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CONVIVIALITY AND BECOMINGS WITH-IN DIFFERENCE: MORE-THAN-HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN CANDOMBLÉ

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, focusing on Candomblé among Afropindoramic¹ peoples in Brazil, I analyze the complex dynamics of relationships among more-than-humans², showing how an ontological monism, based on forces and flows, a composite and continuously in-becoming³ constitution of beings with-in⁴ difference, a circular conception of life and of a dynamic balance of forces in the cosmos, all sustain a form of worlding and a mode of existence that struggles to survive in niches of resistance and re-existence.

Candomblé emerges in a process of reterritorialization of human beings, divinities, and traditions, after forced deterritorialization and the destruction of their social structures with the slave trade. Despite the variability among the different traditions and lineages, because of a lack of centralized organization, and the prevalence of orthopraxis over orthodoxy, we can define Candomblé through the following distinctive features: the worship of ancestry, the ritual embodiment of divinized ancestors⁵

¹ I employ the term Afropindoramic according to Antônio Bispo dos Santos (2016) in order to denote Traditional African-Derived Peoples and Indigenous peoples in Brazil.

² The term “more-than-human” is employed in the sense of Sarah Whatmore (2006), who proposes it in order to break the dichotomy between human and non-human, showing how the non-human is entangled with the human while also exceeding it. The term “non-human” refers to animate and inanimate beings including those considered as pertaining to the “natural realm” like animals, plants, minerals, etc.; those of the “technological realm” like objects, artifacts, etc., and those of the “spiritual realm” like spirits, ancestors, divinities and forces.

³ According to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “Becomings” denote “new kinds of relations emerging from non-hierarchical alliances, symbiotic attachments, and the mingling of creative agents” (1987, p. 241–242).

⁴ I use the hyphen in “with-in” in order to refer to being in relation with and making part of.

⁵ *Orisha* in *ketu nation*, *vouduns* in *jeje* and *efon* ones, or *inquices* in the *angola* one. The generic term *saint* is also used. Each nation refers to different traditions of the African continent (*ketu nation* to Yorubaland in West Africa, *jeje* and *efon* to the ancient kingdom of Dahomey, in Benin Republic, *angola* to the Bantu people of Central Africa) and distinguishes itself from the others through ritual

(who hold sway over the elements of nature and social and cultural domains, such as war, metallurgy, hunting, justice, and medicine), a complex initiation procedure, animal sacrifice, oral transmission of knowledge marked by secrecy, oracular consultation, and social organization in so-called *terreiros*.

Candomblé communities, as well as other Traditional African-Derived Peoples⁶, form “an *other* population” in Brazil, a “niche of culture preservation and creativity” (Segato 1988, p. 143). According to the author:

The Afro-Brazilian religions [...] constitute a very important niche of culture preservation and creativity. These traditions have inscribed a monumental African codex containing the accumulated ethnic experience and strategies of African descendants as part of a nation. [...] It contains a stable repertoire of images that make up a truly alternative myth, and the forms of conviviality they enforce spread far, affecting the society at large, well beyond the niches of orthodoxy where the work of elaboration and preservation of this codex takes place. In this sense, this codex operates as a stable reservoir of meaning from which flows a capillary, informal, and fragmentary impregnation of the whole of society (Segato 1998, p. 143).

Candomblé’s philosophy and way of being in the world are passed down through coexistence and the word of the elders⁷, in a process marked by a bodily and affective involvement with people, sacred objects, and space. Customs, traditions, values, myths, languages, rhythms, and songs all contribute to the development of skills, sensitivities and ancestry-based identity.

The survival of Traditional African-Derived Peoples is threatened together with their vital relationship with nature and the territory, in a society in which structural racism and religious intolerance directly attack their communities, members, culture, and ritual practices (animal slaughter foremost); the market economy puts at stake their traditional forms of food production, consumption and sharing; and global ecologic, climatic, and pandemic crises particularly impact their members and communities.

I note that some *terreiros*, particularly those led by white men with higher economic status, take advantage of the market economy, make an extensive use of media to publicize their services, gain prestige from strategic relationships with political authorities, artists, and intellectuals, and participate in transatlantic routes that connect West Africa with the African Diaspora or expand to other countries (see, for instance, Prandi 2004). Other *terreiros*, particularly those located in urban outskirts or rural areas, mostly composed by Black and poor people, mostly led by

language, drum rhythms, the ancestors worshipped and some ritual elements. In this paper I employ the terms of the *ketu nation* and the Yoruba spelling (see, for instance, Beniste 2021).

⁶ African-Derived religious communities may be considered among the Traditional African-Derived Peoples, as claimed by many religious leaderships and recognized by the Federal Government (Cartilha 2016).

⁷ Elder people (considering both age and initiation seniority, i.e., the time passed from the initiation, and the religious offices occupied) are highly valued as respected, for their accumulation of knowledge, experience, and sacred force.

women and/or linked to Black Movements, oppose current changes and fear for the continuity of their existence, accusing colonialism, capitalism and racism, as well as the *terreiros* which exploit the market economy.

It is especially continuous urbanization, pollution, and deforestation that invade their territories and attack the vital relationship of Afropindoramic peoples with nature, threatening to destroying their niches of cultural resistance and places of refuge, in a process that Anna Tsing (2015) connects with the Anthropocene/Capitalocene/Plantatiocene⁸.

In any case, Candomblé communities show great force of resistance and re-existence, continuing to adapt to new situations; developing and maintaining social and political activism on behalf of their members and those in need, and fighting against racism, religious intolerance, police violence against Black people, gender inequalities, hunger, diseases with higher incidence among Black people⁹ and epidemics, environmental exploration, and pollution. They also establish alliances with other Afropindoramic peoples in order to make their voices heard in global debates on climatic and ecological crises, proposing forms of living in a more harmonious and respectful way with the other forms of life, the environment, and cultural differences.

In this paper I explore the complex dynamics of more-than-human relationships in Candomblé as part of its philosophy of life and mode of existence, which sustain the struggles for preserving nature and its communities' living conditions, in dialogue with my interlocutors in the field, the members of the *Àşe Idasilê Qdê*, a Candomblé *terreiro* of the *ketu* nation, directed by Bábá Marcelo dos Santos Monteiro Ifamakanjuõla Alabi Adedosu, located in the neighbourhood of Olaria, in the northern zone of Rio de Janeiro, and members of other *terreiros* in the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro. The *Àşe Idasilê Qdê* has familiar conduction, since Bábá Marcelo, his wife *Ïyá* Dolores Lima Oyaiyele (both "born in Candomblé", i.e., whose families practiced Candomblé) and their children all have religious offices in the *terreiro*. The members of the *Àşe Idasilê Qdê* live in different neighbourhoods of Rio de Janeiro, have varying educational level, economic and professional position, and include numerous Black people. Bábá Marcelo and *Ïyá* Dolores participate in local and national political, social, and cultural activities, particularly for the recognition and dissemination of Afro-Brazilian traditions, food sovereignty, and traditional African-Derived forms of production and distribution, environmental issues, health and education, as well as the battle against religious intolerance, racial and gender inequalities, and violence.

The data that will be discussed in this paper are the fruit of an intensive participation in the life of the *Àşe Idasilê Qdê* community over five years, when I took part in collective and individual rituals, festivities, courses, seminars, political meetings; debates on ecology, food, religious intolerance, and daily life, as well as feasts and

⁸ See Crutzen and Stoemer (2000); Moore (2015); Haraway et al. (2016).

⁹ Particular attention is given to sickle cell anaemia, hypertension, AIDS, Covid-19, and the higher incidence of maternal mortality among Black women.

rituals in other *terreiros*, demonstrations and celebrations in the public space, and Afro-Brazilian artistic performances. The time spent together allowed me to learn from the elders in the traditional way in which people enter the *terreiro*, to develop skills and sensitivities, as well as to witness exceptional events and the affective and reflexive reactions of people to them.

In conducting my research, I followed the steps of Èṣù, the trickster, *òriṣà* of communication and movement, who also constitutes the foundational principle of Yoruba cosmology (Sàlámi, Ribeiro 2015) and ethics (Aguessy 1970). Èṣù invites one to stay at the crossroads (*okoritameta*), a place of encounters and multifaceted realities, where “the principles of mobility, transformation, unpredictability, exchange, languages, communications and every form of creative act are evoked” (Rufino 2019, p. 74).

Therefore, my research is based on a “relational ethnography”, as proposed by Matthew Desmond: “fields rather than places, boundaries rather than bounded groups, processes rather than processed people” (Desmond 2014, p. 548), thus favouring processes involving configurations of relations, transformations, movements, and exchanges. Extending the social to more-than-human beings, I follow the proposal of multispecies ethnography (e.g., Haraway 2008), studying the contact zones where lines separating nature from society have broken down, and how encounters with a multitude of organisms’ livelihoods generate mutual ecologies as well as political, economic, and cultural forces, and of an “anthropology of life” – i.e., “an anthropology that is not just confined to the human but is concerned with the effects of our entanglements with other kinds of living selves” (Kohn 2007, p. 4).

The paper is organized into four sections. In the first section, I present the myth of the creation of the universe collected in the field, which serves as the foundation for further investigation. In the second section, I explore the common origin, interdependence, and interconnectedness of all more-than-human beings, as well as how an ontological monism underpins different ways of relating to nature and other more-than-human beings. In the third section, I examine the movement and transition possibilities expressed by the *òriṣà* Èṣù, which sustains a multifaceted reality, in which all more-than-human beings are part of a meshwork of relationships and forces, as well as individualized and conscious beings. In the fourth section, I present the relationship of Candomblé practitioners with the Earth and the land as something they belong to and to which they should reintegrate after death, in a circular conception of life.

THE MYTH OF THE CREATION OF THE UNIVERSE

The myth describing the formation of the universe and of all beings which populate the *aiyé* (the material world) shows an original state of undifferentiation between the divine principle and all beings, as well as the process of individualization of all beings, which continue to be interconnected and form a meshwork of life lines.

I present a version of this myth elaborated by Bàbá Marcelo from the translation of the Yoruba text *Awon àṣà ati òrìṣà ilẹ̀ yoruba* by Olu Daramola and Adebayo Jeje, which differs from other versions principally from the *òrìṣà* in charge of creating the *aiyé* (here, Òrúnmilà, divinity of wisdom and creator of the oracular system, Ifá; in other versions, Ọ̀bàtálá or/and Odùdùwà).

Ọ̀lórún, the lord of the *òrun* (the sky, the spiritual world) was willing to create the *aiyé*, the physical world where humans, animals, vegetables, and minerals would live. Saturated with the energy emanating from him, called *àṣe*, he exploded and subdivided into the *osa* (the four basic elements of the universe): *osa omi* (water), *osa ilẹ̀* (land), *osa iná* (fire), and *osa ofurufun* (air). These, in turn, subdivided into different unfoldings or divine variations. For example, the water unfolded into the river, the lagoon, the rain, the sea, etc.; and fire into the sun, the thunderbolt, etc.

Proceeding in the formation of the *aiyé*, Ọ̀lórún gathered all the divinities and presented them with two gourds, one containing a red mass (the *osùn*¹⁰) and the other a white mass (the *èko* or *àkàsà*¹¹), and the tree of life. He told them: “Whoever manages to put a gourd in each hand and the tree of life on the head will create the physical world.” All of the deities tried, but none of them succeeded. Henceforth, Ọ̀lórún created a being called Òrúnmilà, whose name (Orun-mi-ela) means “my action in the universe”. Òrúnmilà represents the “spiritual link between God and all his creation” (Aderonmu 2015, p. 75) and is responsible for maintaining order in the *aiyé* and for advising human beings to conduct their lives in the best way through the oracle. Òrúnmilà achieved the task and, consequently, received the bag of generic existence, which contained physical particles from each of the four *osa*, the tree of life, a chicken, and a chameleon. He poured the content of the bag of existence into the immensity of the cosmos and a mass began to form. Then he sent the chicken, which began to spread the earth (*ilẹ̀*), so rivers, oceans, mountains, hills, minerals, vegetables, animals etc. began to form, and the fragments of the *osa* took physical form. Before descending to the Earth, Òrúnmilà sent the chameleon (one of the main symbols of this divinity), which, after stepping on and proving the firmness of the Earth, invited him to come. So, Òrúnmilà stepped on the *aiyé*, placed the two gourds, planted the tree of life and turned to Ọ̀lórún, giving him the title of Olódùmarè (“the Lord of creation”) in order to know how to proceed. Following his directions, the next day, before the sunrise, Òrúnmilà uncovered the two gourds, gathered their contents and put water on top, giving rise to Yangí, the laterite stone¹². With his breath, Olódùmarè transformed Yangí into Èṣù Igbá Kẹta (“the third gourd”) – the first being of the generic existence. Continuing to throw water on Èṣù every day, the first human beings formed and began to reproduce and populate the *aiyé*.

¹⁰ Red powder extracted from the tree *Dracaena Mannii Agavaceae* through termites or sawdust natural action. It is connected with the Ìyámí, the Ancestral Mothers, and blood, especially menstrual blood, and, so, to fertility and the generative potency of women and nature.

¹¹ Paste prepared with white cornflour or with white corn.

¹² A ferruginous and aluminous stone, reddish in colour, common in West Africa.

Èṣù, a male *òrìṣà*, is represented with a big phallus to indicate his role in life's origin and reproduction through sexual intercourse. He is the dynamic principle of life and of individuality, the *òrìṣà* of communication and movement, who makes the *àṣẹ* circulate in the universe, ensuring the continuity of life and the order in the cosmos (Sàlámi, Ribeiro 2015) and society (Aguessy 1970). In some cases, "order arises from chaos and justice is often conquered through the fight against injustice" (Sàlámi & Ribeiro 2015, 139), often provoked by Èṣù.

ONTOLOGICAL MONISM AS THE BASIS OF RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS ALL BEINGS

According to the myth of creation of the universe, each *osa*, its unfoldings and all beings appear as Ọlórún itself fragmented and differentiated, as the outcome of a flux which can be cut in various ways, akin to how light refracts into rainbow colours. Marcio Goldman (2005) expresses the process of subdivision, emanation and unfolding of the *àṣẹ* from Ọlórún through the concepts of "modulation", "molarization" and "crystallization":

Axé modulations – in a simultaneous process of concretization, diversification and individualization – constitute everything that exists and can exist in the universe. The deities themselves or *orixás* in the first place. Each of them is nothing more than the embodiment of a specific axé modulation. Then the beings and things of the world: stones, plants, animals, humans – but also colours, flavours, smells, days, years etc. – 'belong' to different *orixás*, but only to the extent that they share with them this simultaneously general and individualized essence. In a sense, each being constitutes, in fact, a kind of crystallization or molarization deriving from a movement of the axé, which from general and homogeneous force diversifies and materializes uninterruptedly (Goldman 2005, p. 107).

The *àṣẹ*, analogous to other principles like *mana* and *orenda*, constitutes life in all of its manifestations and forms, enables the life process, ensures dynamic existence and the process of happening and becoming (Elbein 2008). As a result, we can say that Candomblé is founded on an ontological¹³ monism, a common origin and unity of substance and essence from which existence descends, an all-encompassing power. According to Goldman (2009), "the unity of this force guarantees that everything participates in everything, but its modulations imply that there are degrees of participation" (ibidem, p. 123) and "everything exists in perpetual interaction" (ibidem, p. 133).

The movement, exchange, transition, and circulation of the *àṣẹ* ensure the continuity of life, in successive states of balance and unbalance, so that, using the words of Roger Bastide, we can define Candomblé as a "dynamism", "a vitalist or dynamic philosophy, a theory of Forces" (Bastide 1953, p. 32), which can flow, circulate and be manipulated, concentrated and distributed, but can also diminish and spoil. Stagnation and disruption of mobility would signify weakness and death. Èṣu, as

¹³ I use the term "ontology" as a "way of worlding", according to Mario Blaser (2012, p. 5).

“the third gourd” and as generating principle from which the first human beings formed, is both number three (the first odd number) and the operation “+1”, which represents the generating and transforming power, as expressed in formulas in which +1 produce the infinite rather than the successive number. Thus, Bábá Marcelo often said that there are $400+1$ *òriṣà*, i.e., an infinite number.

Human beings increase and balance their *àṣẹ*, which is synonymous with life and health, in rituals aimed at transmitting, making the human being “participate” in specific modulations of *àṣẹ* and establish flows and movements of *àṣẹ* in the cosmos (Calvo 2019), as well as in daily actions such as taking a bath, drinking, and eating.

In a discussion following a feast for the *òriṣà* at the *Àṣe Idasilẹ Ode*, Ìyá Dolores spoke on traditional food production of Traditional African-Derived Peoples, diet and the meal served to guests after a feast for the *òriṣà*. This meal may be more or less elaborated depending on the occasion and in some *terreiros* it is common to offer the so-called “White’s food”, i.e., dishes common to daily or special occasions in the general society, as opposed to the food prepared with the meat of the animals which were sacralized and sacrificed to the *òriṣà* and the ancestors, which distributes *àṣẹ* and reinforces relationships among the humans, the *òriṣà* and the ancestors.

When feasible, the animals offered to the *òriṣà* are reared in the *terreiro*, otherwise purchased from breedings specialized for Afro-Brazilian religions, where they are reared in open spaces, well-treated and preserved in good health, as is the case in of the *Àṣe Idasilẹ Ode* and the other *terreiros* I attended.

Ìyá Dolores further stated that industrial production techniques, the use of chemical products in the fields, and animal suffering in intensive farming deprive food of nutrients and life. As a reaction and survival strategy, some practitioners of African-Derived religions engage in social activism in support of ecology and assert their right to “food sovereignty”, including respect for their traditional system of food production and relationships with the land. For example, Ìyá Dolores is a member of the FONSAPOTMA (National Forum of Food and Nutrition Security of Traditional African-Derived Peoples)¹⁴, which forms alliances with other Traditional African-Derived communities (as *quilombos*¹⁵) and other organizations, such as the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Movement of Rural Workers without Land)¹⁶, to protect their rights to traditional food production and consumption, to promote agroecology (which, according to Ìyá Dolores, “is a new way of naming what our ancestors have always done”), a sustainable and respectful relationship with the environment and other beings, and to combat famine.

When animals, plants, minerals, waters, air, and natural ecosystems are contaminated, ruined, or mistreated, their *àṣẹ* weakens, it is no longer living and the *òriṣà*

¹⁴ www.fonsapotma.com.br, accessed 24.06.2022.

¹⁵ Originally, communities of African descent who resisted slavery during colonization, coming to also include other communities formed through territorial, social, cultural, and kinship relations.

¹⁶ www.mst.org.br, accessed 24.06.2022.

no longer live there. As a result of the invasion of concrete in urban outskirts, traffic and pollution, as well as the reduction or erasure of forests, the members of the *Àṣe Idasilẹ̀ Ọḍẹ* and many other *terreiros* located in urban outskirts are forced to drive for hours in order to collect pure water from rivers or waterfalls for ritual use, or to find uncontaminated forests or rivers to perform rituals (such the initiation or cleansing) or deposit offerings.

On the basis of the conscience of these problems, many practitioners of African-Derived religions are substituting clay potters with castor bean leaves and composing offerings¹⁷ from perishable components, which may be absorbed by nature more rapidly and do not intoxicate animals which may consume them.

An informal network of *terreiros* as well as more organized associations and actions, such as the *Terreiro Sustentável* (Sustainable Terreiro)¹⁸, promote the production of sustainable offerings, the substitution of clay, glass, and plastic objects with perishable materials and the reduction of offerings in size and quantity. Furthermore, many Candomblé practitioners criticize the richness and ostentation in dresses, sacred objects, offerings, feasts and decorations of other *terreiros* and accuse those practices, along with the insertion of Candomblé into the religious market, of a supposed imminent “end of Candomblé” and the consequent difficulties of poor people in practicing this religion (with the result of exclusion of most Afro-descendants). This reveals, more than a diminished number of practitioners, the *saudade*¹⁹ for the “Candomblé of ancient times”, with bare feet, simple dresses, knowledge that was lost and buried with the elders, as well as values like humility and reverence to the elders.

Bàbá Marcelo pointed out that his intention is for an offering to be accepted by the *òriṣà* and “work” (in the sense of producing the desired effects and bringing peace, health and prosperity) and this is dependent on the *àṣẹ* contained there (which is unrelated to quantity or brightness), faith, good feelings and intentions.

The care with sustainable offerings is also motivated by the desire to avoid accusations of polluting the environment, especially in the light of the recent rise in religious intolerance and violence against African-Derived religions, as revealed by a message that Bàbá Marcelo shared in the *Àṣe Idasilẹ̀ Ọḍẹ* WhatsApp group: he photographed some voluminous offerings in clay pots in a busy street near his *terreiro* and decried environmental contamination and the vulnerability of all practitioners of African-Derived religions to criticism and hostility.

¹⁷ Offerings can be deposited in the forest, near a river or a waterfall, under a tree, at crossroads, in the trash, either directly or after a period at the *òriṣà*'s *ojúbo* (also called collective *assentamentos*, which are, at the same time, the place where the *òriṣà*'s energy is concentrated, where they live and are worshipped and the same *òriṣà*), depending on the oracle's direction and the purpose of the offering.

¹⁸ www.terreirosustentavel.com, accessed 24.06.2022.

¹⁹ The Portuguese term *saudade* may be defined as a form of intensively living the past through memory, with a feeling of loss, joy, and love; a search for roots and existential, symbolic, and affective territories which may constitute the basis for the present and the future.

In Rio de Janeiro, a park with green fields and a waterfall, called *Parque Ecológico dos Orixás* (Orixás' Ecological Park)²⁰, was formed and is administered by practitioners of African-Derived religions in order to have a location to perform their rituals and offerings, in security, peace, and respect for the environment, and to avoid acts of religious intolerance.

Responsibility, respect, reciprocity, sharing, care, and repair are called into question in individual and collective choices and actions, in the relationships with all more-than-human beings, as well as the consciousness of mutual connections and dependence in maintaining a dynamic balance of forces in the cosmos, where events which disrupt this balance can have severe consequences at individual and collective levels and require reparation.

For instance, the Covid-19 pandemic received interpretations in light of this principle: according to many Candomblé priests, the pandemic arose from an unbalanced relationship with nature, which suffers from the destruction of the survival conditions of all living beings through deforestation; air, water and earth pollution; extensive farming; industrial agriculture; the extraction of minerals and fossil fuels; wildlife trafficking and the devastation of ecosystems. As a result, the pandemic represents both a consequence and a reaction of nature, attempting to impose a new balance and compelling human beings to think on and adjust their attitude towards nature and the other humans (Calvo 2021).

ÈṢŪ, WEAVER OF LIFE LINES AND RULER OF THE BODY

In a hybrid ontology, based on multiplicities²¹, continuities, creativity, not-excluding possibilities, and transitions, Èṣù represents the principle of existence, the movement of *àṣẹ*, the interconnection and unity of existence, which flows from a common divine origin, as well as the principle of individualization. Èṣù is *Ọlòṣjà*, the lord of marketplaces, locations of encounters and exchanges, the *òrìṣà* of crossroads (particularly those of three streets, *okoritameta*), where centripetal and centrifugal movements originate, streets and people meet or depart, where the nine celestial spaces meet with the nine earthly spaces.

Èṣù appears in many myths as a trickster, transgressing, transforming, disguising, and subverting limitations and rules (including space and time, as expressed in his infinite possibilities of movement and in the common sentence “Èṣù killed a bird yesterday with the stone that he threw today”), but his actions always seek to maintain order in the cosmos and society. Èṣù constitutes the foundational principle of Yoruba cosmology (Salámì, Ribeiro 2015) and ethics (Aguessy 1970) and has a privileged position in all ritual acts: he is the first “to eat” (to receive offerings) and to

²⁰ www.uucab.com.br/parque/historia, accessed 24.06.2022.

²¹ “Multiplicities” is intended in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), as a substantive tied to a pluralism that resists any form of dualism.

be invoked when rituals are performed, because he is “the elder”²² of all *òrìṣà*, who can establish communication and deliver the offerings to the other *òrìṣà*.

As Èṣù Obara, the ruler of the body, and “the third gourd” in the myth of creation of the *aiyé*, Èṣù also embodies the principle of individualization, the “cutting” of flows and forces which gave rise to the different forms of existence, the actualization which proceeds from the virtual²³ to active structures through the intensive processes of individualization and moves, the individualization from a protomatter. This may be illustrated through the ritual significance and the form of preparation of the *èko* or *àkàsà*, when a fluid matter condenses and takes form. According to the myth of creation of the universe, the *àkàsà* is the material contained in one of the two gourds of existence from which Èṣù and the first human beings formed.

In the kitchen of the *Àṣe Idasile Ode*, I learned how to properly prepare the *àkàsà*: water is added to cornflour or white corn, which is then heated while mixing with a wooden spoon. A paste forms, the consistency of which is evaluated by pouring a few drops into a glass of water, and the preparation stops only when it does not come apart, since, as Bàbá Marcelo explained to me, the *àkàsà* represents a human body. In fact, the *àkàsà* takes form from a fluid matter, realizing the same process of formation and individualization of Èṣù and of the first human beings from the original protomatter. Alcides Reis (2002) underlines the ritual significance and symbolism of the *àkàsà*:

There is only one offering capable of restoring the *axé* and bringing peace and prosperity to the earth, and that is the *acaçá*. [...] As a result, the *acaçá* is a [human] body, the symbol of a being, the only offering that restores and redistributes the *axé*. [...] The *acaçá* refers to the ultimate meaning that life can have: life itself (Reis 2002, p. 17, 18).

Èṣù expresses a hybrid ontology: a multifaceted reality, in which all beings are, at the same time, a condensation of forces and individuals with a destiny, autonomy, will, conscience, desires, and feelings; which I propose to express with the metaphor of light, with its double nature as energy and matter, which can manifest in one or another form depending on the observation conditions and the interaction with other beings and forces.

As Francis Nyamnjoh (2017) argues for popular understanding of reality in Nigeria, also in Candomblé consciousness is something that “can inhabit any container – human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate, visible and invisible – regardless of the state of completeness or incompleteness of the container in question” (Nyamnjoh 2017, p. 4).

²² In Candomblé, old age is associated with authority, as a result of accumulation of *àṣe*, knowledge, and experience.

²³ I mean the pair “virtual-actual” in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), as opposed to the pair “possible-real”, where the virtual is already a positivity which hasn’t yet been actualized. In Candomblé, the process of creation is a manifestation of previously existing virtualities rather than an *ex-nihilo* creation and “what appears to happen with all beings assembled by Candomblé is that, in some manner, they already are what they may or should become” (Goldman 2009, p. 124).

The treatment of plants and animals in Candomblé may illustrate their essence as part of a meshwork of life flows and as individualized, autonomous subjects, with their own will, desires, consciousness, feelings, and experience.

Plants are a concentration of life forces that can be awakened by words, the breath, other components (such as water, gin, and Guinea pepper), and ritual gestures, extracted in the form of fluid through maceration in water, then, in the form of a bath, transferred to and concentrated into places, objects, and people.

Plants are also conscious beings, which may choose to show themselves to the priest who is seeking them in the forest. The traditional ritual of plant collection²⁴ in the forest is preceded and accompanied by a series of behaviours, precautions, rituals, offerings, prayers, and chants devoted to *Ọ̀sányìn*, the *òriṣà* of medicinal leaves (Bastide 2001; Barros 1993), in order for plants to reveal themselves and allow the priest collect them. Indeed, “plants are really tricky and, if things are not done correctly, they disappear” (Barros 1993, p. 29).

Plants have interactions with peoples and places: when they are cultivated, their health reveals the energy balance of the house, its occupants and visitors. People frequently claim that when a plant dries after someone’s visit, it is a sign that he or she carries a “bad energy” that can affect peoples and places, and was carried away by the plants, protecting the house and its residents²⁵. Plants carry the energy of the *òriṣà* who “owns” them, and are, in some sense, the same *òriṣà* because they participate in his or her divine essence. Some myths describe plants as human beings, which consult the oracle and perform offerings, or as human beings who were transformed into plants, seeds or leaves as a result of their choices and behaviours, as is the case with the *obi*, the kola nut.

Animals are conscious and autonomous beings, with whom humans develop relationships of affection, care, and empathy²⁶; messengers of the *òriṣà* or other spiritual beings and the same *òriṣà* or spiritual being²⁷; molarizations of *àṣẹ*, which, through their blood, organs and meat, feed *òriṣà*, ancestors and human beings and can be transferred and condensed into objects and places. Some myths depict animals having anthropomorphic characteristics and engaging in human activities as commerce and agriculture, as well as establishing relationships with one another or with other beings (*òriṣà*, humans, plants, stones, artifacts, spirits).

²⁴ This rite was traditionally carried out by a special priest called *babalóòsannyìn* and consecrated to *Ọ̀sányìn*, the *òriṣà* of medicinal leaves, particularly those growing in the forest and uncultivated areas, but it was progressively integrated within the charges and knowledges of the fathers-of-the saint or mothers-of-the-saint (the priest leading a *terreiro*). Currently, many *terreiros*, particularly those located in urban areas, purchase the leaves from specialized dealers known as *erveiros*.

²⁵ Particularly some plants, such as the *pèrègún*, *Dracena Fragans*, popularly known as Saint Jorge’s sword, which is a plant of *Ọ̀gún*, *òriṣà* of metals, technology and war, which opens the path and protects his devotees from enemies and injuries.

²⁶ Intended as creating the possibility of an embodied communication.

²⁷ There are particular correspondences between the *òriṣà* or spiritual beings and specific animals, therefore a dog can be a manifestation of *Ọ̀gún*, the fishes of *Yemojá*, the mother of fishes and *òriṣà* of the sea, and the birds of *Ìyámí*, the Ancestral Mothers.

The procedure of animal sacralization and sacrifice reveals sensitivities, response-abilities (Haraway 2016, p. 130) and ritualized acts in treating the animal and establishing a communication with it, since, as Bábá Marcelo observed, “the animal should willingly offer its life for the community’s sake”, so that it should not cry, because this would be a curse against those who are realizing the sacrifice and bring negative consequences to the entire community or some of its members, and it should manifest this acceptance, for instance, eating the leaf of *ajóbr*²⁸ that is offered to them. The *aşógún* (“priest of knife”, especially consecrated and prepared for realizing animal sacrifice) pays close attention to the animal’s behaviour and signs and proceeds with respect and care, trying to limit at most its suffering.

“WE BELONG TO THE LAND”: CONVIVIALITY AND COMPOST

In Candomblé ontology, human beings partake with animals and plants in the above described double essence as individualized beings and as part of a meshwork of lines of becoming, linked to all more-than-human beings, affecting and being affected by fluxes of *àşę* and the state of balance or unbalance of forces in the cosmos.

Human beings can help to maintain and restore this balance by transferring and manipulating the *àşę* through the performance of offerings and prayers, but they can also devolve and put their *àşę* into circulation in the life flows: their breath (which constitutes the principle of life) and their *àşę* are transmitted to the offerings through their prayers and breath, as well as the efforts and time they devote to rituals. However, it is primarily at the time of death that human beings devolve to the Earth the matter from which they were formed at birth and the nourishment they received along their existence. Burial in the ground is a form of devolution and re-integration to the flows of materials and life, allowing new life to surge, in the circularity of existence, where life is the condition of death and death is the condition of life (Oliveira 1999).

In fact, according to a myth, humans are formed from the primordial mud, which has a limited stock, so, when they die, their matter should return in order to fill the hole in the ground and reintegrate into the primordial matter from which other human beings may come to life.

The concerns of Candomblé practitioners with regard to funeral rituals and the fate of the body of the deceased, which dramatically came into debate during the Covid-19 pandemic, bring to the fore a conception of humans as humus, as compost, which must be returned to the soil to ensure the continuity of life. In fact, several newspaper articles and blog posts²⁹ expressed concerns about the possibility of cre-

²⁸ *Astronium fraxinifolium*, popularly known as *aroeira*, which has the property to establish relationships of familiarity and has an anaesthetic effect.

²⁹ See Silva (05.04.2020) and Hortélio (03.04.2020).

mation of the bodies in cases of stocking the cemeteries, and claimed the right to burial for Candomblé practitioners.

Thus, the continuity of existence is possible only if humans accept their fragility, incompleteness, and participation in the flows of life and materials, exchanges, and interconnections with all more-than-human beings, and their condition as *compost*. Donna Haraway (2016) employs the concept of compost to propose a way of conceiving of and living in relationship with the Earth, in contrast to the anthropocentric and androcentric perspective that sustains the exploration of the Earth when conceived as a resource, as well as the separation of human beings from nature. The author points to the interconnection between all the beings that inhabit the planet, which can blend, compose and decompose with each other, be part of the terrestrial composting, the humus, a symbiotic tangle, in the ecological development that sustains the continuation of life.

Candomblé practitioners' interpretation of the Covid-19 pandemic evidence this concern: the pandemic reveals the precariousness of existence, human participation to and responsibility with a dynamic balance of forces and the interconnectivity and interdependence of all forms of life, and, thus, the importance of recognizing the "need to bend to nature" (Mãe Wanda de Omolu *apud* Fortuna 08.04.2020) and of healing one's relationship with it.

The devolution of matter to the Earth through burials adds further sense to the relationship of Candomblé practitioners with their territory and the planet they inhabit. Antônio Bispo Santos (2018) discussing the problem of land property in *quilombos*, points out that, according for African-Derived Peoples:

The land doesn't belong to us, we belong to the land. We do not say 'that land is mine' but 'we are of that land'. There was an understanding among us that the Earth is alive, and since it can produce, it must rest too. [...] If we could, our lands would be as they are – in relation to life.

The author also points out counter-colonial actions³⁰ of African-Derived Peoples in claiming respect for their relationship with the land and with all more-than-human beings, put at stake by the imposition of colonial practices, global processes, and a capitalist concept of progress and of nature as a resource to exploit or a menace to fight (based on "cosmophobia", or fear of the cosmos, derived from original sin), as well as the politics of land ownership and the liberal market. To the separation of human beings from nature, alongside with what he calls "synthetic" thought and action on nature – based on "having", "owning", and on the production of things, the author opposes an "organic knowledge", based on orality and "being" and connected to life. Referring to the capitalist system, Santos observes that "at that moment he [Western man] created work as an action for synthesizing nature. [...] Thus, they would need to synthesize everything and so they went out into the world synthesizing

³⁰ Santos (2016) defines "counter-colonization" as Afropindoramic peoples' fights, resistance and (re-) existence in defence of their territory, symbols, meanings and ways of life, while challenging and opposing the Eurocentric project.

– including themselves” (Santos 2018), in a process that leads to the deterritorialization of peoples (since the relation with their land is attacked) and to the exploitation of nature, that can lead to the destruction of both nature and the human beings, since “‘having’ [owning] is the creature that devours its creator” (Santos 2018)³¹.

To express the relationship with more-than-human beings in Candomblé, we can use the concept of “companion species” (Haraway 2003, Kohn 2013, Tsing 2012), with which humans establish relationships and entanglements and enact possibilities of living together with-in difference, looking at dimensions like incompleteness, translation and affect³²:

Within an open space of indeterminacy, fluidity and networks of connectivity, conviviality can be understood as the effect of stronger or weaker connections between different human and nonhuman ‘actants’ (Manzi 2020, p. 36).

In fact, Candomblé practitioners consider themselves responsible for their actions towards all more-than-human beings, and “subjects-in-the-world” (Ingold 2000), integrated into the cycles and dynamics of the environment, and an open process within a continuous field of relationships. Responsibility is one of the main values of Candomblé ethics and a necessary quality in a world based on the law of action and reaction, where wrongdoing or misbehaviour with other more-than-human beings brings an unbalance with consequences at individual, social and cosmic levels, that can be transmitted to successive generations. So, reparative acts are needed to restore the social or cosmological unbalance resulting from a misconduct, often thanks to the oracle’s advice or based on myths and previous experience. Responsibility is directed to all more-than-human beings and is based on attentiveness, sensibilities and affects (in the sense of how to affect and become affected by the others), and the capacity and ability to respond. For instance, when sacrificing an animal, attentiveness to the animal’s behaviour, the environment, the weather, objects and people impels to interpret and respond to perceived signals, through intuition, accumulated experience or an oracle consultation.

Ronilda Ribeiro (1996 p. 18) noted that, in African ontology, the Universe is characterized by “correspondences, analogies and interactions, to which man and all other beings constitute a single network of strength”, and N’Sougan Agblemagnon (1961) maintains that there is “an order of the world where man suddenly finds his place, where man suddenly finds his autonomy, where man suddenly finds his being” (Agblemagnon 1961, p. 5).

Bastide (1993) used the term “relational” to define the developing process and form of dwelling in the world in West Africa and Candomblé, as:

it is necessary to search the key of individual reality in the set of relationships, which tie the human being to the different constitutive principles of the cosmos and the set of social relations (including, of course, those that he or she maintains with the Dead (Bastide 1993, p. 40).

³¹ See also Calvo (2021).

³² Affect is intended as a transitional state, a change of intensity, a way of connecting to others and to the world (Massumi 2015, p. 3–4).

Human existence is possible only via living in conviviality with other more-than-human beings, in a continuous field of relationships and life lines, in a shared destiny and in “a complex play of biological, social, economic and political forces, continuously charged with *axé*, whose quality and quantity may vary. And, in fact, vary” (Sàlámi, Ribeiro 2015, p. 148).

I propose, therefore, to use the Bantu concept of *Ubuntu* (“I am since we are”) – which expresses the union and interdependency of all human beings and constitutes the basis of ethics and philosophy of all African-Derived cultural and religious manifestations – to express the relationships among all more-than-human beings. The image of a circle of children, which is the most common representation of *Ubuntu*, may be substituted by a circle or a sphere congregating all more-than-human beings, ruled by *Èṣù*, which is also represented as a sphere, with no end nor beginning, as the circularity of life and the multiple possibilities of interconnectivity and in-becomings.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this paper, I explored, through an analysis of myths and ethnographic research, how Candomblé ontology and mode of existence imply the mutual dependence and in-becomings of all more-than-human beings, which are part of the original divine principle, participating in a mesh of life flows and in entanglements of relationships, materials and forces, as well as sentient and autonomous beings, companions living in conviviality. They affirm reverence and attentiveness towards the environment, the sacrality of any form of life and highlight incompleteness, continuities, exchanges and collaborations among all more-than-human beings in maintaining a dynamic balance of forces in cosmos and society.

In fact, instead of capitalist attempts to appropriate and control nature, in Candomblé, reciprocity, sharing, respect, response-ability, and care sustain the relationships in a society which includes more-than-human beings, which come to form a unique meshwork of forces.

Human incompleteness, porous boundaries, transitions and participations, the circularity of life, and the relational nature of all more-than-humans lead to the need to establish alliances, dependencies, and partial connections (Strathern 2004)³³, along with active engagement with the world and understanding oneself as compost.

Candomblé *terreiros* continue to constitute cultural and ecological niches of resistance and re-existence, to participate in political and social activism and alliances with other Afropindoramic peoples, in order to sustain their right to live with-in difference with the other more-than-human beings and in Brazilian society, in which genocide, epistemicide, feminicide, and ecocide are variations of the same process which puts their survival at stake directly (through discrimination and violence

³³ Marilyn Strathern (2004) describes “partial connections” as “a connection between entities based on the fact that each realizes capacities for the other: each makes the other ‘work’” (Strathern 2004, p. 39).

against people, territories, objects, cultural manifestations, and symbols) and indirectly by reducing places of refuge, invading and polluting the natural environment, and attacking their relationship with the land.

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CONVIVIALITY AND BECOMINGS WITH-IN DIFFERENCE:
MORE-THAN-HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN CANDOMBLÉ

Key words: more-than-human relationships; multispecies ethnography; conviviality, Candomblé; African-Derived religions; ontological monism.

In Candomblé, existence and the continuation of life are dependent on a complex dynamic of interactions involving all more-than-human beings (humans, objects, artifacts, the environment, animals, plants, minerals, the ancestors, spiritual beings, forces). The myth of the creation of the universe from a common divine origin; the concept of *àṣẹ*, the life force that constitutes life in its manifestations, and its possibility to flow inside and outside the bodies establishing interconnectivity, interdependence, and mutual in-becomings of all more-than-human beings; the centrality of *Èṣù*, *òriṣà* of crossroads and encounters, which ensures movement, communication, and the dynamic balance of forces in the cosmos and society, as well as the principle of individualization, they all sustain a mode of existence, of inhabiting the world, developing along life lines and living in conviviality with the other more-than-human beings.

Based on ethnographic research carried out at the Candomblé *terreiro* *Àṣe Idasilẹ Ọḍẹ* of *Bàbá* Marcelo Monteiro Ifamakanjuḡla Alabi Adedosu and other *terreiros* in the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro, I explore forms of conceiving and living with other more-than-human beings, the ethics which sustain these relationships, the forms of resistance and re-existence in a changing environment, and the claims for maintaining their vital relationship with nature, food, and the land.

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