Afro-Brazilian Religion, Resistance and Environmental Ethics

A Perspective from Candomblé

Valdina Oliveira Pinto*
Teacher and practitioner of the philosophical and healing traditions of the Afro-Brazilian religion
valdinapinto@gmail.com

Rachel E. Harding
University of Colorado Denver, CO, USA
rachel.harding@ucdenver.edu

Valdina Oliveira Pinto is an extraordinary woman. A teacher and practitioner of the philosophical and healing traditions of the Afro-Brazilian religion, Candomblé, for many years she was the Makota Ngunzu (ritual elder responsible for training new initiates and transmitting sacred knowledge) of the Tanuri Junçara Candomblé terreiro in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. Makota Valdina, as Pinto is respectfully known, has recently assumed a similar function, Mameto ma Ngunzu at the Nzo Oniboyá Candomblé terreiro. There, together with her sister, Maria Angélica, Makota Valdina continues a family legacy of spiritual leadership based in the community where she was born and raised.

Makota Valdina is also an environmental ethicist, esteemed community scholar, and tireless advocate for the human rights and religious freedoms of people of African descent. She travels widely—throughout Brazil and internationally—as an eloquent spokesperson for devotees of Afro-Brazilian religious traditions. She has received numerous honors and recognitions of her work, including, in 2005, a “Grassroots Wisdom Master” award from the Gregorio Mattos Foundation.

In April 2011, Makota Valdina spent a week as scholar-in-residence in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado Denver. During her visit, she presented a public lecture that interwove her personal history with the

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* Lecture by Valdina Oliveira Pinto, translated and edited by Rachel E. Harding.
history of Candomblé, reflections on the environmental consciousness embedded in the religion, and the importance of Candomblé for the preservation of African-based cultural, linguistic, and ritual resources in Brazil. The following is a transcription of the lecture—which was filmed by Charles Pankey, and translated, transcribed and edited by historian Rachel E. Harding.

I’m very happy to be here again in this city. I would like to thank the University of Colorado Denver and all the institutions and individuals who enabled me to be here so that I could share with you all a little of the traditions, the practices of African-based religion that were brought to Brazil by enslaved Africans. But I also believe some part is here in the United States among African Americans. I see some faces that I know; some people who have heard me a few times before. But I also see a lot of new people—and I’m happy for the opportunity to meet them and to make new friends. So, for those who have already heard me, please be a little patient, because you may hear something you’ve heard before. But I need to make an introduction for those who have not heard me previously.

To talk about Candomblé, for me, is to talk about my life. Even before I was initiated in Candomblé, I lived Candomblé. I was born into a family in which my mother practiced Candomblé. I was born into a community that was an extended family, beyond the blood family. Mine was a neighborhood where there were no Catholic or Protestant churches but where we had a lot of Candomblé temple communities, terreiros. I grew up in my family and in my neighborhood, with this practice, with this culture, with these traditions.

I was initiated in Candomblé in 1975. At that time, I realized that many things, many words, many ways that I had first encountered as a child in the neighborhood where I lived, still existed within the Candomblé religious communities. But because of “progress,” outside influences and television, we were losing those things, we were losing some of these traditions.

So what is Candomblé? Candomblé is the traditions, the rites, the practices that we Afro-Brazilians recreated in Brazil, from what the Africans who were enslaved brought with them. We recreated and gave new meanings to those African rites, rituals, traditions and worldviews and made Candomblé. For us, Black people in Brazil, Candomblé is much more than just a form of spirituality or a religion. Candomblé is an expression of resistance. It is a way of affirming

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1 Makota Valdina was born in 1943 and raised in the community of Engenho Velho da Federação, a working-class area which, at the time, lay just on the rural edges of Salvador, the capital city of the state of Bahia.