

## ***Yorubá and Black Theologies, a Dialogue***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper will show how the African-Brazilian religion called Yorubá can be employed/function as a sacred text, and how it can become a source of strength and a partner in dialogue in the struggle against racism and economic destruction of black people in the Americas. The paper introduces Candomblé. And then develops Diego Irarrázaval's four main points of dialogue in the Black Christian theology-African religions. At the end, the article will focus on the relations between the theological notions of Axé and Holy Spirit and see how this mutual learning can empower these communities. The hope is then to offer a black inter-religious approach that can offer decolonial tools for black theology to expand its sources of sacred texts and embrace the Yorubá religions as its own people. Hopefully black movements of resistance throughout the Americas can offer mutual life, offer resistance, sustenance and honored ways of living.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Axé! In gratitude for my great-grandmothers, stolen from me by white supremacy and colonization, I offer this reflection on the connection between Yorubá and Black/Womanist theologies. It is through a lived understanding of Axé that I have found my roots and the connection to both my Latinidad and my Blackness.

In this paper I consider the possibilities of a dialogue between Candomblé, a Yorubá related African Brazilian tradition, and Black and Womanist theologies in the US, trying to go along with several people who have been expanding this relation, like Dianne M. Stewart's "Three Eyes for the Journey," Tracey E. Hucks' "Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism," and our precious Monica Coleman's "Making a Way Out of No Way."

While I don't explicitly name the relations of Axé and Black/Womanist theologies I hope it will be clear that I see them as commensurate and deeply inter-related rather than oppositional.

The dialogue will be grounded in the Yorubá notion of Axé in relation to the Christian notion of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Candomblé and Black Churches in the US create alternative spaces for the life of black people, spaces where identities are developed and sustained, offering refuge and safety, as well as a springboard to understand ourselves. Thus the theologies of Candomblé and Black/Womanist theologies become theologies that increase our capacity to survive and recreate life for Black people in the Americas.

In this paper I begin with the vicious reality of racism as it is lived in Brazil. I continue with Candomblé and the notion of Axé. From there, I draw connections and similarities between Candomblé, Black and Womanist theologies. I conclude suggesting a dialogue between Axé and Holy Spirit.

While I talk you will see a video of spiritual manifestations both in Pentecostal churches and in Afro-Brazilian religions. The Axé and the Holy Spirit will look very similar.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwodwMY4\\_V0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwodwMY4_V0)

***Racism in Brazil and the resistance of African religions.***

The history of Brazil is the history of Indians, Europeans, Africans and their religions. However, Brazil's history is deeply tainted by almost 400 years of slavery perpetrated by Portugal.

In 1888 Brazil became the last major country in the world to enact a law ending slavery. The impact of 400 years of slavery is still very much alive in Brazil today, but the Brazilian cultural apparatus has made us believe that we are not racists. Brazil's racism is not an "in your face" movement with public signposts saying "blacks are not welcome here," but blacks are not welcome anywhere. Brazilians did not have a civil rights movement but there is a war on black people everyday. Just in 2012, 30 thousand young people were assassinated in Brazil and 77% of them were black kids.<sup>2</sup> The war on Black people is rampant!

As a result of this racism, Brazil, or even Latin America, never developed a sustained black liberation theology. There was no place where the distinctiveness of black lives could be developed. It was and it is still mostly within the Afro-Brazilian religions that this discourse has developed.

So Let us consider Candomblé quickly. Candomblé

Traveling from Africa, Candomblé changed and took on a new configuration in Brazil. Rachel E. Harding defines Candomblé this way:

Candomblé is a rich and complex portico of ritual actions, cosmology, and meaning with deep and obvious roots in several religious traditions of West and West Central Africa – especially Yoruba, Aja-Fon, and Bantu. It is a (re)creation of these traditions, and others, from within the matrix of slavery, colonialism, and mercantilism which characterized Brazil and other new societies of the western hemisphere from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries.<sup>3</sup>

Candomblé is grounded in the mystery of *Awô*, the *secret* that is transmitted orally to new generations of believers over time. Candomblé is passed on by the initiated as they live its religious precepts together. It has a non-structured orality and its tradition is sung and danced and drummed. The synthesis of the whole process, says Alessandra Osuna, would be

the search for an energetic equilibrium between the inhabitants of the material world and the energy of those beings who inhabit the orum, a space dimension that could be called heaven, the interior of the earth or a place beyond anything that is known, according to different understandings of tribes, peoples and traditions. Each human being has an Orixá who protects him/her and that person will only know if s/he gets in touch with the Orixá through a ritual. By fulfilling the obligations ascribed by the Orixá, the person receives a reserve of energy and will gain more equilibrium."<sup>4</sup>

Candomblé is a religion that is particularly suited to a globalized world, with a strong and malleable capacity to adapt and adjust to new places and situations. Candomblé's rituals, prayers, dancing, offerings and so on are sacred texts and its worship spaces, terreiros, a unique place for blackness, that kept and still keep black people in Brazil alive, ancient sacred actions holding a wealth of wisdom that can become a great resource for the ongoing development of black theologies in the American continent.

***Axé***

A central energy sustains the *Awô*, the mystery of the Afro religions that is called *Axé*. Rachel Harding describes *Axé* as the "Yoruba term for spiritual energy, or life force – but the concept of generative and transformative energy present in varying degrees and qualities in all beings is widely held in traditional African societies."<sup>5</sup> For Gisèle Omindarewá Cossard, this force comes from *Olodumarê* and is spread around the world. Everything belongs to it, every seed, stone, flower, a drop of water, and it is transmitted one to another. <sup>6</sup> The Orixas move this force, connecting us with nature and keeping the vital energy in constant flow.

*Axé* is a living text that possesses us and takes hold of our lives. The body becomes a sacred

text, a sacred loci of the manifestation of the Axé.

Oral history and memories are preserved in the body of the people and passed through by dancing, singing, drumming as the movements of the Axe are circulated throughout the entire community. Eating, dancing, dressing, sleeping and living out the precepts are the literal, living text of Axé.

### ***Black Inter-Religious Dialogue***

As we think about the inter-religious dialogue and the pluralism of theologies between Black, Womanist and Candomblé, Diego Irarrázaval gives us paths in the Christian-African religions:<sup>7</sup>

First, “to celebrate and to think, meaning that the celebratory way of the African religions are ways of thinking, of constructing their lives, and a recreating the world.” African-American Christianity and African-American religions hold the celebration of life as one of its fundamental sources of living. Theologies, the thinking of faith, come out of these liturgical celebratory practices that are deeply rooted in our bodies and our cultures. Celebration is not sheer happiness it is an amalgam of death and life together.

Second, Irarrázaval says that we need “to celebrate the mystery of the African way, which is the celebration of the sacred in our bodies, and to realize that the body is a privileged foci for the revelation of the sacred .” While this point does not hold much contention, it is necessary to make a distinction between Christians and Candomblé people as they celebrate through their bodies.

Christianity spiritualizes the body in order to get to a place of acceptance with God. Based on guilt, the body needs to be sanctified, and for that it has to engage in sacrifices, like fasting, sexual abstinence, and penance, so the body can mortify the flesh and become finally spiritual, through an asceticism towards God.

Within Afro religions, including Candomblé, Black and Womanist traditions, there is an opposite movement, toward the embodiment of the Spirit. Without dichotomy or guilt, the body is desired by the Spirits, the Orixas, who come to the body freely without sanctification, to communicate with his/her own people. The body is thus the place of interlocution, of connection, of communion. Possessed by the marvelous, the body dwells in transcendence!

### ***Axé and Holy Spirit***

Axé is a vital force of life, a blessing, a living text that can be only understood like the Yoruba language, by practicing. Axé is a living text when it is drummed, danced, when the Orixas are received or fed, when the energy is cared for by each other in the community. The Axé is a balancing energy that keeps evil away and brings us joy.

In the same way, the Holy Spirit is the vital force of life that can only be understood by living under its guidance and anointing. The Holy Spirit lives in us, making our bodies sacred texts. The Holy Spirit is God balancing our lives, protecting us from demons and the devil and bringin us the angels and God’s mighty presence.

Axé and the Holy Spirit create alternative spaces through rituals that strengthen individual and collective identities against the subjugated force of colonialism and dominant white society that constantly tries to shatter our self-affirmation.

Axé and Holy Spirit dance and call upon the power of the ancestors and the cloud of witnesses to give us strength, to help sustain our life, and move us into the future.

Axé and the Holy Spirit offer alternative places for healing, reconstitution of family, of values, of refuge, and of strength to fight slavery and find freedom.

Axé and the Holy Spirit create conditions for the dismantling of racism and the forms of death that surround us everywhere we go.

Axé and the Holy Spirit create forms of theological thinking that undo the narrative of the master’s house.

Similar to Candomblé worship spaces, black churches are places that sustain the circularity of

energies and strength between the world, people and God. From our womanist theologians we learn the circularity of Axé, moving from our grandmothers' kitchens into the house, the churches and all of the places of our lives. In church our bodies are taken by the Holy Spirit, and we are also possessed by the marvelous presence of God. God comes to us as to talk to us by taking our bodies and be present, or better said theologically, be incarnate in our midst.

***Concluding***

Candomblé offers decolonial tools for black theology to expand its sources of sacred texts and embrace the Yoruba religions as its own people, as we complicate our theological projects to better create life, resistance, sustenance and honored ways of living.

So, imagine Calvin and Barth dancing with Xangô? Tillich and Bonhoeffer dancing with Omolu? Or James Cone, Dwight Hopkins, Stephen Ray or Adam Clark dancing with Ogum? Or Monica Colman dancing with Iansan, or Andrea White dancing with Yemanjá? Powerful thinkers thinking with their Orixas through their bodies!

Axé and Holy Spirit balance the energies of the world and our own people. As we move forward I go to Axé to learn how my people have learned to live and survive. I go to the Holy Spirit to learn how my people have learned to live and survive.

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