

a reality out of phase in time and space with the bustle and blare on the street. It is a mutually supportive environment, a parallel society where people of color give respect and expect it in return. Often conversing in hushed tones, *filhas-de-santo* nevertheless walk with heads high, confident of their position, humble but not degraded. The economic division that governs much of Brazilian society loses its meaning as you enter the *terreiro*. To cross the frontier of a house of Candomblé, whether small and nondescript or rich and illustrious, is to exit the European world and enter a space that is ideologically and culturally African.³²

Candomblé is a practical, here-and-now belief system, dedicated to the realities of life rather than the uncertainties of death. It is, as Pierre Verger aptly describes, an "exaltation turned toward life and its continuance,"³³ as opposed to a religion of salvation directed toward the hereafter. Hell, heaven, and purgatory are alien concepts to the Candomblé way. Rather than chain the body and soul to an unknowable European paradise, Candomblé resonates with the power to improve the lives of people during their brief passage through *aiê*. Dedicated to the liberation of mortals during this as opposed to the next life, Candomblé has a powerful appeal for the descendants of Africans as well as for an increasing number of Brazilians of European ancestry.

Source:
Voeks, Robert / *Sacred Leaves of Candomblé*, 1997, pp. 69-114.

5 CANDOMBLÉ MEDICINE

To say that the majority of white Brazilians reject the legitimacy of Candomblé healing practices is an understatement. Reactions generally range from visceral repulsion to mild amusement. At the extreme, Candomblé is seen as impregnated with devil worship and **macumba**, and its practitioners as embracing the lowest form of heathenism. Those with a milder reaction see it as a jumbled compendium of European superstition and African hocus-pocus, a benign blending of rituals meant to attract the simple-minded and the desperate. The notion that Africans and their descendants could be masters of a serious and relevant intellectual tradition seems beyond the pale of most neo-Europeans.

The religion of the Yoruba and their New World descendants is centered on practical issues. Unapologetically hedonistic, it revolves around the resolution of the everyday trials and tribulations of human existence. Unlike the religions of salvation, which are obsessed with the day of reckoning, the Yoruba belief system seems wholly unconcerned with preparing its flock for the afterlife.¹ Their cosmology clearly distinguishes the world of mortals (*aiê*) from the world of spirits (*orun*), and transcendental communication is a means to an end, as it is in most religious ceremony and ritual. But the Yoruba conception of the hereafter is "relatively imprecise and unelaborated."² In Africa and Brazil, the focus is on the here-and-now, on real-world problems—prosperity, fecundity, physical health, and spiritual well-being.³

According to the Yoruba worldview, the human condition is largely a product of interrelations with the spirit world. It is, of course, recognized that

accidents “just happen,” with no attendant spiritual meaning or causation. But most difficulties can be traced to disequilibrium with the spirit world. Thus, the sources of problems as diverse as headaches and heartaches, bankruptcy and boils can be traced to disharmony between mortals and their spiritual guardians. Candomblé priests are thus called upon to administer to a list of sundry, seemingly unrelated phenomena. In addition to issues of health and wealth, *pais-* and *mães-de-santo* are trained in the arts of sorcery and conjure. They can negate the nefarious effects of black magic and, if the situation warrants, employ the occult arts for their own ends or those of their clients.

Despite its formidable scope, Candomblé medicine represents a cohesive medical system. It is characterized by a well-developed theory of causation, and its priests are able to associate symptoms with specific illness, defined in the broadest possible sense, as well as to prescribe culturally acceptable treatments. Also, because health problems have a definable origin, they can, in principle, be avoided. Prevention is considered preferable to cure. The problems that beset humankind, in terms of health, the material world, and other matters, can be avoided, provided that the appropriate prophylactic measures have been implemented.

Preventive Medicine

Preventive medicine is dominated by the concept of establishing and maintaining a state of equilibrium with the spiritual universe. This transcendental balance between gods and mortals is achieved by adhering to the strictures of Candomblé, by avoiding material and spiritual excesses, and by understanding as well as putting into practice the lessons contained in Candomblé mythology. In West Africa, *babalaó* priests nurture a rich oral history of the origins and actions of the Yoruba pantheon, and this wisdom has survived as part of the fundamental knowledge of Candomblé. Although the role of the *babalaó* priest did not persist in Brazil, their unwritten scriptures have survived, albeit fragmented and modified, as part of the knowledge of the Candomblé *pai-* or *mãe-de-santo*. The most significant myths, or *odu*—those that priests and their followers have found most relevant to their New World setting—are passed on to Candomblé adherents during long years of initiation. Apprehending the message of the *odu*, and thereby understanding the basics of Yoruba cosmology, represents one of the means through which supplicants maintain spiritual equilibrium. Knowledge is power; ignorance is dangerous. Many of the physical, emotional, and material problems experienced by Afro-Brazilians are traced to a lack of understanding of the text of the *odu*.

Consider the following two examples of well-known *odu*. The first addresses the origin of mortals and of the material world in the actions of Oxalá, god of creation.

Olórun decided to create the universe. And he gave the bag of existence to Oxalá and ordered him to scatter its contents. But on the journey, Oxalá became thirsty, and stopped to drink palm wine. But this trip was not in the material world, it was in the *orun* world, because everything that exists here exists there as well. This world [*aiê*] is a copy of *orun*. So Oxalá drank the palm wine and became intoxicated. And Odudua [wife of Oxalá] came to see how the job was going and found Oxalá fast asleep. She picked up the bag of living things and returned it to Olórun. So Olórun ordered her to return to create the world. And Odudua created the world. When Oxalá woke up, he looked for the bag of living things, but couldn't find it. So he returned to Olórun to relate what happened. And Olórun said, “It's too late, the world is already created. You will retain the power to create the human beings.” And so Oxalá went and created humankind. But who created the world was Odudua.⁴

This story contains several necessary messages. First, by describing the origin of the material world and its human inhabitants, it supplies an important piece of the creation puzzle. Oxalá created humans; his wife Odudua created the material world. Second, it underlines the supremacy of Olórun as the high god, he who has power over all aspects of creation and the other deities. Olórun is seen to be distant and unapproachable, so much so that he assigns the tasks of creation to his spiritual ambassadors. Third, the myth reveals a fundamental dimension of Yoruba cosmology, that the material and spiritual worlds are exact duplicates, parallel expressions of the same reality. All material objects and beings—plant, animal, mineral, and human—find their copy in *orun*, the spiritual universe. Fourth, by means of allegory, the story addresses the issue of obligation and opportunity. By indulging in excesses and neglecting his spiritual mandate, Oxalá squanders his chance to be the creator of the material world. The message for mortals is clear. Finally, the story gives spiritual justification for one of the *euó*, or taboos, of Oxalá and his followers: palm wine.

This next *odu* illustrates the mortal origin of Oxóssi, Yoruba deity of the hunt.

Odé [mortal forebear of Oxóssi] was a stubborn hunter. Beyond being a great seeker, a procurer, Odé was stubborn in the sense that he was stuck in his paradigm. He couldn't understand explanations of the world be-

yond his own paradigm. Odé went together with Oxum in a perfect pair. And one day he went hunting, and he encountered an enormous serpent. A serpent so large that it was the size of the world. But because he was a man who did not know fear, he loaded his bow to kill the serpent. And the serpent sang out, "Don't kill me, because I'm an enchanted serpent." But Odé became frightened and killed the serpent anyway, because he couldn't understand that the serpent was enchanted. Then he took a knife out of his belt to cut off a piece of the snake. And the snake sang, "Don't cut me in pieces, because I'm an enchanted serpent." And Odé said, "A serpent, even an enchanted one, doesn't talk after it's dead." So he cut off a piece of the serpent. He carried the piece to a river to clean it, and the serpent sang, "Don't clean a piece of me in the river, because I'm an enchanted serpent." Odé said, "A piece of enchanted serpent can't sing." So he began to cook it, and the piece of serpent in the pan sang, "Don't cook me, because I'm an enchanted serpent." And Odé said, "A piece of cooked serpent can't talk." He began to eat the cooked snake, and the serpent sang, "Don't eat me, because I'm an enchanted serpent." And Odé responded, "A dead serpent can't sing." He continued to eat the serpent, and the serpent continued to sing inside of his belly. And the belly of Odé began to grow, and grow, and grow, filled up completely, and finally exploded. When his stomach exploded, Odé left *aié*, the land of life, and Oxum, the mother of *agô* [entreaty], poured onto him the tears of *agô*. And the tears caused a miraculous return, and when he returned he was enchanted. And when he became enchanted, he was no longer Odé; he was Oxóssi.⁵

The members of the Yoruba pantheon were, according to myth, living entities who were transformed into gods or goddesses by virtue of their exemplary lives and heroic deeds. In this story, the mortal Odé becomes the god Oxóssi, confirming the material ancestry of one important deity. The myth also sheds considerable light on the archetype of Oxóssi, one of the principal Candomblé deities, and in particular on the weaknesses to which he and his mortal followers are prone. Oxóssi is a skilled hunter. But his ceaseless search for knowledge, his insatiable curiosity, can be his undoing. In many aspects of his life, such as in personal relationships and material endeavors, the chase takes precedence over the kill. Solitary, self-reliant, and obstinate in his opinions, Oxóssi and his disciples are unable to accept the views of others. He is hardheaded. His intellectual myopia is symbolized by his habitat, the closed tropical forest, where the visual field is severely constricted by the density of the vegetation. Curiosity and stubbornness, Oxóssi's primary survival mechanisms, can be either assets

or liabilities—for even virtue, if carried to excess, can be hazardous. The health and prosperity of Oxóssi and his followers depend upon using their considerable talents. At the same time, if they transgress the frontier of acceptable behavior—if they fail to respect the limits of their archetype—they are vulnerable to spiritual disequilibrium and all of its attendant problems.

In the course of reciting the *odu* and deciphering their meanings, priests and priestesses of Candomblé spiritually reinforce the importance of respecting material prohibitions and preferences. These myths yield necessary insights into the personalities of the deities, piecing together the archetypes of the gods to which each adherent belongs. Myths elaborate the activities of the deities and yield theological insights into Yoruba cosmology. The fact that many of the *odu* have changed since arriving in Brazil, having been redefined and reformulated in the context of a new social and physical environment, is irrelevant to their function. Their role is not only to impart the rich oral tradition that successfully traversed the Atlantic, but also to legitimize a worldview that is decidedly at variance with that of the religion of whites. Rather than an atavistic relic of a primitive and pagan past, the religion of the *orixás* emerges as a powerful and persuasive competitor to Christian hegemony and European dominance.

Axé

While knowledge of the Yoruba myths plays a necessary role in Candomblé preventive medicine, equilibrium with the spiritual realm is achieved by maximizing *axé*, the vital force. *Axé* is a concept central to Yoruba-derived belief. As the life-giving nutrient of the material and spiritual realms, *axé* represents power, energy, and strength. Without it, "existence would be paralyzed, deprived of possibility and action."⁶ All that is material and spiritual—divinities, humans, plants, animals, or rocks—is endowed with its own innate level and quality of *axé*. This source of energy is concentrated in specific organs or materials. In humans and other animals, *axé* is abundant in the lungs, heart, liver, and especially the blood. In plants, it is located in the leaves or roots—any part that yields liquid. *Axé* is a fluid and dynamic force, transferable between objects and entities by which it is possessed. It can be assimilated and accumulated by the individual and the *terreiro*, or it can be eroded and lost, depending on the level of sincerity and adherence to the strictures of Candomblé. Meticulously planted and nourished, *axé* grows in strength, towers over the *terreiro*, and succors its loyal servants from adversity and calamity. Failure to cultivate this vital force, or straying from the natural equilibrium it instills, threatens

not only the individual, but all those associated with the *terreiro*. Preventive medicine, with its materials, rituals, and obligations, is about following the path that maintains and enhances the magical energy of *axé*.⁷

Guardian Deities

Adherents balance their personal *axé* by respecting the behavioral limits and material preferences established by their guardian deities, the 'owners of the head' (*donos da cabeça*). Two deities dominate each person.⁸ They represent dichotomous forces, opposing energies, hot and cool, apparent and transparent. One is masculine; the other feminine. They are temperaments constantly in conflict: one revealed, the other hidden; one dominant, the other recessive. This dichotomy is similar to the division of the Candomblé universe into *aiê* and *orun*, symbolized perfectly by the two halves of the sacred bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*), separate but equal. For example, someone who is outwardly calm and accepting is, on rare occasions, subject to flashes of anger and intolerance. Someone who is normally shy and reticent becomes, under unusual circumstances, gregarious and talkative. These behavioral aberrations are not faults or perversions. Rather, they constitute natural manifestations of a deep-seated psychological dualism, an opposition that is codified by association with two different gods and which is successfully maintained by respecting the limits of each.

The dominant or revealed *orixá* is the one that is most apparent. The archetype of the deity—whether fiery, curious, sensual, or otherwise—corresponds to the outward behavior of his or her mortal follower.⁹ Because the suite of characteristics of each principal *orixá* is known by everyone, it is usually abundantly clear which deity dominates each person. A hot-tempered, outgoing, sensuous woman, incapable of forming permanent relationships, is clearly associated with *Iansã*, the hot-blooded goddess of storms and wind. A serious, obdurate, scholarly person, especially if he or she has a skin problem (lots of moles or blemishes, for example), will be dominated by *Omolu*, god of small-pox and disease. Someone who is aggressive, jealous, and corpulent, with evident leadership abilities, is likely connected with *Xangô*, masculine god of thunder and lightning. The gender of the adherent is not a factor in determining the gender of his or her revealed deity. Aggressive and rotund female *Xangós* abound, as do svelte and high-strung male *Iansãs*.

The elusive nature of the second governing deity is seldom revealed. It shows itself infrequently, and then possibly only to intimates. For example, a person may be dominated by the masculine deity *Oxóssi*, the hunter, and may nor-

mally manifest his behavioral qualities. The opposite dimension of this restless personality, the hidden side, could be under the influence of *Oxum*, the narcissistic goddess of fresh waters, an archetype characterized by warmth, personal hygiene, vanity, and jealousy. Or someone lacking physical beauty and disinterested in sexual relationships, with a distinct intolerance of dishonesty, would likely be dominated by *Naná*, the aged goddess of rain, swamp, and mud. This feminine side, the known personality, would be counterbalanced by a masculine deity, infrequently revealed, but present and occasionally apparent. Not surprisingly, these two opposing psychologies create considerable internal struggles and crises, and reconciling the inherent conflicts of these forces constitutes one of the goals of preventive medicine.

The difficulty of establishing a balance between the forces of opposing *orixás* is compounded by the fact that each deity retains his or her individual state of equilibrium. *Xangô* is aggressive, *Oxalá* is peaceful, and *Iroko* is plodding. These are the inherent dispositions of the gods and goddesses. Neutral forces, neither good nor evil, these personality traits become problems only when taken to extremes. For the Candomblé believer, behavioral excesses translate to disequilibrium with the spiritual realm. *Oxum*, for example, is on the one hand fraternal and communicative, and on the other vain and materialistic. This is the natural state of *Oxum* and her followers, and it is useless to attempt to correct one or another of her ways. Nevertheless, like all the *orixás*, *Oxum* is tempted by excesses. Personal hygiene can develop into compulsive washing; hours can be spent deciding on the proper clothes; all her money can be spent on perfume. Under these circumstances, *Oxum* has fallen out of balance. *Oxalá*, the god of creation, is naturally loving, patient, and sensitive. Greatly admired, he is a gifted arbitrator and peacemaker. At the same time, *Oxalá's* patience can be his failure, and if it is taken to an extreme, he is prone to fritter away opportunities by being too cautious and thorough. In both of these examples, the *orixá*—and, correspondingly, the spiritual condition of his or her supplicant—has strayed from the center of the path, from the salubrious and beneficial region of controlled *axé* to the risky and unpredictable region of chaos. This hazardous place, beyond the zone of acceptable behavior, is personified by the most dangerous of the deities: *Exu*.

The concept of *Exu* is integral to Candomblé health and healing. On the one hand, he is a problematic *orixá*, as enigmatic as he is unpredictable. As the owner of streets and crossroads—the arteries of communication—*Exu* symbolically directs traffic between *aiê* and *orun*. He facilitates horizontal contact between the different *orixás* as well as vertical communication between the *orixás* and humans. During divination via the *jogo-de-búzios*, it is *Exu* who

transmits the messages of the divinities to the *pai-* or *mãe-de-santo*, who in turn translates them for the client. During *terreiro* celebrations, Exu receives the first offerings, the *padé*. This is done to encourage Exu to transmit the further offerings to the appropriate gods, as well as to discourage him from disrupting the proceedings. Nothing is done in Candomblé without first placating the spirit of Exu. It is his malicious side, his penchant for introducing calamity and chaos into the lives of humans, that makes him such an object of fear in the Afro-Brazilian community, and that has led many to associate him with the Christian devil. Capricious and enormously powerful, Exu is a catalyst of change, for both good and evil. He delivers divine protection to those who propitiate him and disaster to those who do not.¹⁰ Exu is never taken lightly.

But Exu is more than just a messenger and trickster. He symbolizes the wild and unbalanced side of human nature. According to Candomblé tradition, each person retains, in addition to a revealed and transparent guardian deity, an inherited form of Exu. Twenty-one varieties of Exu are believed to exist. All mortals are associated with one or another of them, which is often referred to as an adherent's *escravo*, or slave. Exu reveals his presence only when mortals indulge in the excesses and compulsions of their guardian deities' temperaments, when the bounds of spiritual equilibrium established by the archetype of the *orixá* have been trespassed. It is at the frontier that separates order and balance, where acceptable idiosyncrasy grades to hopeless obsession, that the trickster lies in wait. Exu is disequilibrium.

Prohibitions and Preferences

Spiritual equilibrium is maintained partially by avoiding the excesses of Exu. In the first instance, this follows from adhering strictly to the behavioral limits set by the *orixás*. Harmony is also nourished when adherents observe their guardian deities' specific preferences and *euó*, or prohibitions, concerning food, drink, color of clothing, necklaces, hazardous places, herbs, and other matters. Candomblé novices learn the likes and dislikes of their deities during initiation. Most are presented by the *pai-* or *mãe-de-santo*. Others are learned by chance, just as one might discover a food allergy. For example, followers of Abaluaíê, the youthful manifestation of Omolu, are prohibited from eating fish with skin, such as shark and dolphin. Devotees of Iansã must not consume squash or lamb, whereas those of Ossaim, god of the leaves, should avoid contact with dogs. Oxalá and his followers refrain from eating crabs and hot peppers, and they always dress entirely in white. Black clothing is strictly taboo for Oxalá. Devotees are spiritually renewed by visiting the geographical province

of their guardian deities: for Oxum, the riparian zone; Yemanjá, the seashore; Oxalá, a hilltop; Nanã, a valley. Xangô lives in fear of cemeteries, so his supplicants avoid them.

These *euó* represent points of weakness for the individual and for the group. As a rule, Candomblé followers are hesitant to discuss them in detail. Because there are believed to be rival priests who are bent on threatening the *axé* of other terreiros, nothing is to be gained by broadcasting an adherent's personal *euó*. Thus, personal taboos enter into the closely watched cache of *terreiro* secrets.

Candomblé adherents wear necklaces made of colored glass, crystal, or ceramic beads. Consecrated to the individual's guardian *orixás*, these symbolic rings of protection and obeisance underscore the unity of the spiritual and material worlds. Before being worn, the beads are washed by the *pai-* or *mãe-de-santo* in an herbal bath while he or she recites the incantation necessary to invoke the magical power of the leaves. The color of the beads represents the color preference of the deity.¹¹ The beads of Oxalá are always white, symbolizing the peaceful side of his nature. Those of Exu are red and black, suggesting his hot temper and dark powers. Oxum's necklace is golden yellow, reflecting her love of wealth. The beads of Yemanjá are transparent crystal, suggestive of her aqueous environment. Candomblé adherents wear one necklace for their dominant *orixá* and another for the deity to which the *terreiro* is dedicated. As a sign of respect, the necklaces are placed in an appropriate place when not being worn, not dangled from a hook or tossed on a table. Also, they should never be worn while engaging in sexual relations.

Adherents further honor the deities by respecting their individual food preferences. Ritual food offerings are placed on the *peji*, or altar, of each *orixá* on the day of the week dedicated to that deity. During this *ossé* ceremony, the *otá* (sacred stones), and other consecrated objects located in each *peji* are cleaned, and previous offerings are removed. For Omolu, food offerings are likely to include rice, black beans, black-eyed peas, and roasted corn. More elaborate functions might involve sacrifices of his favorite animals, male goats and pigs. Yemanjá receives white corn, rice, mush, and hominy. Her sacrificial animals include female goats, female sheep, and chickens. The offerings to Exu include black beans, honey, farofa (a mixture of toasted ground manioc, onions, and shrimp cooked in *dendê* oil), and, true to his nature, wine and *cachaça* (sugarcane rum).

The days of the week dedicated to each *orixá* represent periods of heightened *axé*. These are the most effective times to make offerings and carry out other functions. Monday is the day of Exu, Iroko, and Omolu. Saturday is the

day of most of the female **orixás**, Nanã, Yemanjá, and Oxum. Thursday is the day of the forest, and is dedicated to Ossaim, god of sacred leaves, and Oxóssi, the hunter. Friday is reserved for Oxalá, the god of creation, and no actions that are seen as harming the fruit of his creation, such as sacrificing animals or collecting sacred leaves, are carried out on his day. Sunday is known as the day of all the **orixás**, and no specific deities claim this day.

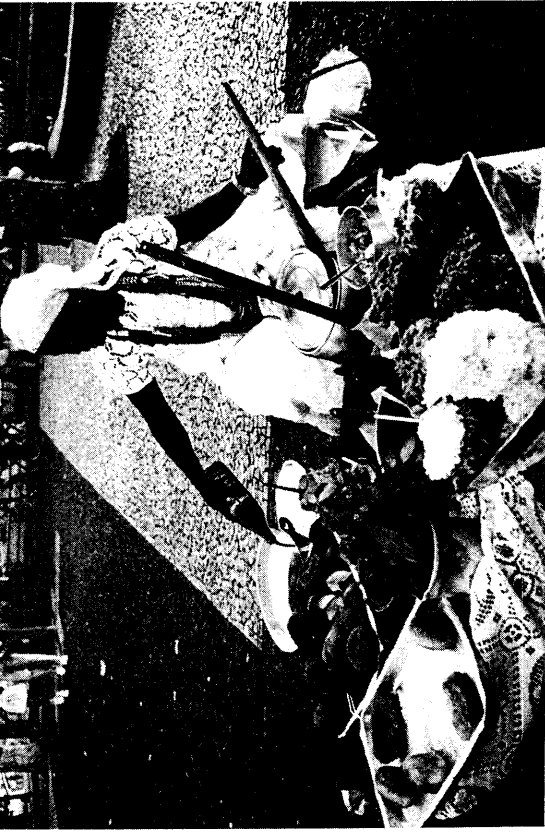
Aside from ritual offerings to the deities, the consecrated foods are also hawked on the streets of most Bahian cities. *Filhas-de-santo* tend to their small food stalls attired in the traditional clothing of the *terreiro*: voluminous skirts and petticoats, white turbans, and necklaces dedicated to the **orixás** (Fig. 5.1). The ubiquitous street corner presence of *Baianas*, as they are popularly known, represents the strongest visual signal of the continued strength of African traditions among the Brazilian population. Long an important source of income and independence for Bahian women,¹² food stalls serve as a traditional form of obligation for *filhas-de-santo* inasmuch as they are preparing and dispersing the material preferences of the **orixás**. Besides homemade confections and fried fish, *Baianas* dispense a host of West African delights, including **acarájé** (black-eyed pea dumpling fried in **dendê** and filled with shrimp), **vatapá** (manioc paste cooked with **dendê**, shrimp, and hot peppers), and **abará**

(steamed black-eyed pea meal wrapped in banana leaf). In the process of savoring these exotic delicacies, unwitting locals and pink-skinned tourists make offerings to one or another of the African gods or goddesses.

Omolu

In addition to fastidiously adhering to the preferences and **euó** of the guardian **orixás** and of Exu, Candomblé followers pay particular attention to cultivating the goodwill of an especially dangerous deity, Omolu, the god of smallpox and infectious disease. Known among the Yoruba in Africa as *Shopona*, this hot-tempered deity is so feared that even mentioning his name aloud is avoided, lest it incite his wrath. The image of Omolu is ancient, bent, and twisted, with limbs horribly gnarled by arthritis. The archetype of Omolu and of his followers is extremely serious, uncompromising, and tactless, with an inherent inability to entertain the ideas of others. Normally quiet and reserved, Omolu is dynamite waiting to be ignited. Those who fail to propitiate this god of illness and suffering risk an outpouring of vengeance and misery.¹³

Omolu should not, however, be perceived as the harbinger of medical calamity. He is not only the source of disease and death. Rather, as the following myth describes, he has learned through personal experience how to keep these malevolent forces at bay.



5.1 *Baiana* selling consecrated foods of Candomblé on a Salvador street corner. (Photo: Janira Voeks)

Omolu and Oxumaré are both descended from Nanã. The first born was Omolu. Soon after he was born, he contracted the famous disease smallpox. Since his mother Nanã could not cure him, she left him in a basket at the seashore. And when Yemanjá, the **orixá** of the ocean, was passing by, she encountered him covered with crabs. The crabs were devouring him. So, even though Omolu was so diseased, she picked up the baby and carried him away to be raised in the sea. But he remained with horribly deformed skin, profound pox scars, so Yemanjá sewed a hood for him made out of *palha da costa* [raffia fiber] so that his deformities wouldn't be seen. And so he was raised by Yemanjá. But very soon, because he was raised sequestered away, he became very studious and demonstrated himself immediately to have great knowledge. When Yemanjá perceived that he had become extremely knowledgeable about human nature and human diseases, Yemanjá proposed to him that he overcome the differences that he had with [his] true mother Nanã. So Yemanjá leaves the waters with Omolu, and goes to the land to present Omolu to Nanã, to overcome the impasse between the mother and son. And as a result of Yemanjá's actions, there is a reconciliation between Nanã and Omolu. Because he

had by inheritance from Nanã this great knowledge of the soil, the principal generator of human life, he became known as the master of the land, the owner of the land. By the **axé** that he had received from Yemanjá, the owner of the ocean, and the **axé** of Nanã, owner of the soil, and the knowledge that he had personally acquired, he became the counseling doctor: the one who knows how to avoid evil, how to avoid disequilibrium.¹⁴

Omolu embodies the dual energies of humankind, both creative and destructive. Feared by his followers for the misery he is capable of releasing, Omolu is nevertheless the owner of the land, by virtue of his birthright by Nanã, as well as "the doctor of the poor" (as he is frequently called), by virtue of his period of isolation and research. With the aid of his emblematic **xaxará**—a whisk broom fashioned of raffia, **piassava**, or oil palm and adorned with divination shells—he can either unleash the full power of epidemic or sweep up the ills of the world.¹⁵ Omolu's actions, good or evil, depend on the level of devotion of his followers. A deity uneasy in the presence of others, Omolu has his **peji** located outdoors, in a natural setting, away from human settlement. His **ossé** is made on Monday, his consecrated day, in order that good health may follow during the balance of the week.¹⁶ His favorite food offerings are black beans, black-eyed peas, popcorn, rice, and roasted corn.

Omolu has acquired the knowledge necessary to contain or release disease, but he is not a healer. His understanding of medicine, of the curative energy of the sacred leaves, is limited. It is Ossáim, guardian of the leaves, who knows all the plants and how to invoke their magical properties. But this deity of medicine is even less sociable and communicative than Omolu. He hides behind his wall of vegetation and receives no one, whereas Omolu hides behind his suit of straw and receives all who will listen. The medicine of Ossáim is curative, while that of Omolu is preventive.

Collective Axé

Candomblé followers seek health and prosperity by establishing spiritual equilibrium with their own guardian deities, as well as with Exu, Omolu, and the god to whom the terreiro is dedicated. But the Candomblé temple is more than an odd assortment of individuals, each with his or her own personal goals and aspirations. It is an integrated community of like-minded members, a religious organism that assimilates as well as imparts the salubrious benefits of controlled **axé**. In this way, the terreiro generates a collective energy, a group **axé**

whose value is greater than the sum of the individual energies. This interdependence can function in either direction. Members who are balanced contribute to the power and collective **axé** of the group, which, in turn, imparts this collective energy to the individuals. Mutualism prevails, with both the group and the individual feeding on the **axé** that each contributes. It necessarily follows, however, that failure on the part of a single adherent to tend his or her own field, to dutifully worship the gods, or to scrupulously observe his or her personal **euó** ultimately places not only the individual but the entire terreiro at risk of a spiritual backslide. Preventive medicine thus depends in part on nourishing the **axé** of the terreiro.

The terreiro maintains and increases its **axé** through adherence to the fundamentals and obligations of the religious community. The primary set of obligations—those that attract the interest and curiosity of outsiders—are the public ceremonies dedicated to the worship of the **orixás**. These annual events provide the opportunity for the terreiro to heap adulation on individual deities. It also allows the gods and goddesses to return to earth, to taste once again the fruits of mortal existence by reincarnating for a brief time in the bodies of their supplicants.

Public ceremonies are held on a special day of the year consecrated to the deity. The precise date varies with the terreiro and the nation. Some celebrations, such as those for Yemanjá and Oxalá, have been adopted by the greater Brazilian population and thus take the form of enormous public ceremonies. The public celebration for Yemanjá, goddess of the sea and adopted patron saint of fishermen, is held near the arrival of the New Year on the beach. Attended by hundreds of thousands in the principal cities of Brazil, especially Rio de Janeiro, the festival ends with the scattering of flower offerings in the tide, to be carried away to Yemanjá's watery depths. In Salvador, the largest outpouring of public participation takes place during the *lavagem do Bonfim*, or washing of the Church of Bonfim, realized in mid-January (Fig. 5.2). This celebration, dating at least from the nineteenth century, takes **mães-de-santo**, members of their terreiros, and several hundred thousand tourists and locals on an eleven-kilometer procession to the church. There, following the directives contained in a Yoruba myth, the **mães-de-santo** ritually wash the steps of the church.¹⁷ Accompanied by samba bands and thousands of beer stands, the *lavagem* has become classically Bahian.

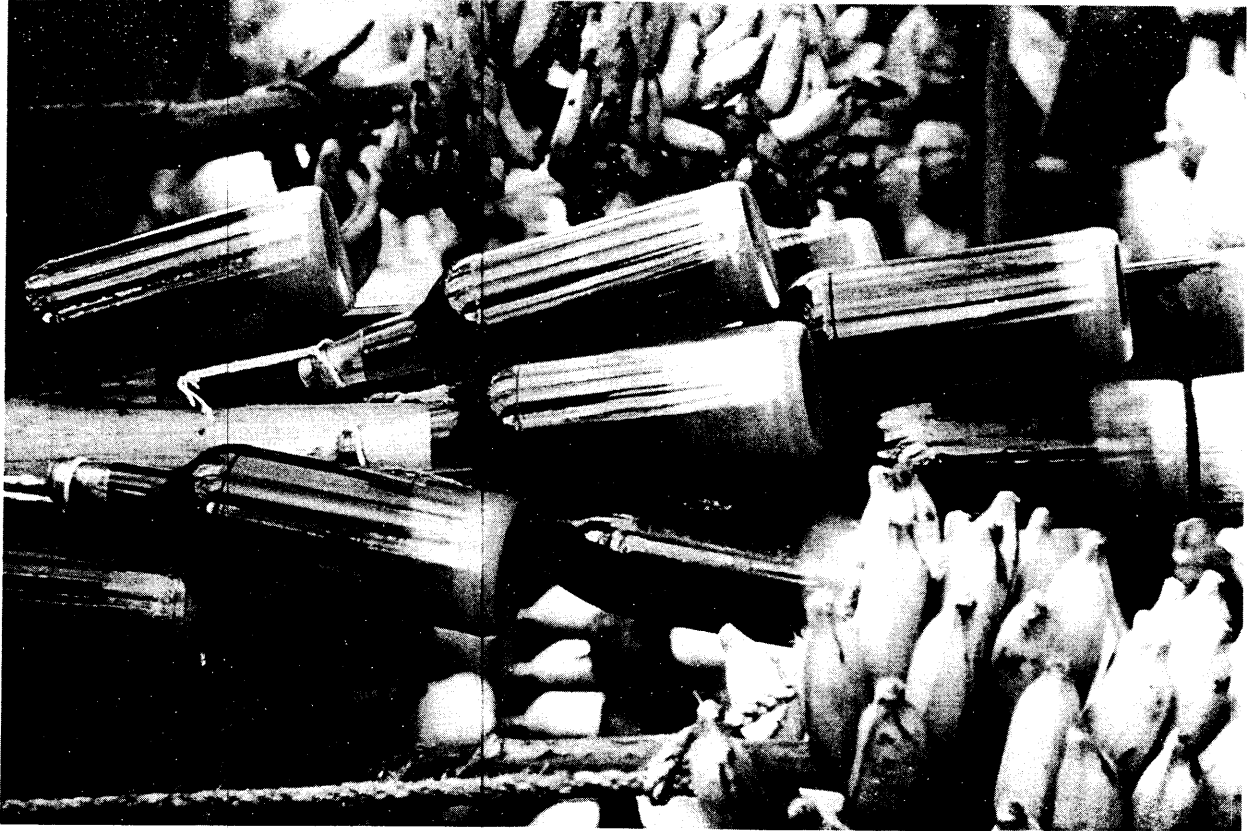
Most celebrations, however, are more modest in scope, limited to the terreiro membership and a few interested onlookers. Activities begin with the *matança*, or ritual killing, of the preferred animals of the deity. These are usually goats, chickens, Guinea fowl, and white doves. The killing is carried out



5.2 *Mães-de-santo* and spectators preparing for the *lavagem do Bonfim* in Salvador. (Photo: Robert Voeks)

by the *faca* ('knife'), the *filho-de-santo* responsible for delivering the appropriate incantation, dispatching the animal properly, and dismembering the body parts that are employed as offerings to the gods. These include the viscera, such as the heart, lungs, and liver, as well as those body parts thought to impart special qualities (*exés*)—the wings for flight, the feet for locomotion, the head for vision and thought. As blood is the transporter of animal *axé*, it is carefully drained from the body, and a portion is poured on the sacred stones retained in the *peji*. After being doused with oil of *dendê* (Fig. 5.3), the body parts are also stored in the shrine. The remainder of the carcass is not wasted, but rather finds its way to the ceremonial meal served to members and visitors at the midpoint in the celebration.

Previous to the celebration, the *barracão*, or central meeting place, is ritually prepared with liturgical leaves. The main entrance and windows are festooned with *mariúó*, shredded and woven leaves from the *dendê* palm (*Elaeis guineensis*). Collected prior to the celebration, the leaves are cut from the *olho*, or 'eye' of the palm, the pliant young fronds that have yet to separate from the stem. *Mariúó* functions as a line of defense against the negative energies and forces that invariably enter with visitors. In some *terreiros*, *mariúó* is believed to



5.3 *Dendê* oil for sale in open market in Salvador. Besides its use in Candomblé, *dendê* is a staple in Bahian cooking. (Photo: Robert Voeks)

guard against the entrance of **eguns**, ancestral spirits of the dead, which are considered to be disruptive influences. Some houses of Candomblé hang the long, lanceolate leaves of **peregum** (*Dracaena fragrans*) on the wall in the shape of an X or simply place them in a vase. In its native West Africa, **peregum** is planted around the outdoor shrines of the **orixás**.¹⁸ In Bahian terreiros, this introduced treelet is believed to repel the spirits of the **eguns**.¹⁹ The floor of the **barracão**, in the past made of hard red soil but now usually cement, is littered with leaves dedicated to the deity of the celebration. Gathered in the forest, the **folhas de pisar** (leaves to be stepped on during public functions and celebrations) serve to neutralize bad energies and fluids tracked in with visitors. Later the leaves are discarded, their spiritual energy spent. Flowers consecrated to the deity being honored—white for Oxalá, red for Xangô or Iansã, purple for Nanã, or yellow for Oxum—are often placed near the center of the **barracão**.

The ceremony begins with the **padê**, also known as the **despacho** for Exu. To placate his capricious nature, the **filhas-de-santo** sing the verses of Exu's songs and place his favorite foods outside of the **barracão**. The dancing and singing that follow are accompanied by three drummers, each an **ogã** (Fig. 5.4). The drums, or **atabaques**, which come in three sizes and are covered with stretched leather, are beaten with sticks or bare hands. One of the **filhos- or filhas-de-santo** or else the **pai- or mãe-de-santo** rings an **agogô**, constructed of two metal bells of different sizes joined at the ends. Each of the **orixás** are serenaded in their proper order, the **xirê**, beginning with Exu and ending with Oxalá. The **filhas-de-santo** gather in a **roda** (circle) and begin dancing in a clockwise direction to the rhythm of one deity after another (Fig. 5.5). Male members as well as females dance in Angolan candomblés, but less commonly in Ketu and Ijexá. The **filhas** trace out the choreographed movements of each deity, movements learned during the long months of initiation. For Iansã, dancers push the front parts of their palms in the air, stirring up the wind and storms of this tumultuous deity. Oxóssi dances with fingers linked in the form of a weapon, the hunter tracking down his game. Ossaim, one-legged and maimed, stoops as he moves to the music, collecting his healing leaves.

It is during the dancing, at first slow and methodical but later bordering on frenetic, that the deities penetrate the translucent field separating the parallel worlds. Descending to earth, summoned by the salutary music and chants, the gods arrive to occupy the bodies of their disciples. Although possession can appear at any time during the evening's proceedings, each **orixá** tends to manifest late in the dance to him or her, when the tempo is at its maximum. As one or more participants appear close to being mounted by their deity, one of the



5.4 Candomblé drummers during a Candomblé evening ceremony. (Photo: Janira Voeks)



5-5 Filhas- and filhos-de-santo dancing in the roda during Candomblé ceremony. (Photo: Robert Voeks)

drummers changes the beat, hammering out a discordant message that pushes the filha over the edge. With muscles twitching at the first shock of the deity's entrance, the possessed is immediately attended to by an ogã and the mãe pequena, who removes glasses, watches, and other material encumbrances. The orixá, once firmly seated in the body of the supplicant, is free to wander about the barracão, dance, and sporadically announce his or her presence. Omolu greets the material world by shouting "Atotô." Oxóssi announces his presence with "Oke" (Fig. 5-6). Eventually the possessed are led to a separate anteroom where they are attired in the ritual clothes and icons of their mounted deity.

After each deity has been serenaded three times and a light refreshment of the orixá's preferred foods have been served to the guests and members, the dance sequence begins again. The possessed filhas are brought back to the barracão, many now adorned in the traditional costumes of their mounted deities. For both female and male deities, this is usually a brightly colored dress underlaid by layers of starched petticoats. Filhas of Ogun, god of iron, wear a metal helmet and bracelets and carry a war ax. Oxum dons a crown and bracelets, wields a sword, and adores herself in her abebé, her combination fan and mirror. Iansã wears a crown and carries a sword and an eriquerê, the tip of a



5-6 Filha-de-santo possessed by Oxóssi, god of the hunt. (Photo: Janira Voeks)

cow's tail used to battle *eguns*. Some *terreiros* are also frequented by an indigenous spirit, the Caboclo, who wears a feathered headdress. Eyes glazed and heads lowered in respect, the *filhas* assimilate the *axé* of the earth and of the *orixás* as their bare feet trace out the movements introduced by their African ancestors.

Towards the end of the festivities, in the early hours of the morning, *filhas* often enter a secondary trance. In this infantile state, *erê*, the deity manifests in the form of a child, three or four years of age.²⁰ Usually led off to finish *erê*, these baby gods and goddesses are sometimes allowed to stay and frolic in the *barracão* (Fig. 5.7). They chase each other, cry, argue, have food fights, play with imaginary toys, and generally assume the roles of capricious children. The public celebration usually ends on this note.

The combined forces of individual and group *axé* serve to immunize those who have given themselves to the deities against ill health and the other misfortunes of life. A balanced Candomblé adherent—one who has fulfilled his or her personal and community obligations, has respected the limits of his or her guardian deities and the deities of others, and has followed Yoruba strictures that were first established in a distant time and place—takes an active role in controlling his or her own destiny. But mortals are frail creatures. They are



5.7 Having been in a possession trance earlier in the evening, a *filha-de-santo* dances and sucks on a pacifier while in the *erê* state. (Photo: Robert Voeks)

drawn by instinct, peer pressure, and circumstances beyond their control to be less than fastidious in carrying out their obligations, or to neglect them altogether. With notable exceptions, the average Candomblé follower is poor, overworked, and underpaid. Thus, the expenses and material eccentricities associated with maintaining a well-balanced existence—proper food and drink, appropriate clothing, sacrificial animals, and a host of votive paraphernalia—are beyond the means of most Bahians. Life is short, and the temptation to indulge in excesses is considerable. Rapid descent into disequilibrium, into the territory controlled by Exu, represents an invitation to physical, emotional, and material problems. Reestablishing spiritual harmony may be a simple process or may require the employment of the full arsenal of spiritual medicine available to the *pai-* or *mãe-de-santo*.

Spiritual Medicine

As we have seen, Candomblé etiology ascribes illness to a state of disequilibrium with the spiritual realm. Adherents or clients who fail to make timely offerings to their guardian deities, indulge in excesses, or neglect the preferences and prohibitions of the gods chart a spiritual course that is fraught with hazard. The medical effects of risky behavior can range from temporary illness episodes to chronic, even life-threatening health disorders. Although illness can occur for other reasons, it is when health problems become chronic, when families confront one disaster after another, or when Western medical assistance fails that suspicion falls on failure to *tratar os santos* 'treat the *orixás*.' Among those who believe that African spiritual entities intervene in the lives of humans, the source of the distress can be determined only through reference to the Yoruba pantheon. Once a deity has chosen to punish his or her negligent child, and this displeasure has been manifested in physical or emotional symptoms, the consultation of a *pai-* or *mãe-de-santo* becomes necessary.

Divination

For secular patients not initiated into Candomblé, the healing process begins by identifying the client's two guardian deities, the apparent one and the concealed one. This is done by means of the *jogo de búzios*, or shell toss, the most enduring of the various methods of divination introduced by West Africans.²¹ Carried out by both male and female Candomblé priests, this means of communication between *aiê* and *orun*, with the *pai* or *mãe-de-santo* serving as intermediary between deity and client, represents one of the principal duties

(as well as sources of income) of each priest.²² Deep in concentration, the *pai-de-santo* begins by murmuring salutary phrases, in what appears to be a mix of Yoruba and Portuguese, to summon the appropriate deities. He or she tosses sixteen African cowry shells on a small wooden board circumscribed by a ring of sacred necklaces (Fig. 5.8). The resultant numbers of “open” and “closed” cowries (that is, the number that land with the shell aperture facing up and facing down) and the geometric configuration of the shells transmit one or more sacred messages. The accuracy of the message is tested by a second toss, this time using only four shells.

Each shell configuration is associated with several *odu*, or Yoruba myths. It is up to the diviner to determine which of these sacred oral messages is most relevant to the problem under consideration, and how to interpret its meaning. Anthropologist Julio Braga lists examples of the *orixás* and *odu* associated with many of the possible cowry combinations, as well as the significance for the client of these oral messages. He records, for example, that three open and thirteen closed shells point to a message being transmitted by Oxóssi, deity of the hunt, by means of five different *odu*. In this case, one of the allegories describes the life of a wealthy man, a man who loses his fortune and decides to take his own life. Preparing to hang himself, the man observes the great suffering of a leper. Reflecting on the courage of the leper, the man abandons his



5.8 A *pai-de-santo* using the *jogo-de-búzios* divination method. (Photo: Janira Voeks)

suicidal plan. Later, he is called to take the throne upon his father's death. The protagonist resolves to take care of the leper who earlier saved his life.

The message of this particular *odu* is clear. The client should persevere with his current difficulties, knowing that improvement is in his future. To realize this favorable outcome, the client is advised to make an *ebó*, or offering, to Oxóssi of two doves, one land snail, and a length of rope, the implement of suicide alluded to in the story. Although the means to an end are fairly clearly stated in this particular *odu*, this is not always the case. The interpretation and the *ebó* can vary considerably from one *pai-* or *mãe-de-santo* to another.²³

Spiritual Therapy

The therapeutic prescription contained in the message of the shell toss can take various directions. In most cases, however, a *limpeza*, or spiritual cleansing, is a necessary first step. The objective is to eliminate negative fluids and energies that have accumulated in the body. A *limpeza* will usually involve some combination of *ebó*, animal sacrifice and material offerings, a *sacudimento*, or leaf whipping, and an *abó*, or leaf bath. A simple cleansing may include passing consecrated leaves, raw eggs, and animals over the body of the afflicted to extract the offending energies. It is a private ceremony. The client stands on a mat in the *barracão*, wearing old, disposable clothing. Bowls of food precious to the deities are poured over the client's head and shoulders—for example, popcorn for Omolu, or *acarajé* for *lansã*—and allowed to fall onto the mat. The sacrificial animal, usually a white dove or a chicken, is passed over the body beginning at the person's head. The client may be asked to whisper a wish to the animal before it is killed. Before dispatching the bird, its head may be rubbed with a leaf of *folha-da-fortuna* (*Kalanchoe pinnata*). After the *pai-* or *mãe-de-santo*, or the *terreiro* *facá*, has slit the throat of the bird, he or she removes the head and allows its blood, the conductor of animal *axé*, to drain into a ceramic bowl. The wings, head, and feet are carefully arranged on a plate, and the *ebó* is sprinkled with a mixture of the fowl's blood and the oil of *dendê* (*Elaeis guineensis*).

Later, around midnight, the spiritually contaminated food that was poured over the client's head and the prepared *ebó* are placed in an appropriate location. In Salvador, this can be the Dique, an artificial lake that has long constituted sacred African space.²⁴ A boatman carries the offering to the middle of the lake, where it is deposited. *Ebó* may also be placed at a crossroads, the locational domain of Exu, messenger of the gods. Often found littering the streets after Candomblé ceremonies, the rotting remains of sacrificed chickens

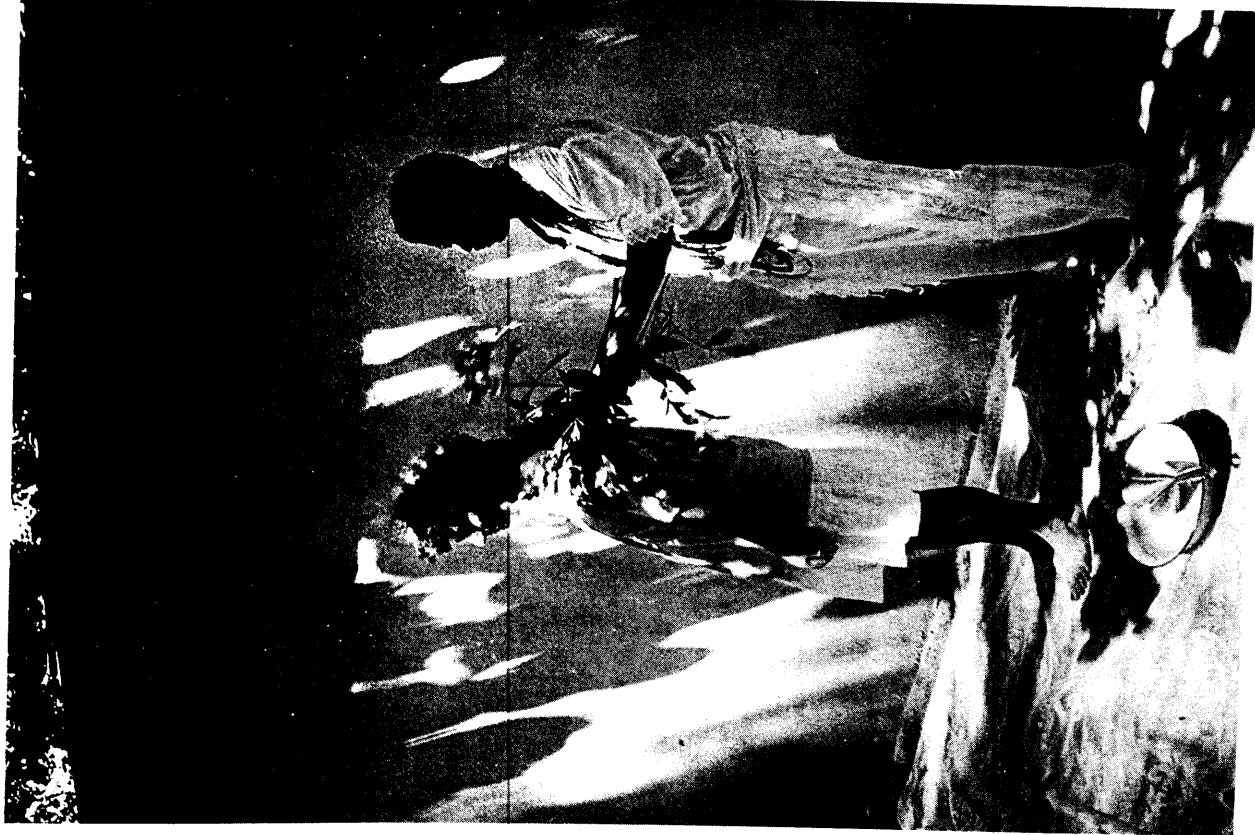
are constant reminders of the ubiquity of African-derived beliefs. They also create a perceived hazard, as these decomposing offerings are believed to be charged with Exu's unstable negative energy. Unfortunate passersby may well attribute future problems to spiritual contagion accidentally picked up on a street corner.

A sacudimento, or leaf whipping, is employed to neutralize negative energies and to restore spiritual equilibrium (Fig. 5.9). One to three plant species usually enter into the sacudimento, each consecrated to the orixás of the client or those of the offending deity. The leaves and twigs are gathered into a bundle and either brushed lightly over the body or briskly whipped, depending on the severity of the problem and, perhaps, the temperament of the pai- or mãe-de-santo.

Healing Baths

The principal purification ritual performed on devotees and secular patients alike is the abô, or leaf bath. Known as the amaci in many terreiros, especially in Candomblé de Angola, the leaf bath is nearly always prescribed during the shell toss. It is prescribed for health problems as well as difficulties related to finance and personal relationships. The banho de descarga 'discharge bath' serves to eliminate negative energies that may be constraining the client. The banho de desenvolvimento 'development bath' is meant to attract good fortune. Depending on the nature of the problem, the abô may be carried out, using the specified leaves, either in the privacy of the home or at the terreiro. A simple abô can be prepared at home and taken immediately after the consultation. Recipes usually include the leaves of three species that "belong" to the deity of the client, although seven or more taxa are employed in complicated cases. An odd number of species appears to be the rule for abô prescriptions. The leaves are macerated in a basin of cool water (preferably drawn from a stream or well) and poured over the body. The head is left dry if the leaves of the abô are considered 'hot'—that is, pertaining to a particularly hot-tempered deity.

If the abô is to treat a complicated problem or is to be employed in initiation, more preparations and precautions are taken. Just as the perceived properties of the plants used in the abô vary, so too do the processes of plant collection and preparation. With few exceptions, a sacred species that has been improperly harvested becomes 'just a plant,' devoid of spiritual energy. This is perfectly acceptable if the plant is being employed in simple medicina caseira 'home herbalism,' where the therapeutic properties are of a chemical as op-



5.9 A pai-de-santo administering a leaf sacudimento to a client. (Photo: Janira Voeks)

posed to a spiritual nature. But if its intended use is for spiritual medicine—if the occult powers of the plant need to be awakened—then specific collection and preparation procedures need to be observed.²⁵ These precepts include gathering the plant at the proper time.²⁶ The preferred collection time is usually late at night or early in the morning, when the leaf sap is most abundant. The liquid exudate from the leaves symbolizes the blood of the plant, the vegetal *axé*, the principal source of foliar energy. Dried leaves, which have lost their liquid energy, are not employed in Candomblé ritual. If the leaves are collected outside the grounds of the *terreiro*, such as in the forest, it is necessary to seek the *agô*, or permission, of the appropriate deities: Ossáim, god of leaves and medicine, and Oxóssi, god of the forest and hunt. This permission is obtained by begging the forgiveness of the deities and also paying a small offering for the leaves. The gift often consists of a few coins, a chunk of black tobacco, and some honey.

The *pai-* or *mãe-de-santo* prepares the *abô* by placing the leaves in a basin of cool water and slowly kneading them with his or her hands (Fig. 5.10). This physical manipulation of the leaves serves to augment the inherent *axé* of the leaves with that being transferred by the priest. An incantation is often whispered over the leaves in order to awaken their spiritual energy.²⁷ In order to marshal even more spiritual energy, the developing *abô* may be placed inside



5.10 Preparation of an *abô* by a *pai-de-santo*. (Photo: Janira Voeks)

the *peji* (shrine) of the appropriate *orixá* for a period of time. The final result is medicine charged with the spiritual energy of the leaves, of the priest, and of the offended deity. The client washes with the leaf bath in privacy, standing naked and pouring the greenish liquid over his or her head. A split bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*)—the sacred vessel that, according to mythology, holds Ossáim's medicinal secrets—may be used to pour the *abô*. The client lets the water and leaves dry naturally on his or her body, usually without toweling off. The aroma of sacred leaves, whether sweet or pungent, constantly follows adherents to Candomblé.

Another *abô*, known as the *abô de casa* 'house leaf bath,' is fundamental to Candomblé worship. This bath includes a complicated array of foliar elements as well as other sacred materials, including, for initiates, the blood of sacrificed animals. Also known as the purification bath, the house *abô* is administered to members of the *terreiro* before all major ceremonies and to *iaô*, Candomblé novices, during the months or years of initiation (Fig. 5.11). Depending on the *terreiro*, the initiates are usually brought out of their *roncô* (quarters) late at night or early in the morning and administered a cold *abô* by the *mãe pe-quena*. Most *iaô* are required to drink periodically from the leaf bath so as to purify both the inside and the outside of the body. While most *iaô* describe these nocturnal purges in disparaging terms, the leaf bath apparently has a profound psychological impact. Years after initiation has been completed, just the aroma of this leaf combination can induce possession trance.

Unlike the medicinal baths prescribed during consultations, the elements of the house *abô* are not modified to fit the occasion. Rather, the specific foliar composition is a characteristic of the *terreiro*, one that in principal never changes and that represents one of the *terreiro's* most closely guarded secrets. Ranging in composition from seven to sixteen to twenty-one species, each house *abô* is learned by the priest during his or her years of initiation.

Determining whether a problem is of a spiritual rather than an organic origin is not necessarily easy. Despite fastidiously attending to the wishes of the *orixás*, followers experience illness, lose loved ones, and face financial difficulties. Acts of spiritual prophylaxis serve to diminish the probability of becoming ill, but do not eliminate it. Moreover, spiritual imbalance is not the source of every predicament. There are problems that "just happen." A respiratory ailment may be nothing more than a viral infection. A broken arm may result from simple carelessness. A family member may die because it was his or her time. If a health problem is deemed to be of organic origin, the client is often referred to a physician. A few Western doctors maintain reciprocal relationships with *pais-* or *mães-de-santo*, in which one sends clients to the other if

the problem appears to be within the other's purview.²⁸ In those cases in which the *pai-* or *mãe-de-santo* is well versed in the practice of herbalism (which is often), he or she may prescribe a medicinal plant therapy.

Curandeiros

The distinction between organically and spiritually derived illness is fuzzy for Bahians in general, and even more so for those who are serious followers of Candomblé. In principle, all illness is believed to be derived from imbalance with the other world and, hence, within the purview of spiritual divination and treatment. According to Nina Rodrigues, most Bahians at the end of the nineteenth century attributed all disease and mortality, with the exception of violent death, to the actions of the spirits and of living magicians.²⁹ Contemporary Afro-Brazilians both within and outside of Candomblé are well acquainted with the causes and consequences of microbial and parasitic infections, and the European conception of germ theory has been injected with little resistance into the regional ethnomedical belief system. African slaves may have imported their own notions of disease cause and effect, such as the elaborate system retained by present-day Nigerian Yoruba, but there is little or no evidence that such a system survived in, or even arrived at, Brazil.³⁰ Thus, although subject to individual interpretation, illness is believed to be generally separable into that which is treatable via divination and work with the deities, and that which is treatable by Western doctors or herbalists.

Many *pais-* and *mães-de-santo* are adept at identifying and treating organic illness, and thus have come to occupy the role of community *curandeiros*. Others steadfastly avoid "practicing medicine."³¹ For this latter group of priests, organic medicine is viewed as a *negócio do médico* "doctor's business," and well outside the scope of sacred medicine. When symptoms suggest an organic cause, such as a virus, bacterial infection, or muscle pain, the client is simply referred to a physician trained in the Western tradition.

Whether the priest does or does not choose to work with herbalism follows from several considerations. First, because many *pais-* and *mães-de-santo* believe that all illness, accidents, and calamities have spiritual or magical causes—resulting, for example, from failure to observe *euó* or carry out obligations, or from an inadvertent evil eye—treatment of the other-worldly source of the illness may well cause the symptoms to disappear. This is particularly the case when the client has already visited a Western-style doctor without resolution of the problem. The wealth and prestige of the *terreiro* is another factor. With the exception of the few well-appointed temples in Salvador, the majority of



5-11 Male *iaó* during *orunkó* ceremony. While possessed by his principal deity, the initiate shouts his new Candomblé name three times to the assembled audience. (Photo: Robert Voeks)

Bahian candomblés are poor and underfinanced, forever struggling to provide not only a service for the community but also subsistence for the pai- or mãe-de-santo. In these myriad proletarian terreiros (more common in some Bahian neighborhoods than the ubiquitous corner pharmacy), the pai- or mãe-de-santo may well survive on the revenue generated by fee-paying clients. The success of many terreiros is thus underpinned by the ability of the priest to be a jack-of-all-healing-trades: spiritual, magical, and organic.

It is also true that whereas mastery of liturgical and medicinal plants lies at the fulcrum of Candomblé knowledge, most pais- and mães-de-santo are nevertheless increasingly drawn from the ranks of an urban population with limited familiarity with either local or exotic flora. Open space in burgeoning cities such as Salvador, Cachoeira, Ilhéus, and Itabuna is becoming rare, and traditional knowledge of all but the most common medicinal taxa is disappearing rapidly. For most urban dwellers, including the majority of Candomblé followers, the healing forest has largely been supplanted by the ever-present, if unaffordable, corner pharmacy. Even where cognitive skills in herbalism are being preserved, decreasing access to native vegetation often forces the pai- or mãe-de-santo to travel long distances to gather sacred herbs, an expenditure that few terreiros can afford, or else to patronize a casa de folhas, or herb stand. A Salvador filho-de-santo once complained, for example, that someone had chopped down the last bico-de-papagaio (*Centropogon cornutus*) in the neighborhood, a small tree used both in initiation ceremonies and to treat stomach ulcers. Thus, while the art of herbalism survives in the Candomblé terreiro, kept alive by custom, demand, and financial reward, its continued existence is uncertain.

Herbalism

Dispensing medicinal advice and herbal remedies is part and parcel of the role of pai- or mãe-de-santo as neighborhood curandeiro. The priest's familiarity with the healing properties of leaves stems in part from his or her daily employment of plants for other purposes, especially preventive medicine and spiritual healing. Nearly thirty percent of the Candomblé species collected in this study (see Appendix 1) retain more than one use, serving the function of spiritual treatment as part of one therapy, and of organic healing in another. The aromatic leaves of leopoldina (*Alpinia zerumbet*), for example, are common constituents of a healing abô. In other situations, the plant serves as a leaf infusion for the treatment of anxiety and shortness of breath. The fern samambaia (*Lygodium volubile*)³² is used in baths to dissipate negative energies as well

as baths to treat rheumatism. This dual nature of the healing flora leads to conflicts, however, such as with carrapicho (*Bidens pilosa*). Representing one of Candomblé's most powerful magical plants, this innocuous little weed frequently finds its way into malevolent recipes involving animal parts and fresh grave dirt. Thus, although an infusion made from this herb is well known to be an excellent treatment for kidney problems, its association with black magic and Exu precludes its medicinal use in most terreiros.

Organic Medicine

A total of 76 taxa out of the 140 species collected in this study are employed as treatments for organic health problems. The majority are applied in the form of the characteristic chá, or leaf tea, the tried-and-true treatment of Brazilian home medicine. There is nothing sacred or uniquely African about these prescriptions, as most Brazilians can recite at least a few home remedies using infusions. They are the first line of offense against pathogens, and when you call on a doctor in Bahia, it is not unusual for him to ask if you have tried um chazinho 'a little tea' yet. If Africans have influenced the nature of these infusions, it would probably be in the unusually high incidence of leaves used in their preparation, as opposed to roots. For the Yoruba and their diaspora, leaves are the major repository of vegetal axé.

Herbal baths represent the next most common form of treatment. Although leaf baths are the dominant form of spiritual therapy employed among the Yoruba, their widespread use as treatments for physical maladies, both inside and outside of Candomblé, owes much to early indigenous habits. The Portuguese marveled from the first days of discovery at the frequency with which the natives bathed, especially given the notorious lack of hygiene exhibited by most Europeans of the time.³³ But by the mid-1600s, according to Dutch physician Guilherme Piso, the practice of using aromatic herb baths "against afflictions of the body as well as for pleasure" was common among the Portuguese.³⁴ The banho das folhas, or aromatic leaf bath, is firmly entrenched in Brazilian folk medicine.

The other medicinal preparations are as varied as the uses to which they are applied. Leaves are chewed in a raw state, dried and smoked, boiled in water until attaining a thick syrupy consistency, or steeped in hot water for vapor inhalation. Leaf juice is squeezed from raw leaves and either taken internally or rubbed on the place of affliction. Hot leaves are applied directly above the point of pain or discomfort, as is the oily extract of certain seeds. Several leaves and stems are prepared as garrafadas, or bottled medicines—meaning the leaf

Candomblé priest or priestess healer does not claim confidence in treating. There are a total of 153 maladies that are treated by the Candomblé pharmacopoeia, or roughly twice the number of medicinal plants. Thus, each species on average has two different medicinal applications. But while the diversity of treatments is impressive, most of the prescriptions are in fact used to treat ordinary, everyday health complaints. Of the total medicinal flora, 26 percent are used as infusions for flu and stomach ailments, 20 percent for general stomach problems, and 18 percent for relief of rheumatism. Thus, although some of these medicinal plants are prescribed for life-threatening illness, much of this pharmacopoeia is best characterized as equivalent to "over-the-counter" Western medicines.

Magical Medicine

The people of Northeastern Brazil labor under an array of magically derived health problems that often defy diagnosis and prescription within the sweep of Western medicine. These culturally defined illness episodes, often viewed by Western doctors as psychological in origin and hence outside their expertise, can nevertheless lead to serious physical and emotional suffering. Although some of these perceived maladies and their cures arrived with Africans, most trace their ancestry to European magical beliefs and superstitions.⁵² In their general-purpose role as neighborhood curandeiros, Candomblé practitioners inherited by default the responsibility to deal with the sundry magically derived afflictions that harass the population, including even those that traditionally require treatment by means of folk Christian rituals.

At the same time, Candomblé priests have traditionally been called upon not only to resolve the problems associated with magic, but to dispense it as well. The use of magical formulas to improve the health, personal relations, and financial status of clients has long been part of the stock and trade of Yoruba priests and their Brazilian descendants. It is inevitable, however, that the process of improving the lives of some necessarily translates into introducing pain and disorder into the lives of others. Among the African Yoruba, for example, Pierre Verger notes that recipes serving to make rain fall from the skies are "good for some people, but can be awful for others."⁵³ Thus, even where priests are not directly acting against others, their attempts to tip the balance of fortune inevitably create winners and losers, victors and victims.

As noted earlier, the perceived ability of New World Africans to do harm, both to their owners during the period of slavery and to enemies within the African American community, is one of the principal reasons for the survival

of this and other neo-African religions. For the majority of Brazilians, in fact, Candomblé connotes **macumba**, the summoning forth of dark forces to do injury to others. Thus, while subscribing to the central tenets of Candomblé is anathema to many Bahians, most nevertheless admit to maintaining a healthy respect for the malevolent powers of its practitioners. Respect in these cases is best translated as fear. Thus, Candomblé priests to some degree maintain the dual role of purveyor of and protector from magic.

The role of magic in many terreiros, I suspect, is nevertheless slowly eroding. Candomblé and other African-based belief systems are emerging from their dubious past to become legitimate means of religious expression in Brazil. No longer persecuted by the authorities, Candomblé and its practitioners are increasingly viewed, at least by intellectuals and many enlightened Brazilians, as powerful symbols of the African cultural contribution to Brazilian society. In some instances, particularly for the large and prosperous terreiros in Salvador, Candomblé has emerged from its humble and oppressed origins to take its place as an acceptable spiritual alternative to Christianity. And part of this legitimacy appears to be derived from a declining emphasis on the practice of magic. As fear is gradually replaced by respectability, many practitioners no longer feel the need to conjure occult forces. Because the positive social role provided by the community terreiro is, in the eyes of many, compromised by continuing such activities, the practice of black magic appears to be on the decline.

magic → religion (Candomblé)

Evil Eye

Among the myriad magically derived problems affecting Bahians, perhaps the most common among Candomblé believers and nonbelievers is mau-olhado, the 'evil eye.' A few special people, it is believed, are born with the innate ability to cast the evil eye, even if inadvertently. Mau-olhado originates as a form of exaggerated envy for the material possessions of others, such as animals, house plants, or pets. Small children are particularly susceptible. Often without realizing it, the perpetrator transfers negative fluids directly to the object of his or her desire, resulting in the injury, ill health, or even death of relatively defenseless beings, such as small birds and children. Every family seems to have experienced the effects of evil eye at one time or another. Ever vigilant against this dangerous force, Bahians are immediately suspicious of exaggerated compliments from friends and neighbors.

Olho grande, or big eye, represents a variety of evil eye, except that in this case the negative effects occur more in the area of business and finances. Failed

business ventures, decreasing sales, and lack of professional promotion are all signals that the jealousy of a peer is blocking the path to advancement and success. Unlike mau-olhado, however, olho grande is considered to be intentional rather than accidental.

Both of these afflictions are more easily avoided than treated. The traditional means of fending off evil eye is to summon the occult powers of the plant kingdom to provide the necessary prophylaxis. The first line of defense involves the placement of specified ornamental plants in the entryways to private residences and businesses and at various points in the terreiro. The most common plants for this use include the woody herb vence tudo African (Justicia gendarussa); the bowstring hemps espada-de-Ogun and espada-de-Oxóssi (Sansevieria cf. aethiopicata); the woody aroid comigo-ninguém-pode (Dieffenbachia maculata); the shrubs abre-caminho (Baccharis sp.), pinhão roxo (Jatropha gossypifolia), and vence tudo (Rolandra fruticosa); and the fern samambaia (Lygodium volubile).

Although most of these species represent common pantropical cultivars, all are endowed with special significance within Candomblé. Each of these plants is said to "belong" to one or another of the gods of fire—deities whose nature is aggressive, bellicose, and masculine. It is not the power of the plants themselves but rather that of their owners that provides the necessary protection. The relevant gods include Ogun, with his power to clear paths; Oxóssi, the hunter; Omolu, the feared god of smallpox; and Caboclo, the indigenous god of the Brazilian forest. If it is to attack its intended victim successfully, evil eye must be able to navigate a gauntlet of spiritual protection.

Individuals can partially protect themselves against evil eye by carrying a sprig of arruda (Ruta graveolens) or laranja-da-terra (Citrus aurantium) somewhere on their bodies. Arruda in particular has a lengthy history of magical and medical use, extending well before the colonization of Brazil. It served as a panacea for all ailments during Greek and Roman periods,⁵⁴ and Roman ladies are reported to have hidden cuttings from this small cultivated shrub in their clothing to fend off evil eye.⁵⁵ Ferdinand Magellan carried arruda, probably for good luck, on his unlucky voyage of discovery.⁵⁶ In the 1830s, the French traveler Jean Baptiste Debret reported that African slaves sold arruda on the streets of Rio de Janeiro to buyers who hid small cuttings inside their turbans or behind their ears as protection from bad luck.⁵⁷ Arruda continues to serve precisely the same purpose, and the scene described by Debret has changed little in 160 years. Arruda is still available on the streets of Rio as well as in the herb markets of Salvador, and Baianas can still be seen with pieces of this magical plant tucked in the folds of their turbans or behind their ears.

Another line of personal protection against evil eye, as well as against other forms of bad luck, is provided by wearing or possessing various protective amulets. The horns of animals, strategically placed, have long represented lines of defense against unseen malevolent forces. For the European ancestors of Brazilians, horns symbolized "sexual energy, fecund impulse, and physical energy."⁵⁸ The use of horns to repel evil eye was common in Iberia at the turn of the century, as it has been among the African Yoruba in recent times.⁵⁹ The practice was also common in early nineteenth-century Brazil,⁶⁰ and it continues in Bahia today, where many Candomblé terreiros situate oxhorns in their gardens to repel evil eye.⁶¹

The most common Bahian amulet is the figa, represented by a small wood carving of a human fist with the thumb inserted between the index and middle fingers. Although some figas are crafted from bone, stone, or even plastic, the wood of guiné, arruda, native fig, and other spiritually powerful species is preferred.⁶² Dating from at least as far back as Roman times, the use of the figa symbol against evil eye was common at the turn of the nineteenth century in Lisbon and Madeira,⁶³ and it is still displayed for this purpose in Portugal. Figa amulets in Brazil have been recorded since the early 1900s. Robert Walsh reported from Rio de Janeiro that illness in children that could not be explained through physical causes was "attributed to the effects of an evil eye," and that as a precaution, mothers "suspended over the head of the child to be protected, a little hand, with the thumb placed between the fingers, which they call a figa."⁶⁴ In late nineteenth-century Salvador, the figa was probably the most common form of amulet.⁶⁵ Today this tiny carving represents one of the most visible symbols of continued deference to the occult powers. Small figas are worn around the neck or as bracelets, and almost every Bahian household has one on display, even if only for decoration.

Another frequently used protective amulet is the patuá,⁶⁶ a small cloth pouch hung around the neck containing sacred objects, devotional messages, and plant parts. In the past these were fashioned from leather, but today they are usually made from cotton or synthetic cloth. Patuás have a considerable history of use among Europeans and African Muslims. Ancient Egyptians inscribed lengthy magical verses on their papyrus amulets well before the Christian era, and medieval Europeans carried various types of sacred objects with mystical messages hidden on their bodies for protection against magic.⁶⁷ In late nineteenth-century Bahia, Black Muslims—the descendants of Hausa slaves—carried protective talismans inscribed with Koranic messages to "close the body against all the evils."⁶⁸ The Hausa traders in West Africa were considered, at least until recently, "great salesmen" of these magical packets,⁶⁹ and such

talismans are still commonly employed by Muslims throughout the world. Ever prepared to fortify his own arsenal of magical powers, the non-Muslim African readily incorporated these Islamic charms "to enrich and fortify his own magic."⁷⁰ Like most forms of protection against evil eye, the use of **patuás** is not restricted to followers of Candomblé; conversely, not all Candomblé followers subscribe to their use.

The foliar components of the **patuá** are fairly consistent. The ones I've seen prepared include a piece of rhizome from **dandá** (*Cyperus rotundus*) cut into the shape of a figa. This figure is then sandwiched between small leaves of **arruda** (*Ruta graveolens*) and **guiné** (*Petiveria alliacea*) and sewn into the tiny cloth bag. Christian prayers on small scraps of paper may also be included. West African **akokó** (*Newbouldia laevis*) also finds its way into **patuás**, as do pieces of garlic, clove, **abre-caminho** (*Baccharis* sp.), **vence tudo** (*Rolandra fruticosa*), and other herbs.⁷¹

In houses that experience chronic problems with evil eye or new homes whose owners seek to avoid these problems, a Candomblé healer may be called to do a **limpeza**, or cleaning. This process consists of, among other things, shaking specified leaves in the house and symbolically wiping away any negative fluids or envy that may have accumulated. The bundled leaves, which are always fresh, often include **caicara** (*Borreria verticillata*), **São Gonçálio** (*Catseara* sp.), **coerana** (*Cestrum laevigatum*), **murici** (*Byrsonima sericea*), and **candeia branca** (*Miconia hypoleuca*).

The treatment for those suffering the effects of evil eye, aside from the herbal baths described earlier, is Christian prayer. For Candomblé priests and priestesses, most of whom were baptized as Catholics, the recitation of Christian prayers does not seem to represent a spiritual conflict. Rather, it is simply a matter of administering the appropriate medicine for the specified affliction. In one such healing ceremony, the afflicted places cuttings from one, two, or three plants in a glass of water. These can be **arruda** (*Ruta graveolens*), **vassourinha** (*Scoparia dulcis*), **salsa-da-praia** (*Ipomoea pes-caprae*), **pinhão roxo** (*Jatropha gossypifolia*), **fedegoso** (*Senna occidentalis*), or **alfazema** (*Vitex* sp.). The person then places one hand over the heart, saying at the same time, "In the name of the father, son, and holy ghost." The participant then recites the following verse:

[Name of the participant],

God generated you,

God created you,

God frees you from the affliction that affects you.

Open life, open death,

There is nothing stopping you.

If it's because of your smile,

If it's because of the way you speak,

If it's because of the way you walk,

If it's because of your beauty,

If it's because of your ugliness,

If it's because of the way you study,

If it's because you work so well, . . .

Then the afflicted person continues to state all the possible sources of the evil eye.⁷²

Aside from evil eye, a host of other complaints, most of magical origin, afflict the population as well. One of these is **quebranto**, which is described as a type of physical lassitude, a general pain in the body, and a lack of urge to do anything; it is one of the more common culture-specific illnesses. Manifesting flu-like symptoms without a viral source, **quebranto** is believed to be caused by the entrance into the body of negative fluids. Another common ailment is **espinhela caída**, described as a weakened condition of the arms and upper body, with pain typically in the thoracic area. The presence of the illness is diagnosed by measuring from the tip of the index finger to the elbow, and then comparing this length to the distance from the edge of one shoulder to the other. If the two measurements do not correspond closely, then the patient is believed to be suffering from **espinhela caída**. **Vento caído** is a common childhood illness. It is characterized by fever, diarrhea, and symptoms of dehydration, again without apparent organic cause. Diagnosis is made by passing a finger over the child's forehead and tasting it. If it tastes sour, or if the child's two feet are not the same size, then **vento caído** is indicated.

Because these health problems are not African in origin, their treatment is largely outside the arena of Candomblé spiritual medicine. The usual remedy involves spiritual purification by means of herbal baths, fumigations with incense, and Christian prayers. For example, **cobreiro** is a common affliction that lies outside the purview of Western medicine. Thought to be caused by the touch of a spider, toad, or snake, **cobreiro** manifests as an unexplainable outbreak of rashes and skin eruptions, something like water blisters. One of the treatments includes repeating the following prayer three times:

I came from Rome, from Romaria,

curing **cobreiro**, and **cobreria**,

with a green branch, and cold water.

We cut our head, we cut our tail,

in the name of God and of Maria.⁷³

After saying the prayer, the patient dips three small stems of arruda in cold water and passes the moist leaves over the area affected by cobreiro.⁷⁴ Although the recitation of this and other healing prayers does not necessarily place this cure in the realm of magic, the inclusion of the ritual with arruda, a plant with no particular Christian significance but with a lengthy history in the realm of conjure and sorcery, does.⁷⁵ (*i i . X t a n k e i n e l y j a n / C a n d o m b l é = n e f e i*)

While many of these magically derived ailments are as common today as in the past, other treatments appear to be dying out through lack of relevance. One such practice involves the use of mamona (*Ricinus communis*), the castor bean plant, to alleviate painful lactation. According to one elderly Candomblé pai-de-santo, in the past, small sections of the stem of mamona were cut and hung around the necks of women as amulets in order to stop lactation. This practice was apparently common during Brazil's colonial era, when large numbers of African and mulatto women were rented out as wet nurses to care for abandoned children in cities such as Salvador.⁷⁶ For those women who chose not to spend much of their adult lives breast-feeding hungry infants or who found sustained lactation to be painful, the mamona amulet was believed to provide a temporary respite. Aside from one description of mamona's past use, I saw no evidence of the plant's being used for this purpose.

The most complete erosion of magical practice involves the issue of fertility. In the literature on Yoruba as well as general African ethnomedicine, the subject of maximizing fertility in men and women assumes a prominent position. Children, for the Yoruba, are "the crown of life," and for a woman there is no greater dishonor or social calamity than to be pronounced barren.⁷⁷ Considered to be the work of witches or malevolent spirits, infertility is traditionally treated with the spiritual assistance of a babalaó (father of mysteries), a babalorixá (father of the orixás), or an herbalist. The functions of many of the Yoruba medicinal incantations recorded by Pierre Verger are self-explanatory: "Owner of Penis and Testicle," "Draw Semen," "Huge" (to get children), "It Cuts, It Cuts" (to make a man's sperm stay in the body of a woman), and others.⁷⁸ This preoccupation with fertility was, however, never elicited in my discussions with Candomblé priests. Other than a few plants thought to possess aphrodisiac powers (which of course are of marginal importance to the issue of fertility), no mention was ever made of plants or other means for increasing fertility. When I posed the question to Pai Ruy, he said that among most Afro-Brazilian women, many of whom are poor and without reliable husbands, the most significant issue was how to stop fertility, not how to enhance it. He could never recall having been approached by a client hoping to increase her fertility. A historical explanation for this lack of interest in pro-

creation was offered by anthropologist Roger Bastide, who asked pointedly, "What was the good of asking the gods to make women fruitful when they could bear nothing but infant slaves?"⁷⁹

Medicine for Wealth

The ritual use of plants to increase wealth or enhance business success is also common in Candomblé terreiros. Financial problems are a never-ending source of hardship for much of the Afro-Brazilian population, and not surprisingly, Candomblé priests have retained those rituals associated with acquiring and keeping money. One frequent method used is the banho de desenvolvimento 'development bath.' This ritual, as noted earlier, is similar to the purification baths, and like them it uses an odd number of sacred leaves in the recipe. The difference is that these leaf baths are specifically employed to improve the financial or commercial success of clients. People who are about to begin new businesses or are hoping to improve their current financial situation can seek to improve their chances by taking banhos de desenvolvimento as prescribed by a pai- or mãe-de-santo.

Financial status may be improved as well by employing the power of plants that chama dineiro 'call money' to them, such as vintém (*Drymaria cordata*), akokó (*Newbouldia laevis*), and folha-da-fortuna (*Kalanchoe pinnata*).⁸⁰ Folha-da-fortuna, the 'leaf of fortune,' has the remarkable ability to reproduce viviparously, sprouting roots and tiny buds from the serrations of the leaf margins—hence its English name, "everlife" or "neverdie."⁸¹ This ability seemingly to produce something from nothing led to its magical association with attracting money in West Africa, as noted in the following Yoruba magical incantation directed at folha-da-fortuna:

Abamoda [folha-da-fortuna], my aspiration will be accomplished
Orisa Oke [Orixá Oké] accept the aspiration of the chameleon
I aspire to money.⁸²

The special qualities of this species are also attested to in the following oral text recorded in Bahia:

It is said that in the beginning of the world, all the leaves of the forest were told to make the above ebó (he goat, cocks, obí, orobo, etc) in order that each one might live as comfortably as possible under the prevailing circumstances. But none of them took heed except Ologaman (leaf of fortune) who made up his mind to dispatch such an ebó. As a consequence,

he was endowed with all the magical powers of Osanyin and became a miraculous leaf among all others which even today sprouts so admirably that it is the most powerful leaf in the occult sciences.⁸³

Having diffused from West Africa, the understanding of the powers of this leaf are retained as Candomblé collective knowledge. In Salvador, I have seen a leaf of *folha-da-fortuna* nailed to a Candomblé priest's door in the belief that this would attract money. I was told that if one plants the leaf in a pot over a single coin in the soil, its roots will eventually draw the financial energy of the coin and thereby attract money.

The power to influence people, either financially or otherwise, is attributed to the weedy sedge *dandá* (*Cyperus rotundus*). In Nigeria, in addition to a host of traditional medicinal uses, the aromatic tuber of *dandá* is chewed by people who seek to influence others by their words. Defendants in court cases will conceal pieces in their cheeks as charms to secure acquittal.⁸⁴ The magical use of *dandá* has survived intact among the Afro-Brazilian population in Bahia.⁸⁵ At the suggestion of a *pai-de-santo*, I tried chewing the root while giving a talk at a conference, with results that were distinctly unsuccessful.

Magical Powder

One of the magical practices for which Candomblé priests have been most renowned is the production and use of magical *pó*, or powder. At least until recently, a highly regarded *pai-* or *mãe-de-santo* was seen as one "who has all the leaves in his nail."⁸⁶ This appellation referred to the alleged practice of reducing powerful plants, either poisonous or magical, to a powder. Concealed in the hand or under a fingernail, the *pó* was transferred to a victim while shaking hands. Pai Vicente stated that this practice was common "in the old days," and that was why he chose not to shake hands with other priests. Pai Balbino reported that people from Itaparica Island were particularly suspect, and that he never ate food, drank water, or touched anyone when such people were visiting for fear of being poisoned. Every *pai-* or *mãe-de-santo* has a story about other unscrupulous Candomblé practitioners who used powders to kill or harm their enemies, although few were willing to admit that they themselves employed them. Not all magical powders are necessarily employed for nefarious ends, however, as Nina Rodrigues noted that magical powder was also used in amulets for protection.⁸⁷

One of the best known magical powders is prepared from the seeds of *pimenta-da-costa* (*Aframomum melegueta*). These small, reddish seeds, which

have been an item of trade between West Africa and Iberia since about the thirteenth century, have been imported from West Africa to Salvador at least since the mid-1800s.⁸⁸ Small plastic containers containing *pimenta-da-costa* can still be purchased in a few open markets. Frequently referred to as *ataré* among Candomblé priests, the seeds of this plant have retained their African magical uses in Brazil. Among West Africans and their diaspora, the species is employed to create domestic problems. The Yoruba soak the seed in special medicine and place it in a position to be stepped on by the intended victim, who will become diseased.⁸⁹ It is also placed in the home of a victim, again to be stepped on, in order to bring general disorder to the occupants.⁹⁰ This practice appears to have survived in Louisiana, among the descendants of Vodun practitioners, as well.⁹¹ In Bahia, Manuel Querino noted in the 1930s that crabs prepared with this seed were used to create domestic discontent.⁹² I was told by a *pai-de-santo* that simply placing the powder of *pimenta-da-costa* on the floor of the victim's home was sufficient to create havoc in his or her personal life.

There seems to be an endless list of recipes for magical powders employed to attract or dissuade someone's romantic attention. These are often prepared from the standard macabre fare of dried frogs and snakes, eggs, human body hair, fingernails, menstrual blood, and poisonous parts. A small packet of the powder is placed strategically in or near the victim's house, often near the doorway or under the bed.⁹³ In Ilhéus, a *filha-de-santo* described a case in which a husband was desperate to get his wife to leave him. He had tried everything, but she refused to leave. Finally, he consulted a *pai-de-santo*, who gave him the following formula: Collect seven small handfuls of sand from the grave of a recently buried man and put it in a sack. Then buy a package of *pemba de Exu* (a magical powder sold in religious shops). Collect some *corredeira* (*Borreria* sp. or *Irlbachia purpurascens*), and slowly grind all the ingredients together until they make a fine powder. Take the powder to a place frequented by Exu, such as a crossroads, and tell him that this powder belongs to the slave (individual Exu) of your deity. Then put the powder somewhere in the house of the victim. According to the *filha-de-santo*, the woman left within three days, never to return.

A very common type of magical affliction, which is not exactly either intentional or accidental, involves a process known as *troca da cabeça* 'exchange of heads.' This complicated and well-guarded ritual facilitates the transfer of some negative spirit that has been picked up by a client to an animate or inanimate object. It is not unusual, for example, for a person to be possessed by an unwanted spirit—perhaps a spirit of the dead, an *egun*—or to acquire the

spiritual presence of an inappropriate **orixá**—perhaps picked up while passing an **ebó** on the street. In this type of affliction, which can only be positively identified through consultation with a Candomblé priest, the client needs to exorcise the spirit and transfer it to an alternative host. The usual medium is a sacrificed chicken. After the transfer is effected, the dead animal is placed at one of the haunts of Exu, usually a crossroads. However, as noted earlier, the negative energy in the decaying bird is highly volatile and is likely to leap into the body of any vulnerable passerby—a dog, a cat, or a human—initiating the need for another troca da cabeça. And so on.

The troca da cabeça, according to two pais-de-santo, can also serve a more sinister purpose. As the symbolic owners of their filhos or filhas, pais- and mães-de-santo have both the power and the right to exchange life forces with their supplicants. An aging or seriously ill priest can thus effect a troca da cabeça in order to trade his or her illness and limited life span for the health and longevity of a younger and stronger adherent. It is rumored, for example, that a famous mãe-de-santo in Salvador took the lives of seven of her filhas in this way, so that each died prematurely in order to provide another year of life to this elderly priestess. Seven deaths for seven years of extra life, or so the story goes.

6 MEDICINAL PLANT CLASSIFICATION

Candomblé etiology charts a complex passage through the parallel worlds of the material (**aiê**) and the spiritual (**orun**). Because illness is seen as reflecting a dysfunctional relationship between the gods and their mortal followers, it follows that prevention and treatment is effected through direct intervention by the spirits or their proxies. However, aside from their presence during possession trance, when the **orixás** ride about the barracão on the backs of their supplicants, the gods are not present in any physical sense in order to implement their wondrous magic. Rather, they have endowed certain natural elements with sufficient **axé** to combat illness in all its forms—spiritual, magical, and organic. Among all the elements of creation, it is the sacred leaves that most directly manifest the healing power of the deities.

Ossáim

Ossáim, guardian of the sacred leaves and medicine, is the deity most intimately involved in health and healing. His domain is the forest and the field, wherever curative plants grow spontaneously. Often in the company of Oxóssi the hunter, with whom he is said to trade medicine for meat, Ossáim is the dedicated but reticent steward of the vegetal realm. Among the Yoruba and their New World diaspora, his image is one of absurd physical disability—one eye, one leg, one enormous ear, and a humorous high-pitched voice.¹ His symbol is a piece of iron with seven points, with the central point mounted by a