

*Reflections on viruses, death, life and human-nature relationship in Candomblé*

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ABSTRACT

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Concerned about the possibility of cremation of bodies because of the increase in the number of deaths by Covid-19, some associations of Afro-Brazilian religions have claimed the right to burial of Candomblé members. Funeral rituals facilitate the passage of the dead to the spiritual world and his or her reintegration into society as an ancestor, and returns the matter with which the person was formed to the earth. This concern for death is, therefore, a concern for life and nature and reaffirms the principle of interconnection among all beings and of circularity of existence.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Candomblé, funeral rituals, human-nature relationship, health.

A causa de la preocupación por la posibilidad de cremación de cuerpos por el incremento del número de muertes por Covid-19, algunas asociaciones de religiones afrobrasileñas han reclamado el derecho de entierro de los miembros del Candomblé. Los rituales funerarios facilitan el paso de los muertos al mundo espiritual y su reintegración en la sociedad como antepasados, y devuelven a la tierra la materia con la que se formó la persona. Esta preocupación por la muerte es, por lo tanto, una preocupación por la vida y la naturaleza, reafirmando el principio de interconexión entre todos los seres y de circularidad de la existencia.

**Palabras clave:** Covid-19, Candomblé, rituales funerarios, relación humano-naturaleza, salud.

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## Introduction

The rapid spread of the Covid-19 pandemic led to a large increase in deaths and in bodies that, carrying the danger of contagion, should be removed from contact with the living as soon as possible, and required space in cemeteries that started to become overcrowded.

Figure 1 – Collective burial in São Paulo during pandemics.



Source: Jiménez, 02/04/2020<sup>1</sup>.

Faced with this scenario and the possibility of cremation<sup>2</sup> of the dead, associations of Afro-Brazilian religions, such as the *Associação Brasileira de Preservação da Cultura Afro-Ameríndia*<sup>3</sup> (AFA) and the *Instituto de Defesa dos Direitos das Religiões Afro-Brasileiras*<sup>4</sup> (IDAFRO), reaffirmed the prohibition on cremation of bodies and on burial in drawers for Candomblé members.

Worrying about burial means not only taking care of the fate of the spirit of the deceased and of his or her relations with the living: in Candomblé, it takes on additional meaning in its cosmopolitics<sup>5</sup>, where a balance of forces should be maintained in the cosmos. In fact, burial allows human beings to devolve to the earth the primordial matter with which they were formed, allowing new life to surge, according to a cyclical conception of time and life.

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<sup>1</sup> This and similar images circulated in social media, being shared and commented by many members of Afro-Brazilian religions (Jiménez, 02/04/2020).

<sup>2</sup> Cremation of the dead was feared as a measure that could be adopted by some municipalities in order to face a potential shortage of space in cemeteries. The photographs of military vehicles bringing bodies to crematoria from the hospital in Bergamo, Italy, went throughout Brazil, causing uproar and concern that a similar situation could occur also there. See *Ansa Brasil* 19/03/2020.

<sup>3</sup> Association for the Preservation of Afro-Amerindian Culture.

<sup>4</sup> Institute for the Defense of the Rights of Afro-Brazilian Religions.

<sup>5</sup> Here I employ the term “cosmopolitics” according to Isabelle Stengers (2005), where “cosmos” refers to the “unknown” made up of multiple and divergent worlds and to the articulations they can be able of.

Many Candomblé members (in line with the statements of ecologists, biologists, epidemiologists, intellectuals, artists, and indigenous peoples<sup>6</sup>), interpret the pandemic as a direct consequence of the predatory action of humans against nature, who, in the name of “progress”, destroy the survival conditions of all living things 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.

The novel coronavirus and viruses in general take on a significance beyond their destructive power, contributing to the balance of forces in the universe, since they impose a pause, a “silence” that the earth needs, and encourage human beings to rethink their place in the cosmos and their relationship with nature. Furthermore, an already unbalanced relationship with nature cannot be furtherly compromised, and burial can’t be replaced with cremation, because the primordial matter from which the person was created must be devolved to the earth in order for life to continue and regenerate.

This work is based on an extensive field research conducted in the Candomblé *terreiro* *Àșe Idasile Ọde*, directed by Bábá Marcelo Ọđarofa, located in Rio de Janeiro, on conversations, interviews based on a semi-structured script with Candomblé members from Rio de Janeiro, newspaper articles and publications of Candomblé members on their social media.

In the first section, I give a brief overview of Candomblé funeral rituals and analyse their role in assisting the passage and the destiny of the deceased’s spirit, as well as the breaking of old links with the living and the formation of new ones. There is also a consideration on the challenging of performing funeral ceremonies during the pandemic and its implications. In the second section, I discuss the significance of burial in Candomblé – whose right was reaffirmed during the pandemic – not only for the dead’s spirit and the living, but also as an act that contributes to the balance of forces in the cosmos and the continuance of life. In the third section, I explore the relationship between life and death, and health and disease, through an analysis of myths and rites involving Ìkú (death) and the *òrìșà* who control creation, health, disease and death. In the fourth section, I describe some elements of the ontology of Candomblé that evidence the interrelationship between all beings (human and non-human) and provide the foundations for analysing, in the fifth section, the meaning of many discourses of Candomblé members regarding the causes of pandemic and possible solutions. Finally, in the sixth section, I focus on the interconnection among all beings and its planetary

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<sup>6</sup> To name just a few: Bruno Latour, Philippe Descola, Frédéric Keck, Tobias Rees, Achille Mbembe, Thomas E. Lovejoy, Jane Goodall, Ailton Krenak, Greenpeace, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), WWF International, and the World Health Organization (WHO).

dimension, which was brought to light by the pandemic, by connecting reflections in Candomblé with viruses and pandemic researches.

### Funeral rituals in Candomblé

In Candomblé, death is celebrated through complex rituals which provide for a manipulation of the body, and acts involving the spirit of the deceased, his or her belongings and *assentamentos*<sup>7</sup>, and the living, as described, for instance, in Elbein (2008), Prandi (2008) and Cruz (1995).

The human being consists of components that have a dual nature—material and spiritual: ancestral elements (which bind him or her to his or her ancestors), cosmological principles (the four basic elements of nature) and divine particles (in particular, *emì*, the breath, which constitutes the principle of life, the spirit, the soul, and disappears with death, reintegrating with the collective energy) contribute to the formation of the human being. These elements, which are arranged at birth, strengthen and increase alongside others throughout life and the initiation process, are separated at death, and each one must follow its own destiny, in order for life (of the dead, now as spirit, of the living, and of the ecosystem) to continue.

Funeral rituals, called *Àṣṣèṣè*<sup>8</sup>, *Sirrum*, *Mukundu* or *Ntambi*, depend, in complexity and length, by the person's place in the hierarchy of his or her *terreiro*<sup>9</sup>, as well as by the relationships that bind the person to the other members of the religious community. When a father-of-the-saint or mother-of-the-saint or other important person dies, his or her spirit is integrated into the family ancestry and the living can honour his or her memory by evoking his or her spirit in a sacred pot that has been especially prepared.

Briefly, the funeral rituals consist in three parts. The priests handle the corpse after death and before funerals to remove from his or her head the *osu*<sup>10</sup>; they then wash the top of his or her head with a herbal preparation, and make offerings. This first phase seeks to erase the dead's link with his or her *òrìṣà* and prepare him or her for the journey in the spiritual world, the *òrun*. Following the burial, a ceremony is held in the *terreiro*, with the religious community present. The dead's ritual implements and other personal effects are arranged and placed

<sup>7</sup> Material construction that concentrates the force of one's *òrìṣà*.

<sup>8</sup> I use one of the African Yoruba transliteration versions to transcribe Yoruba terms. See, for instance, Beniste (2011).

<sup>9</sup> Shrine of Candomblé, directed by a *mãe de santo* (mother-of-the-saint) if she is a woman or a *pai de santo* (father-of-the-saint) if he is a male. The years from initiation and the religious offices determine the hierarchy.

<sup>10</sup> A cone prepared during the initiation procedure, that contains the vital force of his or her *òrìṣà* and other elements and is fixed through ritual incisions.

beside a provisory altar built for the dead. His or her presence is called and he or she is celebrated with music, chanting, dancing and offerings; each person dances alone, collecting money from the public, and depositing it in a gourd as a sacrifice to the dead's spirit. Then, the priest questions the dead's spirit about the fate of each thing (whether it should be destroyed or inherited by someone) through the oracle. This phase culminates with an initiated embodying *Ọya*<sup>11</sup>, who takes the *carrego de egun*, which contains the articles to be destroyed. While the rest of the people waits for them to return, some priests take *Ọya* to a natural place determined by the oracle to deposit the *carrego*. This phase permits the dead's spirit to break free from the material world and the living, transforming into an ancestor who may be invoked for protection and assistance and ensures the group's roots and identity. When the priests and the person who embodied *Ọya* return, purification rituals on all the participants to the *Àṣẹṣẹ* are performed. They return to the *terreiro* another day to wash the *assentamentos*<sup>12</sup> of the *òrìṣà* with a herbal preparation and to perform prayers, invocations and offerings. The activities of the *terreiro* are suspended for a length of time determined by the importance of the dead in the *terreiro*, which normally lasts one year in case of a mother-of-the-saint or a father-of-the-saint.

These rituals serve to enable the passage of the deceased to the world of the dead (*Ikú- àiyé*), integrating him or her with the ancestors and establishing a new relationship with the living. If this passage does not take place, the deceased's relatives and the members of the *terreiro* may face death, disease, accidents, or other difficulties in their life. For example, when I attended an *Àṣẹṣẹ* in the *Àṣẹ Idasilẹ Ọdẹ*, for a member of the *terreiro*, *Bàbá Marcelo* explained to me that one of the causes of her death<sup>13</sup> was her attitude towards her deceased husband, because she continued to think of and cry for him, and wished he was with her: "Since her husband couldn't come to remain with her, he took her with him" (*Bàbá Marcelo*, personal communication).

Even while most Candomblé members agree to follow sanitary regulations for Covid-19 during funeral ceremonies (avoiding crowds and contact with infected persons and bodies) in order to protect life and prevent pandemic spread, death, particularly for young people and under the conditions imposed by a highly contagious virus, and incomplete passages remain an open topic for many. In fact, death, according to the Candomblé worldview, is part of the cycle of life, but it should happen only when a lengthy life has allowed the person to fulfil the destiny

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<sup>11</sup> *Òrìṣà* of winds and storms, who is in charge of transporting the dead's spirit to the *òrun*, the spiritual world.

<sup>12</sup> Shrines where the force of the *òrìṣà* is concentrated and renovated on a regular basis, and are considered the dwelling of the *òrìṣà* or the *òrìṣà*.

<sup>13</sup> She fought with her granddaughter, who had left her house to return to her mother's, she was lonely and smoked heavily.

he or she chose before being born (see, for instance, Calvo, 2019). Long life, together with patience and a good temperament, are essential values in Candomblé and the subject of daily concern and ritual attention, as they are the primary means of completing one's life journey, of being venerated as a group ancestor, and of not leaving one's own tasks to be carried out by one's own descendants, as analysed in Calvo (2019).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, while it is possible to perform funeral rituals without the presence of a corpse, the conditions imposed by the high risk of contagion can prevent the completion or realization of the funeral procedure. In fact, while funeral rituals are still performed in some cases in a limited form and with a limited number of people, there are Candomblé members who died during the pandemic and are not given a funeral ceremony. In fact, several *terreiros* (particularly those with elderly or vulnerable members) have suspended group celebrations and any contact with not-cohabitants; the majority of Candomblé members adhere to social isolation (forced by local government, their *terreiro* leadership or accepted willingly); in some cases, members of the deceased's family and of the *terreiro* are quarantined, and priests capable of performing funeral rituals avoid traveling and gathering. In fact, as Prandi (2008) points out, only a few priests know the secret procedure of funeral rituals, and they are often called to different *terreiros*, sometimes in other cities or states, when a person dies. For instance, during my field research, I attended an *Àṣṣèṣè* for a mother-of-the-saint of a *terreiro* in Rio de Janeiro, that was celebrated by *Ògá*<sup>14</sup> Bangbala, who is over 100 years old and who, before the pandemic, travelled the entire national territory to celebrate funeral rituals.

Some Candomblé members said that dealing with death is still a problem they will have to face when the pandemic will be over, while others suffer from psychological issues brought on by the loss of family members and friends, as well as concerns about the destiny of the dead's spirit and the possibility that this could affect their own lives, causing diseases, death or other issues. Even though some of them receive treatment and ritual assistance from their mother-of-the-saint or father-of-the-saint, the matter may remain unsolved and sums up to the difficulty in dealing with the other problems provoked by the pandemic.

### **The need to bury the body**

As Silva (02/04/2020) and Hortélio (03/04/2020) pointed out, in the event a Candomblé member dies from Covid-19, IDAFRO and AFA leaders have stated

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<sup>14</sup> A religious office held by men who do not embody the *òrìṣà*.

that funeral rituals can be performed without the presence of the body<sup>15</sup>, and have so recommended carrying out those rituals that must be performed immediately after death — such as the *carrego* of the dead and the offering to the spirit — while adhering to safety protocols, and deferring the other rituals.

IDAFRO and AFA underscore the indispensability of burial in Candomblé, precluding cremation and placement in drawers. The AFA explained that, going into the earth, the deceased can close the life cycle correctly and the spirit can follow his or her journey. This will prevent someone from his or her family or religious community from suffering spiritual and psychological consequences and avoid provocation of an imbalance of *àṣẹ*, the vital force that constitutes life in its different manifestations, as analysed by Goldman (2005).

Oliveira (1999, p. 32) reports a song intoned when the body is lowered to the grave, which expresses the reintegration of the body into the ground and the importance of this passage for the deceased:

Ò Ìkú bá lẹ̀, Ilẹ̀ yó,	The body with the earth, the earth is complete,
Ìkú bá lẹ̀,	With the body under the ground.
Ò Ìkú bá lẹ̀, Ilẹ̀ yó,	The body with the earth, the earth is complete,
Ìkú bá lẹ̀,	With the body under the ground,
Bá lẹ̀ níre Èégún	With the earth, Èégún is happy.
Ní ṣ'orò 'hò.	He is traditionally worshipped in the grave.
Ò Ìkú bá lẹ̀, Ilẹ̀ yó,	The body with the earth, the earth is complete,
Ìkú bá lẹ̀ ara nlọ.	With death, the body goes away into the earth.

As Elbein (2008) points out, the burial of the body aims to restore the matter with which human beings were formed to the earth, to *Igbá-nlá*, the great gourd, which “by receiving them, restores her parenting capacity and, fertilized by water-semen, will become the ‘fertilized womb’ from which everything is born and expands both in the *aiyé* and in the *òrun*” (Elbein, 2008, p. 108).

Bàbá Marcelo affirmed the function of burial in maintaining a relationship between the deceased and the living, since: “The Traditional Peoples of African Matrix have as a principle that everything we want to eternalize we bury.” (Bàbá Marcelo, personal communication).

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<sup>15</sup> Funeral rituals normally include a preparation of the body, but there is the possibility to act without the presence of the corpse (as in case of death for fire or other accidents).

He also explained the role of burial in the dynamics of forces in the universe that sustain life:

We believe that we are fruits of the womb of the mother earth. Clay is the primordial matter of human conception. By burying, we are restoring to the earth the matter that has allowed us to exist in the physical world. When we invoke our ancestors, we address the earth as their habitat, so that they can emerge and come and hear us. (Bàbá Marcelo, personal communication).

### Link between life and death, health and disease

According to an *itàn*<sup>16</sup>, when Òrìṣánlà<sup>17</sup> was commissioned by Olódùmare<sup>18</sup> to shape human beings and looked for the most appropriate material, he found *amò*, the primordial mud (a composition of water and earth), but, when he tried to remove it, the earth cried, dripped water. Therefore, he took pity and continued, unsuccessfully, to look for another material. But Ìkú (a young and beautiful warrior) collected the mud and handed it over to Òrìṣánlà, who entrusted him with the task of returning the primordial matter from where he removed it, bringing back to earth what belongs to her.

Ìkú is also the leader of the *Ajogún*, the *Igba Imalè*, spirits of the left, *lit.* “warriors against humanity”, spirits who embody many catastrophes and accidents that might corrupt or ruin human existence. Death, illness, defeat, struggle, bankruptcy, prison, affliction, catastrophe and so on are examples. Despite their destructive effects on human existence, the *Ajogún* play a crucial role in maintaining the cosmos’ equilibrium of forces and the cycle of life, as well as testing human beings to ensure that they have a good temperament.

The previous *itàn* shows how Ìkú plays a role in sustaining the dynamics of life circularity, where life is the condition of death and death is the condition of life. As Oliveira (1999) points out:

Ìkú, for the traditional Yorùbá, is, at once, the primordial supplier and the restorer of the matter withdrawn from and supplied by itself, thus the beginning and the end, and the beginning and the end, and the beginning and the end..., so on, in an eternal circle, where there is no beginning nor end, which is always starting again. (Oliveira, 1999, p. iii-iv).

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<sup>16</sup> Narrative of mythic or historic events. This *itàn* was collected during my field research in the *Àṣe Idasile Qdẹ*.

<sup>17</sup> *Lit.* “great òrìṣà”, is also called Oṣálá and is considered the oldest of the òrìṣà, as he appears in several myths about the creation of the *ayé*, the material world.

<sup>18</sup> The Supreme Being, “Lord of creation”.



The *òrìṣà* Nàná and her son Ọmọlu/Ọbalúaié (“the son of the Lord”/“the Lord of the earth”), who is also called Ẓànpònná (“he who kills on the way”), guard the mysteries of life and death and remind human beings of the strict connection between life and death, health and disease.

Nàná synthesizes within herself death, fecundity and wealth. According to one myth, she collaborated with Oṣálá to shape human beings from the primordial mud and has power over the *amò*, the mud. When someone is born, someone else must die in order to fill the hole formed in the earth.

As the Lord of earth, epidemics and skin diseases, Ọbalúaié has the power to spread sickness and to kill, but also to heal. Bàbá Marcelo observed that Ọbalúaié’s tool of power, the *ṣàṣàrà*<sup>19</sup>, is the symbol of the spread of disease and healing, of the mysteries of life and death. His favourite food, popcorn or *doburu*, represents his wounds and has the power to purify from all diseases and, according to Reis, “Popcorn heals smallpox, since it evokes a representation of the disease itself, proving that often an effect looks like its cause” (Reis, 2002, p. 51).

Many prayers, invocations and offerings are currently directed to Ọbalúaié, asking for his protection from Covid-19, a rapid exit from the pandemic and the development of a cure (Lyrio, 11/04/2020). Ọbalúaié is also the *òrìṣà* who is regularly sought for sick people, particularly those from Covid-19, as he was for past epidemics such as smallpox: members of the same *terreiro*, relatives and friends invoke, pray and make offerings to Ọbalúaié for the people that contract Covid-19, or consult the oracle and follow its instructions<sup>20</sup>.

An image of Ọbalúaié was carried in a procession through the streets of Salvador by representatives of Candomblé *terreiros*, in order to ask for protection and healing from Covid-19<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> It is made from the leaf of the oil palm, decorated with shells, straw from the coast, thread of bill and gourd.

<sup>20</sup> During the pandemic, these rituals are usually performed at a distance, avoiding spreading the disease. In any case, if a relative or friend contracts Covid-19, the most usual course of action is to visit a doctor and follow his or her advice; in some case herbal teas and specific foods are prescribed.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Bahia Notícias*, 01/06/2020.

Figure 2 – Call to a collective prayer online for Omolú.



Source: *Ilê Omolú e Oxum*, Facebook page.

Figure 3 – Procession with the image of Omolú in Salvador.



Source: Journal *Bahia Notícias*, 01/06/2020.

The importance of Ọbalúaié for health and life, as well as the cyclicity of life and death and the law of exchange that rules the cosmos, appeared in many cases analysed in my research about healing in Candomblé. For instance, Doné<sup>22</sup> Malu Paixão, of Ọya and Ọbalúaié, who attends the *Àṣe Idasile Ọde*, was diagnosed in January 2019 with the worsening of her heart problem and the need to operate. At that time, she stressed the importance of giving an offering to Ọbalúaié, the “owner of the earth”, as determined by the oracle, before entering the hospital, explaining that “we feed the earth so that she does not take us and allows us to step on her for a long time” (Doné Malu, personal communication).

In fact, the earth, a feminine element, participates in the composition of the planet and allows the sustenance of the beings who inhabit her, as shown by Reis:

The earth is the great maintainer of man in his trajectory, it is she who provides the animals and fruits for their feeding; in her man settles and establishes his tribe, it is from her that all the metals and ores that enable evolution and human progress come.

If water is the origin – after all, mothers are the origin – earth is the continuance, maintenance, sustenance, progress. If water gives birth, the earth creates, nourishes and shelters, completing the function of water in the life cycle. (Reis, 2000, p. 48).

### Humans as ecosystemic and relational beings

The cycles of life and death, as well as *Ajogun*'s activities, contribute to the continuation of life and the balance of forces in a cosmos in which all beings (humans and non-humans) are interconnected and have an impact on the system's functioning. Ribeiro (1996, p. 18) noted that, in African cosmology, the universe is characterized by “correspondences, analogies and interactions, to which man and all other beings constitute a single network of strength”.

The material world (*aiyé*) and the spiritual world (*òrun*) coexist and affect one another, forming “a cosmic unity,” in which “everything is connected, everything is solidarity” (Hampaté Bâ, 2010, p. 173) through flows of *àṣe*. *Àṣe* is the vital force that flows from the Supreme Being, *Olódùmarè*, and which, via a progressive subdivision process, gives rise to everything that exists in the universe. According to Elbein (2008), *àṣe* is the principle that permits the vital process and the dynamic of existence, and *Sàlàmi* points out that:

Axé, the vital force, the energy that flows on the physical, social and spiritual realms, is therefore the most powerful force to achieve a goal. [...] Distinct elements

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<sup>22</sup> Doné is a title used in *Jeje nation* to denote a mother-of-the-saint.

have distinct qualities of axé: each orixá has its specific axé and distinct material substances have distinct qualities of vital force. (Sàlámì, 2011, p. 43).

Health may be expressed in terms of *àṣẹ*, meanwhile, according to Barros and Teixeira (1989), the absence of *àṣẹ* is defining feature of disease, which can be viewed as a physical-mental disease or as a visible disorder in any domain of social life. Healing rituals and initiation procedure aim at accumulating specific qualities of *àṣẹ* in order to have a healthy and full life.

In Candomblé, human beings are conceived in an ecosystemic and relational way, permeated by vital flows, situated in a lineage, in the cosmos, in society (which also includes the ancestors, the *òrìṣà* and the other spiritual beings) and the environment, all of which have an impact on his or her life and on his or her way of being in the world. The human body is envisioned as porous and “spread,” (Flaksman, 2014, p. 213) or, to use Ingold’s terminology, as a “hive,” “energized by flows of materials” (Ingold, 2010, p. 96) which keep the person alive. In continuous interaction in the flow of life and in his or her encounters (with other humans, with beings of nature and “things,” and with spiritual beings, forces and spiritual components of oneself), the human being, as well as “the materials,” (Ingold, 2012, p. 26) overflows beyond his or her boundaries.

The human being’s health is inextricably linked to the health of nature (as environment, as well as as a source of food, of elements for rituals and of forces that he or she can accumulate or concentrate), the balance in his or her family and social environment and the harmony in his or her relationships with ancestors, the *òrìṣà* and the other spiritual beings. In fact, environmental factors (such as working in a hospital or being in contact with old people or corpses) and relationships (with family members, neighbours, coworkers, friends, but also with ancestors, *òrìṣà*, and other spiritual entities) occur among the causes linked to disease or financial and familial issues in the narratives of Candomblé members that I collected during my research on healing treatments (Calvo, 2019). Consequently, Candomblé healing rituals not only treat the person who suffers, but also his or her individual and collective universe.

Pandemic compelled the ecosystemic and relational conception of human beings, as well as the principle of cosmos harmony, to gain greater prominence in the discourses and concerns of Candomblé members, who were attempting to use the suspension imposed by pandemic in order to rethink and improve the relationships among people, all living beings and nature.

For example, Síkírù Sàlámì (Bàbá King), a Nigerian *òrìṣà* worshipper who founded the *Odudwa Templo dos Orixás* in Mongaguá (SP), expressed these values in a post on his Facebook profile of 15/06/2020, where he invited people to reflect on and to modify their relations with other beings and the planet:

The world is one. We have nowhere else to go. We must learn to live in the world and to live with each other without killing ourselves and without destroying our environment. Traditional black African societies have taught for millennia that competition, predatory behaviour and selfishness can spoil everything, but collaboration, environmental care, collective commitments and solidarity make us multiply good things. (Sàlámì, 2020).

### **“The world needs to bow to nature”**

The interpretations of pandemic among Candomblé members express worries about human-nature relationships and the destruction of the environment.

In a Facebook group *Conhecendo ketu – oficial*, in which members of different *terreiros* of Candomblé exchange information, opinions and questions, a post published on 01/07/2020 asked: “Do you believe that this pandemic is a divine punishment? Have your temples suspended their functions?” The answers<sup>23</sup> to the first question (which included, in small part, the possibility of divine punishment; an interpretation of the pandemic as a time to reflect and redeem values such as love, patience and solidarity; and the conviction that the novel coronavirus was fabricated in a laboratory) almost unanimously considered the pandemic to be a consequence of the behaviour of human beings and of their unbalanced relationship with nature. Here are some of these comments:

No. It is only the effect of the environmental imbalance caused by humanity.  
In a way, the pandemic is a consequence of the predatory exploitation of the environment by humans.  
It is not about divine issues, it is about biological issues and about man’s relationship with nature. However, it is still an opportunity to improve.  
No, dear. It’s not punishment, it’s a consequence of what man does to nature....  
Garbage, pollution, deforestation .... That’s it.... The word would be consequence and not punishment... caused by us....  
I think it’s part of life.  
It’s all intertwined, brother.  
No. The pandemic is just the result of our actions towards the planet. We destroy, spoil and sicken the Earth. Like every organism that makes its antibodies available to destroy the threat that causes its disease, the planet is only defending itself. We’re the real virus. Unfortunately, that’s it. It is time for human society to change its concepts and to live harmoniously with others: humans, animals, plants and planet [...]

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<sup>23</sup> Even though this group, as well as others with similar topics, includes members who do not practice Candomblé or other Afro-Brazilian religions, I selected comments made by people who identified themselves as Candomblé practitioners (explicitly through their discourse, or by their initiation name).

It's not punishment, since the orixás don't punish. It is the consequence of human attitudes, by destroying forests, the human being came into contact with these animals and caused the disease and the lack of empathy and love for others, not quarantining, thinking that everything is normal, caused the ballast of the disease. I don't believe in punishment in any way. The human being who felt immune to the whims of nature itself. Every day animals and plants face all kinds of difficulty just to survive, only the human being forgot that he/she is part of that same nature, feeling the greatest and untouchable being of creation. Nature and the Orixás are forces that can never be controlled by human will, AFTER ALL, THEY ARE GODS.

Also Mãe Wanda de Omulu, from *Ilè Ìyá Mí Òsún Mùíyáwá* in Rio de Janeiro – in an interview with the newspaper *O Globo* – associated the pandemic and ecological issues (see Fortuna, 08/04/2020). According to her, “the orixás warned that the world was going to stop, that the way it was, it couldn't continue any longer,” and, “The universe is saying ‘Enough!’”. She interprets the pandemic as a warning by nature of the need for human beings to change their attitude with respect to all beings and the planet, and the period of suspension of activities imposed by the pandemic as a pause to make humans reflect and the earth cleanse:

The earth is undergoing a cleansing and we need to review our postures, values and the consumption of material goods. [...] We can't go back to normal, because normal was just the problem. The world needs to bow to nature, take away the mould, the garbage, to go back to the values that matter. (Mãe Wanda of Omulu, 2020).

Analogously, Francesco Remotti (2020) links the theme of “suspension” with pandemic and lockdown, which have been used in many countries to counter the spread of contagions. As a result, many people have been forced to remain at home and many activities of socioeconomic life have come to a halt. Remotti applies the concept of “cultural auto-suspension”, i.e. “those phenomena according to which a certain society predicts and plans for itself periods of total stop of its activities, especially economic activities” (Remotti, 2020) to the current crisis (see also Remotti, 2011 and Favole, 2018).

Saturday (*Shabbath*) in Jewish culture is a day set aside for God with no activities, just as the six days of creation were followed by the sanctification of Saturday, according to *Genesis* (2, 3). This precept was applied as a God's commandment to the year of rest that interrupted agricultural work in each period of seven years, demonstrating the significance, in Jewish culture, of “the release from economic and social encrustations, and their relative regeneration” (Remotti, 2020).

Mãe Wanda de Omulu's (2020) interpretation of pandemic suspension is similar to the Jewish *Shabbath*, since it represents a period of rest during which the

earth, which has been exploited and destroyed by human activity, reclaims its generative capacity. In addition, for Mãe Wanda and many Candomblé members, the suspension of socioeconomic activities should also serve as a catalyst for reflection on one's relationship with nature, people and all living beings (see also Calvo, 2021).

Remotti (2020) and Apolito (2020) go further in this association, linking suspension to a liminal period, a passage that may stimulate reflections on and changes in one's culture, existence and relationships, as initiation rites in different societies do:

We are no longer the people we were before the virus (closed, sometimes forced, squashed in our homes, unable to maintain normal social and work relationships), we are not yet the people we will be after the virus (because there will be an after-virus). We are in a liminal condition, marked by sacrifice, trial, surrender, suffering). (Apolito, 2020).

Also many Candomblé members compared reclusion at home during the pandemic to initiation, while maintaining social isolation as a means of preventing the spread of contagions, preserving one's own life and protecting the beloved ones. In fact, in Candomblé, neophytes go through initiation rites, which typically last 21 days and include staying in the *terreiro* and suspending daily activities and relationships, as explained, for instance, by Bastide (2001), Elbein (2008) and Calvo (2019). Initiation represents a new birth after a symbolic death and gestation in a maternal womb. According to many initiated, isolation and suspension of daily activities encourage, during initiation, contact with one's own inner essence and contemplation on one's own existence.

Ìyá Glicia of Iyansã, mother-of-the-saint of the *Ilê Ayaba Afefé-Afeiyka*, in Rio de Janeiro, underlines the same aspect in pandemic:

The moment is difficult, it is a time for recycling, to review moral values and patterns, social and behavioural values and patterns. [...] Afro-Brazilian religions establish the care for each other. Therefore, we are doing so. It is time to stay at home, but it is also time to look inside ourselves and see all this need for brotherhood and companionship. (Ìyá Glicia, personal communication).

### **Interconnections and the lesson of viruses**

Most of the interpretations of the pandemic that I collected among Candomblé members align with environmental discourses, articulating biological hypotheses to a particular worldview and way of living, in which people are

considered responsible for their actions and “subjects-in-the-world” (Ingold, 2000), integrated to the cycles and dynamics of the environment.

Thus, it is the predatory action of nature by humans, the destruction of ecosystems and the hunting and consumption of wild animals that caused Covid-19<sup>24</sup>. It is an unbalanced relationship between human beings and the planet they inhabit.

Rees (2020) underscores this interconnection between humans and non-humans revealed by the pandemic:

[the history of Covid-19] is history made by an exponentially growing configuration of human and non-human things that steadily blurs and thereby undermines the distinction between the two: an infinitely radiating network of bats, caves, viruses, pangolins, rainforests, humans, tracking routes, markets, airplanes, facemasks, nation-states, ventilators, borders and more. (Rees, 2020).

As highlighted in one of the previous Facebook posts, many Candomblé members attribute the pandemic to the fact that “the human being forgot that he or she is part of that same nature,” contrasting the ontology of Candomblé – according to which the human being is conceived relationally and ecologically – to capitalism and neoliberal politics.

Antônio Bispo Santos (2018), discussing the problem of land property in *quilombos*<sup>25</sup>, points out that, according to African-derived cosmology and way of life:

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. (Santos, 2018).

Rees (2020) observes that the differentiation of humans from nature began in Europe around 1600, with the distinction between nature and politics, becoming mutually exclusive, in the thought of the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Humans were no longer a part of God-given nature-cosmos, and nature became “the dominion of animals and plants, the dominion of non-human”; no longer the place of origin from which human beings once belonged, but the place from which

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<sup>24</sup> Most of the people I interviewed and the opinions which Candomblé members expressed in social media consider Covid-19 to be caused by zoonosis, that is, the passage of the virus from an animal (in this case, bats and an intermediate host, probably pangolin, which would have taken place in a wet market in Wuhan, China), in line with the most accredited version.

<sup>25</sup> Communities of African descent who resisted slavery during colonization.



they became alienated; an empirical field to be studied through science and explored through technology.

The separation of humans from nature, a “synthetic thought and action on nature,” and “cosmophobia,” according to Santos (2018), are all products of the Bible’s original pity narrative. He defines “synthetic thought and action on nature” as a process based on “having,” “owning,” on the production of things, which the author contrasts with “organic knowledge,” which is based on orality and “being” and is linked to life; and, “cosmophobia”, as the fear of the cosmos.

According to the Bible, after Adam and Eve’s original pity, eating the forbidden fruit, they and their descendants could no longer eat the fruit, the leaves or anything that land offered, and were instead condemned to eat only by the sweat of their brow. Santos (2018) observes that “at that moment he created work as an action of synthesizing nature. [...] So, they would need to synthesize everything and so they went out into the world synthesizing – including themselves” (Santos, 2018). This gave rise to a process that leads to the deterritorialization of peoples (since the relation with their land is attacked) and to the exploitation of nature. And can lead to the destruction of both nature and the human beings, since “‘having’ [owning] is the creature that devours its creator.” (Santos, 2018).

This “ontology of modernity” (Rees, 2020) is at the basis of human action on nature, such that, as the author notes: “by practicing a politics of differentiation based on sustaining and defending an illusory concept of the human, we have begun to damage the planet – and ourselves as an integral part of the planet.” (Rees, 2020). Similarly, Mbembe (2020a) refers to “brutalism” as the contemporary process “by which power as a geomorphic force is now constituted, expressed, reconfigured, acts and reproduces”, through “fracturing and cracking”, “filling of vessels”, “perforation”, “emptying of organic substances” (p. 11), “depletion” (loss of fundamental elements of the organism) (p. 9–11), “processes” and “toxicity, i.e., the multiplication of chemicals and dangerous waste” (p. 10).

According to Mbembe (2020b), the threat of asphyxiation, previous to the current epidemic and caused by the destruction of the biosphere, has become, through Covid-19, the greatest danger, which can make all life forms impossible. With the premise of the connection between humanity and the biosphere, the author asks the following question: “Will we be able to rediscover our belonging to the same species and our unbreakable bond with all life?” (Mbembe, 2020b).

In an interview with Paul Gillroy on June 17, 2020, Mbembe points to a possible exit from the ecological emergency, of which Covid-19 is both consequence and alarm, through the application of two principles: 1) “le rendez-vous du donner et du recevoir” (the commitment to give and receive) expressed in the poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor, as a project “on the sharing of the world, the world we share in common, how we can shape our shared world and live on

earth with others”; and 2) “biosymbiosis”, the interdependence among humans and all varieties of life, “a shared ecology, if you wish, a shared ecosystem, circulation of life, vital fluids – organs – between different types of species, and the process of co-transformation, co-evolution, and so on.” (Gilroy, Mbembe, 25/06/2020).

From the perspective of microbes and viruses, as proposed by Roberta Raffaetà (2020a; 2020b) and Tobias Rees, the interdependence of all beings and the need to abandon an anthropocentric perspective is clear. Thus, the perspective in which the human being is the ultimate measure should make way for an ecosystemic one, in which “Viruses teach us that we humans are really little more than a multi-species ecosystem among multi-species ecosystems – ponds among ponds” (Rees, 2020, p. 6). According to this point of view, the health of human beings is “the product of the dynamics that are established at the ecosystem level. Health is not the property of a body but highlights the relations (socio-political, economic and environmental) of an ecosystem” (Raffaetà, 2020b), of coexistence and of the “intertwining of relations with humans and non-humans” (Raffaetà, 2020a, p. 26).

According to Rees (2020), Covid-19 represents “a great ‘un-differentiation’ event” (p. 11), showing, through its zoonotic quality, the interdependency and interconnectedness of all organisms with one another, and with the biosphere. In this way, even the distinction between humans and non-humans appears to be a product of a historical and cultural process, in contrast with other ontologies, as observed by Descola (2015).

## Conclusions

The interconnection and interdependence among all beings, between organisms and the environment, which an anthropology of viruses illuminates, is part of the ontology of Candomblé and of a particular way of being in the world, based on exchange and balance of forces in the universe.

The Candomblé members struggle to resist the logic of the market and to survive in a society that condemns and discriminates against their practices (such as animal sacrifice) and hinders the realization of their project of living in harmony with nature, as manifested in the different actions for ecology, the claim of “food sovereignty”<sup>26</sup> and of a sustainable economy based on their traditions.

This ontology and mode of existence in Candomblé *terreiros* emerged strongly during the pandemic, in the discourses of their members, emphasizing the possibility of human existence only as part of an interconnected world, in a

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<sup>26</sup> As claimed in the *Cartilha dos Povos e Comunidades Tradicionais de Matriz Africana* (Cartilha, 2016, p. 27).

field of relationships based on respect for humanity, all living beings and nature. The pandemic is seen as a symptom of the unbalanced relationship between human beings and nature, marked by the exploitation of resources, the destruction of ecosystems and the pollution of earth, water and air.

The balance and reciprocity law (that is at the basis of offerings and of a series of acts that mark daily life and rites in Candomblé), already compromised, cannot be broken with the cremation of the body, since it must return to earth and restore the materials with which it was formed and from which it was fed during his or her life. Ikú, Nàná and Obalúaié teach the link between life and death, between health and disease, and the cyclicity of existence (in opposition to the linearity imposed by colonization and occidental thinking), of “living organically” (Santos, 2018) in opposition to “living synthetically” (Santos, 2018).

As observed by Santos (2018), the circularity of life is expressed in the circular space created in African-derived manifestations: “The capoeira is spinning, the samba is spinning, the *batuque*, spinning in the *umbanda* and *candomblé*... Everything for us is spinning.” (Santos, 2018). According to Candomblé ontology, circularity and fluxes of forces should be maintained, in order to ensure the continuation of life, which can only exist in an “organic” and ecosystemic relationship with nature and all beings.

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