

**Rethinking Histories of Resistance in Brazil and Mexico
Project**

**First project seminar, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil
March 27-30, 2007**

**Afro-Brazilian Religion in 19th Century Bahia: Slave
Resistance or Resistance to Slavery?**

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**Preliminary Working Draft: Not to be cited without express written
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This paper covers the formative years of *Candomblé*, an expression that appears for the first time in written record in 1807, and by the mid-nineteenth century had already become the most frequently used term to denote religions of African extraction in Bahia. It referred to both a wide range of religious practices privately performed by ritual specialists, and to a group of initiates hierarchically organized around a cult-head in a temple or *terreiro* where a sort of “convent life” (to use Bastide’s formula) was observed, and public and private ceremonies were held, especially spirit possession rituals to the sound of drums and the performance of dances.¹ Private practices such as divination, healing, witchcraft and counter-witchcraft procedures, and amulet making represented perhaps the most important and widespread dimension of Candomblé life in nineteenth-century Bahia, and they were not necessarily performed in a *terreiro*.

In this paper I will focus on the relationships between Candomblé and slavery, namely how the involvement of slaves with Candomblé affected slavery, which implies how Candomblé helped slaves to cope with, resist and often to overcome slavery. In that sense it addresses the question of slave resistance.

Candomblé was introduced to or reinvented in Brazil by African captives, but it expanded its clientele and membership considerably in the course of the nineteenth century. Actually African freed persons made up the bulwarks of Candomblé. They represented the majority of its leadership and rank-and-file. Candomblé also recruited – primarily, though not exclusively, as clients -- *mestiços* and whites, including individuals who belonged to the elite.² Although the religion represented in many respects “a refuge in thunder” for exiled African slaves, as Rachel Harding argues, it went beyond that.³ In other words, Candomblé was not simply a slave religion, one first reason why it is somewhat complicated to discuss it in terms of slave resistance. Candomblé would rather seem to be a set of practices and world views used by different groups and individuals as an alternative to predominantly Western values, in particular conventional Catholic doctrine, as well as medical and other allegedly scientific procedures. In that sense it could be considered an aspect of African cultural resistance, but this is not the focus of this paper. I am here concerned with social praxis derived from religious affiliation rather than the eventual clash or even hybridization between cultural formations. Religious meaning becomes important in this paper only when it translates slave agency or experience, this being one of the reasons why we also need to take into consideration their masters’ experience with Candomblé.

Slave masters were among those who often sought Candomblé – just as they had sought Calundu during Brazil’s colonial era – for a number of spiritual and material reasons and needs. The evidence on this is considerable, meaning that slave owners could share with their bondmen and women similar attitudes – if not meanings -- toward the spiritual world and the mechanisms to deal with it, including sorcery, habitually following the failure of other methods such as institutional medicine or Catholic masses to patron saints. Unexpected results were sometimes reached. In 1864, a master in Salvador, Bahia’s capital, consulted a famous African diviner and healer about curing his wife only to find out that her lingering illness was allegedly caused by *feitico* or witchcraft dispensed by one of his domestic female slave. The slave was brutally punished by her master.⁴ Situations, such as this one, in which African priests accuses other African slaves on behalf of their masters, make the resistance paradigm difficult to be automatically attached to Candomblé practices. In that respect I would disagree with James

Sweet that even when condemning other slaves to the wrath of masters African diviners challenged the slave holding society because their judicial methods were being chosen over the masters' methods.⁵

Yet Candomblé practices, especially but not exclusively divination and medicinal procedures, may still be considered an important tool of slaves' struggles to challenge their position in society. This is the reason why, although far from being unanimously accepted, the concept that Candomblé and slavery did not make a good mixture was widespread among masters, police and political authorities in nineteenth-century Bahia. It can be argued that the more than thirty slave uprisings and conspiracies that shook the region in that period, and in which the Yoruba-speaking Nagô nation played a predominant role, were possibly inspired, besides Allah, by traditional warrior divinities such as Ogun, the god of Iron and war who became increasingly popular in Yorubaland at the time of the most intense phase of the Bahian slave trade from that region in the 1820s through the 1840s.⁶ There is at least one case for which evidence exists of Candomblé involvement with a concerted slave uprising, the Urubu revolt of 1826. This revolt began with the gathering of fugitive slaves from Salvador in a *quilombo* (runaway slave hideout) in the outskirts of the city. The plan was to attack the capital on Christmas eve, kill the white population and conquer freedom. The revolt was aborted ten days before.⁷

The police found a Candomblé cult house in the site where the quilombo had been implanted. The name of the quilombo itself, Urubu or Vulture, may have derived from the presence on the site of African cult houses, since around them vultures abounded, attracted as they were by the remains of animals sacrificed to African gods and other spiritual entities. These birds are part of Yoruba mythology because they are believed to carry sacrificial offerings to their proper destination.

Accusations that slavery and Candomblé did not match up abound in police records and newspaper reports. In 1853 a police officer arrested a Hausa freedman in the main sugar plantation region of Bahia, the Recôncavo, and reported that the existence of a "great number of Africans" in the area made his cult house a dangerous venture.⁸ In the cult-house the police officer found a long list of ritual objects, animal sacrifices, besides papers written in Arabic that reminded those used eighteen years earlier by Muslim rebels in Salvador.⁹ Nothing indicates, however, that the Hausa man – probably a Bori priest -- had a rebellion in mind, despite his Muslim writings. The relationship between Candomblé and slave resistance followed more often a different, less dramatic path.¹⁰

Usually the association between quilombo and Candomblé did not imply collective, armed resistance, but peaceful, individual slave flight. In 1807 Bahia's colonial governor Count of Ponte unleashed a stern repression to *quilombos* and Candomblé houses located in the suburbs of Salvador. In his report to Lisbon the governor explained that slaves fled to and gathered in the thickets that surrounded the capital under the leadership of "industrial charlatans", and there the runaways "lived in absolute liberty, dancing, wearing extravagant dress, phony amulets, uttering fanatical prayers and blessings. They lay around eating and indulging themselves, violating all privileges, law, order, public demeanor."¹¹

The connection between Candomblé and quilombo continued to be made in Bahia way into the nineteenth-century, and, what is more telling, urban Candomblés were associated with quilombos, which was typically a rural or at least a suburban phenomenon. In 1869, the satirical newspaper *O Alabama* used the expression *quilombos* to refer to the residential buildings occupied by Africans in a street of the populous São Pedro parish, where “the drums, dances and cries boil until late at night”. The newspaper also complained against the foul smell of animal sacrifices emanating from those buildings.¹²

The image of Candomblé as quilombo was justified by the frequency with which slaves abandoned the service of their masters to attend all kinds of religious ceremonies or to consult with diviners and healers. In February, 1859, in a site known as Quinta das Beatas, where Candomblé houses thrived, 42 persons were arrested, among them seven fugitive African slaves. Later in that same year, the police chief announced a large operation in the capital and the interior to close down Candomblé houses where lavish festivals attracted “people of all colors and conditions”. This kind of mixture was considered dangerous by those many Bahians who thought that social segregation helped to keep public order and enhanced European civilization in the province of Bahia. One element in the mixture, namely slaves, was especially undesirable. And I quote the police chief: “The majority of the slave flights originate in these drumming sessions (*batuques*), in which they (the slaves) stayed for days, and fearing a deserved punishment (by their masters) they abscond to very far, and sometimes commit suicide.”¹³ Very far indeed: suicide was perhaps considered by some slaves a last, permanent flight to the other world, which for many meant Africa, a journey undoubtedly negotiated with their gods and ancestors.

In December 1864 the police attacked another candomblé in Salvador, and of the 22 individuals “of both sexes” arrested, nine were African freed persons, and four creole slaves, two of whom had been astray for two months from masters who lived in Inhambupe, a village in the interior of Bahia. The other two slaves were not considered fugitives yet, and they may have negotiated with their masters some break time, an arrangement usually unwelcome by police authorities. In April, 1862, for instance, the Chief of Police took measures to guarantee that masters “watch over their slaves’ behavior and see to it that they retire before curfew, sleep at home and do not wander through the streets.”¹⁴ A few masters did tolerate short-term flights that lasted, say, hours, as long as they did not become a routine. In 1869, Amaro Gomes Vieira asked the police for the release of two of his slaves who had been jailed in the Casa de Correção (House of Correction) for having been arrested in a Candomblé.¹⁵ Masters usually asked the police to punish slaves arrested for this kind of transgression, which was not the case with Amaro. That masters did not accept systematic escapades is illustrated by a letter written in November, 1874, by Felipa Laura Maria da Conceição to the police chief, in which she complained that her African slave named Maria was a chronic runaway who often disappeared to go to candomblés, “disobeying her and refusing to perform even a few domestic tasks.” When Felipa Conceição penned these words, Maria had already been arrested, and her mistress asked the police chief to punish the rebel slave woman with three dozen strikes with the *palmatória* or ferule on the palms of her hands before returning her back to captivity.¹⁶

Candomblé ceremonies to the gods or to the dead could last for days, during which time masters simply had their slave labor force withheld from their service. In April, 1873, a Candomblé that gathered a large number of devotees and nosy visitors of all walks of life, including “fugitive slaves”, had been beating the drums for days and loudly enough to disturb the

neighbors.¹⁷ Slaves systematically challenged the authority of masters to attend Candomblé assemblies, out of devotion or for the fun of it, to socialize with social peers, to see or seek lovers and so on. Women represented the majority among these runaways, thus adding a gender dimension to this genre of challenge to slavery. In 1870, the newspaper *O Alabama* reported that slave women dared to risk “leaving home without the authorization of those who govern them”, so they could participate in the New Yam festival, dedicated to Orisala, which lasted for a couple of days and opened the annual cycle of public religious ceremonies in many Bahian candomblés.¹⁸

Women such as these ones mentioned by the newspaper were probably full members of established Candomblé temples, meaning initiated priestesses. Slaves could abandon the company of masters for several months to undergo initiation rites. The police constantly received complaints from masters who accused cult-heads of keeping slave women imprisoned in their candomblés. The *Alabama* told the story of a master who urged the police to search a house where his slave woman had been “cloistered” by force with several other initiates to undergo ritual obligations that would last between three to six months. The newspaper described the small room (*camarinha*) where the initiates were lodged as extremely filthy and fetid, so much so that the women could only stand it because they had been drugged to the point of losing control over their senses. Certainly herbs that altered one’s perception of reality were part of the initiation process. According to *O Alabama*’s report, after the time spent in seclusion the initiates – whether slave or free -- would still “serve as slaves to the people who had bought them in the saint”, most likely referring to patrons who had paid for the expenses involved in the initiation rites. Echoes of this procedure survived in post-emancipation era rituals and have been studied by Herskovits and more recently by Nicolau Parés.¹⁹

The painful experience of initiation represented a radical rupture with the secular world, which included slavery. Under seclusion, neophytes were taught to obey their parents-in-the saint or ritual leaders, as well as learn total subordination to the new owner of their heads”, meaning the gods they should serve for the rest of their lives. When isolation was suspended, they had to learn all over again the conventions of the outside world, which included its modes of subordination. However, they would never be the same person again, if for nothing else because they were now to serve, dedicate their time and resources to more than one master so to speak, their gods and ritual fathers or mothers included. If their masters still had claims over their bodies, they had now lost control of their minds in a very deep sense. One can only imagine, however, the pressure under which slaves had to live, and better understand why some may have committed suicide, as the chief of police pointed out above. Maybe it is mainly poetry the idea that slave bodies possessed by African spirits became free bodies, “a stunning contestation of subalternity”, as Harding writes, unless this is considered specifically in the context of possession rituals.²⁰ But what if the slave initiate were not a possession priest or priestess as many were not? In any case, slavery as it existed before slave initiation suffered a significant blow. Slaves did not seek religious pledge necessarily as a strategy to fight slavery or aspects of it, but whatever the starting point, more often than not, the end result radically affected their relations with masters.

According to an expression commonly used at the time, slaves involved with Candomblé became *inutilizados*, or useless for their owners. In 1882, this time in the town of Cachoeira, the local district officer arrested seventeen persons in the house of an freed African woman.

According to the police report she was locally “known as a witch and against her there were several complaints from property owners about the evil caused by the superstition that she knows how to instill in slaves and ignorant persons, who, *in their pursuit of happiness*, deviate themselves from their duties by means of witchcraft.”²¹ The freed African woman clearly deviated slaves from their duties to masters, and therefore became an accessory to slave resistance.

But how could an *inutilizado* slave survive the wrath of his/her master? One result that slaves regularly hoped to obtain from consulting with professed *feiticeiros* was embodied in expressions such as “*amansar senhor*” (“taming of the master”), “*abrandar o ânimo do senhor*” (“soften the willpower of the master”), and so on.²² The concept was not entirely new, as the studies by Luiz Mott, Laura de Souza and James Sweet demonstrate for the colonial period in details unfortunately unavailable in my sources.²³ We do know, however, that in nineteenth-century Bahia the taming of a master could mean controlling his anger against slaves who stole from him, disobeyed, idled or escaped. As we saw slaves often absconded to attend Candomblé ceremonies (or for other reasons), and they subsequently returned to slavery and an irate master that needed to be dealt with. In 1853 a slave woman accused of poisoning the coffee she served to her masters’ family in Itaparica island declared that she had only mixed cowry shell powder with lemon because “she was told it was good to soften her masters temper.”²⁴ The African slave certainly knew that cowries, a currency in West Africa, and because of this, had important ritual functions -- as as adornment to sacred emblems or as instruments of divination for example --, and could therefore meet the expected results. A report in *O Alabama* confirms that a major reason for slaves to seek Candomblé priests entailed efforts to break the spirit of masters. In 1868, the newspaper made a list of people who attended a Candomblé house which included -- besides sexually unhappy married women and unsuccessful businessmen -- “slaves who went there to ask for ingredients to soften the willpower of their masters”²⁵

Domingos Pereira Sodré, known as *papai* (daddy) Domingos, a freedman from Lagos, present-day Nigeria, was accused in 1862 of divination and of selling slaves “drinks and mixtures” for them to “be able to tame their masters”, which led to “the loss of many Africans who are today useless (*inutilizados*), their masters not being able to count on their labor.”²⁶ If we are to believe in this verdict, Sodré’s witchcraft promoted efficient slave resistance. The scenario here is one of empowered slaves – empowered by the protection of their gods or more directly by witchcraft procedures and material conduits– who now were able to classify their masters as weak figures who could be manipulated and, above all, who could not react effectively to their slaves’ boldness.

The concept of taming masters belonged to elementary witchcraft protocol, of course. The tamed victim was one that submitted to the will of the person who commissioned the *feitico*. Among other things, witchcraft directed at controlling masters’ willpower may perhaps be seen as a strategy of resistance in the realm of paternalist control typical of nineteenth-century Brazil. As Sidney Chalhoub has explained, resistance in this paternalistic context implied that the resolve of the slave appeared for the master as his own (the master’s) resolve.²⁷ Under paternalist cultural and ideological pressure slaves often worked hard to create bonds of affection with masters often using medicinal and other unconventional methods, but they also tried to untie their lives from those of their masters through negotiated strategies that led to manumission for

instance. Witchcraft and manumission were frequently linked. Domingos Sodr e’s potions presumably could weaken the will of his slave clients’ masters when the time came for them to negotiate manumission terms, namely the cost and conditions of freedom, which could vary widely.

Reporting on an additional damage to the seigniorial order, the chief of police wrote that slaves stole money and valuable objects from their masters to give to Papai Domingos and obtain “their freedom through witchcraft.” The police chief claimed that Salvador was filled with “speculators” like him, and promised an unrelenting repression against them “to guarantee other people’s property and prevent sad consequences.” He was keen on this point when he wrote: “these superstitions are much more damaging in a country in which a large part of its wealth is invested in slaves.”²⁸ What the police chief did not realize was that Sodr e also led a manumission society, a kind of savings institution that lent slaves money to buy their freedom. At least part of what slaves stole from their masters almost certainly ended up in the manumission society’s funds controlled by Sodr e.²⁹ One disappointing detail though: Sodr e did not bewitch masters and led a manumission society out of ideological or moral opposition to slavery, for he was himself a slave owner.

Domingos Sodr e represents well the ambiguity of Candombl e towards slavery, for his experience just like that of his religion in a wider sense, lay on the threshold between slavery and freedom. Candombl e served a wide range of devotees and clients irrespective of their social backgrounds, including both slaves and masters. Being as it was staffed primarily by freed and free persons, Candombl e served as a showcase for slaves eager to conquer freedom, besides helping them to reach that goal through a series of ritual procedures. But because Candombl e leaders had to negotiate a breathing space in a hostile, master-controlled environment, they rarely attacked slavery head on. In many ways slavery represented just one among other misfortunes against which Candombl e priests had to fight when healing the lives of slave clients specifically. In that sense, Candombl e was only marginally concerned with the question of slavery. Thus, in answering the question posed in the title of this paper, as far as Candombl e was concerned, slave resistance did not always imply resistance to slavery. The slaveholding system, however, almost always suffered from the interest slaves invested in Candombl e, for even when it fulfilled slaves’ spiritual needs that were unrelated to their pursuit of freedom, Candombl e still challenged slavery by simply competing with masters for their time, labor and resources.

ENDNOTES

¹ Roger Bastide, *O Candombl e da Bahia: rito nag o* (S o Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2001). Also see Vivaldo da Costa Lima, *A fam lia de santo nos candombl es jejes-nag os da Bahia* (Salvador: Corrupio, 2003).

² For a definition of calundu, see Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 144-45.

³ Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder*.

⁴ *O Alabama*, 12 January 1864.

⁵ Sweet, *Recreating  frica*, 120, 135. And then there is a sentence such as this: “Sometimes the outcomes of African divinations did not affirm

the expectations of white clients, working instead in favor of slaves" (p. 134). Only "sometimes"?

⁶ On the expansion of Ogun's cult in nineteenth-century Yorubaland, see J. F. A. Ajayi, "The Aftermath of the Fall of Oyo", in J. F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder (eds.), *History of West Africa* (London: Longman, 1974), 133; Sandra T. Barnes and Paula Girshick Ben-Amos, "Ogun, the Empire Builder", and J. D. Y. Peel, "A Comparative Analysis of Ogun in Precolonial Yorubaland", both in Sandra T. Barnes (ed.), *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 39-64, 263-289. See also, on what he calls "the Era of Ogun", J. Lorand Matory, *Sex and the Empire that is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), esp. 13-22.

⁷ For details on the 1826 revolt, see João José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 55-59.

⁸ Subdelegado-suplente of Monte parish, Gustavo Balbino de Moura e Camira, to the delegado of São Francisco do Conde, 15 March 1853, apud Cecília Moreira Soares, "Resistência negra e religião: a repressão ao candomblé de Paramirim, 1853", *Estudos Afro-Asiáticos*, 23 (1992), 139.

⁹ On this revolt, see Reis, *Slave Rebellion*.

¹⁰ Grade, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 128-31, promises but does not demonstrate the role of Candomblé in the abolition of slavery in Bahia.

¹¹ Count of Ponte to Viscount de Anadia, 7 April 1807, in *Anais da Biblioteca Nacional do Rio de Janeiro*, 37 (1918), 450-51.

¹² In its edition dated 24 August 1869, *O Alabama* also refers to a terreiro as a quilombo.

¹³ Chefe de Polícia ?????? to the President of Province, 28 April 1859, APEBa, *Polícia. Correspondência expedida*, vol. 5726, fl. 320.

¹⁴ Chief of Police to the President of the Province, n.d, and Subdelegado Sinfrônio Pires de Franca to the Chief of Police, 12 December 1864, APEBa, *Polícia*, maço 3139-28; Edict by the Chief of Police João Antonio de Araujo Freitas Henriques, 21 April 1862, *Diário da Bahia*, 23 April 1862.

¹⁵ Amaro Gomes Vieira Lima to the Chief of Police, n/d, APEBa, *Polícia*, maço 6335.

¹⁶ Felippa Laura da Conceição to the Chief of Police, 14 November 1874, APEBa, *Polícia*, maço 6497

¹⁷ Chief of Police A. Ferreira Espinheira to subdelegado of Santo Antonio parish 2d district, 17 April 1873, APEBa, *Polícia*, maço 5819.

¹⁸ *O Alabama*, 24 November 1870. For a short description of this ceremony, see Manuel Querino, *A raça africana e seus costumes* (Salvador: Livraria Progresso Editora, 1955), 52-53. See also Graden, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 121-22.

¹⁹ Luis Nicolau Parés, "Memories of Slavery in Religious Ritual: Comparing Benin Vodun and Bahian Candomblé" (unpublished essay, 2006). See also an earlier study by Melville Herskovits, *The New World Negro* (Indiana University Press, 1966), 217-25.

²⁰ Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder*, 156.

²¹ Delegado José Antonio de J(?) to the Chief of Police, 15 May 1882, APEBa, *Polícia*, maço 6503. Emphasis added.

²² This too had colonial antecedents. Souza, *O Diabo*, 206-08.

²³ Sweet, *Recreating África*, pp. 164-165, 166-167, 185; Souza, *O Diabo*, pp. 206-209, 265. Ver também Laura de Mello e Souza, "Revisitando o calundu", in Lina Gorenstein e Maria Luiza Tucci Carneiro (orgs.) *Ensaio sobre a intolerância - inquisição, marronismo e anti-semitismo* (São Paulo, Humanitas, 2002), pp. 293-317.

²⁴ "Relatório dos sucessos, violências, e crimes que tiveram lugar na Província durante o mez de Setembro de 1853", APEBa, *Polícia. Relatórios para a Presidência, 1849-54*, livro n° 5689, fl. 344v. In this case, doctors at the Faculdade de Medicina da Bahia concluded that arsenic had been used by the slave cook. Certainly the vomit and dizziness suffered by those who consumed the coffee were not caused by shell's powder; however, that could have been the information passed on to the slave by whoever prepared the substance.

²⁵ *O Alabama*, 2 September 1868.

²⁶ Subdelegado Pompílio Manuel de Castro to the Chief of Police, 27 July 1862, APEBa, *Polícia*, maço 6234. See also Harding's discussion of this case as a strategy of slave resistance in *A Refuge in Thunder*, 94.

²⁷ On paternalism in the world of slaves and dependents in nineteenth-century Brazil, see Sidney Chalhoub, *Machado de Assis historiador* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2003).

²⁸ Chief of Police João Antonio de Araújo Freitas Henriques to *subdelegado* of São Pedro parish, 25 July 1862, APEBa, *Polícia. Correspondência expedida, 1862*, vol. 5754, fl. 215.

²⁹ See a detailed narrative of Sodré's story in João José Reis, "Domingos Pereira Sodré, um sacerdote africano na Bahia oitocentista", *Afro-Ásia*, 34 (2006): 237-313.