation of a new Candomblé house is derived from the prestige of the terreiro where the *made-de-santo* was initiated, but...
each is autonomous. As with the pastors of pentecostal churches, fast-growing rivals to Afro-Brazilian cults for the spiritual allegiance of poor, black Brazilians, the force of character of the founding priest or priestess is an important factor in the success of a new terreiro. Unlike Protestant pastors, mães- and pai-de-santo are not tied to a single sacred text (nor are they committed, as Protestants are, in theory at least, to reject other religious as snakes and delusions). The reputation of particular terreiros waxes and wanes from generation to generation, although a small number have managed to maintain their influence since the last century. This institutional fluidity and the variety of Afro-Brazilian traditions means, for instance, that not every pai-or mãe-de-santo claiming to practise the Nagô rite would be recognized as actually doing so by a ritual specialist from one of the well-known Nagô houses. The Nagô orthodoxy itself has been modified within living memory, on the one hand by the almost universal incorporation of the cult of candomblé, native American spirits, alongside the orixás cult, and on the other by a conscious ‘re-Africanization’ of the formal organization of some of the traditional terreiros.

For social scientists the maintenance of orthodoxy, the internal transformations of Afro-Brazilian cults, the resistance they offer to assimilation by the culture at large and, conversely, their influence on the wider field of Brazilian religious experience, are all questions of considerable theoretical interest. For those who live within the pale of faith they are questions of practical choice. A person with an interest in Candomblé will inevitably have attended services in Catholic churches and very likely Protestant ones as well. He or she will typically frequent a number of different terreiros before making a commitment to one in particular. Brazilian religious culture is dense and populous, a forest of beliefs. Syncretism is a response to this plenitude (as, in another fashion, is Protestantism). In individual lives, faiths may be intertwined; thus the variation between cults is complicated by variations in the relation that individual adherents have to the cult and to the world outside the terreiro. Despite its elaborate preservation of ancient ritual, the Candomblé terreiro is by no means a closed community. One of its sources of strength is its incorporation of individuals in mind and will therefore tend to come from a different social milieu from the filhos-de-santo. All these individuals participate in a communal rite, but only some of them live permanently in the terreiro, so it is principally there that they meet their fellow adherents. Further towards the periphery of Candomblé, but crucial to its economic survival, are the day-to-day clients of the pai- or mãe-de-santo. Such people, from all classes and walks of life, seek consultations for purposes of divination or magical intervention (in their own lives or those of others). They may know very little of the religion and probably do not attend the festivals of the orixás, even though these are open to all comers. Candomblé has a different meaning for each of these categories of person and plays a different part in their lives.

The relation between Christianity and Afro-Brazilian religions and the wider significance of the African cultural heritage in Brazil are matters of discussion well beyond the terreiros and the seminar room. In Bahia particularly, where Brazilians of largely African descent make up the greater part of the population, Afro-Brazilian religions have become explicit symbols of racial affirmation. In the current era of democratization in Brazil, this has given a new, specifically electoral dimension to the political importance they have always had, even in times of persecution. The folklore of Candomblé—the promotion of its picturesque elements to encourage tourism and the staging of sacred dances for commercial interest—is routinely condemned as an act of cultural appropriation. At the same time, the figures of the orixás are beginning to be incorporated more openly into secular culture, in carnival floats or blocos and in the rhythms and lyrics of popular music, sometimes as part of a rhetoric of liberation from white economic and cultural domination. Among the Catholic clergy, the influence of liberation theology and the renewal of commitment to pastoral activity among the poor has led to greater interest in the values of folk religion, both popular Catholicism and Afro-Brazilian cults. The presence of Candomblé has become more visible, its prestige greater. This is doubled as a source of strength, but it may also be seen as a new kind of appropriation, a subtle transformation in the tenor of life in the terreiros and their relation to the wider world.

My experience of Candomblé is based on sporadic fieldwork during two periods of residence in Salvador, in 1986 and 1987. Although I came to Bahia with an Africanist background, my enquiries were shaped by wider ethnographic reportage which included accounts of communities in various parts of Brazil, so relations between Candomblé and other religions are of primary interest to me. I attended feitiço-de-santo and other rituals at various terreiros, particularly Ilê Axé Opô Afihan (the House of the Power of the Sign of Xangô), a Nagô terreiro in a small coastal town outside Salvador where I lived for a time in 1986. The pai-de-santo, Balbins de Paula, is a filho of Ilê Axé Opô Afihan, one of the most venerable houses of Candomblé in Bahia. He represents, therefore, at least as far as ritual goes, traditional Candomblé, the least syncretic, most ‘African’ kind. Balbinho is in his mid-forties. He has had little formal education but enjoys, more than most pai-de-santo, extensive contact with Bahian intellectuals who interest themselves in Afro-Brazilian religion—writers, artists, musicians, and social scientists. He has also visited Africa twice, a fact that gives him additional authority in the world of Candomblé. His terreiro is a spacious enclave of trees and shrines in the shadow of a high, white sand-dune, secluded but populous, with some half-dozen families and as many individuals in permanent residence. Though twenty kilometers distant from Salvador, it’s regularly visited by people from the city.
These included, during the period of my stay, local politicians, popular musicians, a Catholic priest and the members of a Dahomean cultural delegation, as well as Balbinho’s mogbas, clients and non-resident filhos-de-santo. Ilé Axé Opó Aganju was thus a fair vantage-point for monitoring the everyday life of Candomblé, the gossip world of a terreiro and sporadic discourse concerning its relation to other religions.

There was nothing visibly syncretic about Ilé Axé Opó Aganju. A hut by the gate concealed the phallic emblem of Exú, the trickster of Yoruba deities, guardian of paths and crossroads. Exú is a mercenary deity, often invoked in rituals of magical vengeance and self-aggrandisement that are a significant part of a terreiro’s day-to-day business. For this reason he has long been identified by Christian missionaries in Brazil as the Devil (in the iconography of Umbanda, Exús are represented as red homunculi with horns and tails). These days, only Protestant pastors make an explicit identification of Exú with the Devil; in the Protestant view, all Afro-Brazilian spirits are demons of one kind or another. But the figure of Exú reveals a crucial lack of fit between the moral systems of Candomblé and Christianity, one that no system of correspondences can bridge. The Candomblé vision of the world is permeated by witchcraft; it does not make the same dichotomy between good and evil as the Christian tradition; its deities are not paragons but have both good and bad characteristics in the manner of the gods of Greece and Rome; and its public rituals deal not with guilt and the forgiveness of sins but with the ecstatic transcendence of jealousy and competition.

In Balbinho’s terreiro, the main public rituals, the festas-de-santo, took place in a large building opposite the main gate, the barade. These rituals involve trance-possession of the devotee by one or other of these gods (though not by Exú). The orixás are summoned by drums to take over (pegar) the body of the filho-de-santo. A possessed person dancing is regarded as the embodiment of the god: in the trance, his or her comportment changes, often dramatically, to correspond to the mythic character of the orixás, who may be of a different age and/or sex. The filho-de-santo often has little subsequent recollection of the trance, even though this can last several hours and involve quite violent exertions.

In many terreiros, though not in Balbinho’s, these ceremonies occur under the gaze of Catholic saints, as described above. At Ilé Axé Opó Aganju the saints were present, but confined to the reception-room in Balbinho’s house, along with secular memorabilia. Participation in festas-de-santo, which usually occur on Saturday nights, see no contradiction in attending mass the following day, though few do so. If asked they will almost invariably describe themselves as Catholics. In the census for Lauro de Freitas, the municipality where Balbinho’s terreiro was situated, 32,741 out of a population of 35,437 declared themselves Catholics and only 38 as adherents of an Afro-Brazilian religion. The figure was clearly absurd: more than this number of filho-de-santo came to any given festa at Ilé Axé Opó Aganju and there were half-a-dozen other terreiros in the near vicinity. But there were reasons for the underestimate: historically, discretion has been advisable in revealing such affiliations—from the correspondence between saints and orixás—and Catholicism is still associated with the apparatus of the state, including census-takers. So for the purposes of the census, Balbinho explained to me, fingering the gold crucifix he wore around his neck, that he was a Catholic himself. ‘Everyone is a Catholic,’ he said. ‘We are born Catholics. We are Catholics first, before we become filho-de-santo. It is our birthright. It is like citizenship.’ In this instance Balbinho spoke of Catholicism as though it were a secular power rather than a rival religion. For him, it seemed, acknowledging its claims on the inhabitants of the terreiro was not so much a religious observance as a rendering unto Caesar.

Catholicism can function, however, in a significant way, as a ritual supplement to Candomblé. Despite the elaborate ceremonial of Afro-Brazilian cults, they lack formal rites of passage for two important events: birth and marriage. The second of these is not of great importance in Candomblé, where most filhos-de-santo are poor and few of them are formally married ( terreiros, moreover, offer a metaphorical family for those who fall outside conventional kinship units; for this reason and others they attract a high proportion of single mothers and homosexuals). Catholicism, however, is considered a necessity. I asked the mother of a new-born child, herself a filho-de-santo of Iansã, the most powerful of the female orixás, why she wanted him baptised. She replied, puzzled and amused, ‘Because I don’t want him to grow up a pagan.’ She did not mean, of course, that she did not want her child to participate in the religion of the orixás—he would doubtless be initiated when his orixá manifested itself—rather, she wanted him to have the best of both worlds, since he had to live in two. Baptism was a mark of citizenship, of status in the world outside the terreiro.

At death, a filho-de-santo is subject to Catholic and Candomblé rituals at the same time. An extended Candomblé ceremony, the axxé, coincides with the Christian burial but does not supplant it. When Mãe Menininha of Gariná, the most celebrated of all mães-de-santo in Brazil, died in 1986, she was interred with some pomp in a Catholic cemetery; a mass was sung over her grave at the same time as the axxé began in her terreiro. Such ritual simultaneity, it should be stressed, is evidence not of syncretism but rather of its opposite, complementarity, or, to use Fry’s term, symbiosis. Only at a single point in the funerary ceremonies do the two religions come together. At the axxé for Gariná, a mogba of Ilé Axé Opó Aganju who died an untimely death in 1987, the week-long ritual concluded with a silent prayer, eyes closed and hands together in the Christian manner. Afterwards, I asked Balbinho who we had been praying to, ‘God,’ he said. ‘But which god?’ I asked. ‘The god who is up there,’ said Balbinho.

In a commentary on the second World Orixá Conference, an international meeting of practitioners and analysts of Yoruba-derived religions held in Salvador in 1989, Fry detected two strains of thought about the Catholic Church among the candombléiros (his term for the adherents of Candomblé).
Mãe Stela, of Ilê Axé Opó Alunja, would have no truck with syncretism. Slaves had needed it, she said, but it was no longer necessary. She wished to abolish the correspondences between orixás and figures of Christian mythology. She also opposed the assimilation of the orixás to secular rituals, notably their appearance in carnival processions. Mãe Stela was supported by four other leading Bahian mísse-de-santo, including Mãe Menininha, but a number of pai-de-santo disagreed. Balbinó was among them. ‘Syncretism,’ he said, only exists in a few external aspects of the Yoruba cult. It makes no difference if you dethrone the images of Catholic saints in the terreiro. Candomblé and Catholicism are like water and oil—you can put them in the same glass but they won’t mix.10

Balbinó frequently used this image when asked about syncretism. Sometimes he would shake drops of dondi oil into a bowl of water to make the analogy viable. The viscous, red oil of the dondi palm (Elaeis guineensis), which is of African origin, is an important ingredient in offerings to the orixás, so the contrast with water—holy water—has a special appropriateness. But the image was not entirely unambiguous; purification by water is also an important feature of Candomblé, the annual festa for Oxalá is called the Waters of Oxalá, and the syncretic ceremony at the Church of Bomfim centres on the ritual washing of the church steps. Lúis da Muriçoca, a pai-de-santo who supported Balbinó’s position on syncretism, told the candombeiros at the Orixá Conference:

I know very well that Our Lord of Bomfim is not Oxalá, but nobody is going to take his statue away from my feiti [altar of an orixá]. I have been to mass on Fridays at Bomfim since I was a boy. Our grandparents taught us to do this.

Fry also noted a difference of opinion within the Catholic hierarchy. The then Cardinal-Archbishop of Salvador, Dom Avelar Brantão, was reported as remarking, in response to Mãe Stela’s anti-syncretic petition, that if the adherents of Candomblé rejected syncretism they would be renouncing Christianity. This, he opined, would be bad for both Church and Candomblé. On the other hand, the auxiliary bishop, Dom Boaventura, while doubting that there was any real likelihood of an end to syncretism, argued for the elimination of its more ‘abnormal’ aspects. ‘The two religions’, he was reported as saying,

are intimately linked, at least in Bahia, but we must put an end to this. Syncretism is illegal, contradictory, absurd. Nowadays, on the feast of Our Lady, people don’t know whether they are paying homage to her or to owa njejú. So the ambiguous existence of the two religions had critics and apologists among both Catholic clergy and pai-is and mísse-de-santo. But the progressista wing of the Catholic Church, to which neither Dom Avelar nor Dom Boaventura belonged, had a more radical critique of syncretism. At Ilê Axé

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personal identity constitute a problem for Christian moral theology, though they make sense as responses to the demands of life in a culturally hybrid urban society. Similarly, the emphasis on magical manipulation of the world in Afro-Brazilian religions is hard to reconcile with Christian doctrine. The progressive position on Candomblé, rejecting syncretism but bringing the two religions together in a single embrace of faith, can be maintained only by passing over these divergences. Holy water and *dende* oil, to use Balthasar’s metaphor, can be shaken together but they will not stay mixed. The present tendency in Brazil, a democratic tendency, encouraged by people of goodwill on both sides, to elevate Candomblé to a place alongside Catholicism, is quite proper. But speaking of the two religions as though they were comparable in every respect may obscure the very differences that enable them to co-exist.

Carmelo Ledón-Tolosana

THE BEATAE:
FEMININE RESPONSES TO CHRISTIANITY
IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY CASTILE

The first half of the sixteenth century and the kingdom of Castile compose a spatio-temporal arena in which a struggle unfolded between Christian tradition and modernization. The leading protagonists were women seeking a solution to what is, essentially, an age-old dilemma. Let us explore the culturally specific mode of discourse and action of these deeply religious women who proposed a new, feminine approach to Christianity.

Such women were known as beatas, a term which, although used earlier in different contexts, began in the closing decades of the fifteenth century to be applied to women who, without being nuns, dedicated themselves to lives of marked religious observance and reflection. The word *beata*—"blessed one"—seems already at that time to have had ironic overtones: it conveyed the idea of an exaggerated, affected display of religiosity, and this slightly pejorative meaning is the one that prevails today.

Beatas, in the sense of contemplative, fervent and devout women, often visionaries and miracle-workers, already abounded in Castile during the final two decades of the fifteenth century; but, to be fully appreciated, their emergence must be seen against the backdrop of their curious historical period.

1. Few scholars are familiar with this feminine movement, at its height in sixteenth-century Castile, and certainly it has not to my knowledge been studied from an anthropological perspective. Its significance has not, in fact, been noticed, let alone remarked upon before. The decline of this movement had set in by the seventeenth century, and it is scarcely remembered today. The information in this essay is taken mostly from A. Hurreg, *Historia de los alumbraos* 1520-1650, Madrid 1907, and M. Andrés Martín, Las Beatas: Nueva síntesis de la vida de estas santas españolas 1520-1700, Madrid 1975 (Fund. univ. española, Monographas nos. 31 and 13 respectively), both of which, of course, consider the question mainly from a theological point of view.