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WRITINGS ON THE WALL: RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM THROUGH GRAFFITI IN NORTH EAST BRAZIL

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Syncretism between Catholicism and the major Afro-Brazilian cults of Xangô, Candomblé and Umbanda, is a widely accepted phenomenon. Historical explanations vary which seek to account for such miscegenation of belief. Rodrigues 1935, [35] for example, speaks of a "catechetic illusion", whereby seemingly unconvertible black slaves incorporated Catholicism to the cult of orixás. Fernandes 1937 [16] and Valente 1977, [38] however, prefer to stress "external adjustment" and the "modification of internal experience." Thus, for instance, a slave might have outwardly honoured St Benedict by participating in his annual procession. Nevertheless belief would have focussed on the orixá represented by that saint, in this case Omolú (Cacciatore 1977; Pierson 1938; Querino 1938; Ramos 1951; Valente 1977). [7, 30, 31, 32, 38]

Arguing in a similar vein, Herskovits 1941 [20] offers a thesis of "reinterpretation", whereby black Catholicism in Brazil was regarded as an extension or generalisation of the cult of African deities to the veneration of saints.

On the other hand, Bastide 1978 [2] describes the situation as one of "compartmentalisation" in which the immigrants managed two types of existence simultaneously, the Catholic patronal festivals of the Casa Grande and the African rites of the Senzala (Freyre 1970). [18] Bastide argues that there could never have been full accommodation in belief and ritual, since orixás differ fundamentally from saints in two important respects. Firstly they were directly, rather than postumously, associated with specific natural forces. Secondly, the power or mana (Swanson 1960) [36] of these divine intermediaries manifested

itself in the devotee through spirit possession. By contrast, favours requested from Catholic saints occurred externally without any internal transformation of the supplicant.

Whatever the past nature of the relationship between Catholicism and Afro-Brazilian cults, today their "interpenetration" is evidenced at various levels. Parallels may be found in their respective use of liturgical calendars, priests, rituals of initiation and confirmation, wedding ceremonies and funeral rites, etc. One has also noted elsewhere (Dann 1979) [11] that to the three principal components of the Afro-Brazilian creed: the hierarchy of the spirit world, spirit possession and reincarnation (Teixeira 1967) [37] there correspond the Catholic elements of belief in the communion of saints, the efficacy of prayer and the after life.

Nowhere, however, is the similarity so striking as in the contemporary cult of African orixás and requesting favours from Catholic saints. Indeed the correspondence is so close that Motta (1975: 196) [24] has claimed:

> ' there is complete identity between orixás and saints who participate in the same concrete fashion in the daily lives of the faithful' (here, as elsewhere, translation mine).

The following preliminary study is an attempt to examine this claim by investigating the various points of convergence and divergence, and the degree of syncretism between Catholicism and Afro-Brazilian cults. The investigation focusses on two famous Catholic shrines, known also to be frequented by adherents of Xangô and Candomblé: Nossa Senhora do Carmo in Recife, and Nosso Senhor do Bomfim in Salvador da Bahia. At a later stage some may wish to extend the inquiry to other churches, while others may prefer to look at the Catholic influence on cult centres by commencing operations in the "terreiros".

Common to these shrines, and indeed many others, is the practice of inscribing messages in the immediate vicinity of the representation of the saint. If there has been penetration of Catholicism by the cults, we should therefore find such traces in the graffiti themselves. By applying content analysis to these religious messages it should thus be possible to monitor syncretism unobtrusively, without encountering the methodological disadvantages often associated with the more direct techniques of participant observation and interviewing (Webb et al. 1966). [40] At the same time, however, we should be careful not to falsely infer from human traces the identity of those supposedly responsible for such accretions. In the present case, since one cannot with certainty determine the precise authorship of the graffiti, as a working hypothesis one makes the assumption of greater likelihood that messages to saints found in Catholic churches are the work of Catholics. Where the content casts doubt over this assumption we are free to accept either that they have been written by cultists pure and simple, or, more than likely, by those with some mixture of mentality. The case for religious interpenetration clearly rests with the latter possibility.

The research is reported in three stages:

1. the shrines and their syncretic relevance,
2. an examination of the messages and their interpretation,
3. reflections.

1. THE SHRINES AND THEIR SYNCRETIC RELEVANCE

a) *Nossa Senhora do Carmo*

The feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel is comparatively recent in the Catholic calendar, having been instigated by Pope Benedict XIII in 1726. However its observance by Carmelite monks and nuns goes back to 1322. According to tradition, the followers of Elijah and Eliseus became disciples of John the Baptist, and subsequently of Jesus. They built a church on Mount Carmel in honour of the Blessed Virgin, and lived by a monastic rule which was revised by Simon Stock and approved by Pope Innocent IV in 1245.

It is surely more than coincidence that the feast of the female orixá Oxum is celebrated by xangozeiros in Recife on exactly the same day in July as Nossa Senhora do Carmo, when the statue of the madonna is carried in procession from the nearby town of Olinda. The sacred overlaps the profane with a street fair outside the church and a firework display in the evening. Bastide (1978: 266, 274)[2] and Bastos (1979: 41)[3] note the syncretism between Oxum and Our Lady of Mount Carmel. In this regard, Valente (1977: 77)[38] also writes:

> 'We have observed that the black divinity is venerated with the same devotion as the corresponding Catholic saint. Thus, for instance, Oxum is venerated in the same manner, and in conformity with Catholic principles, as Our Lady of Carmel. In as much as religious fervour towards Oxum is demonstrated by requests, so too are hopeful promises made to Our Lady of Carmel.'

De Oliveira (n.d: 75)[15] even supplies a photograph of a medium consecrated to Oxum thanking Our Lady of Carmel.

More specifically, Oxum is a divinity of the river bearing that name at Oxogbo in the province of Ibadan (Cacciatore 1977: 213)[7] in Nigeria (Maia 1978: 55; Ribeiro 1969: 90; Valente 1977: 90).[22,33,38] She is thus referred to as the goddess of sweet, soft or fresh, waters (Cacciatore 1977: 213; Carneiro 1978: 41; De Freitas et al. 1965: 48; Bastide 1978: 377)[7,9,14,2] in contrast to the Lady of the Sea, Yemanjá (Maia 1978: 55).[22] For this reason, the "filhas" of Oxum in their dances often imitate her bathing in the river, and afterwards, combing her hair in a hand mirror (Valente 1977: 91).[38] Commentators variously describe Oxum as voluptuous, beautiful and flirtatious (Ribeiro 1969: 90),[33] sensual (Maia 1978: 55),[22] who manifests love, purity and goodness (Costa 1974: 57).[10] Consequently her daughters are thought to be vain, capricious and fickle (Ribeiro 1952: 125).[34] Bastide (1978: 377)[2] puts it so well, when he says:

> 'The children of Oxum . . . have a liquid amorous quality — the fascinating sensuality of lazy rivers or still lakes sprinkled with sunlight.'

According to some (eg. Bastide 1978: 226; Ribeiro 1969: 90),[2,23] Oxum was the favourite, the youngest (Cacciatore 1977: 213)[7] and the second (Maia 1978: 54)[22] wife or lover (Alvarenga 1948: 101)[1] of Xangô, and thus

automatically the Queen of Oyó (Cacciatore 1977: 213).[7] Maia (1978: 54)[22] observes that Oxum was originally the wife of Oxossí (god of hunting), but was taken from him by Xangô whilst away in search of game. What consensus there is points to the divine origin of Oxum, sufficient, it would seem, to permit the syncretic identification with the Blessed Virgin, even though authorities differ as to the exact title (Bastide 1978: 266-7; Valente 1977: 101-2).[2, 38] There is also agreement that Oxum is the goddess of (sensual) love (Bastide 1978: 263).[2] By extension Cacciatore (1977: 214)[7] identifies her with childbirth and infants. For this reason she is often called "mother" (Bastos 1979: 138; De Freitas et al. 1965: 91, 97; De Oliveira n. d: 121; Fontenelle n. d: 116-7; Ortiz 1978: 74).[3, 14, 15, 17, 29]

According to Valente (1977:70),[38] before Recife based novices of Oxum can be "made", they must first visit the church of Nossa Senhora do Carmo. The theoretical syncretism outlined above thus assumes the status of "de facto" identification.

Interestingly the statue of the patroness madonna is found immediately at the entrance of the Carmo church. In practice this means that many supplicants pay their respects only to this figure without entering the main body of the building at all, a conclusion reached by on spot observation. By contrast, Catholics believe that a church is the house of God, where reverence is directed towards the Blessed Sacrament, located in a tabernacle either on the high altar on in a separate side chapel. Yet in Nossa Senhora do Carmo values are strangely reversed. Here greater respect is apparently bestowed on the Mother of Jesus (outside) in seeming preference to the inner sanctum of the Son of God. Our Lady thus transcends her traditional role of intermediary interceding with her son and becomes a figure of significance in her own right. It is argued here that such role reversal would be a theological oddity were it not for the possibility of penetration of Catholicism by Xangô and the mental replacement of the madonna by Oxum.

b) *Nosso Senhor do Bonfim*

The eighteenth century church of Our Lord of the Good End is located on the Itapagipe peninsula overlooking the city of Salvador da Bahia. On Fridays and Sundays the church attracts crowds of worshippers, many of whom invoke the protection of the image of Nosso Senhor do Bonfim and return to give thanks for graces received in the side chapel of the famous shrine.

However, not all the faithful in attendance are Catholics. Costa (1974: 109)[10] reminds us that the Bonfim church features prominently in the initiation ceremonies of Candomblé. More specifically, "iaôs" consecrated to Oxalá are obliged to attend mass at Nosso Senhor do Bonfim. The night before is spent in preparation for the event, in which the sons and daughters appear resplendent in their jewels and white robes. After the Catholic service, the cultists return to their terreiro for a blessing from the babalaô. A rigorous period of twenty one days ensues, during which the initiates must abstain from certain foods and sexual intercourse, and sleep on rush mats covering the floor.

This "romaria de Oxalá", as it is known, highlights the syncretism between Nosso Senhor do Bonfim and Oxalá. The latter (the Nagô abbreviation of Orixalá and the Portuguese rendering of Obatalá) was the Yoruba god of the skies and creation (Bastide 1978: 251; Maia 1978: 68),[2, 22] the Eternal Father (Valente 1977: 88),[38] and as such the chief orixá (Fontenelle n. d: 99).[17]

In this connection, Ribeiro (1969: 103-4)[33] provides several myths featuring the male Obatalá and the female Odudua sent by Olodumaré in the skies to create or fertilize mother earth. Costa (1974: 35),[10] referring to Candomblé, speaks of Oxalá as the cosmic manifestation of the sky, earth, light, peace and love. In Umbanda the all important line of Oxalá is directed by Christ (Bastos 1979: 136).[3] Da Matta e Silva (1969:86)[12] calls him the uncreated one who bestows his magical power on the orixás who direct the line.

Although authorities describe Oxalá in two forms: as a child or young man (Cacciatore 1977: 210-1; Carneiro 1978: 64; Maia 1978: 91; Ribeiro 1969: 103)[7, 9, 22, 33] and as an elderly person (De Oliveira n. d : 76; Maia 1978: 91; Valente 1977: 89),[15, 22, 38] corresponding to the two modalities of Christ as the Infant Jesus and the Good Shepherd (Bastide 1978; Carneiro 1978; Ramos 1951)[2, 9, 32] the most common syncretic title for Oxalá is Our Lord of the Good End (Bastide 1978: 264-5; Valente 1977: 101).[2, 38]

According to Yoruba tradition, Oxalá, the son of Olórum, the Supreme God, was to be venerated on top of a mountain. Yet the urban slave living at sea level in a port such as Salvador da Bahia would naturally be unable to fulfil this minimum requirement of worship. Conveniently, however, the church of Nosso Senhor do Bonfim could serve his purpose in a dual fashion. First it stood on a hill, and secondly it bore the closest Catholic resemblance to Oxalá. By seemingly honouring the Christian Son of God, the filho of Candomblé was thus able to pay respect to Oxalá.

The above "black god – white mask" phenomenon is illustrated by a ceremony known as "the washing" (Bastide 1978: 276; De Carvalho 1915: 50ss)[2, 13] Although today this rite has been prohibited by local ecclesiastical authorities, originally followers of Candomblé in and around Salvador each January used to converge on the Bonfim church in order to cleanse it with the waters of Oxalá. The water itself had been drawn from a sacred spring and mixed with flower petals and various herbs. The actual washing of the stones (corresponding to Christ crucified according to Rodrigues (1935: 71),[35] was to renew mana and symbolise purification (Carneiro 1978: 64).[9] Interestingly there is a Catholic genetic explanation to the ceremony which derives from the promise of a young soldier bound for Paraguay that if he returned from battle unscathed he would wash the atrium of the church of his savior (Bastide 1978: 276).[2]

Ribeiro (1969: 103-4)[33] shows how the washing ceremony is based on African legend. According to one account, Oxalufã (the elderly Oxalá) wanted to visit his friend Xangô, King of Oyó in Nigeria. Before leaving he consulted a babalaô who advised him against the journey. Oxalufã insisted, asking the priest whether he could not make offerings to Ifá in order to safeguard him on his travels. Despite the repeated request, the babalaô still

maintained that disaster was imminent. Oxalufã set out and presently met Exú sitting on top of a barrel of palm oil by the roadside. As a trick the mischievous sprite tipped the oil over the old man and vanished in laughter. Oxalufã went off to a nearby place and bathed. Later on, entering the kingdom of Xangô, he encountered a runaway horse. Going up to it, he was about to offer the animal something to eat, when he was overpowered by the servants of Xangô who took him for a thief. Unknown to Xangô, Oxalufã was beaten and put in prison for seven years. During his sojourn all was not well in the kingdom of Oyó. When a puzzled Xangô consulted Ifá he was told to free his friend Oxalufã. The elderly man was immediately released and bathed. He later returned to his son Oxaguiã amid much celebration.

This story, a sort of Prodigal Son with role reversal, is said to account for the washing of Oxalá for a period of seven days (symbolising the seven years in jail). Later we whall see how the number seven features in religious graffiti.

2. AN EXAMINATION OF THE MESSAGES AND THEIR INTERPRETATION

a) *Nossa Senhora do Carmo*

The various inscriptions surrounding the Carmel shrine had the common characteristic of referring to Our Lady directly, rather than as an intermediary. This observation would be strange had the messages been entirely Catholic in content, since traditionally the Blessed Virgin is asked to intercede with her son on behalf of the petitioner. The absence of the role of mediatrix therefore suggests that there was a strong penetration of the Catholic mentality by another. That this other was cultist in origin is supported by the fact that orixás are also invoked directly.

More specifically, in the form of greeting the majority of graffiti contained the singular possessive adjective, even to the point of yielding the bizarre construction of "My Our Lady". This stands in sharp contrast to the plural form of address found in such everyday Catholic prayers as the Our Father and Creed.

Subsequently the words "mother" or "good mother" were often employed. When taken in conjunction with the singular possessive adjective, these expressions may be translated as the more intimate "mummy", with the petitioner playing the role of favoured child.

Such terminology is quite consonant with the cultist reference to Oxum as "mamãe" and the supplicant's corresponding self-identification as "filha". In Umbanda, for instance, where cabocla Oxum belongs to the line of Yemanjá (Da Matta e Silva 1969: 89),[12] Mamãe Oxum features in baptism and wedding ceremonies. In this connection, Bastos (1979: 154)[3] provides the following priestly invocation:

> Mother Oxum,
> You who répresent love.

Protect this union
For all the life on earth.'

Yet in Catholic prayers there is no parallel intimacy of relationship. The most well known example, the Ave Maria, addresses the Blessed Virgin formally and theologically as "Holy Mary, Mother of God". The invocation transcends the individual and stresses the community of the faithful when it continues "pray for *us* sinners now and at the our of *our* death" (emphasis added).

In other graffiti the term "senhora" was applied. The expression may be translated variously as "lady", "madam" or simply "Mrs", all of which imply motherhood in the absence of the alternative female designation of "senhorita" or "Miss". Once more the title was frequently accompanied by the singular possessive article.

The imagery is cultic when one thinks of various orixás being described as "lords" and "ladies" who intimately possess their *protégés.* After all initiates do not select their patrons at random. They are carefully chosen after consulting the babalorixá.

However, this form of address again stands in sharp contrast to the corresponding Catholic titles employing the communal mode, eg. Our Lady of the Rosary, Our Lady of Sorrows, Our Lady of Good Counsel, etc. The alternative Catholic title of "Queen" also suggests a more distant relationship, that between sovereign and subject.

Turning to the content of the messages, one observed an almost exclusive preoccupation with love and human relationships, the specific prerogative of Oxum. By contrast, Our Lady of Carmel has no such parallel sphere of influence.

' Help me in love with Carlos, because I am infatuated with him
' Help my marriage '
' Help my daughter '
' Help me to retain my love for Sidney '

Here the use of the first person predominates both as pronoun and adjective. One also notes the abandonment of the individual to the superior power with the invocation of "help".

In all these cases too supplicants are female. Such an inference extends to most other graffiti also, either from the content of the message, or from those instances where a women's name was appended, or again from the rare addition of the feminine form of thanks – "obrigada". (An interesting exception occurred where petitions had been authored by two lovers. Interestingly the girl's name appeared first, a reversal of both Catholic and secular orders with their traditional male bias. One also noted that only forenames were used – indicative of intimacy with Oxum – and that, whereas the female name was usually Christian, eg. Teresinha, that of the male was often secular, eg. Orlando, Adson, Fernando).

Now while it is true to say that there is a disproportionate attendance of women at Catholic churches, the point here is that those dedicated to Oxum, the "filhas", are exclusively female, and it is surely more than coincidence that such a preponderance is reflected in the authorship of the graffiti.

Two more examples illustrate the female bias:

' That my boyfriend Roberto be not tempted '

' May Luis be a perfect son and Irene a perfect daughter '

This time, however, the use of the subjunctive mood gives the requests the characteristics of the Catholic prayer of petition. Nevertheless, lest they be confused with such prayer, one hastens to add that in many cases a contract was implied or indicated. For instance one anonymous writer stated that:

' I will give you seven masses with candles if you grant me my objectives. '

Several points should be noted here. First, there is the customary salience of the first person singular. Second, the "do ut des" arrangement is similar to the 1–1 relationship established between magician and client, in which material, rather than spiritual, favours are sought in exchange for a gift. Such a relationship is a far cry from Catholic practice where in spiritual advantages (grace) are enjoyed by a community of believers through participation in the re-enactment of Calvary. Yet it is very close to the manipulationist, utilitarian and opportunistic attitudes of the xangozeiros (Motta 1977: 135; 1978: 148; 1979b: 235, 238) [25,26,28] who make offerings in return for material favours (Motta 1978: 151).[26] It is also very similar to the imitative magic of Candomblé with its "pade" (Bastide 1978: 194ss; Ramos 1951: 94), [2,32] and the openly declared magical content of Umbandan belief (Da Matta e Silva 1969)[12] deriving from the use of herbs, talismans, charms, potions and formulae of the Amerindians (Kiemen 1954; Métraux 1963). [21,23]

Third, the use of the number seven reinforces the magical interpretation of the cultist. In Umbanda, for instance, all the legions and phalanxes are subdivided by powers of seven (Da Matta e Silva 1969).[12] Bastide (1978): 446-8) [2] emphasises the use of seven in Candomblé, where festivals sometimes last as many days, and where songs to the orixás are arranged in multiples of seven (Carneiro 1978: 75).[9] More specifically, seven candles often feature in offerings to the gods (Bastos 1979: 151; Ortiz 1978: 81) [3,29] On the other hand, in Catholicism the number seven refers only to the sacraments; other references are of Judaic origin.

Fourth, the use of candles themselves is of great significance in xangô ceremonies (Motta 1975: 195),[24] as also in Umbanda (Dann 1979: 215).[11] Bastide (1978: 41)[2] observes that originally a candle for members of the black slave community often replaced the sacrifice of a cockrel or goat to a Yoruba or Dahomey divinity in anticipation of immediate temporal reward. By contrast, in Catholicism it makes little difference for purposes of efficacy of the mass whether candles are used or not. They are not so much essential ingredients of ritual, but rather symbolise Christ as the light of the world. That such an interpretation is absent from the mentality underpinning the graffiti suggests that the latter have been heavily penetrated by the worldview of the Afro-Brazilian cultist.

The magician-client relationship is further illustrated in two more examples:

' Give me happiness '

' Give me friends '

Here the demand is far bolder and less subtle. The stark request, although quite inappropriate in Catholic prayers of petition, which employ greater reverence, is arguably more understandable in terms of a contract in which the assymetric relationship of superordination and subordination disappears, only to be replaced by the equalising obligation of exchange. Even the plain "Give us this day our daily bread" of the Our Father is softened by the preamble "Hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." But in the above graffiti there is no evidence of praise and honour preceding the request.

Finally, two more graffiti relate specifically to protection:

' Protect my sons '

' Protect my mother '.

While such a theme is not absent from Catholic thought, (one thinks for instance of guardian angels), among cultists the orixás are regarded as mothers and fathers who look after the welfare of their offspring, whilst at the same time punishing their transgressions (Motta 1978: 146).[26] The "despacho de Exu" which precedes rituals in Xangô, Candomblé and Umbanda is precisely intended to drive out the forces of evil from the "terreiro" and place it under the protection of the gods. The various protective devices of the Tupí (Kiemen 1954; Métraux 1963) 21, 23 have their correspondence in Candomblé (Costa 1974) 10 and Umbanda (Da Matta e Silva 1969).[12] The specific protection of a family or love affair is thus quite consonant with the cult of Oxum. It is less likely to be associated with Our Lady of Carmel.

(b) *Nosso Senhor do Bonfim*

Just as the graffiti of Nossa Senhora do Carmo had a common theme (that of love, marriage and the family), which supported the contention that the mentality of Oxum had penetrated that particular shrine, so too the messages of Nosso Senhor do Bonfim shared a unified focus. Here, however, the preoccupation was with death, disaster and illness, the domain of Oxalá as Lord of Creation.

Unlike the case of Oxum, who was addressed in an intimate fashion, graffiti directed to Oxalá were discovered to be either totally lacking in any title, or else they employed a formal designation such as "Senhor" or "Deus". There was an absence of the term "father" as in the "Pater Noster". Nor were prayers directed to the Son, Jesus. Occasionally the faithful used the formal "vos" or "thee" in their messages.

The reticence in identifying the divinity serves to emphasize the respect due to him. More importantly, however, it lends weight to the suggestion that here the greatest of all orixás was being addressed. A similar situation can be found among the Jews, who had numerous synonyms for Jehovah, so reluctant were they to utter the sacred name. By contrast, Catholics often invoke the Holy Name in an informal manner, particularly when addressing prayers to Jesus. Yet here in the church of Bonfim, where countless opportunities existed for following suite, there was absence of familiarity. The implication is clear — the

cultic mentality had so invaded the petitions that Oxalá had penetrated the Lord of the Good End.

Yet the lack of familiarity in the graffiti may seem strange when one appreciates that cultists often employ a term synonymous with "daddy" when referring to Oxalá (Carneiro 1978: 64).[9] The expressions "Epâ babá" and "Exê ê Babá" are common forms of salutation for Obatalá in Afro-Brazilian cults (Bastos 1979: 162; Cacciatore 1977: 211; Costa 1974: 36; Maia 1978: 68; Ribeiro 1969: 103)[3, 7, 10, 22, 33] In Umbanda Oxalá is frequently referred to as "father", as for instance in the following verse:

> ' Meu pai Oxalá é o rei
> Venha me valer.' (De Freitas et al. 1965: 88)[14]

In baptism, wedding and funeral ceremonies the babalaô also calls upon "Father Oxalá" to bless those present (Bastos 1979: 145-50).[3]

The above paradox is resolved, however, when one examines the content of the messages themselves. In most cases they referred to a past event rather than the present of future. In other words, they were messages of thanks or praise. They did not invoke the deity to perform some task, as in a prayer of petition. By contrast, in many cultic ceremonies Oxalá is addressed by the priest. He is called upon to protect, bless, or to carry out a specific request. Such is often the manipulationist nature of the interaction that a more familiar form of address is employed when asking a favour. Once the favour has been granted, however, the contract ceases and an assymetric relationship obtains in which Oxalá assumes the position of superordination and familiar titles disappear. Thus Oxalá is treated with greater respect once a successful outcome has materialised, the situation for the faithful at Nosso Senhor do Bonfim.

An example should help illustrate the point. One inscription went as follows:

> ' I thank thee for the graces received, because in a very difficult moment of my life I turned to thee and encountered the necessary help.'

In the first place, we can note the use of the formal "vós", an expression of deep respect. Secondly, the event was a critical period of the individual's past life, and for that reason the person turned to the Principle of Life, the Lord of Creation. Thirdly, the outcome was successful. Consequently thanks were offered to the divinity for granting the favour. The gratitude placed the supplicant in a subordinate position, similar to that of the receiver of a gift. Hence the formality of address. Had the graffiti been directed towards Jesus, one imagines that the message would have been more intimate and employed more colloquial expressions. The fact that it did not, suggests that Oxalá had subsumed Nosso Senhor do Bonfim.

The relative superiority of Oxalá to Oxum, and the concomitant attitude of reverence, has the inevitable effect of distancing the supplicants from the divinity. Consequently the faithful may have sensed a greater need in the Bonfim situation to accompany their petitions with images, to reassure themselves, as it were, that they were communicating effectively with the godhead. (By contrast, the more intimate discourse with Our Lady of Mount Carmel did not require the support of visual material).

For this reason it was not surprising to find many of the Bonfim graffiti alongside photographs, drawings and newspaper clippings. For example, there were several pictures illustrating the connection between life and death. Among the popular scenes were those of hospitals, of patients coughing blood, and of seemingly hopeless bedridden cases beyond the skills of physicians.

In one instance there was a newspaper account of a plane crash in which there were few survivors. A grateful escapist from otherwise inevitable destruction had written:

> I was saved by God whom I called upon
> in the hour of my disaster.'

Again one observes the reference to a past event, the fact that the divinity has been invoked and had responded to the petition, the successful outcome, and consequently the use of the formal "Deus" rather than "Father". It is also interesting to note that salvation was considered in material terms, in opposition to the orthodox Catholic emphasis on spiritual redemption. There is also the associated use of the first person: "I was saved", "I called", and "my hour". Once more one detects a client-magician relationship.

The connection between religion and magic comes out more clearly in another example. Here the author wrote:

> ' O miraculous image of Our Lord of the Good End.
> I offer (this) as proof of my true faith, in having escaped with my life.'

Alongside the message was the picture of a truck turned upside down on the roadside. The already familiar themes reappear. The prayer of praise, the formal title, the use of the first person singular, the reference to life, and the successful outcome in terms of material salvation.

However, the most fascinating feature of the graffiti is the reference to the *image* of Nosso Senhor do Bomfim rather than to God himself. Moreover, it is this image which is reputed to possess miraculous powers. For Catholics such a position would be irreconcilable with mainstream teaching. Yet the same phenomenon would pose few problems for Afro-Brazilian cultists, whose terreiros are often adorned with Catholic pictures and statues (Velho 1977: 166).[39] Certainly such images provide a veneer of orthodoxy for cultists whose temples are raided by the police. At the same time, however, they also serve as symbols of magical power. For this reason "the miraculous image of Our Lord of the Good End" maybe represents the mana of Oxalá rather than simply a member of the Blessed Trinity.

Identification with Oxalá was further reinforced in those messages linking death with war, and in accompanying illustrations depicting young men on their way to battle. In this connection we have noted already the origin of the Bonfim washing ceremony as a form of thanks for protection. As Bastide (1978: 276)[2] points out, this rite was adopted by blacks "to honour the old one". Consequently, he argues, it could hardly have been directed towards Christ, who died at the age of thirty three, but was instead in praise of Oxalá. The image of war is also appropriate to the primordial conflicts with which Oxalá was associated: the dispute between himself and Odudua as to who

created the world (Bastide 1978: 199-200),[2] the legendary journey to Xangô (Maia 1978: 69)[22] and the feudal image of Obatalá as a knight of Olorum (Bastos 1979: 15).[3] In Umbanda mediums are even described as "soldiers of Oxalá (De Oliveira n. d : 76).[15]

The number seven also featured among the graffiti of Bonfim. We have already alluded to the significance of this number for Afro-Brazilian cults. Its reappearance here is additional indirect support for the view that Oxalá has penetrated the Lord of the Good End.

Finally brief mention should be made of the "ex votos" adorning the Bonfim shrine. These comprised heart-shaped metallic plaques, often expressing thanks for a grace received and bearing the name of the supplicant, together with plastic representations of the requested favour (eg. replicas of parts of the body: heads, arms, legs, etc. and miniatures of houses, cars, boats, etc.).

While the phenomenon of "ex votos" is quite commonplace in Latin American folk Catholicism (Büntig 1970),[5] it tends to figure more prominently in the context of miraculous religious shrines than in famous churches less renowned for granting favours. In other words, the more the requests move from the spiritual to the material domain, the closer such religion approaches the realm of magic.

However, as we have seen, in the cult situation belief in magic is not something peripheral; it is an essential characteristic. According to Motta (1978: 146),[26] the cultist's religious behaviour is entirely centred on the orixás, to please them and to secure protection for all circumstances of life. Furthermore, Motta (1978: 155)[26] adds that belief in an orixá becomes synonymous with a contractual relationship in which both parties exchange gifts. Consequently, the instruments of transaction, ie. rocks, shells, pieces of metal, items of food, etc. take on a far greater significance than a statue or picture, which merely stand for a divinity or saint (Motta 1978: 154-5)[26] In the case of food offerings and sacrifices to the orixás an imitative magic is followed. The fact that Oxum, for instance, is offered eggs and bananas clearly associates her with reproduction. The seniority of Oxalá is similarly implied with the realisation that all meat and produce destined to him is traditionally light or white. The imitation continues where parts of animals are offered. Here Costa (1974 : 138)[10] indicates that the animal's feet are associated with the supplicant's walking. By a similar token, an offering of a head is considered to stimulate thought, a tail to give direction to life, and the heart in order to bestow vitality.

Seen in this light, the replicas of various bodily organs surrounding the shrine of Bonfim assume a cultic significance beyond that associated with mere folk Catholicism. Arguably they represent the mentality of the cult of orixás under the external guise of the Catholic devotion to saints.

3. REFLECTIONS

Thus far it has been suggested that the graffiti and their accompanying representations are largely directed to orixás under the guise of devotion to Catholic saints. As such, it is argued, they provide further evidence of syncretism

between Catholicism and Afro cults in Brazil. Moreover, the method selected, that of unobtrusive measurement, may yeld greater validity than the social scientific alternatives of the interview and questionnaire, since we are dealing with an intimate area of people's lives in which the admission of cult membership to an outsider might signify greater loss of face than identification with a more respectable established religion. Indeed the likelihood that cultist belief has accommodated itself to the point of hiding behind Catholic saints supports the view that accretion analysis is a more viable procedure for unmasking the camouflage than direct questioning.

However, we still have not answered the question why it is *necessary* for adherents of Candomblé, Xangô and Umbanda to record their petitions and messages of gratitude at Catholic shrines. Surely they can obtain their favours by direct recourse to orixás by means of their own efficacious ritual.

In this writer's opinion such an objection neglects the overriding phenomenon of syncretism, since by a similar token cultists could practise their faith without any contact whatsoever with Catholicism. Yet, as we have seen, historically the interpenetration of church and "terreiro", and its carryover to the present, has made syncretism a contemporary fact of Brazilian life. Bastide (1978: 262ss, 389ss) [2] speaks at length of the adoption of Catholic symbols in Afro-Brazilian cults. According to him, there is a two-way process of exchange – aryanization and africanization – which takes place at the morphological, institutional and normative, levels. At the morphological level one finds the Catholic altar entering the "terreiro" and the use of both pictures and statues. (He could also have added graffiti to his list). Institutionally, Catholic fraternities encroach upon other forms of black relationships. At the normative level the mass becomes part of the initiation rite. In other words, at the aryanization stage, there is a "whitening" of black religion, in which Catholic symbols infiltrate the practice of that religion. At this stage parallels between Afro cults and Catholicism are easily discernible structurally, culturally and socially. As an example of structural parallelism Bastide cites the intrusion of the Catholic hierarchy of intercession into the cult of orixás. Culturally, a correspondence between saints and orixás is established. Just as saints are identified with specific causes, so too can orixás be seen presiding over various forces of nature. The social parallel is similar to the above institutional level, where brotherhoods and sodalities aryanize the black framework of "nations".

However, this process is neither static or unidirectional. The Catholicizing of African religion is not so thorough or deep rooted as to change the black memory with its system of collective representations. Thus, while certain organisational changes take place, these are followed in turn by an Africanizing of the newly introduced elements from Catholicism. The saint is therefore never *identified* with the orixá, but becomes the *symbol* of the orixá (Bastide: 1978: 390). [2]

Thus the madonna, which had originally penetrated African religions, to the extent that her statue and picture were used by cultists, was never *identified* with Oxum. Certainly the syncretism was there, but it had not pervaded the African *mentality*. Rather, Our Lady had become Africanized to the point

where she became a useful device for intercession with the orixás. A double symbolism is thus encountered. Firstly Our Lady of Carmel stands for Oxum, conjures up the image of Oxum, and calls forth the collective representations associated with Oxum. Secondly, the use of invocations "mother","mummy", "good mother", etc., while clearly not referring to the natural mother of the petitioner, nevertheless symbolize a divine relationship in anthropomorphic terms. The significant earthly relationship of child to mother is thus transferred to Oxum as a sign of honour and intimacy. The former acknowledges her rank in the sacred hierarchy of orixás. The latter refers to the indwelling of the orixá — "the gift of the head".

A similar interpretation can be provided for Oxalá. Here his supreme position is *signified* by absence of title. Had devotion simply been paid to Jesus, arguably a different symbolism would have ensued. However, where the term of address is omitted, there is a compensatory set of symbols in the form of pictures and "ex votos". These are not just testimonies of miracles wrought on behalf of the faithful. They jointly *represent* the power of Oxalá the Creator, particularly his power over life and death. Moreover, it is a power which exceeds that normally associated with Our Lord, who, being the second person of the Trinity, is not linked in popular belief with the act of creation. That role is usually assigned to God the Father.

The graffiti and their accompanying images thus constitute a vast system of symbols which serve to reinforce each other mutually at different levels. The theme of love in the messages to Oxum goes deeper than the association with Our Lady as the mother of the faithful. It symbolically expresses a desire for love in human terms to the divine patroness of love, a personage both distant and close, transcendent and immanent.

Symbols of their very nature are outward signs of one or more ulterior realities. In the case at hand, the graffiti signify a relationship with the orixás. At the same time, however, they may be portraying the earthly condition which *necessitates* a turning towards the supernatural. In other words, the symbols may both contain and signify their own explanations.

Acceptance of such an hypothesis can certainly enhance our understanding of religious graffiti. More specifically, Motta 1979a 5)[27] believes that a cult such as Xangô exists as a response to the problems of urban life which have been inadequately tackled by the State (Motta 1977: 121-6).[25] Xangô is thus seen as a "truque adaptativo" (Motta 1979a : 7),[27] in which the orixás help in the spheres of health, wealth and employment (Motta 1978: 151).[26] Furthermore, its success is bolstered by the corresponding failure of Catholicism to deal with the problems of poverty, immigration (Burns 1970),[6] malnutrition (Gallet 1972),[19] disease (Willems 1965)[41] and inadequate housing (Câmara 1968).[8] Alternatively stated, Afro cults, unlike their Christian counterpart, have always been practical in outlook; in Motta's (1977: 121)[25] words, good for eating, organising and thinking. They cater to everyday needs with their system of orixás, each of which has a particular area of specialisation. Originally, in the pre-slavery situation, recourse was made to the orixás either directly or through the intervention of the priest. After contact with the New

World, however, the slaves had to accommodate the religion of their ancestors to European values. They did this by inwardly retaining their system of collective representations while outwardly honouring Catholic saints. Under this hypothesis the graffiti therefore *appear* to be directed to the Blessed Virgin and her Son, but *in reality* they turn towards Oxum and Oxalá. The content of the messages reveals that they deal with the respective practical concerns of love and health.

Nevertheless it can be objected that one does not require a cult to respond to the problems of everyday life. In the above cases surely all that is necessary are the services of a marriage counseller and medical practitioner. After all, we are living in the twentieth century in which the forces of secularisation have relegated the shaman and priest to the sanctuary. No longer are these intermediaries expected to be local leaders, politicians, lawyers and physicians.

True, the objection has certain face validity. Its weakness, however, lies in its failure to appreciate the context of the pressures of an urban shanty existence. Here a dominating penury often precludes the possibility of professional consultation. In Recife, for instance, Motta (1977: 121-6)[25] tells us that there is very rapid population growth, 53% are under the age of 19, 30% of adults are either unemployed or underemployed, and 95.1% are reckoned to live below the international poverty line. In such despairing circumstances, he argues, it surely makes more sense to avail oneself a *free* services provided by a religion which has both therapeutic and psychoanalytic functions (Motta 1975: 191).[24] Interpreted in this light, the messages of the graffiti are pleas for supernatural or magical help in the context of natural disaster. As Bastide (1978: 397)[2] remarks:

> ' Any society that distinguishes between the strong
> and the weak tends to set great store by magic,
> which is, of course, one of the few weapons
> available to the weak. '

Finally the graffiti may be considered as symbols of identity and power (a consideration, incidentally, which does not exclude the previous interpretations).

Originally the relationship between divinity and terrestrial subject was viewed as one of patronage (Brown 1979: 297-9),[4] one easily accommodated to the Catholic notions of patron saint and guardian angel during the period of slavery. At the same time, however, the actual obtaining of favours brought a certain measure of ego enhancement to the subject, one denied by alternative means. Thus Bastide (1978: 378-80)[2] is able to argue quite convincingly that not only did Afro cults provide the necessary solidarity in the transition from slavery to free labour, but they supplied status otherwise denied by society to the black masses.

Seen from this perspective, the power of the cultist, derived from the mana of the orixás, can be interpreted as a symbolic reversal of the relationships of superordination and subordination obtaining in the society at large (Willems 1965).[41] Thus, with the power of Oxalá at their disposal, the slaves could envisage themselves overthrowing their masters and of upsetting the assymetry

between the senzala and casa grande. Today they have the potential of transforming the inequalities associated with urban deprivation.

Turning to the graffiti, we may observe the power of the supplicant in the contractual nature of the relationship and the manipulationist orientation of the petition. Particularly in the Bonfim collection, where there is evidence of requests having been granted, do we see a display of power by the cultists. They have been specially favoured by Oxalá (and for this they must have an affective and effective relationship), and so they exhibit their new found status symbolically with pictures, waxen images, hearts, trinkets and abandoned crutches. Materially disadvantaged they may be, but their spiritual elevation more than compensates for this. Consequently they can talk to their orixás on more or less equal terms, as can be seen in the graffiti, both in their forms of address and the content of the messages.

In conclusion, an analysis of the content and symbolism of the graffiti of Nossa Senhora do Carmo and Nosso Senhor do Bonfim leads one to the position that such inscriptions cannot just be considered the work of devout Catholics pure and simple. There may be Catholics, cultists, those that practise both, and those that use one as a front for the other. Whatever their origin, one thing is surely clear. The early syncretism of Afro-Brazilian religion, although currently displayed in a less manifest way, is still as strong today as ever.

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