

THEMATIC SECTION:  
CHILDHOOD AND EDUCATION  
OF ETHNIC-RACIAL RELATIONS



## Childhood, Ethnic Identity and Knowledge of African Matrix in School

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**ABSTRACT – Childhood, Ethnic Identity and Knowledge of African Matrix in School<sup>1</sup>.** This article analyzes the children's and youth literary production of the writer Reginaldo Prandi, who addresses the Yoruba mythology and the Yoruba-descendant culture in Brazil, with the purpose of introducing its possibilities of use as literature and didactic material in the school. Based on the selection of six titles of the author, it seeks to situate this production in all his writings, in order to examine the representations of childhood and children expressed in these narratives. The essay articulates topics such as ethnic identity, African diaspora, anti-racist and decolonial education, as a contribution to reflection on the importance of African and Afro-descendant cultures in K-12 Education.

**Keywords: Childhood. Children's and Youth Literature. Decolonial Education.**

**RESUMO – Infância, Identidade Étnica e Conhecimentos de Matriz Africana na Escola.** Este artigo analisa a produção literária infantil e juvenil do escritor Reginaldo Prandi, que aborda a mitologia iorubá e a cultura iorubá-descendente no Brasil, com o propósito de apresentar suas possibilidades de uso como literatura e material didático na escola. Com base na seleção de seis obras do autor, procura-se situar esta produção no conjunto dos seus escritos, com vistas a examinar as representações de infância e criança expressas nessas narrativas. O ensaio articula temas como identidade étnica, diáspora africana, educação antirracista e decolonial, como contribuição à reflexão sobre a importância das culturas africanas e afrodescendentes na Educação Básica.

**Palavras-chave: Infância. Literatura Infantil e Juvenil. Educação Decolonial.**

## Introduction

This article presents an analysis of the literary production of the writer Reginaldo Prandi, intended for children and young people, introducing the Yoruba mythology and the Yoruba-descendant<sup>2</sup> cosmovision in Brazil. It aims to explore its potential as literature, as well as its opportunities for use as teaching material in the school, encouraged by the curricular changes proposed by Laws 10639/2003 and 11645/2008 (Brasil, 2003; 2008), which established the teaching of Africa history, African-Brazilian cultures and Indigenous cultures in K-12 education. The paper results from a set of considerations from our experiences as professors of the extension project entitled *Children's and youth literature on the teaching of African-Brazilian cultures and Indigenous cultures*, carried out in Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-Brasileira (UNILAB-CE). An initiative that took place throughout 2018, with focus on the development of courses and pedagogical activities directed to students of bachelor's in education in Pedagogy, Languages and History, as well as to teachers and managers of municipal and state networks from the Maciço do Baturité region in Ceará state. The proposal sought to assist educators and undergraduate students in the training and exchange of experiences regarding the use of children's literature in school, in order to prepare and develop didactic sequences aimed at valuing the Afro-Brazilian cultures and Indigenous culture in K-12 education, in an intercultural, an interdisciplinary and a decolonial perspective.

Children's and youth literary production of Reginaldo Prandi (2001a; 2002; 2003; 2004; 2007; 2017) devoted to Yoruba mythology integrated the collection of works chosen by the project, to be studied as didactic material for the teaching of History of Africa and the Afro-Brazilian cultures in K-12 education. It was selected four of his children literary books: *Os príncipes do destino* (2001), *Ifá, o adivinho* (2002), *Xangô, o Trovão* (2003), *Oxumarê, o arco-íris* (2004), in which the author presents a wide mosaic of Yoruba myths adapted for children, in addition to two of his children and youth novels: *Contos e lendas afro-brasileiros: a criação do mundo* (2007), and *Aimó: uma viagem pelo mundo dos orixás* (2017), which theme is the Yoruba-descendant cosmovision in Brazil.

Within the limits of this article, we seek to locate this production in all his writings, with the objective of analyzing the representations about childhood and children expressed in these narratives. The analysis perspective adopted here is grounded in the methodological proposals of authors as Hampâté Bâ (2003; 2010) and Vansina (2010), who point out African myths as meaningful oral texts to understand the internal logic and ways of thinking of these societies. Articulated to Walter Benjamin's concept of experience (1996), to detail aspects related to the meanings of children's culture of African societies, understanding the game as a cultural experience. We also use the contributions of studies in the field of Sociology of Childhood, by Anete Abramowicz, Diana Levcovitz e Tatiane Rodrigues (2009), as well as from Anete Abramowicz e Fabiana Oliveira (2012) and Sônia Kramer (2007), who emphasize the

singularities of the meanings of childhood and child in the most diverse socio-cultural environments, always emphasized by aspects related to social class, gender and race.

## A Myths Collector

The sociologist and writer Reginaldo Prandi was born in Potirendaba, in the countryside of São Paulo. He moved to the state capital in 1964 to study Veterinary Medicine at Universidade de São Paulo (USP). He changed his degree to the field of Sociology, an option that was crucial for his career as a researcher and professor at the same institution. His master's research was presented in 1974, and he received his Ph.D. degree in 1977. Both titles were obtained from the Department of Sociology of the School of Philosophy, Letters and Human Sciences of USP (FFLCH-USP), an area that he joined as a professor in 1976 and where he ended up becoming an associate professor in 1989, with his dissertation on the formation of *Candomblés* in São Paulo.

He retired in 2005, but continued linked to the same department as a senior professor, where he acted as a postgraduate advisor in the postgraduate level. During his academic career, he also worked in the no *Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento* (CEBRAP) [Brazilian Center of Analysis and Planning], and he was one of the founders of the *Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Ciências Sociais* (ANPOCS) [National Association of Post-graduation and Research in Social Sciences], and professor at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo (PUC-SP). In June 2018, he received the title of emeritus professor from Universidade de São Paulo.

In his extensive production, we find 37 publications, distributed among sociological studies, police fiction and Children/youth literature. As a researcher, he focused his investigations in the field of Sociology of Religions, with emphasis on religious traditions of African matrix in Brazil. From his important essay writing, we highlight: *Candomblés de São Paulo: a velha magia na metrópole nova* (Prandi, 1991), a study in which he analyzes the formation of *Candomblés* houses in the metropolitan region of São Paulo; *Mitologia dos orixás* (2001), a compendium of Yoruba mythology, resulting from an extensive ten-year long research, where he combined a vast literature review of Yoruba myths dispersed in studies made by Brazilian researchers and foreign researchers, as well as an extensive experience in field research, in which he managed to collect 42 mythical stories. In total, his work gathers 301 myths – of which 106 originate from Africa, 126 from Brazil and 69 from Cuba. The book is considered the largest and most detailed edition of African and African-American myths already published in a single edition; *Segredos Guardados: orixás na alma brasileira* (2005), a sociological analysis of *Candomblé*, which investigates the formation and permanent transformation of this religion of African matrix in Brazil; *Caminhos de Odú* (1999), edition organized by the author, based on the transcription of a 1928 manuscript, by Agenor Miranda Rocha, a respected *oluwô*<sup>3</sup> from

Nagô-Kêtu tradition in Bahia<sup>4</sup>. The book is considered the richest Brazilian primary source of Yoruba myths. He also published the police novel *Morte nos búzios* (Prandi, 2006), that inaugurates his production in this literary genre.

Agenor Miranda Rocha (1907-2004) was a teacher of Literature and Portuguese at Colégio Pedro II, in Rio de Janeiro, in the decades from 1930 to 1960, and an important fortune-teller of the Nagô saint family in Bahia. As some Afro-Brazilian studies<sup>5</sup> indicate, Casa Branca do Engenho Velho was the first *Candomblé* house of Nagô-Kêtu in Brazil, founded in Bahia by African slaves released and their descendants around 1830. It is the matrix community from which two other *Candomblé* communities from the same lineage subsequently originated: *Terreiro do Gantois* (1849) and *Axé Opô Afonjá* (1910), that together formed the three oldest *Candomblé* houses of the Nagô tradition, to which Agenor Miranda Rocha belonged<sup>6</sup>.

*Caminhos de Odu* (1999) is a notebook written in 1928, which refers to the teachings he received from his *ialorixá* Eugênia Ana dos Santos<sup>7</sup>. In 1997, Agenor Miranda Rocha gave a copy of his notebook to the sociologist Reginaldo Prandi. The idea of publishing was immediate and teacher Agenor not only agreed, but he was willing to participate in the work of editing his book. Prandi says that “[...] the text faithfully reproduces the original manuscript, with its simple and tasty language”, noting that teacher Agenor always said that he sought to write it “[...] in the way the old *Nagô* spoke” (apud Rocha, 2009, p. 15).

In *Os príncipes do destino* (2001), the author’s first book for the children’s public, Prandi (2001b, p. 113) says that “[...] this book is for children, but the tribute is to a 93-year-old man, Agenor Miranda Rocha, perhaps the last living remnant of the princes of Fate”. Reginaldo Prandi, in part of his essay and literary production, devoted himself to translate by writing the African ancestral knowledge, historically disrespected and undervalued by Western Eurocentric knowledge. In his production, it is flagrant the author’s interest in registering the myths and interpreting the cultural practices of the Yoruba cultural legacy in Brazil. This way, he contributes significantly to the memory preservation of this knowledge.

## The Literary Translation of Yoruba Mythology

The sociologist thorough work gave birth to the literate of Yoruba mythology. His trajectory as a researcher and essayist has substantiated the literary translation carried out by the author. In his book *Os príncipes do destino* (2001), as well as in its trilogy *Ifá, o adivinho* (2002), *Xangô, o Trovão* (2003) and *Oxumarê, o arco-íris* (2004), Prandi creates a literature directed to the children’s audience, being faithful to the storylines and the narrative format that we find in the canonical texts of the Yoruba myths, collected by him in his ethnographic studies.

In *Contos e Lendas Afro-Brasileiros: a criação do mundo* (2007), the author assumes a longer narrative structure, closer to the children and

youth novel, to tell the story of Adetutu, a young African woman, who was imprisoned by slave hunters and transported to Brazil on a slave ship. At the beginning of the narrative, the character falls asleep and dreams about the world creation by the orishas and, in the course of the plot, she hopes that *Oxalá* fulfills his mission, she gains *Exu*'s complicity, she is thrilled with *Xangô*'s behavior and gets emotional with *Iemanjá*. From the stories of the African gods who came to Brazil with the enslaved Africans, the text leads the reader to scale the depth of the Atlantic transit of African cultures in diaspora and its importance in the Brazilian cultural formation, in addition to uncover relevant aspects of the Yoruba civilizational complex.

In his most recent work, *Aimó: uma viagem pelo mundo dos orixás* (2017), Prandi describes the adventures of a girl equally born in Africa, who was taken to Brazil to be a slave. However, from the beginning of the narrative the character discovers herself in a strange place, inhabited only by the orishas and spirits who awaited the moment of her rebirth. She had no recollection of her family, or of her name, but she cried because she felt alone and without knowing whom to call for help. So she got the name Aimó, that in the Yoruba language means *the girl that nobody knows who she is*. All she wants is to return to her home world but, to make it possible, Aimó begins a long journey through the mythological times, accompanied by *Exu* and *Ifá*, experiencing many adventures with the orishas. Only then she could acquire the necessary knowledge to make a choice that allowed her to finally come home<sup>8</sup>.

Through his narratives, we approach the orishas – the gods of the Yoruba pantheon, and we can follow the stories of *Olorum*, the Supreme Lord and the creator of orishas, to whom it was assigned the creation and government of *aiê*, the world of men. We also know *orum* – the heaven of the orishas, from which these deities control life and events among humans. The whole of these mythical stories teaches that from the simplest natural phenomena to more complex human activities, everything has the direct interference of the orisha or of several of them.

In this sense, we highlight a trait that is fundamental to approach the Yoruba cosmivision, characterized by the permanent relationship between the world of the living and the orishas, in a constant dynamic between men and gods. This trait is that the deities reveal everything you want to know, and they prescribe through their priests<sup>9</sup>.

Based on these mythical stories, a little of the internal logic of this civilization complex is being unveiled, as well as the knowledge and practices that compose this knowledge of *Ifá*, The God of the Oracle, of knowledge and of divination. He is one of the many gods who inhabit the *orum* and who keeps interfering in the lives of men. *Ifá*, the fortune-teller, represents the wisdom for counseling, is the deity who always knows the best formula for each of us to avoid the attacks of sickness and death, through his priests, the *oluôs*.

The stories of *Ifá* show us mythical characters, like *Exu*, the messenger god and guardian of the crossroads; *Oxalá*, the god of creation and the orisha who created men; *Oxóssi*, the god of hunting and the ori-

sha of plenty; *Ogum*, the god of war, iron, metallurgy and technology; *Xangô*, the god of thunder and justice; *Obá*, the goddess of the river and one of the *Xangô*'s wives; *Iansã* or *Oiá*, the goddess of the rays, winds and storms, besides of being *Xangô*'s wife who accompanies him in the war; *Oxum*, the goddess of freshwater, of gold, fertility and love; lady of vanity, who was the favorite wife of *Xangô*. They tell us about the nature and adventures of the orishas, revealing their powers and weaknesses. These are myths that Brazil inherited from Africa, as Prandi draws attention (2001b p. 113), “[...] they are no longer simple stories of an African people who lived on the other side of the ocean, they are Afro-Brazilian stories, they are Brazilian stories”.

According to the tradition of Yoruba peoples, the *odus* form a mythological *corpus* comprised of 16 black princes, who have as their job to collect and tell stories. In Africa, the *odus* are mythical stories in the form of poems recited by heart by the *babalaô*. In Cuba, the priests of *Ifá* keep the myths of the *odus* written in notebooks kept secret (*pa-taquís*). In Brazil, the poems were forgotten; however, the *odus* have preserved their names and the orishas that are part of the narratives and omens of each of them. This oral literary *corpus* of Yoruba myths constitutes the basis of the Yoruba and Yoruba-descendant thinking and cosmovision in Brazil.

In Africa and Cuba, the Oracle is the prerogative of the *babalaôs*, and in Brazil, where the *babalaôs* became extinct; it is a prerogative of the *babalorixás* and *ialorixás*. Here, little by little the divination practiced in the *Candomblé* in the cowrie shell divination was simplified and the body of myths was disconnected from the divinatory practice, preserving, however, the names of the *odus*, the predictions, and the *ebós* or propitiatory offering, besides the orishas name who were the protagonists of the original stories of each *odu*. The *Orunmilá* himself was being forgotten, and *Exu* starts to occupy the central role in the oracular practice of the cowrie shell divination (Prandi, 2001a p. 18-19).

The myths of *Ifá* are organized in 16 chapters, each subdivided into 16 parts, which comprise a set of 256 stories including all the possibilities of human destinies, allegorized in these narratives that need to be memorized and interpreted by the *babalaôs*. It cannot be forgotten that the writing was not, until very recently, part of the culture of the Yoruba-speaking peoples in the African continent.

For this tradition, the idea of time is not linear, but cyclical and expressed by repetition and the emblematic return of a mythical past. Thus, the events narrated by the myths serve as allegories to interpret the present and guide the future, as narratives that function as models of human experiences. In *Mitologia dos orixás*, Prandi highlights the fact that all this knowledge was given to a fortune-teller named *Orunmilá*, also known as *Ifá*, who have passed it on his followers, the *babalaôs*. “For the old Yoruba, nothing is new, everything that happens

would have happened before. Identifying in the mythical past the event that occurs in the present is the key to the oracular deciphering” (Prandi, 2001a, p. 18).

In the divinatory practices of the African matrix, the *babalaô* needs to find out in which of the chapters is the story that deals with the problems of his consultant. This is because it is believed that the solutions of the problems are in the exact interpretation of the myth. Thus, the priest throws the 16 cowrie shells, or other divination instruments, so that they indicate which is the *odu* and within this, what is the myth you seek. It is thought that *Exu* is the messenger responsible for the communication between the *babalaô* and *Ifá* because he is the one who gives the answer and is responsible for transporting the offerings to the orishas’ world. “This art of divination survives in Africa, among the Yoruba followers of the traditional religion of the orishas and in America, among the participants of the Brazilian *Candomblé* and the Cuban *Santería*” (Prandi, 2001a, p. 18).

For historian Jan Vansina (2010, p. 158), African myths are oral texts that must be listened to and known by heart, “[...] digested internally, as a poem, and carefully examined, in order to learn their many meanings”. The proposed method recommends a slow and meticulous pace for these studies of the texts so that we can engage in their collective representations. The mythological *corpus* of Yoruba oral tradition also represents the collective memory of a society or community, which gains significances and meanings through these narratives. The author indicates that it is necessary to “[...] start in the ways of thinking of oral society, before interpreting its traditions” (Vansina, 2010, p. 158).

In this sense, it is worth remembering the words of the German literary critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin (1996, p. 198), stating that the “[...] experience that passes from person to person is the source to which all the narrators turned to and, among the written narratives, the best are the ones that are less distinguished from the oral histories told by the countless anonymous narrators”.

After this rapid journey through Prandi’s sociological and literary production, we selected three stories from his award-winning book, *Ifá, o adivinho* (2002)<sup>10</sup>, and a set of seven traditional Yoruba myths referring to the children gods *Ibejis*, which are gathered together in *Mitologia dos Orixás* (2001)<sup>11</sup>, with the objective of emphasizing aspects related to the representations about childhood and child in these narratives.

## The Proposal for a Slow and Meticulous Analysis

The option for selecting this set of texts was made considering the possibility that this cutout offers us to verticalize a little further the analysis of traditional Yoruba myths and the children’s narratives proposed by Reginaldo Prandi in his trilogy directed to children’s public. With support in the method proposed by Vansina (2010), we have chosen a slow and meticulous description of these narratives, in search of

ways of thinking about the child and childhood in the traditional Yoruba culture and Yoruba-descendants in Brazil, because the myths and the stories analyzed here intend to underline singularities related to the relationships that children must keep between themselves and with the world.

The traditional Yoruba myths, as well as Prandi's child narratives, often do not denote explicit meanings, but always hide representations and meanings that need to be analyzed. Myths transcend their evident, literal and explicit content. More than that, they always express value and efficacy in social life, which keep a message or encrypted and diffuse teaching. They are revealing aspects of the functioning of the internal logic of the system of thought that these narratives are bearers of.

The traditional Yoruba mythology is not only composed of the orishas myths because there is a huge variety of Yoruba myths starring common men, animals, and elements of nature, in addition to the countless proverbs, *oriquis*<sup>12</sup>, and enchantments that complement the vast Yoruba and Yoruba-descendant cultural heritage (Prandi, 2001a).

The myths of *Ibejis* are meaningful to approach the representations of children and childhood in the Yoruba and Yoruba-descendant culture in Brazil. In these narratives, *Ibejis* are boy and twin gods, who represent the child as a reveler, cunning, creative and naughty being, while childhood is identified with the time of play, discoveries and oneiric inventions.

When analyzing the selected texts, we can observe particular aspects of the civilizational model and the functioning of this traditional Yoruba society, a set of storylines and characters far too representative for our understanding of the Yoruba universe in its specific cultural context.

In the myth *Os Ibejis brincam e põem fogo na casa*, the idea of the child associated with play and mischief is remarkable. The story presents *Egbé* as a proud mother of the twin boys; however, she was always looking over her shoulder, because the children were very naughty and liked to play with fire. "The naughty twins brought the fire home and the fire ignited the home of *Egbé*. His house was thus always in repair, always redone from the ashes, never fully completed, because with a new game, new fire" (Prandi, 2001a, p. 373).

*Egbé* is an orisha considered a kind of female *egungum*<sup>13</sup>, worshiped by women in Ibadan – the third largest city in current Nigeria. The deity is linked to children's health problems, and sugar cane is its favorite attribute. In the language of the Yoruba people, the word *egbé* represents the community, farm, association. For the religious traditions of the Nagô-Kêtu *Candomblé* in Brazil, the term is associated with the notion of community-*terreiro* or *Candomblé* house, also as profound emotion, kindness or heart.

In *Os ibejis são transformados numa estatueta*, the mythical narrative tells the story of the two twin boys as children of *Iemanjá*, who spent the day playing and *Orunmilá* transformed the naughty twins into



wooden statues, to always stay together as “[...] two twins boys playing eternally” (Prandi, 2001a, p. 369). The idea of the child as a reveler and cunning being is in the traditional Yoruba myth *Os ibejis enganam a morte*. In the book *Ifá, o adivinho* (2002), Prandi retells the story with the title *Os gêmeos que fizeram a morte dançar*. The narrative tells that in the old village of *Ifá*, everything was going as usual, when, one day, Death decided to concentrate its harvest there. “Everything started to go wrong. The crops became infertile, the fountains and streams of water dried up, the cattle and all that was breeding animals languished” (Prandi, 2002, p. 26).

Death already enjoyed her great feast, bringing mourning to every house. It was when the twin boys took their magic drum, an instrument they played like no one, and got out looking for death. They found her on a nearby road and the *Ibejis*, then, devised a plan to stop *Icu*, the Death. They split up and one of them went down one of the dangerous trails where *Icu* had set several of his traps. The other one followed his brother hiding in the woods. “The *Ibeji* who went down the trail was playing his little drum. He played with such enthusiasm and mastery that Death was amazed, she didn’t want him to die and warned him about the trap. *Icu* started to dance absolutely thrilled, bewitched by the sound of the boy’s drum” (Prandi, 2001a, p. 376).

When the brother who played was tired, the other one assumed the frenetic rhythm of the drum, without *Icu* noticing. Thus, the brothers changed continually, and the music never stopped. Death danced without taking a break because she could not stop dancing following the irresistible rhythm of the drum. “*Icu* was already exhausted and asked the boy to stop the music for a moment so that she could rest. *Icu* begged, wanted to get some rest. *Icu* no longer endured dancing his gloomy ballet” (Prandi, 2001a, p. 376). That is when the twins proposed a pact. The song would stop, only if Death would compromise to undo and collect all her traps.

*Icu* had no choice, she surrendered. The twins won. That’s how the *Ibejis* saved men and gained fame as very powerful, because no other orisha could win that battle against Death. The *Ibejis* are powerful, but what they really like is to play games (Prandi, 2001a, p. 376-377).

These narratives, in addition to bring us closer to the conceptions of child and childhood in the traditional Yoruba culture, also provide us with information about certain aspects of the functioning of the Yoruba society, as well as it leaves clues related to the Yoruba and Yoruba-descendant civilizational complex in Brazil. Through the analysis of this set of myths, we can see significant aspects that are related to the centrality of community life within the Yoruba culture, which symbolically influenced the formation of the Nagô-Kêtu communities-*terreiro* in Brazil. The Nagô *Candomblé*, as a typical Atlantic historical elaboration, sought to symbolically reproduce the old Yoruba family, in a religious-based institution, in which each of its members, as components of a traditional family, occupy a place well defined in the hierarchy of its

organizational structure, that is, in the different levels of power. Above all, there are *iaolorixá* or *babalorixá*, who is the maximum priestess and high priest of their community. Below there is the son of saint, and son of the same *ialorixá* or *babalorixá* who consider themselves to be brothers of saint. Each one has their collateral relatives, uncles and aunts of saint, nephews of saint, and so on, who eventually consolidated into a family-based religious institution created in Bahia, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by enslaved Africans, released slaves and their descendants.

The community functions as an aggregator core for knowledge transmission. It continuously spreads and recreates, through its internal and external activities, a particular grammar, comprising a hierarchical conformation, a mythology, a cosmology, a complex epistemology of ethical and aesthetic principles materialized in their liturgical practices. It constitutes a detailed set of rules and taboos which, according to the customs of that community-school, it is believed that everything must be learned *with patience and mutual friendship*, a *subtle thought*, that has “[...] a cosmology, a psychology and a theodicy” (Bastide, 2001, p. 24-25)<sup>14</sup>.

The extensive family of saint of Nagô *Candomblé* functions as a community of knowledge – a school. The older generation represents the living memory of tradition and customs, bearer of the knowledge and driving force of circulation and the maintenance of its cultural heritage. Through a network of interpersonal relationships, the community transcends the physical space of the *terreiro*, making the knowledge to circulate in direct contact between generations, “[...] From mouth to ear, from master to disciple” (Hampâté-Bâ, 2010, p. 167).

In this community, it is important to emphasize the centrality of women as parents and caregivers of childhood, allegorically represented in Prandi’s literature in the storylines of the goddess *Euá*, the mysterious. In the story *A fonte que deu de beber aos filhos gêmeos*, we see the *Ibejis* as twin sons of *Euá*, who walked with the mother to the market, to the river to wash the clothes and to the fields to cultivate the yam, because she had no one to leave her children with. “Where she passed, people said: There goes *Euá* with her small twin children” (Prandi, 2002, p. 17).

One day *Euá* went out to get some firewood in the woods, with which she made a fire to cook. She took the children by the hands, and, with the help of the twin boys, made a pack of twigs and very little sticks. They had taken too long to collect that her boys already complained of hunger. *Euá* said to the children: “[...] we are going to go home and soon we are going to eat a really tasty roast yam. The boys felt the mouth salivating” (Prandi, 2002, p. 17). So, the three were walking when *Euá* realized that they were lost. She looked, she was on a trail, another, but she could not find her way home and the boys could not bear the thirst. The twins cried; they no longer had the strength to walk. The woman was desperate, needed to kill the boys’ thirst. She looked up at the sky and then begged *Olorum*, the Supreme Being, to not let her children die. *Olorum* sympathizes of that unfortunate mother:

*Euá* was sitting on the ground with her legs open and her arms stretched out, supporting, on each side of the body, one of the boys. Then the hands and arms of *Euá* were transmuting into the water, they have changed into a source that sprouts out of the ground. Suddenly, the water spurted fresh, crystalline, pure (Prandi, 2002, p. 18).

*Ibejis* saved themselves; they relieved their thirst and gained strength. The fountain continued to spurt and produced a stream of water that invaded the forest, transforming into a river. The twins managed to return to their village and there they told the story of the mother-source, the mother-river.

And since then, that river runs on African soil and until today it is called the *Euá*, the *Euá* River. That is how *Euá*, the mysterious, turned into a river. *Euá* is now the orisha of the river that has her name. *Euá* is the orisha of the fountains. *Euá*, the mysterious, who does not fear Death (Prandi, 2002, p. 18).

By analyzing this set of traditional Yoruba myths and stories retold by Prandi, we can perceive childhood as “[...] an experience that may or may not cross the adults, in the same way that it can, or cannot, cross children” (Abramowicz; Levcovitz Rodrigues, 2009, p. 180). In this sense, it is fundamental to recognize the plurality of childhood in an epistemic perspective that recognizes the diversity in unity. The child is not understood based on a uniform conception of childhood, universal and out of history (Diop, 1964), but as a subject that consists himself within the specific experiences of a certain social, historical and cultural context that “[...] is not linked solely to the age range, the chronology, a psychological stage or a linear, cumulative and gradual temporality, but to the event, to the art, to the unusual, to the untimely”, as a kind of “dis-aging” (Abramowicz; Levcovitz Rodrigues, 2009, p. 180).

For Kramer (2007, p. 15), “[...] childhood, more than an internship, is a category of history: there is a human history because man has history”. Children are social and historical subjects, marked by social diversities and rights holders, who produce cultures and are produced within these cultures; they carry specific marks of their childhoods from their access to imagination and fantasy, to the artistic creation and games, understood as the experiences of each culture.

Children do not form an isolated community, as they are part of a social group, born within a class, ethnicity, where customs, values, habits, social practices and experiences interfere in their actions and meanings that are given to them (Kramer, 2007). Even considering the homogeneity factors among children as groups with similar age characteristics, the factors of heterogeneity should be considered (social class, gender, ethnicity, race, religion, etc.). Thus, the different structural spaces differentiate the children.

The social function of the child that we find in the Yoruba myths and in the stories retold by Prandi is intimately linked to the notion of community and not to the idea of an individual. The subject, in this con-

text, exists according to the society, because in the Yoruba culture, as in other African cultures, “[...] being a child, young, adult or old, is more occupying a position in the social and institutional space than to manifest a given state of maturation” (Ezémbe apud Abramowicz; Oliveira, 2012, p. 57). After searching for nuances concerning the ways of thinking, the child and childhood in the traditional Yoruba and Yoruba-descendants culture in Brazil, components of the narratives studied, we seek to discuss aspects pertinent to perspectives and possibilities for using this literature in school.

### **What is the Importance of this Literature in School?**

Fifteen years after the promulgation of the Law 10639/2003 (Brasil, 2003), which regulated the compulsory teaching of History of Africa and Afro-Brazilian cultures in K-12 education and high schools, the topic continues to offer much resistance in the school environment and the law remains far from being fully enforced. The subject involves complex and central aspects of the elaboration of nationality and Brazilian identity, related to the ways in which African and slave inheritances have left their marks. After more than a decade and a half, many of the arguments alleged by educators and educational managers, related to the lack of teacher training and the absence of quality didactic material for pedagogical work, in our evaluation, are no longer acceptable as rationale for the precariousness of the teaching work, in assuming a more advanced attitude towards the Brazilian ethnic and cultural plurality, in order to overcome epistemic racism in everyday school life.

The children's and youth literary production of Reginaldo Prandi analyzed here is an example of the effort of several authors to disseminate the knowledge produced in the academic scope about African history and Afro-Brazilian cultures, which constituted a successful experience of literary and didactic translation for pedagogical work with children and young people in K-12 education. His works present to the young Brazilian reader the Yoruba deities, the orishas, as literary characters in their narrative storylines. The material is not unique, nor is it configured as an isolated production; on the contrary, it is part of an extensive production that has been developing largely and efficiently in recent years, leveraged by Laws 10639/2003 and 11645/2008 (Brasil, 2003; 2008).

The use of this type of literature in the school is justified in a decolonial and non-Eurocentric perspective of curriculum and school, defined as an intransigent political action in the defense of the right to memory and the history of undervalued peoples and cultures in modern historical process. This requires, increasingly, a reconfiguration of the contents and practices, as well as the conceptual apparatus that guides this new curriculum design, marked by the appreciation of diversity and the fight against racial and epistemic prejudice.

A central notion of this perspective refers to the perception of a premise developed by a group of Latin Americanist intellectuals<sup>15</sup> on

European colonialism in the Americas, Africa and Asia, as a historical process in which “[...] European thought consolidated the humanities as a unique, universal and objective model for the production of knowledge, in addition to disinherit all the epistemologies of the West periphery” (Mignolo, 2005, p. 75).

Although traditional colonialism, however, has been formally terminated, subjective structures, imaginaries, and epistemological colonization have persisted and are still intensely rooted in colonized societies. According to the Puerto Rican philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007), coloniality refers to a pattern of power that emerged as a result of modern colonialism, related to the way the work, knowledge, authority and intersubjective relations are articulated among themselves through the world capitalist market and the idea of race. Thus, although colonialism precedes coloniality, it survives to colonialism.

It remains alive in didactic texts, in the criteria for good academic work, in the culture, in the common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in the aspirations of the subjects and in many other aspects of our modern experience. In this sense, we breathe the coloniality in modernity daily (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 131).

In the same sense, the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (2005) proposes the concept of coloniality of power as a category that refers to the mastery of the other’s imaginary, or its westernization. This undervaluation of non-European human groups and their cultures created what these authors call coloniality of knowledge, understood as the repression of other non-European forms of expertise, thus reducing the cultural and historical legacy of indigenous and African peoples to the primitive and irrational category. For Ramón Grosfoguel (2007, p. 35), European thought never admitted “[...] any other epistemology as a space of production of critical or scientific thought”, disseminating a kind of *epistemic racism*. On one hand, we would have the history of European modernity and, on the other, the muted history of European coloniality. While the first is a history of self-affirmation of the logic and the celebration of the European epistemic emblems, the second is the history of denial and rejection of different modes of rationality and history of colonized peoples and cultures.

For these authors, it is urgent to begin to think from the ruins, the experiences and margins created by the coloniality of power, especially to start recognizing other knowledge in an epistemological horizon built on the basis of analysis and perception of ways of being, thinking and knowing that differentiate themselves from the European paradigm (Mignolo, 2003). This point of view demands the statement of the right to the history of African cultures in diaspora, as well as of Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples in Latin America, thus prioritizing a perspective on epistemological approaches and subjectivities undervalued and excluded in the modern historical process. The proposal differs from postmodern criticism, often only referenced in Western thought. The recognition and perception of other ways of be-

ing, thinking and knowing are fundamental to the analysis of historical experiences marked by coloniality.

This set of concepts and notions, pointed out here, help us in the definition of what Walter Mignolo (2003) calls a *thinking-other* as *decoloniality* expressed in the colonial difference, that is, in a reorganization of the geopolitics of knowledge in two directions: the criticism of the undervaluation from the perspective of the excluded knowledges and the emergence of a new thinking as a new Epistemological modality, constituted based on the experiences and categories suppressed by Westernism and Eurocentrism.

In addition to the originality and pioneering of the work of Prandi, in the panorama of the Brazilian literary production aimed to the children's public, what seems most relevant in the production here analyzed is the decolonial and non-Eurocentric perspective of his approach to Yoruba mythology, opening new possibilities of exploration of topics related to Afro-Brazilian cultures, historically stigmatized in the school curriculum and culture.

## Final Remarks

The analytical effort undertaken in this essay through the set of selected narratives, sought to address the potential of the children's and youth literary production of the author Reginaldo Prandi, as didactic material for the pedagogical work in K-12 education. The teaching of History of Africa and Afro-Brazilian cultures in the school environment can no longer remain divorced from a decolonial perspective of teaching, which recognizes, both in their curricula and in the internal practices of school life, the multiple identities obscured by a nationally, pretentiously homogeneous and exclusive identity.

In our schools, knowledge about Afro-diaspora cultures still remains, to a certain extent, marginalized or stigmatized. The school marked by ethnic-cultural multiplicity makes education a challenge as practice and theory, involving different subjects, agents, agencies and institutions, since it is increasingly urgent that the constitution of a social order based on equality and the respect for differences, for facing the racial and epistemic prejudice prevailing in society, that the affirmative educational policies proposed to us to do more than a decade ago.

Access to knowledge about the history of Africa and Afro-Brazilian cultures helps us to understand the historical and ideological reasons for racial and epistemic prejudice for its overcoming. As heirs of a school that historically always favored Eurocentric content, we now live the urgency of reviewing content and formative topics in our school benches working with History, Geography, Arts, Literature, Philosophy, Mathematics and Music.

We cannot continue teaching knowledge patterns related only to an epistemic and formative matrix, in this case, the European, insisting on disregarding undervalued and excluded cultures in the histori-

cal process of modernity. It is necessary that we are convinced of the relevance of this knowledge in schools, so that we can convince our students about their epistemic importance and their formative function.

In this regard, the children's and youth work of Reginaldo Prandi offers itself as a didactic trail of extraordinary literary and pedagogical value in K-12 education, in the direction of the challenges that the current Brazilian curriculum guidelines impose on us. In this work, the black-African Yoruba mythology shows all its richness of formative possibilities equivalent to any other mythological set of European matrix. Through the texts recreated by Prandi, we find black heroes and characters as protagonists of the stories, making knowledge visible and valuing identities historically undervalued.

His literature presents itself as a tribute against religious prejudice, which is also racial and epistemic prejudice, offering perspectives for interdisciplinary work at school. It evidences elements of African influences in the Brazilian Portuguese language, as well as the importance of orality and mythology as literary works. It also allows unveiling the black aesthetic characteristics of our daily lives, as well as working on aspects of the practices of African matrix divination referring to the way of thinking and the Afro-Brazilian cosmovision. Thus, this literature reveals the Yoruba culture as a cultural complex of fundamental importance for the constitution of an anti-racist and decolonial curriculum, as a foundation of democratic and non-Eurocentric school culture.

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## Notes

- 1 This article is part of the Thematic Section, Childhood and Education of Ethnic-Racial Relations, organized by Renato Nogueira (Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro), Míghian Danae Ferreira Nunes (Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-Brasileira), Luciana Pires Alves (Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro) and Nancy Lamenza Sholl da Silva (Universidade Federal Fluminense).
- 2 The expression refers to the Yoruba-speaking peoples – from the southwestern region of current Nigeria and south-eastern region of the Republic of Benin – who, since the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, already constituted a demographically relevant ethnicity among the African population in Brazil and especially in Bahia. Ethnic identity is not understood here only as a group of fixed signals (origin, biological kinship, language, religion, etc.), but as a historical, dynamic process in which these signs are selected and reworked in contrast with other ethnic identity groups in African matrix.
- 3 *Oluô* – The owner of the secret, the priest, the fortune-teller; the one who possesses the knowledge to interpret the oracle of *Ifá* or the cowrie shell divination. It literally means *pai do segredo* (father of the secret), but also the word could

- be translated as Lord of Knowledge, because it is his duty to learn, preserve and pass on the wide oral knowledge that gives his people the meaning and sense of the world, of life, of the gods and of men (Prandi, 2005).
- 4 Nagô-Kêtu – The term refers especially to the Nagô-Kêtu rite or simply Nagô, an important nation of *Candomblé* in Brazil. The word refers to the Yoruba-speaking peoples.
  - 5 Among other studies, see: Bastide (1971; 2001), Lima (2003; 2010), Rodrigues (2006), Santos (2008) Silveira (2006), Verger (1981; 1987; 2012).
  - 6 Concerning the trajectory of Agenor Miranda Rocha, see Sodré and Lima (1996), Rebouças Filho (1998), and Basso (2016).
  - 7 Eugênia Ana dos Santos (1869-1938) *ialorixá* responsible for the initiation of Agenor Miranda Rocha in Bahia in 1912. Mãe Aninha, as she was known, was born in Salvador on July 13, 1869, in Freguesia de Santo Antônio, beyond Carmo. She was the daughter of Sérgio dos Santos and Lucinda Maria da Conceição, a couple of Africans descended from the *Grúnci* nation, an ethnic group that still inhabits the savannas of northern Ghana and the south of the former Alto-Volta, current Burkina Faso. The priestess was an outstanding black leadership of Bahia and founder of *Axé Opô Afonjá* in Rio de Janeiro in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and in Bahia (1910). She was immortalized in the literary pages of *Capitães da Areia*, of Jorge Amado, as Don'Aninha – protective of Pedro Bala and his companions (Basso, 2016).
  - 8 This literary production was widely recognized and awarded for its scientific and cultural value, receiving from the Sociedade Brasileira para o Progresso da Ciência (SBPC) [Brazilian Society for the Progress of Science] the Érico Vannucci Mendes award for its contribution to the preservation of Brazilian cultural memory, as well as the award of Best Retelling Book from Fundação Nacional do Livro Infantil e Juvenil (FNLIJ) [National Foundation of Children's and Youth Book] with *Ifá, o Adivinho* (2002). *Aimó* (2017) is a fictional work winner of the UNESCO Literacy Prize (Chair 10).
  - 9 On the subject of the permanent relationship between men and their deities in African cultures, see Sweet (2007) and Thornton (2004; 2012).
  - 10 The selected stories of the book are: *O adivinho que escapou da morte* (first story); *A fonte que deu de beber aos filhos gêmeos* (third story); and ultimately *Os gêmeos que fizeram a morte dançar* (fifth story). The book gathers ten stories based on the myths of the Yoruba oral tradition, followed by a final text with the title *Como os orixás vieram para o Brasil* and one more text, that works as a sort of illustrated glossary, *Quem são os nossos personagens, os orixás*, which is at the end of the book and describes the characteristics of the 20 most well-known and worshiped Yoruba deities in Brazil.
  - 11 The mythical stories are in Prandi (2001a), listed in this sequence: 1. *Os Ibejis nascem de Oiá e são criados por Oxum*; 2. *Os Ibejis são transformados numa estatueta*; 3. *Os Ibejis brigam por causa do terceiro irmão*; 4. *Os Ibejis nascem como abicus mandados pelos macacos*; 5. *Os Ibejis brincam e põem fogo na casa*; 6. *Os Ibejis encontram água e salvam a cidade*; 7. *Os Ibejis enganam a morte*.
  - 12 *Oriqui* – Epithet, phrase of praise that speaks of attributes and heroic acts of a certain person, family or orisha.
  - 13 *Egungum* or *Egum* – Ancestor, spirit of dead; some orishas are divinized *eguns*.
  - 14 We emphasize here another text of the French researcher, in which we found this perspective of analysis suggested: Bastide (1981).



15 The group consists of intellectuals of diverse origins and insertions, who seek to establish an epistemological, ethical and political project based on the critical analysis of Western modernity and its historical, sociological and philosophical postulates. Among its central figures, there is the Argentinian philosopher Enrique Dussel, the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, the Puerto Rican semiologist and theoretical Ramón Grosfoguel, the American linguist, settled in Ecuador, Catherine Walsh, the Puerto Rican philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres and the Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar, among others. It is worth noting that this group maintains conversations and activities with the American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein and the Portuguese theorist and intellectual Boaventura de Sousa Santos. The studies produced by the group have contributed to the reflection on topics such as: multiculturalism, interculturality and transdisciplinarity, cultural diversity and ethnic-racial relations in the field of Education, especially in the current contexts of Latin America.

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Childhood, Ethnic Identity and Knowledge of African Matrix in School

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