CADERNOS EBAPE.BR 20 YEARS

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ARTICLE

"I respect your amen, do you respect my axé?": an ethnographic study on candomblé terreiros as resistance organizations in the light of a decolonial perspective

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Abstract

This article aims to understand how candomblé *terreiros* organize themselves as resistance to religious racism. Therefore, we developed an ethnographic research in a Candomblé Center of the Ketu Axé Oxumaré nation, located in Belo Horizonte (MG). Data from the interviews were submitted to narrative analysis. The results suggest that candomblé is perceived by the members of the casa de santo as a strategy, an organization for not only physical survival but also for subaltern lifestyles. It is about the resistance of Afro-Brazilian culture, an anti-colonial resistance that promotes, through religion, the political belonging of affirmation of blackness. It is a decolonial organization of survival, maintenance, and, above all, the perpetuation of traditions and ways of life in neglected, debased, denied, and subalternized *terreiros* by coloniality.

Keywords: Decoloniality. Resistance. Candomblé. Ethnography. Religious racism.

"Eu Respeito seu amém, você respeita meu axé?": um estudo etnográfico sobre terreiros de candomblé como organizações de resistência à luz de um olhar decolonial

Resumo

Este artigo tem como objetivo compreender como os terreiros de candomblé se organizam como resistência perante o racismo religioso. Para tanto, desenvolvemos uma pesquisa etnográfica em um centro de candomblé da nação Ketu Axé Oxumaré, localizado em Belo Horizonte (MG). Os dados das entrevistas foram submetidos à análise de narrativas. Os resultados sugerem que o candomblé é percebido pelos integrantes da casa de santo como uma estratégia, uma organização de sobrevivência não só física, mas também de estilos de vida subalternos. Trata-se da resistência da cultura afro-brasileira, uma resistência anticolonial que promove, por meio da religião, a pertença política de afirmação da negritude; de uma organização decolonial de sobrevivência, de manutenção e, sobretudo, de perpetuação de tradições e modos de vida nos terreiros negligenciados, aviltados, negados e subalternizados pela colonialidade.

Palavras-chave: Decolonialidade. Resistência. Candomblé. Etnografia. Racismo religioso.

"¿Yo respeto tu amén, tú respetas mi axé?": un estudio etnográfico sobre los terreros de candomblé como organizaciones de resistencia a la luz de una perspectiva decolonial

Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo comprender cómo los terreros de candomblé se organizan como resistencia al racismo religioso. Para ello, desarrollamos una investigación etnográfica en un centro de candomblé de la nación Ketu Axé Oxumaré, ubicado en Belo Horizonte (MG). Los datos de las entrevistas se sometieron al análisis narrativo. Los resultados sugieren que el candomblé es percibido por los miembros de la casa de santo como una estrategia, una organización no solo para la supervivencia física, sino también para los estilos de vida subalternos. Se trata de la resistencia de la cultura afrobrasileña, una resistencia anticolonial que promueve, a través de la religión, la pertenencia política de afirmación de la negritud. Es una organización decolonial de sobrevivencia, mantenimiento y, sobre todo, perpetuación de tradiciones y modos de vida en terreros desatendidos, envilecidos, negados y subalternizados por la colonialidad.

Palabras clave: Decolonialidad. Resistencia. Candomblé. Etnografía. Racismo religioso.

Article submitted on June 10, 2022 and accepted for publication on October 07, 2022.

[Translated version] Note: All quotes in English translated by this article's translator.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1590/1679-395120220149x

INTRODUCTION

The marginalization of Afro-Brazilian matrix religions is still quite evident in Brazil, where a high degree of violence persists against their followers, symbols, and institutions through acts perpetrated by the general population and the State. Aggressions, attacks, and vandalization of places of worship associated with these religions and symbols occur on a daily basis. Although religious intolerance has been outlawed in Brazil since the second half of the 20th century (Lei nº 9.459, de 13 de maio de 1997), the number of reports and notifications at police stations has increased exponentially in recent years, even if considering the underreporting and the challenges of recording such claims, which are often typified as "vandalism" (Fonseca & Adad, 2016). For example, in the state of São Paulo, reports of religious intolerance have tripled in the last five years. Among the victims, 62% claim to profess Afro-Brazilian matrix religions, such as Umbanda or Candomblé (Preite, 2022).

The Afro-Brazilian religions *terreiros* (places of worship) are perceived as marginal spaces integrating marginalized bodies. Therefore, they are typically built and managed far from urban centers since they are still regarded as a threat or nuisance to Brazilian society. Indeed, the historical processes of arrival, existence, and permanence of certain religions in Brazilian territory still influence the spaces belonging to different religious groups in society to this very day, in a scenario where Christian religions enjoy great visibility in urban areas, materialized by the monumentality of their temples and buildings. In contrast, Afro-Brazilian matrix religions remain hidden or discretely characterized in Brazilian cities (T. F. Nascimento & Costa, 2019). That is, unlike Christian churches, for example, which occupy prominent spots in urban geography, the Candomblé *terreiros* are marginalized, which is compatible with the social place occupied by these faiths in this society.

Furthermore, established in the scope of a certain matrix of knowledge and a civilizing paradigm, the Afro-Brazilian religions are part of a tradition of local and subaltern knowledge, which have coexisted and resisted the imposition of a Christian Eurocentric culture. As the decolonial perspective points out, these religions deeply question the white Western epistemological framework in which the theories and concepts of gender, race, sexuality, economy, and humanity have been grounded (Torres, 2021), as will be explained later. Indeed, this is the same understanding of Quijano (2005, p. 118) since, according to the author, "in America, the idea of race was a way of granting legitimacy to the relations of domination imposed by the conquest." The fact is that the pattern of Eurocentric capitalist modernity, founded on the imposition of a racial/ethnic/gender/economic/political/cultural hierarchization of the population on a global level, has continued to deem those who are allegedly outside this center as inferior (Grosfoguel, 2008). For example, Candomblé, due to its African roots, constitutes itself as alternative knowledge to the colonial matrix. The transmission of knowledge within its *terreiros* produces yet another form of sociability, and this religion constitutes an alternative to the colonial matrix of power (Nunes, 2018).

Furthermore, Candomblé goes against the long-standing patriarchal, class, and racial structures that constitute capitalist modernity and resists and confronts privileged agents by revealing an increasingly stratified reality. That is, it tries to create counterrevolutionary dynamics contrary to a field engaged by the majority (Faria, Abdalla, & Guedes, 2021).

Thus, the history of the *terreiro* peoples in Brazil shows that they need to permanently preserve certain conditions of resistance and survival, whether in the face of State attacks or those resulting from conservatism, prejudice, and religious racism cultivated by part of Brazilian society. Indeed, to be a follower of an Afro-Brazilian religion in Brazil is an act of resistance. The *terreiros* are where the predominantly Black communities organize themselves, propose local actions and improvements, and build a solid cooperation network. The possibility of continuation of these spaces is housed in the resistance of their groups so that one can seek alternatives that contribute to tackling the racism and conventionalisms that revolve around these religions, especially in the space of the *terreiros* (T. F. Nascimento & Costa, 2019).

These processes and the increasingly prominent need to problematize the organizational context of religions in management and organizational studies are considered here since this theme has still been sparsely discussed in the area (Enoque, A. F. Borges, & J. F. Borges, 2016; Flausino, Medeiros, & Valadão, 2018; Tracey, Phillips, & Lounsbury, 2014). Therefore, this study aims to understand how Candomblé *terreiros* are organized as centers of resistance against religious racism. To this end, we developed ethnographic research in a Candomblé center of the Ketu Axé Oxumaré nation, located in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil, based on different field research techniques, such as participant observation, photos, videos, participation in

WhatsApp groups, interviews, and embodied practices. Additionally, an ethnographic diary and a logbook of impressions were prepared, with entries written after each day spent by one of the authors on-site. Additionally, meetings and events held by the Candomblé center were recorded and logged, along with 30 in-person interviews conducted with other members of the *terreiro*. Interview data were subsequently subjected to narrative analysis (Bastos & Biar, 2015).

COLONIALITY AND ITS ARTICULATION WITH AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIONS AS R-EXISTENCES

In recent years, despite the growing academic interest in decolonial theories, their concrete relationship to religious organizations and their formative role in constituting the modernity/coloniality system have yet to be systematically theorized (Yountae, 2020). Initially, it is worth noting the differences in meaning between the terms "colonization," "colonialism," and "coloniality." Despite the intrinsic relationship between such processes, colonization and colonialism are dated historical phenomena manifested in various territories during imperial expansions. Coloniality, on the other hand, can be understood, in the scope of this article, as the underlying logic of the foundation and unfolding of Western civilization that goes beyond the particularities of historical colonialism while seeking to explain the continuity of colonial forms of domination and exploitation since they do not disappear following independence movements or the end of colonialism (Mignolo, 2017; Quijano, 2005). Instead, it has to do with what was established by colonial violence, which continues until today, as religious racism will be characterized throughout this section.

The concept of coloniality refers to the ideas of Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano (2005), who developed it to understand the historical context of inequality in Latin America based on three axes: power, knowledge, and being. Coloniality of power can be understood as a process that has structured the modern/colonial world system that translates the power dynamics employed in the organization, division, and hierarchization of societies, aiding the interpretation of different colonial forms of domination and exploitation beyond colonization (Quijano, 2005, 2013). In this context, crucial in Quijano's (2005, 2013) analysis is the colonial use or invention of race as a category of social classification and racial hierarchization of peoples into inferior/superior to maintain domination through the control of the labor of subaltern peoples. Race, therefore, operates as the primary tool for demarcating colonial differences.

In the context of the coloniality of power, the dominated and subaltern populations have their identity submitted to the Eurocentric hegemony, which ultimately defines what knowledge is. Thus, the coloniality of knowledge (Lander, 2005) is articulated in the axis of the coloniality of power and refers to the hegemonic domination of Eurocentric thinking, which implies epistemological mutilation by denying and invalidating non-Eurocentric knowledge.

In turn, the coloniality of being can be understood as "the lived experience of colonization and its impact on language" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 130). That is, it denotes the internalization of the subalternity and inferiority of the non-European subject. Accordingly, with the colonization of America and the Caribbean, social classifications were imposed whose racial identity was associated with hierarchies, places, and social roles that responded to a pattern of domination of the colonized ones on behalf of the Western man, in which the European identity – specifically the heterosexual/white/patriarchal/ Christian/ military/capitalist/European man – is regarded as superior to that of non-European peoples and cultures (perceived as the "others"), hence consolidating the hegemonic European culture (Grosfoguel, 2008). Moreover, the construction of a view of hierarchization and superiority of Europe and Europeans guarantees and legitimates several types of violence, such as racism, imperialism, and dogmatic views of the other (Said, 2007), especially those situated at the opposite end of this representation of being, in the colonial exteriority, who have been rendered silenced and subaltern.

For Dussel (2000), Mignolo (2000), and Maldonado-Torres (2014a, 2014b), in addition to race as a fundamental constitutive element of coloniality that shapes social relations, the emergence of the modern/colonial imaginary of Europe must be articulated to the notion of religion, especially since both were formative elements in the invention of the Americas as Europe's "other." In this sense, the impact of religion in colonial Americas stretches far beyond the well-known history of Christianity's missionary activities. As pointed out by Yountae (2020, p. 3), "since the first colonial encounter, religion has served as the metaphysical backbone of colonial governance, which was not a mere imposition of political structures and cultural norms, but a cosmological one."

Therefore, coloniality implies not only sacrificing and denying others based on categories such as race, gender, and sex, for example, but also for being non-Christian. According to Lundell (2020), to understand religious racism in contemporary Brazil and the notion of the country as a Catholic nation, it is vital to address the colonial heritage and long-standing historical prejudices in the country, legitimized by eugenics, which adopted Catholic Christianity as the crown of religious evolution. The author also highlights that intolerance and violence against Afro-Brazilian religions have occurred in Brazil since colonial times when enslaved Africans did not enjoy the right to worship their deities and traditions while being forced to learn the Portuguese language, European customs, and adhere to Catholicism, which was the only officially accepted religion at the time. In that period, all religious expressions of various African origins were repressed and forbidden, although they were cultivated and hidden under the umbrella of Catholicism. Even after the abolition of slavery and the declaration of Brazil as a secular state by the new constitution in the 1890s, Afro-Brazilian religious remained criminalized and persecuted by the police until the mid-1960s (Lundell, 2020; Silva, 2014).

Thus, coloniality, in its various axes, materializes in the social imaginary, establishing a hierarchization also of religious expressions, in which Christian ones – such as Catholicism, which is officially recognized and legitimated in Brazil – are regarded as superior, while it demeans and subordinates other religions, especially those of the Afro-Brazilian matrix (Lundell, 2020; W. F. Nascimento, 2017), as is the case of Candomblé. In this sense, Franco and Dias (2021) state that we can consider religion as an intersectional marker that, while legitimizing and reproducing forms of oppression, establishes itself, in the context of intersectionalities, as a locus in which subalternity markers are manifested, interrelated to elements such as race, gender, class, nationality, among others, and is a fertile ground for the proliferation of counter-hegemonic insurgencies.

For W. F. Nascimento (2017), the subalternization and demeaning of Afro-Brazilian matrix religions occur because these fail to correspond to the Euro-ethnocentric status of Christianity through the violent attempt to extirpate what is different (the "others") from social coexistence and even as a punishment to submit the other to the values and beliefs imposed by the hegemonic social contexts. In other words, besides being regarded as inferior, Afro-Brazilian religions have also been exoticized and demonized for holding non-Christian beliefs or dissociating from European culture, which somewhat served and still serves as a "divine" justification to persecute, violate, and annihilate such religious expressions in Brazil.

The author also adds that the demeaning and violence against certain expressions and people linked to Afro-Brazilian religions also stem from racism since these cults are predominantly attended by Black people and incorporate African and indigenous elements and symbols. According to W. F. Nascimento (2017) and Nogueira (2020), much of the physical and symbolic violence against people of Afro-Brazilian religions should not be typified as religious intolerance but as manifestations of religious racism since it is grounded in coloniality, which has racialized and hierarchized people, knowledge, beliefs, regions, and ways of life. Indeed, the very exoticization and demonization of Afro-Brazilian religions often derive from racism under coloniality. That is, religious racism is grounded in the colonial creation of the race category on the American continent as a strategy for the domination of enslaved peoples, as seen much in Brazilian slaveholding. Moreover, by creating a world duality consisting of two distinct poles, namely civilization (the Europeans) versus barbarism (the colonized peoples), Eurocentrism imprinted several characteristics in the Brazilian social imaginary, which until today labels beliefs of people of African origin as inferior and barbaric (N. V. E. Fernandes, 2017).

Thus, religious racism characterizes the actions of discrimination/intolerance against Afro-Brazilian religions since the Africanness of the practices associated with the racist colonial historical context is one of the primary motivations of the perpetrated actions (Sanz, 2012).

Grosfoguel (2016) points out that religious racism was the first racist component of the patriarchal, Eurocentric, Christian, modern, and colonialist world system, constituted during the 16th century and even before "color racism" emerged. According to the author, upon the conquest of the Americas, the colonized peoples were already classified and hierarchized by the European colonizers as "people with or without religion" or "people with or without a soul." Indeed, those who did not adhere to any religion were considered soulless and inhuman, that is, animals. As a result, the Church and the Spanish imperialist State enslaved various Indigenous peoples since they assumed they were soulless and, therefore, should be Christianized by the Church. Later, starting with the enslavement of African peoples, color racism complemented – or slowly replaced – religious racism (Grosfoguel, 2016).

Religious racism is understood in this paper as the projection of the "color racism" dynamics to African and indigenous expressions present in Afro-Brazilian matrix religions. Indeed, through this process, certain religions are discriminated against (W. F. Nascimento, 2017). According to Nogueira (2020, p. 123), "religious racism wants to kill existences, eliminate beliefs, erase memories, and render origins silent."

Several studies have denounced religious racism and different forms of violence against Afro-Brazilian religions in contemporary Brazil (see Cerqueira & Boaz, 2021; F. B. M. Fernandes, 2013; W. F. Nascimento, 2017; Lui, 2008; Lundell, 2020; Miranda, 2020; Santos, 2009; Sousa, 2021). F. B. M. Fernandes (2013) points to lethal violence perpetrated against transvestites and homosexual men associated with Afro-Brazilian religions in Brazil. Lui (2008), Lundell (2020), and Miranda (2020) describe the sharp increase in discrimination against followers of Afro-Brazilian religions promoted by Neo-Pentecostal churches, such as the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. Sousa (2021) points out how a Candomblé *terreiro* in Salvador (BA) was harassed by a neighboring resident, who filed fictitious or exaggerated complaints to the authorities, using the State's power to support his religious racism. W. F. Nascimento (2017) also revealed prejudiced attitudes, murders, invasion, depredation, and arson of *terreiros*, physical and psychological harassment, and the destruction of divinized symbols. Indeed, the author states that religious racism is the primary cause of the increase in violence against Afro-Brazilian religions in Brazil.

This is why Afro-Brazilian religions, such as Candomblé and Umbanda, can be considered a form of anticolonial resistance of religious communities in Latin America (Nunes, 2018; Sansi & Parés, 2012; Santos, 2009; Yountae, 2020). After all, they resist coloniality culturally and politically, as the latter continues to silence, stigmatize, and render them subaltern. W. F. Nascimento (2017) states that not only the problem of racism but also the character of resistance – to racism, coloniality, and chauvinism – are vital to understanding the violence against territories and people associated with Afro-Brazilian matrix religions.

In another study, W. F. Nascimento (2016) points out how traditions and way of life in *terreiros* linked to Afro-Brazilian religions have resisted by maintaining and rebuilding a corpus of spiritualities inherited from African peoples allied to indigenous elements. The author also points out how the "market" understanding in Candomblé *terreiros* – constituted by experiences of caring and solidary community relations, not as a place of accumulation that often involves expropriation and exploitation – is distinguished while resisting the competitive ideas of capitalist markets. Along these lines, Nunes (2018) describes Candomblé as anticolonial resistance:

> In a Candomblé *terreiro*, we can find, besides religion, a worldview, values, practices, and ways of relating to what is sacred and to nature. These are different from Christianity and the Western matrix because Candomblé perceives other human beings as part of a great living organism, a network of correspondence between the *orixás*, nature, and humans, building itself out of the binarism involving mind/body, reason/emotion, individual/nature, and sacred/everyday. Thus, it presents possibilities to think about the construction and transmission of knowledge as another epistemology, which resists the Western way of thinking, a stance towards life, an immanent mode that does not situate the being outside nature and considers a network of relationships between beings and nature (Nunes, 2018, p. 217).

In this study, resistance is closely related to the notion of "decolonial turn," which refers to the theoretical, practical, political, and epistemological resistance movement against the logic of modernity/coloniality (Ballestrin, 2013). Therefore, to resist neocolonial forms of domination and violence is to create or enable something improper to the modern/colonial world system to be created or r-exist. Thus, "more than resistance, what we have is r-existence, since one does not simply react to another's action, but rather, something pre-exists, and it is from this existence that one r-exists. I exist; therefore, I resist. I r-exist" (Porto-Gonçalves, 2010, p. 51). Mignolo (2007) and Grosfoguel and Mignolo (2008) corroborate the idea of a decolonial resistance that goes beyond mere resistance as r-existence; that is, critical and creative action taken together with the ongoing global processes of decoloniality.

THE PATHS TAKEN

To achieve the primary objective of this study, we conducted qualitative empirical research since this design allows us to understand the subjectivities in the researched space, which encompasses beliefs, symbols, values, and meanings behind the subjects' actions. Ethnography (Burawoy, 1979) was chosen to support the qualitative research. Indeed, the emphasis here is on understanding the behaviors, beliefs, customs, and other characteristics of specific social groups since it is a way of seeing (Wolcott, 1999) that requires sustained immersion in a given community. This implies conducting in-depth research very closely to the reality of those being addressed.

The ethnographic work was conducted in a Candomblé center of the Ketu Axé Oxumaré nation, in the city of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil, where one of the authors of this article took the role of observer/participant since he is a member and novice practitioner of this religion himself. It is worth pointing out that the name of the *terreiro* and its specific location in the city have been omitted in this paper, not only to preserve the confidentiality of the data and the research subjects but also because we understand that disclosing its name and more precise location may give room for new acts of violence to be perpetrated against the center and its members.

The choice for conducting this research in this *terreiro* was supported by the accessibility to the place and the fact that the researcher would have the freedom to move around and make the necessary observations in this environment. When the ethnographic process began, all the members of the *casa de santo* ("the house of the saint") were aware of the research, a fact that was well accepted and praised by them, given the need to expose the reality inside a Candomblé *terreiro* to shed light to practices that remain marginalized and subordinated both in academia and in society itself, as emphasized by some respondents. The field research involved multiple and varied materials, such as photos, videos, participation in a WhatsApp group, interviews with members of the *terreiro*, participant observation, and embodied practices.

Thus, in early January 2020, one of the authors went to the field and began participant observation, which lasted until mid-January 2022. This data collection method was selected because it is a field strategy that simultaneously combines document analysis, informant interviews, participation, direct observation, and introspection (Denzin, 1989).

Clifford and Gonçalves (2011) state that the ethnographer's participation in the researched community's activities allows the researcher to achieve a better understanding and be accepted into the group. Furthermore, such participation offers the researcher the opportunity to understand the language of the researched community, assimilate to it, and then translate it into scientific terms. During data collection, interaction with the members of the *terreiro* was gradual, according to the participation and follow-up by those responsible for the group's main activities. The researcher was also added to the Candomblé center's WhatsApp group, slept on-site, and participated in all processes conducted during the *terreiro's* meetings and rites, also known as *funções* ("functions"). In addition to understanding the ways of organizing the *terreiro* and its socio-affective and spiritual dynamics, the researcher was able to get to know better all the members who were actively involved in them.

During fieldwork, the researcher kept an ethnographic diary and a logbook of impressions with entries written after each day spent at the research site. Based on Van Maanen's (1988) recommendations, these notes reflected an attempt to record immediate observations and insights on noteworthy events and everyday conversations, issues, experiences, emotions, or passing exchanges, both regarding the center's everyday activities, ways of organizing, and forms of resistance.

In addition, meetings and events held at the Candomblé center were recorded, and 30 in-person interviews were conducted with 20 *yaôs* (people who had gone through the initiation ceremonies, referred to as *feitura* ("deed") in Candomblé) and 10 *abiãs* (people who had not been initiated until the time of the research). Of the 20 initiates, 13 were *babalorixás* (*pais de santo*, "fathers of the saint," or the male priests) and *ialorixás* (*mães de santo*, "mothers of the saint," or the female priests). The interviews were conducted gradually, five months after the beginning of the observation, without a predefined script, so that the conversations with the respondents were based on data emerging during the ethnography. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that during the ethnographic process, the interviews were conducted at different times, considering the observations made, as well as the ceremonies, events, and festivities held throughout the observation period. The respondents were identified according to the *orixás* to which they were initiated to preserve the research subjects' identity and the data's confidentiality. All participants verbally authorized the recording of the interviews by signing an Informed Consent Form (ICF).

The data obtained from the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through Narrative Analysis (Bastos & Biar, 2015) so that the researched subjects could transmit life experiences based on constructed meanings about themselves, their religion, and their forms of resistance. Furthermore, the stories narrated by the subjects allow us to understand events in their social and personal lives. Accordingly, both ethnography and interviews were employed to contextualize the ways of organizing Candomblé as an organization of resistance, and the narratives represent the way to access the stories of those who attend the *terreiro*.

All the data were read separately, and another reading was integrated after the first to identify significant aspects and events that meet the objective proposed in this article. Finally, these aspects and events were signaled and named, respecting the words and expressions used by the respondents themselves.

Also, during the data analysis process, we selected some photographs taken during the field research that we identified as alluding to the objective proposed in this article, and that came to compose and enrich the presentation and discussion section of the results. Thus, these photos were interpreted considering the context or narrative excerpts linked to them.

The data collected from the observation, the field diaries, the logbook of impressions, the photos, the videos, and the interviews were analyzed, first and foremost, by the researcher conducting the ethnography, who is the lead author of this article. Afterward, the other authors interacted with the field data, read the analyses prepared by this researcher, and offered secondary analyses based on the theoretical framework. We opted for this form of data analysis because we understand that, although ethnographic work is the result of an individual effort, the production of theoretical reflections on field data can be enriched by collective work. Therefore, in the next section, the account of the field experience follows the logic of shared authorship assumed in this article, complemented by the adoption of the first-person plural as the pronoun of choice in the presentation and discussion of the data.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

In January 2020, when we entered a Candomblé *terreiro* to start this study, we sought to understand the reality lived there based on a decolonial perspective. To do so, as emphasized by Yountae (2020), we consider that religion and religiosity have been used for years as part of a colonial structure of being, thinking, knowing, and acting. Thus, as complex as it may be, we seek to strip ourselves of preconceptions formed about "reality" since this would possibly reflect a colonial heritage. Accordingly, we chose to begin the construction of this study after 24 months of ethnographic insertion in the field because, according to ethnographers, the long and continuous involvement with the organization object of analysis allows the separation between fiction and fact, the specific and the general, and the common and the extraordinary (Van Maanen, 1979).

For the organization of this study, we separated the presentation and discussion of the data into two parts: the first one presents the impressions of those who were entering the field, as well as their philosophy of life, valuation, and reproduction of values; the second reports the discrimination and religious racism that Candomblé suffers in the Brazilian context.

Entering the Ilê Axé: preliminary notes

Our preliminary field notes highlighted important impressions on the part of those entering a world where everything would acquire new connotations. At that moment, magic and sacredness became intertwined and gave birth to a new reality: a conch shell can speak, *canjica* (hominy corn) means protection, and popcorn is medicine. In this world, absolutely everything has a sacred explanation. For example, a cold bath is a blessing, eating with your hands is a privilege, and sleeping on a mat represents an encounter with what is most sacred, essential, and pure, that is, one's *orixá*.

> I spent three months sleeping on a mat, in the shack, during my initiation, and at home, during my precept. As I say this, you may think, [...] "Wow, how uncomfortable is that? That mat is so hard and uncomfortable. But for me, that was such a beautiful thing, [...] it was like I was lying down in a sacred place; you know, it was like... No, it *was* a sacred place. When I slept, I felt like I was waking up in mom's arms [referring to her *orixá*, Oxum].

As one looks at the walls surrounding the Candomblé grounds, one can identify a series of rites and symbols typically associated with prosperity and protection for those there.

Figure 1
***Mariuô* and the offerings to Oxaguian and Yemanjá**



Source: Author's private collection.

The *mariuô* (highlighted in Figure 1 with a red circle), also called *igi op*ê by the *povo do santo*[1], is made by shredding a palm leaf and consecrated to Ogum and commonly placed on the windows and doors of the Candomblé centers to bring protection and scare away negative energies and disturbing spirits. Above the *mariuô* are some offerings to the *orixás* Oxaguian and Iemanjá to bring balance and harmony to the *casa de santo*. Besides these, several other symbols and offerings are arranged throughout the Candomblé, demarcating that it is a sacred ground in which logic is thought based on a Black perspective, which sometimes clashes with the neoliberal capitalist logic of Western societies.

> Not only is Candomblé an African matrix religion, but it's also imbued with the resistance of the Afro-Brazilian culture. Besides this political sense of resistance, there is also, in my view, the importance of reconnecting with nature and the *orixás* because the forces we worship are ancestral forces connected to nature. And we are now witnessing human and economic values [gaining importance], [whereas] the values related to nature are being lost, right? So, I think there are two important things in Candomblé: the cult of ancestry and ancestry linked to nature as vital forces, and another related to political belonging and affirmation of Blackness (Ogum).

Our experience in Candomblé allowed us to identify that, based on daily practices linked to a Black matrix, its followers, in addition to being an act of political resistance, characterize this religion as a form of decolonial resistance directly related to the r-existence in the face of neoliberal power matrices (Grosfoguel & Mignolo, 2008; Mignolo, 2007). Thus, in a context in which the matrix of power is coloniality (Quijano, 2005), to r-exist is to decolonize, based on the perspective of others, the subaltern, such as the Afro-Brazilian religions. This points to the construction of alternative and decolonial horizons of meaning (Quijano, 2013); it is to reveal past and present thoughts, practices, and experiences that challenge the colonial matrix of power and domination, existing despite it, inside and outside its borders (Walsh, 2010). This study contributes to the critical-theoretical debate about resistance and subalternity according to the decolonial option by questioning coloniality and

[1] A term commonly used to refer to Candomblé practitioners.

its forms of violence that still prevail in large centers. Meanwhile, it tries to reposition the voices and places of those silenced and demeaned by hegemonic power, having Candomblé and its policy of affirmation of Blackness as a backdrop.

The reflections in this preamble led us to the fact that to enter the world of Candomblé, one must strip oneself of neoliberal values and be re-socialized into a community whose values are crystallized under a view that sometimes antagonizes a society structured beyond the walls of this religion. It is a community with specific norms and rules.

> [When you are] outside, you can be a doctor, judge, politician, or whatever you want. But when you cross that gate, you're either an *abiã* or a *yaô,* and, just like everyone else, you must bow your head, wear your attire, ask for the blessing, bless your brothers, and walk barefoot. If you don't want to follow these rules, you've come to the wrong place. [When you are] outside, you can be whatever you want, but when you're in here, you must follow the rules (Oxóssi).

Interestingly, the values of Candomblé have their specific power matrix that, on certain levels, rescues values from African culture, especially those related to senses of community and belonging. Indeed, we can identify in Candomblé the materialization of the "decolonial turn" as a practical, political resistance movement against the logic of modern coloniality (Ballestrin, 2013).

Reflecting on the field research in the Candomblé *terreiro* in question, we can observe the valorization and reproduction of principles that we often heard our parents and grandparents pass on to us but that, little by little, were lost under the aegis of a capitalist society. Thus, Candomblé seeks to deconstruct Western colonial values linked to capital; it resists and r-exists in a logic based on family, community, cooperation, and simplicity, as observed in the excerpt below.

> Simplicity is worth much more than any temple luxury or the ideas one holds about Candomblé or religion. I learned this from my father, who is already a *pai de santo*, the greatest authority here. He never lost the humility and simplicity of having his feet on the ground and not worrying too much about what he is wearing because he knows what is inside him. Not that clothes are unimportant; they are very important, but what matters the most is the light of the *orixá*, which can only shine from the inside out. You can be wearing your worst clothes, barefoot, but look beautiful anyway because there is something that transcends all this and charms the eyes of those who see it. I learned this from my father, and I try to pass it on every day to my *filhos de santo* ("children of the saint"), simplicity, and truth (Oyá).

The notion of simplicity and equality is one of the key values disseminated during the months we have been attending and participating in the daily life of the *casa de santo*. Interestingly, we have found that these values are practiced every day by the members of the center, as depicted in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2
Walking barefoot in the ceremonial dress (*ração*).



Source: Author's private collection.

The photo in Figure 2 was taken during a *yaô* departure ceremony and three-year *feitura* obligation (a ceremony celebrating initiation into the life dedicated to the *orixá*, as those who have gone through the *recolhimento* ("retreat") and *feitura* are referred to). This pompous celebration symbolizes the introduction of a new initiate to society. In this ceremony, the so-called *yaôs* and *abiãs* wear the so-called *roupas de ração* ("ration clothes"), consisting of white fabric clothing stripped of adornments, and remain bare feet, to try to portray values associated with humility and equality among all the members of the house. Such practices refer to Nunes (2018), according to which Candomblé presents knowledge possibilities with a different epistemology from the Western way of thinking and is, due to its very nature, a way of decolonizing (as a verb). That is, it is a way of confronting a colonial logic with discourse structured based on the competitiveness of differentiation between subjects (W. F. Nascimento, 2016).

> Candomblé changed me dramatically. Before Candomblé, I had been corrupted by neoliberal values, you know? That is [...] [this idea of] detachment, the loss of any sense of collectivity, this worldview marked by a will to succeed, the overvaluation of oneself, these values that are too contemporary. And in the *casa de santo*, we see ourselves as part of a bigger nucleus, you know? [We are] part of a community, a house where you always breathe collectivity. Of course, there is uniqueness in each one, but the uniqueness crosses what is common, which is the dynamics of the *casa de santo* and the family (Xangô).

As can be observed in the excerpt above, this religion directly related to a philosophy of life in which values suppressed by the colonial logic are rescued and put into practice. Indeed, throughout the field research experience, we witnessed an attempt to bring these values back to life, and the words and the notion of what a family is are perhaps the cornerstones of this type of organization. In all the interviews, the centrality of the idea of family in the narratives was confirmed.

However, a point worth mentioning is that this is a "big family," which sometimes is not composed of members of the respondents' biological family nucleus but of another group of people, many of whom have already been victims of discrimination and marginalization in society, primarily because of their sexuality, as we can see in the narratives below:

> They say Candomblé is the religion of whores, transvestites, and faggots. To be honest, maybe it is indeed, do you know why? Because here, the whores, the transvestites, and the faggots can be whatever they want because nobody has anything to do with it. Nobody will discriminate against them for this reason. They will not suffer any violence for what they do in their private life. Outside here, that's nobody's business. Look: the *pai de santo* here is a gay man. In many houses, the *pai de santo* is a transvestite or the *mãe de santo* is a lesbian, and this interferes with absolutely nothing in the everyday of the Candomblé worship place. Out there, people and society kind of force people to [adhere to] a model, to what they determine as good, right, or divine. Here you can be whatever you want, and you will be respected and even loved the same way (Logun Edé).

> Transvestites don't have much choice, do they? When I started my transition process, I was kicked out of my house, and fell into prostitution. In a certain way, the *casa de santo* and the Candomblé were the only places that opened doors for me and helped me to see that it wasn't my fault, I wasn't doing anything wrong. So, here I found a new family. I have various fathers, mothers, and brothers [...] And for those who never had anyone, who had always been alone, this is such a beautiful thing (Airá).

Still, others found in Candomblé a refuge from family tragedies and the loss of loved ones.

> My parents died when I was still very young. So, I came to this place to try and make up for how much I missed them, and, in a way, I was able to have a family again (Obaluaê).

> I've been a member of Candomblé for more than 30 years and came here for the lack of other people I could call "family." Here I am a mother, and I can help my children and my brothers. You know, I look around, and I can say that I have a family and someone to fight for. And everything I have of most dear, everything I know, I learned here, in this simple house (Oxum Opará).

Such narratives are in line with the etymology of the word "Candomblé," which means *dança de roda* ("a dance in honor of the gods"). That is, it is a religion that seeks to connect people. It is permeated with spiritual and affective traits that aggregate and welcome everyone regardless of their behavior outside the walls of the *casa de santo*. However, it is important to point out that, as one moves forward as a follower of this religion, the need to correct certain mistakes and attitudes in personal life comes naturally. In short, during these two years in the *casa de santo*, we realized that Candomblé is metaphorically related to an extended family, mostly composed of marginalized and socially demeaned people, regarded as subalterns. This is why Afro-Brazilian matrix religions can be considered communities of anticolonial resistance (Sansi & Parés, 2012; Santos, 2009; Yountae, 2020), given that the daily life of these houses reflects structures of political and cultural r-existence of a colonial hegemonic matrix that insists on stigmatizing and silencing them.

We are talking about the organization of resistance/r-existence of a world in which leaves have blood, animals are sacred, and using a razor blade, one can create life, be reborn, and raise a family; bowing down is a great honor and demonstration of humility; and the link between the subject and nature is remade through deities, the *orixás* (*ori* – head, mind; *xá* – expansion; that is, "the expansion of the mind").

Resist and r-exist: discrimination, religious racism, and coloniality

Between the field research and the joint analysis of the data, we reflected on the evident neglect and marginalization of the knowledge produced by Candomblé practitioners in Brazilian society, given the country's historical colonial heritage. We must consider that the model of Candomblé as a religious practice is rooted in Africa; however, there are differences since we are talking about Brazilian Candomblé, which has ways of organizing and worshipping nature that are essentially Brazilian.

To understand the discrimination and religious racism that Candomblé suffers in the Brazilian context, we must point out that the Brazilian version of Candomblé began to be structured and organized from the diaspora of African peoples. That is, the religion we are addressing here was founded on the trafficking of enslaved Black people to Brazil during the colonial times. When the Black Africans landed in Brazil, primarily from the ports of Angola and Ketu in Nigeria (hence the names of the Candomblé nations of Angola and Ketu), their families had been torn apart by the slave trade, and they worshipped their deities in the *senzalas*, to keep their culture alive.

In this complex scenario, the Brazilian Candomblé emerges as a way to unify the enslaved Black people in a single nation. As we have pointed out previously, it is worth noting that the logic of an extended family in today's Candomblé is nothing more than a form of decolonial r-existence. Indeed, this term transcends the idea of resistance (Porto-Gonçalves, 2010) based on the sense of belonging.

> Here in the Candomblé center, I manage to make up a little bit for the lack of a family. I feel somewhat inserted again in [...] a group of people I can count on, just like a family (Oxalufã).

While in colonial Brazil, the Candomblé dance was perceived by white Europeans as a harmful process to the *senzala*, since it reconnected the Black individuals to their dreams and homeland, what is clear now is that present day's Candomblé can still be seen as a threat to the historically inherited colonial structure. Thus, it suffers from marginalization and violence on a daily basis.

> I respect your amen, and you respect my *axé*. But you know what happens? The *macumba* drums bother people [because] it's a way of resisting, and it creates meaning for us. The atabaque echoes. For us, it is sacred and alive. Its sound means so much to me. It puts me in a trance and moves me (Oyá).
>
> It is funny, isn't it? Everyone speaks ill of Candomblé. They demonize us. In evangelical churches, we are the very incarnation of evil. But none of this bothers me too much. Society still has its eyes closed. They still haven't realized that this is not connected to spirituality but to the Black people, enslaved people, the *senzala*s, and all the blood white people have shed on this Earth (Nanã).
>
> For me, this is a State agenda, a silent holocaust, out of the mainstream media's focus. The idea is to remove Black people, and everything related to them. Perhaps this is why the atabaque bothers so many people. It is a way of saying, "We are here, and we shall remain" (Xangô).

Notably, such narratives corroborate that religious racism is no more than a projection of the "color racism" dynamic," which dates back to the marginalization of Indigenous and Black people or the so-called subaltern peoples in colonial Brazil (W. F. Nascimento, 2017). Along these lines, the concept of religious racism opens important paths for the antiracist struggle in the country. Therefore, it becomes evident that coloniality not only operates by limiting the egalitarian positioning of religious identities and institutions in Brazil while reproducing and legitimizing the inferiority of Afro-Brazilian religions; it also reproduces physical and symbolic violence against others by dehumanizing, subjugating, and even annihilating the followers of Afro-Brazilian religions (Lundell, 2020).

As pointed out by Franco and Dias (2021), these narratives show how religion can be understood as an intersectional marker that legitimizes and reproduces forms of exclusion and violence against subjects of other religions, especially those of Afro-Brazilian origin, while also establishing itself, in the case of Candomblé, in the context of intersectionalities, a locus in which subalternity markers are manifested with interrelated elements such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. By "subaltern" or "subalternized," we mean marginalized groups that are neither heard nor legally and politically represented precisely because of attributes in terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality, among others (Spivak, 2010).

According to the previous narratives, it is notable how the violence imposed on Candomblé practitioners is associated with oppressive historical issues of race and geography. This happens because the Candomblé *terreiros* consist not only of a policy of affirmation of Blackness but also other marginalized social groups, such as "whores, transvestites, and faggots," who are welcomed into these places of worship without discrimination, so that they can behave the way they really are, according to the account of Logun Edé. In other words, the sacred place in society reserved for these subaltern and marginalized groups are the Candomblé *terreiros*, which are not central places either but peripheral and marginalized loci in the context of colonial production dominated by Christian religions. In short, they are subject to suffering several types of violence perpetrated by society.

We must emphasize that the *terreiro* where this study was conducted has not suffered any depredation or explicit violence. However, religious racism is present in everyday life of Candomblé practitioners and was highlighted by all respondents as an almost naturalized violence.

> Sometimes, when we are doing some ritual here, someone stops the car on the corner and preaches evangelical sermons. [Eventually] I got used to this and don't even care anymore (Oxóssi).

> Every time we go out on the street wearing African or white clothing, we hear comments such as "Check out the *macumbeira*, Jesus' blood is powerful, go on and kick that *macumba* gift, God forbid!." I used to react, but not anymore. This never changes. We shouldn't waste a minute with people like that (Iansã Topé).

The naturalization of religious racism against Candomblé practitioners can be perceived as a result of the moment when racism in Brazilian society was legitimized and became a liturgy in Christian matrix religions, especially Neo-Pentecostal ones. In this field, hate speech and the demonization of deities and Black roots have taken over the scene as a result of a colonial matrix. The stigmas attached with Candomblé in Brazil result from the historical persecution by a Christian-European colonial system that has marginalized and silenced African matrix religions (Santos, 2013), and even led several members to hide their religiosity from society to avoid demeaning. This is why religions such as Candomblé sometimes seek invisibility before lay eyes, as Birman (1983) points out.

Finally, after two years of ethnographic insertion, the logic of work and the dynamics of Candomblé made us realize that the decolonial r-existence that we have mentioned repeatedly in this article is intimately related to the meaning things take on in this universe through the connection with the sacred and simple gestures such as sweeping a *terreiro*, picking up some leaves, or taking a cold bath can incorporate.

> The world has lost its connection to the sacred. This is exactly what we do in Candomblé. We reconnect people to their essence, to the sacred (Oxumaré).

> I don't see any other meaning in Candomblé than to [acquire] an ethical consciousness of work, which we have lost throughout this century. Work is no longer a force that gives us a parameter of identity or a parameter of existence. It has become a process that makes us lose ourselves. We lose the sense of who we are, we lose the sense of what we produce, and we find no meaning in what we produce.

> In Candomblé, I see a completely opposite movement. There is no precariousness because there is collectivity, and there is no loss of meaning because there is a consciousness of what one does and why one does it. The meaning of all this in Candomblé is in the sense of identity and personality creation, a "non-emptying" (Ogum).

Therefore, the expansion of consciousness ("ori-xá"), the trance, the feasts and ceremonies held at the *terreiro*, the drumming of the atabaques, the white attires, and the ornate clothes of the *orixás* would be the materialization of a decolonial r-existence, an act of decolonizing, of being present even when the hegemonic matrix tries to suppress the existence of this way of organizing and its relationship with the world and nature, as represented in Figures 3 and 4 below.

Figure 3
Ogunhê



Figure 4
Eparrey Iansã



Source: Author's private collection.

As we return to the *senzalas*, this study revealed something related to the idea of liberation that Candomblé brings to the *casa de santo* participants. For most respondents, the greatest expression of this liberation comes with the trance process achieved during some rituals, as expressed in Figures 3 and 4 above. Accordingly, we found that Candomblé, in the view of several members of the *casa de santo*, emerged, as it did in the past, from the enslaved people's conditions, as an urge to engage not only in physical survival strategies but those relating to subaltern lifestyles as well. Therefore, neglecting the knowledge and ways of organizing produced by Afro-Brazilian matrix religions would deny the "pluriversality" of knowledge that can and does extend beyond colonial borders.

> I can say that there is a lot in this logic, the Afrocentric logic. Generally and broadly, we suffer from a loss of meaning and direction in Western culture. And all the systems, whether political, epistemic, evaluative, or economic, even now, during the pandemic, we see the urgency to revisit our values, to rethink our path of humanity, and there is a lot [going on] in the traditional *terreiro* communities. We need many values to face the dehumanization we have been going through. We need to overcome,

> first of all, religious racism and then understand that there is subjectivity, that there is production, that there is importance inside this place that are the traditional *terreiro* communities and try to understand beyond our specific beliefs because I can be a Christian and understand that certain values inside the traditional *terreiro* communities can be brought to the political sphere. So, I think we have a lot to teach to a society that has failed in its values until now, to show them that there is another way of doing things, and it is also our job to resist and stay alive to teach what we know (Ogum).

In this scenario, we saw Candomblé as a strategy in itself, as a decolonial organization of survival, maintenance, and, above all, the perpetuation of ways of life that have been neglected, demeaned, denied, and rendered subaltern by the colonial matrix.

FINAL REMARKS

This paper aimed to understand how Candomblé *terreiros* organize themselves as resistance against religious racism. To do so, we developed an ethnographic work in a Candomblé center of the Nação Ketu Axé Oxumaré, located in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil, by employing different fieldwork techniques, such as participant observation, photos, videos, participation in a WhatsApp group, interviews, and embodied practices. We prepared an ethnographic diary and a logbook of impressions, with entries written after each day that one of the authors spent at the research site. Additionally, meetings and events at the Candomblé center were recorded, along with 30 in-person interviews with other members of the *terreiro*. Interview data were subsequently subjected to narrative analysis.

Thus, we can see that the organization of Candomblé is permeated by offerings, rituals, and particular symbols, in which magic and sacredness are intertwined. Moreover, Candomblé is perceived by the members of the *casa de santo* as a strategy, an organization of not only physical survival but subaltern lifestyles especially cultivated by intersectional subjects and crossed by different social markers that operate in combination, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. However, precisely because they involve sacred rites regarded as "non-traditional," not typically seen in the daily life of society, in the hegemonic media and other spaces, and because of how *terreiros* are organized according to a Black perspective, these symbols, *terreiros*, and their members regularly suffer from attacks perpetrated by the population in general and even by the State.

This violence results in religious racism, a historical process of persecution of a European Christian colonial system that has hierarchized, marginalized, and silenced religions of Afro-Brazilian origin and is sanctioned by it. Therefore, Candomblé is perceived by some as a threat to the historically inherited colonial structure and, therefore, it suffers daily with marginalization and violence in an attempt to extirpate what is different from social coexistence and even as a form of punishment to try to submit others to the values and beliefs imposed by the hegemonic social context. This causes the *terreiros* to be located far away from urban centers, so as not to attract attention and even so that many Candomblé practitioners hide their religiosity from society to avoid demeaning.

Therefore, the *orixás*, the feasts and ceremonies held in the *terreiro*, the beat of the atabaques, the white attire, the ornate clothes of the *orixás*, the other rituals and symbols, and the Candomblé *terreiros* themselves can be considered the materialization of a decolonial resistance/r-existence; that is, a way of being present even when the hegemonic matrix of power tries to suppress the existence of this way of organizing. It is the resistance of the Afro-Brazilian culture, a form of anticolonial resistance that promotes the political belonging of affirmation of Blackness through religion. It is a decolonial organization of survival, maintenance, and, above all, the perpetuation of traditions and ways of life in the *terreiros* that are neglected, demeaned, denied, and rendered subaltern by coloniality. Candomblé exists; therefore, it resists. It r-exists.

Thus, what we seek with this study is to deepen the discussion in the field of management and organizational studies by casting a decolonial look at Candomblé, on how Candomblé *terreiros* find several ways to r-exist neocolonial dynamics such as the Western way of viewing the world and the violence arising from religious racism that crosses it. In this sense, the decolonial critique and struggle in this work are not only meant to challenge the hegemonic conception of the normative human but also the intensified systems of oppression, especially through the demonization and trivialization of Afro-Brazilian knowledge and beliefs.

The implications and contributions of this research for management and organizational studies are many. First, we must appreciate research addressing organizational forms other than those consolidated in the mainstream. In the case of this paper, it is about the ways of organizing Candomblé and how it is constituted as an organization of resistance. In addition, we were able to reflect on what voices, perspectives, and ways of organizing have been neglected and silenced in management and organizational studies. From this point, we can also examine how researchers in the field can change these neocolonial dynamics. Therefore, answers are many and we have no intention of exhausting them. However, one of the paths would be to denaturalize these neocolonial dynamics and give more attention and visibility to the issues related to the Afro-Brazilian matrix religions in the environments where we are inserted, especially in academia, by promoting debates, workshops, and antiracist behaviors that may contribute to the recognition of the relevance of these cultural and religious manifestations in this country.

For future research, we suggest that other researchers investigate the organizational context of Umbanda based on the evidence and valorization of its rites, symbols, knowledge, and ways of organizing since this religion also struggles against physical and symbolic violence in Brazil, arising from religious racism. In addition, we recommend conducting studies addressing intersectionalities since the violence imposed on the practitioners of this religion relates to historical issues, ignorance, race, and oppressed geographies.

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