


### Oogun Àṣẹ\*: Candomblé practices and health care in New York City, USA

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\* Yoruba for “remedies of Axé”

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This article presents the results of an ethnography carried out between 2013 and 2017, which relied on participating observation, interviews and monitoring of the everyday life of three Brazilian *mães de santo* (mothers of saint) who sought to reinvent Candomblé in New York City, USA. The article follows them as they attempt to transpose their religious beliefs and practices to this new, foreign context. It describes their relationship with practitioners who seek health care through the use of plants and prayers during religious rituals and ceremonies.

**Keywords:** Candomblé. Mothers of saint. Religion. Health care practices.

## Introduction

Candomblé is a Brazilian religion originated in Africa, formed by the fusion of religious elements from various enslaved people, which were also influenced by indigenous culture, popular Catholicism and European-derived Spiritism<sup>1</sup>. Its practice is complex, using magical activities with plants, magic dust, sacrifice rituals and refined food and drinks, aiming to maintain the vital force, known as “Axé”<sup>2</sup>, a dynamic energy moving process, which increases in accordance with rituals and offerings given to Orishas.

These ritual practices aim to fulfill earthly existence with well-being, quality of life, physical and mental health and material prosperity. In this case, the priest, called “father” or “mother-of-saint”, plays the main role as, besides the devotees, must serve the clients who seek his magical services, which classifies Candomblé as a way of health care and to seek well-being<sup>3-7</sup>. The health care could be comprehended as an intersubjective relationship, which grows with time and should embrace the treated person’s wishes and needs, besides being concerned with his well-being<sup>8</sup>. Arouca<sup>9</sup>, described working in health care as “affectionate work”, which requires human contact, as cooperation is immanent and, according to Onocko Campos<sup>10</sup>, in the meeting between care givers and care seekers, bodies and affections also meet, and they are both affected. Well-being, could be defined, according to Miranda Sá Jr<sup>11</sup>, as a subjective perspective of feeling well, not showing somatic or psychological suffering, nor personal or social performance loss. It can also be defined as a feeling of overcoming life difficulties.

In the last few years, many authors have been dedicated to describing the continuous journey of Candomblé and its religious elements to different parts of the world and they have demonstrated, in general, the constant transposition of its practices to a new destination<sup>1,2,12-15</sup>. This transposition continues and Candomblé reinvents itself, as it travels the world, including its healing rituals. Observing these journeys, it was decided to start this paper, carried out between 2013 and 2017 in New York City, describing the existence of Candomblé practices in this city, its relationship with that particular urban space and its reinventions, demonstrated by the meetings with three Brazilian mothers-of-saint from “Candomblé Ketu”, whose traditions, mostly, come from Yoruba people.

In this paper, the mothers-of-saints’ sets of strategies of care are discussed, called Ogun Ase, or Axé medicines in Yoruba language, rituals as a way to regain mental and physical health and to provide relieve to their clients or devotees’ discomforts and life difficulties, showing these practices’ peculiarity, when carried out in this specific context in the city of New York, what does not occur the same way when shifted from its usual context in Brazil and, particularly, presents differences originated from interaction with the three mothers-of-saint, who have their unique backgrounds in this new environment.

## Method

This article is based on the results of a research on Candomblé practices in New York city, through participating observation, interviews and monitoring the everyday

life of three Candomblé Ketu mothers-of-saint, originated from Yoruba culture. The participating observation is broadly applied in researches on Candomblé, as this is an initiatory religion, where most of its functional elements are secret. Therefore, an “outsider” will hardly have access to these elements if he doesn’t become a member. Joining Candomblé results in a methodologic issue to the researcher, as once he is immersed into the religion, at first, because of his scientific interests, he ends up “bewitched” by the religion, as quoted by anthropologist Stefania Capone<sup>13</sup>, an obvious consequence of the participating observation method. What really happens is a mixture of “being witted” and “letting to be witted”, building, as highlighted by Favret-Saada<sup>16</sup>, the experience of “being affected” as a way to experiment the effects of a particular communication network on his own.

In this case, as anthropological literature reading on Candomblé became more and more often, a closer approach to this religion occurred. The interest in studying Candomblé influenced me, deeply, to join the religion and resulted in my initiation during the execution of the research project. Candomblé initiation is a process where the person remains reclusive for a period of twenty-one days, submitted to various secret rituals what is characterized as rebirth to a religious life dedicated to Orisha.<sup>2</sup> To be part of it, at first, seemed to facilitate the researcher’s access to the field, once he had some knowledge regarding its “language”. However, as far as he was immersed into the field, he realized language was only a small facilitating part, but not its wholeness, as each “priestess” had her own secrets, both in the religious aspect as in the topics related to religious practices in a foreign country.

The fieldwork was carried out between January 2013 and February 2017, characterized by many encounters with three important Brazilian mothers-of-saint, who practice or practiced Candomblé rituals in New York City. In the four years of research, there had been many trips to New York and Salvador, to arrange encounters and talks with these mothers-of-saint and other interlocutors. Although it was not possible to remain long periods of time in New York City, due to my psychiatrist doctor’s duties, the meeting with the mothers-of-saint were frequent and intense. In every new encounter, which usually lasted many hours, new information and knowledge emerged

## Results

The purpose of this article was to analyze the paths of the mothers-of-saint’s care for their clients in New York City, pointing out convergences and divergences between these practices compared to the ones carried out in Brazil. Although I had been informed of the existence of other priests in New York, it was not possible to find them during the course of this article. Thus, most of the knowledge highlighted in this article come from intense encounters with these three mothers-of-saint, who are introduced as follow:

## Regina, Pimpa and Bárbara, *Àwọn Ìyá Àṣẹ*, or the Axé Ladies in the Big Apple

The three mothers-of-saint arrived in New York City in the mid-1980s, bringing with them their knowledge, cowrie-shells, magic tools and “Axé”. Thus, when these women arrived in New York City, they also carried Axé with them, and kept on practicing the religion in the new city, reinventing its practices according to their needs and possibilities.

Regina was the first mother-of-saint to practice Candomblé in New York City, that is known, even before starting this research. This “curious” information was so remarkable that it raised my interest in studying this reality deeply. During frequent trips to Salvador, a friend of mine has told me Regina used to travel to New York City every year and she used to stay there for about six months, during the hot seasons, and the rest of the year she used to stay in Salvador, when various encounters between her and the researcher occurred. She is 79 years of age and it has been fifty years since her initiation process, she keeps on disseminating Axé, seeing devotees and prescribing spiritual treatment till current days.

Bárbara is 56 years-old and she has been living in New York City for over thirty years. Through a Brazilian friend of mine, who lived for a few years in New York City as an illegal immigrant, I met Bárbara. Bárbara began her spiritual life attending to Umbanda sacred places, an African-originated religion, characterized by worship services to Orishas, associated with the presence of spiritual guides, such as “Pretos Velhos, Caboclos, Erês, Pombagiras and Exus”, who would meet the devotees. Although her first contact with Umbanda was in Niterói, her hometown, she only developed her Umbanda mediumship when she was already in New York City. She was initiated into Candomblé few years later in Rio de Janeiro. She reads cowrie-shells and gives prescriptions through card games. Not as often, she performs Candomblé ceremonies and she keeps her Umbanda practices, organizing parties to “Pretos Velhos, Caboclos, Erês, Pombagiras and Exus”.

Pimpa was officially the first mother-of-saint to arrive in New York City. Reaching Pimpa was possible through my connection with Stefania Capone, in my first meeting with her in Rio de Janeiro in 2015, during her stay in Brazil, due to the fact she is one of the major researchers in African originated religions in the world. The brief and meaningful meeting happened in 2015, in her place, in São Paulo. She was seventy years-old, and she suffered from terminal cancer. As she said that day, her condition was extremely serious. She passed away three months after the meeting. She taught various Candomblé rituals to Cubans and Afro-Americans, which were unknown or not performed in Santería – a Central America religion of African origins – and she got very close to *santeros*, name given to the priests of this religion. She continued to perform her mother-of-saint practices with them.

Regina, Bárbara and Pimpa, despite their geographic and sociocultural differences, had convergent knowledge regarding Candomblé, even though they had been initiated by different fathers-of-saint, in their hometowns. It had been noticed that, although many of their practices differ from one another, some elements, which will be presented next, are constant and fundamental in their practices.

## Cowrie-shells divination

Cowrie-shells divination is an oracular system which must be performed by a Candomblé father or mother-of-saint and from its outcome, it will be determined the treated person's current situation, his paths, his spiritual, energetic, health, financial and relationship problems, and who is the Orisha who will lead the person's head, called "saint-of-head", leading aspects such as personality, paths, destinies and even physical features<sup>17</sup>.

Cowrie-shells reading itself has therapeutic effects. It is the moment to figure out difficulties, allowing an interpretation through the eyes of religion and to offer words of comfort and counseling. Diseases, sleep disturbances, allergies, arguments, are, in most cases, considered to be originated from imbalances that must be resolved with offerings to Orishas, showers, cleansing or they can also suggest that Orisha is "demanding the head", in other words, demanding that person's initiation.

The mothers-of-saint have a large amount of knowledge regarding showers, herbs, cleansing and incenses, and, not rarely, guide their followers through these rituals, according to the type of difficulty they are dealing with. However, even though there is an accumulated knowledge from past experiences, the cowrie-shells must be always read, specially, for Candomblé rituals, because the Orishas' rites and needs for each client are unique. And, through cowrie-shells divination, Orisha will say what he wishes, which herbs or products will be used for that person.

## Magical prescriptions

Prescriptions to rituals to be carried out emerge from cowrie-shells divination, in other words, the moment of the treatment itself. It's very common that fathers and mothers-of-saint have, besides the cowrie-shells reading, a notebook to write down prescriptions to their clients. Herbs, grains, magic dust, showers, incenses, "amulets", "collars", cloths, animals, drinks and an infinity of products that can be used.

Bahia<sup>12</sup>, emphasizes, in the literature on Candomblé proliferation, the religion's plastic and highly flexible capability to adapt to different societies and contexts, such as in Latin America<sup>18,19</sup>, Portugal<sup>15</sup>, France and Germany<sup>12</sup> as in other parts of the globe. During the bibliographic research, it was possible to notice, although there had been stories of Candomblé practices in the United States<sup>13</sup>, there hasn't been found any study that described in detail how these practices occurred. Regarding voodoo, McCarthy Brown<sup>20</sup> reinforces Mama Lola's role, a Voodoo priestess, another religion of African origins, as an important way to maintain religiosity among Haitian immigrants in New York City.

This plasticity and flexibility do not mean, according to Bahia<sup>12</sup>, the religion hybridity and transnationalization do not have problems nor barriers in their new national context. Constant reinventions implemented by the mothers-of-saint ensures this religion and its practices to remain in this new national environment, which consists of an elaborative process inside the diverse setting of the new place, politically as much as symbolically<sup>19</sup>. In this article, the three priestesses explained that, in the beginning, it was very hard to find the right products, such as leaves, seeds and magic dust used in the rituals and, in a lot of occasions, they had to think of new strategies, for example, the use of dry leaves instead of fresh leaves, or even freezing plants which



were difficult to be found, because they were not local plants or they were unavailable during winter.

Bárbara explained the constant process of replacing products, based on checking the available literature on Candomblé, summed up to her years of experience as a mother-of-saint and successful results achieved. Unlike Pimpa and Regina, Bárbara expressed a bigger concern, not only regarding its positive outcomes, but, being careful to avoid unwanted side effects, in addition to maintain a trustworthy relationship with her devotees and clients:

The replacement exists, it is a religion with great power of adaptation, and you can create strategies. You try a new experiment and it works, but you cannot tell the person that herb is not available here, and you are going to use another one, as it will seem unreliable, but the desired outcome will occur. (Bárbara)

This way, it is possible to learn that, such as in this specific context of the mothers-of-saint in New York City as in other places where Candomblé goes to and settles in, magical prescriptions are recreated, according to the availability of necessary products, culminating a process that involves creativity and knowledge, besides having to constantly negotiate with Orisha himself, who will authorize these new magical recipes.

There are two very specific types of prescriptions in Candomblé rituals, which are highly used by Brazilian priests, and are also used by these three mothers-of-saint in New York City: “ebó” and “bori”. “Ebó” is a ritual to cleanse the person and to enhance positive energies. Depending on which type of Ebó is prescribed, food and drinks, objects and animals are rubbed against their bodies and then disposed, in other words, they are left outside the place the ritual was performed.

“Bori”, which means “giving food to the head” in Yoruba, embraces food offering, usually white and unseasoned food, such as rice, sweet corn pudding, bread, fish and “manjar” (custard pudding), offered to Orishas, Yemanjá and Oxala, because they are considered to play major roles in mental sanity.

This ritual, at first, aims to prepare the head to receive Orisha at the time of initiation, but, in most cases, it’s also performed to bring calmness and serenity to the treated person. Pimpa was the first mother-of-saint to perform a “Bori” in New York City, moreover, on some Santeria priests, and according to her, either they were not aware of the ritual itself or they didn’t perform them properly.

### **Who seeks Candomblé in New York City?**

The three mothers-of-saint point out that the clientele was composed of, mostly, Brazilians, but also Americans, Hispanics and Afro-Americans, from different social levels, who also had health insurance. Therefore, seeking Candomblé services is a choice, a health care strategy and a sought for physical, spiritual and material well-being.

They described very convergent motivations for seeking religious services: resolution of health, financial and relationship problems, emotional or psychological conflicts relieve, spiritual or energy balance. There were a lot of people who had

previous contact with Candomblé, or other African-derived religions, such as Umbanda, Santería or Ifá cults (a ritual offered to Orishas brought by Nigerians, recently), as a way to confirm or amend what it had been done previously, “incorrect” or “incomplete”. They share the opinion there is a need, from people who live in New York City, to be in contact with spirituality and Candomblé, believed by Hispanics and Afro-Americans, to be the most reliable source of traditions originated from Africa, which fade away during slavery and colonization.

Pimpa, Regina and Bárbara share the opinion their clients’ sought for Candomblé is, in most cases, motivated by the presence of signs of mental illness. The head, or Ori, is considered our consciousness headquarters, and for this reason, the main connecting point to Orisha. The head must be taken care of to provide a fulfilled life. Bárbara also mentioned that mental disturbances may be caused by obsessions, in other words, are caused by the presence of obsessor spirits, whose influence could be eliminated with Ebós rituals and other cleansing methods:

I notice there is a connection between religion and mental health. When I was younger, I used to read Kardec and about obsessions, but it was when I started to attend Umbanda rituals that I met extremely disturbed people who became well after being treated. (Bárbara)

Bárbara, unlike the other two, besides the cowrie-shells divination practice, also preserves her reverence for Umbanda “guides”, who assist her through spirit possession. She emphasizes “Preto Velho” spirit possession who are known in Umbanda practices for being full of wisdom and patience, besides his vast knowledge in praying, blessing and the use of herbs, to cure diseases and disturbances. However, she also assists devotees through other guides, such as “caboclos”, “erês”, “exus” and “pombagiras”<sup>21</sup>.

From the first consultation and after the prescribed treatments are done, if the person succeeds in accomplishing their wishes, they will become a loyal client to the mother-of-saint. The three priestesses described that, in many cases, they end up becoming friends with the people who seek them and, many of them, remain clients for many years. It was possible to talk to some of these people who were seeking these treatments and services, and, in general, they emphasize their availability to help them to solve problems they were facing, their good will, capacity of listening to them, and their huge faith.

### The need of initiation

Pimpa, Regina and Bárbara have different strategies regarding the right time to initiate a person in Candomblé. It is said that Orisha “wants the head” and this desire is perceived, not rarely, through sickening and misfortunes, which lead the person to seek for doctors and health services, unsuccessfully, resulting in the encounter with the priestess who will unveil the Orishas’ wishes.

Pimpa said she conducted some clients to be initiated in Brazil, because, according to her, there was no way to do the initiation, somehow, in New York City, as it is done in Brazil, due to the lack of a sacred place – the “terreiro” (a place of worship), and

other barriers such as to perform rituals in public places and to dispose used materials, besides the shortage of materials:

I did it, “ebó”, I played. I initiated 3 “iaôs” (initiated), but I brought them to Brazil to do so. I believe, personally, to be impossible to have a proper “house” there (New York). A “house”, as it should be, is very difficult to have. I wanted to bring them to my home, to “fazer santo”, I brought a girl to Zé Flávio’s house and I was her little mother. The other ones I only did it because they insisted. “I want you”. Let’s go to Brazil then. Because you have the proper plants there, we are short of a lot of things. (Pimpa)

Bárbara also considered impossible to perform initiating rituals in the city, for the same reasons pointed out by Pimpa. More than that, Bárbara considers herself as a “path carer and not a head carer”. She reports, in those cases, she oriented the person to look for a sacred place in Brazil to do the initiating process: “In other words, everything changes. But I don’t know how an “iaô” is done over here. I mean, you may be able to do it, but with many changes” (Bárbara).

Regina, in this matter, presented herself to be more “daring”. As mentioned previously, she initiated a lot of people at the same time in a rented house located on a beach close to New York City, and she was about to initiate another big group in California. She described some parts of this complex journey:

Listen, my son, a friend of mine, who is a mother-of-saint and lives in New York City, rented a beach house close to New York City. It was a desert beach. We “made a boat” (name given to the process of initiation) with 13 “iôs”. We manage to collect everything there, herbs, magic dust, seeds and even animals. Surely, we had restrictions, we couldn’t be too loud, we performed the rituals during the day not to disturb the neighborhood. It was amazing, but it’s very time consuming, as there weren’t a lot of people to help. (Regina)

In the context of the need of an initiation process, conduct divergences between the mothers-of-saint can, on one hand, be originated from the knowledge learned from their priests, and their native houses-of-saint (“terreiros”); on the other hand, from their life stories, their different ways of adapting to a new space, results in particular methods of elaboration and reinvention of their religious practices. Bahia<sup>12</sup>, while studying Afro-Brazilian religion transnationalizations and their adaptations, exchanges and proximity to European context, mostly in Portugal and Germany, demonstrates that practice divergences and perspectives, not only in the initiation process, but many other practices related to religion, also emerge in these new sceneries.

According to the author, there is a sought for legitimacy of the practices when Brazil is associated as the official or original place of Candomblé. In this article, we notice it happens to Pimpa and Bárbara, as they mention they do not have any basic elements, physical space, a more complete structure like in “terreiros” to perform an initiation process, which would result in an incomplete or “not accepted” process by the Orisha. It is interesting to note they legitimate other performed rituals, in most cases with many replacements, such as happens in “Bori” and “Ebó”, however,





at the same time, they consider impossible to perform the initiating process outside Brazil. Regina, when performing the initiation process in New York City, with all her elements and many initiated people, offers an important counterpoint to the other two mothers-of-saints' opinions, explaining that perhaps this "impossibility" says more about fear and insecurity from who leads than the Orishas' wishes themselves.

## Discussion

The research on Candomblé practices in New York City, has shown that many elements change, get transposed or merge with other religious and cultural influences. In every new place, historic context and different spaces, however its entry will occur in a singular way, transposing its practices, rewriting its concepts, reinventing its meanings<sup>22</sup>. However, no matter how much Candomblé reinvents itself, becoming already modified in new cultural landscapes, the perception of the existence and the importance of Axé remains unchanged for being, according to Elbein dos Santos<sup>23</sup>, the vital force to sustain the world and directs the cosmovision of African influenced religions.

Candomblé reinvention in this new scenery, as a typical process of religious transnationalization, leave us with an image resulted from ranges of culture or ethnical "fringes" which will stablish new connections and heterogeneities, formerly, absent. By analyzing each mother-of-saint's insertion into New York City, it's possible to perceive that, through this process, while practice reinventions occur, they will also incorporate new believing systems, in an intense dialog with native elements, either nationals or brought by other cultures<sup>24,25</sup>.

Going through Regina, Pimpa and Bárbara's memories, it was possible to follow the steps of their itineraries, whose personal motivations merge with a shared understanding that their journeys were determined by their Orishas' decisions and wishes. Their material and cultural backgrounds, even though vary, had Axé in common, planted and cultivated in their origins, brought and transposed to New York City. It's for this reason they were called *Àwọ̀n Ìyá Àṣẹ*, the Axé ladies in the Big Apple. According to Prandi<sup>21</sup>, "You have Axé, you use it, you wear it off, it restores, it accumulates. Axé is the origin, it's the roots brought by ancestors". It is the best way to balance health and well-being, because, for Candomblé, diseases do not have only physical causes, in the contrary, they are consequences of an Axé imbalance process<sup>21</sup>. which can be seen through cowrie-shells divination, the basis of building a caring relationship, from this therapeutic encounter, not coincidentally called consultation. In every encounter with the three mothers-of-saint, this practice was emphasized in their words: "a client came to have a consultation with me", "the cowrie-shells divination suggested he needed to do a "Ebó", and so on.

Even though the explanations of why they seek magical services are, apparently, tangible, such as health problems, financial struggles and even relationship issues, and even the solutions offered by religious practices seem tangible too, through the prescriptions of showers, cleansing, dusts and offerings, there is an implicit subjective perspective in this sought that, not rarely, differs from the biological schematic model proposed by contemporary medicine, with its noticed organizational bias. Taking in consideration the human need to appreciate subjectivism to seek solutions to problems



and conflicts of various types, these priestesses' ritual practices are considered a method of health care, in accordance with Arouca's way of think, who named this type of care as "affectionate work", due to the fact it will affect the care giver and the person who is being taken care of.

The cowrie-shells divination can be a therapeutic meeting on its own, because it has elements that might influence positively the person's subjectivity, firstly, for being an encounter with someone endowed with priestly duties, who is believed to have vast experience and wisdom, therefore, an encounter fulfilled with communicative elements, social interactions and comforting feelings; secondly, for its cathartic aspect by allowing anguish or suffering to be exposed, and, thirdly, for decoding the problem, as it has been said previously, through Candomblé's complex system of meanings. It is possible this transformation is enough to that person who seeks care, but, in many cases, it is necessary to perform other rituals to accomplish the desired outcome, because, as Pinezi<sup>26</sup>, Mandarino and Gomberg<sup>27</sup> emphasized, the supernatural primacy is the label of this therapeutic process and the recommendations originated by cowrie-shells divination must be respected.

Bárbara, Pimpa and Regina, said that it was harder in the past to find most of the products than it is nowadays, in New York City, or even with traders in Miami, because of its abundance of Santería in that region. On the other hand, they mentioned that, when a certain product is not found, it won't stop the ritual service from happening and they rely on the premise that "Orisha has wisdom" and he will understand the lack of a specific element or its replacement for a similar one.

The premise of Orisha's wisdom is not only related to materials replacement, for example, replacing a leaf for another; they can be even more complex, as simplifying or exchanging rituals, or even using a plant's sap, named "vegetal blood", instead of an animal sacrifice. This process does not occur automatically or in a casual way. Through cowrie-shells divination or another substitute oracular system, usually using "Obi" (kola nut) or 'Alubosa' ("alobassa" or onion), sliced in four pieces and thrown to a surface, the same way the cowrie-shells divination is done, Orisha, will determine if the replacement is accepted or not. Therefore, in the healing rituals performed in New York City, every exchange, replacement or reinvention are not done aleatorily. It is always based on previous knowledge, taught in native sacred places or conveyed by older leaders or, as related by Bárbara, originated by writings, including researches in Anthropology and, in the absence of these type of references, contacting Orishas, through the oracular system. Therefore, regarding permission to reinvent Candomblé in every new context, it is not about "self-permission", but, a real permission given by Orisha, inside the system of meanings. Besides having permission, the priestesses also relies on a "double-checking" system, contacting once again the oracular system after every ritual is done, as a way of making sure if it was accepted or, as it is commonly said, if Orisha was "satisfied".

There is another method, even a more subjective one, to evaluate the rituals efficiency: the result achieved, or so called "answer" given by Orisha to the ritual, to the offering, to its realization. The mothers-of-saint share an assurance that their practices are in accordance with Orishas' wishes and orders, from checking if their wishes and their client's wishes are being satisfied, or at least they feel flourishing and fulfilled, having the feeling of overcoming the difficulties ahead.



Bárbara largely differs herself from Pimpa and Regina regarding her practices in two main aspects. Firstly, she is the only mother-of-saint who owns a specific space to read cowrie-shells, a small studio located on the ground floor where she lives and a basement where she keeps her saints and where Candomblé and Umbanda gatherings take place. Secondly, she continues to pray to Umbanda entities, the “guides”, who give spiritual advices during the gatherings throughout the year. These consultations, in a way, are a way to access the clients and prayers’ distresses, including, prescription of showers, incenses and some other rituals to cure their uneasiness. Bárbara’s relationship with Umbanda is justified for being connected to the beginning of her spiritual development, but also, according to her, because of the mixture of Candomblé and Umbanda in the city of New York enables people’s access to simpler spiritual treatments, as Candomblé has more complex rituals, therefore, harder to be done and comprehended.

In this case, the need of having a specific place to perform Candomblé was not considered essential to them, only regarding its making, opinions differ. Generally, the priestesses share the opinion that initiation or “feitura” is not the final path, or it really is not necessary to every person who seeks their services; it seems most people seek help to deal with, in a more comfortable way, daily life difficulties, and only in a few cases, the initiation will be recommended, when it is really necessary. Following this logic, the mothers-of-saint seem to be more similar to African “Babalawo”, constantly moving around and travelling, from home to home, from client to client, carrying oracles and magical tools with them than to a typical Brazilian priest who owns a house and performs most of the rituals in this place.

In conclusion, the research experience of the rituals practiced by these priestesses in New York City, seems to clarify its importance as healing agents for a population who is not only consisted of Brazilian immigrants, but also, Americans, Hispanics and Afro descendants who see, in the Candomblé practices and the mothers-of-saint’s presences, a more powerful return to the African ritual traditions. Considering these women’s roles as healing agents, influencing their clients’ lives in different levels of complexity, since cowrie-shells divination, counseling as a sort of therapy, the talking and small rituals as showers, the use of incenses and potions, to more complex rituals, such as “ebós” and “boris” and even resulting in initiation rituals, it is clear the sought for these therapies has the objective of achieving good health, well-being and relieve to imbalances, anguish and suffering.

Arriving in a foreign land, these priestesses continue to build, step by step over the years, a *praxis* that, in many cases, differ from the Brazilian Candomblé references, getting to a point they are considered, through more traditional perspective, to distort the religion itself and accused of not practicing the “true Candomblé”. However, in a closer approach, their reinventions become, slowly, a sort of consolidation, rooting, and they seem to contribute genuinely to the religion expansion in new territories. As, on one hand, the constant needed changes seem to get more and more distant to the rituals, there is, among them, genuine concern to satisfy Orisha’s plans, specially, in relation to maintaining Axé as a vital force.

## Authors' contribution

All authors participated actively along all manuscript elaboration steps.

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To the mothers-of-saint – Pimpa, Regina and Bárbara, who spared their time telling me their stories.

To all “people-of-saint”.

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