

African Gods and Saints in the Americas: Some Considerations

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Abstract. In addressing the way in which African religious traditions transited the Atlantic during the slave trade, this article takes up a theology driven approach to African religion. African religious traditions generally have spiritual figures that are local in character: ancestors, territorially delimited deities and lesser spiritual entities. Major exceptions were areas like Angola where African deities were discovered to be Christian saints in Africa; and the Gbe speaking areas (in Togo, Benin and Nigeria) where some deities were not limited to a particular territory. Although in general African deities could not pass the ocean, the techniques for locating spiritual entities by continuous revelation did, and so new deities were located in Brazil. For many Africans in Brazil, the Catholic saints known in Angola became focus for worship and propitiation in Brazil; and there is documentary evidence that continuous revelation in Brazil allowed deities from the Gbe speaking area to transit the ocean as well, resulting in the earliest stages of the development of Candomblé.

Keywords. Religion, continuous revelation, Brazil, Angola, Gbe-speakers.

Resumo. Ao abordar as maneiras pelas quais as tradições religiosas africanas transitaram pelo Atlântico durante o tráfico de cativos, este artigo enfatiza uma abordagem teológica da religião africana. As tradições religiosas africanas geralmente têm figuras espirituais de carácter local: ancestrais, divindades territorialmente delimitadas e entidades espirituais menores. As principais exceções encontram-se em áreas como Angola, onde divindades cristãs foram descobertas na África; e as áreas de língua Gbe (no Togo, Benin e Nigéria), onde algumas divindades não foram definidas territorialmente. Embora geralmente divindades africanas não pudessem atravessar o oceano, as técnicas de localização de entidades espirituais por revelação contínua fizeram-no, e assim novas divindades foram localizadas no Brasil. Para muitos africanos no Brasil, os santos católicos conhecidos em Angola tornaram-se foco de adoração e propiciação, havendo evidências documentais de que a revelação contínua no Brasil permitiu que as divindades da área de língua Gbe também transitassem pelo oceano, resultando nos estágios iniciais do desenvolvimento do candomblé.

Palavras-chave. Religião, revelação contínua, Brasil, Angola, falantes de Gbe.

How Africans brought to the Americas dealt with the religious realities of their new world is a puzzling question. In some places, especially those dominated by Protestantism, for example, North America or the English speaking Caribbean, some scholars believed that there was a “death of the gods” as Albert Raboteau wrote of Africans in North America, to be replaced eventually by evangelical Christianity of the Great Awakening (RABOTEAU 2004 [1978]). For others, there was the practice of a sort of folk religion, without much structure variously called “conjure” or “obeah,” which eventually underlay or was replaced by Christianity (CHIREAU 2003; ANDERSON 2005). Sometimes these practices opposed Christianity and or could be interpreted as resistance to Christianity.

On the other hand, in Catholic America, their fate seemed quite different. Typical analysis held that Catholic saints were more appealing to Africans and matched African religious conceptions better, and as a result some Africans paired their gods with the saints to create a medley of Afro-Christian traditions: Candomblé, Santería, Vodou, Shango and other lesser known interpretations. Very often such matchings were viewed dimly by the institutional church and thus went underground: commonly this was a strategy described as “hiding behind the saints,” which allowed the continued worship of old and now forbidden gods with the features of Christianity which they otherwise rejected (BASTIDE 1971).

These approaches have often studied religion as sociology, a means of accommodating another way of thinking, or of using religious means to political purposes, either to assimilate or to resist. Often there is the perception of Africans seeking to hold on to their religion against forces in the colonial world that would deny them their own gods. Secretly practicing an African religion then represented a form of resistance. However, there may be more merit in adopting a strategy of understanding religious activity theologically by placing oneself in the position of believers as believers. This is to suggest that people may not see religious practice as a strategy to confront slavery, but because they believed in the existence of these supernatural agents, as a reality and not just a strategy of resistance.

No discussion of the movement of gods from Africa can start without understanding African religions. When scholars think of African religions they often start with cosmology: the way people understand the supernatural world, the unseen but powerful Other World inhabited by spiritual entities of one kind or another¹. Taking Christianity as both a baseline for European

¹ SOBEL (1979: 1-76) which developed an “African Sacred Cosmos” moving to an “African American Sacred Cosmos” is one of the more comprehensive.

religion, and a paradigm for other religions, one might start by describing the structure of the Other World and what it demands of those in this world. Having the correct cosmology was a problem that greatly vexed Christianity as it grew from a mystery cult to a religion: Church councils like Nicaea or Chalcedon debated the exact relationship between the elements of the Trinity, the Reformation challenged the role of saints, and often such theologies also included diabolism – the idea that contacting the Other World through an alternate theology would lead to an unwitting contact with the Devil. Likewise, consulting or supplicating spiritual forces that were not part of the Christian landscape of saints, Mary, Jesus or God was viewed as diabolic, a position which became much more rigorous and extreme in the period of the Reforms in the sixteenth century. All these ideas were linked to a more or less comprehensive cosmology with carefully established relationships both between the licit parts (like the structure of the Trinity) or the illicit parts associated with the Devil.

Viewed from this perspective, African religions were viewed generally as the way the Church viewed what was called “magic” or “superstition” in Europe, as “vain practices” which inevitably were connected with diabolism. They could not be tolerated in the Americas and were condemned in Africa. Modern research, of course, does not take the position of Christian Europe and America as the only model, but assumes that other parts of the world have religious traditions similar to the cosmological ideas underlying Christianity but with different actors.

Understanding cosmology might not be the only or even the best way to understand African religious thought. African religions in the period of the slave trade, in fact, did not have the same sort of concern about cosmology as Christianity did. Often visitors to the African coast, in inquiring, about religion met either a multitude of differing ideas, or no particular ideas at all on the shape of the universe. Ludvig Römer, for example, questioning a variety of people on the Gold Coast in the mid-eighteenth century, thought their ideas about religion varied widely, making them “as different as east and west” (RÖMER 1760: 49)².

While not all visitors to the African coast paid serious attention to religious ideas, those who sincerely wanted to know what people believed came away disappointed. A few believed that Africans did at least conceive of a High God (though many even doubted that), they did not find clear evidence of salvation by a deity or a reckoning of a life’s actions for their fate

² The original pagination is marked in the English translation of Selena Axelrod Wisnes (Oxford 2000).

in the afterlife, all critical elements of Christian orthodoxy. When they did meet these ideas, it was often because the more cosmologically oriented Africans interpreted religion for them in ways that seemed more acceptable to Europeans. Thus, Willem Bosman writing about the Gold Coast in the late seventeenth century believed that while they had an idea of God who created the earth, they did so in “a rough way, without being able to make a good or fair idea of it, and they believe in the same way about the daily maintenance and administration of all that is created”. But he claimed that they did not derive this “rough” belief from their own ideas, or from ancestral traditions, but from taking in and perhaps reworking ideas presented to them by the Europeans (BOSMAN 1704: 137).

We can address this problem by going to the foundation of religious life, that is revelation or rather revelations³. The Other World as conceived by religious people everywhere is invisible and imperceptible to most people most of the time. We in This World can only learn about it through indirect means, which are often called revelations. Many people can experience the Other World through dreams, for example, but a few special people can receive messages from this Other World in more dramatic ways. Maybe an Other Worldly denizen can take the initiative and possess mediums and speak through them; or perhaps the intentions of the Other World can be explored and revealed through divination: creating a random activity like throwing shells on the ground or on a marked board, the movement of stars, apparently random patterns found in animal entrails, and deducing the Other World’s knowledge and intentions from studying recognizable patterns.

Such revelations are continuous revelations, that is small scale and specific revelations often given at the initiative of humans in a very limited way, in response to a specific request or problem. Alleged or potential messages from the Other World can be tested by the results. If one prays, for example for a particular outcome, and the corresponding result is a beneficial response, it is considered a valid revelation. If a particular set of actions, perhaps prescribed by a medium or gifted person, has a satisfactory result, this too is a revelation. Often an acceptable result could simply be interpreted as good luck, but spiritual intervention could create or augment good luck. More dramatic verifications of the validity of a revelation, for example a result that would not normally be possible – such as a rapid healing of a disease known to be incurable, the revival of an apparently dead person, or a complete reversal of what seemed

³ For the concept of revelation as defined here and later, see THORNTON 1998: 235-248; 2012: 409-419.

an irreversible outcome would be miracles, the ultimate proof of a revelation.

In fact, continuous revelations are tested every day; if they continue to be satisfactory, then the Otherworldly entity alleged to be in charge of the revelation is validated. The entity does exist and has power. If it is not validated than the entity is conceived to have lost its power, or perhaps even its existence, or alternatively, the supplicant has failed to make a request properly or has annoyed or angered the entity that controls the revelation. Either way, it is prudent to abandon this.

Bosman, inquiring about gods on the Slave Coast (Mina Coast), was told by a philosophically oriented person, that he had an infinite number of gods, explaining that whenever people left their homes in the morning, they might light upon the first thing they saw as their god, “whether a dog, cat or any bad creature, or even something that has never had an animate life, whether a stone, [piece of] wood or whatever it may be”. Having taken up its worship, they would make offerings and vows to it, asking it to provide good fortune or success. If, in their opinion “our intention is successful, then we have found a new and helpful God, who is worshiped daily with a few Sacrifices,” but if not, then the new god is summarily rejected (BOSMAN 1704: 153).

Continuous revelation is the day to day work of the Other World, but there is also discontinuous revelation. Discontinuous revelations only happen rarely, but they have very high content, and they might even lay out whole plans for religious life. The prophets of the Old Testament, records of Jesus’ time on earth, visions or inspired ideas of Church Fathers, all fit into the discontinuous revelation model. Often, they produce a concrete text: The Bible, the Qu’ran, the Upanisads, are written texts of messages from the Other World. Even if they were not written they might still be remembered exactly and passed down orally for generations, as for example, as Buddhist sutras were, or the ancient testimonies revealed in the Jewish Mishnah.

Such revelations were frequently lodged in poetic form to enhance exact memorization. For many theologians, religions based on discontinuous revelation are called revealed religions, putting aside an active role for continuous revelations. Following the Christian demission of non Christian continuous revelations, especially after the Reforms, they were denounced as “superstition”. In the Reform era superstitions were diabolic, if they worked the Devil was responsible, in the Enlightenment, when supernatural agency and even religion itself was increasingly denied, they were useless, false or foolish (THORNTON 2012: 400-409).

When Catholic priests brought the Reforms to Kongo and Angola, they

typically burned locally produced objects intended to work with continuous revelation, claiming their success to be the work of the Devil, as they did in Europe as well for supplication of non-Christian spiritual entities. For the priests working in Africa, they were counteracting witchcraft, and their terminology, such as “feitiçaria” drew on witchcraft language in Europe (PIETZ 1987: 31-45). Since Africans also recognized that continuous revelation could be used for evil and selfish ends, they too recognized that some continuous revelation was witchcraft. It was this connection that allowed priests to burn “feitiços” at will in Kongo without serious challenge in spite of having only lukewarm support of the state and the ire of the people so charged.

Discontinuous revelations were the source of cosmological thinking that we associate with religions like Christianity or Islam. Recording, reading, analyzing and discussing the underlying revelations would be the stock and trade of the creation of a cosmology. Debates about this reading might lead to split interpretations and often followed by denunciation and rejection. In the history of Christianity cosmological dissenters were often punished or expelled, wars might result if dissent was regional.

What set African religions apart from Christianity particularly was that African religions relied far more heavily on continuous revelation than on discontinuous revelation. Cosmologies, while present were diffuse and often personal, the idea of a fixed cosmology more often challenged in an experience-oriented religion driven by ever changing continuous revelations. While individual Africans undoubtedly had ideas about the cosmos these were regarded as personal reflections. Africa did not have heresies, nor were debates about the nature of the cosmos held to be final and binding. As the inquiring Europeans in Africa learned, ideas about the nature of the cosmos were regarded simply as speculations, did not result in binding norms, and were generally not controversial. Hence a wide variety of ideas were freely expressed without danger being accused of heresy⁴.

In estimating African cosmologies, it might be best to start from the daily experience of religion rather than meditations on fixed texts or debates about them. Reading sixteenth through nineteenth century texts of visitors to the African coast, and comparing those with reservation to modern observation by anthropologists and other scholars, leads to understanding that there was a broad conception of the nature of the cosmos that guided religious action, but that on the basic level, these conceptions were rarely if ever the source of contentions. Rather it was the efficacy of the spiritual forces that people

⁴ For a more systematic account of non-Christian West Central African, see THORNTON 2008: 81-100.

encountered or the way they encountered them that led to belief in one or another configuration of the universe.

European questioners, our most important sources, were most concerned about the prospect of Africans believing in a High God, or if not a single god, at least a pantheon of deities like those of the Classical Mediterranean. Africans probably did believe in a High God, although the insistence that Europeans had in identifying this god may well have played into the creation of one, at least to satisfy the prejudices of inquisitive foreigners. Sometimes this deity would be more of a transcendent spirit that inhabited all the Other World, other times the deity might be anthropomorphized, but generally the High God was not an entity to which regular propitiation was made. Africans often appear to have seen the deity as a last resort, who had great power and might rescue one from a situation beyond their control. We know something about this deity because Europeans were so insistent on looking for it, but also that they were often disappointed in not appearing to find it⁵.

If there was a universally accepted concept, it was that when people died their souls continued to be engaged with the world. Questioning Christian visitors wanted to know if the dead went to a particular place, thinking of course of the concept of salvation that drives Christianity's understanding of the afterlife. Africans tended to believe that all, or almost all who died became ancestors, and there was no specific test to become one. For Africans, it seems that exactly where ancestors went after death was a subject of disagreement, often they were prepared to accept the idea of Heaven being where ancestors lived, but certainly that was not universal. Many Africans were often willing to propose that at least some people, typically witches, did not get an afterlife at all. Of course, there was also an idea that some souls were restless, perhaps because they were wicked people, or they had no descendants who would visit their graves, or they died mutilated or far from home. But even those souls continued to exist and to work in the material world.

Certainly, the baseline was that everyone had ancestors who could intervene in their lives. Their powers were not great, but they could send sickness or health, good luck or bad. When facing misfortune, Africans might go to a spiritual mediator, a person capable of receiving or interpreting revelations to see the cause, and often it was an ancestor who was disappointed and needed to be mollified; likewise, when seeking good luck or healing, the ancestor was the first spiritual entity to beseech. Ancestors' graves were the most likely place to contact them, and if one got too far from home the ancestors might be out of range.

⁵ For a more detailed survey of African religions along the whole coast, with regional documentation, see THORNTON 2022: 1-28.

Another cosmological constant was the existence of more powerful spiritual entities that controlled territories, and potentially everyone in them. They were important and powerful enough that we can call them deities. Territorial deities usually inhabited some place, either man-made (a shrine) or perhaps a pool, stream, or rock formation that they had made their home. Cosmologies were not concerned about standardizing their origins though theories abounded – perhaps the soul of the first person to live in a village or territory, perhaps a powerful ruler’s soul, or even the whole royal family of an area. Alternatively, territorial deities might be considered eternal spiritual entities that had never had an earthly existence.

Territorial deities were powerful and addressed a community. They could affect weather, epidemic disease, crop success or failure, victory or defeat in war. They were communal rather than personal, and far less whimsical than ancestors might be, since ancestors often retained the personalities of their formerly living selves. Most political units had territorial deities associated with them, and often were based on the souls of the ruling family or group, hence conferring a certain sacred character on lineages as territorial rulers.

As communal deities, territorial deities were the subject of communal propitiation. If Africans performed liturgies with fixed texts and actions, it would be for these territorial deities. Feast days and regular celebrations were also addressed to them, as were celebrations of communal good luck or concerns about disaster.

Below the territorial deities there were lesser spirits. They could have a multiplicity of origins, perhaps disconnected human souls, guardians of such small territories that they would not be counted among the territorial deities, or simply wandering eternal spirits with no particular origin. They had a multiplicity of personalities, often evil or malevolent, they might also bring good luck. Since they were weak but ubiquitous, they might often be the source of minor trouble. They could be captured and enclosed in spiritual vessels, which visiting Europeans often called fetishes and sometime idols, and their power harnessed if properly captured.

Thus, one can imagine a universe in which humans shared space with a wide range of spiritual entities: ancestors, territorial deities, or undefined spirits that were either eternally spiritual or dislocated ancestors. They ranged in power from mighty deities to minor spirits. In any case, while people might be troubled by them, they were invisible and often imperceptible, and so everywhere one found spiritual mediators. These mediators often had special powers of perception. Their powers were subject to constant testing – could they deliver messages from the Other World, did the spiritual entities they

contacted provide the services that their clients needed? Did their mediation produce good outcomes?

One of the features of the spiritual universe described here was that the entities were local. The core of the system: ancestors and territorial deities had a place where they could be consulted: a grave or a shrine, or a home in some natural feature. Because of this feature, most Africans did not expect their home spiritual helpers to be available when they went elsewhere, when outside their home territory they would be drawn to whatever entities, typically either territorial deities or the lesser spirits, could be found where they went. Sometimes a particularly famous territorial deity might be the center for a pilgrimage, their power available to whoever came to visit them, as long as they made their demands properly, but people were more likely to go to it than for it to go to them.

There were breaks in this system of localism, however, on the one hand, those parts of Africa, notably Central and West Africa where the local population had converted to Christianity or Islam, the more universalizing features of these religions would find a home. In both Christian and Islamic Africa, pre-conversion territorial deities and ancestors usually continued in place, to the chagrin of more orthodox, and usually foreign, visitors. A process for doing this was co-revelation, that is to seek the aid of a likely Christian saint in the location of a territorial shrine and then when the prayers were answered, to assume that the saint and the territorial deity were identical. It was not uncommon in Europe when dedicating a church for example, to divine and determine which saint the church could be dedicated to, so such a divination might locate a saint in Africa, who could be co-revealed with a territorial deity (CHRISTIAN 1981: 71-90).

In Islamic regions sometimes the jinn, powerful supernatural beings, might be co-revealed as the operating force behind a shrine. Reformers denounced the idea that people should worship the jinn, but it was a common practice to consult them in the Islamic world. Alternatively, Islamic mysticism could also offer a solution. A particularly charismatic mystic, especially one who performed miracles during his lifetime, might continue that power, *baraka*, after death, and his tomb would become a place of pilgrimage, very much like territorial deities who were at times identified as formerly living persons.

In another part of Africa, the regions speaking Yoruba and Fon, related languages of what linguists call the Gbe group, some deities had more univer-

sal jurisdictions and possibilities⁶. They could move from place to place and be found in multiple locations at the same time. One of the earliest descriptions of such a deity is the snake god Dangbe of Whydah, who was held in eighteenth century descriptions as a sort of manager of the cosmos, without being a High God. Dangbe was said to have come from Allada to Whydah, and subsequently moved to Dahomey following the conquest of Whydah in 1727. Other deities found in the Yoruba-speaking areas, such as the divination god Ifa (Fa in Dahomey), or the trickster god Elegua, who originated in Oyo and found their way into Dahomey and its near neighbors of Allada and Whydah as Legba (THORNTON 2022).

Moving to Brazil

Africans came to Brazil from many parts of Africa, but one of the prevailing features of Afro-Brazilian history is the remarkable number of people who came from just two parts of Africa: Angola and the Mina Coast (usually associated with today's Bénin, Togo and western Nigeria). As it happens these two regions are the ones that also had movable deities. In Angola many local deities had been co-revealed as saints, the process began in late fifteenth century Kongo, but moved rapidly into Angola as the Portuguese began their conquest after 1575.

Initially the movement to Brazil was largely from Angola. A convergence of circumstances led to a situation in which the governors of Angola had a near monopoly of sale of slaves to Brazil. As a result, from about 1600 nearly all the slaves coming to Brazil were from Angola, captured in the massive warfare that characterized the history of Angola in the first half of the seventeenth century⁷. Starting in the latter part of the seventeenth century, Minas began arriving in fairly large numbers, reaching about half of imports by the early eighteenth century, at least in Bahia and the emerging province of Minas Gerais⁸. Pernambuco, however, continued to be settled by slaves from Angola, and for a brief period, Senegambians along with Angolans came to the northern, Amazonian, region. It is significant, however, that the majority of people transported from Africa to Brazil came from Christian regions, perhaps more

⁶ For an excellent description based on both seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources and modern ethnographic fieldwork, see PARÉS 2016.

⁷ On the “Angolan Wave” origins and implications for the Atlantic region, see HEYWOOD and THORNTON 2007. While the thrust of the book is on North America and the Caribbean, the causes and direction also include Brazil.

⁸ On these proportions, see PARÉS 2007: 23-62.

so than any other part of the Americas, and some provinces, such as Pernambuco, Christian Africans made up a large majority.

While the proportions of various ethnic Africans are an important part of the understanding of Brazil's religious direction, it was the action of the Inquisition which brings it to our attention. Travelers made occasional mentions of African celebrations that suggested to them the play of a non-Christian religion, but the Inquisition's specific search for religious irregularity gave us remarkable evidence about this direction.

However, studying Inquisition files has its own pitfalls which should be understood. First of all, very few African-descended people were actually accused or tried under the Inquisition, when compared to the total population. Its relationship to the total population makes it a poor measure of the popular reach of its targets and should favor skepticism about its statistical validity. Secondly, the people who ended up victims of the Inquisition's attention were often people who had made themselves unpopular with a subset of the general public who were powerful enough or persistent enough to bring charges and complaints. Rather than thinking of Inquisition reports as indicating the general state of belief, they should be considered as anecdotes told by travelers are, with the notable exception that at least the travelers were in a position to say how common practices they noticed were.

Another important proviso is that Inquisition reports considered African born or African descended subjects rather rarely. Africans are not at all common in either denunciations or in actual trials, when compared to the non-African (and non-indigenous) population⁹. Considering the demographic preponderance of Africans and their descendants in the Brazilian population this should be considered significant. It indicates that either the practices they describe were extremely rare, in fact, exceptional, or that officials rarely bothered themselves with pursuing slaves and poor free-people of color, the most likely explanation for the paucity of African cases. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the Inquisition cases are extremely useful for determining the religious life of the Afro-Brazilian population. Incidental statements in the examinations themselves point to the frequency and popularity of the practices, as do informants' accounts and even the testimony of travelers.

Thanks to the Inquisition, we can learn a great deal about this ground level spiritual universe, as testimonies of those engaging in "superstitions" an

⁹ SWEET (2007) represents a substantial number of cases, one of the most thorough, yet they are only dozens out of the thousands of cases reported. The author's own experience in the archives in Lisbon confirms the overwhelming number of non-African cases even in Brazil, both in the "Processos" and in the more diverse "Cadernos do Promotor".

excellent term drawn from the European Reform movement, that regarded the supplication of such entities as engaging in an implicit form of witchcraft. For the large number of Central Africans, primarily from Angola or Kongo, this process of discovery took place in what were called *calundús*, often described as a dance. The Kimbundu root term *-lundu*, sometimes presented as an alternative name for *calundú* is defined in the Capuchin missionary Bernardo Maria da Cannecatim's dictionary of Kimbundu, compiled in the late eighteenth century as necromancy, an appropriate term for consulting with spiritual entities who might often be the souls of previously dead individuals (CANECATTIM 1804: 535). The term *calundú* is not in his dictionary, but in Kimbundu the addition of a *ka-* prefix puts the stem of the word in a diminutive status and suggests that those who danced *calundú* were engaged in a lesser, perhaps day-to-day capacity.

Examining the details of many of these cases, it is fairly clear that the *calundú* was done in order to discover and consult with spirits, primarily, it seems local spirits which might include the ancestors of second-generation Brazilians, or potentially ancestral spirits of indigenous Brazilians or Afro-Brazilians buried in Brazil (MARCUSSE 2015: 178-201). The leaders (the ones usually accused) consulted spiritual entities, sometime through possession, sometimes by one or another form of divination, and learned from them cures for diseases, avenues for luck or for love. They usually did not specialize either in the manner of divination or in the request with which they were presented. On the whole no deities were named and rarely were even the spirits.

Such a pattern is hardly surprising when majority of the population was Angolan. Already in Angola and in the neighboring Kongo, the territorial spirits had long before been co-revealed as one or another Catholic saint¹⁰. In fact, Christian Africans with spiritual gifts could also guide non-Christians through the process of co-revelation in Brazil. And while pre-Christian Angola (and the large areas that had not embraced Christianity) certainly had territorial deities, as early Jesuit reports attest, those entities would not cross the ocean. Instead, the Christian saint that had been co-revealed would be recognized on the other side of the ocean. Brazil had no shortage of saints to choose from, but even if the specific saint of one's own homeland was not to be found at hand (and recall that even plantations were named after saints and dedicated to them), and so it was easy enough for Angolans to immediately latch on to one or another saint on the Brazilian side of the Atlantic.

Not all slaves brought from "Angola" were from the Portuguese colony of

¹⁰ Pero Tavares to Jeronimo Vogado, 14 October 1631, in BRÁSIO (1960: 8: 67) on the co-revelation of a cross with the local kilundu, an early example of co-revelation.

course, and a good many were from places that had no Catholic presence. But most spoke Kimbundu or a closely related language and would soon learn that saints in Brazil were the equivalent of territorial deities of Africa, and as all knew that since their own deity could not cross the ocean, they moved to the saints in Brazil, just as they might have done in traveling from one part of the Kimbundu speaking world to another.

In Brazil, as in Africa, luck, healing and success in love were not just left to the saints. The weaker but more accessible lesser spiritual entities could also be consulted, and were. Even in Angola, the Inquisition found plenty of evidence of the use of local spiritual entities to prosecute. The spiritual entities that were to be located in Brazil were not African, as those spirits were if anything, very local in Angola (KANONJA 2010: 443-365). Rather the techniques of capturing or interrogating spirits were imported, and the entities encountered were local to Brazil. Angolan evidence shows that even there, Christian components were part of the technology of locating spiritual entities; such a system would apply equally in Brazil¹¹.

Good luck charms, spiritual vessels, and bolsas de mandinga could be made to harness these local spiritual entities, were available. The bolsas themselves, as we know from Cécil Fromont's work, may well have begun as Islamic gris-gris, in which a verse of the Qu'ran enclosed in a pouch could convey spiritual good. But whatever their ultimate origin, the bolsas soon took on the characteristics of African spiritual vessels, variously defined by the Church as fetishes or idols, and variously called *iteke* or *zinkisi* in Western Bantu languages like Kikongo and Kimbundu (FROMONT 2020: 460-504).

During the Angolan phase of Brazilian life, then it would not be accurate to say that African religion was brought to Brazil, if African religion was defined simply as attending to the otherwise local ancestors, territorial spirits, or lesser entities in Angola was their religion. Rather the structure of African religion was imported and applied locally, with the saints effortlessly serving as the territorial deities and local spiritual assistance located by those who knew how to find and tame them, employed as the local spiritual entities were in Africa. Angolans served as models for those who came from elsewhere in Africa. Given their strength in the seventeenth century we do not see this very much in the *calundús*, but as slaves from the Mina coast appeared, they would also need to be accommodated. Catholic missionaries served in this region, usually around the European settlements or as occasional missionar-

¹¹ SWEET (2007) cites a number based on Angola cases reported to the Inquisition and shows how the locating process in Brazil, which he terms divination, often used various combinations of elements and probably always varied widely, could be found in Africa.

ies to the local elite, but they had relatively little impact (LAW 1991: 42-77). Slaves from Whydah, Dahomey, or later from Oyo or the Nago country did not have Catholic saints to approach. In Brazil they would have to discover their own territorial deities to assist them.

It would not be difficult to assume that just as slaves from non-Christian inland or southern regions of Angola would have to learn from and accept what culturally similar Christian Angolans could tell them about saints, so the Minas would have to learn this lesson as well. Perhaps they did, and many simply made the easy transition from territorial deity to Catholic saint. If so, evidence of this transition would be extremely hard to find, since no one was harassed by the Inquisition for supplicating a saint.

But in the Mina Coast there were also the movable and potentially universal deities of the coast: Dangbe, a deity that was typically associated with a snake in Whydah being one of the most important, at least initially. He was reported in the New World quite early, in French Saint Domingue where he was described but not named in the 1710s, and in the Danish Virgin Islands where his name was first written on the American side of the Atlantic in the 1760s (CHARLEVOIX 1730-31: 510; OLDENDORP 2000-2002: 1: 420)¹².

Beginning in the later eighteenth century, as one might expect, the Inquisition and sometimes civil authorities who had taken over part of the Inquisition's role in prosecuting non-Christian practice, began to discover African deities and rituals that would be typical for a territorial deity. An early and likely appearance of a mobile deity from the Gbe speaking area was reported already in Paracatu in 1747, in which witnesses described the activities of a number of possessed individuals concerning the way in which African deities had come from the Mina Coast to Brazil.

A crucial player, according to the testimony, was a Mina named Josefa Maria. She began her appearance in the house where celebrations and dances took place, beginning with, presumably, a standard Catholic prayer or component in the liturgy, "profetindo algumas palavras que encontram nossa Santa Fe Catolica" (prophesying some words that are found our Holy Catholic Faith) but continued with perhaps a similar evocation spoken in "outras [palavras] que ela [testemunha] não entendeu," (other [words] that she [the witness] did not understand) as we assume they were in an African language. Josefa Maria entered a state of possession trance "fingia de morta caindo no chao" (feigning death she fell to the earth) and from that point can be assumed to be speaking words of the spiritual entity that possessed her as a rev-

¹² OLDENDORP (2000-2002: 1: 420) learned of the African name of this deity in the Caribbean.

elation. The state of possession often gave a spiritual worker access to a much wider spiritual universe than would be available to an ordinary supplicant in Brazil, including even the spirits of ancestors buried in Africa (MARCUSI 2015: 95-96).

Immediately Josefa Maria was carried to a smaller house which appears to have been a temple and

saia uma que se chamava Quitéria e la subia em cima da casa e se punha a pregar pela sua lingua dizendo que era Deus e filha de Nossa Senhora do Rosario e de Santo Antonio, e que o Santo de sua terra estivera sete anos de joelhos diante de Nossa Senhora do Rosario para lhe dar licença para vir a esta terra e que já ca estava e trouxera uma para nestas Minas se lhe fazer uma igreja¹³ (Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo [doravante ANTT], Tribunal do Santo Oficio [doravante TSO] Inquisição de Lisboa [doravante IL], Processo 1551, fl. 4v)¹⁴.

This is a striking presentation of a co-revelation that links a deity from the Mina Coast to the Christian community. The text is confusing though rich with possibilities. Once possessed and carried to the temple, someone named Quitéria arrived and said she was God. This person, who is not identified in spite of the fact that virtually everyone else is carefully identified in the testimony, might just be another person (as Luíz Mott assumed in his interpretation of the passage) or perhaps the entity possessing Josefa Maria, bearing that name, or even potentially the Catholic saint of the same name. A spiritual possibility is potential because she was able to “subir em cima da casa,” (ascend to the top of the house) which could be by climbing, or in a spiritual way, by simply ascending. Later Josefa de Sousa, a Mina, would identify several other attendees as being “suspendia no ar” (suspended in the air) presumably in possession (ANTT, TSO, IL, Processo 1551, fls. 10-10v). Either way, she identifies herself as God and under that authority relates the story of the arrival of the “Santo de sua terra” (Saint of her country) who beseeched him to come and establish a church.

One might imagine that God himself would not need written authorization, but “que já ca estava e trouxera uma carta de Roma para nestas Minas se lhe fazer uma igreja” (who was already here and had brought a letter from

¹³ Someone called Quitéria came out and ascended to the top of the house and began to preach in her language saying that she was God and the daughter of Our Lady of the Rosary and Saint Antonio, and that the Saint of her country had been on his knees for seven years before Our Lady of the Rosary to give him permission to come to this land and that he was already here and had brought one to these Minas to build a church for him.

¹⁴ Transcriptions of significant parts of the partially deteriorated process are provided by MOTT (1986).

Rome to build a church in these mines) even though the Visitor General tore this letter up, not once but twice, even as it was posted on the church. The question of God and Saint comes up in later testimony of the same event. Ana, who said she was a *santo* (presumably of the Mina Coast) and advised other women to “*irem a tal casa terem o santo da sua terra a senão fossem que o santo de sua terra as havia de castigar*” (go to such a house to have the saint of their land, otherwise the saint of their land would have to punish them) which she said was a “*Boneco*” (Puppet) (in this case, a ceramic image). Later several other possessed women were identified as being, like “*uma preta*” (a Black woman) who “*entrava a dançar e dizia que era Deus, que tinha feito o ceu e a terra, agua e pedras, e tudo que havia no mundo tinha criado*” (started dancing and said that she was God, who had made the sky and the earth, water and stones, and everything that was in the world she had created) language that would be repeated by several others in the same inquest (ANTT, TSO, IL, Processo 1551, fl. 4v.).

An explanation of this remarkable claim would be to say that the “*Deus que tinha feito o ceu e a terra...*” was a Portuguese translation of *vodou*, a term which might apply to any deity, a high deity or a creator deity in Fongbe (an important language of the Mina Coast). Both Spanish missionaries to Allada in 1658 and Antonio da Costa Peixoto’s vocabulary in 1741 used this term in the same sense as the Christian creator god (FERNANDES 2012 [1731-1741]: 36). The German Moravian priest and linguist Georg Christian Andreas Oldendorp noted that several informants in his study of African religion and life from the 1760s called the person he saw as the Creator God Gajiwodu (OLDENDORP 2000-2002: 1: 412)¹⁵. In each of these cases, therefore, the Christian god is equated with this deity and then made a mediator for lesser gods, here called “*santos*” (saints)¹⁶.

However, this creole cosmology as we might call it, also included the Virgin, here associated with the popular religious brotherhood of the Rosary, by far the most popular means by which Africans became familiar with Christian theology and practice. God herself, in Quitéria’s discourse, “*e filha de Nossa Senhora do Rosario e de Santo Antonio,*” (was a daughter of Our Lady of the Rosary and Saint Anthony) and that it was to her that “*o santo de sua terra*” (the saint of her country) prayed asking to establish his church in Brazil. And through the Virgin, God had allowed the church to be established, even if the Portuguese authorities denied or diabolized its existence.

¹⁵ One of his informants also called God Vodou, and another Ma-u (Mawu).

¹⁶ For an important discussion of the presence of a high god in the Ewe-Fon region see BABALOLA YAI 1993: 241-265.

For these Africans and others as well, the veracity of the testimony of possessed mediums was valid, not because of what they said, but by the fact that miracles were performed by these newly arrived santos. The inquests into *calundús* generally and those of the Minas in particular attest to miracles, which in the end counted as necessary and sufficient proof of the existence and power of the santos de sua terra in Brasil. Francesca de Matos testified in the same inquest that many Blacks believed that “o Deus da sua terra estava fazendo milagres e que muitos pretos e pretas la iam adora-lo” (the God of his land was performing miracles and that many Black men and women there were going to worship him). She learned that “que tinha Rosario e Santo Antonio e que vinha batizado por Nossa Senhora do Rosario fazer milagres nesta terra de Paracatu” (who had the Rosary and Saint Anthony and who came baptized by Our Lady of the Rosary to perform miracles in this land of Paracatu) (ANTT, TSO, IL, Processo 1551, fl. 8v).

While the “santo de sua terra” might be unique to the community of Minas, this did not preclude supplications to Catholic saints, for it was ultimately by the same authority they had their power, and saints from a variety of backgrounds had vouchsafed their identity and efficacy through the miracles. An interesting contrast to co-revelation of saints in the abandoning of any religious form that does not work, attested in another case, of Rosa Gomes, who frustrated and disappointed with the saints not giving her any help “assim desesperada e fora de si, partiu a facao as imagens de Nossa Senhora, Santo Antonio, inclusive o Menino Jesus, decepando-lhes a cabeça e arrancando-lhes os braços” (thus desperate and out of mind, she broke the images of Our Lady, Saint Anthony, including the Baby Jesus, with a knife, cutting off their heads and tearing off their arms). As in Africa, a spiritual aid that no longer works would be abandoned, in this case in a particularly violent way (quoted in MOTT 1986: 131).

The idea of co-revelations vouchsafed by miracles addresses one of the more dominant ideas about the formation of Afro-Brazilian religious cults. Some scholars, such as James Sweet, argued that Africans had re-created their home religions in exile and warded off attempts of the Inquisition to stamp it out (SWEET 2007). Alternatively, the idea that Africans were “hiding their religion behind the saints” made popular by Roger Bastide (1971) among others is based on the same general idea. A model, if not *the* model, for such a struggle was that of the New Christians, Portuguese Jews who, forced to adopt Christianity to remain in Portugal and its empire, put on an exterior show of Christian devotion while secretly practicing Judaism as the Inquisition systematically sought them out.

Similarly, it seems that Africans from Islamic Africa, entering in the early nineteenth century conformed more closely still to religion as a form of re-

sistance. There the several Malè revolts seem to have a clear religious orientation, with Qu'ranic amulets, religious gatherings and the like pitched in a small-scale war against another religious tradition that was pushing down on them (REIS 2003).

There is no doubting the New Christian pattern of secret religion or of Islamic revolution, were real, but it is important to recall that Judaism and Islam, like Christianity, have a discontinuous revelation tradition that generates a fixed cosmology and an insistence on dogma. Thus, Christianity, Islam and Judaism represented three different dogmas which could not co-exist, except in secrecy. Traditional African religions were primarily based on continuous revelation, with the unstated supposition that any religious practice or Other Worldly being had to assert and re-assert their power and relevance constantly by miracles. An effective religious agent, whether originating in Africa, Europe or the Americas, would be accepted if it produced effective results. Practitioners were indifferent to cosmological or theological debates, viewing them more as potentially interesting speculations, than as imperative guides to action.

As Laura de Mello e Sousa showed in her classic study of popular religious life in Brazil, the common people all followed the pattern of continuous revelation, so that Christians of any background could also accept spiritual help from unnamed or named spiritual entities tamed or directed by spiritual mediators (SOUSA 1986). The plethora of such practices were the target in Europe, America and Africa by the forces of the Counter-Reformation that aimed to diminish continuous revelation to a narrow set of routes mediated by the clergy. They wielded the weapon of demonization as a way to discredit even effective spiritual remedies that were not controlled by the Church. (THORNTON 2012: 404-409)

This does not mean, however, that those Afro-Brazilians who sought spiritual assistance outside the church and went to mediators who practiced with African techniques for help were not engaging in some sort of resistance to slavery. However, religion was a means to resist through its power to assist supplicants in whatever activities they engaged in, including resistance, but was not resistance in itself. The fact that the authorities challenged the African practitioners was no different from their reasons for persecuting thousands of non-Africans who also addressed their problems through unapproved continuous revelation, which was anchored in the Counter-Reformation's war on all forms of "superstition." Security concerns did emerge more strongly in the nineteenth century as control moved from religious to secular authority, however.

We have already noted that the Gbe speaking region of Africa was one of the

only ones that had mobile deities, elsewhere the highest deities were typically territorial spirits which were anchored in their home regions (barring Christian Central Africa). These, and even more so the mundane spirits of daily life, were incapable of crossing the ocean. But the Gbe speaking deities did, not just in Brazil but also in Saint-Domingue/Haiti, Cuba and elsewhere. Eventually these mobile deities would show up as named gods, as it would seem the “Santo de sua terra” was specifically an African deity, not a local spirit.

An Inquisition case from 1759 suggests a potential identity with a god of the Gbe group of people from the Mina Coast itself in Brazil. In this case Manuel Mina and Tereza Rodrigues were accused of religious infractions by the local capitão-de-mato, and among the paraphernalia seized by his men, were iconographic representations of snakes. In commenting on this case, João Soares Brandão, the Visitor observed that “paôs pintados” (painted posts) found among the paraphernalia represented “figuras de certas cobras, que alguns dos gentios da quella Costa da Mina adorão por seus Deuzes” (figures of certain snakes, which some of the heathen of the Mina Coast worship as their Gods) (ANTI, TSO, IL, Cadernos do Promodor, L 315, C 125, fl. 69). While it is quite likely that the worshipping of snakes was a clear manifestation of Dangbe, attested already for some years in Saint-Domingue, the name of the deity itself is not mentioned.

Nevertheless, it is clear that by the last half of the eighteenth century, the Minas of Brazil had transported a high-level Gbe deity to Brazil as well as elsewhere in the Americas through continuous revelation. Luís Parés has made it clear that the arrival, and the creation of more or less formal temples dedicated to the “santos de terra” (saints of their country) of the Mina Coast, had set in motion the development of Candomblé as it is known today in Brazil (PARÉS 2007).

It also seems clear that this development coincides with the replacement of “*calundús*” with “*candomblé*” in the vocabulary of the enforcers of religious orthodoxy roughly took place at this time as well. Parés has traced in detail how formal worship, with altars, offerings and ultimately liturgies dedicated to African deities made their way into Brazilian life. Earlier supplication of deities and other spirits were largely confined to seeking aid in daily life even if African deities were supplicated; formal worship, reserved on the whole to the territorial deities, arrived in Brazil as those deities established themselves as co-revealed saints.

Other more mundane developments also took place, one of the most important one being the end of the Inquisition in deed if not in fact. The detailed inquests that Inquisition authorizes conducted in Brazil gave us many

important insights into Afro-Brazilian religious life. But the civil and religious authorities also did their own inquests, if not always driven by the same motives, and these discovered the arrival of the Yoruba deities that took place at the same time. No doubt Yorubas had been coming to Brazil, sometimes as Nagô, or often just as Minas, but their numbers were probably small. With the end of the slave trade in many parts of Africa, and the explosive wars in Yoruba country at the end of the eighteenth century, substantial numbers of Yorubas came to Brazil. They were already establishing themselves in Cabil-dos in Cuba as early as 1835, when Shango is mentioned by name in a Cuban source (LOVEJOY 2019: 79, 138, *passim*).

Later investigations, notably by João José Reis and by Rachel Harding, using largely descriptive articles of religious practices in the newspaper *O Alabama*, reveal that named Yoruba deities showed up in Brazil in around the mid-nineteenth century if not earlier (HARDING 2003; REIS 2001: 116-134). And Parés has made the important point that the way was paved for their appearance by the pioneering of the Jejes, or inhabitants of the Mina Coast a century before (PARÉS 2007). While we would not want to give sole credit to the remarkable co-revelation reported in Paracatu in 1747 as being either unique or the first such revelation, it is a striking example of the way co-revelation would work. No doubt elsewhere and in the hands of other spiritual mediators, similar revelations connected Catholic saints to the mobile gods of the Gbe-speaking region of Africa in Brazil. These connections establish a theological as opposed to sociological mechanism for explaining the transit of African religious characters to Brazil.

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