Robert Voeks. Sacred Leaves of Candomblé: African Magic, Medicine & Religion in Brazil. Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1997.

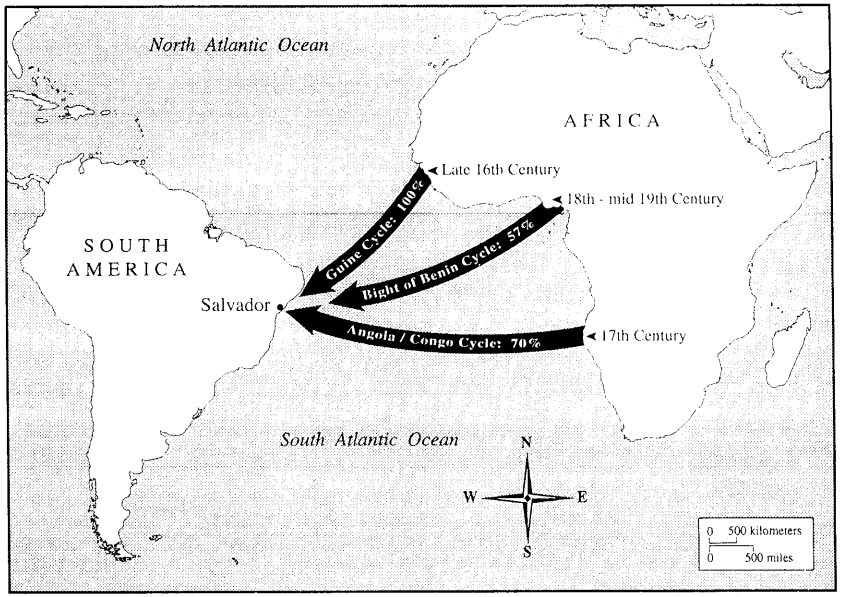
8 AFRICAN RELIGION IN THE AMERICAS

The existence in Brazil of the Candomblé religion—a set of beliefs and practices that are, at their foundation, of West African origin—requires explanation. On the one hand, the problem falls squarely into the arena of migration and diffusion studies: the movements of people and their culture over space; adjustment to new physical, social, and economic conditions; retention or abandonment of native ideas, materials, and technologies; and absorption or rejection of innovation.[1] Candomblé is thus, in many respects, a case of simple cultural diffusion. At the same time, two features distinguish this as well as other elements of the New World African diaspora. First, the actors were unwilling participants in the migration, and second, cultural retention occurred both in spite of and partly as a result of the gauntlet of barriers to diffusion that were erected by European society. In the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles placed in their paths, including forced removal from their homeland and forfeiture of their material culture, the horrors of the transatlantic crossing and plantation slavery, and the imposition of an alien society and religion, how and why did Africans retain so much of their traditional culture? The answers, it seems, do not fall into a single category, but rather draw from each of the factors—economic, social, political, and environmental—that made the African diaspora unique among the world's great migrations of people and ideas.

African Migration

The migratory features of the slave trade most clearly delimited the diffusion of African religious and medical systems to one or another point on the Atlantic coast of the Americas. Where the volume and duration of the slave trade were heavy and protracted, African-based ethnomedicine not only survived, but in some cases came to predominate. This was clearly the case in Brazil, which absorbed over four million African immigrants, or about 40 percent of the total slave population to arrive in the New World, over the course of the four centuries of slave trafficking. The old Spanish Main received roughly five million Africans, and the existence of such orthodox expressions of African belief systems as Santeria in Cuba and Vodun in Haiti, both major destinations for slaves, underscores the evident importance of numbers. North America, on the other hand, having received scarcely 500,000 Africans during the entire slave trade—roughly 5 percent of those reaching the New World—witnessed limited survival of African-based religious and ethnomedical systems.[2] These figures, combined with the fact that throughout most of its colonial period Brazil was dominated numerically by Africans,[3] give a rough idea of why African cultural traditions have persevered there. For example, the population of Salvador in 1807 was recorded as 28 percent white, 20 percent mulatto, and 52 percent black.[4] By 1824, after many Portuguese had fled Brazil following independence, whites constituted less than a quarter of Bahia's total population.[5] At least in purely racial terms, Bahia was settled by Africans.

The ethnicity of the incoming African immigrants and particularly the timing of the slave imports were critical to the eventual hegemony of Yoruba over other African beliefs and practices that arrived in Bahia. Although there was considerable diversity of source regions during the course of the slave trade,[6] the preferences of the planters, merchants, and miners, as well as the changing economic and political environment in Africa, resulted in regional pulses of slave imports. Pierre Verger divides slave arrivals to the Captaincy of Bahia into several cycles (Fig. 8.1).[7] The Guine Cycle, covering the period from the dawn of slaving activities until the end of the sixteenth century, witnessed mostly arrivals from the Guine coast. This early trickle of bondsmen, amounting probably to no more than seven thousand individuals, left little imprint on the evolving cultural landscape. The Angola and Congo Cycle, which tapped mainly into Bantu populations south of the equator, subsumed most of the seventeenth century. The large number of Bantu imports during this period, as well as their reported attitude of assimilation rather than resistance, translated into considerable contributions to the language, religion, and culture of



8.1 Principal source regions for African slaves arriving in Bahia. Verger's (1987) last two phases are consolidated into a single Bight of Benin cycle. Percentages are of all slaves taken to Brazil during each cycle.

the region.[8] The Mina Coast Cycle, lasting to the latter quarter of the eighteenth century, developed as a result of the demand in old Dahomey for Bahian tobacco. Bypassing the usual triangular trading pattern, Bahia exchanged its coarse-grade tobacco directly for Mina slaves. Relations were so good that in 1795 and 1805 Dahomey posted an ambassador in Salvador.[9]

The last cycle, which persisted until the arrival of the final slave ship in 1851, focused on the Bight of Benin. By agreement with Britain, which was exerting increasing pressure to end the slave trade, the Portuguese crown agreed to confine its slaving acquisition after 1815 to ports south of the equator, and by 1830 to halt slave imports altogether. While Rio de Janeiro, in accordance with the agreement, limited most of its imports to West Central and East Africa during this period,[10] Bahian imports increasingly came from north of the equator, particularly from the feuding West African kingdoms of the Yoruba and the Dahomeans. Bahia in this period was in the midst of a resurgence in its sugar economy after many decades of decline. The need for chattel workers for plantation and mill skyrocketed just as the region's principal source areas were on

the verge of closure.[11] Thus, rather than gradually winding down their slave imports during the waning years of slavery, planters and other slave-owners rushed to purchase as many Bight of Benin captives as possible before the final deadline. This regional preference persisted after 1830, as clandestine slave ships began dumping their ill-treated "pieces" at deserted stretches of beach away from the watchful eyes of the authorities. During the final four decades of slave trafficking to Bahia—including twenty years of illegal imports—an estimated 242,800 West Africans arrived in Bahia, or just over 6,070 per year.[12]

The numerical dominance during the eclipse of the Bahian slave trade of the Yoruba and Dahomeans, groups which through centuries of contact in Africa had come to share many of the gods and beliefs that would ultimately take root in the New World, was a major factor that led to the ascendancy of their cosmology over the beliefs of others that had preceded them. Other African religious survivals, such as Vodun in Haiti and Santeria in Cuba, were each also derived from the ethnic group that dominated the last wave of immigrants.[13] Regions where no particular group predominated, such as Venezuela, preserved aspects of African religious expression, but to a much lesser extent.[14] In Bahia, the cultural traits and traditions of the millions of Africans who lived and died before the last cycle of slave importation would remain, becoming absorbed and redefined by Candomblé and by greater Brazilian society, but the foundation of African religion in Bahia was to be shaped by the Yoruba.

Slave Life

The conditions of existence imposed by slavery also helped determine the continued demand for large numbers of African laborers, as well as the degree to which their cultural attributes eventually persisted in Brazil. Austrian traveler Johann Rugendas gave Brazilian slave-owners generally high marks, noting that their slaves "are infinitely better treated" than those in the English colonies.[15] Anglican chaplain Robert Walsh observed that, at least in terms of access to hospital facilities, there was no separation of patients according to race or social standing.[16] The benign paternalism that, according to early scholars, tended to characterize Brazilian slavery was the fruit of long association between the Muslim Moors and the Spanish and Portuguese prior to the fifteenth-century Iberian Reconquest. Centuries of cultural exchange and miscegenation with people of color, it was believed, had left Iberians incapable of the level of brutality meted out by the English slavocracy. The Portuguese who colonized Brazil, according to historian Gilberto Freyre, constituted "a people existing indeterminately between Europe and Africa, and belonging uncompromisingly to neither one."[17] In any case, even if human compassion and dignity were not overriding concerns for the average slave master, plantation slavery was surely subject to the laws of benefits and costs. Fair and decent treatment of chattel slaves could be justified by simple economics. Or could it?

The conditions of slave life clearly varied from region to region, from plantation to plantation, and from urban to rural settings. Not all slaves were treated poorly, and not all owners were tyrants.[18] Many estate slaves were allowed to cultivate their own plots of land and even sell any surplus in markets.[19] As a rule, they were allowed one free day to work their garden plots, just as had been the practice in Africa.[20] Petty private enterprise made it possible for many slaves to buy their own manumission, a strategy supported by many masters. By providing decent working conditions and a chance for freedom, the plantation owner could count on many years of diligent work and obedience and, eventually, the return of his original investment when the slave's strength was waning.[21]

Slave conditions appear to have been better on sugar estates operated by the Christian orders. In his analysis of the Santana sugar plantation near Ilhéus, which was owned by Jesuits, historian Stuart Schwartz suggests that reasonably stable family units were the rule among chattel laborers. In 1731, the majority of slave households included a man, a woman, and one or more children. In 1752, following two decades of a pro-family policy, roughly 80 percent of Santana slaves lived in family units. Although the underlying objective of these Jesuit policies may have been to counter the perceived "moral failings and sexual laxity of the slaves,"[22] the results, at least for some African slaves, were conditions that may have been marginally tolerable.

Taken as a whole, however, slave conditions in colonial Brazil appear to have been as brutal as anywhere in the New World. According to Nuno Marques Pereira, an early eighteenth-century traveler to Brazil, rural slaves were required to work not only during the day, "but also at night, ragged, naked, and without sustenance."[23] Beasts of burden, according to one observer, were treated better than African slaves were in Brazil.[24] Slaves were branded, whipped, chained, raped, dismembered, and, as an example to coworkers, occasionally tossed kicking and screaming into the sugar furnaces.[25] Noses and ears were routinely chopped off. At least one African was punished by being hung by his testicles until he died.[26] By any index of inhumanity, the inventory of instruments of torture was chilling.[27] Body mutilation, scars, and physical deformities resulting from beatings and overwork were widespread. Life expectancy for Brazilian-born slaves was a mere twenty-three years,[28] and self-destruction was a tragically common means of escape.[29]

Merciless working conditions, in concert with other features of Brazilian slavery, had serious implications for slave demographic patterns. Planter preference for young male laborers left the black population with a heavily male-dominated sex ratio. Plantation sex ratios in Bahia approached two to three males for every female.[30] Marriages were generally not encouraged, and infant and child mortality among the black population bordered on astronomical.[31] The results were predictable. The slave population, rather than growing gradually through natural increase, declined by 1.5 to 3.0 percent per year. Population losses were balanced by further imports. This demographic attrition ironically made perfect economic sense for the estate owner. Throughout much of the slave trade African slaves were a bargain, and the owner doubled his initial investment if the slave survived a brief five years of captivity.[32] It appears that slave-owners, rather than protecting their work force and encouraging its multiplication, viewed the importation of "fresh hands" as economically preferable to the cost of maintaining healthy chattel.

Disease took its toll as well. The debilitating effects of overwork and chronic malnutrition militated against whatever natural resistance to pathogens Africans might have retained.[33] Smallpox epidemics raced through the population every ten to twenty years until the early 1800s, when outbreaks were finally controlled by vaccination programs.[34] Measles, tuberculosis, bronchitis, and dysentery were common as well. Although frequently misdiagnosed, beriberi was apparently rampant in the slave community.[35] High mortality among the slave population in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro was attributed to the effects of tuberculosis, dysentery, and smallpox, all compounded by the effects of malnutrition.[36] African-borne diseases, such as elephantiasis and Guinea worm, arrived on the slave ships and continued to plague the black community in the New World.[37] Syphilis was also common among the slave population, a circumstance Gilberto Freyre attributes in part to the belief among whites in the Northeast of Brazil that sexual intercourse with an African virgin girl was the best purge for this chronic disease.[38] The verdict on the conditions of Brazilian slavery, with notable exceptions, is unequivocal. For most African slave laborers, life was brutal and brief, a sustained state of misery in a New World purgatory.

As a direct consequence of poor working conditions, disease, and suicide, the average slave survived a brief seven years in captivity, and his or her life expectancy was a mere twenty-three years.[39] The combined effects of high mortality and of fertility rates below replacement level generated an incessant demand for fresh captives during the four centuries of slavery. In Rio de Janeiro, for example, even after three centuries of sustained slave traffic, over 73 percent

of its 1832 slave population was born in Africa as opposed to Brazil.[40] According to João José Reis, the "typical slave in Bahia in the nineteenth century was then male, young . . . and African born."[41] As a result, the captive labor force was, throughout much of the slave trade, numerically dominated by people whose worldview was shaped by their African heritage.[42] The insidious byproduct of this circumstance, at least from the point of view of the ruling class, was that each shipload of fresh slaves reintroduced African cultural practices and beliefs just as they were in the process of eroding and, just as important, gave renewed status to the value of African culture among the population. This cultural rescue effect meant that traditional religious values were continuously being reinforced among the African slave and free population in Bahia.

African Connections

Among the Yoruba and their descendants in Brazil, the rejuvenation of African cultural beliefs was a function, however, of much more than negative population growth rates. It was also a result of the conscious effort of Africans to keep in close contact with their homeland, to cultivate and disseminate the beliefs and practices of their forebears in Brazil, and to remain true to a worldview that set them apart from the rest of Brazilian society. Although the cumulative effect of this process came to represent a direct challenge to Portuguese ideology, constituting a conspiracy of resistance on the part of an oppressed race, it is important to remember that the actors were individuals with their own motivations and agendas. Some must have earnestly felt the evangelistic calling to expand the worship of the **orixás**. Others strove for the power and prestige associated with religious leadership. Others, perhaps, simply wanted to make a profit.

The cultural connection between West Africa and Bahia in the decades following the end of slavery was probably more direct than that of any of the other peoples of the African diaspora. As Melville and Francis Herskovitz observed a half century ago, for Afro-Bahians "Africa is no vague mythical land. . . . It is a living reality, whence many of the objects they use in their rituals are imported, where people they know have visited and . . . where their fathers or grandfathers came from."[43] Some of the slaves emancipated when slavery was finally abolished in 1888, as well as some of the African slaves who had managed to purchase their freedom or had otherwise been emancipated in the decades before, returned to their homes in Africa. Exactly when this repatriation process began and how many chose to return is uncertain. But by the early 1850s, applications by ex-slaves for passports began to appear, along

with classified announcements in the local newspapers of their imminent departure for "the coast of Africa." For example, in an 1858 copy of the *Diário da Bahia*, an ad announced that "The liberated African Benedicto, of the Nagô [Yoruba] nation, returning to the coast of Africa, is declared to be allowed to leave."[44]

For many of these repatriates, bitter memories of a lifetime of forced servitude must have been partially erased by putting Brazil and all that it meant permanently behind them. For others, however, who left friends, family, and commercial opportunities behind—not to mention a familiarity of place that must have long before supplanted the memory of Africa—Brazil was not so easily abandoned. A number of repatriated Africans, upon returning to Africa, recognized the business potential of transatlantic trade in goods appreciated by those who remained in Brazil. For example, José Francisco dos Santos returned to Wydah, Dahomey, and established an import-export business that operated from the 1840s to the 1870s. His 112 surviving letters show that he shipped over six hundred slaves before 1851, mostly to Salvador, while in the subsequent period he focused on **obí**, pano-da-costa, and other items in demand among the black population in Bahia. He also kept up with the lives of his old friends and business associates and frequently handled remittances of money and other valuables being sent by friends in one direction or the other.[45] In another case, a black women born in Cachoeira, Bahia, named Isadora Maria Hamus, moved to Lagos, spent eight years learning Yoruba and English, and returned to Bahia to become a leader of a house of Candomblé. In intellectual circles, perhaps the best known repatriate was Sr. Martiniano do Bonfin. His father had been illegally brought to Bahia from Nigeria as a slave in 1842, but was freed by Governor's decree in the early 1850s and later purchased his wife's freedom. In 1875, he journeyed to Lagos with young Martiniano, in order that the boy receive a proper education and learn the religion of his ancestors. Eleven years later, fluent in Yoruba and English, Sr. Martiniano returned to Salvador. He went on to become a respected consultant on matters of African ritual for the most powerful houses of Candomblé.[46] And finally, as noted earlier, several of the most important houses of Candomblé were founded by African repatriates who eventually returned to Bahia.[47]

Such individual initiative was necessary for the perpetuation of African cultural beliefs and, by extension, for the formation of houses of worship. Disseminated in an environment that was, throughout much of its history, numerically dominated by Africans and their descendants, these kernels of cultural continuity were likely to sprout and take root, provided that there were cracks in the matrix of social control instituted by the authorities. Such openings of opportunity, narrow and inadvertent as they were, were provided by the nature of the Brazilian slavocracy and the strategies it employed to maintain power.

Black Brotherhoods

The spark of potentiality provided by individual initiative was able to catch fire in Brazil in part because of some of the nuances of the evolving Brazilian economy, society, and religion. One of these was the colonial government's policy of encouraging the formation of Catholic brotherhoods that were segregated according to ethnic affiliation. Dating from the thirteenth century in Portugal, these fraternal organizations were intended to uphold proper Christian virtues, to provide for the welfare of members and their dependents, and to promote charitable activities. For Africans in Brazil, both slave and free, the brotherhoods served as the only officially sanctioned means through which they could reestablish a measure of the corporate identity lost from the old continent and rigorously prohibited in the new. Although membership in some brotherhoods was open to all, others enforced an exclusive policy of ethnic standards—admitting, for example, only Jeje from Dahomey, or Ketu from Yorubaland. Each brotherhood retained its own ruling body, provided for the Christian education of its members, honored its patron saints, and generally served as a symbol of the successful integration of African pagans into European society.

While on the one hand upholding proper white Christian values, the brotherhoods on the other hand constituted one of the few legal means by which African language, customs, and ideas could be perpetuated. Here were islands of African space, congenial environments where people of similar language and worldview could support each other and be supported. Here was a parallel social structure wherein the bonds of oppression were temporarily loosened, an African meritocracy where hard work and perseverance might be rewarded with an elected high station. Here were the personal contacts between ethnic compatriots that fostered the perpetuation of African religious beliefs. The fact that these organizations were dedicated to Christian beliefs probably represented only the minutest of contradictions for its membership, who then, as now, viewed each belief system as an adjunct or even a logical extension of the other.[48]

The white authorities' lack of control of the black population, particularly in urban areas, has been cited as a factor that further facilitated the preservation of African culture and language. This was particularly the case regarding

dancing and singing in native African languages. A certain level of tolerance was advocated by ecclesiastics and government officials on the grounds that a contented laborer was likely to be more productive and less prone to attempt escape. Others argued that African dances stirred the libidos of the slaves and thus encouraged reproduction.[49] How such opinions were weighed by plantation owners must have varied greatly. However, in cities like Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, slaves and freedmen were commonly seen dancing the **batuque** and the **lundú** in the early hours of the morning, to the annoyance of some but apparently not all of the white population. There were occasionally arrests in Salvador, as a municipal code ostensibly prohibited such public demonstrations, but in most of these cases the perpetrators appear to have been drunk and disorderly.[50] Johann Rugendas describes seeing the dances of the Africans, including the **lundú**, which "the Portuguese also dance."[51] The general indifference on the part of the authorities was reflected in angry letters from Bahian merchants to the Prince Regent. One correspondence suggested that "Perhaps we should ask them on our knees not to dance the **batuque** and not to convert this country into a new Mina Coast, as they have been doing up to this time."[52] From the point of view of the government, however, allowing Africans to associate openly with their ethnic kindred, whether by singing and dancing or in the more structured environment of the brotherhood, was part of a long-standing policy of divide-and-rule, a strategy to avoid conspiracies against the ruling order by encouraging historical sentiments of antagonism between the different African "nations."[53]

The Church

Lax enforcement of colonial and, later, imperial policy found its religious parallel in the area of ecclesiastical education. Comments by most contemporary observers were in agreement that Africans seldom received more than the barest rudiments of religious training, a circumstance that seems irreconcilable with the principle that Brazil was colonized in order to bring the one true god to the heathens. Slaves were baptized either before being loaded in Africa or shortly after arrival in Brazil, and for many this gesture represented the beginning and end of their Christian education.[54] For the planter, pastoral attention to the laborers translated into diminished productivity, and whether slaves were permitted to observe the Sabbath and other religious holidays depended on the disposition of the master.[55] Catholic missionaries, who waged a fierce battle for the souls of the indigenous population, seldom directed their efforts at the Africans. As major slave-holders themselves, the Jesuits, Franciscans, and

Benedictines served more as pastoral apologists, counseling the oppressed blacks to seek their salvation in the hereafter. It fell on the chaplain, the master, and his overseers to impart a few simple prayers and the commandments to their slaves. Without a forceful program of indoctrination, it is less than surprising that so many Africans clung tenaciously to the religious beliefs of their homeland.

Not only the generally low intensity of Christian evangelism but also the particular brand of Catholicism that arrived in Brazil weighed heavily in the capacity of Africans to appear to acquiesce to the religion of the whites while continuing to practice the religion of their ancestors. Removed from the rigid and ascetic Catholicism of Rome, Iberia had preserved a medieval Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation, a folk religion grounded in a hagiology of hands-on, miracle-working saints. Through prayers and votive offerings, white colonists called upon patron saints like St. George, St. Emiliano, and St. Sebastian—often pictured as military men "on horseback and sword in hand"—to open paths and conquer their enemies, or they besought the Virgin Mary, often depicted wearing a thin, provocative gown, to bring health and good looks to newborns.[56] Direct appeals to the saints for help in solving health problems found pastoral support in the words of Pope Innocent III, who stated that "many times bodily illness is due to spiritual indisposition, and applying a remedy to the ailment of the soul, our Lord sends health to the body."[57]

It was this cult of the saints, the adoration of a pantheon of spiritual entities that solved earthly problems, that Africans came to know as Catholicism. This obvious correspondence between the archetypes of saints and **orixás** was early perceived and capitalized on by the African population, who by the late nineteenth century were actively engaged in the process of associating their own deities with those of the Catholic hagiology. St. Barbara, the patron saint of storms and lightning, became one with Xangô, the Yoruba god of thunder. Oxalá, the most highly regarded of the Yoruba deities, became linked with Jesus Christ.[58] Which saint came to be associated with each **orixá** varied considerably from terreiro to terreiro, from nation to nation, and from period to period as well.[59] It was, as Nina Rodrigues could readily perceive in the late nineteenth century, "precisely this fact that gives the illusion of the Catholic conversion of the Negroes."[60] The long-term result, regardless of which spiritual correspondences came to predominate, was to give blacks the license to worship their own gods.

The polytheistic nature of Brazil's Catholicism was complemented by a series of other structural similarities to the religion of the Yoruba. Whereas the simple rituals of North America's Protestant churches, dominated by Meth-

odist and Calvinist ideals, stood in sharp contrast with the complex structure of African religious practice, "the pomp and display of the Catholic liturgy gave the Africans a basis for identification and correspondence."[61] Elaborate rituals and offerings, belief in magic and divination, ancestor worship, votive offerings and sacrifices, and the adjuration of gods to deal with real-world problems—all fundamental to African religious structure—found their ready parallels within Catholicism. Even the sign of the cross, the most pervasive and seemingly exclusive emblem of the Christian faith, was already a traditional sacred symbol to slaves who hailed from Dahomey.[62] In addition, unlike its Protestant counterparts, the Catholic Church maintained an implicit policy of tolerance toward pagan rituals and deities. Converting the heathens to the one true religion was best effected, not by destroying their icons and suppressing their ceremonies, but rather by the gradual substitution of Catholic symbols and rituals.[63] In this way, Africans could continue to carry out pagan rites, now disguised as Catholic liturgy, and to honor their own gods, now absorbed by the names of Catholic saints. In Protestant North America, where the clergy rigorously attacked African "heathenism,"[64] the religion of the slaves was for the most part extinguished.[65] In Catholic Brazil, the similarities between the religious practice of the whites and those of the black population, combined with a general policy of tolerance and gradual religious assimilation, allowed Africans to build a facade of Catholicism while at the same time maintaining the fundamentals of their belief system.

Resistance

The nuances of the slave trade, the conditions of life on plantations and in the cities, and the peculiarities of the evolving Brazilian social structure facilitated the continuation as well as the mutation of African cultural beliefs and practices. But while these features created windows of opportunity for African cultural retention, it was the aggressive actions of individuals from a marginalized social stratum, struggling to improve their lot in life or even to recreate the society from which they had been uprooted, that formed the basis of African cultural preservation. The avenues of resistance ranged from purely symbolic to physical attacks on the prevailing social structure: work slowdowns on the plantations, suicides, armed insurrections, and the formation of **quilombos**, or communities of escaped slaves.[66] Viewed in an ideological framework, such actions represented highly rational responses on the part of individuals and groups to unacceptable living and working conditions. The persistent attempts to reassemble African religious systems in Brazil were motivated in part by

similar material desires, but they also drew much of their inspiration from the specific inability of the Catholic faith to address the primary concerns of its people. Because these religious assaults challenged Catholicism—the spiritual cornerstone of Catholic civilization, underpinning the economic and social interests of the dominant class—these fronts of resistance were particularly insidious and revolutionary. Structural similarities and levels of syncretism notwithstanding, the Yoruba spiritual worldview was diametrically opposed to its Catholic counterpart in ways that must have attracted both slave and free blacks during the course of Brazilian history, and that today draw adherents from all social and racial backgrounds.

At center stage of the challenge was the contrast in the roles that each religion offered to Brazilians—between a European folk religion that justified the earthly status quo through eventual salvation, that put off the promise of progress until the next life, and that sought solace through a distant and unknowable god, and an African religion that empowered its members, that sought to level the social and economic playing field through direct action during this life, and that allowed its members to dance with the deities. Solutions to the problems of everyday life—health, love, jealousy, and finances—were the issues most relevant to the African population, and these were precisely what was offered by Candomblé.

Magical medicine constituted perhaps the most potent weapon of the Africans, first as executed by isolated priests and magicians, and later as a collective effort within houses of Candomblé worship. In the otherwise one-sided context of the master-slave relationship, the ability to tap into the occult forces came to represent one of the few powers that Africans held over their owners—as well as over their fellow bondsmen. Early Portuguese settlers came from a world in which the practices of magic and witchcraft were viewed as routine, day-to-day activities, and it was only later that such practices became associated with the work of Satan. But while the Inquisition drove these practices underground in the Old World, belief in the power of magical medicine found fertile soil on the isolated frontiers of a new continent,[67] a landscape where uncertainty and lack of control underscored the lives of Africans and, to a lesser extent, of the Portuguese population. African priests, who had long been considered masters of these unseen forces, moved to fill this social niche vacated by the demise of the indigenous ***pajés***. It may be, as reported elsewhere, that initial perceptions of the magical power of Africans actually expanded over time, feeding on the fears and superstitious nature of both races. Such an expansion may have also been fostered among the black population in response to the complete power exercised by the white population, a power that in the

minds of many could only be explained by the magical power of the Europeans.[68] On the one hand, African priests drove fear into both the white and the black population; on the other hand, both races firmly believed that certain Africans retained these powers, and at one time or another both races found cause to seek out their services. This situation has changed little over the years, as many Bahians, both black and white, refer to Candomblé priests with a mixture of fear and contempt, and yet are known on occasion to seek their counsel.

Beginning with the formation of the first Candomblé terreiros in the early nineteenth century, the knowledge of magical medicine retained by individual Africans became collective knowledge, kept alive and passed on from generation to generation—however modified—by the hierarchy of the terreiro. A few traditional terreiros have zealously preserved what they perceive to be the purely African elements of these ethnomedical systems, whereas the multitude of smaller, proletarian terreiros, which at least by force of numbers constitute the true Brazilian Candomblé, have acted as clearinghouses for African as well as various fringe medical and magical beliefs. Adherents as well as secular clients now seek out a host of ethnomedical services, searching for the cause, the diagnosis, and the prescription for problems ranging from spiritual and magical to purely organic. There are few illnesses or immediate social problems for which one or another Candomblé priest cannot offer an explanation and a remedy. And there are few, if any, healing rituals that do not depend on the use of the liturgical and medicinal flora. "Without the leaves," as one priest noted, "there is no Candomblé." Thus, social and economic factors notwithstanding, the physical environment into which Africans were transported was a pivotal factor in their ability to recreate their belief system.

Gods in the Forest

The religion that the Yoruba brought to Brazil was fundamentally animistic. Unlike universal religions of conversion and salvation, such as Christianity and Islam—which embrace proselytization, spiritual hegemony, and geographical expansion as central tenets of their earthly mission—the Yoruba belief system was firmly attached to place. It was associated with a specific, nation-sized area, and it was tightly integrated with the functioning of local governing bodies. Most importantly, the Yoruba religion was spiritually committed to the features of its immediate physical surroundings. Its gods were nature gods, personifications of physical elements: wind, thunder, water, trees, and soil. Reverence and meaning were attached to sacred spaces: towns, hills, forests, and rivers.

Unlike the religions that developed in Africa's nearby savannas and deserts—wide-open landscapes where worship was directed toward the celestial vastness of the heavens, toward the sun, the moon, and the stars—the religion of the Yoruba was a closed forest religion, drawing its inspiration, as Una McClean describes, from "a myopic, green landscape where close-up detail predominates."[69] Firmly rooted in place, the religion of the Yoruba, like other ethnic belief systems, represented an unlikely candidate for wide-scale diffusion.[70]

These barriers to diffusion were partially cleared by the nature of the Yoruba slave migration and by the characteristics of its destination. As unwilling participants in an insidious European enterprise, Africans were forced to travel by long-distance saltation rather than incremental expansion. Disengaged from one tropical forested region and deposited in another, Africans bypassed many arid physical habitats that would have proved less inviting to their pantheon. Coastal Bahia, although distant from the known world of the Yoruba, presented an array of physical features complementary to the ones to which they had previously attached cosmological significance. Oxum found a home in the region's deep perennial streams. Frequent thunderstorms suggested the presence of Xangô, and the accompanying rain, winds, and lightning indicated the presence of his mythological wife, the unpredictable Iansã. Oxóssi and Ossâim, the hunter and the herbalist, found refuge in Bahia's broadleaf evergreen rainforests. Devastating smallpox epidemics, as bad as those that had swept across native Africa, testified to the New World existence of Omolu. At least for the Yoruba pantheon, Bahia's tropical forest landscape presented nearly all the physical ingredients necessary for animistic correspondence and substitution.[71]

The New Land

Biogeography represented a more formidable obstacle to successful diffusion. Because the religion of the Yoruba is centered around a practical, this-worldly motif, bringing fertility, happiness, and good health to its followers, arriving African priests faced the material challenge of how to perpetuate a plant-based healing system in an alien floristic landscape. Over two thousand miles of ocean and 100 million years of evolution separated healers from their healing flora. African captives were obviously in no position to convey their ethnoflora during the Middle Passage, and as slave laborers and later as poor freedmen, Afro-Brazilians were severely constrained in their ability to import liturgical plants from their homeland. Although the successful introductions **obí** (*Cola acuminata*) and **akokô** (*Newbouldia laevis*) are ritually significant, these trees constituted a tiny fraction of the necessary plant arsenal. While their Portu-

guese masters went about transplanting their temperate agrosystems to tropical Brazil, however impractical the task and maladapted the species, African priests must have recognized early that the ability to practice magic and medicine in the Americas depended upon their capacity to adopt the flora immediately at hand. This ethnobotanical puzzle, as has been suggested in previous chapters, was solved by various means.

At the rank of plant family and genus, Africa and South America exhibit a reasonable degree of propinquity. This taxonomic similarity was the product of the Cretaceous separation of the West Gondwana plate into Africa and South America, vicariant continental rafts that dragged kindred floras in opposing directions. In subsequent millennia, pulses of climatic change and plant evolution dissolved much of the original floristic similarity. Native species that had once inhabited both banks of the incipient Atlantic, probably without exception navigated unique evolutionary paths. As a result, arriving priests and priestesses may well have been disappointed, at least at the species level, by the vicariant pre-Columbian flora they encountered.

At the level of plant genus, however—the rank that is most salient in terms of human cognition[72]—and certainly at the plant family level, eastern Brazil and western Africa would not have seemed so very different. Some of the most ubiquitous families in the Atlantic forests of Brazil are common components of West Africa's flora, for example, Myrtaceae, Sapotaceae, Euphorbiaceae, Lauraceae, Melastomataceae, and Moraceae, to mention only a few. The list of genera common to both floristic provinces is even more impressive, providing a wealth of possible candidates for substitution. These included *Aristolochia*, *Bauhinia*, *Casearia*, *Ficus*, *Mimosa*, *Piper*, *Sida*, *Vernonia*, and *Vitex*, all of which enter into the **odu** of Yoruba **babalaô** and all of which, in time, were incorporated into the Candomblé spiritual flora.[73] For example, the West African **abafé**, *Bauhinia thonningii*, was replaced by the morphologically similar *Bauhinia ovata* of Brazil. The African **aloma**, *Vernonia senegalensis* and *V. amygdalina*, became Candomblé's **alumã**, *Vernonia condensata* and *V. schoenanthus*.[74] Because the Yoruba system of liturgical plant taxonomy is based mainly on sensory attributes—visual, tactile, and olfactory—the presence of slightly variant flower or fruiting structures on newly encountered Brazilian species probably would not have severely impeded their acceptance into the neo-African ethnoflora.

The vegetative similarity between the two distant continents transcended this floristic affinity. Both exhibit coastlines that are, or at least were, mantled by moist tropical forests, habitats that provided similar structural elements for the ethnofloral replacement process: tall broadleaf evergreen trees, great spreading buttresses, and branches festooned with lianas, stranglers, and epiphytes. The diffusion of the Yoruba god Iroko to the New World represents perhaps the best example of this substitution process.

Sacred Trees

The peoples of West Africa hold many tree species to be sacred. In the distant past, defacing one of these "tree gods" constituted a capital offense.[75] West Africa's most sacred tree, perhaps, is the silk cottonwood *(Ceiba pentandra)*,[76] a species fortuitously native to West Africa, the Caribbean, northern South America, and perhaps Southeast Asia.[77] Recognized and immediately readopted by arriving Africans, the silk cottonwood became the dwelling place of African spirits in Venezuela, of the god Loco in Haiti, and of duppy spirits in Jamaica.[78] For these constituents of the African diaspora, the task of transferring their principal tree deity was solved by the vagaries of long-distance seed dispersal or plate tectonics long before they themselves arrived. For the Yoruba, however, the process required more creativity.

One of the most sacred trees of the Yoruba is the **iroko** (*Chlorophora excelsa*), dwelling-place of the god Iroko. Among African Yoruba, Iroko is a male deity associated with peace, whose primary role is to settle disagreements between human beings.[79] Temples were once built wherever the **iroko** tree was seen to germinate spontaneously, and it was thought that the tree would not survive if purposely planted.[80] Like many of the other **orixás**, in Brazil Iroko assumed a somewhat different archetype. He became the god of time and eternity.[81] According to Ruy Póvoas, Iroko and his adepts are difficult to work with, generally out of equilibrium, and thoroughly disconnected from the daily regimen of existence. You will "wait the lifetime of a vulture to get a reply from Iroko." Like the other deities, he retains his own preferences and prohibitions and has his dedicated days. The principal difference is that this god resides in a tree—a tree species that occurs only in West Africa, and that at least in the past was believed to be recalcitrant to intentional transplant.

The response of believers was to adopt a completely different species, a tree that lacked any transatlantic connection but exhibited certain structural and taxonomic similarities with the original African **iroko**. The species chosen was the Brazilian native gameleira branca (*Ficus* sp.), a species that apparently held no particular spiritual import for the native Tupinambá (Fig. 8.2).[82] Both the African and the adopted Brazilian **iroko** are in the mulberry family (Moraceae), and both bleed abundant white latex when cut.[83] Like its West African counterpart, the Brazilian **iroko** is a formidable tree, broad and commanding, surrounded by abundant niches in its buttresses for the placement of votive offerings.[84] For many traditional as well as proletarian terreiros, a towering

8.2 The sacred **iroko** (also known as **loco** among Jeje [Vodun] adherents), dwelling-place of the Yoruba god Iroko. The African species (*Chlorophora excelsa*) was replaced in Bahia by gameleira branca (*Ficus* sp.). (Photo: Robert Voeks)

iroko near the barracão represents a necessary landmark in their sacred African space.

However compelling as a framework for ethnobotanical diffusion, this substitution process in fact contributed only a relatively small number of plants. The opportunities for floristic and physiognomic substitution were considerable, but the process was infrequently carried out. This is particularly the case with regard to Bahia's old-growth rainforests, which are notable for their absence from the Candomblé healing flora. Indeed, of the few primary-forest taxa that were adopted into Candomblé, most are equally or more abundant in heavily disturbed sites. Native trees constitute a small minority of perceived useful Candomblé plants, and epiphytes are completely absent. Structural attributes of the coastal rainforest vegetation, however similar to the vegetation in West Africa, do not appear to have played a dominant role in the diffusion of an alien ethnomedical package.

In principle, floristic similarity at the species level could have been augmented by waif dispersal after Africa and South America separated. As richly illustrated by the flora of the Hawaiian Islands, plants have the capacity to disperse away from their immediate surroundings, sometimes by prodigious leaps. The two most likely candidates for long-distance dispersal are the bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*) and the beach morning-glory (*Ipomoea pes-caprae*), species with specialized flotation devices that in all likelihood facilitated their transatlantic colonization. The bottle gourd, of such great symbolic value to the Yoruba as a perfect representation of the parallel worlds of the material and the spiritual, may well have suggested the presence of the **orixás** in the New World. But aside from these limited exceptions, the vast majority of the pre-Columbian flora would have presented a medicinal mystery for newly arrived Africans. It was, rather, the arrival of Europeans and their wholesale transformation of the New World bioscape that allowed the diffusion of African ethnobotany.

Plants and People

By the time Yoruba priests were arriving in large numbers, in the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and particularly during the period when the first houses of Candomblé worship were being established, the Bahian flora had already been irreparably damaged—or, depending on your philosophical bent, significantly enhanced—by human intervention. Responsive to successive boom-and-bust economic cycles of extraction and plantation, the primary forests had been cut, burned, and transformed for generations by waves of settlers. The old-growth forest frontier was already well away from the coast.

And the human floristic landscape, comprising the habitats with which people were most intimately familiar—the plantations, the pastures, the roadsides, and the kitchen gardens—was brimming with species that were familiar to Africans. At the species level, nineteenth-century Bahia was not so strange at all.

The full significance of the effect of human actions is revealed by reviewing the Candomblé species list (Appendix 1). Nearly half of the species employed in Candomblé ritual and ceremony inhabit both sides of the Atlantic, a biogeographical homogenization that was the result of human rather than natural processes. When species in the same genera are included in this calculation, nearly 60 percent of the Candomblé ethnoflora is also employed by present-day Yoruba healers in Africa.[85] Several of these are Old World taxa that arrived in Bahia and were being employed medicinally by the mid-1500s.[86] Most, or perhaps all, of the other species that would later find their way into the Candomblé ethnoflora were present by the early 1800s.[87] Their modes of transport varied. Many were purposely transplanted in Brazil—not by Africans, but by their European captors. Fruit- and oil-producing species, like **dendê** (*Elaeis guineensis*), jambo branco (*Syzygium jambos*), mango (*Mangifera indica*), and mamona (*Ricinus communis*), were introduced for commercial purposes and to enhance the number of useful species in the region. By the late 1500s, Friar Vicente do Salvador boasted that Brazil was blessed with more food plants than any other tropical country because it received "the crop plants of all the others."[88] Garden herbs, imported for culinary and probably also medicinal and magical purposes, included poejo (*Mentha pulegium*), manjericão (*Ocimum canum*), arruda (*Ruta graveolens*), and perhaps transagem (*Plantago major*). Other garden cultivars, such as **peregun** (*Dracaena fragrans*), leopoldina (*Alpinia zerumbet*), and espada-de-Oxóssi (*Sansevieria* cf. *aethiopica*), must have been brought for their ornamental qualities. A host of other Old World plants arrived with the Portuguese as stowaways, opportunistic Old World weeds that colonized the increasingly disturbed Brazilian landscape with a vengeance. These included **dandá** (*Cyperus rotundus*), jasmin-do-brejo (*Hedychium coronarium*), and others, all of which found their way into the Candomblé pharmacopoeia. By whatever means and for whatever motivation it reached the Americas, much of what African Americans would eventually adopt as their own ethnoflora owes its presence to the unintentional actions of the ruling class.

However significant these Old World imports, the majority of Candomblé species are in fact of New World origin. Some had been transported to Africa earlier, during the course of European colonization, either as weeds or cultigens, and were there incorporated into Yoruba healing. When Africans arrived

in Brazil, they discovered many of these familiar healing plants, of New World origin, but long important elements in Yoruba healing recipes. New World maize, for example, which arrived in West Africa early, was assimilated into Yoruba **babalaô** recipes for good luck, wealth, and healthy births.[89] Other cultigens included cotton (*Gossypium barbadense*) and tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*) as well as a long list of weeds, such as malissa (*Mimosa pudica*), guiné (*Petiveria alliacea*), and alfavaquinha-de-cobra (*Peperomia pellucida*).

The opportunities for ethnobotanical diffusion resulting from these processes of floristic homogenization are exemplified by the composition of the house **abô**. Fundamental to initiation among the Yoruba and their Brazilian diaspora, the house **abô** would not seem to have been open to wholesale floristic reformulation. Examination of the **abô** of three terreiros suggests that continuity, by whatever means, was largely the rule (Appendix 2). Among those taxa for which origins can be determined, over half occur in West Africa and also in eastern Brazil. Some, such as **akokô** (*Newbouldia laevis*), the espadas (*Sansevieria* cf. *aethiopica*), ***macaçá*** (*Ocimum canum*), and leopoldina (*Alpinia zerumbet*), were purposely introduced for various ends. Others, such as cordão-de-São Francisco (*Leonotis nepetifolia*) and **dandá** (*Cyperus rotundus*), were Old World taxa that arrived as weeds. Still others were New World weeds that had long ago attained amphitropical distributions, including pinhão roxo (*Jatropha gossypifolia*) and fedegoso (*Senna occidentalis*).[90] Among the remaining **abô** species not found both in Africa and in the Americas, most are at least represented by pantropical genera. Whether by biogeographical or by cognitive processes, ethnobotanical continuity was maintained.[91]

Because many of the species used in Candomblé continue to be endemic to the Americas, it appears that African healers were capable of assimilating entirely new species from their immediate surroundings. This ethnobotanical flexibility was provided, at least in part, by the Yoruba system of medicinal plant organization. In West Africa, liturgical and medicinal species correspond with one or another of the ancient deities, a relationship mythically underpinned by the legend of Ossâim's leaves. The nature of these god-plant associations, which are encoded in the medicinal recipes and incantations of the **odu**, are maintained as oral text and recited during divination by **babalaô** priests, the most respected class of Yoruba healers. Although the specialized role of the **babalaô** failed to survive in Brazil, the conceptual framework provided by their system of association did. Whether any of the original Yoruba god-plant correspondences survived in Brazil is not clear. What was most important, however, was that pais- and mães-de-santo were able to justify conceptually the incorporation of hitherto unknown New World plants into their pharmacopoeias. The newly assigned god-plant associations were based upon a broad

suite of characteristics corresponding to the personalities, physical appearances, and preferences of each of the African **orixás**.

Candomblé in Brazil

The existence in a neo-European landscape of Candomblé, a religion reconstituted and perpetuated by African slaves and their descendants, is clearly not a puzzle at all. Indeed, given the interplay of so many supportive processes—social, economic, political, and geographical—it would be a mystery if it had failed to take root and prosper. Although encompassed by a Portuguese social structure, Bahia was and continues to be dominated numerically by people of African descent. Wave upon wave of forced immigrants arrived at the Bay of All Saints, introducing and reintroducing the traditions and language of their homeland. These last human pulses, driven by the ethnic preferences of planters and urban elites, were dominated by Yoruba and Dahomey people, African cultures with cosmologies and traditions that rivaled those of their European captors in complexity and resilience. The incessant infusion of African ways was fostered, ironically, by the horrific conditions and consequently the abbreviated life spans of Brazilian slaves, as well as by the voluntary movements of black freedmen back and forth across the Atlantic. Diffusion was facilitated further by the structural similarity of Brazilian Catholicism, a folk religion that emphasized saint worship and extravagant ceremony, to the religion of the **orixás**. The similarity of Bahia and West Africa's floristic landscapes, supplemented exponentially by the transatlantic exchange of cultigens, weeds, and sacred species, allowed for the continuation of African healing practices as well as the assimilation of those of European origin. This biological correspondence encouraged the diffusion of African ethnobotanical practices to Brazil, accompanied by the corresponding Yoruba system of beliefs.

However effective at laying the foundation for cultural diffusion, these features and processes could not have functioned without the perseverance of individual Afro-Brazilian leaders. Candomblé terreiros did not establish themselves. They were the products of individual initiative, mostly by unknown priests and priestesses who refused to buckle under the pressure of European spiritual hegemony. While most of the seeds of their resistance withered and died, a few survived and ultimately multiplied, providing sacred space within which the oral wisdom of the African gods could be cultivated, hybridized, and disseminated to future generations.

APPENDICES