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## ME CONTE TUDO: CONTAS DE CANDOMBLÉ E CARNAVAL EM SALVADOR DA BAHIA

During the summer the city of Salvador is pulsating with numerous secular and sacred celebrations. References to Candomblé are very prominent in the different festivals and during carnival. Iconography of the orixás is seen on carnival costumes, images of them are found on souvenirs and trinkets sold to tourists, and most importantly, the use of beads during this time is very prevalent. Candomblé beads, as they move from the terreiros to the streets, take on a secular connotation, functioning not so much on a religious level, but rather on a social and ideological one. Strands of beads are worn by priests and priestesses, initiates, and people not officially involved with Candomblé. These beads are used self-consciously, purposely flaunted in this very public display. In Salvador, beads are present in everyday instances and in special occasion events, namely festivals and carnival, for both secular and religious reasons. They serve the purpose of asserting African and Brazilian group and individual identities simultaneously through the nonverbal communication achieved by wearing the beads.

### Everyday

The Senhor do Bonfim ribbons are worn by tourists in whatever color appeals to them: purple, orange, light blue, and pink, among

others. Baianos on the other hand, tie a ribbon in the color of the orixá with whom they most identify: royal blue for Ogum, red for Iansã, white for Oxalá, gold for Oxum, green for Oxóssi, and so on. People wear the color of the orixá that rules their head or of an orixá from whom they need help. For example, a person needing help in the realm of love will don a gold ribbon to please Oxum, the orixá closely associated with love. Although a cowrie shell divination procedure conducted by a Pai de Santo or Mãe de Santo can reveal the orixá that rules one's head, most people do not seek such methods of prophecy. Orixás are usually "felt" either by the person or a relative since each orixá has specific attributes and personality traits which may be manifest in that person. This special association with an orixá may be expressed either by wearing the ribbon or a single strand of beads associated with that orixá. These single strands are known as guias in Portuguese and dilogún in Yorùbá, named after the divination system called merindilogún. (1) The guias are worn either by non-initiates or by initiates of Candomblé for the first seven years. The main orixás, their colors, and their attributes are common knowledge to Baianos. Although "[a] complex system identifies each orixá by songs, beads,



colors, dance steps, leaves, and herbs,”(2) ribbons and beads worn by the residents of Salvador automatically communicate to which orixá the person belongs, regardless of their level of involvement in the terreiros of Candomblé. This tradition is a way of expressing personality traits to the outside world. Analogous to the practice of using astrology as a system of identifying mates or compatible people, orixá association, as expressed through ribbons and beads, functions in the same way in Salvador. In a city where fashion-conscious young adults at first glance look very similar due to almost identical attire, it is precisely the color of the beads around their necks or the ribbon around their wrists that distinguishes and categorizes people, and serves as effective nonverbal expression to possible friends and lovers.

### Special occasions

Because of the grand scale and immense popularity of celebrations of Lavagem de Bonfim and Festa de Yemanjá, they are simultaneously secular and sacred. One of the ways to distinguish religious involvement of the attendees is by the presence or absence of Candomblé beads. These beads give the priests and priestesses a level of religious authority and a way to visually separate them from the masses who are there mainly to partake in the abundant beer and music, as well as showcase an individual sense of aesthetics expressed in the juxtaposition of the beads with the attire and other body adornment.

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### Lavagem do Bonfim

This annual festival takes place the second Thursday of January. In the 1750s the Church was actually scrubbed with brooms by devotees. Since 1890 though, the purification ritual has been relegated to a symbolic washing of the steps by pouring water from vases carried on the head(3). The rite commences with a large procession that leads from the Church of Conceição da Praia to the Church of Bonfim, ten



kilometers away, where the ritual washing is to occur. This cortejo is led by Baianas who wear multiple strands of beads and carry long white vases on their heads filled with sacred water and long-stemmed white flowers. The color white has special significance for this festival since Senhor do Bonfim, Jesus Christ, is associated with Oxalá, whose color is white. Other festivities are also marked by the wearing of white clothes; besides the religious connotation of purity and piety, white serves a very practical function in these ceremonies which are often held during the hottest time of the day.

The percussion group Filhos de Gandhi march behind the Baianas, leading a crowd of thousands with music all the way to the Church of Bonfim. Gandhi, whose ideals reflect those of Oxalá, is seen almost as an avatar of the orixá, thus the group's very symbolic and favorable presence in the procession. A few thousand people follow the cortejo to the Church of Bonfim. Tens of thousands of others remain scattered around the beach, among booths of food and drinks, and loud

axé music. An obvious distinction is seen as the beads, flowers, Baianas, and Filhos de Gandhi go uphill towards the Church, while the bulk of people stay behind by the beach surrounded by beer and hot dogs vendors.

The procession is full of energy, drumming, and chanting. The sun is piercing hot, and the people stay cool by drinking water, beer, orange juice, or by pouring little bags of water over their heads.

In this vast sea of white clothing, two elements bestow color on the event: the ribbons and beads that glisten in the sunlight. The Baianas wear their most beautiful beads, those reserved for special occasion ritual wear, whereas Filhos de Gandhi wear their characteristic strands of blue and white plastic circular beads, worn diagonally across the torso. As a way of showing mutual support, the Baianas and members of Filhos de Gandhi wear "each other's" beads; Baianas, along with their sacred Candomblé beads, wear a few plastic secular beads associated with the group Filhos de Gandhi, who in turn adorn themselves with orixá beads to commemorate the religious aspect of the festival.

### Festa de Yemanjá

This impressive festival commemorating the Goddess of the Sea, Yemanjá, is celebrated every year on 2 February. As in the Lavagem do Bonfim, all participants and observers of the festival must wear white; the distinguishing factor between secular and sacred participation is once again the presence of the Candomblé beads, worn in multi-strands, accented against the white clothing. These multi-stranded bead necklaces are called oshunbetá and are worn after seven years of being an initiate of Candomblé. Inside the shelter is where the primary image is kept, a metal statue of the goddess admiring herself in a hand held mirror. Around the statue are enormous wicker baskets ready to accept the offerings brought from home and bought from street vendors outside. These gifts consists of plastic beaded necklaces, bottles of

Alfazema (cheap lavender eau de toilet), white roses, soaps, or tiny mirrors. Yemanjá is believed to be very beautiful and aware of this fact, therefore the offerings indulge her vanity.

The gift baskets, once full, are taken to an area where they are held until loaded onto boats. This holding area is colorful and sweet smelling, with about fifty large baskets filled with roses, carnations, chrysanthemums, as well as miniature boats, plastic dolls, mermaid figurines, perfume bottles, and ribbons from the Church of Bonfim. At around 4 pm, all gather around and wait to witness the yearly spectacle. The fishermen's boats are filled with the baskets. The metal statue of the goddess, heading a procession to the sea, passes everyone on her way to the shore. All stand in awe as the beauty and power of Yemanjá gleams in the sunlight and graces everyone with her magical presence. She accompanies the boats and oversees the tossing of the baskets' contents, but returns with the fishermen, for she must be present the following year.

Throughout the day, there are Candomblé rituals being performed at different locations by the beach. Adjacent to the gifts, a Candomblé ceremony is held in which Mães de Santo dance, chant, and enter trance-possession. The beads worn by the Candomblé practitioners, both male and female, are usually what are considered "fancy" due to the size and shape of the beads. These prettier beads are worn by Mães and Pais de Santo during Candomblé ceremonies at their respective terreiros, during cowrie shell divination sessions and during these public events where they will be on display, in a manner of speaking. Ordinary beaded necklaces, on the other hand, are worn everyday, usually underneath the clothes.

Vendors sell beads of Yemanjá, strands of tiny clear glass beads, as a souvenir, to be worn during the day and taken home and kept as a reminder of the Rainha do Mar on her feast day. The Festa de Yemanjá is the last principal public celebration before carnaval, and one with special significance to the residents of Salvador. Being on the coast, the city has always made



its livelihood from fishing and selling the “fruits of the sea.” According to local legend, fishermen’s wives would send offerings to Yemanjá to appease her in the hopes that she would return their husbands back to them, since once at sea, the fishermen were symbolically married to Yemanjá and belonged only to her. Besides protecting the fishermen and providing for the residents of Salvador with their subsistence, Yemanjá, embodying the ocean, renders another important function: she provides this predominately Black population with a symbolic link back to their place of origin, Africa.

A common sight at these festivals as well as at most sidewalk corners, shopping malls or beaches year-round is a “*baiana de acarajé*”; who are either *Mães de Santo* or *Filhas de Santo*. All wear the thicker *oshunbetá* necklace, which is technically reserved for *Mães de Santo*. Although some of these *baianas de acarajé* are not priestesses, they don the sacred multi-stranded beads. This act, along with the practice of adorning the table where the food is presented with beaded necklaces, reflects the fact that beads are used by *baianas de acarajé* to help reinforce the African connection of the food they are selling, primarily for tourists, in whose eyes the beads further authenticate the food they are about to eat.

### Carnaval

The pre-Lenten festival of Salvador is regarded as a celebration of the people, who stay on the streets the six days before Ash Wednesday, following behind their favorite group or dancing alongside as it parades down the street. There are about 150 carnival groups which perform on three different parade routes simultaneously. Of the 150 groups, most are classified as either *grupo de trio elétrico* or *grupo alternativo*, featuring *axé* music. There are approximately twenty-one *blocos Afros*, with dozens of drummers on the streets and themes paying homage to African or Afro-Brazilian history. There are about five *afoxés*, groups

that sing in praise of the *orixás* and dance in the *Candomblé* rhythm of *ijexá*, produced by the instrument *agogô* and hand beaten drums. *Blocos Afros* and *afoxé* groups are both very heavily associated with *Candomblé* in their names, themes, *orixá* symbolism and iconography, and actual *Candomblé* rituals which often launch their parade.

Due to the large quantity of people in each group, participants seek ways in which to stand out, usually achieved by enhancing one’s costume in some way; obtaining individuality while maintaining a look that is cohesive with the rest of the group. The costume of the *axé* music groups consists of a *abadá* (4) matching Lycra shorts and a *bandanna*, with an occasional pom-pom. The costume is the same for both men and women and usually comes in a day-glow color. These costumes, picked up a few days in advance, are often altered by women. Tunics are made into varying styles of small halter tops, and shorts are shortened. Not only is the alteration of the costume allowed, it is admired by others, attesting to the unique aesthetic vision of the wearer who not only showcases her body but also expresses good taste and individuality. The costumes for *blocos Afros* and *afoxés* vary greatly in style; unlike the others, they cannot be altered. The way to secure beauty, individuality, and innovation is to adorn the body with beads, either *Candomblé* ones in the colors of the *orixás*, or secular plastic beads in the colors of the *blocos Afros*. This simultaneous individual, group and African identity is best exemplified by looking at the beads of the participants of the *blocos Afros Ilê Aiyê*, and *Olodum*, and the *afoxé Filhos de Gandhi*.

### Olodum

The Grupo Cultural *Olodum* was founded in 1979 as a carnival group by the dwellers of the *Maciel-Pelourinho* district of Salvador, who were seen as marginal members of society because they included prostitutes, thieves, and poor Blacks (5). From its inception,



Olodum has served as a backbone for the Black community of Salvador, along with the other blocos Afros, through its involvement in the Movimento Negro. The bloco's name, Olodum, is an abbreviation of Olodumaré, the principal orixá in Candomblé. The lyrics of most Olodum songs are inspired by African mythology and the orixás as well as the history of slavery, the struggle for Black power, and Brazilian cultural heroes such as Lampião and Zumbi. The songs suggest that Olodum is a vehicle that enables its followers to travel to faraway lands such as India, Egypt, and Madagascar, where people of color suffer but also inspire the Black struggle in Bahia. Many Olodum events, as well as the weekly rehearsals, take place on the square Largo do Pelourinho, the exact spot where a few hundred years ago slaves were whipped and tortured by their masters. Olodum purposefully headquarters in Pelourinho to tap into the energy caused by the shedding of slave blood, thereby gaining strength for their fight for Black equality and power. (6)

Olodum is identified by the following four colors often associated, in different combinations, with the Black National Movement, Marcus Garvey, and the Rastafari Movement: red, gold, green, and black.(7) These colors appear on all the merchandise and CDs of the bloco, but are most visible on the hand-painted drums which, when struck, create Olodum's characteristic high-energy, earth-rattling sound; thunderous bellows of many drums being beaten simultaneously. During carnival time, strands of plastic beads in the colors of Olodum are sold on street corners and Candomblé supply shops, but surprisingly these beads are not found in the authorized store Boutique do Olodum, thus making them unofficial. The Olodum beads are worn by affiliates during carnival, over their costumes, or occasionally wrapped around their wrists for beauty and to further enhance their support of Olodum's music and philosophy.

To this day, many of the poor residents of Salvador support Olodum. Not being able to afford the R\$250 costume, most opt for the R\$2 strand of beads that shows their affiliation with the bloco. Olodum is the most famous bloco Afro of Bahia especially among foreign and local tourists, as a result of Olodum's participation in the albums of Paul Simon and Michael Jackson. The most popular tourists' T-shirts displayed on every street corner of Pelourinho are Olodum shirts; some read "Olodum, Bahia, Brasil," making the association of Olodum and the four colors with the Black state of Bahia and the Movimento Negro. National and international tourists purchase not only the T-shirts but Olodum beads as souvenirs of Afro-Brazil.

Some of the over one hundred drummers that comprise the bateria section of Olodum wear beads to show association with the bloco even when not drumming. One beaded item sold by the Boutique and worn by some drummers, is a beaded wrist bracelet, into which the word "Olodum" is woven. Gold, green, red, and black beads are also sported in many beaded hair styles; often times the black bead is



omitted, since the black of the hair already supplies the color. These are seen on both men and women, affiliates as well as band members. Due to Olodum's connection to Candomblé and Africa, and the very easily recognizable color scheme, these beads, whether as necklaces, bracelets, or hair ornaments, are becoming increasingly popular during carnival season in Salvador.

### Ilê Aiyê

The bloco was founded in 1974 in the Liberdade district of Salvador, one of the city's poorest and predominately Black neighborhoods, by Antônio Carlos dos Santos, affectionately known as Vovô and his mother, Mãe Hilda, who is Mãe de Santo to most of the affiliates of Ilê Aiyê. This is the oldest bloco Afro, the only one that restricts admittance only to Blacks, and the one with the strongest connection to Candomblé. The African kinship is demonstrated in the name of the bloco, which in Yorùbá means "House of the World." The official start of the carnival parade is commenced in front of Mãe Hilda's terreiro, marked by a private Candomblé ceremony at the end of which white doves are released. Baianas start the procession blessing the event and its participants, and the drums start to sound. Ilê was established with a mandate to restore self-esteem and pride in the Black population of Salvador, exemplified in the reoccurrence of these themes in the lyrics (8). The bloco's mottos are *O orgulho de ser negro*, and *Beleza Negra*, which is comparable to the United States' "Black is beautiful" theme popular during the 1970s. Yearly carnival themes feature either a country in Africa or the Diaspora, the United States being chosen in 1993. (9) The costumes, drums, and beads are in the Ilê colors: white, red, yellow, and black, which symbolize, respectively, peace, blood, gold and Black skin color.

Costumes are elaborate: long pants and a long tunic for men, a full skirt, tunic, waist sash, and turban for women. Many beads are worn,

Candomblé and plastic ones, in the Ilê colors. Since these affiliates presumably are initiates of Candomblé, the beads not only represent their orixás, but reinforce the Candomblé (and subsequent African) connection which is at the essence of the bloco's roots. Ilê's costumes in their cut, iconography, and related paraphernalia are very "African"; regardless of whether or not they resemble the attire of actual Africans, it is a perceived and thus forged concept of what an authentic African costume looks like. Because of this idea, beads are common on participants, since in the popular mind, Candomblé beads are African in origin, the carnival Ilê beads by association take on the same implication. Beads are also worn in braided hair styles, attached to elaborate head wraps, or affixed to the costume. An essential element in the graphics and costume iconography is the presence of cowrie shells, a common symbol of Africa often seen as jewelry alongside the beads.

Mirroring Ilê's perpetual emphasis on beauty and dignity, affiliates march, especially during the official start of the parade on Saturday night, carefully tailored and polished, head wraps tied in elaborate ways and wearing a plethora of beads around the neck and sometimes silver bangles on their wrists. In other blocos Afros, such as Olodum, beads serve to further reinforce group identity and provide entrance for those not able to participate due to financial restrictions. In Ilê, besides serving this same purpose, beads also grant symbolic affiliation for those not allowed to participate due to the light hue of their skins. Ilê beads, besides making explicit the connection to Africa, serve perhaps the most important and simple function: that of the beautification of its male and female members, creating a united front in which the *Beleza Negra* is flaunted on the streets of Salvador.

### Filhos de Gandhi

Afoxés have been around since colonial times, when African slaves were relegated to playing instruments for church celebrations.(10)

After the musical style was abolished from Catholic festivities, it entered the terreiros of Candomblé and procured a more African flavor.(11) In fact, the early musicians of afoxé were players of atabaques (percussion created by beating drums with hands) in the terreiros.(12) Although having a strong historical presence in Bahia, afoxés re-emerge again in 1949 when the afoxé Filhos de Gandhi was founded, two months after the assassination of Gandhi. Afro-Brazilian rhythms, played on West African instruments, are combined with East Indian pacifist philosophy to bring peace on the restless streets of Salvador during the six-day long carnival celebration. Filhos de Gandhi's Candomblé connection is reinforced on the Sunday afternoon of carnival, when the group marks the start of their parade with a public Candomblé ceremony held on the cobblestone streets of the historic center of the city, Pelourinho. Whereas Ilê Aiyê restricts membership only to Blacks, Filhos de Gandhi excludes women; men of all ages and races are welcome however. Their parade, characterized by melodic rhythms, and the members blessing spectators by spraying água de cheiro (Alfazema, often found in Candomblé ceremonies) has a calming and soothing effect.

The five thousand participants from the all-male bloco wear white sheets and tunics, white terry cloth turbans – each with a sapphire-blue plastic stone – white sandals, and sapphire-blue socks. They are beautifully adorned with many necklaces of blue and white plastic and glass beads which they also carry and distribute on the streets. In fact, although the beads can be purchased on any street corner during carnival or in Candomblé shops, a necklace received from a member is especially valued. So desired are these beads that, analogous to the U.S.'s New Orleans's Mardi Gras custom of swapping beads for favors, members of Filhos de Gandhi customarily trade beads for either a kiss or a can of cold beer. Of all the groups of Salvador's carnival, this is perhaps the most respected one, due to the associations with



Oxalá, the group's calm presence, and its nonviolence philosophy. Many people, especially women, wear the beads as a symbolic association with the afoxé. Unlike the other carnival groups in Salvador, Filhos de Gandhi is the only one for which beads are a mandatory part of the costume. In fact, the cover of their recently released CD shows a bare chested man wearing three different types of white and blue bead necklaces, one of which is remarkably reminiscent of the oshunbetá style of Candomblé beads. Even within the mandatory donning of beads there is variation; how one wears them, how many and with what other ornaments is how individual aesthetic distinction is made by members of the group and by outsiders. One member in 1996 paraded wearing many single strands of Gandhi beads combined with Candomblé beads as well as a large silver pendant of a bow and arrow which distinguished him from the rest of the group; through this adornment, he paid homage to Oxalá, but also to his personal favorite, Oxóssi, the hunter, often represented by the bow and arrow.



Alongside Olodum, Filhos de Gandhi have the most recognizable colors of beads. If Olodum's red, gold, green, and black beads symbolize Black Bahia, the white and blue symbolize the carnival of Salvador. The latter are not only the most common beads, have the longest history in carnival, but are actually given out on the streets. The beads have in fact been appropriated to symbolize Salvador's carnival in billboard advertisements and have been used by a domestic airline company, which ran a campaign offering Brazilian tourists a strand of blue and white plastic beads on all the flights departing from Salvador shortly after carnival. During the Lavagem do Bonfim, people vie for a little of the perfumed water carried on the heads of the Baianas. Likewise, during carnival, residents of Salvador value the blessing from the bloco that personifies Oxalá and subsequently Senhor do Bonfim, patron saint of Salvador. Most people are granted a generous spraying of água de cheiro, a few lucky ones receive the beads. These simple beads function in many ways: to adorn the body and the rather simple costume of the afoxé members, to provide a connection with Oxalá and Senhor do Bonfim, and to grant a blessing to the special person a bloco member feels deserves a little peace in his/her life.

In this Black City, beads play a significant role in both sacred and secular expressions of identity, both in everyday life and in the popular festivals. In contemporary Salvador, the people of Bahia are able to visibly display their support of the Black Movement and Candomblé religion, pay homage to Oxalá and Yemanjá, and express individual personality traits, all by simply adorning themselves with strands of beads.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Personal Communication, Henry J. Drewal, July, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Smith Omari, Mikelle. *From the Inside to the Outside: The Art and Ritual of Bahian Candomblé*. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1984, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Grotelaars, Martien. *Quem é o Senhor do Bonfim?* Rio de Janeiro: Editora Vozes Ltda., 1983, p. 119.

<sup>4</sup> From *agbadá*, a Yoruba word meaning "traditional garment." Henry Drewal, personal communication, July 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Tita Lopes, Director of Health, Grupo Cultural Olodum, personal communication, January, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Leão, Director of Education, Grupo Cultural Olodum, personal communication, February, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Olodum's interpretation of Marcus Garvey's philosophy in *Jornal Banto Nago*, uma publicação do Departamento de Cultura do Grupo Cultural Olodum, November 1995, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Organizações de Resistência Negra, Caderno de Educação do Ilê Aiyê*, 1995, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> *Canto Negro: América Negra* "O Sonho Africano," Ilê Aiyê, Salvador, Bahia, 1993. 10. Rodrigues, Nina. *Os Africanos no Brasil*. Brasília: Editora Universidade de Brasília, p. 181.

<sup>11</sup> *Organizações de Resistência Negra, Caderno de Educação do Ilê Aiyê*, 1995, p. 19. 12. Riserio, Antonio. *Carnaval Ijexá*, Salvador: Corrupio, 1981, p. 12.

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