

From Umbanda to Evangelicalism - A look behind Brazil's urban religious movements through my family's life story

Trigger warning: Homophobic statements

Introduction

When Berlins patronizing clouds start to lift their gray curtain over the city, when my skin craves for the warmth of the sun, I find myself deliberately playing music that fits a certain criterium. For example, the song „Não Identificado” from the Brazilian icon Gal Cost. Listening to her soft voice appear, after a psychedelic beginning reminding me of a dystopia, I get overcome by a special sensation, melting physically and mentally away with her voice, oozing at following beginning lines¹:

Eu vou fazer uma canção pra ela; uma canção singela, brasileira

Para lancar depois do carnaval

Eu vou fazer um iê-iê-iê romântico

I'll write her a song; A simple song, a Brazilian one

To be released after this Carnival

I'll write a romantic yé-yé

I receive a very similar feeling with Jorge Ben Jorge's samba „Pais Tropical”

Moro num país tropical, abençoado por Deus

E bonito por natureza (mas que beleza)

I live in a tropical country, blessed by God

And beautiful by nature (what a beauty)

I get succumbed to deeply romantic and at the same time melancholic emotions, making me in awe with the feeling they sing their music for, the country my mother is from, regardless, making me simultaneously understand, how little I know about Brazil. My knowledge about Brazil is limited by being dominantly factual. I inform myself about the history, geography, and social characteristics/movements, yet I lack emotions. I am oblivious to what it feels like to live in Brazil, to experience the constant heat, the constant traffic and the constant self-awareness in a space that repeatedly tries to violate you, while concurrently being nation gifted with an immense amount of joy and pride and beauty.

I never lived in Brazil. My family and I visited São Paulo every year until 2016, stopping after Jair Bolsonaro got elected in 2018 and the flights were excruciatingly expensive (over 1000 Euros!). Over the past year the pandemic made me ache to get out, to escape my small 23 square meters studio apartment. It started a phase in my life of wanting to experience Brazil. As a way of escaping. One obvious way for me to experience Brazil is through my mother, my main connection to Brazil. Over time my mom and I held many conversations about her life prior to Germany. I found out about her intense dynamic with her mother, the urge she felt to get out of her family house and later out of Brazil, to survive by escaping.

Gratefully, through this course I found another missing piece of the puzzle of my mother's life, a puzzle piece that is so inherently Brazilian, that I have a long journey with it. Religion.

¹ Author's note: It is recommended to listen to Não Identificado (and the entire album) now, in a room, alone.

In this project I will walk the reader through parts of my mother's religious journey, trying to explain the different religions starting with the syncretic faith of Umbanda and the queer-friendly Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé, continuing with ultra-conservative Pentecostalism and will shortly finish with the faith my mother feels at home with, Spiritism.

I will be asking myself the question, through the story of my mother and grandmother, how personal changes of trajectory can facilitate the expanding reach of religions? I hope that this story can explain, how the abundance of poverty, wealth, migration, race, and sexual orientations influence the democratizing practice of finding one's personal life narrative, adhering to various religious communities, and extracting personal fulfillment and salvation, in a never-ending melting pot of cultures.

My mother's journey

Born the eldest daughter of four in 1965, my mother spent the first seven years of her life in the capital of Brazil, Brasilia. The planned and newfound city was born 5 years prior to her, its parents being the President Juscelino Kubitschek and the city planners Lúcio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer and Joaquim Cardozo. The goal was to remove the capital status from coastal Rio de Janeiro to the center of the nation. During and after its foundation, Brasilia experienced a rapid influx of migrants coming from all parts of the country in search for work and prosperity. Planned to reach a population of 500.000 by the year 2000, it already did so in the beginning of the 1970s, just barely ten years after its foundation, having climbed to over 3 million as of 2021. My Grandmother and her parents were part of the first migratory movement. They came around 1960 from the northeastern region of Brazil, which is characterized by long droughts, slavery and poverty, to help bear the child through manual labour using steel and concrete.

During that time, and to a lesser extent today, the Catholic faith was the most predominant religion in Brazil. Brought by the Portuguese during colonial times, and heavily subjugated by missionaries, Brazil's Indigenous population and slaves were forbidden to practice anything other than Catholicism for over two hundred years. Thus, the strong catholic tradition in the population. Though my grandmother was not strictly religious, she did adhere to Christianity. Even so, that she gave my mother a Christian name and middle name.

The first disruption of faith happened when my mother fell ill as a baby. The suffocating, tropical climate, in which she took her first breath, was suddenly threatening her to never breathe again. Intense stomach pains plagued her for weeks. Due to lack of access to medication and healthcare, given by my family's poor monetary resources, my grandmother thought that she would die. She was already planning a little funeral. Yet salvation came in form of a local man of faith. My grandmother, on her mission to rescue her daughter, followed the advice from her godmother and godfather, both belonging to the religion of Umbanda, and met their local pai-de-santo. Pai-de-santo is synonymous for a priest from the religion Umbanda, who works with Caboclos to obtain remedies. Through a ritual in which the Pai-de-santo smoked herbs, in order to communicate with spirits, he was able to detect wounds in my mother's intestines and ordered my grandmother to feed her mashed beef liver and rice water. Miraculously she survived.

This event was a spiritual awakening for my grandmother. Shortly afterwards she converted to Umbanda, bringing her daughters to her new faith as well.

Umbanda is a syncretic religion, being a mix of Christianity, Spiritism, the diasporic African religion of Candomblé and Indigenous beliefs. Syncretic comes from Greek and means a combination of different religions and philosophies, which together form a new, independent religion. Umbanda was established in the early twentieth century, as a response to the new movement of Spiritism and the critiques towards Afro-Brazilian religions that were doomed “primitive” and “demonic”.

They believe in one supreme God called Olorum and in various higher entities called Orixás. Additionally, the Umbanda faith includes an immense spirit world that can be categorized in three ways:

- Pure Spirits: Encompassing angels, seraphims and spirits that reached spiritual perfection.
- Good Spirits: Those spiritis possess mediums and guide them through rituals and ceremonies. Through the liaison with Good Spirits, humans increase their spiritual perfection. This category is comprised by three types of divinities:
 - Caboclos: Deceased autochthone spirits that were used in the ritual to save my mother. They specialize in medicine and herbs, taking thousands of years’ worth tradition of Amerindian people from the amazon and coastal regions of Brazil. While incorporating a Caboclo spirit the medium will walk and smoke pipes.
 - Preto Velho (translated Old Black Man): They are departed slaves that died enslaved during their attempt to flee plantations. They are characterized by their empathy, humility, and mercifulness. While conjuring the Preto Velho, the medium is not able to stand and sits smoking pipes.
 - Preta Velha (or Old Black Woman): The pendant to the Preto Velhos, specializing in maternal compassion.
 - Exus: Spirits that form the crossroads between our world and the spirit world. They serve as messenger linking mediums and Orixás. Thereby, they are inherently needed, for we require their permission. They are called through sacrifices, that unlike Candomblé don’t involve dead animals or black magic. During colonization and the strong influence of the catholic church, Exus were often associated with the devil, not because necessarily because of their abilities or functions, but rather due to their physical appearance, looking like skeletons wearing a red cape. They can carry out good and evil acts.
- Other Good spirits include, *Crianças (children) and Baianos (People from the Brazilian state of Bahia)*

Umbanda adapted from Spiritism the idea of reincarnating souls. With each incarnation, they strive for spiritual perfection, with every lifetime being a opportunity to get closer to purity. Additionally, the spiritisms explanation of cosmogony represented in Umbanda as well.

Albeit being categorized as an Afro-Brazilian religion, Umbanda’s following is much whiter in racial terms than its predecessor Candomblé, and even whiter than Brazil’s population as a whole.

A few years after converting to Umbanda, my grandmother decided to move to São Paulo. It was during the same time that São Paulo was transforming into Brazil’s new “el Dorado”. While Brasilia received a big influx of national migrants, nothing compares to São Paulo. The booming coffee and cotton industry brought an unprecedented number of migrants to the city. Sao Paulo grew uncontrollably in all directions, devouring its surrounding nature with long expanding tentacles and manifesting itself by heavy and innumerable high-rise buildings, creating a concrete jungle.



<https://proddigital.com.br/viagens/destinos/sao-paulo-sp-brasil>

The following numbers state the size of São Paulos metropolitan area over time:

1960: 3.970.000

1970: 7.620.000

1980: 12.089.000 (of which 13% were born in the Northeast, compared to 3% in 1940)

1990: 14.776.000

However, São Paulo was already used to receive big waves of migrants. In the 100 years from 1872 to 1972 at least 5.35 million immigrants came to Brazil, of whom 31% were Portuguese, 30% Italian, 13% Spanish, 5% Japanese, 4% German and 16% of other unspecified nationalities. Many of them (especially Italians) moved to São Paulo, due to its proximity to Brazil's main port Santos. Yet their migratory movement was superseded by internal migrants in the second half of the 20th century. The majority of national migrants came from the northeastern States of Brazil.

Brazil is often divided into 5 territorial regions. The North, Northeast, South, Southeast and the Central West region. São Paulo is located in the Southeast, which alongside the South is marked by its strong European heritage. In the Southern States 78,34% of the population identified as white in 2010 (in some states the German ancestry amounts to over 40% of the population) and 63,65% in São Paulo.

The Northeasterners, who were the predominant national group that came to São Paulo, consist of 29% Whites, 59,78% Mixed Race and 9,45% Afro Brazilians. They moved southwards to escape poverty and droughts, bringing their culture and traditions with them, including Afro-Brazilian Religions like Candomblé and Umbanda.

When my mother's family relocated from central Brasilia to São Paulo, at the age of 7, they arrived without any resources and contacts. No one was there to prevent them from being swallowed by São Paulos brutal ignorance towards the poor. They moved after a friend promised them that he would get my mother's stepfather a workplace, but after an 18 hour long journey, they arrived at the bus station with no one waiting for them. Fortunately they managed to get an "apartment" in a poor neighbourhood consisting of 2 rooms for the family of five, without running water, electricity and even windows. This was fatally for them, because sometimes São Paulos winter get cold for Brazilian standards, scraping at the 10 degrees Celsius mark, causing various periods of sickness in my mother and her sisters, who were already suffering from malnourishment, lack of clothes and medications. While my mother grew up, their financial insecurity was so tough, that she searched piles of waste to find some objects, that her child like brain could transform into toys.

In 1978 famous Singer Caetano released a song called "Sampa" which is the abbreviation for São Paulo. Caetano himself grew up in the Northeast of Brazil, the state of Bahia, home to most of the Afro-Brazilian traditions, and later composed a hymn to the city after visiting it multiple times, creating an accurate picture of São Paulo for newcomers at that time (and still today). Moreover, he is my mother's all-time favorite artist.

Sampa on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nmxp4XQnBpw>

<p>Something happens in my heart</p> <p>Only when it crosses Ipiranga and São João Avenue¹ When I got here, I didn't understand anything Not the concrete poetry of your street corners Not the discreet inelegance of your girls</p> <p>I didn't know Rita Lee² yet Your most thorough interpretation Something happens in my heart Only when it crosses Ipiranga and São João Avenue</p> <p>When we were face to face, I didn't recognize myself I called what I saw bad taste, called it bad taste, bad taste Because Narcissus thinks that what is not a mirror is ugly And what is not yet old scares the mind Nothing from before when you are not a mutant³</p> <p>And you were a difficult beginning I push away what I don't know And those who come from a different dream of a happy city Quickly learn to call you reality Because you are the contradiction of the contraction of the contradiction</p> <p>From oppressed people in waiting lines, in neighborhoods, in favelas From the power of money that builds and destroys beauty From the ugly smoke that rises, erasing the stars I see your poets of fields and space Your forest factories, your rain gods</p> <p>Pan-American from utopian Africa, tomb of samba The newest of Zumbi's quilombo⁴ And the new baianos "promenade" through your garoa⁵ And the new baianos can leisurely enjoy you</p>	<p>Alguma coisa acontece no meu coração</p> <p>Que só quando cruza a Ipiranga e a avenida São João É que quando eu cheguei por aqui eu nada entendi Da dura poesia concreta de tuas esquinas Da deselegância discreta de tuas meninas</p> <p>Ainda não havia para mim, Rita Lee A tua mais completa tradução Alguma coisa acontece no meu coração Que só quando cruza a Ipiranga e a avenida São João</p> <p>Quando eu te encarei frente a frente não vi o meu rosto Chamei de mau gosto o que vi, de mau gosto, mau gosto É que Narciso acha feio o que não é espelho E à mente apavora o que ainda não é mesmo velho Nada do que não era antes quando não somos Mutantes</p> <p>E foste um difícil começo Afasto o que não conheço E quem vem de outro sonho feliz de cidade Aprende depressa a chamar-te de realidade Porque és o avesso do avesso do avesso do avesso</p> <p>Do povo oprimido nas filas, nas vilas, favelas Da força da grana que ergue e destrói coisas belas Da feia fumaça que sobe, apagando as estrelas Eu vejo surgir teus poetas de campos, espaços Tuas oficinas de florestas, teus deuses da chuva</p> <p>Pan-Américas de Áfricas utópicas, túmulo do samba Mais possível novo quilombo de Zumbi E os novos baianos passeiam na tua garoa E novos baianos te podem curtir numa boa</p>
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1: Two famous streets in the São Paulo

2: A singer from São Paulo and national treasure

3: Os Mutantes was the name of Rita Lee's band

4: A village created by escaped slaves

5: Novos Baianos (Translated: „New people from the Bahia State”) is a famous band and Caetano is from the State Bahia; Garoa is a rain typical from São Paulo, like a light drizzle

(Translation from <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/sampa-sampa-its-nickname-city-sao-paulobr.html>, with some alterations done by my mother and I)

Their only safety net was the newly joined centro de Umbanda, a local centre of Umbanda. There my grandmother found a community of likeminded migrants, and an attachment figure, her madrinha. A madrinha takes on the roles of a godmother and teacher and is often times a mãe-de-santo as well (female priestess in Umbanda).

My great grandmother, my grandmother's mother, suffered from psychological illnesses all her life, which caused her to be very absent in my grandmother's upbringing. Thence, the immediate bond with the Umbanda center and her madrinha. She finally had someone, who would make her feel recollected, being a young mother of 3 in a foreign city.

Maybe another reason, why my grandmother decided to continue following her faith in their new home, is because of what Umbanda offers its believers. Through offerings and rituals, Umbanda presents instant solutions to all kinds of problems. For marginalized urban communities, who have to cope with struggles induced by poverty, governmental negligence and (every imaginable form of) injustice, it is no wonder that this immediatism attracts families like mine.

Once they established themselves in São Paulo and in the centre, my grandmother took up the role of preparing the nightly rituals. During her time away at the temple, she left her children at home. This might be the start of my mother's religious trauma, which will intensify over the course of her membership in Umbanda and especially Candomblé. At the age of 7-8, my mother had to clean their family home, and supervise her younger sisters, forcing her to skip her childhood, while her mother was at the centre. Though, she was forced to take up this parental role already at age 5, it was the beginning of a new phase of negligence, caused by my grandmother's newfound religiousness.

This changed slightly a few years later. Once again, my mother was taking care of her sisters, while being alone at home without adults, when she suddenly felt a spiritual force. It was as if another presence joined her in the empty room she was in. It was the first time she felt transcendence. When she told her mother about what she felt, she was taken to the temple, where the members of the community invited her to join the rituals, the thought of which gave her joy, creating the only way to be in her mother's company. Thus, she was able to join religious excursions organized by the centre to waterfalls and other spiritually gifted natural sights where rituals are occasionally performed. Unfortunately, her proximity to her mother was solely geographically, their relationship remaining emotionally distant.

A few years passed and my grandmother decided to move within São Paulo. They stayed in the poor, peripheric north of the city, yet edged a little closer to the dreams of São Paulo. They settled in the industrial neighborhood Bairro do Limao, limiting the Tietê River, which divides the city centre from the outskirts. Geographically, they shortened their distance from prosperity, from places south of the city centre, where "the power of money" shows itself in form of mansions and imported luxury cars, like in neighborhoods Morumbi and Jardins. Areas, where São Paulos never ending noise, doesn't invade the empty streets, which are decorated with luscious green trees, and pavements used by maids to walk expensive dogs, greeting the security guards protecting 5.000.000 Dollars mansions. Even scratching the border that separated the third world from the first world, it would take my mother 1-2 hours of hellish traffic, to reach it. 2014 São Paulo broke records with the longest traffic jam, spanning 344km, causing its elite to skip it traffic by flying, making São Paulo the city with most helicopters worldwide, while the working class easily spends 4 to 5 hours a day in public transport. Multiple worlds in one colossal city.

Their new home didn't lie at such proximity to the Umbanda centre anymore and considering that my grandmother accumulated a lot of knowledge over the years, she decided to open her own temple at her new home. For that she registered her centre at an institute and paid a small tax. She quickly enjoyed high attendances at her home, after word got around, that she was especially good

at physically healing others through rituals. She herself was now a madrinha for others, taking care and teaching them, while continuing to derelict her children. It did allow my mother to exhale though, not being in danger of physical violence when others were around. Though my mother wasn't formally initiated yet, she, and her two eldest sisters, had to participate in the preparation for the rituals. While her friends were out partying (which starts early in Brazil) and enjoying adolescence, my mother had to stay at home. Only on a few occasions did her mother let her have a day off, solely after pleading to my grandmother, who would make her clean every corner of the house, every crumb, every dust particle.

Simultaneously, my grandmothers focus shifted, getting curious about the dark side of Umbanda, which is much more limited than the dark side in Candomblé, eventually leading her to practice both religions at once, before deciding to completely focus on Candomblé. It is important to say that my grandmother didn't look for the dark side to practice it or to harm anybody, but more because of her curiosity, and the appeal that evilness has. The power it promises. This was a long process though, finalizing only when my mother was a teenager.

Before my mother's story continues, let me dive into what Candomblé is and how it distinguishes itself from Umbanda.

Candomblé is a religion forming one of the backbones of Umbanda. It is the continuation of mainly West African faiths, brought by slaves between the 16th and 19th century, and over time developed itself into a syncretic Brazilian religion. It is a mix of traditions and beliefs from the Yoruba people, home to modern-day Benin, Togo and Nigeria, and certain aspects of Catholicism. It developed in the northeastern state of Bahia, when slaves were systematically forced to practice Christianity, causing them to dissimulate their religion, tradition, and language behind it. The hideout enabled the Afro-Brazilian population to maintain a link with their African heritage to this day.

An illustration for this hideout are the Orixás. There are roughly 12-16 deities in Candomblé, called Orixás, and every practitioner is connected with one of them. When the slaves were forced to convert, they concealed them behind catholic saints. My mother's Orixá Omolu, the God of sickness and health, was hidden behind the Saint Lazarus of Bethany, making it possible to pray to him, without being caught.

There are many types of Candomblé, depending on which countries the slaves were from. These different Candomblés are called nations. Though they have the same core, they distinguish themselves through their Orixás, languages and rituals. My mother belonged to biggest branch, the Queto nation, coming mostly from Benin and who practice and sing in the Yoruba language compared to the Bantu branch, which is the only non-west African nation, originating in Angola and southern Congo, leading them to practice in Kokngo and Kimbundu language.

Candomblé has no central authority, unlike the Magisterium in the Catholic Church, on the contrary, it is organized through autonomous groups, who come together at so called terreiros, comparable to centres and temples. Since it is a religion without scripture, one can only learn how to practice Candomblé by going to these terreiros

As mentioned, practitioners believe in 16 divinities called Orixás, additionally to Olódùmarè, also known as Olórun, who is the one omnipotent source of all the universe, the supreme being, the infinite power. Living in a different dimension or sphere than us humans, Olódùmarè is never directly worshipped to. That's when Orixás come into place. They mediate between humans and Olódùmarè. Each practitioner is linked with one Orixá, all are differently defined by their colours, clothes, economic activities and types of animals and foods that should be offered to them. Additionally, each

Orixá is a personification of parts of nature (e.g. rain and rainbows), while possessing certain human attributes. They can neither be seen as good nor bad.



<https://www.travel-brazil-selection.com/informations/brazilian-culture/religion/candomble/>
(Portrayal of different Orixás. The second from left is my mother's Orixá)



<https://thereaderwiki.com/en/Candombl%C3%A9>
(Traditional clothes of Candomblé adherents)

Though it's strongest following is still in the Bahia state, especially in Salvador (the biggest city with roughly 3 million people), it has spread all over the country in the 20th century, through northeastern migrants moving away, especially to the white, Christian south, leading to exponential growth urban communities. Before the 1960s there existed only one terreiro for Candomblé in São Paulo. In 1980, after millions, including my family, moved to São Paulo, there were already 2500 terreiros established all over the city.

Over the past decades, Candomblé, like many other Afro-Brazilian religions, spread into urban centres across countries bordering Brazil, like Venezuela, Uruguay, and Argentina, emphasizing its strong growth.

One reason for this growth of Candomblé in cosmopolitan cities is its interpretation of life. Personal affirmation is an imperative. This is also to a lesser extent in Umbanda. There is no limit for personal development and growth, with the explanation that happiness doesn't make sense after one's death. Due to various rituals everything is at hands reach. Even the destruction of your enemy could be accomplished by a ritual.

Candomblé and Umbanda share a lot of similarities. They have the same higher entities, Olódùmarè and Orixás, yet Candomblé is the religion that remains the most traditionally African, while Umbanda distanced itself from the dances, sacrifices and other ceremonial aspects, embracing its syncretism with Spiritism and Indigenous beliefs.

Brazil has a big amount of Afro-Brazilian diversity, yet it is very hard to distinguish them from another and understand their socio-historic context, because in 1890, two years after Brazil turned into a republic and abolished slavery, the statesman and Minister Rui Barbosa ordered to burn the archives related to slavery, to make way (in his reasoning) for a better society. Only since the 1980s, after becoming a democratic country, the plurality of Brazil can be explored and appreciated.

Over time, there was a visible change at my grandmother's temple. More rituals and offerings were held, the dominantly white membership was substituted by mainly Afro-Brazilian, many of whom were queer. Terreiros, like my grandmothers terreiro did, create a safe space, in which openly queer people are allowed to hold the same positions as heterosexual people. Besides being a mainly

religious get together, my mother remembers sometimes seeing drag queens or transgender people performing little shows at her home, their terreiro, underlining the strong and all-embracing community aspect of Candomblé.

Brazil, like most other Latin American societies, who are characterized by the strong loyalty towards Christian values and ideas, is a deeply macho society. Gender hierarchies and expectations, homophobia and transphobia are strongly structural and internalized by many people. Yet even in regard to queer rights, Brazil remains incessantly contradicting. It is the country that kills the most queer people in the world, it has elected a president that openly admits being “incapable of loving a homosexual son” and would prefer him “die in an accident”, “Yes, I am homophobic — and very proud of it.” and “If your child starts to become like that, a little bit gay, you take a whip and you change their behavior”. At the same time São Paulo has the biggest pride parade worldwide and Brazil legalized Same-Sex marriage in 2013, four years before Germany did.

In terreiros from Candomblé it is widely common for heterosexuals and queer people not only to coexist, but to dance and pray together. As religions that openly embrace queer people are hard to find in countries that are strongly influence by Catholics and Evangelicals, it is no wonder why Candomblé has seen a big influx of the community, even leading to the stereotype, that all male Candomblé practitioners are gay. Stereotypes remain stereotypes, but a survey done in 2005 in São Paulo found that 10,2% of queer people belong to Candomblé, compared to only about 1% of the overall Brazilian population.

The reason for the open-mindedness of Candomblé towards queers, lies within the connection between oneself and the personally linked Orixá. Due to their human attributes, Orixás can be classified by their gender. Iabás are female Orixás and Oboró male Orixás. If a queer woman’s Orixá is an Obroró, then this could be an explanation for her sexual orientation. There are also transsexual or hermaphrodite Orixás, like Logun-Edé and Oxumaré, that express themselves as male for half a year and then as female for the half.

However, two things need to be said. Firstly, this approach is cause for some debate inside Candomblé, since there is no scripture to prove or disprove it and secondly, no human led religion, institution, or organization, especially in countries fundamentally shaped by Christianity, will ever be free of prejudice and homo-/transphobia, and this applies to Candomblé too. Many people grow up with different religions, adapting transphobic and homophobic mindsets, which will be reproduced, even if only subconsciously, after converting to other, more open-minded faiths. However, Candomblé is unquestionably one of the most welcoming and embracing religions.

During the time my grandmother practiced more Candomblé than Umbanda, a sick baby was brought to her to be healed. The parents had no resources to get medical assistance and relied on the kindness of other. This may have reminded grandmother of her daughter, when she was sick baby herself, only salvaged by the pai-de-santo in Brasilia 15 years prior. Either way, she made my mother try to heal the baby spiritually. Shortly after this day my mother commenced her journey in Candomblé. At their home, just the three of them, they performed a healing ritual. My mother remembers, how she drew a cross in the air with a knife while praying. She felt at peace something while doing so, a sensation that would accompany her many times while praying. Apparently, to the delight of her mother, it worked. Thinking that she had a gifted child, that could pass on her legacy in the future, she wanted my mother to formally start her “iniciação”, to initiate.

Before this process began, they had to find out with which Orixá my mother is linked with. This is done by shell reading, Jogo de Búzios, where the pai-de-santo or mãe-de-santo throws 8 or 16 shells on an especially prepared table, after determining a question for the Orixás . It is believed that the

divinities have their influence on the outcome of the shells. After having found out that my mother's Orixá is Omolu the rite of passage can begin.

The initiation into Candomblé takes a lot of preparation. My mother, while still being underaged, spend 21 one days in a closed room with 3 other people who were being initiated as well. This ritual starts with another practice, symbolizing the separation of one's profane individuality before the initiation. My mother head was shaven, and her clothes dispatched. Thereupon, the clothes are substituted by traditional white attires. This signalizes the separation from one's old social life, and the birth to a new one, the religious social life. Then, in those 21 days, she had to learn the music played in Candomblé (it is sung in the Yoruba language), pray, make collars, and keep her thoughts clean and pure, for her Orixá to be able to possess her spiritual head, all that while retaining complete muteness. Something very essential in Candomblé and Afro-Brazilian religions in general is one's possession by spirits. In order for us humans to get close to Orun, a supernatural space where souls and the Orixás live, the person being initiated needs their Orixá to manifest itself in their body and mind, and lead them with an uncontrollable force, through the rhythmic sounds of the Atabaques (a hand drum) alongside certain dance steps, while losing control over reality. This way, (over a lot of time) us humans are able to evolve our spiritual knowledge. The more you participate in rituals, the more knowledge you will accumulate, which will then be passed on orally.

The 3-week-long rite of passage is supposed to signal the devotion to enter Candomblé. During that time, my mother was only allowed to be in contact with the people directly involved in her initiation and eat certain foods that are associated with her respective Orixá. In my mother's case, with Omolu, her diet was limited to grains, legumes, black beans, corn, all mirroring his earthy colours.

After the 21 days, my mother was taken to a room next door, filled with altars for the initiators Orixás. Atabaques were played while she sang the previously studied songs and danced. When the dance reaches its elated peak, the person performing in ritual falls in trance, making way for the possession, until certain hymns are sung that end the performance. It was a special ceremony, making my mother feel a lot of things, but she did not fall in trance. Afterwards the scarification of animals started. The main reason for sacrifices is to please the Orixás in order to keep life in harmony. This is accomplished by feeding them in a spiritual sense through sacrifice, which maintains the connection between humans and the spiritual world. Traditionally, in the case of Omolu, armadillos are used, but not strictly, for some terreiros view certain wild animals as sacred, which is why domestic animals like goats, pigeons and pigs are preferred. Especially in a metropolis like São Paulo, which pushed nature away with concrete, armadillos, and other animals, like specific tortoises, used more regularly in the rural Northeast, are hard to come by. For the initiation of my mother, pigeons and pigs were sacrificed, with some of their blood poured over my mother. This time too she felt an inner warmth arise, but this time it wasn't spiritual. She was shocked when she felt the warm fresh blood touch her skin and white clothes.

Another common part of the ritual is to make 2 small cuts with razorblades at the top of one's head, followed by sprinkling some of the animal's blood on it, to make the possession by the Orixá easier (?). But my mother was spared of that, for which she is thankful until this day.

During this ritual she wore white clothes, with a veil made out of straw, the material used to depict Omolu, while her face was painted with chalk. When her public appearance and the ritual was done, the whole community gathered and ate the abundance of food made for this occasion.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O96wo9K3KaI&t=97s>

The entirety of the initiation is only finished after three months. Succeeding her ritual, my mother was obligated to wear white clothes and a necklace called quelé, until the commemoration "Fall of

the Quelé” after three months. This symbolizes the marriage of the human with the sacred, the unification of the initiator with the Orixá.



<https://www.wikiwand.com/pt/Quel%C3%A9>

She went to school with her bald head, white clothes and Quelé. Most of her friends and classmates were Catholic or at least Christian, which made her feel very uncomfortable, being a young teenager just trying to fit in. She covered her Quelé with a white cloth, but her whole remained an eye-catcher. One time a male classmate threatened her to tear her necklace off, which she feared terribly, for it would disrupt her connection with Omolu.

During this whole time, and even the following year after her initiation, a lot of doubts crossed my mother’s mind. Even though she believed in some aspects of the religion, many things weren’t tangible for her. For example, the holiness of stones in Candomblé was a concept that was hard to grasp for her. Candomblé believes that certain stones carry the spiritual force from Orixás called axé,

However, it is safe to say that her strained relationship with her own mother played the biggest part of her growing rejection towards it. Not only was her conversion to Candomblé something that was decided for her, not by her, but the religion, and my grandmother’s religious power, was often times a tool used to make my mother compliant. E.g., when my grandmother left town to do some excursion to a beach, she threatened my mother by saying that the spirits and Orixás see occurs at their house and will report to her, what occurred during her absence. So, my mother better ought to be a good girl and do the chores like a maid.

Over time it was clear to my mother that she wanted to leave Candomblé and try out a different religion while simultaneously moving out of her family home. She knew that this would be very hard to tell her mother, and that she might risk not being an explosive feud.

One way she escaped the unwanted rituals, was through studying and going to university. My mother was the first one of her family to go to university. She was always very dedicated to learning and studying (she currently studying again, doing her master’s degree), and was able to enroll in one of the best universities of Latin America. An upper lower-class child going to university in a developing country like Brazil can fill a family with pride, like it did my grandmother. Thus, if my mother said that she had to study, she was allowed to not to attend rituals and gatherings.

Around the same time, when she was 19, she met her now ex-husband, who was beginning his own religious path. He was Evangelical. Their relationship moved fast and within two years they were married and living together at their own apartment, also in the Northern São Paulo. He, and his mother were very skeptical of Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian religions, thereby they were skeptical of my grandmother and her terreiro.

It is a common phenomenon, that conservative Christian religions in Brazil frown upon, and even discriminate Afro-Brazilian belief systems and members. Especially now, with (ultra) right wing president Bolsonaro at power. Between 2016 to 2021 reported acts of religious discrimination in the state of São Paulo tripled from 5.214 to 15.296. In 2019, while only 0.2% of Brasilia's population belonged to Afro-Brazilian religions, 59,42% of cases of religious discrimination were reported by the mentioned groups. Various terreiros are burned, vandalized or victims of shootings. A sad reality, that unfortunately doesn't come as a surprise, in a post-slavery society that still struggles to tackle structural racism and a colonizer mindset, although 7% of the national population identifies as black and 43% as mixed. Evangelicals describe Afro-Brazilian religions as "devilish" and "barbaric", words used to denominate African religions worldwide, like Voodoo in Haiti or Santeria in Cuba.

Additionally, most of the attacks towards Candomblé and other religions are executed by evangelicals. The famous *billionaire* self-proclaimed bishop Edir Macedo published a book in 1997 called "Orixás, Caboclos and False Gods or Demons" in which he stated that Afro-Brazilian religions like Candomblé and Umbanda "seek to keep us from God. They are enemies of Him and the human race. (...) This struggle with Satan is necessary (...) to eternal salvation," he added. It was banned after it sold over 3 million copies, nonetheless he still preaches at various evangelical churches.

Additionally, there has been a report of evangelical-gangs with connection to prisons in Brazil. Those institutions are notorious for being unofficially under control by the country's biggest narcotraffic organizations. Parts of Rio de Janeiro's north and western periphery are under control of the Pure Third Command, many of which are newly converted evangelicals. Their conversion is a product of the prison system, where 80 out of 100 prison ministries are led by evangelical churches. Once converted to evangelicalism in prison, inmates are often housed in cleaner wings than they were before. Combined with doctrines of some ultra-conservative pastors, who spread the idea of a "spiritual cleansing" in Rio's slum, is a recipe for disaster. Many favelas nowadays are controlled by converted militias, while also being the destinations for many northeasterners that settle in richer cities like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Consequently, favelas, already notorious for violence, a clashing point between Candomblé and the hatred towards it.

Yet, in the case of my mother's ex-husband it wasn't that extreme. He didn't like Candomblé, but since my mother wanted to leave anyways, it wasn't a point of discussion. However, there was one incident where her soon to be mother-in-law went to the house of my grandmother with a bible and invited her to convert to Evangelicalism. That was the first and last time both mothers saw each other.

My mother accompanied him to his evangelical church. She expected participate in a mass similar to those of catholic churches but was surprised when right at the beginning the pastors catharsis started. To this day she can remember the screaming of "hallelujah", "Jesus, save me", the tears and the sobbing of the attendants, while the pastor screamed "deliver your life, deliver your soul to God, don't let the devil touch you". This was followed by some attendants to speak in tongues and while swaying in all directions. "Hallelujah". My mother was shocked. This was a big change to the dancing, singing, and eating from Candomblé, and from "regular" Christian masses. As the mass moved on, and the pastor fell in silence, the devout believers seemed to have collected themselves. They radiated happiness. Suddenly, the quietude was disrupted by the tithing, which the pastor says is an offering to God. The more money you give the church through Tithing, the more financial success you will receive back. Stinginess will be punished by stinginess.

Evangelicals are an extremely fast growing part of the protestant movement, with their doctrines reaching every corner of earth. They set foot in Brazil in the late 19th and early 20th century through Swedish and US-American missionaries that travelled through the never-ending, dense amazon jungle to convert the indigenous population. However, their exponential growth is a phenomenon of

the last decades. In 1960 fewer than 5% of Brazilians were protestants, 15% in 2000, 22,2% in 2010 and the figure is now estimated at around 31%, most of which are evangelicals. The number of catholics is shrinking fast, reaching "only" 64,6% in 2010 and dropping annually by 1,2% per year. More than half of evangelicals reported having grown up in the catholic faith, before eventually converting.

Their theology makes them so appealing for many people, especially urban migrant communities, like my mother and like her ex-husbands family who came from the Northeastern state of Sergipe to São Paulo. They promise personal salvation and monetary success. By joining the church, being devoted to it, tithing, and accepting their terms, you will climb the financial ladder.

During her marriage my mother only went a few times to the church her husband affiliated with. It didn't fill the spiritual void that she was feeling, and did more to join her husband became more devoted over time. Even when she didn't go to church there were certain rules that my mother had to obey, imposed by the evangelical faith:

- No cutting her hair
- Only "modest" clothes (long skirts or dresses, no jeans)
- No Makeup
- No newspapers
- No sins
- No parties
- No music, besides Christian music (especially hard for my mother, who used music to preserve through times of violence)
- ...

At some point over the years of her marriage, when my sister was already born, my mother tried out a different evangelical church. She was hoping to save her marriage by going and to find a new place of worship, which she was craving for. She went to the church "Universal do Reino de Deus" (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God), whose founder is the pastor who wrote the provocative manifesto against Afro-Brazilian religions, Edir Macedo. It is one of the biggest evangelical denominations of the country, with 8 million followers in over 150 countries.

Her first impression was that Universal Reino de Deus was an improvement to her husband's church. The entire ceremony seemed less hysterical, and she was more able to concentrate on what she felt. Yet when the tithing started, her perception changed. The silence was longer, and people gave more money. She noticed that even though most of the people looked poor, they were taking off their watches and jewelry, gifting them to the church. This procedure took a lot of time in which her spirituality was substituted by indignancy.

My mother continued to go, until the church management insistently pushed her to be baptized. In the church (which architecturally structured differently than a catholic church) is a pool that imitates the Jordan river, and after her baptism, they immediately gave her a contract, in which, if signed, she is obliged to give 10% of her gross income to the Universal do Reino de Deus. She opted out, closing her chapter with evangelicalism. In 2009, Edir Macedo, the founder, was charged with fraud and money laundering by transferring donations through offshore accounts, increasing his personal assets and those of other church officials. Nonetheless, he continues being a billionaire.

She remained married to her religious husband for some time (divorce would have been a scandal for him at the church), feeling depressed for a long time. It was not until, the rules started to be applied to my sister, who was a child then, that she drew a line under their marriage. They divorced.

From then on, it took my mother 7-8 years, trying out various religions and spiritual streams from, Hinduism and Buddhism to Taoism, the New Age movement and Schamanism, until finally finding Spiritism in the mid-2000s. Spiritism is the religion where she feels comfortable and collected. It is the religion that answers her questions and gives her the strength she needs. Even though she doesn't go to the centre for Spiritism in Germany (she did, but when they started to incorporate Umbanda into their preaching, she stopped going. She couldn't go back to the past), she holds weekly prayer meetings alone, reading from scriptures and praying. Spiritism became the religion that I grew up with for over 8 years. My sister and I used to join her prayer service, but eventually stopped when she moved out and I didn't identify with spiritism or any other religion in my vicinity anymore.

Final words

Looking back at the entirety of my mother's religious journey there are a few last thoughts that I have. Her long voyage through different religions and corners of Brazilian society, would not have started, if my grandmother hadn't brought her sick daughter, in all her motherly desperation, to the pai-de-santo from Umbanda. Whilst my mother was the cause for their commencement in Afro-Brazilian religions, it was never her choice to try these out. She was proselytized. The obligation, forced upon her by psychological and physical violence, over the years made her develop emotional trauma towards these religions. Until this day, she feels resentment towards Umbanda, but especially towards Candomblé. They are indirectly part of the reason, why she lost her childhood and adolescence. Even if their teachings are mostly positive and the adherents generally openminded and loving.

Yet, my mother and I acknowledge that my grandmother, in distress, being a single mother for a long period throughout this story, residing in the urban chaos, living in and close to poverty, didn't know how to be a mother, having never had a maternal figure of her own. Though she was extremely and unnecessarily brutal to her daughters, especially my mother, she didn't do it because she was evil. She didn't make my mother convert out of malice. She just didn't know any better. This is in no way a justification, yet it explains her behavior.

My mother's religious trauma might have caused her initial approximation towards the opposite of what was practiced at home, Evangelicalism. Possibly, this was her way to cope with her in satisfaction, however, only until the first few masses, after which she tossed the religion aside (with some sporadic exceptions, due to her marital problems combined with cravings for spirituality). Even though, she was already an adult, the strong restrictions trying to limit her identity as a woman, as a human being, to try and make her compliant to the evangelical church, perhaps caused another trauma. Luckily at that time, she had already undergone years of therapy, which probably helped process that trauma more easily.

Finally, my family's story wouldn't have been possible without Sao Paulo, serving as a host of a large religious market, created, and enforced by large scale international and national migrants. A melting pot of Christianity, Judaism and Spiritism brought by Europeans, east Asian religions introduced by the Japanese, Candomblé by northeasterners, the descendants of slaves, and Brazil's own religious creations like Umbanda. Through my work, I found out that my family's story is just one of many similar stories from Sao Paulo. Many middle- and lower-class people dabble with the exact same

religions: Umbanda, Candomblé, Evangelicalism, Spiritism, and Christianity. All of them have an appeal for people, trying to escape from urban powerlessness, a way out of poverty, institutional neglect and a refuge from a constantly transforming city that makes and easily breaks you.

Through my mother's journey, I started to question my own faith, and it started a ripple of curiosity towards all the possibilities we have nowadays. The internet might even be a bigger religious market than Sao Paulo, yet it can easily be the source of more religious trauma if one is not careful. Only future will tell if this ripple transforms into a wave. Nevertheless, after dealing with my mom's history over the last semester, I can say with deep conviction, that I feel utmost happy for her to finally have found the comfort, security, and home she was craving for her entire life.

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