

# Afro-Derived Religions on the Web and Global Diaspora<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Through websites, mailing lists, discussion groups and social networks focused on issues of religiosity of African origins, I evaluate the contribution of the Internet to the creation of a new network of sociability that is built through the replacement of the real terreiro (sacred houses where candomblé's rituals take place) by the virtual terreiro. The text analyses also the transformations experienced by religions centered on oral tradition into hypertextual religions, by [re]configuring themselves in the virtual space, image-text space, hypertext space. This fact points to a new reality: the democratization of knowledge (even of the secret, the liturgical knowledge) and the opening to a new configuration of the diasporic Afro-derived religious field as a space for the global dissemination of Afro-derived religions, with the offer of magical-religious services or as an identity resource; a moment in which the Internet transforms religions previously considered as religions for minorities into global religions and, hence, in inclusive religions.

**Keywords:** Internet; Afro-Brazilian religions; Media activism; Anti-racist communication

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## 1. Introduction

The data presented here refer to the updated results of the research that I began to work on since my doctoral thesis, defended in the Postgraduate Program in Communication, at Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), in 2002; therefore, more than 20 years ago. Considering the transformations that have occurred in the context of technological innovations in computer system interfaces and recognizing the proliferation of websites (especially the Brazilian ones) that deal with religions of African origin on the Internet, I understand that it is of great value to elaborate a review of such data in relation to the present day and to compare the data previously obtained with the demands of contemporary time. It is also worth considering that the short and rapid passage of the research period, still in the twentieth century, at nowadays, already in the twenty-first century, witnessed important transformations in the use of the Internet in Brazil. In this sense, this paper is characterized as a contribution to current studies on the use of the Internet as a tool for shortening time and space and for the promotion of communities formed by geographically distant members.

By analyzing the transformations that occurred with the creation of virtual communities on the Internet for debate on issues related to the construction of a network for the exchange of information (which included the offer of magical-religious services, healing of afflictions and health care), more objectively related to the promotion of cultural expressions and the preservation of Afro-Brazilian symbolic and material heritage, and almost always in direct association with other forms of Afro-descendant religiosity in the diaspora, I aim to investigate the use of the Internet, through mailing lists, as a means of communication and interaction by communities of practitioners of Afro-Brazilian and Afro-derived religions, both in Brazil or abroad, like Europe or in the United States<sup>3</sup>, perceiving the dynamics of the globalization process as a complex dialogism between the local and the global that cannot be reduced to the simple exchange of information or the search for services and benefits.

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<sup>3</sup>I will use the acronym USA to designate the United States of America. Due to the fact that the moderation of the analyzed lists was carried out, in their entirety, from the USA, I privileged the North American case as an illustration of "overseas" in this text.

It is important to highlight that Brazil, at the time of the research, was unaware of Web 2.0 and broadband internet. Thus, mailing lists, at that time, functioned as a kind of what we now call social media.

Therefore, I focus on the way in which a new form of media activism is constructed, through the creation of virtual communities on Afro-Brazilian and Afro-derived religions, a moment in which the debate between democratization versus elitization of information, provided by access or non-access to information and communication technologies as an element of visibility, is privileged – both outside and inside the universe of digital media and, in this way, an instrument of promotion for insertion in the political public space, which has in the search for the offer of magical and religious services, which included the cure for afflictions, an important device.

It is worth noting that, although concerns with health care and illness are part of what I call here "healing of afflictions through the provision of magical-religious services", the Internet, even today, has not been used as a means of explicit publicization of such types of services, since such offer involves certain taboos regarding the boundaries between volunteering, welfare ("doing good without looking at whom") and the faith market, the religious market. For this reason, all references to health treatment and distressing situations are subliminally embedded in the category of field, which would be, according to Pierre Bourdieu's network of objective relations (of domination or subordination, of complementarity or antagonism) between positions. Each position is objectively defined by its objective relationship with other positions or, in other words, by the system of pertinent, i.e., efficient, properties that allow them to be placed in relation to all the others in the structure of the global distribution (BOURDIEU, 1996).

In this sense, health care, as it is included in the notion of the Afro-Brazilian religious field, is implicitly endorsed, even in moments when the debate on identity (rescued) or heritage (immaterial) prevails; that is, even at times when the theme of health is not explicitly described, but which is mainly related to the modes and visions of the world that will characterize the Afro-Brazilian or Afro-derived religious universe and that will determine the relations between consultants and consultants, "healers" and afflicted, priests and the faithful.

In this way, the Internet, through the lists, serves the cure of the most objectively pathological disorders as well as the cure of spiritual and emotional disorders, which include "saudade" (a deep emotional feeling of melancholic longing for a person or thing that is absent) and the malaise caused by dispersion (immigration).

## 2. Virtual terreiros as active media

If the beginning of the 21st century meant the intensification of the debate on digital inclusion in Brazil, mainly due to the dissemination of the research carried out by FGV and CDI<sup>4</sup> for Brazilians living in the USA, this same period, if it did not represent a milestone in the debate on the digital divide, represented the consolidation of lists and discussion groups<sup>5</sup> on the Internet about Afro-Brazilian religions. Moderated by Brazilian migrants, absolutely distant from the Brazilian socioeconomic reality, such lists would undergo impactful transformations, based on the increasingly regular access to the Internet of adherents of Afro-Brazilian religions residing in Brazil, due to a so-called democratization of access to the world wide web, provided by the phenomenon of popularization of the Internet in Brazil, provoked, in turn, by the increase in the number of access providers; market competition, with the reduction of monthly fees; the expressive sales of popular computers, provided by the implementation of policies to increase the use of personal computers; the indiscriminate opening of Internet access points, even commercial ones, with the proliferation of internet cafes in regions occupied by disadvantaged populations and communities, etc.

The contact between Brazilian migrants living in the USA and Europe and supporters living in Brazil depended, at first, almost exclusively on the possibility of accessing the Internet in the workplace. In this sense, discussion lists in the form of groups, characterized as virtual communities, served the community of adherents of Afro-Brazilian religions more effectively than chats, an application widely used at that time, and which required real-time conversation (IRC or instant messengers). The lists made it possible to participate without the need for an immediate response.

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<sup>4</sup>Map of the Digital Divide. Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas and Committee for the Democratization of Informatics. Apr. 2003.

<sup>5</sup>The terms list(s), forum(s) and discussion group(s) on the Internet, as well as the terms community(s) and virtual group(s), appear indistinctly in the present work. Although I recognize the specificity of each of the terms mentioned, because I also recognize that they have as a common motivation the agglutination of geographically and physically distant people, with exceptionally common interests, which can be shared through messages via *email* (e-mail), I give up the particularities of each of the terms. It should also be noted that in the first two years of the survey (from 1998 to 2000) *eGroups* was the largest manager of mailing lists on the Internet. Soon after, new managers (the Grupos.com.br among them) emerged. Finally, after the purchase by *Yahoo*, *eGroups* became part of the *Yahoo.com.br*.

For this reason, the participation of users residing in Brazil was verified during business hours, while the participation of users residing in the USA occurred mainly in the early hours of the morning, during the "home rest". Because of the difference between the time zones, the message forwards eventually matched, giving expressive dynamism to the lists, regarding the exchange of messages and participatory interaction between users residing in Brazil and users residing in the USA.

Considering the significant portion of adherents unemployed or allocated to the informal labor market, the access of Brazilians established in Brazil was carried out, in its entirety, by adherents who were users of privileged classes (economically, socially and culturally), who, in addition to not finding difficulties in the possibilities of access, had mastery of specialized bibliography (anthropology of Afro-Brazilian religions) and foreign language (more specifically, English), fundamental factors for a good performance in terms of participation in mailing lists at the end of the 1990s.

This fact brought up an important issue: even if the digital divide was not a reality experienced by the Brazilian immigrant community in the USA, outside the virtual environment a good part of the users of the lists still faced legitimizing traits of discriminatory and exclusionary actions due to the conditions of color, race and ethnicity, nationalisms, gender, sexuality and, above all, religion; This characterized the set of users of the lists as an ideologically minority, legally vulnerable group (in addition, many were illegal immigrants) and, finally, a group of excluded (if not from the digital sphere, at least from the civilizing process and recognition for citizenship in the face of the North American reality).

Considering the purchasing power of the members, for the Brazilian religious leaders, the Internet could serve as an important means for the aggregation of clientele interested in the offer of magical-religious services. On the other hand, for the faithful members, the Internet enabled quick contact with the providers of such types of services, abolishing the need for physical-spatial travel to the place of offer. However, few Brazilian religious leaders had access to such technologies. These few, however, even if they were members of privileged classes, found on the Internet an important source of subsistence, to the point that some live solely and exclusively on this type of offer.

Consultations for the cure of afflictions (cure of illnesses, health care, love affairs, problems with unemployment, residence visas and marriage, above all) were almost never witnessed. When it occurred, it caused the querent to be immediately directed to the private email of, possibly, a *babalorixá* or *ialorixá* (a priest or a priestess).

As a religion of affliction or a "hospital for poor people"<sup>6</sup>, Candomblé would find on the Internet an effective means to expand the supply of welfare services offered by the *realterreiros*, even considering the difficulties of access faced, at first, by members and sympathizers with lower purchasing power.

This fact allows us to categorize the use of discussion lists on religions of African origin on the Internet by adherents of these religions, whether in Brazil or abroad, as a kind of media activism, since, by making use of media resources (in this case, the computer with Internet access), they promote a type of social activism, even if covered by the contents of messages of a religious nature. A good illustration can be found in the fact that virtual communities also serve as a space for many immigrants (some illegal and almost all of them with minority traits) to share legal support initiatives on issues related to the discriminatory actions suffered, in addition to the search for and supply of jobs, critical considerations about traveling (legal and illegal immigration), of obtaining and sending worship material.

For this reason, even if one recognizes the religious and magical character of the motivation for the network meeting, the virtual communities were characterized, above all, as a kind of radical alternative media to the forms of exclusion as still seen in Brazil.

By radical alternative media, John Downing (2002) translates the use of media resources and vehicles as agents of old and new social movements, articulating and mediating forms of political actions. For the author, the "radical alternative media" are types of hegemonic counter-information, which intertwine commercialized mass culture, popular culture, local and regional cultures, and oppositional cultures illustrated by graffiti, the internet, hip-hop, community TVs and radios, street and popular theater, clothing, etc. (cf. DOWNING, 2002). Therefore, whether in the case of Brazil or in the case of the United States, access to computers and the Internet has served as an effective instrument for the insertion of groups and populations deprived of power, privilege and prestige, even in societies where digital inclusion is a reality (this is the case of the USA), configuring itself as a counter-hegemonic mode of social networking. both in the "new earth" and in the homeland.

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<sup>6</sup>On the concept of the poor people's religion, see Pierucci and Prandi, 1996; Fernandes, 2002; Ortiz, 1978.

The lists and discussion groups on the Internet about Afro-Brazilian and (soon after) Afro-derived religions, moderated from the USA, ended up bringing together a significant number of migrants of other nationalities, adherents and sympathizers of other religious traditions of African origin and, not by chance, no less excluded, such as: Cubans, Haitians, Nigerians, Puerto Ricans, Trinitarians, Tobagians, etc. They also had a substantial number of African Americans and Europeans who would swell the number of users. In this way, what previously seemed to be transformed into a space for discussion about Afro-Brazilian religious traditions ended up becoming an ecumenical [Afro] space, a space for discussion about the most diverse Afro-derived religious traditions, or even a space for Afro-derived traditions, whether religious or not; in addition to serving as an office for the healing of afflictions - including health issues and body care.

Such a finding dispels the belief that the new communication technologies seem to provoke forms of solo sociability, which are increasingly individualized, solitary, and isolated. On the contrary. In what is consolidated as a communicational space for citizenship, a plurivocal space, it contributes to the emergence of forms of sociability that are increasingly communitarian, group, even if the interactions do not take place in face-to-face relationships, along the lines of public exhibitions of street cinemas or community TVs. In addition, it also contributes to the democratization of relations between the most diverse actors and agents, both regarding the instances of religious participation and the processes of assistance, help and cooperation in the field of health and well-being. Networked Afro-ecumenism is further proof of this.

### 3. From orality to hypertext

All sorts of religions of African origin scattered throughout the New World are based on oral tradition. As a result, Afro-derived religions, whatever they may be, are unaware of the existence of a book of revelation, of liturgical or sacred texts that determine orthodoxies. For this reason, Internet mailing lists and discussion groups have transformed textless religions into hypertext religions. The [hyper] text functions, therefore, as an agglutinating element of empirical experiences once lived in the original homelands. It becomes a datable, archivable record and, therefore, a historical document for religions practiced in the diaspora by populations, for the most part, unfamiliar with the use of the text - mainly due to illiteracy (whether functional or digital) perpetuated by situations of inequality and exclusion since colonialist regimes. However, in the U.S., in addition to mastering information and communication technologies, the users of the lists are proficient in reading and writing text, either in their native language or in a "new" language (since most lists only receive posts in English).

In this way, Internet mailing lists insert Afro-derived religions and their users not only in the list of technologization of the world, but, above all, in the list of groups and communities that make use of media resources in order to obtain insertion in the sphere of public visibility and, by extension, in the political public sphere<sup>7</sup>.

However, some characteristics of the lists make them distance themselves from a mediativist model. First, because they are moderated — which means that the approval of a new member is subject to rules determined by a moderator. In addition, there is a recurrent prohibition of affiliation to non-initiates in these religions, which may demonstrate that, there, the interest is not to show off to the outside. The themes, as they concern issues of religious secrecy, seem to focus on a universe of interest that is much more micro, private, than macro, universal. This fact leads us to believe that the users of the lists do not make use of the Internet for the elaboration of civic actions, macro-policies, but for the elaboration of almost private initiatives. Moreover, if we consider access to computers and the Internet as a hegemonic way of relating to communication and information tools, the traces of counter-hegemony present there lose their intensity.

Such findings are not determinative, but provocative. The paradox lies in the fact that actions that are carried out in an almost private sphere (even if in a network) have no less interest in the visibility of the public. After all, micropolicies are structured based on the democratization of information and accessibility to an infinite network of users<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, by acknowledging that counter-hegemony inhabits hegemony (that the latter is the edifying order of the former), the use of media resources experienced by privileged groups does not cease to be counter-hegemonic, at the moment when it favors issues related to the universe of migrants seen as participants in a peripheral culture<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, in addition to religious affiliation and the fact that they are immigrants to the U.S., the users of the lists share the experience of being non-white subjects in a nation that values WASP culture over other cultures.

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<sup>7</sup>On the concept of the political public sphere, see Habermas, 2003.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Gramsci, 1999.

<sup>9</sup>White, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant.

For this reason, Brazilians, Cubans, Dominicans, Haitians, Trinidadian and many other Afro-descendant immigrants, by recognizing themselves as constituents of an African diaspora in the New World, thus form, from the movement of migration to the USA, an African half-diaspora in the New World, or, more specifically, a diaspora of the diaspora. Finally, by breaking away from the place reserved for them in their countries of origin, Afro-descendants immigrants in the U.S. cease to occupy the periphery of the periphery to finally occupy the periphery of the center. But, to further fuel the provocation, it is worth remembering that, if we consider that only those who have access to the Internet can integrate the virtual terreiros and interact with the webdiaspora, such religions and virtual communities, previously seen as religions and communities of inclusion, for all, for the world, are thus transformed into religions and communities of exclusion. Also contributing to corroborate this fact is a certain "intellectualization" and elitization of the debate held in the virtual space, which does not allow participation regardless of the degree obtained in the hierarchy of the cult (in some lists, non-initiates cannot have active participation in virtual discussions). There is also the elitism provided by access to the text and mastery of foreign languages, which, with the advent of the Internet, has only been strengthened. Considering the high costs for maintaining the telephone bill, the values of the equipment, the monthly fees of the providers and the need to master a foreign language, those who make up the mailing lists in Brazil (and even abroad) are thus different from the users of the real terreiros, by the fact that they form a "safe" network of sociability, materialized by both economic and intellectual (or informational) affinities.

#### 4. The cyberinformatization of candomblé

The lists are more like an informal discussion, hours of questions and answers, like the ones that come after conferences on Orisha religions. In these congresses, conferences, lists, etc., what happens is a 'network' of contacts that often leads to a real ritual of religion. [...] Candomblé, terreiro, is the experience, it's prayers, it's possession, it's feeling axé in the body, it's the parties, the sounds, the cooking, the people, the gossip, it's religion... Religion is real living... In one is typing... (Obalaná, interview, sic)<sup>10</sup>.

Forums, lists, websites, and chats about Afro-Brazilian religions (Umbanda and Candomblé, especially) have several functions. Abroad, they serve as a meeting place for the "more isolated" Brazilians, living in cities far from the places of the terreiros. There, they also serve as a resource to provide a meeting between foreigners who are nostalgic for Brazil and Brazilians, in addition to serving as a space for consultations between outsiders and virtual Brazilian consultants<sup>11</sup>. Consultations are understood as all types of demand for magical-religious services, including cures for cases of illness, through electronic-digital prescriptions (online, virtual) or possible (real) meeting with the consultant. In this sense, health care, by governing the motivation for demand, finds in the shortening of time and space provided by the Internet, an important ally.

In Brazil, it will be characterized as a space for the debate on liturgical knowledge, forbidden in the objective reality of the terreiros, in addition to serving the same search for the cure of afflictions in the foreign case.

In the case of a search motivated by the desire to cure some affliction, the consultant usually tells the consultant to look for him in PVT (private). In this way, both private and intimate issues of the consultant are preserved, as well as secret issues on the part of the consultant, such as the prescription for the resolution of the case, which may contain the name of the herbs for bathing; the types of animals, in case sacrifices are required; the preparation of food, with their respective culinary materials, etc.

Even if the solution to the problem is not made available on the list, even if in PVT (private), as in most cases, the Internet will be configured as the means of distribution to the detriment of meeting in the real (physical) terreiro.

In this way, the network also acquires the characteristic of facilitating the extra-limit meeting of the terreiros (the online, off-terreiro meeting, even if virtual) that in the even more remote past was intended for African-Brazilian brotherhoods and fraternities.

For this reason, the absence of real communities (of terreiros) seems to be the great motivator for the creation of virtual communities (of online terreiros or webterreiros). But it only seems, since the interest of Brazilians in the virtual world is more related to the democratization of information about the secrets of the cult and the supply and demand for magical-religious services, in addition to the interest in resources and technological innovations, than to the need for frequency in a religious setting — this, perhaps, is another demand of the "gringos" and outsiders of Brazilians residing in Brazil. After all, on the days scheduled for the meeting of users in the discussion forums in honor of some deity (orixá), few users accessed the discussion groups.

<sup>10</sup>Interview conducted with a moderator of an Internet mailing list.

<sup>11</sup>Candomblé's Priest and Priestess, *babalorixá* or *ialorixá*.

During the research period, there were two major online parties held by the forum with the highest number of visits and participations: the Xangó<sup>12</sup> festival, entitled Xangó's Bonfire, and the Omolu<sup>13</sup> festival, entitled *Olubajé* (the healing party for the "doctor of the poor"). The idea was for participants to contribute image files (photos and videos) and audio files (songs).

In addition, a number of gifs (still images and animations) have been posted. They also published several links about the deities honored. Many users spoke of experiences lived in the Brazilian royal terreiros, the time of the festivities in honor of the deities celebrated in the list. Even so, the participation was small, compared to the number of participants in that virtual community.

It is worth noting that, in Brazil, terreiros are called communities, terreiro-communities, *ilégbé*. For this reason, virtual communities, in addition to contributing to the shortening of distance (and reduction of saudade), provide the proximity of the religious space, even virtual, for users who are "more isolated" from the real space of the terreiros (especially those who are abroad). Virtual communities assume the contemporary role destined, in the past, to the space reserved for academic production (anthropology of Afro-Brazilian religions, above all), which is still quite recurrent among adherents of religions of African origin. If the specialized bibliography and audiovisual resources allowed the exchange of information reduced to the classic unilateral logic of sender-message-receiver, the discussion forums will allow the emergence of an effectively more participatory debate, which will give rise to online conferencing, a place of various lifestyles, worldviews, religious forms, cultures. Hence, a plurivocal space, of circularity.

The discussions deal with the most varied subjects, related to religious life or not. The dynamics of the forums are divided into tasks, messages and discussions. Tasks are subjects to be researched for a period of one month, divided among all users of the forum. In forum D, one of the tasks dealt with the characterization of the Orisha Ogum in the Angola, Jeje and Ketu nations<sup>14</sup>. Discussions are messages posted on a certain subject that are reproduced in reply for an indefinite period, but which do not last more than a month. In forum A, the characterizations of the Orisha Aganju in Brazilian Candomblé, Nigerian worship and lukumi, both North American and Cuban, were discussed. Messages relate to more general subjects: birthdays, service cards, themes about spirituality, use of software, comments, and invitations to candomblé parties, etc. Finally, there are messages of demand for help, always related to the supply and demand for magical-religious services.

Another point that deserves attention is the content of the debates held on the mailing lists. This fact is evidenced in the discussion on topics of a more confidential order, which refer to secrets, forbidden, the orthodoxies of worship, and the *orôs*. The recurrence of bibliography (an important instrument for the growth of the faithful) and audiovisual material continues to be constantly used and updated. There are many discussions and messages that allude to a particular book, movie, or video.

In addition to the initiates, we find in these spaces a number of people interested and sympathetic to Afro-Brazilian religions who use the lists to choose the house to be attended (in which they wish to be initiated), to clarify doubts about rules of behavior (which will be called *netiquetas* or *redetiquetas* of the saint)<sup>15</sup> and even some "fundamentals" (liturgies and orthodoxies of worship). Forum E is intended for this clientele.

In the lists, they still try to maintain some rules of behavior, especially those concerning religious hierarchies (whether to speak such a subject or not, *orô* and *ewó*<sup>16</sup>; forum for the uninitiated; forum for initiates, etc.). However, cybernetic culture's tendency to enable its actors to take on diverse roles paradoxically dismantles the boundaries between public and private, secretive, and democratized, hierarchy and equality, online and offline. After all, such roles have, in advance, two types of identification: religious affiliation and virtual contact.

It is interesting, therefore, to perceive the way in which the virtual space is creating new networks of sociability among the followers of Candomblé and Afro-derived religions, both in Brazil and abroad, uniting worldviews, lifestyles, cultures so distinct and distant, by creating a cybernetic network for a people of cybernaut saints. After all, the only common bond for cybernauts is the accessibility to the network and the connection to religions of African origin in diaspora.

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<sup>12</sup>African deity.

<sup>13</sup>Ditto.

<sup>14</sup>Nation is a native term to define the origins of worship related to the origins of people enslaved on the African continent who brought the worship to Brazil. In this sense, the term nation also identifies types of worship (Jeje, Nagô, Ijexá, Angola, etc.).

<sup>15</sup>The term "of the saint" or "of saint" is commonly used among adherents of religions of African origin. It is no coincidence that they have been commonly categorized as "*povo de santo*" by the anthropology of Afro-Brazilian religions. "*Povo de santo*" is, however, a native category.

<sup>16</sup>Secret and forbidden rituals, respectively.

There is a frequency of invitations to Orisha parties, whether in Brazil or in the United States, at which time all members of the forums are invited to participate and, in this way, have the opportunity to get to know each other outside the virtual environment. An offline (face-to-face) meeting between users of two forums in a suburb of Rio de Janeiro was also scheduled for a certain month. Foreigners, of course, pleaded for an international offline (face-to-face) meeting.

Many foreigners already have contact with the religion of the Orishas, through attending Afro dance and capoeira courses, or even through the exhibition of films and videos. For them, the expense of travel costs and the material necessary for the initiation rites does not present itself as a problem for coming to Brazil, a fact that illustrates well the socioeconomic profile of those who are building this network of cyberinformatization of Candomblé, both outside and inside Brazil. After all, as already said, only those who have access to new communication technologies, and therefore, the world wide web, can participate in such communities. This is clarified by the users of the lists, who usually differ from other adherents by the access/non-access to informatization, perceiving themselves as part of an elite and a privileged category — thus constituting a differentiator that is not necessarily dissociated from the race and class relations that solidify social relations in Brazil. For this reason, the cyberinformatization of Afro-Brazilian religions is strictly related to intellectual formation, to the professional occupation of adherents (since many have had contact with technological innovations in the workplace), as well as to the inequalities of color and class that feed, to a great extent, sociocultural and political-economic realities - fundamental for the migratory flow. It is also worth noting that, for those abroad, especially in the United States, cybernetic instrumentalization and, consequently, the use of the network becomes almost a mandatory instrument of socialization. Another fact is that there the costs with telephone bills and providers are infinitely lower than in Brazil, in addition to the fact that in any office you can find equipment available for consultation.

Obaloná is a good example. Initiated into the religion in Brazil in 1981, it moved to the United States in the same decade in order to get better job opportunities and salary. Obaloná, after a few years of living in the USA, seeks his Brazilian babalorixá so that he can complete his obligations<sup>17</sup>. After returning from the babalorixá, Obaloná began to meet Brazilian and foreign friends who had been initiated in nearby cities. At least once a month, these friends will gather at Obaloná's house to perform small rituals. Friends will be recruited from your (real) and informational friendship circle, friends from the forums (before, virtual).

When I lived in San Jose, I helped MãeObaloná, I attended *bori*, parties, meetings, etc. She moved and we also moved to Southern California. I miss the parties in the terreiros, but the day-to-day life of the terreiro, the chats, the kitchen, is what I miss the most. (Nananci, interview, sic)<sup>18</sup>.

The Internet, in this sense, makes up for part of this lack. Nananci is a user of the forum moderated by Obaloná. This forum includes many Brazilians living in the United States and some foreigners initiated into other forms of Afro-derived cults, which generally raise questions regarding the comparison between Candomblé and these other religions.

Some of Obaloná's children and clients are also recruited from the same forum. Obaloná does not have an open house. He does what he can inside his house: he plays conch shells and does small ritual obligations. Only "it doesn't start" (sic)<sup>19</sup> supporters. However, his house has a jug with water over the door<sup>20</sup>, *marinó*<sup>21</sup>, a permanent calendar of festivals, etc. — something like a royal terreiro. He has already made a *xiré*<sup>22</sup> and a gift for Iemanjá, in which a Brazilian, ogã from a traditional terreiro in Brazil and former percussionist of Oba-Oba<sup>23</sup> who, because of the concerts, ended up settling in the United States, was the one who played. Obaloná spends much of his time in the United States on the Internet: researching things about religion and managing and moderating the list. She also plays conch shells<sup>24</sup>, which requires her to travel around the United States. He knows almost the entire country, because of the many boris, gifts (offering of food, flowers and sacrifices to the deities) and ebós (cleansing of the body). It is much requested for consultations with conch shells, due to its recognition by the community of Brazilian migrants and, above all, by the members of the forum.

<sup>17</sup>Religious rituals.

<sup>18</sup>Interview conducted with a user of a mailing list on the Internet.

<sup>19</sup>The initiation known as "making a saint" is an overly complex ritual, in addition to requiring almost three months of interdicts and permanence in the *terreiro*.

<sup>20</sup>Insignia of a *terreiro*.

<sup>21</sup>Oil palm leaf. It is placed over the door to keep out the spirits of the dead. It is also one of the insignias of a Candomblé *terreiro*.

<sup>22</sup>Ritual party composed by songs, dance and percussion (drums, above all).

<sup>23</sup>Concert hall, owned by radio broadcaster Oswaldo Sargentelli, very popular in the 1970s and 1980s.

<sup>24</sup>Oracle. Sacred material for divination.

Obaloná is not an isolated case of Brazilian consultants who offer magical-religious services outside Brazil<sup>25</sup>. In the thesis that originates this text, I chose to categorize them as "traveled", because they do not necessarily live outside Brazil. In most cases, they made regular trips abroad, but they were mostly Brazilian residents. By "travelers", I classified the Brazilian migrants, who, living abroad, sought these types of services through the Internet.

Both Brazilian consultants living in the United States or Europe and Brazilian consultants living in Brazil have remarkably similar travel descriptions.

There are at least two suitcases. One with personal utensils, the other with material necessary for the performance and practice of rituals, which can include clothing, herbs, culinary condiments, tools, images and, of course, conch shells. The service is usually carried out in an apartment or house located in an accessible place and that can be paid by the financier of the trip. Usually, the stay takes place at the financier's own residence, who is in charge of publicizing the traveler's ticket and stay to other children or friends interested in the services. If the trip is concentrated in only one city, the interested parties (children and clients) residing in other cities and countries travel to the city of stay. However, it may happen that, on the same trip, the babalorixá or ialorixá travels through more than one country.

Some people can pass through five countries in a single trip. This will depend on the applicants' funding or the certainty of financial return (so that they can undertake the displacement). The problems presented by those who seek the services of travelers are like those of Brazilian consultants: love, employment, health — the most common cases. There are also new ticket demands that, not coincidentally, have also been witnessed in Brazil. Among these, we can mention: the reencounter with blackness and the search for the cure of problems of the existential, psychoanalytic order — questions that escape the rule of the most obvious searches, which try to put an end to the most strictly material afflictions.

If there is a need to perform a "more serious" obligation, which means "to make the saint" (to be initiated), the consultant must travel to Brazil, since in Europe "there is nowhere to make that requirement" [according to a babalorixá from Pernambuco, sic.].

The case of Pamella<sup>26</sup>, an Italian sympathizer of Afro-Brazilian religions, is illustrative. Pamella came to Brazil twice. Every time he was here, he spent more than a year conducting interviews, filming, photographing, recording, collecting material for video production (documentaries for German TV and Italian TV) and for the publication of articles in Italian newspapers and magazines (one of his articles is in a Brazilian scientific journal). He also conducted many interviews for radio broadcasts in Italy. In short, he collected expressive material on the most varied manifestations of Brazilian culture, including Candomblé. On his last stay in Brazil, he gave a bori in a traditional Rio de Janeiro terreiro. I had a lot of faith in the religion of the Orishas. Extremely fragile, she thought that the Orishas could cure her of almost all her ailments. Pamella was already very "mystical, even before she arrived in Brazil" (sic). Still in Italy, he had already made some incursions into shamanic rituals. When she returned to Italy, she took with her the thread of bead of Ogum<sup>27</sup> given to her during her stay in the terreiro for the bori. One day, his string of beads broke. The next day, walking down a street in Rome, he came across a string of beads dedicated to this Orisha, almost the same as his own. For Pamella, this was the calling she needed. He doesn't know why, but he misses Brazil a lot. He thinks that here he has found something that perhaps in the remote past he has already experienced. Part of this nostalgia is related to his connection with Candomblé. He misses Candomblé and knows that recovering it would mean having to return to Brazil. As he still could not get the money to do so, he started to frequent a Brazilian terreiro in Rome. This terreiro was created by a Brazilian babalorixá who goes to Italy twice a year. In Brazil, the babalorixá lives near Belo Horizonte. The terreiro is twenty kilometers away from Rome.

It is a terreiro of the Angolan nation mixed with Umbanda. Another Brazilian, an assistant in the rituals and a kind of little father of the terreiro, also performs shaman rituals there. When they return to Brazil, the terreiro is under the care of an Italian woman, Oxum's daughter, who they started eight years ago and who, Pamella believes, is being prepared to be a mother-of-saint. It is a terreiro with many young people. The three work together, "mixing knowledge and experience". They believe that Umbanda is closer to solving material problems than Candomblé.

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<sup>25</sup>I chose to describe only the case of Obaloná due to the restriction of space for formatting in an article. For reference to other cases, see FREITAS, 2014.

<sup>26</sup>The choice of Pamella as the only case of a consultant is due to the same motivations mentioned above regarding the choice of a single consultant in this article. For more cases, see FREITAS, 2014.

<sup>27</sup>Necklace, guide, rope with beads.



For this reason, the strong point of the terreiro is the moment in which the umbanda sessions are held. Pamella, in the terreiro, makes fruit offerings, takes some special baths, and feels "like after the *bori*" given in Brazil. "I heard Brazilian voices and songs and drums there. I was very touched, but most of them are Italian. I saw only one Brazilian woman and I met another one from Chile".

Before traveling to Brazil, Pamella had already visited another Brazilian terreiro in Italy — a kind of Brazilian association, run by a Brazilian woman. Pamella did not really like the work she saw there. Pamella met other people who also did not like the services held by the Brazilian in a store selling material for Afro-Brazilian worship called *Bagunça*. However, he felt particularly good in the terreiro in Italy. A little more than a year after attending the terreiro, the babalorixá proposed to Pamella to perform a "more serious" ceremony to concretize her connection with the terreiro. Pamella felt threatened by the proposal. He believed that with this he would sever his connection with Rio de Janeiro and Brazilian terreiro; A house that, according to her, gave her comfort and tranquility. Therefore, it chose not to make such an obligation. And so, she continues as a mere customer of the Italian terreiro.

Pamella is not looking for Africa or any Africanity in Brazil. His connection with religion concerns, solely and exclusively, the magical and spiritual acts that Afro-Brazilian religions dedicate to him individually. However, a certain Brazilian way of life, which, for Pamella, can very well be found in the terreiros, is seen as one of the motivations for her to continue looking for candomblé outside Brazil. After all, for Pamella, Braziliananness means joy, sincere friendship, energy — things that, for a fragile, extremely sensitive woman and, therefore, afflicted by the assiduity of emotional shocks, seems to be the great cure.

In two investigated forums, questions were raised on the tenor of the debate on what should and could be discussed. The message of the first moderator said that this concern became unfounded, at a time when the Internet, interconnecting people from different nations and terreiros, opened space so that in the future there would not be so many controversies about the things of the saint. It is a space for learning together. The moderator also recalled that in the cyber network no one talks about fundamentals<sup>28</sup>. Only routines, day-to-day things of the terreiros, things of religious life, common and unusual habits practiced without knowing why they are done or should be done. There, in the forums, she believes that answers are obtained, while in the terreiros these answers are not always obtained.

It seems clear that the shortening of the time for learning and for solving problems of a material and symbolic nature are the main motivations for the existence of the forums. In the terreiros, learning seems to be strictly related to the experience, to the experience inside the house of saint<sup>29</sup>, acquired, most of the time, in long and arduous years of participation. In cyberspace, the place of immediate learning sums up this time and space (without the displacement, sometimes so extensive, between the residence and the yard). The same can be observed in relation to the offer of services, by making the resolution of problems over the Internet something more immediate, almost instantaneous. However, the moderator is also an ialorixá, which seems to replace the users' real ialorixá with a virtual ialorixá.

If time and space are radically abolished in the matter of learning and helping, on the contrary, space (RF, real life) seems not to have been abolished by cyberspace (VR, virtual reality). After all, invitations to real parties and conch shell games are still common messages on lists and greater proof of this.

## 5. The Diaspora of the Plugged Diaspora

Even if aspects related to racial issues are not the emphasis of the lists, due to the fact that they discuss issues about religions of African origin practiced in Brazil and in the world, they constantly host discussions about a so-called "rescue" of blackness or Africanity through religious insertion, which creates a network of solidarity and common units (communities) between adherents and sympathizers dispersed throughout the New World and the "new earth". This fact proves that, in addition to the demand for the offer of magical-religious services, the lists function as binders of followers concerned with identity issues, the preservation of liturgical traits, tradition for the maintenance of worship or the search for traces of Africanity and, by extension, blackness, through the worship of African deities. After all, even the search for the cure of diseases through magical-religious experiences of African origin contributes to the promotion of ways of life and worldviews, which will configure the Afro-descendant or, more precisely, Afro-Brazilian identity field. After all, the terreiros function as traditional forms of mutual aid, which in Brazil have contributed, through the exercise of religion and faith, to the questioning between traditional and modern forms of cooperation and to the decimation of afflictions and anxieties, which will characterize philanthropic and non-profit actions aimed at or for the Brazilian popular classes through magical and religious services. (FREITAS, 2009).

<sup>28</sup>Native term to designate the secret part, the secret, of any religious ritual.

<sup>29</sup>Another term to designate *terreiro*, the church.

Rubem César Fernandes (2002) points out that the search for healers and spiritual counsellors, trade unions, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), associations, etc., constitutes "reserves of social action that exist on the margins of typically modern institutions" (FERNANDES, 2002). Therefore, it emphasizes the need not to disregard the importance of these actors and institutions for the characterization of a cultural concrete that, apart from the abstract of the official law, acquire moral authority to compose an ideal of citizenship that rises below the legal and political connotations of the universal language of citizenship. (cf. FERNANDES, 2002).

In this sense, the Internet functions as an important platform for the construction of a network of political strengthening, more objectively related to social movements, civil rights and citizenship issues; it serves the construction of a network directly related to the promotion of cultural expressions and the preservation of Afro-Brazilian symbolic and material heritage, almost always in direct association with other forms of Afro-descendants in the diaspora; it also lends itself to shortening the distance of time and space caused by the physical distance from the terreiro (both for migrant Brazilians and for Brazilians living in regions far from the terreiros), annulling the geographical and spiritual distance; it serves as a place for the exchange of experiences and knowledge, most of the time forbidden to the adepts in the real terreiros, due to the advent of secrecy, secrets, hierarchy and the mode of transmission of knowledge (in this case, centered on orality and not on writing); and, finally, it functions as a clinic for the underprivileged, as we find that the lists are sought after by both the disadvantaged classes as well as by the dominant classes, by attributing to them the same characteristics of the royal terreiro, a space for the cure of afflictions, a "hospital", a "clinic" sheltering afflictive disorders – which made possible the Afro-Brazilian religious expressions designations such as tambor-de-cura and pajelança (in clear reference to the cure), in addition to constituting the naming of entities such as Seu Sete Sara Cura, Caboclo Cura Demanda etc.

Estélio Gomberg, when analyzing the use of therapeutic resources by the faithful and clients of a northeastern terreiro, recalls that Candombléseeks to look at the individual in a comprehensive way, enabling him not only to take care of the state of imbalance inscribed in the health/disease binomial, but also to reconfigure himself as an individual, through his insertion in a new reality [...]. By entering this therapeutic religious system, the subject will experience and confront a series of innovations in his daily life, expanding his views and perceptions about the causalities of the disease, which will have repercussions on the consideration that he will have on the relationship between "body/mind/Orisha", thus opening a new perspective in relation to the various therapeutic options available to individuals. (GOMBERG, 2008).

Finally, it is worth remembering that, at the time of the research, voice programs were still non-existent and that the speed of connections did not allow the exchange of voice data in real time. As a result, the written (digital) text was configured as the greatest expression of contact. They thus transformed an atextual religion into a textual religion, a religion devoid of the presence of a revelation-book into a revealed religion.

The changes between the research period and today are significant. If at that time social networks were still non-existent, today, they are the most used and popular applications, especially in Brazil. If before, digital communication in collectivity took place through mailing lists and chats, today, especially among Brazilian fans, social networks such as Orkut have presented themselves as an important tool to make public some type of festivity, to offer magical-religious services (game of conch shells, *ebós*, etc.), to publicize events that have already taken place (photographs and videos of parties in honor of the Orishas), make public the myths referring to the deities (*orikis*) and locate terreiros and consultants.

Advertising and publicity of magical-religious services or the offer of these, even today, are not common on the Internet, unlike the production of printed materials (magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, and posters) where this type of exposure and publicity has only intensified.

Also worthy of attention is the case of the rescue of blackness or Africanity provided by the web connection between Brazilians and foreigners (mostly blacks and mestizos) who see in the lists effective instruments to materialize an identity encounter and to mark the difference in the new land of "welcome" — which, in times of globalization, seems to be at the top of the debate. A feeling of rescue of blackness and Africanity that makes Brazil Africa.

In this way, a new religious expression is created. No longer Afro-Brazilian, but Afro-Brazilian-diasporic (or universal), which reveals the construction of a new network of sociability articulated between gringos (Americans and Europeans) and minorities (Brazilians, Cubans, Nigerians, Haitians...), Afro-Brazilian religions and Afro-derived religions (Candomblé, Umbanda, Lukumí, Santéria, Palo, Voodoo, Ifá...), center versus periphery, global versus Location, Identity and Media, Tradition and Modernity, New Communication Technologies and Transnationalisms.

In this way, the dynamics of ecumenism that will take place between the Afro-derived religions in Brazil, the United States and Europe through the web will begin to be elaborated, even before it is in the virtual space, in the space of the terreiros itself. This one, a real space.

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