

Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

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Edited by Bron Taylor

Orixá Iroko

I went to Salvador de Bahia to learn about a tree, a tree that grows not up but down, a sacred tree. My interest in sacred trees has developed out of a desire to explore the cultures and traditions of people who still live with, and relate to, nature in a spiritual way. This tree, the gameleira, is sacred to the Candomblé tradition, a prominent religion in northeastern Brazil. I had not been in Brazil long when an invitation came to attend a ceremony for the orixá Iroko that manifests through the gameleira tree. It was to be held at a terreiro, a house of Candomblé, on the outskirts of the city of Salvador. That evening I stepped onto the leaf-strewn floor of the terreiro and watched a Candomblé ceremony unfold. As the participants and attendees filtered into the room, this unfamiliar place filled with an air of warmth and kindness. When the rhythm of the drums picked up and the ceremony began, I understood immediately that even if what I witnessed that night passed outside the realm of my usual reality, the experience would be a positive one.

Through the rest of the evening and in fact throughout my stay in Bahia, the presence of this kindness and that rhythm pervaded my experiences. That evening I listened to the drummers and their complex change of rhythm. I watched the swirl and sway of the dancers, barefeet below dresses and drapes of yards and yards of beautiful material, feet bared and in contact with the Earth. I felt the building of energy as the pai de santo (the spiritual leader of the terreiro) sang his call and the dancers responded as they moved around and

around the room. This energy, the force in Candomblé they call axé, was everywhere.

Understanding Candomblé is all about understanding what axé is and how it is accessed to maintain right relationships within one's entire universe—person to person, person to community, person to nature, starting with the conduit of all these relationships: person to orixá. While the structure of Candomblé with its pantheon of orixá, associated entities and rituals can seem very complex, its central concept, axé, is not. Axé is the vital force that exists in all things; it animates all things. It is the energy of "being." This vital force is found everywhere, but in everything it is not the same. Each different type of energy has a different lesson. For instance, every plant has axé, and understanding the different healing properties of each plant is to understand the axé. Leaves and plants are of tremendous importance in Candomblé. They are used to heal the physical body but there is also a plant-orixá association that comes into play in the proper maintaining of the spiritual self. When there is a disruption, an imbalance spiritually or physically, what has been disturbed, displaced or disregarded needs to be brought back into balance. The orixá are necessary to help human beings access the forces around them.

Asking questions and questioning a belief system are two different things—but the first is sometimes mistaken for the last. People are often sensitive about discussing religious beliefs. The day after the ceremony I interviewed Pai Valtinho, the pai de santo of the terreiro Axé Ibá Faromin. I thought my inquiries into this religion would not go easy but I

was wrong. Although Pai Valtinho noticeably stiffened when the word “interview” came up, his whole persona changed when it was explained that I was interested in religions that have a strong relationship to nature. What I learned quickly in my conversation with Pai Valtinho was that all orixá are associated with elements of nature. Each orixá has different characteristics associated with an elemental force. These forces have different lessons to teach, and each can help an individual in need of guidance in a different way.

It is important to pay attention to these forces, Mãe Detinha instructed me. “It is important to keep your two feet in contact with the earth,” she looked at me intently, “feel the earth.” We were sitting in one of the houses incorporated in the compound of the terreiro Axé Opô Afonjá, one of the older terreiros in Salvador. It was founded in 1910 and now sits in a beautiful spot on a small hilltop in the district of São Gonçalo. The compound is not just a terreiro, but a school where they educate children from the local community. Aside from their lessons, the children learn the Yoruba language and they learn about Candomblé. In the compound each orixá has a small house or temple, freshly painted in the colors associated with that orixá. All except Iroko, the place of Iroko is a huge tree, the gameleira. The tree has an Oja tied around it, the same wrap of white material that is worn by the human initiates of the orixá. Mãe Detinha made sure I understood that not all gameleiras were sacred. They do not venerate the tree as a tree but as a vehicle for the manifestation of the sacred. Likewise, when an orixá manifests through an initiate, that person does not become a deity, just a conduit for a

sacred force.

To try to explain or commit to paper what any of the orixá represent is to enter into a situation where a thousand asides would not quite cover the variations of language, the variations in Candomblé traditions, the variations that continually evolve in a culture of oral traditions. After reading the field-work of many anthropologists, all with varying descriptions of Candomblé, the orixás, their characteristics and the practices associated with each, I understood exactly what Pai Valtinho meant when he said to me at our meeting – “I can only tell you what I know.” The variations in myth and the mutations of the orixá might cause confusion to those outside the religion but this complexity has much to do with the room this religion gives to adaptability, progression and the changing reality of its followers and their oral tradition. What does not change, is the basic tenet of maintaining a “right relationship” with one’s world, and the concept of axé, these are a constant. In regards to Iroko the constant amid the varying details and descriptions seems to be that Iroko is time universal.

Mãe Detinha addressed my confusion regarding Iroko sometimes being referred to as Loko or Tempo in different traditions. She explained that Iroko, Loko and Tempo are really the same orixá, their identity only slightly different, as human beings are one from another, but the same as all humans are the same. Iroko holds the awareness of each person’s destiny, understands the justice in destiny, sees what is not seeable on a human scale. Iroko represents, so to speak, the “big picture.” To look to Iroko for guidance one must

understand that the resolution that comes might not be the one sought but it will indeed be the correct unfolding of one's destiny. Pai Valtinho explained to me that the force of Iroko, or any orixá, is not positive or negative. How someone reacts to that force, however, can result in a negative outcome if that person disregards the axé of their orixá, because in doing so that person is acting against his or her own true nature.

The tree of Iroko is never planted. A terreiro can be built around or near an existing gameleira, but Iroko is not brought to a place chosen for it – destiny places this tree. Destiny is to be respected. The telling of the origin myth of Iroko will vary in detail but the premise is the same. Iroko did not originate from the earth but started life as a seed dropped from the sky; Iroko grew from the heavens down to the earth. Mãe Detinho, after telling me her idea of the story, explained that the gameleira does, in fact, grow not up but down. The gameleira is what is called a strangler fig. A strangler fig usually sprouts in another tree as an epiphytic vine. As it grows it often encloses the host tree with its roots, ceasing the growth of the tree or eventually killing it. Wherever it germinates, whether in another tree, on a ledge or atop a human-made structure, the roots will search for the earth and keep growing downward until they reach the ground. Once rooted, affixed to the earth, the tree will proceed in its growth upward, often becoming a rather massive and beautiful tree.

There are endless lessons to be found in nature, and the orixá's representation of these forces is a way to access these lessons. The gameleira, like nature as a whole is powerful,

destructive, though at the same time benign and life giving: both predictable and unpredictable, constant and yet never the same. In looking to the wisdom of Iroko or one of the many other orixá, the emotional impact the natural forces have on us as human beings becomes an everyday awareness. There is Ossain who is associated with leaves, herbs and healing; Xango, fire, justice, the warrior; Iansã, wind and storms, strength; Oxum, fresh waters, beauty/vanity; Iemanjá, the ocean, motherhood. Acknowledging this energy, this axé, spiritually integrates us into our world, our surroundings, instead of separating us from them.

On one of my last days in Bahia I attended a program at the terreiro Axé Opô Afonjá that brought together people from other Candomblé terreiros around Bahia. One man, in expressing the importance that Candomblé held for him, ended his testimony with a word of caution saying "If we destroy our forests, pollute our waters, there can be no Candomblé." In this statement the understanding of what is at stake, what is to be lost in a spiritual way, is strong. No matter who our god or gods are, this valuation of nature in a spiritual sense, this emotional connection, might be what is lacking for those on this planet who do not take seriously the more pragmatic lesson of nature.

The lessons of science are not sinking in; we know that we cannot survive as a species unless we still have oxygen to breathe, untainted soil to till and clean water to drink, yet, being fully aware of this, we continue to do damage to our only life-support system. It is possible that the lack of emotional connection to the rest of nature, as Carl

Jung suggests in *A Man and his Symbols*, that causes us to feel lost in the cosmos will lead us to being lost *to* the cosmos – permanently. Or perhaps there will come a moment in time when nature once again becomes sacred to us all and our spirituality brings us back to being one entity, showing us how to have a right relationship with our surroundings, with our community, with one another.

Jane Coffey



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