AFRICAN ACCENTS, SPEAKING CHILD SPIRITS AND THE BRAZILIAN POPULAR IMAGINARY: PERMUTATIONS OF AFRICANNESS IN CANDOMBLÉ.

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The role of African influences has constituted a central dilemma for Brazilian attempts to construct a national identity from the end of colonial times. Since abolition views of the influence of African people and their cultures on the nation's character have undergone a number of permutations. These have ranged from explicit attempts to 'whiten' the makeup of Brazil's population to celebrations of miscegenation and on to more recent debates on affirmative action in higher education (see e.g. Skidmore 1993, Segato 1998, Fry 2000, Telles 2004). In more recent years Africanness has also come to figure as an object of celebration in its own right. While some have posited African cultural influences and expressions at the core of Brazilianness, others have seen the appreciative representations of Africanness as a means to mobilize the nation's darker-skinned masses around more positive self-identifications than those offered by valorizations of miscegenation. Such varied agendas have predictably led to disputes over the right to define and represent the content of the newly celebrated Africanness (see e.g. Hanchard 1994, Sansone 2003, Teles dos Santos 2005). Nevertheless, despite the multiplicity of perspectives in this highly fraught discursive field—occupied at present by such diverse actors as politicians, Afrocentric activists, intellectuals, tourist guides, and martial artists—there is one issue that all agree upon: the Candomblé religion as it is practiced in the most prestigious temples of Bahia represents the purest and most authentic expression of Africa in Brazil, if not the contemporary world. Like

1 Brazil constituted the world's largest slave economy. Estimates of the number of people transported from Africa to Brazil vary from three to six million. While slavery was abolished in 1888, people of African descent still constitute the majority of the poor in Brazil, whereas the country's elite is predominantly white.

2 The claims for the resilience of Candomblé as a reservoir of African religiosity are often supported by advocates' observations concerning the declining popularity of traditional religions in Africa itself, where increasing numbers of practitioners have converted to Islam and Christianity. Many have also heard of African practitioners
Herskovits’ (1966) and Bastide’s (1978a) valorizations of African survivals, these more recent celebrations of Candomblé have been founded on the degree to which the religion’s practice and theology appears to have retained fidelity to its African origins. Indeed, there is much that ostensibly speaks for such a view. In most temples the gods are still sung and prayed to in what are understood to be sacrolects of African origin. Similarly, Candomblé ritual foods and drum rhythms bear strong resemblance to those by which the gods have been fêted on the other side of the Atlantic. Most importantly, however, the gods that practitioners incorporate are themselves held to be African.

The particular manner in which Candomblé’s Africanness has come to be celebrated in these broader discourses has, however, been highly selective. This is clearly reflected in the way in which Candomblé has come to be known as a cult of the orixá, inquice and vodun gods. Despite their central role in Candomblé theology, however, these gods are not the only African spirit entities that are revered in the religion. Instead, practitioners also incorporate a group of African child spirits called erês.3 Like the orixá, inquices and voduns, these spirit entities play a crucial role in many Candomblé ceremonies. Still, they are but rarely mentioned in either popular or scholarly depictions of Candomblé. In fact, the few earlier anthropological accounts of Candomblé that acknowledge the child spirits do not even consider them to constitute autonomous spirit entities. Instead, they describe the erês as a transitional state between full possession by the orixá, inquices and voduns, and a medium’s mundane personhood (see Landes 1947: 55–7, Leacock 1964: 107, Herskovits 1966: 21–22, Bastide 1978b: 206–34). It is only in recent scholarly treatments that the erês have been depicted as spiritual entities distinct from the higher gods (see Wafer 1991, Pessoa de Castro 2005).4

traveling to Brazil in search of religious knowledge that has been forgotten on the other side of the Atlantic.

3 Candomblé temples are divided into lineages called nações (nations) on the basis of their purported places of origin in Africa (Lima 2003 [1972], see also Matory 2001). In Salvador, Bahia, where I conducted my research, temples tend to identify as representatives of the Ketu, Angola or Gege nação. In the Ketu tradition the African gods are called orixá, in the Angola tradition they are called inquices and in the Gege tradition voduns. In practice, however, the Ketu terminology often dominates even in temples of the other nations. As such, the African child spirits are generally referred to by the Ketu term erê in all temples although on occasion I would hear practitioners of the Angola tradition employ the term vunji.

4 Whether this represents a misperception on the part of earlier ethnographers or a genuine change is, of course, impossible to say.