The centrality of gender and identity in Candomblé.
A reflection about religion, gender and society.
(Antologi *La Ciudadania en el Mercosur*, Montevideo)

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1998
The centrality of gender and identity in Candomblé

My perspective about the role of the women in the Candomblé religion focus on the following aspects: women played an important role as founders of the first terreiros (churches) of Candomblé in Bahia (Brazil) and today, women are the high authorities (mães) in the majority of the terreiros in Bahia. Therefore I will particularly illuminate on the importance of a religious career for these women.

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June O’Connor (1995: 14) has emphasised that the role of women in contemporary religions is different as they had in traditional religion. In her arguments: "Women are responsible for reconstructing the past on the basis of the new information and the use of historical imagination; and employing new paradigm of thinking, seeing, understanding and valuing."

According to my field-material of the terreiros of Candomblé in Bahia, I could confirm this ideas by talking with women who practice Candomblé.

One of the benefit and improvement of women in Candomblé was and still is, to influence and modify its "world," by the creation of distinct religious styles, new everyday practices and also on the impact of Candomblé in the wider society. For instance, these women have the capacity into influence and mediate between the gods, the members, and the wider society. But, through acquiring high positions in their terreiros, women find more social prestige and it would improve their ordinary lives.

In their way, male member, however, have the commodity of take care their traditional roles, which are to be the terreiros representative in the society. This situation is not in opposition, at the same time, with the general gender values within the wider society.

**Gender role in the terreiros of Candomblé, according historical reasons**

Studies concerning the first terreiros of Candomblé show that women’s participation was important in the Yoruba religion (e.g. Costa Lima 1972, Bastide 1978, Verger 1981, Augras 1983).

For instance, most women were only dancers. The ebomim was the first wife of the orixás and it was the highest religious rank a woman could achieve. The principal religious authority was the babalorixá (a
man) and the *pegigā* was his male assistant in the maintenance of the shrines and at ceremonies. The sister of the *babalorixā*’s first wife, the *apetibi*, was his female assistant.

In Brazil the social role of the *apetibi* has changed, (in the way that the Brazilian society is a monogamic and not polygynic as in the references to the original Yoruba religion). Thus, the *apetibi* is no longer the sister of the first wife, but a *filha* of *Oxum*. (female god).

Contrary to Bastide (1978) and the other writers who advocate that the structure of the traditional Candomblé follows the “kinship” structure of the Nagô people, my experiences are slightly different. The present religious structure of the *terreiros* of Candomblé and the interrelation of it with the wider society has influenced and reorganised it. Kinship relations have changed and religious authority is no longer biased by gender. Most of the latter generations’ *terreiros* in Bahia display this religious pattern. Among other things, it has led to the establishment of *terreiros* headed by women and the so called non-traditional *terreiros* such as the *Unipó Filho* which was my case study in Bahia.

The relatively strong and visible position of women in Candomblé has also generated various discussions among different sociological and anthropological schools. Some of them emphasises on socio-historical reasons (Herskovits 1958 and Verger 1992).

In Herskovits view the Afro-Brazilian women purchased their freedom from “slavery” prior to men. “Working as street vendors, women are able to build up capital much faster than the males” (Herskovits 1943 in Verger 1992). Such reasons opened to these women in Brazil an opportunity into acquire new social roles by developing their religious careers faster than men in the *terreiros* of Candomblé. He writes that “by holding a favourable economic position women could accomplish their religious obligations faster than men” (ibid. 1992).

Following the same lines Verger (1992) reflected first on historical reasons emphasising that the position of women in Candomblé is a new social experience that is inspired by polygamy in Africa, in the sense that women there utilise the negotiation capacity found the co-wife position. Then he concludes by proposing that a combination of those two skills (gender and economy) was a prerequisite for women to build the first Candomblé *terreiros* and to take important positions in the religious hierarchy.

These records reveals possible explanations. But, it is modernisation, the abolition of “slavery,” the creation of nuclear families, women’s
emancipation and the transformation of the individual to a juridical person - which has facilitated a greater integration of women as central actors in civil society. As June Nash (1990: 350) has argued about the general situation of women in Latin America, "The incorporation of women throughout the world in the paid work force has only increased the burden they bear reproduction of the families and society." This situation obviously affected Afro-Brazilian women's social lives and certainly their experiences of integrating into the world of Candomblé.

As women, and particularly as Afro-Brazilian women, the Candomblé women are integrated as a labour force in the informal sector. These women usually interact through a social network and manage various strategies in relation to their economic survival, because their jobs carry low income and social prestige. Therefore, they find in the Candomblé an open door to improve their everyday and maybe their future. As a female member explained: I will become a successful and important filha ... and then a very important mãe. In the case of my study, mãe Ana (my key informant) usually emphasised: Being a mãe in Candomblé help me in to be an important woman.

Making women visible

Yet the centrality of gender appears as a relevant issue in the contemporary Brazilian society. There exist a social agreement about the involvement of women in Candomblé. Certainly it can be illuminated, for example, by reading the local newspapers at the Candomblé festivals in Bahia, according the newspaper A Tarde Cultural (1990): Once again the streets of Bahia experience a magnificent demonstration by the Candomblé women.

The Candomblé women processions are an integrated event in the Bahian society. But, the centrality of gender was not an original social factor.

As the last babaláós (priests, who are called in Bahia pais) died, women started chronologically to take higher positions in the religious hierarchy. A new system of positions was set up. The ialorixás — mães (priests — mother) become the highest religious authorities, just as the pais. The second authority of the terreiros headed by women became the mãe pequenas (little mothers). The initiated i.e. iaô — filhas (female
members, *filhos* are the male members) have been given the elementary duties for the functioning of the religious, as well the social life, at the *terreiros*. In ceremonies, the majority of the *filhas* still are the who dances and fall in trance and they do it because trance is a social obligation included in their religious career.

**Religious career**

Becoming involved in a religious career i.e. to reach a post in the *terreiro'*s *familia de santo* (religious structure) entails a positive alternative. To become a *mãe* or a *pai* may be represents an outstanding position for some female and male members. For the Candomblé women, in particular, religious career means to go to through distinct ways as one of my informants explained:

> I was initiated ten years ago in my terreiro. Of course this decision changed my life because I carry on my obligations the best I can. It would be better for me if I had the possibility of building my own terreiro. I have been thinking about this and of course I am prepared to take the responsibility. Maybe I still need to learn a bit more about Candomblé. But, for me it is not a problem of time, but a question of resources.

Through a religious career, the *filhas* obtain a qualified post in the *terreiro*, and maybe become the leaders of new *terreiros*. Therefore religious career seems to signify an improvement in their social life.

The social importance of Candomblé "is not difficult to see," emphasises Sjörslev (1980: 9): "To be a "daughter" can give a woman an enormous prestige in society, specially if she later becomes a "mother."" Because to be a daughter and then a mother (in the context of a *terreiro* of Candomblé), means to fulfil a religious career which entails for them to acquire a better position in society.

In feminist studies about Afro-Brazilian women as well as Afro-American women, Leni Silverstein (1970: 153) emphasises: "The *mães de Santo* as the mother of the family takes the leading position and guides of the *terreiros.*" However, the centrality of gender in their *terreiros* (houses) of Candomblé is an issue comparable with the central role the Afro-Americans' women play at home in the USA (cf. Silvestein 1979).

*Charisma a requisite in these women's religious career*
To become a mãe or pai is a process that entails a passage through different religious stages, following initiation ritual. The position of a mãe or a pai can be achieved through "kinship" inheritance or through a religious career. When leadership is achieved through inheritance the personal capacity of the mãe is accepted, whatever the qualities of the person because it is seen as a "natural" process in the tradition of the terreiros. Consequently, the ability of those leaders is seldom questioned (Costa Lima 1972). In the case however of the mão de santo (high authority) who achieves her position through a religious career, her charisma must be strong in order to attract members and build up a functioning and stable terreiro (Silverstein 1979:153). That is the case of mãe Ana who is the leader of the terreiro Unipó Filho. One of the members of her terreiro explained:

"Charisma is a form of personal power," stated Max Weber (1947) in discussions about the theme. Moreover, he emphasised that "charisma denotes an exceptional quality (real or imaginary) possessed by a single individual who is able thereby to exercise influence and leadership over a group of admirers."

In his terminology, charisma is a particular form of "domination" or "authority," where the "leader's ethical qualities are irrelevant to the concept." Charisma is a contingent phenomenon and the existence or duration of the charisma's enchantment depends, above all, on the response of others. According him, "charisma is either, extinguished or becomes routines," that is, it becomes channelled into traditionally or legally oriented institutions.

These are probably and valid statement I can add in order to interpret the authority of mãe Ana in the terreiro Unipó Filho.

Apart from the large traditional terreiros that can survive through a suction of more or less charismatic leaders: being enough institutionalised. The smaller, not as established ones, has to rely on the personal abilities of their mães or pais. One can see the success of the terreiros as small entrepreneurial projects depending on the new charisma of their leaders. In fact the prevalence of small terreiros entails charismatic leaders who may inheritance strains.
The decision to join one particular terreiro has implications of prestige for that terreiro. The members usually told me that they liked terreiros where the mãe or pai was charismatic. It required a strong social and spiritual capacity because to be a good mãe means to be a good leader and medium - to find the best solutions to the problems of the members and clients. Moreover, it entails becoming the social mother or father for the majority of the young filhas and filhos.

It is generally agreed that an important reason for joining the terreiro is if the mãe or the pai is considered a powerful leader. It gives a sense of security. A filha said:

The real ceremonies are those at the traditional terreiros where the mãe or pai are very strong. The orixás like to possess at those terreiros. In those ceremonies the orixás may possess all the participants, even in the larger audience. There you will get a feeling that you are doing right thing.

Charisma is important in attracting new members. To retain its spell, a person’s charisma must be continually displayed and proved.

Charisma and strains two important aspects of women’s leadership

Talking about the obligations of the new terreiros to their mother terreiros, mãe Ana explained: "the new terreiros demand changes in the life of the leaders in many ways. But, principally improve their position by prestige and power." She, for example, has to travel very often to São Pablo to takes care of a new terreiro. However, this situation has created social and spiritual insecurity amongst the young novices. These young members were worried when mãe Ana had to travel a lot outside Bahia. Mãe Ana was aware of those problems:

There are various challenges in relation to this commitment. Generally, when a new terreiro is to be opened, the economy is the most crucial issue. For instance, I have to make, on times, economic transfers. My private life also changes. I have to control this house and the new one until everything returns to normal. It is just that beginning now. My own daughters and the small children are very worried, but I tell them that they must think about the future. We will become a large Candomblé house and it means a better economic situation too.

Economy, social prestige, and charisma is closely interrelated as important for the main terreiro. We had a conversation with mãe Ana about this aspect:

"Can you tell me what you gain from it?" I asked.
"I do not know! Certainly, more prestige and maybe a better economic security. The material profit, is always important when you live in Brazil. Here everything is very expensive, for all of us and for people in general. There is not enough to go around during these times. Maybe a mãe de santo could be a better leader for this country, because, I think, the present political leadership is not good for the majority of Brazilians. ... Our Candomblé house is based on collective solidarity."

Mãe Ana central position at the terreiro puts her in conflict with the members of the terreiro. There are days when her intense activity mixed with all her obligations and her consultations, interfere with the novices, who also claims her attention. Solutions are provided in different ways: Her biological family accepts her and what her religious life implies. In fact, they take care of some of her social demands, for example, with the guests. In reality, Ana's biological family is also her religious support, in terms of the assistance they provide Ana in conjunction to all the terreiro activities, because she works in different ways, in order to guarantee her family's economic survival as well as the terreiro's image.

She was said to be very influenced by the personality of her god. She agrees about this and when I asked her sometimes about the way she experienced her religiosity she answered with a revelation. Her attributes and ability to “keep it all together” may be possible by the help from her guardian orixá who influence her with spiritual energy into create new manner in the everyday practice of her terreiro and also into carry out with her major responsibility which is her leadership. According the reasons above, she often emphasised. Of course I feel as a “holy person,” and a strong leader. ... I am a mãe!!

Trance a religious and social obligation - the central aspect for Candomblé women religious career

A commonly shared view, in other studies about religion is that trance is a phenomenon which fulfils a social meaning in many societies. Even though trance is an individual experience and principally connected to individuals spiritual identification with their gods. Trance resulting by gender bias and is a central aspect into illuminate. I. Lewis (1971) emphasises that women are frequently the ones who fall in a trance, and often appear as the founders of new religion. He also suggests that a
trance is a socio-political strategy which can relates to their religious career, which then positively affect their family relations, and social networks.

In the studies of Pressel (1974), Bourguignon (1979) and Augras (1983) emphasis on the phenomenon of trance and given it a gender perspective and a socio-cultural dimension. While Pressel focused on the socio-political dimension e.g. that trance is strategically performed. Bourguignon extended the discussion to cover cultural and gender issues e.g. the Afro-Brazilian women are who have the capacity into fall in trance. She states that these women are those who often fall into trance and trance is the central factor of her arguments which concludes that women in Candomblé achieved more important positions because of their trance capacity. According the last statements Sjörslev (1980: 246) writes: "During the ritual treatment the possessed women get attention, sympathy and interest, and fulfilment of the material needs." However, it is generally accepted in the various terreiros of Candomblé that women are who often fall in trance, according to Augras (1983).

Based on my participation in various terreiros of Candomblé in Bahia I agree with Augras on the centrality of gender about trance. That is to say, there are more women than men who participate in Candomblé and that they are who often fall into a trance at the ceremonies.

Some plausible explanations of this phenomenon can be accounted. Firstly, women fall into a trance because trance is an imposed role and consequently their must, necessarily, to fall in trance at ceremonies. Secondly, the history of Candomblé in Brazil indicates that falling into trance has been a strategy by women achieve more social prestige and legitimacy within the terreiros. For the male members, however, prestige appears to be associated with their charges as ogá. In Bastide (1978) argument, to fall into a trance for males, does not, therefore, appears of major importance.

Explaining trance Sjörslev (1995), emphasises that "trance is an individual experience and entails training capacity and time." It is a learning process. It means that members acquire, through time, more sensibility into fall in trance.

According to conversation with Mãe Ana:

Members need time to get and accept the calls from the gods. But, through time, they learn how to communicate with their orixás and accept them. Gods and the people must have a good relationship and that is displayed at the ceremonies. In this communication a technique is developed: there are two manners of falling into a
trance. The first one occurs in dialogues between both sides, the second is a “social performance” that is a trance when the communication between the gods and the members is insufficient, yet the members will simulate a trance because of social expectations.

Nevertheless, the ritual of trance means, that members have to assume a role which in its way entails control in front of the community i.e. the circumstance when the members have to improvise a trance in order to improve a ceremony. Still, this skill is not seen as a strategy act but is accounted by the members’ charisma. Two female members said:

We the Candomblé females have the power to control and influence by this capacity. To fall into trance it is a part of our charisma.

We have the capacity to fall into a trance and ... it has affected my life experience ... I ... now, feel a very important woman.

Thus, trance not only means that they are spiritually closer to their orixás but, through their trance capacity they being influenced by reinforcing their self-esteem, and this is the aspect through they will improve their lives. Which entails that they acquired a central position not only in the terreiros thus also in their families. For instance, by trance women attract the social and political attention of the wider society. Through this power, they achieve more prestige and status. Ritual prestige become thus, synonymous of social identity.

Mãe Ana often emphasised that trance entails a social recognition. She use to talk about people from the public like the filhas and the mães by acclaiming them in the processions. She appreciates being socially recognised as a leader and she likes being able powerful through the importance of her role. And, as a consequence of this, many citizens from various social groups come to the festivals and also to consult the mães at their terreiros. As she explained: I am the leader of this terreiro, the psychologist of the neighbourhood and an important women.
Bibliography


