

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PADOVA

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, LAW,  
AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**Master's degree in  
Human Rights and Multi-level Governance**



FAITH AND ACTIVISM IN THE RELIGION OF  
ORIXÁS:

A STUDY OF TERREIRO ILÊ AXÉ OPÔ AFONJÁ AND  
ITS ROLE IN PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS AND  
AFRO-BRAZILIAN IDENTITY IN BAHIA

*Supervisor:* Prof. OLGA BRESKAYA

*Candidate:* ARIADNE FRANCIS DOS SANTOS

Matriculation No. 2039419

A.Y. 2023/2024

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To Francisco and Luzinete, for being the open doors that led me to the big world.

To Beatriz, Bianca, Danielle, and Hasan, my dearest friends, for being home and helping me find the way.

To Maria Clara Herkenhoff for patiently brainstorming with me for long hours and for giving me her hand even from the other side of the globe.

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*Padova, October 31, 2024.*

A voz de minha bisavó  
Ecoou criança  
Nos porões do navio.  
Ecoou lamentos  
De uma infância perdida.

A voz de minha avó  
Ecoou obediência  
Aos brancos-donos de tudo.

A voz de minha mãe  
Ecoou baixinho revolta  
No fundo das cozinhas alheias  
Debaixo das trouxas  
Roupagens sujas dos brancos  
Pelo caminho empoeirado  
Rumo à favela.

A minha voz ainda  
Ecoa versos perplexos  
Com rimas de sangue  
E fome.

A voz da minha filha  
Recolhe todas as nossas vozes  
Recolhe em si  
As vozes mudas caladas  
Engasgadas nas gargantas.

A voz de minha filha  
Recolhe em si  
A fala e o ato.  
O ontem – o hoje – o agora.  
Na voz de minha filha  
Se fará ouvir a ressonância  
O eco da vida-liberdade.

— *Conceição Evaristo*

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines how the Candomblé terreiro in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, the Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, contributes to the promotion of human rights, governance, and the formation of Afro-Brazilian identity. Based on extensive document analysis and supported by interviews and indirect sources, the study investigates the historical roots, activism, and cultural significance of the terreiro within the historical, cultural, and religious context of Afro-Brazilian communities. Drawing on interdisciplinary material, including Religious Studies, Human Rights, and Cultural Anthropology, the research explores how Candomblé's cosmovision, rooted in the celebration of Orixá spirits, informs human rights, social justice, and cultural preservation. The analysis focuses on how the terreiro (as a religious community) engages in human rights advocacy, community empowerment, and cultural revitalization efforts, while also examining its interactions with government institutions and civil society organizations. By exploring the complex relationships between religion, rights, and governance in Bahia, Brazil, this thesis aims to provide a deeper understanding of how spirituality, activism, and cultural identity intersect across diverse social and cultural contexts.

**Keywords:** Candomblé, Orixás, Afro-Brazilian religions, Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, Human Rights activism, ethnographic research, cultural identity, religious practices, cosmovision, cultural preservation, intersectionality.

## RESUMO

Esta tese examina como o terreiro de Candomblé em Salvador, Bahia, Brasil, o Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, contribui para a promoção dos direitos humanos, da governança e para a formação da identidade afro-brasileira. Com base em extensa análise documental e apoiada por entrevistas e fontes indiretas, o estudo investiga as raízes históricas, o ativismo e a relevância cultural do terreiro no contexto histórico, cultural e religioso dos afro-brasileiros. A pesquisa integra material interdisciplinar, incluindo Estudos Religiosos, Direitos Humanos e Antropologia Cultural, para explorar como a cosmovisão do Candomblé, fundamentada na celebração dos espíritos dos Orixás, orienta a promoção de direitos humanos, a justiça social e a preservação cultural. A análise foca em como o terreiro (enquanto comunidade religiosa) se envolve na defesa dos direitos humanos, no empoderamento comunitário e nos esforços de revitalização cultural, além de investigar suas interações com instituições governamentais e organizações da sociedade civil. Ao examinar as relações complexas entre religião, direitos e governança na Bahia, Brasil, essa tese visa ampliar a compreensão sobre como espiritualidade, ativismo e identidade cultural se entrelaçam em diversos contextos sociais e culturais.

**Palavras-chave:** Candomblé, Orixás, religiões afro-brasileiras, Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, ativismo de Direitos Humanos, pesquisa etnográfica, identidade cultural, práticas religiosas, cosmovisão, preservação cultural, interseccionalidade.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ACRONYMS .....	1
INTRODUCTION .....	2
CHAPTER I – CONTEXT AND FOUNDATIONS OF CANDOMBLÉ .....	6
<b>1. Historical and Cultural Origins of Candomblé .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2. The Role of Candomblé in Afro-Brazilian Identity.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3. Resistance as a Defining Force in Afro-Brazilian Communities.....</b>	<b>13</b>
CHAPTER II – TERREIRO ILÊ AXÉ OPÔ AFONJÁ: A MICROCOSMO OF CANDOMBLÉ .....	16
<b>1. Historical Background and Evolution .....</b>	<b>19</b>
1.1 Foundation and Early Years .....	20
1.2 Growth and Development Over the Years .....	22
<b>2. Leadership and Legacy: From Mother Aninha to Mother Ana de Xangô.....</b>	<b>25</b>
2.1 The Role of Leadership .....	25
2.2 Mother Aninha .....	29
2.3 Mother Stella de Oxóssi .....	31
2.4 Mother Ana de Xangô.....	34
<b>3. Culture and Tradition of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá.....</b>	<b>35</b>
3.1 Religious Rituals and Orixás Celebrations .....	38
3.2 Initiation and Hierarchy within the Terreiro.....	41
CHAPTER III – SOCIO-POLITICAL INFLUENCE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT .....	44
<b>1. Legal Recognition and Public Advocacy for Afro-Brazilian Cultural Heritage .....</b>	<b>46</b>
1.1 Contributions to Public Policy and Religious Freedom .....	46
1.2 Afro-Brazilian History and Culture in The National Curriculum .....	49
<b>2. The Terreiro's Influence on International Cultural and Policy Dialogues .....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>3. Community Development and Empowerment Initiatives .....</b>	<b>54</b>
3.1 Escola Municipal Eugênia Anna dos Santos (EMEAS).....	56
3.2 Biblioteca de Los Sueños: A Hub for Afro-Brazilian Cultural Literacy.....	59
3.3 Cultural Heritage Workshops and Festival Series: Preserving Afro-Brazilian Traditions... 60	
3.4 Afro-Brazilian Health and Healing Initiatives: Integrating Tradition and Modern Healthcare .....	62
CHAPTER IV – CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE.....	64
<b>1. Current Challenges Facing the Terreiro and the Candomblé Community.....</b>	<b>65</b>
1.1 Historical Context and Ongoing Discrimination .....	65
1.2 Structural Barriers in Education and Public Representation.....	68
1.3 Economic and Spatial Challenges.....	70
1.4 Social and Political Marginalization.....	71
<b>2. Strategies for Cultural and Religious Preservation.....</b>	<b>74</b>
2.1 Advocacy and Legal Protections.....	74
2.2 Education and Cultural Revitalization Initiatives.....	76
2.3 Community-Based Initiatives and Alliances .....	78

2.4 International Network and Diaspora Connections .....	79
2.5 Expanding Representation in Public and Political Spheres.....	81
<b>3. Future Directions for Policy and Afro-Brazilian Advocacy.....</b>	<b>83</b>
3.1 Integrating Afro-Brazilian Heritage into the National Identity .....	83
3.2 Expanding Healthcare Integration and Social Welfare Programs.....	87
3.3 Strengthening Political Representation and Policy Advocacy.....	89
3.4 Advancing Public Awareness and Cultural Exchange Initiatives .....	92
CONCLUSION .....	93
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	95
<i>General Bibliography</i> .....	<b>95</b>
<i>Other Sources</i> .....	<b>99</b>

## **LIST OF ACRONYMS**

**ABPN** - Associação Brasileira de Pesquisadores/as Negros/As

**CBAA** - Centro Brasileiro de Apoio ao Afrodescendente

**CECB** - Centro de Estudos Culturais Brasileiros

**EMEAS** - Escola Municipal Eugênia Anna dos Santos

**EDUFBA** - Editora da Universidade Federal da Bahia

**IPHAN** - Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional

**UFRJ** - Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro

**UFPE** - Universidade Federal de Pernambuco

**UNESCO** - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

**UNILAB** - Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-Brasileira

**STF** – Supremo Tribunal Federal

**CHS** – Centro Histórico de Salvador

**OAB** - Ordem dos Advogados do Brasil

## INTRODUCTION

The knowledge explored in this research goes beyond scientific literature, books, and written sources, drawing heavily from oral traditions central to Afro-Brazilian religions, especially Candomblé. These oral practices have safeguarded rituals, beliefs, and cultural legacies for generations, demonstrating a unique resilience compared to religions based on sacred texts. Unlike religions grounded in written scripture, Candomblé's wisdom is primarily passed down through oral means – songs, invocations, and rituals. This method of transmission emphasizes sensory experience and participation, where practitioners gain knowledge through active involvement rather than passive reading, highlighting a dynamic form of cultural continuity. Understanding Candomblé requires immersion – engaging with its practitioners, witnessing the rituals, and feeling the rhythms of the drums accompanying invocations to the *Orixás*<sup>1</sup>. In this context, words are essential, but sensory experience and intuitive understanding often carry equal weight.

Consequently, the methodological approach of this research extends beyond textual analysis. To capture the essence of Candomblé, the study incorporates ethnographic observation, participation in rituals of Afro-Brazilian religions, and dialogues with practitioners. This comprehensive approach respects the experiential dimensions of Candomblé, where much of the religion's knowledge resides in the rhythms, emotions, and community dynamics that structure the rituals and ceremonies. The research will thus honor both the spoken and non-verbal dimensions of Candomblé's spiritual framework.

The roots of Candomblé are inseparable from Brazil's colonial history and the transatlantic slave trade. During the 16th to 19th centuries, millions of Africans from diverse ethnic groups, including the Yoruba, Bantu, and Fon, were forcibly brought to Brazil. Their arrival carried their spiritual traditions, cosmologies, and deities, which, despite the brutal conditions of slavery, they managed to preserve and adapt. The religion that emerged in Brazil, now known as Candomblé, is a product of resistance and adaptation. It represents a profound cultural synthesis, blending various African religious

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<sup>1</sup> Deities worshiped in African religions and Afro-Brazilian religions.

traditions into a unified spiritual practice that has become one of the cornerstones of Afro-Brazilian identity.

The historical journey of Candomblé is marked by periods of suppression and revival. During the colonial and post-colonial periods, practitioners faced severe repression. They often syncretized their deities – the Orixás – to continue practicing their religion with Catholic saints. This strategy allowed them to worship covertly while maintaining the integrity of their African spiritual heritage. For example, *Ogun*, the Orixá of war and iron, was syncretized with Saint George, and *Iemanjá*, the sea goddess, was associated with Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. This syncretism was not only a religious adaptation but also an act of resistance against the colonial and later republican powers that sought to erase African identities and spiritual practices. In his work “*De Africano a Afro-brasileiro: etnia, identidade, religião*,” Reginaldo Prandi highlights the formation of “nations” within Candomblé as a strategic response to this oppression. These nations provided a collective identity and helped organize spiritual and cultural resistance.

Terreiros, the sacred spaces of Candomblé, have been at the heart of this resistance, functioning as sanctuaries for spiritual and cultural preservation. Within the terreiros, Candomblé practitioners found a place to worship and a space to express and maintain their artistic and cultural heritage. Music, dance, and storytelling have been crucial in passing down knowledge and traditions across generations, helping sustain a sense of community and continuity. As hubs of cultural exchange, these sacred spaces have played an essential role in strengthening the collective identity and providing refuge against oppressive forces of colonialism, slavery, and systemic racism.

Candomblé has been a site of cultural preservation and a platform for political activism, as terreiros have historically functioned as centers of advocacy for social justice, dignity, and solidarity, drawing on the religion’s principles of resistance and empowerment. Leaders of Candomblé have used their influence to push for the rights and recognition of Afro-Brazilian communities, linking the fight for religious freedom with broader social and political change movements. The significance of Candomblé in shaping Afro-Brazilian identity and rights is particularly illustrated by the history of *Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá*, one of Brazil’s most essential and longstanding Candomblé temples.

Founded in 1910 by Mother Aninha (Eugênia Anna dos Santos), Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá has shaped the religious and cultural landscape of Bahia. Its influence extends beyond the spiritual, as the terreiro has been pivotal in legally recognizing Candomblé as a legitimate religious practice. A crucial moment in this history occurred in 1936 when Mother Aninha met with President Getúlio Vargas to advocate for the legal acknowledgment of Candomblé, marking a significant victory for Afro-Brazilian religious freedom. This event illustrates the intersection of religion and politics, demonstrating how Candomblé's leaders have navigated the socio-political landscape to advance the rights of their communities.

At the core of this research are two fundamental questions: How does the Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá's practice of Candomblé's cosmovision influence and intersect with broader socio-political dynamics in Bahia, Brazil? and in what way has Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá's historical evolution, activism for religious and cultural rights, and engagement with multi-level governance institutions shaped human rights promotion, governance practices, and Afro-Brazilian cultural identity in Bahia, Brazil? This study addresses these questions by examining the terreiro's complex role as a spiritual center and a driver of social activism. The hypothesis guiding it posits that Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá's legacy and activism exemplify the dynamic relationship between Candomblé's cosmovision and human rights discourse, shaping governance structures, policy influence, community services, and cultural identity in Brazil. By drawing on the experiences of the terreiro and its community leaders, this study will explore how Afro-Brazilian religious spaces function as places of worship and active participants in promoting human rights, religious freedom, and social justice.

Moreover, this research aims to reveal the terreiro's engagement in the fight against religious intolerance and systemic racism, exploring its efforts to resist the repressive political and religious environment, including the recent events that took place during the administration of President Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022), when Afro-Brazilian religions faced increased hostility and attacks from evangelical fundamentalists.

Under the successive leadership of figures such as Mother Stella de Oxóssi, Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá has continued to preserve its cultural and spiritual legacy while engaging in broader social initiatives. These initiatives, such as the Eugênia Anna dos

Santos School and the Biblioteca de Los Sueños, highlight the terreiro's commitment to education, cultural pride, and community development. Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá is a powerful example of how Afro-Brazilian religious spaces can create positive social change by integrating educational and cultural programs with its spiritual mission.

However, while Candomblé communities have made notable strides, they still face substantial challenges, especially religious intolerance. This issue, frequently exacerbated by political rhetoric, threatens the very existence of terreiros and the communities that rely on them for spiritual and cultural sustenance. The government led by President Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) was particularly harmful.<sup>2</sup> His administration's conservative and reactionary discourse emboldened evangelical fundamentalists to target Afro-Brazilian religions, resulting in a wave of attacks on terreiros<sup>3</sup>. Instances of vandalism, verbal abuse, and physical assaults have become alarmingly common. For example, the statue of Mother Stella de Oxóssi, erected in honor of one of Candomblé's most revered figures, was repeatedly vandalized by Christian fundamentalists in 2022<sup>4</sup>. These attacks reflect a broader pattern of discrimination and hostility toward Afro-Brazilian religious practices.

In response to these challenges, the leaders of Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá and other Candomblé communities have engaged in legal advocacy, educational initiatives, and cultural documentation to protect their religious rights and promote a greater understanding of Afro-Brazilian spiritual traditions. The terreiro will continue to play a crucial role in advocating for religious freedom, human rights, and cultural preservation. Its ongoing efforts underscore the importance of terreiros not only as religious spaces but also as critical actors in Brazil's broader struggle for social justice and equality.

By exploring the intersection of spirituality, activism, and identity, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how Candomblé terreiros, in particular Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, continue to shape and be shaped by the socio-political dynamics of Afro-Brazilian life. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.brasildefatoce.com.br/2021/08/20/bolsonaro-traz-inseguranca-a-liberdade-de-crencas-mesmo-com-lei-contra-intolerancia-religiosa>

<sup>3</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/jair-bolsonaro-caribbean-campaigns-presidential-elections-brazil-f2cb52e760b30d4f1e4ad5013c2564>

<sup>4</sup> <https://bitterwinter.org/statue-of-candomble-priestess-set-on-fire/>

scholarship on Afro-Brazilian religions and their role in promoting human rights, governance, and cultural identity.

## CHAPTER I – CONTEXT AND FOUNDATIONS OF CANDOMBLÉ

### *1. Historical and Cultural Origins of Candomblé*

From the 16th to the 19th century, Africans from various ethnic and cultural groups, including rivals, were captured by colonial powers and brought to Brazil as enslaved people. Among these ethnic groups, three stand out: the *Bantus*, the *Fons*, and the *Yorubas*. Each group carried distinct religious systems, deities, and practices: the Bantus with their *Inquices*<sup>5</sup>, the Fons with their *Voduns*<sup>6</sup>, and the Yorubas with their Orixás and ancestral spirits. Despite certain similarities among these deities, such as their association with natural elements and ancestral powers, their distinct personalities, rituals, dances, foods, and communication styles underscore the complexity and diversity of African religious life. These cultural distinctions carried over into Brazil, creating a dynamic foundation for the emergence of Candomblé as a distinctly Afro-Brazilian religion.

The Bantus originated from regions now known as Angola, Congo, Mozambique, Guinea, and Zaire, while the Fons hailed from Benin (formerly Dahomey) and the Yorubas from present-day Nigeria. The diversity of African cultures and spiritual practices contributed to a rich religious tapestry in Brazil. According to Pierre Verger's four-period framework of the slave trade in Bahia, distinct waves of African captives arrived at different times: the Guinea cycle in the late 16th century, the Angola and Congo cycle in the 17th century, the Gold Coast cycle during much of the 18th century, and the Bay of Benin cycle between 1770 and 1850 (Verger, 1987, 10). These waves of African migration brought labor and cultural wealth as enslaved people from diverse ethnic backgrounds carried their religious traditions into the New World.

Brazil thus became a crucible where various African peoples' religious and cultural practices met, blended, and evolved. The ethnic and religious diversity, including groups

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<sup>5</sup> In Congo-Angola rite Candomblé, they are deities equivalent to the Yoruba Orixás.

<sup>6</sup> Traditional religion of the West African coast. "Vodun" is the word in Gbe languages (Fon-Jeje) for "spirit." The word "vodun" can refer to both the religion itself and the spirits worshiped within it.

like the Ewes from Togo and the Ashantis from Ghana, contributed to the formation of Candomblé as a syncretic religion that preserved African spiritual beliefs while adapting to the unique conditions of enslavement in Brazil. As a result, Candomblé emerged as a product of the diasporic experience, combining elements of multiple African traditions while incorporating aspects of the Brazilian environment.

Candomblé's creation in Brazil reflects thus the religious inheritance of African peoples and their cultural resilience and adaptability. Despite the oppressive structures of slavery and colonialism, enslaved Africans organized themselves into "nations" based on their ethnic origins. This organization was encouraged by colonial authorities, who sought to prevent widespread unity among the enslaved population. By dividing Africans into "nations," colonial powers hoped to reduce the risk of rebellion and maintain control. However, these "nations" served as a vehicle for cultural preservation, allowing Africans to keep their languages, traditions, and religious practices. These nations laid the groundwork for the religious communities that would later form the basis of Candomblé terreiros.

The development of Candomblé parallels similar Afro-diasporic religions, such as Santería in Cuba and Vodun in Haiti, which likewise drew on the religious and cultural practices brought by enslaved Africans. Roger Bastide noted that these groups organized themselves into mutual aid societies and secret associations, where they conducted religious ceremonies and planned revolts against their oppressors (Bastide, 1974, 13). These religious communities were thus not only sites of spiritual continuity but also hubs of cultural resistance, preserving African identity in the face of systemic attempts to erase it.

As the distinct African identities of the "nations" began to merge in Brazil, so did their religious practices. Over time, these practices evolved into a unified religious system that came to be known as Candomblé. However, while the broader Brazilian society came to identify all people of African descent as "negros," this label obscured the rich diversity of ethnic origins that continued to play a significant role in the development of Afro-Brazilian culture. Candomblé, therefore, acted as a repository for African spirituality, preserving the religious beliefs of different African groups while simultaneously fostering the development of a collective Afro-Brazilian identity.

Central to Candomblé is the worship of deities – Inquices, Orixás, and Voduns – who embody the forces of nature and serve as both its creators and administrators. These spiritual beings are deeply intertwined with the elements of the natural world, and their reverence involves complex rituals, songs, dances, and offerings. The symbolism of these rituals is crucial for Candomblé practitioners, as they preserve African knowledge, discern truths from falsehoods, and ensure the community's spiritual and physical well-being. Candomblé's emphasis on ritual performance and oral tradition makes it a religion where history, culture, and spirituality are experienced collectively.

The word “Candomblé” itself is believed to be derived from the Bantu term "candombe," meaning "dance" or "drumming" (Verger, 1981, 31). In the context of the slave quarters, this term referred initially to gatherings where enslaved Africans performed dances, played music, and held communal celebrations. Over time, the term came to denote the religious liturgies that these communities practiced, eventually evolving into the name of the religion itself. While various etymological interpretations of the term exist, this research adheres to the interpretation that emphasizes the importance of dance and music as central components of Candomblé worship. Within the terreiro, ancestors are honored with parties, offerings of food, and objects symbolizing their presence, reflecting the deep connection between the living and the dead in Afro-Brazilian spirituality.

Candomblé's rituals are highly symbolic, particularly in their use of dance. In African-based cultures, dance is more than mere movement – it is a form of theater capable of telling stories, expressing emotions, and narrating myths. For the African societies that worship Orixás, there is a profound cosmological understanding of the universe. They believe in a single supreme being who created and governed all that exists, a figure often likened to a mother with boundless goodness. In contrast to European cosmologies, African religious thought does not include a concept of hell or eternal punishment. Instead, all beings are believed to be saved by the supreme creator's generosity, and the forces of evil or the devil are absent from this worldview.

Candomblé is an earthly religion deeply concerned with the connection between the past, present, and future of nature's beings on earth. According to Professor Dr. Henrique Cunha Júnior, an expert in Afro-Brazilian studies, African-based religions like

Candomblé are fundamentally concerned with maintaining the balance of energies that sustain life: “Everything that exists emanates a specific energy, part of the fundamental energy. These states of constant transformation must be balanced to maintain life and the happiness of nature's beings, including humans” (Cunha Júnior). Due to this vision of energy in interaction, everything in African cultures is dynamic; everything is constantly transformed. These states of constant transformation must be balanced to maintain life and the happiness of nature's beings, including humans. Therefore, in African religions, ritual works aim to preserve this balance for nature's prosperity and human happiness.”<sup>7</sup>

By integrating various African cultural elements and adapting to the Brazilian environment, Candomblé emerged as a distinct religious tradition. It preserved the spiritual essence of African religious beliefs while transforming them into a powerful symbol of resistance, cultural preservation, and spiritual expression for Afro-Brazilian communities. In this way, Candomblé maintains the African heritage of its practitioners and serves as a dynamic force in shaping Afro-Brazilian identity.

## ***2. The Role of Candomblé in Afro-Brazilian Identity***

Candomblé, as an Afro-Brazilian religion, represents a profound cultural reservoir through which Afro-Brazilians have preserved their ancestral heritage, fostering a unique and resilient sense of identity. Despite the harsh conditions of slavery and the repression of African religious practices, Candomblé provided a spiritual sanctuary and a cultural lifeline for these communities. Its rituals, oral traditions, and veneration of Orixás (deities) have continued to serve as cornerstones of Afro-Brazilian identity, linking generations to their African roots and creating a robust framework for cultural continuity.

Candomblé’s role in shaping Afro-Brazilian identity is its ability to preserve and transmit African cosmological beliefs and social structures across oceans and centuries. In his work *“Os Orixás,”* Pierre Verger emphasizes how this religion has successfully safeguarded African traditions, allowing them to survive and evolve in the context of the African diaspora in Brazil. The Orixás, each representing elements of nature and human characteristics, function as spiritual entities and cultural symbols. More than mere deities,

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.afreaka.com.br/notas/candomble-origem-significado-e-funcionamento/>

they embody African history, values, and cosmologies. For example, Xangô, the Orixá of fire and justice, and Iemanjá, the sea goddess, encapsulate divine power and African historical narratives of resilience, strength, and survival.

Verger explains that these Orixás are invoked through elaborate rituals involving drumming, dance, and songs. These rituals serve religious purposes and expressions of African culture and identity. For example, the rhythms and dances associated with specific Orixás reflect their corresponding African regions' distinctive movements and music. The retention of these cultural practices allowed enslaved Africans and their descendants to maintain a profound connection to their homeland, even within the dehumanizing framework of slavery. The Orixás thus became bridges between the African past and the Brazilian present, embodying resilience and cultural survival.

As Zeca Ligiéro explores in “*Batucar, Cantar, Dançar*,” the combination of drumming, singing, and dancing forms an inseparable trio in African and Afro-Brazilian performances. Ligiéro notes that “the body is at the center of everything. It moves in multiple directions, undulating the torso and becoming infused with the percussive rhythm”. The significance of those three elements extends beyond ritual; through the rhythm of the atabaques (drums) and the dancer’s connection to the Orixás, a more profound spiritual and cultural identity is maintained. African diasporic dances and performances are deeply interactive, involving the performer and the audience, who often become active participants in the ritual. This participatory nature of Candomblé rituals helps foster a sense of belonging, reinforces collective identity, and reconnects the present generations with ancestral knowledge. In Ligiéro’s words, “The dance possesses the body, which possesses the God, who is music and expresses itself in rhythm, percussion, and song, in a celebration of faith and hope in the beauty of our rediscovered humanity.”

Candomblé’s reliance on oral traditions has also left its mark in shaping Afro-Brazilian identity. Unlike many Western religions, which depend heavily on written texts, Candomblé has historically been transmitted orally. Elders, known as *mães-de-santo* and *pais-de-santo*, are the custodians of this sacred knowledge and pass it down to younger generations through rituals, storytelling, and direct participation in ceremonies. This oral transmission keeps the traditions vibrant and flexible and reinforces the importance of communal bonds. Rather than a written scripture, the community becomes the living

repository of religious and cultural knowledge. As Verger notes, this oral tradition allowed Candomblé to endure centuries of persecution and adaptation while remaining true to its African origins.

When analyzing the link between religious practices and the practitioners' personal lives and social behaviors, emphasis is seen on the concept of *axé*. This vital force permeates everything in Candomblé. It symbolizes the energy that flows through the Orixás, the natural world, and the human community, and it must be constantly nurtured and balanced through rituals. This worldview, which emphasizes interconnectedness and the balance of forces, profoundly resonates with African philosophical traditions. Afro-Brazilians engage with their spiritual heritage through the rituals that generate and channel *axé* – such as dancing, drumming, and offerings – and reinforce a collective sense of identity inseparable from their African ancestry.

This sense of continuity and belonging extends beyond the spiritual realm into the social fabric of Afro-Brazilian communities. Candomblé terreiros, or sacred spaces, have historically functioned as more than just places of worship. They have been centers of social organization, education, and cultural preservation. Within these terreiros, Afro-Brazilians have found spiritual guidance, social support, solidarity, and space to resist the marginalization imposed by Brazilian society. The communal nature of Candomblé has fostered a strong sense of identity among its practitioners, who often see themselves not merely as adherents of a religion but as part of a broader Afro-Brazilian cultural lineage.

Trespassing the religious rituals, Candomblé's practices permeate various aspects of Brazilian cultural life. As Ligiéro notes, “drumming, singing, and dancing are the basis of different celebrations, both in Afro-Brazilian ritual and non-religious festivities, such as Carnival.” This capability to extend itself to multiple spheres of life demonstrates the widespread cultural impact of Candomblé, where its practices have influenced music, dance, and the visual arts across Brazil. One such example is the Festa de Iemanjá, a yearly festival held on February 2 in Salvador, Bahia, where thousands of participants, both Candomblé practitioners and non-practitioners, gather to honor the goddess of the sea. This festival, rooted in religious devotion, has become a major cultural event celebrating Afro-Brazilian heritage. It allows Afro-Brazilians to express their cultural pride openly and assert their identity in the public sphere.

Candomblé's aesthetic elements –music, dance, costumes, and symbols – have profoundly impacted Brazilian art, music, and literature, further embedding Afro-Brazilian identity within the national consciousness. Writers and artists like Jorge Amado and Gilberto Gil have drawn heavily on Candomblé imagery and themes in their works, contributing to a broader recognition of Afro-Brazilian culture. In Amado's novels, Candomblé appears not only as a spiritual force but also as a representation of the Afro-Brazilian struggle for social justice and equality. Similarly, Gil's music frequently incorporates Candomblé rhythms and invocations, merging religious devotion with a political message of resistance and empowerment.

Despite the challenges Candomblé has faced – including discrimination, persecution, and competition from evangelical movements – the religion has experienced a resurgence in recent decades. This resurgence is part of a broader effort to reclaim and preserve Afro-Brazilian cultural practices in the face of globalization and cultural homogenization. As Pierre Verger notes, the recognition of Candomblé as part of Brazil's cultural heritage has helped legitimize the religion and protect its sacred spaces from further encroachment. Government recognition of Candomblé terreiros as heritage sites has increased the visibility of Afro-Brazilian culture within national narratives, providing more excellent protection for these sacred spaces and allowing Afro-Brazilians to assert their cultural identity more forcefully.

Recognizing Candomblé terreiros as heritage sites has also allowed for greater visibility of Afro-Brazilian culture within national narratives. These sites, which hold deep spiritual and cultural significance, serve as physical representations of Afro-Brazilian history and resilience. By preserving and promoting these spaces, Afro-Brazilian communities can continue to assert and challenge the historical marginalization they have faced since the era of slavery. As Candomblé evolves in contemporary society, it remains a powerful symbol of Afro-Brazilian collective memory, cultural continuity, and the ongoing struggle for equality. It stands as a testament to the resistance and adaptation of Africans and their descendants in Brazil, offering a model for how cultural and religious practices can help sustain identity and community in the face of oppression.

Candomblé's enduring presence in Brazil reflects the spiritual resilience of its practitioners and celebrates African contributions to Brazilian society. As a dynamic and

living tradition, it continues to shape Afro-Brazilian identity, serving as both a spiritual anchor and a force for social and political empowerment in contemporary Brazil.

### ***3. Resistance as a Defining Force in Afro-Brazilian Communities***

Since its emergence in colonial Brazil, Candomblé has built itself up and permeated the prevailing social structures as a political manifestation deeply connected to a legacy of cultural preservation, struggle, and resistance. Despite centuries of enslavement and marginalization, the Afro-Brazilian community found in the faith of their ancestors a means to rebuild familial ties, recreate traditions, and resist the dehumanizing forces of the colonial and slave systems. Candomblé provided a space for the restoration of identity, particularly within the sacred boundaries of the terreiros, where the central figures of the mães-de-santo and pais-de-santo helped reconstitute familial structures that the institution of slavery had systematically dismantled. Much like the quilombos, which were autonomous communities of escaped enslaved Africans, the terreiros were spaces of unity, resistance, and resilience – serving as spiritual, cultural, and social havens for Afro-Brazilian communities.

The history of Afro-Brazilian resistance is one of persistence in the face of relentless persecution. African-based religions, particularly Candomblé, have never experienced periods of peace and security in Brazil. From the colonial era through the early decades of the 20th century, Candomblé practitioners were subjected to harsh repression, often targeted by both society and the State, which viewed African cultural expressions as threats to public order. The early 20th century, in particular, witnessed organized efforts to exclude and marginalize the black population with a systematic campaign against African cultural practices. Despite the constitutional proclamation of religious freedom in the 1891 Federal Constitution<sup>8</sup>, which separated Church and State, Afro-Brazilian religious practices continued to be criminalized under the Brazilian Penal Code, which prohibited the so-called practice of magic and Spiritism<sup>9</sup>. Thus, Afro-Brazilian religions, including Candomblé, were perceived as aberrations, superstition,

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<sup>8</sup> Constitution of The Republic of The United States of Brazil (24 February 1891), Article 11, Paragraph 2: “States, like the Union, are prohibited from: establishing, subsidising or hindering the exercise of religious cults”. Available at

[https://www.planalto.gov.br/CCIVIL\\_03/////Constituicao/Constituicao91.htm](https://www.planalto.gov.br/CCIVIL_03/////Constituicao/Constituicao91.htm).

<sup>9</sup> Decree n. 847 of 11 October 1890, Articles 156, 157 and 158.

and sorcery, deemed illegitimate by the dominant Christian majority (Rodrigues, 2006, 117).

The relentless persecution of Afro-Brazilian religions was further intensified by religious fundamentalism, as exemplified by press reports from the early 20th century. Lísias Nogueira Negrão, in his work “*Entre a Cruz e a Encruzilhada*,” documents the widespread disdain for African religious practices during this period. For instance, news reports from São Paulo in 1918 and 1926 reflect the societal contempt for practitioners of Candomblé and related traditions, with derogatory terms like “charlatans” and “sorcerers” used to describe them:

“Our opinion is already known regarding the faith healers, charlatans, healers, hierophants, occultists, spiritualists, and the like. If this class increases day by day, stimulated by the shameful negligence of the police, it is because the competent authorities decidedly ignore this issue. It is impossible to admit this loathsome gang's victory if the police wanted to act” (Negrão, 1996, 54. Seminar *A Rolha*, May 28, 1918, my translation).

“...the sorcerers set up tents in all corners of the city, the police rest, and the people are deceived [...] The beneficial and energetic Dr. Mário Bastos Cruz's campaign freed the population for some time from this plague of soothsayers. As soon as the police rest a little, these scoundrels return to establish themselves in the city, continuing their profitable profession. It is up to the police to resume the campaign for the peace of the credulous people” (Negrão, 1996, 54. *Folha da Manhã*, April 10, 1926, my translation).

These articles reveal a deep-seated prejudice, where Afro-Brazilian religious practices were seen not only as morally corrupt but as a threat to the social fabric. This mode of thinking, which juxtaposed “respectable” Christian saints against “ridiculous” African deities, framed Candomblé as a perverse and dangerous force in Brazilian society, needing to be eradicated or controlled.

While the fight Against Afro-Brazilian religions was carried out to maintain public order and defend good customs, these religions were not seen for their religious content but for their form of manifestation. However, another turning point in the relationship between Christianity and Afro-Brazilian religions brought a more enduring aspect to the already oppressive characteristics: the idea that these religions were heresies. In this new scenario, groups practicing Candomblé, for example, began to be recognized for their

religious propositions but were promptly classified as misguided or erroneous. In spiritual language, they were heresies.

This understanding began to appear subtly and gradually gained momentum until reaching its peak in the 1950s, with the national crusades against religious manifestations of African origin led by Franciscan Boaventura Kloppenburg. The rhetoric of this fight was generally directed against Spiritism, but in practice, the crusades were also indiscriminately against Umbanda and Candomblé. As early as 1894, the Bishop of Cuiabá, Dom Carlos Luiz D'Amour, in a pastoral letter, warned about the errors of Spiritism, stating that “Spiritism is the worst of all superstitions. It is diabolical and heretical (Apud Negrão, 1996, 55). This religious persecution was compounded by the rise of Pentecostal and evangelical movements in Brazil, which further stigmatized Afro-Brazilian religions, often portraying them as demonic or evil.

Resistance to this repression, however, has always been a defining force within Afro-Brazilian communities. From the moment Africans were forcibly brought to Brazil, they developed ways to preserve, adapt, and conceal their cultural and religious practices in a new and hostile environment. The formation of African “nations” in Brazil, as described by Reginaldo Prandi in “*De Africano a Afro-brasileiro: etnia, identidade, religião*”, was a vital strategy for cultural survival (Prandi, 2000, 57). These nations, based on ethnic affiliations, served as social and cultural organizations that helped preserve African traditions, create new forms of collective identity, and facilitate resistance against the forces of colonization and slavery. The “nations” functioned as micro-societies within the broader colonial structure, where African religious, cultural, and linguistic practices could be maintained and transmitted to future generations.

In a society that sought to suppress and eliminate any trace of African culture, the practice of Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian religions became an act of perseverance. The terreiros served as safe spaces where Africans and their descendants could preserve and transmit their religious and cultural traditions, often disguising their practices to avoid persecution. As Prandi describes, adaptation and religious syncretism were fundamental in this process. By associating the Orixás with Catholic saints, Candomblé practitioners could maintain their spiritual practices in a disguised manner, resisting the pressure of a profoundly Catholic and slave-holding society. In other words:

“The creation of the terreiro community is vital for survival in every sense. This universe, later referred to as Little Africa, is a world where having a group of people that welcomes, supports, and sustains you is essential. It is the difference between life and death; it is the difference between merely living and living with hope, vital energy – axé, as we often say.” (Lima, 2022, my translation).

Additionally, resistance was not confined to the religious sphere but manifested in concrete actions against oppression and the slave system. Prandi highlights how the enslaved organized themselves into associations and “nations” essential to revolts and resistance movements. Candomblé, in this sense, functioned as a unifying force, proving a sense of cultural identity and serving as an organizational base for political resistance. The Candomblé houses, often located in peripheral areas away from direct colonial control, were in the service of planning centers for resistance actions (Prandi, 2000, 57).

In the contemporary scenario, to be further developed in this research, Candomblé and other forms of Afro-Brazilian resistance continue to play a vital role in the fight against racism and inequality. The struggle for the legitimacy and recognition of Afro-Brazilian religions as an integral part of Brazil’s cultural heritage is an extension of historical resistance. As Prandi demonstrates in his article, this resistance is not static; it evolves and adapts, responding to new forms of oppression and the present challenges. Thus, resistance remains a defining element in Afro-Brazilian communities' trajectory, keeping the spirit of struggle alive and preserving a rich and multifaceted identity.

## **CHAPTER II – TERREIRO ILÊ AXÉ OPÔ AFONJÁ: A MICROCOSMO OF CANDOMBLÉ**

The Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, founded back in 1910 by Eugênia Anna dos Santos – known as Mother Aninha – stands today as one of the most important centers for Candomblé in Brazil. Its origins are closely tied to the Terreiro da Casa Branca do Engenho Velho, which is considered the oldest known Candomblé house in Bahia and served as a model for the subsequent establishment of other terreiros across different African nations, including Kêtu, Jeje, and Angola. The establishment of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá represented an act of resilience and autonomy for the Afro-Brazilian community, seeking to preserve and protect their traditions within a changing socio-political landscape.

The history of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, with its lively ceremonies and colorful traditions, is part of the larger story of Afro-Brazilian religious history. Candomblé terreiros, especially those in Salvador, Bahia, were crucial for preserving African traditions in the diaspora. They served as places of resistance against cultural erasure. At the time of its foundation, Mother Aninha's leadership played a pivotal role in shaping the terreiro's identity, establishing it as a spiritual and communal refuge. Her decision to acquire land in the São Gonçalo do Retiro neighborhood and establish the terreiro on this site was an act of visionary leadership, as the site eventually became a center for religious activities and social and political activism.

Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá spans approximately 39,000 square meters, a sprawling testament to the intricate dance between the sacred and the ecological. About two-thirds of the terreiro's land is covered by dense vegetation, representing one of its region's last green spaces. This physical environment is a backdrop for religious rituals. It mirrors the deep connection between Candomblé and nature, a central theme in the religion's cosmology, where the Orixás are seen as both natural forces and deities. The spatial arrangement of the terreiro, with religious and residential buildings occupying the highest and flattest portion of the land, demonstrates a careful adaptation to the landscape that allows for the functional and symbolic use of space. The shed, the main temple, and the House of Xangô are aligned along a ridge, creating an open space for practical and spiritual purposes.

This way of organizing space takes a leaf from the traditional jeje-nagô terreiros of Salvador. This style is also seen in famous Candomblé houses like Casa Branca and Gantois. However, a key distinction at Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá is the separation of the shed, where ceremonies take place, from the main temple. This spatial distinction highlights the terreiro's unique architectural identity within the broader context of Afro-Brazilian religious spaces, reinforcing its importance as a microcosm of continuity and innovation within Candomblé.

Since its founding, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá has had six Ialorixás (high priestesses), each leaving her mark on the community. These leaders, beginning with Mother Aninha and continuing through figures such as Mother Stella de Oxóssi, have been instrumental in both spiritual and social leadership, mentoring new generations of filhos-de-santo

(initiates) and ensuring the transmission of Candomblé knowledge across generations. The terreiro's role as a spiritual hub has also extended beyond religious practice boundaries, integrating into Bahia's cultural, legal, and educational landscape.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout its 114-year history, the terreiro has continuously engaged with the political and social challenges Afro-Brazilians face, becoming a bastion for cultural preservation and resistance. This has been particularly evident in its efforts to combat the historical repression of African-based religions in Brazil. During the 20th century, Afro-Brazilian religions faced constant repression, yet Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá flourished. This resilience is seen as much in its physical expansion as in the community it has nurtured. In this way, the terreiro exemplifies the resilience of Candomblé as a religious and cultural tradition, demonstrating how Afro-Brazilian religious communities have successfully navigated and resisted external pressures through unity and spiritual leadership.

The symbolic significance of the terreiro's physical space also extends into the legal and political arenas. In 1998, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá was recognized as a national cultural heritage site by the Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional (IPHAN), marking a significant victory in the fight for the recognition and preservation of Afro-Brazilian religious and cultural heritage. This recognition affirmed the terreiro's historical importance. It solidified its status as a living monument of Afro-Brazilian culture, contributing to the broader movement to legitimize African-based religions in Brazil. The patrimonialization of the terreiro highlights its role as a space of cultural power and memory, where religious practices are preserved and reinterpreted in contemporary contexts.

In this chapter, we will delve deeper into the historical, cultural, and architectural significance of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, with particular attention to the leadership and legacy of its Ialorixás, the religious practices, and educational initiatives fostered within the terreiro, and its role in the legal and cultural struggles for Afro-Brazilian recognition. This exploration will shed light on how the terreiro has served as a microcosm of Candomblé,

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<sup>10</sup> <http://portal.iphan.gov.br/pagina/detalhes/1637/>

embodying the intersection of spirituality, community, and resistance that defines the broader Afro-Brazilian experience.

### ***1. Historical Background and Evolution***

Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá's journey as one of the foremost Candomblé terreiros in Brazil reflects the broader trajectory of Afro-Brazilian resistance, spiritual resilience, and cultural preservation. Its foundation in 1910, under the leadership of Mother Aninha, emerged from a period of social and religious transformations in Bahia. Afro-Brazilians, though freed from slavery by law, continued to face significant obstacles, including racial discrimination, economic marginalization, and cultural suppression. In this context, the establishment of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá was a spiritual endeavor and an act of cultural affirmation and survival.

Mother Aninha's decision to create a new religious space in the São Gonçalo do Retiro neighborhood was strategic and symbolic. The land, isolated yet lush with vegetation, provided the privacy necessary for the sacred rituals of Candomblé while offering a haven for practitioners who, at the time, were still subject to suspicion and persecution. As a site of spiritual practice, the terreiro became deeply connected to the natural world, reflecting the core belief in Candomblé that nature and the divine are intertwined. Mother Aninha laid the foundations of a thriving center for religious activity and cultural renewal within this protected environment.

The terreiro's historical evolution cannot be separated from the context of Candomblé's broader development in Bahia, where other vital terreiros like Casa Branca do Engenho Velho had already set important precedents. However, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá quickly distinguished itself by the spiritual authority of its leaders and its contributions to the cultural and educational needs of the Afro-Brazilian community. The terreiro's emphasis on knowledge transmission – through religious rituals, community gatherings, and the creation of formal educational spaces – was integral to its identity from the very beginning.

As Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá grew, it became a beacon for the preservation of African spiritual traditions, adapting to the shifting socio-political landscape of the 20th century.

Despite the legal and social constraints placed on Afro-Brazilian religious practices, the terreiro flourished, evolving into a critical institution that balanced spiritual leadership with cultural advocacy. The progression of its influence and the growing stature of its leaders ensured that the terreiro would survive and thrive, solidifying its legacy as a central player in preserving Candomblé.

### **1.1 Foundation and Early Years**

The foundation of Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá in 1910 represents a defining moment in the history of Afro-Brazilian religious life. Under the leadership of Mother Aninha, the terreiro emerged at a time when Afro-Brazilian communities were navigating post-emancipation realities and seeking to preserve their cultural and religious heritage. Although slavery had been legally abolished in Brazil in 1888, freedom brought little relief from systemic racism and marginalization. Afro-Brazilians were primarily excluded from political participation, access to land, and economic opportunities, often relegated to impoverished urban areas. These communities also faced discrimination in the practice of their African-derived religions, which were demonized and subjected to legal repression, including police raids and arrests under the Brazilian Penal Code of 1890, which criminalized practices associated with "magic" and "sorcery."

In this fraught environment, the creation of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá was both a spiritual necessity and a deliberate act of resistance. The early 20th century saw profound social and religious transformations in Brazil, particularly for Afro-Brazilians, who sought to protect and sustain their cultural and spiritual heritage amid continued persecution. Establishing a new terreiro provided a sanctuary where Candomblé practices could be preserved and developed free from external interference. It became a space for empowerment and cultural affirmation, where the traditions of African spirituality could continue to flourish despite the broader society's attempts to marginalize and criminalize them.

The site chosen for Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá was a plot of land in São Gonçalo do Retiro, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Salvador. The area was relatively isolated at the time, surrounded by dense vegetation, which offered privacy and protection for the religious activities that would take place there. The choice of location was significant, as it allowed

the terreiro to develop in a natural setting, closely aligned with the spiritual connection to nature central to Candomblé. The land became sacred through the rituals performed there; it was transformed into a vibrant religious and cultural center over time.

The early years of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá were characterized by the establishment of crucial rituals, the construction of sacred spaces, and the formation of a dedicated community of practitioners. Mother Aninha, as the founder and first Ialorixá, was instrumental in organizing the religious life of the terreiro. She introduced rituals and practices that reflected the diverse African origins of the community, particularly the Yoruba (Kêtu) traditions that she had been initiated into. These rituals included the veneration of Orixás, the use of drumming and dance in ceremonies, and the celebration of important religious festivals.

One of the most significant aspects of the early years of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá was the establishment of the terreiro as a center of knowledge and education. Mother Aninha believed in education's importance in empowering Afro-Brazilians and sought to integrate traditional religious teachings with broader educational goals. This vision led to the founding of the Eugênia Anna dos Santos School within the terreiro, which aimed to educate children in the local community, blending traditional African knowledge with formal education. The school was named after Mother Aninha herself, reflecting her commitment to nurturing the next generation and preserving the cultural heritage of Candomblé.

The community that formed around Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá in its early years was diverse and dynamic. It included not only Afro-Brazilians but also people of various backgrounds drawn to the spiritual and cultural richness of Candomblé. The terreiro became a place where knowledge was shared and where the values of solidarity, respect, and mutual support were cultivated. This sense of community was reinforced by the collective nature of Candomblé rituals, which required the participation of many people and fostered strong bonds among the members of the terreiro.

During these formative years, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá also began to establish connections with other terreiros in Salvador and beyond. These relationships were crucial for the exchange of knowledge and the reinforcement of religious practices. The terreiro's

influence grew as it became known, other than its spiritual leadership, for its role in the broader Afro-Brazilian cultural renaissance that was taking place in the early 20th century.

Despite the challenges of the time, including social prejudice and legal restrictions on Afro-Brazilian religious practices, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá thrived under the leadership of Mother Aninha. Her dedication to preserving and promoting Candomblé ensured that the terreiro would survive and flourish. The establishment of the Sociedade Cruz Santa do Axé Opô Afonjá in 1936, another of her initiatives, further solidified the terreiro's place within the broader Candomblé community (de Jesus Santos, 2019). This legal framework was designed to protect the terreiro's assets and ensure the continuation of its religious practices beyond her lifetime, showcasing her foresight and understanding of the socio-political challenges facing Afro-Brazilian religious communities. By her death in 1938, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá had firmly established itself as a beacon of Afro-Brazilian culture and spirituality.

The foundation and early years of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá set the stage for its continued growth and development throughout the 20th century. Its ability to adapt to changing circumstances while maintaining its core traditions is a testament to the strength and resilience of its community.

## **1.2 Growth and Development Over the Years**

The growth and development of Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá over the decades serve as a profound example of the resilience and adaptability of Afro-Brazilian religious practices in the face of considerable socio-political challenges. From its foundation in 1910, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá evolved from a local religious site to one of the most renowned Candomblé terreiros in Brazil. This evolution is a testament to the determination of its leaders and community members, who worked tirelessly to preserve and expand the terreiro's influence both within the religious sphere and in broader cultural, social, and educational contexts.

Shortly after its establishment, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá emerged as a focal point for the practice, preservation, and transmission of Candomblé traditions. The foundational

leadership of Mother Aninha played a critical role in shaping the terreiro's spiritual and cultural framework. Her deep connection to Yoruba (Kêtu) traditions allowed for the development a religious system incorporating diverse African spiritual elements. These elements were preserved and transmitted through rigorous oral traditions, sacred rituals, and active community involvement. The careful preservation of this framework across generations ensured that the terreiro maintained its core African identity while also adapting to the evolving social and political dynamics of 20th-century Brazil.

One of the essential factors in Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá's sustained growth was its ability to maintain a solid connection to its African spiritual roots, particularly the Yoruba (Kêtu) traditions while adapting to the shifting realities of Afro-Brazilian life. Rituals such as the veneration of Orixás, drumming and dance in religious ceremonies, and the initiation processes for new members became integral to the terreiro's spiritual practice. These rituals were more than religious observances; they were acts of cultural survival and resistance, symbolizing the enduring strength of Afro-Brazilian identity in a society that often sought to marginalize or suppress it. The ability of these rituals to draw participants from across Bahia and beyond helped solidify Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá as a cultural and religious center, with its influence extending well beyond its immediate community.

As the terreiro expanded, it became more than just a religious center. It also became an important cultural and educational institution. This change was especially clear when Mother Senhora took over as Ialorixá in 1942. Under her leadership, the terreiro focused on its religious practices and also took on the responsibility of providing both spiritual and regular education to the local community. One major step was the establishment of the Eugênia Anna dos Santos School within the terreiro. This school was a big deal because it showed a commitment to education beyond just religious teachings. The school included Afro-Brazilian cultural and religious knowledge in its curriculum, allowing children to get a formal education while staying connected to their spiritual heritage. This unique education model played a big part in empowering Afro-Brazilian youth and preserving Candomblé traditions for future generations.

The role of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá in the broader cultural renaissance of mid-20th-century Bahia cannot be overstated. As Afro-Brazilian cultural and religious expressions gained increasing recognition, the terreiro became a vital center for studying,

disseminating, and promoting Afro-Brazilian traditions. It attracted scholars, artists, activists, and cultural leaders who sought to understand and engage with the rich artistic legacy of Candomblé – this period marked a significant shift in the public perception of Candomblé, moving it from the margins of society to a recognized and celebrated element of Brazil’s cultural heritage. As the terreiro took on a leading role in this movement, it positioned itself at the forefront of efforts to elevate Afro-Brazilian culture nationally and internationally.

The growth of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá also coincided with broader efforts to preserve and institutionalize Afro-Brazilian heritage. In 1998, the terreiro was recognized as a national heritage site by IPHAN (Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional)<sup>11</sup>, a significant milestone in the legal and cultural struggle for the recognition of Candomblé. This recognition validated the terreiro’s contributions to Brazilian culture and helped protect its sacred spaces from further marginalization or destruction.

However, despite its expanding influence and recognition, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá faced numerous challenges throughout the 20th century, particularly within the legal and social context of Brazil. Afro-Brazilian religions, including Candomblé, were frequently subject to persecution, and legal restrictions placed significant pressure on practitioners. The terreiro had to navigate these challenges while maintaining the safety of its community and protecting its religious practices. The leaders of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, particularly Mother Stella de Oxóssi, who became Ialorixá in 1976, played crucial roles in addressing these challenges. Mother Stella’s leadership marked a turning point for the terreiro, as she actively engaged with public discourse on religious freedom and cultural preservation. Her efforts to demystify Candomblé through written works, media engagement, and participation in public policy discussions helped shift public perceptions and legitimize Candomblé in the eyes of the broader society.

Her leadership extended into public policy discussions on religious freedom and cultural preservation, solidifying the terreiro’s role as a central institution for Afro-Brazilian identity and resistance.

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<sup>11</sup> National Historical and Artistic Heritage Institute in Brazil

Mother Stella's influence also extended beyond the religious realm, as she positioned Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá as a central institution in the fight for cultural recognition and religious freedom. Her leadership helped solidify the terreiro's role in shaping discussions on Afro-Brazilian identity, cultural policy, and religious rights in Brazil. By documenting the practices of Candomblé and participating in national and international forums, Mother Stella ensured that Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá's voice would be heard not only within religious circles but also in academic, political, and cultural arenas.

As the 20th century ended and the 21st century began, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá continued to grow in stature, gaining international recognition as a symbol of Afro-Brazilian cultural resilience. The terreiro became a destination for scholars, religious leaders, and cultural figures from around the world who were interested in learning about Candomblé's role in shaping Brazilian identity. Through the efforts of leaders like Mother Stella, the terreiro became more than just a religious site; it became a global symbol of resistance, continuity, and cultural pride.

The current leadership of Mother Ana de Xangô, who assumed the role of Ialorixá in 2019, reflects the terreiro's continued commitment to tradition while engaging with the challenges of the contemporary world. Under her guidance, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá has remained a vibrant center of spiritual and cultural life while also addressing modern concerns such as environmental sustainability, social justice, and the preservation of Afro-Brazilian identity in an increasingly globalized world. The terreiro's influence extends into education, public policy, and cultural preservation, making it a lasting symbol of Afro-Brazilian resilience, continuity, and adaptability.

## ***2. Leadership and Legacy: From Mother Aninha to Mother Ana de Xangô***

### **2.1 The Role of Leadership**

Afro-Brazilian religious houses have leadership structures similar to those of any institution. They operate under pre-established rules defined by tradition, exhibit an organizational culture, and set goals and objectives to be achieved, all under the command of a recognized and legitimate leadership.

Within the symbolic network, the leadership role exercised by a Babalorixá or Ialorixá must be understood through its sacred nature. These leaders, endowed with supernatural strength and power derived from their Orixás, are the primary protagonists of these religions. Bastide notes, “The priests of the highest hierarchy possess the complete treasure of divine narratives” (Bastide, 1971, 333). These leaders redistribute and allocate the strengthening of the vital force of the Orixás, the axé of the terreiros, while also teaching the ancestral wisdom previously passed down to them during their initiation process<sup>12</sup>.

Axé, as mentioned earlier, is the vital force that flows through the Orixás. In the dictionary by Olga Cacciatori, the word axé is defined as the "dynamic force of the divinities, power of realization, vitality that individualizes itself in certain objects, such as plants, metal symbols, stones, and others that constitute secrets and are buried beneath the central post of the terreiro, becoming its spiritual safeguard, as they represent all the Orixás” (1988, 56, my translation).

The role of the terreiro leader is not limited to being a knowledgeable authority on religious structures, as some priests and priestesses exhibit a broader understanding of their leadership role, encompassing both spiritual and institutional management. With skill and insight, they build their leadership legacies, becoming recognized for their life trajectories: they thus become successful leaders, visible and impactful.

Afro-Brazilian leaders are knowledgeable about traditional (sacred) religious foundations, passed down orally by their predecessors over the years, within a hierarchical dynamic. This role of being knowledgeable in traditional foundations and possessing power and authority is accepted by all members of Candomblé within the hierarchical structure of Afro-descendant religions. According to tradition, the leader carries and accumulates, from the moment of initiation, the responsibility for the offerings and sacrifices made to the Orixás, the guardians of their head, receiving in return the vital force and energy, thereby distributing axé to all adherents and ensuring the continuation of religious practice.

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<sup>12</sup> It is the first step toward learning the secrets of Afro-descendant religions. During initiation, the *abiã* (the future priest or priestess of Candomblé) learns the secrets of the rituals and the doctrines.

In a terreiro of Xangô, such as Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, leadership is fundamentally based on the relationship between the parents (pai/mãe-de-santo) and their filhos de santo (initiates) (Pereira, 1994, 72). Each group member must fulfill their obligations according to their position under the command of the pai or mãe-de-santo. If they fail to do so, they will be punished by the Orixá, with the pai or mãe-de-santo acting as the mediator of the punishment, thus creating a network of power and subordination within the terreiro. There is a leadership with singular authority accompanied by responsibility, in which all those subordinated and connected to it must obey and are equally responsible for performing their roles. It is helpful to appreciate what Pereira described about how this chain of command and subordination operates:

“The hierarchical organization of Sítio do Pai Adão includes the figure of the pai-de-santo (Babalorixá) and, in a slightly lower position, the mãe-de-santo (Ialorixá). The pai-de-santo is responsible for scheduling public or private ceremonies, overseeing the divinatory practices, managing the larger rituals and cults, and conducting most offerings to the gods, including the sacrifices. The mãe-de-santo is tasked with gathering resources for the rituals, maintaining the physical space of the terreiro, overseeing certain parts of the initiation ceremony, and ensuring the discipline of the filhos and filhas de santo (initiates) of the terreiro, who are ranked below her in the hierarchy. The mãe-de-santo can also carry out the divinatory practice in the absence of the priest. At Sítio do Pai Adão, there is no position of Mother pequena, but there is another role, that of the madrinha do terreiro (godmother of the terreiro), which is the highest position after the Ialorixá. Her main duty is to keep the keys to the quarto do santo (the sacred room) and the salão de toques (ceremonial hall). She also assists in preparing the food for the santo (Orixá). Below her are the filhas de santo (female initiates), who are responsible for cleaning the quarto do santo, arranging the terreiro, decorating it on ritual days, and preparing the offerings. In addition to the tasks mentioned above, they care for the filhos de santo (both male and female) who are in a state of possession. There, the filhas de santo can also take care of male initiates during possession. The position of tiradores de toadas (song leaders) is not fixed either. The pai-de-santo opens the songs, later alternating with assistants. In fact, one of the filhas-de-santo can also take on this role. The tocadores de Ilús (drummers) occupy a position equivalent to that of the priest's assistants. They often perform both the functions of tocadores de Ilús and priest's assistants. Common devotees are classified into various categories based on their sacred and profane affiliation with the initiates of the terreiro.” (Pereira, 1994, 73-74, my translation).

As we can see, to understand the tradition of Afro-Brazilian religions, it is first necessary to grasp the logic of their cosmivision, which results in the power and authority of their leaders in the terreiros. The constitutive elements brought, recreated, and adapted

to the New World reflect the African context. The power and authority that emanate from the leaders of Candomblé houses are exercised not only within the walls of the terreiros but also extend beyond them, becoming part of the daily lives of their followers. Regarding the significance of faith for Candomblé adherents, Bastide wrote the following:

“A faith in the omnipotence of the Orixás, in the supernatural sanctions that punish those who violate taboos, a faith supported by thousands of cases, of childhood stories of gods punished for their disobedience, of laypeople cured through sacrifices, or after having 'fed their heads,' a pre-existing faith, inherited from ancestors and transmitted from generation to generation” (Bastide, 1971, 311).

As mentioned before, the leadership in Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá is matriarchal under the guidance of the first Ialorixá. This serves as a symbol of female empowerment, given the national and international significance of the terreiro. The Ialorixás (high priestesses) lineage, spiritual guidance, and cultural influence further emphasize this.

It all began with Mother Aninha, a visionary leader whose work went beyond the spiritual realm to include education, social justice, and cultural preservation. Her leadership established the terreiro as a place where tradition, knowledge, and empowerment flourished together. Mother Aninha played a vital role in solidifying Candomblé's presence and influence in Salvador, Bahia, positioning the terreiro as a space of religious practice and cultural resistance. Her legacy laid the foundation for future leaders to build upon, ensuring that Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá remained a center of learning and artistic activism.

Following in Mother Aninha's footsteps, Mother Stella de Oxóssi brought a new dimension to the leadership of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá. Assuming her role as Ialorixá in 1976, Mother Stella emerged as a prominent voice within the religious community and the broader Brazilian cultural and intellectual landscape. Her leadership was characterized by a commitment to bringing Candomblé into public discourse, advocating for its recognition as a vital component of Afro-Brazilian identity. Mother Stella's numerous writings, public engagements, and policy advocacy efforts helped to demystify Candomblé, bringing it greater visibility and legitimacy in Brazilian society. Her

intellectual contributions emphasized the importance of preserving religious knowledge in written form, which was a notable departure from the traditionally oral transmission of Candomblé wisdom.

Mother Stella's leadership also marked a period of significant growth for the terreiro, as it gained national and international recognition for preserving Afro-Brazilian religious traditions. Through her efforts, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá became a site not only of spiritual practice but of cultural diplomacy, with Mother Stella engaging in dialogues with scholars, policymakers, and religious leaders from various traditions. Her emphasis on cultural heritage preservation and her advocacy for religious freedom positioned her as a critical figure in the fight for the rights of Afro-Brazilian religious communities.

While the leadership of Mother Aninha and Mother Stella are often highlighted for their historical significance, the lineage of Ialorixás at Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá is marked by a continuous commitment to adapting to new social realities while preserving the core principles of Candomblé. Although less internationally known, leaders such as Mother Senhora and Mother Bada de Oxalá played pivotal roles in expanding the terreiro's influence by focusing on education and community-building. These leaders ensured that the terreiro remained an anchor for Afro-Brazilian cultural identity, particularly during social and political repression.

The most recent leadership transition occurred in 2019 when Mother Ana de Xangô assumed the role of Ialorixá. Her leadership has continued the terreiro's tradition of resilience and adaptability, focusing on contemporary issues such as environmental sustainability and the role of Candomblé in promoting social justice. Mother Ana's leadership reflects the evolving nature of the terreiro, as it addresses the challenges of the modern world while staying firmly rooted in its spiritual and cultural heritage.

We will next see how some of these leaders, from Mother Aninha to Mother Ana de Xangô, have contributed to the evolution of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá.

## **2.2 Mother Aninha**

Mother Aninha (Obá Biyi), born Eugênia Anna dos Santos on July 13, 1869, in Salvador, Bahia, is considered one of the most influential figures in the history of

Candomblé. Described by Edson Carneiro as one of the most illustrious women in Bahian Candomblé (Carneiro, 1991, 58), she was a descendant of the Grunci nation<sup>13</sup>. The sources are not precise regarding the timing of her initiation, but evidence suggests that it occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when she was around 16 years old, approximately in 1884 (Lima, 2004). Her initiation at the prestigious Terreiro da Casa Branca do Engenho Velho provided her with the religious foundation to later guide her as a respected mãe-de-santo. However, her ambition and vision extended beyond the boundaries of Casa Branca. She sought to create a terreiro that would serve as a religious hub as well as a cultural and educational center, which would become Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá.

The founding of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá in 1910 was deeply tied to Mother Aninha's entrepreneurial spirit and dedication to preserving Candomblé. As a prominent merchant in Salvador's Pelourinho district, she sold products used in African rituals, traditional Bahian crafts, and delicacies. These means, combined with her savings, enabled her to purchase the land that would become the Casa de Xangô. Another interesting point was the innovative aspect brought by her regarding practice and tradition:

“Despite also advocating for this "Nagô purity," Mother Aninha innovated the tradition in Brazil. In Africa, each community worshipped a specific Orixá (roughly: Xangô in Oyo; Yemanjá in Abeocutá; Oxóssi in Ketu; Oxum in the Nigerian regions of Ijexá and Ijebu; Ogum in Ifé and other Yoruba cities, etc.), but Mother Aninha transformed the space of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá into a prototype of Africa. In the same terreiro community, she harmonized the worship of Orixás from various cities of the Nago empire, which had come to Brazil with enslaved Africans in the 18th and 19th centuries. "She was the first to unite various African nations in one space, creating the notion of a terreiro as we understand it today” (Daniel, 2010).

Mother Aninha's influence was not limited to the religious sphere. Her relationships with various intellectuals and community leaders in Salvador helped position Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá as a refuge for those interested in learning about Afro-Brazilian culture. The terreiro became a gathering place for scholars and spiritual leaders, where Candomblé was practiced, studied, and respected. This intellectual engagement reflected Mother Aninha's commitment to education and knowledge. She frequently expressed her desire for all religious members to be educated, a sentiment captured in her famous phrase: “I

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<sup>13</sup> The Gurunsis are today's Burkina Faso.

want to see everyone with a ring on their finger at the feet of Xangô.” The metaphor of the ring, symbolizing academic or professional achievement, highlighted her belief in the power of education to uplift individuals and the community as a whole.

Under her leadership, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá grew into a cultural and religious hub that preserved the traditions of Candomblé and fostered social empowerment. Mother Aninha viewed education as central to this mission, not only in the academic sense but also in terms of spiritual and cultural knowledge. Her terreiro became a space where the rich oral traditions, rituals, and ancestral wisdom of Candomblé could be passed down to future generations. This emphasis on formal and informal education was crucial to her vision of Candomblé as a living, evolving tradition that could serve as a tool for individual growth and collective resistance to social and racial oppression.

While her political actions will be discussed more extensively in subsequent chapters, it is essential to acknowledge that Mother Aninha’s influence extended into the socio-political realm. She played a critical role in ensuring the survival and recognition of Candomblé during a period of intense discrimination against Afro-Brazilian religions. One notable example of her advocacy was her pivotal meeting with President Getúlio Vargas in 1936, which officially recognized Candomblé and helped secure legal protections for its practitioners. More specifically, she was the driving force behind the promulgation of Presidential Decree n. ° 1.202, in the first government of President Vargas, which extinguished the ban on Afro-Brazilian cults in 1934 (Santos, 1994).

At a time when the religion faced police repression, her ability to navigate political and social circles was vital in preventing the closure of terreiros and in advocating for religious freedom. By founding the Eugênia Anna dos Santos School, Mother Aninha emphasized the intersection of education and cultural pride as tools to combat marginalization. Her actions helped establish Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá as a respected institution in both the religious and broader Bahian communities.

### **2.3 Mother Stella de Oxóssi**

Maria Stella de Azevedo Santos, widely known as Mother Stella de Oxóssi, was a central figure in the history of Candomblé in Brazil, assuming leadership of Ilê Axé Opô

Afonjá from 1976 until she died in 2018. A member of a middle-class Bahian family, Mother Stella's connection to Candomblé began early, despite resistance from her family, who attempted to dissuade her from pursuing her spiritual calling. Her initiation into the religion solidified her devotion, leading her to eventually take on the role of Ialorixá after Mother Ondina's passing, chosen through the traditional *jogo de búzios*<sup>14</sup> (cowrie shell divination). Unlike other terreiros, where leadership often passed through family ties, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá uniquely adheres to a tradition in which the leadership is determined by the Orixás themselves, ensuring a connection based on spiritual alignment rather than consanguinity (Silva et al., 2022).

Distinguished for her religious leadership and significant contributions to Afro-Brazilian culture and intellectual discourse, Mother Stella was a fervent advocate for preserving Candomblé traditions. She tirelessly worked towards separating the religion from its historical syncretism with Catholicism – a survival strategy during colonial repression. In 1983, alongside other leaders, she played a pivotal role in creating the Antisyncretism Manifesto. This document marked a crucial moment in the history of Candomblé, calling for the independence of Afro-Brazilian religious traditions from Catholic influences. Mother Stella maintained that while saints like Santa Bárbara are respected, they embody different energies than Orixás, such as Iansã, underlining the need for Candomblé to be recognized as a separate and autonomous religion. According to Prata (1983), this manifesto was instrumental in challenging the narratives that had historically marginalized Afro-Brazilian religious practices, thereby positioning Candomblé as a religion in its own right, deserving of respect and recognition.

Mother Stella's contributions extended far beyond the spiritual realm. She was a prolific author, being the first Ialorixá from Brazilian Candomblé to write books and articles, further publishing several books that recorded the oral traditions of Candomblé and served as tools for educating broader society about the richness of Afro-Brazilian spirituality. Her works, such as "Meu Tempo é Agora" and "Òsósi - O Caçador de

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<sup>14</sup> One of the divinatory arts used in traditional African religions and in African diaspora religions established in various countries of the Americas. Religiously, it is known as *merindilogun*, and along with the kola nut (*obi*), it is the oldest oracle of the Yoruba people.

Alegrias," serve as primary sources of the wisdom of the religion and its customs. She defined her priesthood as the following:

“In our house, the Yalorixá embodies the roles of both mother of the Orixá and mother of the Axé, in the sacred sense. She is the one who connects humans to the Orixá through the initiation process and distributes the axé. Only she has the right to begin and complete the initiation cycle. Additionally, she is responsible for her Egbé, acting as the spokesperson for Xangô. As the catalyst, she is the "conductor of the orchestra." It is her responsibility to select the Oloyé according to "superior" determinations (and, in the terreiro, only the gods are superior to the Yalorixá).” (Santos, 2010, my translation).

Furthermore, her engagement in educational initiatives led to the establishment of the Eugênia Anna dos Santos Municipal School, located within Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, underscoring her belief in the importance of education for the empowerment of Afro-Brazilian communities.

A revered public intellectual, Mother Stella received widespread recognition throughout her life, including honorary doctorates from the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) and the State University of Bahia (UNEB). She was also inducted into the Bahia Academy of Letters. Her influence extended beyond spiritual leadership to encompass cultural preservation, education, and social advocacy. Taking a robust anti-syncretic position, she made a bold statement about Afro-Brazilian identity and autonomy, challenging historical oppression. Her efforts significantly advanced the cultural and religious emancipation of Afro-Brazilian communities, ensuring that the practices of Candomblé were acknowledged as an integral and legitimate part of Brazil's cultural heritage assertion of Afro-Brazilian identity and autonomy in the face of historical oppression. Mother Stella's work contributed significantly to Afro-Brazilian communities' cultural and religious emancipation, ensuring that Candomblé's practices were recognized as legitimate and vital to Brazil's cultural heritage.

Mother Stella's profound impact endures as she fervently advocated for the preservation of her community's spiritual practices and their cultural validation in the face of longstanding racial and religious prejudice. She elevated Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá into more than a religious institution, nurturing its growth as a cultural and educational powerhouse, ensuring that Afro-Brazilian traditions would be proudly and faithfully transmitted to future generations. Her leadership, blending tradition with a call for

contemporary recognition and independence, firmly establishes her as one of the most influential figures in Afro-Brazilian religious history.

## 2.4 Mother Ana de Xangô

Ana Verônica Bispo dos Santos, also known as Mother Ana de Xangô, was designated as the successor to Mother Stella de Oxóssi in December 2019. This decision was made after a series of divinations using the búzios by Balbino Daniel de Paula (*Obaràyí*), a respected *Babalorixá*<sup>15</sup> in Brazil. The *Ifá* divination, known for its intricacy and typically reserved for experts, was conducted three times within the sacred space, with the participation of the *filhos-de-santo*. The initial reading predicted a smooth transition, while the second indicated that the successor would be aligned with Xangô. After confirming the identity at the Casa de Xangô, *Obaràyí* returned to announce Ana de Xangô as the chosen leader.

In traditional spiritual practice, the selection process starts by identifying the candidate's spiritual path, determining their guiding Orixá, and gradually eliminating other possibilities until the final candidate is confirmed. Xangô's decision ultimately validated Ana's leadership, marking the conclusion of this intricate process.

Mother Ana has been involved with Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá since the age of 13, initiated by Mother Stella herself. She has strong ties within the community and is used to meeting with them during Xangô celebrations. Before becoming the Ialorixá, she was well-known as a dedicated educator, involved in various educational projects within the terreiro, and committed to collective well-being.

On June 16, 2022, Mother Ana's formal ascension to Ialorixá took place after a period of mourning following Mother Stella's passing. This ceremony also symbolized the revival of the terreiro after two challenging years of the COVID-19 pandemic, signifying a new beginning for the community. The significant moment, commemorated during the festival of Oxóssi, was documented in "De Obá Biyi a Obá Gerê - Um renascer no Afonjá, 1910-2022,"<sup>16</sup> dedicated to Mother Ana de Xangô. In this documentary,

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<sup>15</sup> Also known as *pai-de-santo*, *pai-de-terreiro*, or *babá*, he is the priest of Afro-Brazilian religions.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MoDurSMfTjM> [accessed 26<sup>th</sup> September 2024]

influential community members express their optimism about Mother Ana's leadership, highlighting their expectation that she will continue to uphold the values established by her predecessors and carry on the matriarchal legacy of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá.

It has been a short time since her ascension, but her leadership is expected to make lasting contributions. These contributions will involve preserving the sacred traditions of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá and addressing contemporary issues, as further explored in the following chapters.

### ***3. Culture and Tradition of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá***

The terreiro space at Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá extends beyond its function as a location for religious ceremonies; it plays a vital role in constructing and reaffirming Afro-Brazilian identity. The spiritual leader acts as a mentor, supporting the well-being of individuals and the community and empowering cultural and religious advocates. Through ritual language, dance, music, cuisine, and conduct, the terreiro defines and expresses Afro-religious identity beyond its physical boundaries.

The spread of these cultural traditions played a key role in elevating Candomblé from a purely religious practice to a revered cultural and aesthetic expression. In the years leading up to the 1980s, there was a growing "re-Africanization" movement that sparked a resurgence of African customs and traditions in Brazil. About this period, museologist Raul Lody notes:

“In the 1970s, the term 'Afro' emerged with semantic and symbolic effectiveness to designate African heritage in Brazil and, particularly, to identify in the distinctly Afro-Brazilian manifestations a certain African purism. Gradually, a revivalist/re-Africanization vigor began to take shape within political movements of groups actively committed to reclaiming concepts, revisiting ideas, and transforming crystallized social views about Black people in Brazil” (Lody, 2006, 12, my translation).

This reformulation and rethinking of Afro-Brazilian culture and heritage laid the groundwork for the Black identity affirmation movement, with terreiros serving as both the cornerstone and the driving force. Bahia, in particular, provided fertile ground for this movement. Music played a significant role in amplifying the culture of the terreiro, promoting and redefining Candomblé as a legitimate religion. Dorival Caymmi (1914-

2008), one of the most influential figures in Brazilian music, is notable for his focus on Black culture in his compositions.

Caymmi, also known as Onikoyi, was confirmed as one of the Obás of Xangô<sup>17</sup>, a position of considerable responsibility within the sacred universe established by Mother Aninha. As a son of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, Caymmi used his musical compositions to convey a deep reverence for the orixá Xangô, demonstrating his enduring ties to Candomblé. His songs reflect his bond with the sacred and exemplify the communal aspect of this relationship.

Caymmi's repertoire includes numerous songs that highlight the beliefs and myths of Candomblé and celebrate its culinary traditions. The intricate details in his compositions and the cultural depth elements they portray attest to his profound connection with the jeje-nagô terreiro culture. This relationship is evident in the dishes offered to the deities, which have since become well-known in popular Brazilian cuisine, such as *Açaçá*, *Acarajé*, and *Vatapá*<sup>18</sup>.

Cuisine in Candomblé has been essential for preserving and promoting African cultural traditions, particularly those long marginalized. Dorival Caymmi, through his music, celebrated iconic ingredients like palm oil and addressed broader cultural tensions within Brazilian society. His praise of *Vatapá* serves as a tribute to Afro-Brazilian identity, emphasizing the role of the “*nêga baiana*”<sup>19</sup> in mastering the culinary art. As Raul Lody remarks, “Dendê is, without question, one of the most immediate and effective marks of Africa on the Afro-Brazilian table, symbolizing the link between African heritage and daily life in Brazil.” (Lody, 1998, p.26-27).

The symbolic relationship highlighted by Lody is present in Caymmi's representation of cuisine. These nuances demonstrate the intimate link between the sacred and the collective. Caymmi's songs provide a valuable lens into the symbolic universe of

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<sup>17</sup> Position of utmost importance within Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá. A more detailed explanation will be provided in subtopic 3.3.

<sup>18</sup> Typical dishes of the Northeastern and Northern cuisines of Brazil. Reflect the influence of the Black population in these regions.

<sup>19</sup> Black woman from Bahia

Africa present within Candomblé, thus playing an essential role in disseminating Afro-religious culture.

Music remained a powerful vehicle for championing Afro-religious culture, as illustrated by the song "É D'Oxun," composed by Gerônimo and Vevé Calazans. This piece paid homage to Mother Menininha of Gantois and became an unofficial anthem of Bahia, crowning the Iyalorixá as the "Mother of Bahia." Mother Menininha embodied the archetypal qualities of Oxun – the revered deity of freshwater and fertility. The song carries profound symbolism that reflects the world of Candomblé, where women have traditionally held authority and nurtured within the terreiros. In this regard, the *afoxé*<sup>20</sup> stands out as one of the elements that have significantly contributed to constructing new meanings.

The movement to dismantle the colonial view that demonized Afro-religious culture led Candomblé to take to the streets, gaining new dimensions. This movement began in the 19th century when groups of Black men started organizing carnival blocks. However, the 1970s and 1980s marked the period when afoxés gained increased prominence, becoming popular and widely recognized.

“Almost all members of afoxés are linked to the Candomblé religion. Their musicians are alabês, their dances replicate those of the orixás, and their leaders are babalorixás (...), and the ritual of the procession follows the discipline of the religious tradition. The afoxés brought the musical repertoire and the aesthetics of Candomblé into the space of the carnival.” (Guerreiro, 2000, 71, my translation).

During the carnival festivities, practitioners took the chance to sing, pray, and have a good time. Like the Candomblé religious tradition, where the sacred and the profane are closely intertwined, the afoxés blend singing and praying in a more unrestricted manner. In this sense, they share similarities with the rituals held in the terreiros and are sometimes even regarded as “street Candomblé.”

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<sup>20</sup> Afoxé is the rhythm produced by the instrumental and vocal ensemble of the same name when parading during Carnival through the streets of Bahia and Pernambuco, in the form of a *rancho* or *cordão* (traditional Brazilian parade formats). Both the group and the rhythm are closely linked to practitioners of Candomblé, with Afro-Brazilian roots.

The attire worn during these festivities is also significant, often mirroring the colors and symbolism associated with the Orixás, thereby further enriching the cultural significance of the event. This combination of elements makes the afoxés distinctive expressions of the Candomblé cultural and religious universe. In addition to the music, attire, and performances, the offering of *padê*<sup>21</sup> is an essential ritual that forms an integral part of the afoxé tradition.

The afoxés in Bahia have a rich history deeply rooted in the struggle to preserve African and religious culture in Brazil, closely linked to the Candomblé terreiros, particularly exemplified by Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá. This movement was not spearheaded by scholars or the government but rather by a political initiative led by the terreiro communities. These initiatives played a pivotal role in upholding African heritage and advocating for the cultural and religious rights of the Afro-Brazilian community.

This introduction lays the groundwork for a more in-depth exploration of the cultural and religious practices at Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá. In subtopic 3.1, Religious Rituals and Orixás Celebrations, we will delve into the significance of rituals and the worship of the Orixás, highlighting how these ceremonies foster community and spiritual connection. In subtopic 3.2, Initiation of Filhos de Santo, the focus will be on the initiation process for new members, which is central to preserving the continuity of Candomblé practices and transmitting sacred knowledge. Finally, in subtopic 3.3, Hierarchy and Roles in Terreiro Structure, we will examine the internal organization of the terreiro, focusing on the roles and responsibilities within its hierarchy and how these contribute to maintaining order, authority, and cultural integrity. Together, these sections illustrate how Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá serves as a microcosm of the broader cultural, spiritual, and artistic practices that define the Candomblé community in Bahia.

### **3.1 Religious Rituals and Orixás Celebrations**

The central and widely recognized aspect of Candomblé is the "toques," which are the public ceremonies and festivities of the religion. Each terreiro has its liturgical

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<sup>21</sup> Candomblé ceremonies and ceremonies from other religions of Afro-Brazilian origin or influence, in which votive offerings such as food, beverages, and sacrificial animals are presented to Exu before public or private rituals start. The purpose is to prevent Exu from disrupting the proceedings with his playful nature and to ensure his assistance in gaining the favor of the Orixás invoked during the ceremony.

calendar with various celebrations dedicated to different Orixás. Notable ceremonies include those that mark the beginning of the Candomblé new year, such as the "New Yam" festival or the "Waters of Oxalá," as well as the series of celebrations that occur between September and December, venerating several deities in succession. Apart from these established celebrations, each new initiation serves as an occasion for a *toque*, during which the community welcomes its new members (Marcussi, 2010, 4).

In the practice of Candomblé, the traditional structure of a *toque* remains consistent. It commences in the morning with the ritual sacrifice of animals, where their blood, believed to carry spiritual force or *axé*, is offered to the Orixás. The offering of blood is one of the most significant elements of these rituals, representing the transfer of life force to the deities, which is crucial for maintaining their vitality and influence in the physical realm. Following the sacrifice, the meat is prepared and shared among the faithful, symbolizing communal unity and reciprocity between the divine and the human.

The *toque* proceeds with an homage to *Exu*, the deity who paves the way, ensuring that the paths are open for the rituals to proceed smoothly. *Exu*, known as the messenger and gatekeeper, is always the first to be honored in any ceremony, as he controls communication between the spiritual and physical worlds. This homage is followed by songs and dances that honor the Orixás in a sequence known as the "*xirê*." During this celebratory moment, accompanied by the rhythmic beats of sacred drums ("*atabaques*") and chants dedicated to each deity, the Orixás are believed to descend to earth and manifest through the bodies of their followers. The sacred drumming varies in rhythm depending on the specific Orixá being invoked, creating an atmosphere that facilitates spiritual possession.

Possession, or the "coming down" of the Orixás, is a profound element of the *toque*. Initially, when a devotee is possessed, they may temporarily withdraw to prepare themselves, only to return adorned in the attire and accessories of their Orixá for the "dance of the gods." The elaborate clothing, often reflecting the colors and symbols associated with each deity, serves as an identifier and as a vessel of sacred power. These ritual dances strictly follow a longstanding tradition, and only initiated individuals participate, showcasing their deep connection with the divine. Through the dance, the

Orixás express their will, blessings, and presence, reaffirming the bond between the spiritual and the material worlds.

The Candomblé practiced at Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá follows the Ketu rite, belonging to the Nagô nation, which means it has Yoruba roots originating from the regions of Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. The activities carried out by the terreiro are divided into private and public moments. According to Mother Stella de Oxóssi, cited by Santos:

“The objective of Candomblé is the worship of the Orixás, not only in nature and in their temples but also through the coming of the Orixá to earth, manifested in their children — the *filho de santo* — a person who undergoes a seven-year initiation period, which is quite complex. Periodically, the Candomblé terreiros hold large public festivals in honor of one or more Orixás, and this is a day of great joy, dedication, and above all, respect for all the members of the house (...)” (Santos, 2010, 93, my translation)

These public festivals are marked by ritual dances that follow a strict and elaborate tradition, often captivating those who witness them. The rituals are rich in symbolism, reflecting the sacred stories and attributes of the Orixás. Ritual dances are a vital aspect of these celebrations, where each movement, costume, and musical rhythm has a specific purpose and meaning. The *atabaques*, or sacred drums, are played by the *alabês*, whose drumming is integral to invoking the presence of the deities. The sequence of dances performed during the *xirê* serves as both an offering and an invitation for the Orixás to join the gathering (Santos, 1994).

Among the public festivals are those dedicated to Oxóssi, the great Orixá, king of hunters and the Ketu nation, held on the same day as Corpus Christi; the festival of Xangô on June 29th, which begins on the night of the 28th; and the cycles dedicated to certain Orixás, such as Oxalá, the father of all Orixás (Santos, 1994). These celebrations are religious events as well as moments of cultural affirmation, where the values, history, and collective identity of the Afro-Brazilian community are reinforced.

The communal nature of these rituals is also evident in the sharing of the food offered to the revered Orixá. As previously mentioned, cuisine plays a crucial role in Candomblé ceremonies, and the act of partaking in the sacred food represents harmony, mutual exchange, and the divine blessings bestowed by the gods. Traditional dishes such

as *acarajé* and *amalá* are meticulously prepared, as they embody the *axé* that nurtures both the physical and spiritual well-being of the participants.

The toques and public festivals at Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá have multiple purposes. They are held to honor and please the Orixás, to initiate new members into the sacred traditions, and to act as a means of cultural preservation and resistance. These ceremonies celebrate the heritage of the Yoruba people and play a crucial role in passing on traditions, ensuring the continuity of Candomblé practices.

### **3.2 Initiation and Hierarchy within the Terreiro**

The participants of each terreiro are divided into a hierarchical structure organized according to the degree of closeness of the devotee to the deities. According to Candomblé, every person has their spirit dedicated to an Orixá – or, in some cases, to a set of Orixás. The individual is believed to exhibit personality traits that align with their patron Orixá, which guides their path in life. This connection can be strengthened through a complex series of initiation rituals, the simplest of which are the washing of the beaded necklace (called *ekodidé*) and the *bori*, a ceremony intended to strengthen and prepare them for direct contact with the Orixá (Marcussi, 2010, 10).

The initiation process in Candomblé is a transformative journey characterized by a progression through various stages that strengthen the connection between the devotee and the Orixá. According to Marcussi, these initial stages may or may not lead to complete initiation. The first significant stage is the *bori*, which means "to feed the head." It involves offering food to the *Ori* (the spiritual head) and aims to reinforce the link between the physical body and the spiritual realm. This practice prepares the devotee for future spiritual experiences and aligns their physical and metaphysical states, ensuring that they are receptive to the divine presence.

If the initial stages lead to further progression, the devotee undergoes complete initiation, a profound transformation involving several rituals and stages. This culminates in the individual becoming *iaô* or *filho-de-santo*, a vessel for their Orixá on earth. During public ceremonies and festivals of Candomblé, the *filhos-de-santo* may be possessed by their Orixás. In these significant moments of divine trance, the initiate enters an altered

state of consciousness while the Orixá "descends" and takes control of their body to dance and enact mythical scenes.

The *roncô*, also referred to as the initiation chamber or the "great womb," holds significant importance in the initiation ceremony. It is within this space that the initiate, or *iaô*, experiences a period of seclusion and preparation. Symbolizing a place of rebirth, the *roncô* serves as a metaphorical gestation site where the initiate is spiritually nurtured before rejoining the community with a new identity. Here, the initiate adopts new customs, including specific behaviors, attire, and speech patterns associated with their Orixá. This transformation signifies the devotee's rebirth, reinforcing the belief that they are now *omo òrìsà* (a child of the Orixá), deeply connected on a visceral and spiritual level, shaping their entire being (Verger, 1996, 82).

In Candomblé, the journey of initiation doesn't conclude once a devotee becomes a *filho-de-santo*. Rather, it marks the commencement of a lifelong spiritual path characterized by the pursuit of sacred wisdom, undertaking responsibilities, and drawing closer to the divine. After a seven-year initiation period, a *filho-de-santo* may attain the status of *ebômi*, signifying "older sibling." This designation allows them to fulfill specialized roles within the *terreiro*, such as *ogã* (for men) or *equêde* (for women), which are crucial in supporting rituals, including drumming and assisting fellow initiates during ceremonies.

The highest positions in the *terreiro* are held by the *Babalorixá* ("pais-de-santo") or *Ialorixá* ("mães-de-santo"), who are the ultimate spiritual authorities. These leaders are responsible for preserving the religious and cultural heritage of the community, guiding spiritual practices, and ensuring the proper conduct of rituals. The titles of *Babalorixá* or *Ialorixá* are only conferred after years of dedicated service, extensive ritual practice, and the attainment of profound spiritual wisdom. They signify the culmination of a lifetime of dedication to the Orixás.

In addition to fully initiated members, every *terreiro* also includes several devotees who have not completed their initiation, and some of whom may never do so and are not possessed by the Orixás. These members, known as *ogãs* and *equedes*, perform crucial ritual tasks essential for the proper functioning of the *terreiro*. The *ogãs* are responsible

for playing the sacred drums (atabaques) that summon the Orixás and maintain the rhythm of the ceremonies, while the equedes assist by dressing and caring for the filhos-de-santo during moments of trance. The equedes also act as intermediaries, ensuring that the rituals are performed correctly and that the initiates are safe during possession. These roles are vital as they uphold the integrity and flow of the rituals, demonstrating that Candomblé transcends the direct experience of divine possession. It is also about communal support and collaboration in worship. The ogãs and equedes contribute to the terreiro's spiritual and social structure, making it a space where each member has a specific role that supports the whole.

The initiation process in Candomblé, particularly at Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, is a profound spiritual and social journey. Each stage of initiation strengthens the devotee's connection with their Orixá and their spiritual force, known as axé, while also integrating them into the terreiro community. The process involves a series of progressive restrictions and taboos aimed at disciplining the initiate and drawing them closer to the sacred. These taboos may encompass dietary restrictions, abstaining from certain activities, or adhering to specific behavioral codes that embody the values of the Orixá and the terreiro.

The initiation also includes rituals such as the decoration of the sacred calabash, symbolizing the devotee's head and the divine presence it holds. This ritual underscores the idea that the human head (ori) is a sacred vessel for the divine spirit, highlighting the importance of maintaining spiritual harmony (Verger, 1996, 82).

Moreover, initiation is not a singular event but rather part of a series of rites and responsibilities that extend throughout the devotee's life. The filhos-de-santo undergo periodic rites to renew their connection with the Orixás and reassert their dedication to the terreiro. The seven-year cycle, culminating in the ebômi status, is marked by a sequence of ceremonies that honor the devotee's progress and deeper integration into the religious community.

The public aspect of initiation in Candomblé also plays a crucial role in nurturing community ties. During public ceremonies, the community comes together to witness and celebrate the initiation of new members. These gatherings are characterized by intricate rituals, music, dance, and the sharing of sacred food, all of which strengthen the

communal identity of the terreiro. By collectively participating in these ceremonies, the community pays tribute to the Orixás and, most importantly, integrates the new filhos-de-santo into the social and spiritual framework of the community.

### **CHAPTER III – SOCIO-POLITICAL INFLUENCE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

In the first chapter, this study presented different ways in which Afro-Brazilian religious practices were segregated and often criminalized during the periods before and after the abolition of slavery in Brazil. This repression impacted an entire cultural system that transcended the religious sphere. It was, in fact, a real persecution of African heritage, which, in a world dominated by bourgeois and Christian values, was forbidden from finding space to take root. That is why Afro-Brazilian cultural and religious practices, including those specific to Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, served as a significant form of resistance against the attempt to erase Africanism in a Brazil that, politically, was attempting to see itself as increasingly white.

In this chapter, we will delve into the socio-political influence and community engagement of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá and other Candomblé terreiros. While the earlier chapter discussed the cultural repression that spanned the colonial and early post-abolition periods, this section will focus on the more formalized mechanisms of repression faced by Afro-Brazilian religions, especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During this time, Afro-Brazilian religious practices were still widely considered illegitimate and were subject to police persecution, public scorn, and legal prohibitions.

These repressions, deeply rooted in racist ideologies and an overarching desire to control Black cultural expressions, took on new dimensions as Brazil attempted to define itself as a modern nation. The Federal Constitution of 1891, which ostensibly granted religious freedom, often failed to protect Candomblé and other African-based religions, which were continuously criminalized under the Brazilian Penal Code's ban on "magic" and "superstition." This chapter will analyze key events and figures during this period, focusing on how Afro-Brazilian religious leaders, including those from Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, navigated these challenges through advocacy and interaction with the State.

By the early 20th century, notable political interactions, such as the famous case of Mother Aninha's relationship with Getúlio Vargas, marked a turning point in the fight for legal recognition and protection of Afro-Brazilian religious practices. These interactions, while critical, also underscore the complex balance between cultural preservation and political pragmatism. The terreiros, once places of covert cultural resistance, began engaging with formal political institutions, ensuring the survival of Candomblé and its recognition as a crucial component of Brazil's cultural heritage.

This chapter begins by exploring how Candomblé terreiros transitioned from hidden resistance to more direct engagement with public policies and socio-political advocacy. In subtopic 1.1, "Contributions to Public Policy and Religious Freedom," we will examine the steps taken by Candomblé leaders, particularly from Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, to gain legal recognition of their religious practices and advocate for their cultural heritage. This discussion will cover important legal milestones, such as the designation of Candomblé terreiros as cultural heritage sites (*tombamento*) and the ongoing work to secure religious freedom in the face of longstanding stigmatization and criminalization. These efforts represent a broader movement to incorporate Afro-Brazilian traditions and beliefs into Brazil's cultural legacy under its legal frameworks.

Next, in subtopic 1.2, "Afro-Brazilian History and Culture in The National Curriculum," we delve into the inclusion of Afro-Brazilian heritage in educational curricula, emphasizing Candomblé's influence on shaping public education policies. This section highlights how Candomblé leaders have worked to ensure that Afro-Brazilian history and culture are taught in schools, reflecting a broader commitment to addressing systemic gaps in cultural representation and promoting an anti-racist, inclusive education.

Moving to subtopic 2, "The Terreiro's Influence on International Cultural and Policy Dialogues," the chapter discusses Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá's contributions to transnational conversations on cultural preservation and religious rights. This includes the terreiro's engagement with international organizations and its role in fostering dialogue on Afro-diasporic identity and heritage conservation, reinforcing Candomblé's significance as part of a global cultural movement.

Finally, the chapter will turn its attention to "Community Development and Empowerment Initiatives," examining the impact of social programs initiated by Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá. These initiatives, including Escola Municipal Eugênia Anna dos Santos (EMEAS), the Biblioteca de Los Sueños, and the Cultural Heritage Workshops and Festival Series, represent the terreiro's commitment to fostering education, cultural preservation, and social welfare within the community, ensuring the continuity of cultural and educational advancement for future generations.

Together, these discussions illustrate how Candomblé terreiros, and particularly Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, evolved from informal acts of cultural resistance to becoming key players in shaping public policy, advancing legal recognition, and preserving Afro-Brazilian cultural identity. In doing so, this chapter provides a comprehensive view of how Afro-Brazilian religious and cultural practices have influenced, and been influenced by, the broader socio-political landscape in Brazil.

## ***1. Legal Recognition and Public Advocacy for Afro-Brazilian Cultural Heritage***

### **1.1 Contributions to Public Policy and Religious Freedom**

The fight for legal recognition and protection of Afro-Brazilian cultural heritage, particularly Candomblé, has been a lengthy journey closely tied to Brazil's socio-political history. Despite the constitutional promise of religious freedom in 1891, Afro-Brazilian religious practices were systematically repressed throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Seen as superstition or witchcraft, Candomblé faced stigmatization reinforced by legal frameworks, including the Penal Code's prohibition of "magic" and "spiritism," justified as maintaining public order. This racialized legal repression highlighted the pervasive view that Afro-Brazilian religions were aberrant and dangerous to Brazil's desired image as a modern, Westernized nation.

In response, leaders from Candomblé, especially those associated with Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, became key advocates for the legal recognition and protection of their cultural and spiritual practices. Central to this advocacy, Mother Aninha built alliances with influential figures like former President Getúlio Vargas. Her strategic lobbying, supported

by Minister Osvaldo Aranha, resulted in the 1934 Presidential Decree n. 1202<sup>22</sup>, which lifted prohibitions on Afro-Brazilian religious practices. This decree represented a major step in ending formal legal persecution and acknowledged Candomblé as part of Brazil's national heritage. As articulated by Correia:

“Throughout the 20th century, the liturgical practices of Candomblé faced numerous persecutions from various actors within Bahian society, a pattern that persists today. The state, Catholicism, and, more recently, neo-Pentecostal movements have skillfully employed legal strategies and symbolic representations to segregate, differentiate, discriminate, and punish the *povo-de-santo* (people of the saint) regarding their exercise of religious freedoms. However, the 20th century also witnessed the emergence of African-based religions as symbols of cultural representation for a people and, indeed, of a nation. Transitioning from being viewed as practices of witchcraft and false medicine to becoming archetypes of the mysticism of a people, the terreiros oscillated between intolerance and recognition, stigma and exemplary resilience – marks of a country still unaware of its true greatness, which lies in the greatness of its people.” (Correia, 2013, 54, my translation)

This momentum grew in 2000 with the tombamento<sup>23</sup> of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá as a national cultural heritage site. Designated by IPHAN (Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional), the tombamento offered legal protection to the terreiro's physical and intangible heritage, embedding Candomblé traditions within Brazil's national identity.

The designation of Candomblé terreiros as heritage sites marked a milestone for Afro-Brazilian cultural preservation. These spaces, far from marginal, became celebrated cultural repositories, distinguished by their unique physical and cultural symbols:

“Inscriptions on white walls, jars, bottles, and pots above doorways, white flags unexpectedly appearing among trees, walls, and electrical wires, along with many other things, constitute a unique urban symbolism. Often enigmatic and seemingly incomprehensible, these elements signal specific religious and cultural characteristics. They are signs of resistance, and preservation of imaginaries, ideas, knowledge, and values. These objects and practices carry meanings that are not only relevant to the members of these communities and those who frequent them but, being embedded in the social dynamics of the city, state, and country, they hold significance beyond these religious groups, with

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.gov.br/palmares/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/personalidades-negras-2013-mae-aninha>

<sup>23</sup> Established by Decree-Law No. 25 of November 30, 1937, it is the most well-known instrument for the recognition and protection of cultural heritage, which can be enacted by federal, state, and municipal administrations.

local, regional, and national reach. This suggests the possibility of their preservation as cultural heritage.” (Conduru, 2010, 195, my translation)

This cultural significance goes beyond national borders. As Souza notes, “As a form of recognition of African heritage and identity in the constitution of Brazilian identities, it is necessary to identify and safeguard these communities and their spaces, as they are the bearers of their ancestral legacy.” He further asserts that:

“The identification, protection, conservation, and recognition through the instruments of cultural heritage listing or registration are the first steps toward preserving the memory, belonging, and ancestral and territorial legacy of the various Afro-descendant ethnic groups that make up Brazilian society and the history of humanity.” (Souza, 2019, 101, my translation)

During the 1970s and 1980s, Afro-Brazilian faiths gained traction in national culture, contributing to Black culture and civil rights activism. The Black movement, focused on combating racism, integrated these elements into its discourse. For many activists, Candomblé symbolized Black resistance, as these religions preserved Black culture despite long-standing repression (Nascimento, 1980; Pereira, 2008; Cardoso, 2001). The terreiros became centers of anti-racist activism, as seen in the 1978 establishment of the Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU)<sup>24</sup>.

By the 1980s, connections between Candomblé and Black political activism strengthened. Black activists, often initiated into Candomblé, forged alliances with religious leaders, merging Afro-religious practices with Black identity politics. As Santos (2005) observed, Candomblé came to represent the "purification of the roots" of Black culture, anchoring it firmly in the movement for racial justice.

The MNU and other organizations, including Frente Negra Brasileira, Associação Cultural do Negro (ACN), and Grupo Palmares, emerged from Afro-Brazilian resilience and cultural pride. These organizations, along with terreiros like Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, advanced Afro-Brazilian cultural recognition, religious freedom, and racial equality.

The joining of religious leaders and political activists showed how Candomblé terreiros, like Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, were gaining influence in shaping public policy and

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/movimento-negro-unificado>

challenging Brazil's systemic racism. These interactions paved the way for collaboration with government institutions, safeguarding Afro-Brazilian cultural heritage and ensuring continued advocacy for Afro-descendant rights.

In 2019, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, alongside other traditional terreiros, contributed to the establishment of Municipal Law 9.519/2019<sup>25</sup>, affirming Racial Equality and Combating Religious Intolerance in Salvador. The terreiro has also worked closely with organizations like the Ministério Público<sup>26</sup> to combat religious intolerance and uphold legal protections. For instance, they have supported initiatives through the Centro de Referência de Combate ao Racismo e à Intolerância Religiosa Nelson Mandela (CRNM)<sup>27</sup>, established in Salvador to provide legal support and documentation of cases of religious discrimination.

These achievements build upon historical victories while addressing contemporary challenges. Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá's dedication to combating intolerance and supporting legal protections for Afro-Brazilian religions illustrates how these institutions drive social change and advocate for justice. Their enduring commitment shapes Brazil's legal and cultural landscape, embracing diverse national identities and upholding Afro-Brazilian heritage.

## **1.2 Afro-Brazilian History and Culture in The National Curriculum**

January 9, 2003, marked a significant moment in Brazilian education with the passage of Law 10.639/2003. This landmark legislation was the result of decades of passionate advocacy by Afro-Brazilian intellectuals, activists, and religious leaders who fought tirelessly to have their heritage recognized as an integral part of Brazil's national identity. Through Article 26-A, § 1<sup>o</sup>, the law mandates that schools include teachings on

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<sup>25</sup> <https://leismunicipais.com.br/a/ba/s/salvador/lei-ordinaria/2019/946/9451/lei-ordinaria-n-9451-2019-institui-o-estatuto-da-igualdade-racial-e-de-combate-a-intolerancia-religiosa-no-mbito-do-municipio-de-salvador-e-da-outras-providencias>

<sup>26</sup> The Ministério Público is Brazil's independent Public Prosecutor's Office, functioning as both a public prosecutor and guardian of civil rights and public interest.

<sup>27</sup> The CRNM is a state public body that is part of the Bahia state equality promotion system, linked to the Secretariat for the Promotion of Racial Equality. This center offers free and specialized services in psychological, social and legal support, focused on issues related to race relations and the religious phenomenon.

the history of Africa and its people, the challenges faced by Black individuals in Brazil, and the contributions of Afro-Brazilians to the country<sup>28</sup>.

The intention was to address the enduring impacts of colonialism and racism while promoting a more diverse and racially conscious society. Nevertheless, despite its historical importance, the law has encountered several obstacles during its implementation. Numerous schools in Brazil have struggled to integrate Afro-Brazilian content into their curricula due to a lack of teaching expertise, insufficient resources, and, in some cases, resistance from educational institutions themselves. This resistance is reflected in recent data: a 2023 study by the Geledés Black Women's Institute and the Alana Institute, surveying 1,187 Municipal Education Departments (21% of Brazil's municipal education networks), revealed that 71% take little or no action to ensure the law's effectiveness. Only 29% of the secretariats carry out consistent and permanent actions to implement the law effectively<sup>29</sup>.

To understand these implementation challenges, we must first grapple with how deeply colonization has shaped Brazilian education. For centuries, the classroom served as an echo chamber for Eurocentric ideals, painting a distorted picture of reality that cast long shadows over generations of Brazilian minds. This colonial lens portrayed Africa and its people as "primitive," a narrative that conveniently justified their exploitation.

This distortion didn't just influence textbooks – it became the very foundation of educational thinking. European achievements dominated lesson plans, while the rich history of Africa was reduced to a footnote about slavery. This narrow perspective left students with a skewed understanding of the African diaspora, blind to the incredible resilience and cultural wealth of displaced African peoples.

Even in today's classrooms, these colonial perspectives persist. The very language we use – referring to Brazil's colonization as its "discovery" – reveals how deeply these biases run, dismissing the rich histories of Indigenous and African-descendant populations. As Paulo Freire (1987) noted, this "banking" model of education deposits

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<sup>28</sup> Law 10.639/2003, Art. 26-A, § 1º

<sup>29</sup> Full research available at: <https://alana.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/lei-10639-pesquisa.pdf>

information without encouraging students to question the oppressive structures that have shaped Brazil's racial realities.

While Law 10.639/2003 sought to disrupt this dynamic, its passage alone has not been enough to dismantle the deep-seated colonial legacies embedded within Brazil's educational institutions. In Salvador, religious and cultural institutions, particularly the terreiros of Candomblé, have emerged as crucial partners in implementing the law effectively. Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá has been at the forefront of this educational transformation since before the law's existence.

The terreiro's commitment to education predates Law 10.639/2003 by several decades. In 1976, under Mother Senhora's leadership, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá established the Mini Comunidade Obá Biyi<sup>30</sup>, a pioneering educational project that later evolved into the Escola Municipal Eugênia Anna dos Santos (EMEAS) in 1986<sup>31</sup>. This school became a model for integrating Afro-Brazilian history and culture into formal education, effectively anticipating the law's requirements by nearly three decades.

Through the tireless efforts of community leaders like Mother Stella de Oxóssi, the terreiro has developed innovative approaches to support the law's implementation. Under her leadership, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá established partnerships with local schools, offering teacher training programs and cultural workshops. The terreiro's initiatives include the creation of educational materials that accurately represent Afro-Brazilian traditions, such as the textbook "Epé Laiyé-Terra Viva," written by Maria Stella de Oxóssi herself and published in 2009. The book, massively acquired by the Bahia State Department of Education<sup>32</sup>, is a national reference in the implementation of laws and guidelines that deal with education for ethnic-racial relations.

Mother Stella's contributions and those of other leaders from Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá exemplify how traditional religious institutions can effectively bridge the gap between policy and practice in educational reform. In topic 3, we will delve deeper into how EMEAS has become a living laboratory for the implementation of Law 10.639/2003,

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<sup>30</sup> Daycare center for children aged between 6 months and 5 years, created in 1978.

<sup>31</sup> [https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Escola\\_Municipal\\_Eug%C3%AAnia\\_Ana\\_dos\\_Santos](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Escola_Municipal_Eug%C3%AAnia_Ana_dos_Santos)

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.comunicacao.ba.gov.br/2010/08/noticias/educacao/ile-axe-opo-afonja-debate-educacao-e-faz-lancamento-de-livro/>

examining specific pedagogical practices, curriculum development, and community engagement strategies that demonstrate the terreiro's ongoing commitment to social transformation through education and cultural consciousness. This analysis will reveal how grassroots initiatives can successfully implement federal educational policies while preserving and promoting Afro-Brazilian cultural heritage.

## ***2. The Terreiro's Influence on International Cultural and Policy Dialogues***

Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá has become a prominent voice in international dialogues on African diaspora religions, cultural rights, and heritage preservation. Through global collaborations with institutions and communities, the terreiro has deepened understanding of Afro-Brazilian traditions and contributed to broader discussions about religious freedom and cultural preservation.

The terreiro's international profile rose in the 1980s through participation in international conferences., such as the II Conferência Mundial de Tradição dos Orixás e Cultura<sup>33</sup>, held in Salvador from July 17 to 23, 1983. At this event, Mother Stella de Oxóssi presented her groundbreaking perspective on religious syncretism, advocating for moving away from the syncretic practice of equating Orixás with Catholic saints. Her subsequent participation in the conference's third edition in New York (1986)<sup>34</sup> further amplified the terreiro's international voice.

The terreiro's relationship with Africa has strengthened its role in revitalizing African spiritual practices within the diaspora. A significant event in 1987 was Mother Stella's visit to the Republic of Benin with renowned ethnographer Pierre Verger, where she was formally honored as a respected religious leader. This visit signaled mutual recognition between Brazilian Candomblé and African spiritual traditions, helping to validate Candomblé's authenticity and reinforce cultural bonds between Brazil and West Africa.

In recent decades, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá has fostered significant academic partnerships, continuing a tradition of scholarly engagement that dates to collaborations

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<sup>33</sup> The World Conference on Orixá Tradition and Culture was an international gathering dedicated to the global exchange and discussion of Afro-American history and religious traditions.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.geledes.org.br/hoje-na-historia-1925-nascia-mae-stella-de-oxossi/>

with pioneering researchers like Edison Carneiro, Ruth Landes, and Vivaldo da Costa Lima (Lima, 2004). These partnerships have expanded to include universities across the Americas and Europe, leading to research projects and publications documenting Candomblé's role in global religious diversity. The terreiro's importance as a site of academic research is evidenced through works like Lisa Earl Castillo's ethnographic studies of Bahian Candomblé (Castillo, 2008) and Juana Elbein dos Santos' foundational research on Nagô traditions (Santos, 2012). By hosting international researchers and students, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá promotes cross-cultural dialogue that challenges colonial narratives and enriches global perspectives on Afro-Brazilian traditions.

The terreiro's involvement in policy discussions about religious freedom and cultural rights extends to partnerships with human rights organizations and international forums. Since its recognition as a National Heritage Site by IPHAN in 2000, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá has participated in UNESCO's initiatives for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. The terreiro's leadership, notably through Mother Stella de Oxóssi's influential writings and advocacy, has helped shape public understanding of Candomblé's cultural autonomy and religious rights (Santos, 2010). These engagements have provided platforms for sharing experiences on preserving African spiritual traditions and responding to contemporary challenges.

Cultural diplomacy has become a significant aspect of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá's work. Through annual festivals such as the Festa de Xangô and workshops on traditional knowledge, the terreiro attracts participants from across Brazil and internationally (Póvoas, 2012). This educational and cultural model, combining religious practice with formal education and community engagement, has been documented by UNESCO as an exemplary approach to preserving intangible cultural heritage (Nascimento, 2016). The terreiro's influence extends through its cultural center, which hosts regular exhibitions and educational programs that showcase Candomblé's contributions to Brazilian and global cultural diversity.

Moving forward, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá is expanding its influence through digital platforms and innovative cultural exchanges, enhancing its role in discussions about religious freedom, cultural rights, and the protection of traditional knowledge in today's interconnected world.

### *3. Community Development and Empowerment Initiatives*

Mother Aninha and her successors, recognizing the importance of participating more actively in social and political matters, stressed the importance of education, housing, and access to social and political rights for Afro-Brazilians. Mother Aninha believed that education was crucial for overcoming the discrimination Afro-Brazilians faced in a mostly white Christian society. She encouraged both her biological children and her spiritual followers to pursue academic education, believing that knowledge was a way to regain the rights that had been systematically denied to the Black population. As a Black, impoverished woman who experienced multiple forms of exclusion firsthand, she viewed education as crucial to ensure the complete inclusion of Afro-Brazilians in Brazilian society.

Throughout Brazilian history, Afro-Brazilian religions have faced intense persecution from Christian denominations. In four key instances (1890, 1915, 1948, and 1953), the Catholic hierarchy openly condemned African-derived religious practices, especially intensifying this opposition in the 1950s through a targeted apologetic campaign against non-Christian religions, including those of Afro-Brazilian origin (Oro, 1997, 10-11). Christian religious institutions historically contributed significantly to this persecution, demonizing Afro-Brazilian religions in their temples, using media channels to spread their views, and leveraging economic and political power to exert pressure through state law enforcement.

This persecution became particularly evident in Bahia during the 1950s, when the practice of Candomblé was treated as a police matter, forcing Candomblé temples to register with the Games and Customs Department<sup>35</sup>, without which they risked being raided or shut down (Braga, 1995, 26). This refers to State Law n° 22.763-A of December 9, 1969, which required terreiros to register with the Public Security Secretariat if they did not want to have conflicts with the police.

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<sup>35</sup> In Bahia, until 1976, terreiros had to apply for police authorization to carry out their activities. The procedure was carried out at the Games and Customs Police Station, and the terreiros had to pay the costs of obtaining the permit. This obligation was exclusive to axé houses and did not apply to any other religion.

Such state-enforced control of Afro-Brazilian religions reinforced among Black communities a deep-seated feeling of exclusion, which was rooted in the social and racial hierarchies of Brazil's slave society. As Braga (1995) explains, “Initially, police repression reinforced a strong sense of social rejection within the Black community, constructed and rooted in the social and racial relationships that shaped the slave society” (ibid., 27). Consequently, several victims of police repression were arbitrarily arrested, faced judicial inquiries, were cowardly beaten, had their homes invaded, their shrines desecrated and defiled, and religious belongings, emblems, and insignia publicly ridiculed (ibid., 125).

These exclusionary dynamics extended beyond religion, directly impacting the educational experiences of Black Brazilians. The development of religious racism as a historical consequence of anti-Black discrimination became a significant factor in shaping Black identity and affected Afro-Brazilian students' schooling. As Professor Sueli Carneiro notes in the preface to Ricardo Henriques's book, various factors contribute negatively to Black students' academic performance:

“[...] material poverty and the cultural deprivation of Black families, negative stereotypes associated with Black people in the social imagination and present in schools, educational materials, and student interactions; the sense of abandonment that Black children carry due to teachers' neglect in the face of racial humiliation, and the fact that teachers themselves may be the perpetrators of discrimination, as shown in Eliane Cavalleiro's research. Finally, and above all, the educational system's inability or lack of political will to provide quality public education to Black and poor populations has been a defining factor in this process.” (Carneiro, 2002, apud Henriques, 2002, 8, my translation)

These racial exclusion and religious marginalization experiences intersected, affecting Afro-Brazilian communities in multiple ways – from schooling to cultural and spiritual spaces. Within this context, community development and empowerment initiatives arose as essential responses, offering protection and legitimacy to Afro-Brazilian cultural traditions and creating educational opportunities, cultural affirmation, and identity strengthening for future generations. These initiatives, diverse in scope yet unified in purpose, represent enduring and vibrant forms of resistance to historical structures of oppression, claiming the right to exist and thrive within the diversity and affirmation of Afro-descendant origins and histories.

### 3.1 Escola Municipal Eugênia Anna dos Santos (EMEAS)

The Eugênia Anna dos Santos Municipal School (EMEAS), located in the São Gonçalo do Retiro neighborhood within the Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá Terreiro, reflects a commitment to education and the preservation of Afro-Brazilian culture. Established in 1978 and municipalized in 1998, this school has become a longstanding educational center serving the terreiro community and the surrounding population, regardless of the children's religious backgrounds. According to official data from the Municipal Government of Salvador, the school's maintainer, it currently accommodates 296 students divided into 12 classes.<sup>36</sup>

Operating within the cultural context of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, which follows the Ketu rite of the *Nagô* nation with Yoruba roots from Nigeria, Benin, and Togo, EMEAS has integrated these cultural foundations into its curriculum by teaching Yoruba and African History, in compliance with Federal Law nº 10.639/2003. This environment is one of cultural immersion: representations of the *Orixás*, ceramic objects, portraits of the terreiro's *Ialorixás* (spiritual leaders), fabrics, and posters in Yoruba adorn the school, seamlessly integrating Afro-Brazilian heritage into daily educational experiences. Its infrastructure, which blends in with that of the terreiro, includes, in addition to the classrooms, an open courtyard, cafeteria, principal's office, teachers' room, toilets, kitchen, cafeteria, pantry, music room, dance room, secretary's office, as well as the beautiful green area that surrounds this space.

EMEAS's pedagogical approach is shaped by *the Irê Ayó* Political-Pedagogical Project (meaning "Path of Joy" in Yoruba), an initiative developed by researcher Vanda Machado.<sup>37</sup> This project introduces African epistemologies to create a pluricultural educational model that complements and challenges conventional Western approaches to knowledge. The school employs traditional African myths and narratives in its curriculum, including "*Transformação da Conquén*"<sup>38</sup> and "*A Senhora das Águas Doces*

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<sup>36</sup> <http://educacao3.salvador.ba.gov.br/escolas/emeugenia/>

<sup>37</sup> The project arose from the master's research of researcher Vanda Machado, who set out to listen, experience, and understand the African thought recreated in the terreiros and black neighborhoods.

<sup>38</sup> "The Transformation of the Guinea Fowl": a myth that encourages reflection on the need for harmonious and democratic coexistence, as constant change in our lives replaces permanence.

*e da Beleza.*”<sup>39</sup> Through these stories, students connect with values of self-knowledge, community, and reverence for nature. As Machado observes, “The myth relates the individual to their nature and to the world of which they are a part,” fostering a worldview that emphasizes collective existence and solidarity over individualistic perspectives (Machado; Petrovich, 2002).

Furthermore, the *Irê Ayó* Project exemplifies a broader decolonial approach to history, empowering students by recovering narratives long silenced within mainstream education. By bringing these narratives into the official curriculum, EMEAS seeks to instill a historical awareness that honors the rich contributions of Afro-Brazilian communities, again observing the mandate of Law n° 10.639/2003. Students are encouraged to recognize the collective and shared experiences of their ancestors, experiences often transmitted orally in the terreiros. In this process, the teaching of history becomes a tool for empowerment and validation of Afro-Brazilian identities, aligning with the decolonial goals of ethnic-racial education.

The physical and cultural structure of EMEAS includes several facilities that deepen its educational mission. The school is further supported by the *Ilê Ohun Lailai* Museum<sup>40</sup> and the *Ikojppo Ilê Iwe Axé Opô Afonjá* Library<sup>41</sup>, both essential institutions for preserving Afro-Brazilian history and culture. Within these spaces, students can engage with historical artifacts, literature, and cultural knowledge, enhancing their understanding of the heritage they study in the classroom.

Serving early childhood and primary education students, EMEAS has also integrated the concept of experiential learning. Through activities that involve observing natural cycles within the terreiro, children gain insights into environmental processes and learn the symbolic meaning of these cycles in African and Afro-Brazilian cosmologies.

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<sup>39</sup> “The Lady of Fresh Waters and Beauty”: the story playfully teaches the value of cleverness, patience, and intelligent use of resources in problem-solving in a non-violent way, highlighting the preservation of Afro-Brazilian cultural traditions.

<sup>40</sup> The museum was created in 1982 by the Ialorixá of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, Maria Stella de Azevedo Santos, together with Oni Kówé, Vera Felicidade, to preserve the importance of Yoruba history and culture in the Afro-descendant community through religiosity.

<sup>41</sup> The Ikojppo Ilê Iwe Axé Opô Afonjá Library, also known as the Maria Stella Azevedo Santos Library, was founded in 1996 and, in addition to serving as a religious environment, hosts other spaces dedicated to the education, preservation, and dissemination of Afro-descendant memory and identity in Brazil. The library also holds a collection of dissertations and theses authored by members of the terreiro itself.

These outdoor and hands-on experiences are practical extensions of the school's curriculum, helping students grasp concepts that may feel distant or abstract when taught through a strictly Eurocentric lens. Yoruba songs and dances – rooted in ancestral traditions and reflecting moral values, technological knowledge, and community practices – enrich students' learning, offering them culturally resonant tools for personal and collective identity formation.

The effectiveness of EMEAS's pedagogical approach in implementing Law 10.639/2003 is evidenced through concrete educational practices. Claro (2019) documents how Machado's methodology of presenting Yoruba-origin myths through storytelling sessions creates meaningful learning experiences for children in early childhood and primary education. These sessions, which integrate narrative traditions with direct observation of nature within the Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá environment, are guided by local community members who help children connect ancestral knowledge with their everyday experiences. Through this approach, children naturally engage with scientific concepts from the formal curriculum by relating them to mythological narratives, demonstrating how traditional African pedagogical methods can make seemingly abstract academic content more accessible and meaningful. This successful integration of cultural knowledge and formal education exemplifies EMEAS's unique contribution to decolonial educational practices.

As part of Salvador's network of municipal schools, EMEAS's contributions to culturally responsive pedagogy and its successful integration of formal education with Afro-Brazilian traditions have been recognized in academic forums, as evidenced by the participation of its principal, Iraildes Nascimento, in discussions about identity and emancipation in educational spaces at the Federal University of International Integration of Afro-Brazilian Lusophony<sup>42</sup>. This institutional engagement demonstrates how EMEAS's unique educational model, rooted in the terreiro's cultural context, contributes to broader discussions about decolonial educational practices in Brazil.

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<sup>42</sup> II Semana de Pedagogia - Identidades e Emancipação de Sujeitos em Espaços Educativos" (UNILAB Campus dos Malês, São Francisco do Conde, BA, 2023).

In these ways, EMEAS is a pioneering institution in implementing a pedagogy that honors African heritage. The school's methodology fosters a comprehensive educational experience in which spirituality, ancestry, and cultural values are integral to formal education and holistic personal development. Its educational practices empower students to see themselves as inheritors and custodians of a vibrant cultural legacy, promoting anti-racist and inclusive values that shape their understanding of the world.

### **3.2 Biblioteca de Los Sueños: A Hub for Afro-Brazilian Cultural Literacy**

The Biblioteca de Los Sueños project, carried out by CEC Brasil<sup>43</sup> with sponsorship from Dow<sup>44</sup>, marked a significant milestone in the promotion of Afro-Brazilian culture and reading at Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá. This project, implemented in 2023, included the creation of a dedicated reading space and the donation of a collection of 1,200 books, divided between Escola Municipal Eugênia Anna dos Santos and Biblioteca Maria Stella Azevedo Santos, both located within the terreiro. The objective was to promote anti-racist education and expand access to Afro-centered literature for approximately 260 early childhood and primary education students<sup>45</sup>.

The project offers a collection of works by Brazilian authors, including texts in Spanish and bilingual editions. The topics cover sustainability, world literature, and Afro-Indigenous literature, focusing on preserving Afro-descendant identity. This selection aligns closely with the educational mission of the terreiro, which integrates Candomblé values, promotes respect for cultural diversity, and highlights Afro-Brazilian history. Additionally, it aims to promote Brazilian literature and foster an appreciation for books as vital sources of knowledge and cultural exchange, particularly through the establishment of reading spaces in South American countries.

The inauguration of Biblioteca de Los Sueños was a landmark moment, attended by Mother Ana de Xangô, the Ialorixá of the terreiro, and the Minister of Culture,

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<sup>43</sup> CEC Brasil is a company that works in the field of cultural production, aiming for social impact through the development of technology capable of transforming community scenarios in Brazil and South America.

<sup>44</sup> Dow's financial support, through the Culture Incentive Law, was essential for implementing the project. Dow operates on a global scale and is committed to sustainability, boosting investments in projects that expand access to culture and knowledge.

<sup>45</sup><https://www.gov.br/cultura/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/ministra-inaugura-biblioteca-no-terreiro-ile-axe-opo-afonj>

Margareth Menezes. Minister Menezes emphasized the library's significance, stating, "It is a very special, very important moment, the arrival of a library here at Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá. Beyond being a home, a terreiro, this place has a history of anti-racist struggle; it is a place of welcoming. We want fewer weapons and more books in the hands of children and people."<sup>46</sup> Her words reinforced the library's mission to foster cultural literacy, peace, and education in the Afro-Brazilian community, positioning it as a vital space for empowerment and inclusion within Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá and beyond.

Mother Ana de Xangô, the current Ialorixá of the terreiro and sixth successor of Mother Aninha, highlighted that the implementation of the Biblioteca de Los Sueños strengthens partnerships between the cultural sector, government, and Afro-Brazilian religious communities, reinforcing public policies that support reading initiatives within Afro-Brazilian cultural spaces. Founded in 1996, Biblioteca Maria Stella Azevedo Santos has been vital in preserving collective memory and fostering an environment where Afro-Brazilian knowledge is respected and valued. The Biblioteca de Los Sueños project contributes to this legacy, expanding access for the community and visitors to literature that advances social equity and anti-racism.

Thus, Biblioteca de Los Sueños at Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá represents an intersection of cultural preservation, promotion of Afro-centered literature, and social inclusion. The project solidifies its impact by advancing Afro-Brazilian identity within community learning and gathering spaces, reaffirming the importance of community libraries in areas that embody resilience and ethnocultural diversity.

### **3.3 Cultural Heritage Workshops and Festival Series: Preserving Afro-Brazilian Traditions**

The Cultural Heritage Workshops and Festival Series at Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá represent a historical continuity of cultural resistance strategies developed by terreiros since the colonial period, now reconfigured as structured programs for preserving and transmitting Afro-Brazilian cultural heritage. These initiatives constitute spaces for identity affirmation and political resistance in the contemporary context while serving as centers for preserving ancestral knowledge. The program's structure builds upon

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<sup>46</sup> <https://atarde.com.br/cultura/terreiro-ganha-biblioteca-afrocentrada-1237020>

traditional pedagogical approaches that understand the transmission of Afro-Brazilian knowledge as a holistic process encompassing both material and immaterial aspects of culture. This pedagogical methodology, grounded in orality and bodily experience, directly engages with what Sodré (2019) conceptualizes as the body-document phenomenon in Afro-Brazilian traditions, where the body serves as both a repository and medium for transmitting ancestral knowledge.

The workshops' cultural transmission methodology encompasses various traditional practices, with music and ritual dance serving as fundamental elements. Participants learn sacred drum rhythms, study specific choreographies for each Orixá, and understand the liturgical significance of movements while practicing Yoruba chants with their translations and contexts. The sacred craftsmanship component focuses on traditional techniques for creating ritual adornments and sacred garments, emphasizing the symbolism and significance of colors and materials in ritual object preparation. Oral tradition and memory preservation activities include the transmission of *itans* (sacred narratives), the preservation of prayers and enchantments, and the documentation of terreiro histories, alongside a contextual study of the Yoruba language. Sacred culinary practices complete the educational framework, encompassing the preparation of votive foods, the study of sacred herbs and their properties, and the ritual significance of offerings.

The terreiro's festival calendar includes traditional celebrations that function as key moments for community integration and cultural reaffirmation. The Xangô Festival in June represents the terreiro's largest celebration, featuring public presentations of ritual dance and music. The Feast of the *Aiabás* in September honors female Orixás, while the Youth Festival in January focuses on engaging younger community members. The quarterly Traditional Craft Fair provides a space for commercializing and valorizing artisanal production, supporting the community's economic sustainability.

The initiatives face specific challenges requiring constant adaptation, particularly in balancing preservation with innovation. The terreiro must negotiate between maintaining traditional pedagogical methods and incorporating contemporary documentation technologies while ensuring program sustainability through resource acquisition and new instructor training. The development of replicable methodologies and

institutional partnerships presents both challenges and opportunities for expanding the initiatives' reach and impact.

The Cultural Heritage Workshops and Festival Series thus represent more than cultural activities; they constitute a complex system of resistance and cultural preservation operating across multiple dimensions. These initiatives function as mechanisms of social resistance that ensure the continuity of traditional Afro-Brazilian knowledge while promoting social transformation and community empowerment. Their effectiveness demonstrates how terreiros continue to serve as fundamental spaces for cultural preservation and transmission, adapting to social changes while maintaining their traditional essence.

The case of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá illustrates how cultural resistance, historically necessary for the survival of Afro-Brazilian traditions, can evolve into structured programs for community development and identity strengthening. This transformation reflects a broader understanding of cultural preservation as an active, dynamic process that encompasses the protection of traditional practices and their adaptation to contemporary contexts. Through these initiatives, the terreiro maintains its historical role as a center of cultural resistance while developing new approaches to ensuring the vitality and relevance of Afro-Brazilian traditions for future generations.

### **3.4 Afro-Brazilian Health and Healing Initiatives: Integrating Tradition and Modern Healthcare**

Afro-Brazilian health and healing initiatives at Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá exemplify a dynamic fusion of traditional spiritual practices with modern healthcare, creating a model of holistic wellness that responds to the unique needs of the community. This integrative approach is rooted in an Afro-Brazilian understanding of health, where wellness encompasses physical and mental health, as well as spiritual well-being. As highlighted by Anderson (2020), Candomblé temples like Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá serve as vital cultural heritage sites, preserving wellness knowledge that has been cultivated for generations. In this community-centered view of health, wellness is not simply the absence of illness but a balanced state achieved through ancestral knowledge, community care, and modern healthcare practices.

Historically, traditional Afro-Brazilian healing practices have been crucial resources for communities that have faced systemic inequalities and restricted access to conventional healthcare. Grounded in African cosmologies, these practices emphasize the interconnectedness of body, mind, and spirit, embodied through the roles of *mães-de-santo*, or priestesses, who lead the community as spiritual and health advocates. Andreson describes how these “mothers in the family of saints” pass down knowledge on the medicinal properties of plants, roots, and rituals that integrate African, Indigenous, and Brazilian insights. This lineage of healing practices at Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá remains a core resource, where remedies involving sacred plants, herbal infusions, and baths are prescribed alongside prayers and offerings to Orixás, like *Osanyin*, the deity of healing and plants, whose blessings are believed to empower these treatments.

In recent years, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá has sought to complement these traditional practices with modern healthcare services, ensuring a comprehensive health approach that recognizes the value of both traditions. Through partnerships with healthcare professionals and institutions, the temple now offers preventive healthcare services, such as screenings, vaccinations, and workshops on topics like nutrition, mental health, and chronic disease management. These workshops provide essential health information and respect the community’s cultural values. For example, dietary workshops incorporate commonly used Afro-Brazilian foods and address spiritual dietary guidelines, allowing community members to access relevant health knowledge in culturally meaningful ways.

Mental health is approached through both traditional and modern practices, particularly within Afro-Brazilian culture. As Andreson notes, mental health is closely linked to spiritual well-being. Community members often seek guidance from *mães-de-santo* for personal challenges and spiritual clarity. This culturally sensitive support system aligns with Afro-Brazilian values and creates a supportive environment that respects individual beliefs.

Recognizing the importance of both perspectives, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá collaborates with mental health professionals to provide clinical counseling. This collaboration allows members to access a wider range of resources while minimizing the stigma typically associated with healthcare institutions. By promoting culturally inclusive spaces that

honor Afro-Brazilian identity and traditions, this integration helps to reduce mistrust and encourages greater access to healthcare (Andreson, 2020).

Through these efforts, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá has developed an innovative model of healthcare that resonates deeply within the Afro-Brazilian community. By combining traditional healing with modern medical resources, this approach addresses the physical, mental, and spiritual health of the community, promoting cultural preservation, social resilience, and community empowerment. In this way, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá exemplifies how integrative health initiatives can strengthen community identity, trust, and wellness by drawing on the unique strengths of both traditional wisdom and contemporary healthcare solutions.

#### **CHAPTER IV – CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE**

This important chapter examines the contemporary challenges facing the Candomblé community, particularly focusing on historic terreiros such as Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá. Despite achievements in visibility and recognition, Afro-Brazilian religions like Candomblé encounter significant obstacles stemming from historical discrimination, structural barriers, economic pressures, and limited political representation. These challenges affect the cultural preservation of Candomblé and impact the daily lives and spiritual practices of its adherents. Addressing these deep-rooted issues is crucial for safeguarding the cultural legacy and social resilience of Afro-Brazilian religious communities.

In this chapter, we explore the ongoing challenges faced by terreiros and their communities as they strive to sustain and grow within Brazil's complex social landscape. We begin with a thorough examination of these current challenges and then shift our focus to strategies for cultural preservation. This section highlights the community's resilience through initiatives aimed at religious, educational, and economic empowerment. Finally, we consider future directions, exploring potential pathways for political and social advocacy that would support Candomblé as an essential part of Brazil's cultural identity and heritage.

By addressing the complex challenges and opportunities facing Candomblé, this chapter lays the groundwork for envisioning a more inclusive future where Afro-Brazilian religious communities are recognized and empowered.

### ***1. Current Challenges Facing the Terreiro and the Candomblé Community***

Even though the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé community plays a vital role in shaping Brazil's vibrant cultural landscape, it faces significant challenges that threaten its very survival. These issues – stemming from deep-seated historical injustices and ongoing discrimination – hinder the community's ability to practice its sacred traditions and affect its overall social, economic, and political integration in Brazilian society. Addressing these pressing challenges is essential for the survival and empowerment of Candomblé and other historically marginalized Afro-Brazilian religious communities.

#### **1.1 Historical Context and Ongoing Discrimination**

The legacy of religious intolerance against Afro-Brazilian religions like Candomblé can be traced back to the colonial era when African cultural and religious practices were systematically repressed and criminalized by the Portuguese authorities. This persecution only intensified in the 19th and 20th centuries, as Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian faiths were increasingly stigmatized and portrayed as incompatible with mainstream religious and cultural norms.

Though overt legal discrimination has since been dismantled, the discrimination faced by the Candomblé community has adapted and evolved over time. Harmful stereotypes and biases continue to be propagated through media, education, and popular culture, perpetuating misconceptions about Afro-Brazilian religions as superstitious or malevolent. The intersections of race, class, and religion have also shaped the unique challenges confronting Candomblé practitioners, who often belong to marginalized socioeconomic groups.

As noted by Côrtes (2024), in the book *Orixás, Caboclos e Guias: Deuses e Demônios?*<sup>47</sup>, written by the influential Brazilian bishop Edir Macedo, leader of the

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<sup>47</sup> *Orixás, Caboclos, and Guides: Gods and Demons*. Edir Macedo's book, filled with religious prejudice, aims to expose alleged satanic maneuvers supposedly carried out through Spiritism, Umbanda,

Universal Church of the Kingdom of God<sup>48</sup>, there is clear evidence of religious intolerance and prejudice against Afro-Brazilian religions. This is evident in the passage: “If the Brazilian people were fully aware of the witchcraft, sorcery, and magic officially practiced by Umbanda, Quimbanda, Candomblé, Kardecism, and other names that continue to destroy lives and homes, we would certainly be a more developed country.”

This pervasive prejudice has had tangible impacts, manifesting in the desecration of sacred terreiros, verbal harassment, and even physical violence against practitioners. The traumatic legacy of this religious intolerance has cultivated an atmosphere of fear and insecurity, undermining the community's ability to freely and safely practice its traditions.

Moreover, recent political rhetoric has, at times, exacerbated this climate of hostility. Under the administration of President Jair Bolsonaro, prominent figures from his conservative, evangelical-aligned political movement have portrayed Candomblé as incompatible with mainstream religious and cultural values. This divisive discourse has fueled public suspicion and emboldened extremist groups to target Afro-Brazilian sacred spaces, as seen in the repeated vandalism of the statue honoring the revered Candomblé figure, Mother Stella de Oxóssi, in 2022.

The underlying motivations driving this political rhetoric stem from the rise of religious conservatism and efforts by certain groups to consolidate political power by marginalizing Afro-Brazilian religions. The broader societal impacts of this toxic climate include the erosion of religious freedom, the emboldening of extremist factions, and the perpetuation of the Candomblé community's historical struggle for acceptance and safety.

Prejudice against Afro-Brazilian religions extends even to the constitutional right of tax exemption for their religious spaces. Candomblé practitioners, as members of a minority religion in Brazil, often see their terreiros unrecognized as places of worship,

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Candomblé, Quimbanda, and other spiritualist religions, particularly those of African origin. According to the author, these religions are responsible for the origins of diseases, conflicts, addictions, and all other ills to which humanity is subjected.

<sup>48</sup> *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*, or simply *Universal*, is an evangelical Christian and neo-Pentecostal Protestant denomination. It is currently the largest and most representative neo-Pentecostal group in Brazil.

and consequently, they are denied tax exemption – a privilege widely granted to churches, under Article 150 of the Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil<sup>49</sup>:

Art. 150. Without prejudice to other guarantees afforded to taxpayers, the Union, the States, the Federal District, and the Municipalities are prohibited from:

I - imposing or increasing taxes without a law that establishes them;

[...]

b) religious entities and temples of any faith, including their assistance and charitable organizations.

Candomblé terreiros represent an organized set of liturgical expressions, rituals, worship, festivals, dances, and more, regarded by practitioners as sacred sites that embody the cultural heritage of Black Brazilians – the cultural memory of Africa. They should, therefore, be recognized as religious temples, thus receiving state protection to freely exercise freedom of belief and conscience, including exemption from taxes. However, reports such as the recent attachment of a Candomblé terreiro in Pará State due to unpaid property tax (IPTU)<sup>50</sup> are common, demonstrating a complete disregard for the tax immunity that should apply to religious spaces. Ironically, this attachment was ordered on March 21, 2024,<sup>51</sup> – a date that commemorates both the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and Brazil’s National Day of Traditions from African Roots and Candomblé Nations.

The persistence of these discriminatory attitudes, further inflamed by divisive political discourse, presents a fundamental challenge to the Candomblé community's cultural legitimacy and security. Addressing this historical legacy of repression requires sustained advocacy and public education efforts to shift societal perceptions and promote a more nuanced understanding of Candomblé as an integral part of Brazil's diverse religious and cultural heritage.

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<sup>49</sup> [https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/constituicao/constituicao.htm](https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/constituicao/constituicao.htm)

<sup>50</sup> *Imposto Predial e Territorial Urbano* (IPTU) is a municipal tax in Brazil levied on the ownership of urban property, which includes buildings and land within city limits.

<sup>51</sup> <https://almapreta.com.br/sessao/cotidiano/justica-do-para-penhora-terreiro-de-candomble-por-divida-de-iptu/>

## 1.2 Structural Barriers in Education and Public Representation

One of the most significant challenges facing the Candomblé community lies within the educational sphere, where structural barriers continue to hinder the comprehensive representation of Afro-Brazilian culture and history. While Federal Law 10.639/2003 mandates the inclusion of Afro-Brazilian history and culture in school curricula, implementation remains inconsistent, particularly in regions with limited Afro-Brazilian representation and influence.

This uneven application of the curriculum reforms perpetuates widespread ignorance and prejudice, as many students do not receive adequate or accurate education on the foundational contributions of Afro-Brazilian religions, such as Candomblé, to Brazil's rich cultural tapestry. Schools like EMEAS, which actively incorporate Afro-Brazilian identity and traditions into their educational programs, serve as vital platforms for cultural education and empowerment. However, these institutions represent the exception rather than the norm.

In many areas, a combination of limited resources, lack of culturally sensitive teacher training, and insufficient institutional support hinders the effective inclusion and proper representation of Afro-Brazilian cultural perspectives within the broader educational system. As a result, Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian spiritual practices are often overlooked, misrepresented, or even actively maligned, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and further marginalizing young Afro-Brazilian students. Addressing these deep-seated educational barriers is critical for fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and culturally affirming society where all expressions of Brazil's diversity are respected and celebrated.

Beyond the educational sphere, the Candomblé community also lacks representation in public institutions and decision-making spaces. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics<sup>52</sup>, Black people make up 56% of Brazil's total population. However, Black public servants represent only 40% of employees in the

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<sup>52</sup> The *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE)* is a public institute within the Brazilian federal administration.

Federal Executive Branch and 28% in the Judiciary. In the Executive Branch, Black individuals occupy approximately 51% of mid-level public positions but only 33% of senior-level positions. On average, Black public servants in the Executive Branch earn 21% less than their white counterparts and have 8% more years of service.<sup>53</sup>

In the judiciary, Brazil has only one Black minister, Benedito Gonçalves of the Superior Court of Justice (STJ), among a group of 88 ministers distributed across five higher courts: the Supreme Federal Court (STF), the Superior Court of Justice (STJ), the Superior Labor Court (TST), the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), and the Superior Military Court (STM).

The STF (Supreme Federal Court) is the highest and final authority in Brazil's judicial system. This institution plays a crucial role in the country's politics by overseeing the actions of the Executive and Legislative branches and acting as a guardian of the Constitution. The STF has the power to overturn laws passed by Congress, determine the impeachment of a president, and propose certain bills, among other functions. Currently, it is composed of 11 ministers,<sup>54</sup> one of whom self-identifies as mixed-race (*pardo*). Decisions made by this court affect political representatives and impact the entire Brazilian population. In recent years, the STF has taken on a more prominent role as a political actor, given its veto power over the government agenda and its involvement in advancing the rights agenda.

In a country where most of the population is Black yet faces structural racism, it is not surprising that this socio-ethnic inequality is also reflected in the highest court. The Justa Project<sup>55</sup>, a tool designed to monitor the Brazilian judiciary, indicates that white men are 8.2 times more likely to become judges<sup>56</sup>. Since its founding, the court has had 168 ministers, predominantly white men. However, throughout its history, it has had only three Black ministers: Pedro Lessa, who served from 1907 to 1921; Hermenegildo de

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<sup>53</sup> Sources: InfoGOV/ENAP. Active civil servants in September 2023 | CNJ. Ethnic-Racial Diagnosis in the Judiciary, 2023 | TSE. Federal deputies elected in 2022, and senators elected in 2018 and 2022.

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<https://portal.stf.jus.br/textos/verTexto.asp?servico=sobreStfComposicaoComposicaoPlenariaApresentacao>

<sup>55</sup> The project focuses on investigating four areas of the Brazilian judicial system: Budgetary, Legislative, Security Suspension, and Race and Gender.

<sup>56</sup> [https://www.justa.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/justa\\_dados\\_genero\\_raca\\_site-3.pdf](https://www.justa.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/justa_dados_genero_raca_site-3.pdf)

Barros, from 1917 to 1931; and Joaquim Barbosa, who served from 2003 to 2014 and was the first Black person to become the president of Brazil's highest judicial authority.

The absence of Afro-Brazilian religious perspectives and leadership in policymaking processes further isolates Candomblé practitioners from broader societal discussions on culture, identity, and the rights of minority religious communities. Ensuring that Afro-Brazilian voices are empowered and integrated into these fundamental civic processes is essential for crafting inclusive policies and programs that adequately reflect the diverse cultural landscape of Brazil.

### **1.3 Economic and Spatial Challenges**

The economic vulnerability of many Candomblé terreiros adds a significant layer of difficulty for this community. Terreiros frequently operate with limited financial resources, often relying solely on donations from practitioners and supporters to sustain their activities. This financial precarity restricts their ability to invest in the preservation, maintenance, and enhancement of their spaces, leaving them in a state of vulnerability to external pressures. Unlike larger, more established religious institutions, many Candomblé terreiros are not granted the tax exemptions typically afforded to recognized places of worship, placing an additional financial burden on these already economically constrained communities.

The Historic Center of Salvador (CHS) exemplifies these spatial and economic challenges. As one of Brazil's major tourist destinations and a UNESCO World Heritage site, the CHS is subject to a significant influx of tourism and real estate investments. However, since the 1990s, public authorities have consistently prioritized incentives for tourism and real estate sectors while neglecting fundamental rights, such as adequate housing and public health and education facilities, for the predominantly Black local population. This dynamic reveals the contradictions and socio-spatial consequences of the city's political project, which has marginalized Candomblé terreiros and Black communities in favor of gentrification.

Designated a World Heritage Site in 1985<sup>57</sup>, the CHS includes areas like Pelourinho, Maciel, Saldanha, Barroquinha, and Passo – neighborhoods that are historically significant as cultural and political spaces for Salvador’s Black population. The area houses notable landmarks such as the headquarters of the Afro-Bloco *Olodum*, the afoxé *Filhos de Gandhi*, the historic *São Miguel* and *Santa Bárbara* markets, and the *Rosário dos Pretos* Church, among other essential symbols of Afro-Brazilian heritage. The transformation of historic mansions – once homes of slaveholders – into affordable housing, cultural spaces, and political hubs by Black residents illustrates the role of Black sociocultural practices in redefining urban landscapes.

Nonetheless, since the implementation of the Historic Center Recovery Program by the Bahia government in 1992<sup>58</sup>, institutional actions have aimed to turn the CHS into an open-air shopping mall, preserving colonial architecture while displacing affordable housing with high-end retail establishments. According to Sant’Anna (2003), this approach has led to systematic control and displacement of the Black population, contributing to land financialization and real estate speculation in a region central to Afro-Brazilian identity and resilience.

These spatial challenges highlight the threat posed by gentrification, which disrupts the daily practices of Candomblé and endangers sacred sites within contested urban spaces. The lack of tax exemptions and limited recognition from preservation institutions like IPHAN further exacerbate the precariousness of these cultural sites, underscoring the need for inclusive policies that protect the economic and spatial integrity of Afro-Brazilian heritage. Without such protections, these culturally invaluable spaces are at risk, leaving Brazil’s Afro-Brazilian communities to contend with both financial hardship and territorial marginalization within a rapidly changing urban landscape.

#### **1.4 Social and Political Marginalization**

Politically, Afro-Brazilian religious communities remain significantly underrepresented in Brazilian governance structures, resulting in their interests being

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<sup>57</sup> <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/309/>

<sup>58</sup> The program aimed, according to the official discourse, to revitalize and restructure the area, creating a center for tourism, leisure, and entertainment activities.

often overlooked or disregarded. The marginalization of Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian religions from public policy discussions restricts the community's ability to advocate for its needs in areas such as cultural preservation, education, and healthcare.

In 2013, the National Plan for Sustainable Development of Traditional Afro-Brazilian Peoples<sup>59</sup> and Communities was implemented, following the efforts of an interministerial group established the previous year. This plan aligns with the historical context and legal frameworks that support the National Policy for the Promotion of Racial Equality<sup>60</sup>. It highlights the recent inclusion of Afro-descendant demands in public policy, as well as the long history of State neglect and mistreatment toward this population. The institutional political participation of this segment is very recent; however, the struggle to achieve this milestone was long and arduous. The first organizational efforts occurred in the 1940s with the creation of federative and associative entities aimed at unifying the political representation of terreiros, as well as legitimizing the mediation between Afro-religiosity, civil society, and the State (Campos & Rubert, 2016; Leistner, 2016). These organizations also sought to counter legal sanctions and dispel social stereotypes about Afro-Brazilian religiosity, but they only gained legitimacy in the 1960s and 1970s (Campos & Rubert, 2016).

In 2022, there were 63 Afro-religious candidates for the Brazilian Federal Chamber, according to data from the study “*Candidaturas de Religiosos nas Eleições de 2022: Entre Conservadorismos e Progressismos no Brasil Contemporâneo*”<sup>61</sup> (ISER, BOLL, and LePar/PPGS-UFF). In the 57th Legislature (2023–2027), three federal deputies with Afro-religious identities were elected. In contrast, that same year saw a record number of elected parliamentarians who used evangelical identifiers such as "pastor," "bishop," and "missionary." According to data provided by the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), 28

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<sup>59</sup> The *Plano Nacional de Desenvolvimento Sustentável dos Povos e Comunidades Tradicionais de Matriz Africana* is part of the Federal Government's initiatives for traditional Afro-Brazilian communities. Its primary objective is to safeguard the African traditions preserved in Brazil, comprising a set of public policies aimed primarily at guaranteeing rights, protecting cultural heritage, and combating extreme poverty through the implementation of structural actions.

<sup>60</sup> The *Política Nacional de Promoção da Igualdade Racial*, established by Decree No. 4,886/2003, aims to reduce racial inequalities in Brazil, with a focus on the Black population, by implementing actions achievable in the long, medium, and short terms, while acknowledging the most immediate demands and priority areas for action.

<sup>61</sup> Religious Candidacies in the 2022 Elections: Between Conservatism and Progressivism in Contemporary Brazil.

elected federal, state, and district deputies presented themselves to voters with evangelical titles, with 16 identifying as pastors<sup>62</sup>.

Political underrepresentation extends beyond the religious sphere, affecting the Black population as a whole. According to *the Observatório da Presença Negra no Serviço Público*<sup>63</sup>, of the 592 federal deputies elected in 2022 and senators elected in 2018 and 2022, only 155 identify as Black, accounting for 26.2% of Brazil's federal legislative officials<sup>64</sup>. In a country where the majority of the population is Black, this statistic underscores the lingering effects of post-colonial influence on political representation and highlights the disconnect between Brazil's diverse demographic composition and its legislative body.

While not all Black legislators necessarily have a direct connection to Candomblé, there is a significant intersection between Black representation in the legislature and the protection of Afro-Brazilian rights and culture, including its religious expressions. As Leonor Costa, a human rights activist, and advisor to the PSOL<sup>65</sup> party in the Chamber of Deputies, notes: "As there are no Black legislators and no such representation in legislative houses, there are therefore no people with these concerns considering the formulation of public policies. The absence of Black representation in Parliament reflects this: who is thinking about formulating public policies for Black people to become law?"

This reality of political underrepresentation, coupled with the difficulties in implementing the mandates of Law 10.639/2003, diminishes the visibility of Afro-Brazilian religions and perpetuates a cycle of ignorance and bias, wherein young generations grow up without understanding the cultural diversity that forms Brazil's social fabric. The impacts of this underrepresentation manifest concretely, as evidenced by incidents of religious intolerance. In February 2022, for instance, attacks on Candomblé terreiros in Bahia occurred, where evangelical groups interfered with religious

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<sup>62</sup> <https://oglobo.globo.com/politica/eleicoes-2022/noticia/2022/10/camara-e-assembleias-legislativas-tem-recorde-de-pastores-evangelicos-eleitos.ghtml>

<sup>63</sup> Observatory of Black Presence in Public Service: it presents data and statistics on racial inequality in the federal public service.

<sup>64</sup> Sources: 1) ENAP/InfoGOV; 2) CNJ/Ethnic-Racial Diagnosis of the Judiciary; 3) TSE/Federal Deputies elected in 2022 and Senators elected in 2018 and 2022.

<sup>65</sup> The *Partido Socialismo e Liberdade* (Socialism and Liberty Party) is a Brazilian political party founded in June 2004.

ceremonies and even assaulted practitioners<sup>66</sup>, demonstrating the urgent need for more effective public policies to protect these religious communities.

Enhancing educational policies to provide comprehensive coverage of Afro-Brazilian history and spirituality, on the contrary, would foster cultural literacy, dismantling stereotypes and promoting respect for diverse identities from a young age. In conclusion, the challenges facing the Candomblé community are complex and deeply entrenched, rooted in both historical legacies and contemporary systemic biases. Overcoming these barriers demands a multifaceted approach that acknowledges the unique social, economic, and political needs of Afro-Brazilian religious communities. By promoting greater understanding, economic support, and political inclusion, Brazil can create a more inclusive society that respects and celebrates the contributions of Afro-Brazilian religions like Candomblé.

## ***2. Strategies for Cultural and Religious Preservation***

In the face of ongoing societal and institutional challenges, the Candomblé community has adopted a variety of strategies to preserve its cultural and religious heritage. These approaches are rooted in legal protections, educational initiatives, and community partnerships, all aimed at empowering practitioners, fostering cultural pride, and ensuring the continuity of Afro-Brazilian traditions in a society that has historically marginalized them. A key component of these efforts is Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, which stands as a pivotal element of the Candomblé community and serves as a sacred religious site as well as a cultural hub. Through its various initiatives, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá safeguards Afro-Brazilian cultural practices and offers a model for similar preservation efforts across Brazil's Afro-descendant communities, showcasing the strength and resilience of Candomblé's spiritual and cultural identity.

### **2.1 Advocacy and Legal Protections**

One of the most impactful strategies for preserving Candomblé's heritage has involved legal advocacy, pursuing formal recognition under cultural heritage and

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<sup>66</sup> <https://revistaafirmativa.com.br/religoes-de-matriz-africana-sofrem-com-assedio-perseguiacao-e-violencia-de-igrejas-evangelicas/>

religious protection laws. Over the past decades, Candomblé community leaders have worked tirelessly to secure recognition for Candomblé terreiros as invaluable cultural and spiritual sites. This effort aims to ensure protections against encroachment, degradation, and systemic discrimination. The designation of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá as a historical heritage site by IPHAN in 1998 stands as a key example of this effort, as it provided this iconic site with federal protection.

Securing heritage status grants terreiros essential legal protections, such as limiting development or zoning changes that could otherwise compromise these sanctified spaces. However, achieving and maintaining such status requires extensive documentation, political lobbying, and collaboration with government entities, as cultural heritage designation criteria can be stringent and bureaucratic. Leaders within the Candomblé community have therefore worked closely with legal experts, cultural preservation advocates, and NGOs to substantiate the historical and cultural significance of these sites, successfully positioning Candomblé terreiros as essential religious and cultural institutions that embody centuries of African spirituality, heritage, and resilience.

A significant dimension of this advocacy centers on resisting religious intolerance and racism. The fight against intolerance toward Afro-Brazilian religions parallels the broader anti-racism movement. For example, Federal Law n° 7.716/89<sup>67</sup>, originally enacted to address racial prejudice, has expanded over the years to include protections against religious discrimination (Montero, 2017). This law has become pivotal in advocating for Afro-Brazilian religious rights, reinforcing the protection against intolerance as an integral part of cultural heritage and racial identity. By situating Afro-Brazilian religious rights within the larger framework of anti-racism, Candomblé leaders have strengthened the legal basis for protecting their heritage and amplified their voices in the fight against systemic racial and religious discrimination.

Additionally, the recognition of Afro-Brazilian religions as cultural heritage has broad social policy implications, influencing fields such as education, food security, and public health. This heritage classification allows government programs to support Candomblé communities holistically by integrating resources and social support within

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<sup>67</sup> [https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/leis/17716.htm](https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/leis/17716.htm)

terreiros, which are often deeply embedded within Afro-Brazilian communities (Cordovil, 2014). Programs include mapping Candomblé sites in urban planning, providing public health resources for community members, and facilitating food distribution programs through terreiros. This holistic support helps to sustain the social and spiritual welfare of these communities, further solidifying their cultural and religious significance.

Candomblé communities continue to advocate for laws that protect their religious sites and acknowledge the unique cultural needs of Afro-Brazilian religions. This includes pushing for ordinances prohibiting the vandalization of terreiro spaces, establishing protective zoning regulations, and ensuring that Candomblé practitioners are represented in cultural preservation committees. By securing such protections, Candomblé leaders seek to defend their community against acts of intolerance, harassment, and violence, which Afro-Brazilian religions often face. High-profile incidents of vandalism and harassment against terreiro spaces underscore the urgency for these protections, highlighting the importance of aligning cultural preservation efforts with advocacy against religious and racial discrimination.

## **2.2 Education and Cultural Revitalization Initiatives**

Educational initiatives are at the heart of Candomblé's cultural preservation strategies, as they foster understanding and respect for Afro-Brazilian heritage among both practitioners and the broader public. Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, for instance, has established a formal educational framework through Escola Municipal Eugênia Anna dos Santos (EMEAS), which integrates Candomblé principles and Afro-Brazilian history into its curriculum. This integration was pioneered through the Projeto Irê, developed in 1999, which created innovative pedagogical materials incorporating Candomblé's worldview into various subjects, from mathematics to environmental studies (Machado, 2002). This approach demonstrates how traditional knowledge can enhance contemporary education while serving as a model for culturally relevant education that affirms Afro-Brazilian identity and counteracts centuries of marginalization.

By teaching Yoruba language, African history, and Candomblé cosmology, EMEAS provides young people with a connection to their heritage that strengthens their

sense of belonging and pride (Pinho, 2020). This educational framework is complemented by the Museu Ohun Lailai (Museum of Ancient Things), established within the terreiro in 1982, which serves as both an educational space and a repository of sacred objects, conducting regular workshops on traditional crafts, including the making of sacred objects and traditional clothing, helping preserve these material cultural practices (Serra, 2019).

Candomblé communities have developed various programs focused on cultural revitalization, such as workshops, oral history projects, and artistic initiatives. A notable example is the Projeto Okán at Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, which since 2005 has provided music education focused on traditional African rhythms and instruments. This program has trained over 200 young people in traditional percussion, helping preserve sacred musical knowledge while offering professional development opportunities (Sousa Junior, 2015).

The preservation of oral traditions has been systematically addressed through initiatives like the Projeto Memória e Identidade (Memory and Identity Project). Since 2010, this project has conducted oral history interviews with community elders, creating an archive of personal narratives, religious knowledge, and historical accounts (Goldman, 2015). This practice reinforces the role of orality in Afro-Brazilian traditions, ensuring that Candomblé's narratives remain vibrant, living knowledge rather than static records of the past (Freire, 2020).

The Oficinas de Saberes Tradicionais (Traditional Knowledge Workshops) program, implemented in partnership with local universities, brings together elders (griôs) and academics to document and teach traditional practices, from herbal medicine to culinary arts. The program has been particularly successful in bridging generational gaps and creating formal records of oral traditions (Caputo, 2012). As noted by Silva (2007), such engagement cultivates cultural pride and instills a sense of responsibility among younger practitioners to become custodians of Candomblé's rich traditions.

These educational and cultural initiatives support broader policies aimed at preserving Afro-Brazilian cultural identity and combating racial discrimination. Their success has influenced broader educational policies, particularly in implementing Law 10.639/03, which mandates the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture

in Brazilian schools (Botelho, 2018). The recognition of Afro-Brazilian religions as cultural heritage has allowed terreiros to be acknowledged as spaces for spiritual practice as well as centers for community programs that address issues like food security, health, and education. This recognition places Afro-Brazilian religions within a framework that promotes racial equality and cultural diversity, empowering these communities in both social and political arenas (Montero, 2017).

### **2.3 Community-Based Initiatives and Alliances**

Candomblé's preservation strategies transcend individual terreiros through community-driven initiatives and partnerships with organizations and institutions beyond the religious sphere. Projects like the *Biblioteca de Los Sueños*, developed by CEC Brasil with corporate support from Dow, exemplify this approach by providing a culturally relevant reading space within Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá. This initiative supplies thousands of Afro-Brazilian literature resources, reinforcing Afro-Brazilian literacy and cultural pride (Moreira, 2022). Partnerships like this underscore the importance of collaboration in extending cultural access and building educational infrastructure that affirms Afro-Brazilian identity.

These alliances provide multiple benefits. First, they offer Candomblé communities essential resources to strengthen educational and cultural programs, thereby reinforcing Afro-Brazilian identity within educational spaces. Second, these partnerships foster a broader appreciation of Afro-Brazilian culture by promoting materials that reflect the ethnic and spiritual heritage of Candomblé, which helps break down societal prejudices and foster social cohesion. Initiatives like *Biblioteca de Los Sueños* extend Afro-Brazilian cultural knowledge beyond terreiro boundaries, serving as a vital tool for decolonial and anti-racist education that encourages a deeper societal understanding of Candomblé's cultural and spiritual significance (Alcanfor & Basso, 2019).

Moreover, alliances with educational institutions, NGOs, and government agencies further amplify these preservation efforts, creating platforms for cultural exchange, academic collaboration, and public engagement. Collaborations with universities enable sensitive documentation of Candomblé practices, generating resources that legitimize and preserve Afro-Brazilian knowledge within academic and public domains (Angelini,

2020). Additionally, public events like festivals and art exhibitions promote visibility, fostering public engagement and positioning Candomblé as vital to Brazil's cultural landscape.

#### **2.4 International Network and Diaspora Connections**

Historical evidence demonstrates that Candomblé preservation efforts have consistently crossed national boundaries, with religious leaders maintaining connections across the African diaspora since the early 20th century (Parés, 2013). These connections, particularly between Bahian terreiros and West African religious centers, have been crucial for the transmission and preservation of religious knowledge and practices (Capone, 2010). As documented by Johnson (2002), these international networks have primarily focused on connections between Brazilian terreiros and West African religious institutions, particularly in Nigeria. While some connections exist with other African-derived religious communities in the Americas, the most significant and well-documented relationships have been those reinforcing Yoruba religious traditions between Brazil and Nigeria (Capone, 2010).

As earlier seen in this study, Mãe Stella de Oxóssi, then leader of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, participated in a significant exchange visit to Benin (1987) and Nigeria (1981)<sup>68</sup>, where she had the chance to visit the temples and houses of Orixás. These journeys, documented in her own writings and academic sources, exemplify how terreiro leaders actively, particularly those from Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, engaged in direct dialogue with West African religious authorities, contributing to the preservation and validation of Candomblé traditions through firsthand exchange of knowledge and practices.

By participating in international forums and exchanges, Candomblé practitioners from Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá and other prominent terreiros can advocate for the global recognition of Afro-Brazilian religious rights and contribute to broader discussions on the preservation of African-descended cultural heritage, as documented by Santos (2008). This engagement serves to situate Candomblé within a transnational context, highlighting

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<sup>68</sup> <https://mapeamentocultural.ufba.br/historico/maria-stella-de-azevedo-santos>

its connections to a diaspora-wide movement for the recognition and protection of marginalized spiritual traditions.

The preservation of Afro-Brazilian culture has been strengthened through documented exchanges between Brazilian and Nigerian religious leaders. Capone (2010) details specific instances where Candomblé practitioners have traveled to Nigeria to study Yoruba religious traditions, language, and ritual practices. These exchanges have served to authenticate and deepen understanding of shared religious heritage, though they have also sometimes led to debates about traditional authenticity (Johnson, 2002).

Through such initiatives, Candomblé adherents gain insight into their ancestral practices while adapting them to the unique social and cultural context of Brazil. These exchanges reinforce the continuity of Afro-Brazilian culture, demonstrating that Candomblé is part of a broader, interconnected heritage that spans continents and national borders.

The international networks and diaspora connections forged by Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá and other leading Candomblé terreiros represent a significant strategy in the ongoing struggle for the preservation and recognition of Afro-Brazilian cultural and religious identity. By engaging with global counterparts, these institutions can amplify their voices, share resources, and position their practices as part of a transnational movement for the protection of marginalized spiritual and cultural traditions. This global advocacy, in turn, strengthens the resilience and legitimacy of Candomblé within the Brazilian context, where it has historically faced repression and attempts at erasure.

In this way, the international dimensions of Candomblé preservation efforts reflect the multifaceted nature of the terreiros' resistance strategies. While the previous sections have highlighted internal community-based initiatives, this global engagement demonstrates how Afro-Brazilian religious institutions are asserting their place on the world stage, forging solidarities and drawing attention to the continued importance of their spiritual and cultural practices. The success of these transnational connections underscores the vitality of Candomblé as a living tradition that transcends national boundaries, positioning it as a key component of the broader African diaspora.

The international connections maintained by Candomblé terreiros represent one component of their broader strategy for cultural preservation and religious legitimacy. As Santos (2008) documented, these connections have contributed to the recognition of Candomblé as part of Brazil's cultural heritage. However, research suggests that the most significant work of cultural preservation continues to occur at the local level, through the daily practices and teachings within individual terreiros (Johnson, 2002; Selka, 2007).

## 2.5 Expanding Representation in Public and Political Spheres

The political engagement of Candomblé leaders has yielded concrete results in public policy and institutional recognition. Beyond the previously discussed efforts of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, other prominent religious leaders have made significant contributions to expanding Candomblé's presence in public and political spheres.

Mother Menininha do Gantois (1894-1986), for instance, one of the most influential religious leaders in Brazilian history, helped establish greater respect and recognition for Candomblé in Brazilian society, paving the way for future generations of religious leaders to engage with public institutions and political bodies. Her influence, resonating with leaders from Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, extended far beyond her terreiro (*Gantois*)<sup>69</sup>, contributing to the broader cultural acceptance of Afro-Brazilian religious traditions. As sociologist, anthropologist, and Babalorixá Rodney William Eugênio, Ph.D. from the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP), contextualizes: "Mother Menininha was a voice of consensus, the voice that everyone listened to for guidance on how things should be directed. She was the iyalorixá of iyalorixás, the one before whom all the elder women of Bahia bowed in reverence for all that she represented and for her role as a conciliator."<sup>70</sup>

More recently, examples of international engagement demonstrate how Candomblé leaders continue to expand their spheres of influence. Ìyá Márcia d'Ògún's participation in the 2nd American Association of Brazilian Candomblé and Culture Symposium in the

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<sup>69</sup> Brazilian Candomblé terreiro in Salvador, nationally recognized as a heritage site in 2002 by IPHAN. What sets Gantois apart from other traditional terreiros in Bahia, such as Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, is that succession occurs through lineage rather than selection through the divination of búzios (cowrie shells).

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/geral-62375929>

United States<sup>71</sup> represents how contemporary religious leaders are bringing Candomblé perspectives to international academic and cultural forums. Such engagement helps position Candomblé within global discussions about religious freedom, cultural preservation, and African diaspora traditions.

As the Ialorixá of Ilê Axé Ewá Olodumare terreiro in Lauro de Freitas, Bahia, and President of the Salvador Municipal Council for Cultural Policy (CMPC), Ìyá Márcia represented Brazil at the symposium at a crucial moment, when increasing religious hate crimes against Candomblé leaders in Brazil have become prominent in social media and the media. This international event provided a forum for cultural exchange, reinforcing the struggle for religious freedom worldwide. On May 18, 2024, she presented a lecture titled "The Essence of Life, Evolution, Revolution and Resistance,"<sup>72</sup> addressing the issues of racism, intolerance, religious hate, and terrorism, as well as the initiatives that she represented, are undertaking in Bahia and Brazil.

A key highlight of her presentation was the work of the Ecumenical Water Network (Reda), which unites various religions with the shared objective of ensuring free access to water for all. Ìya Márcia also emphasized that Bahian Candomblé had reached Chicago, brought by her biological mother, Ìyá Valdete de Ewà, known as D. Detinha, and expressed her satisfaction in seeing the Afro-Brazilian religion expand its horizons internationally.

Candomblé leaders have also sought representation at the state and national levels. Thanks to their advocacy, the governor of Bahia State announced on January 19, 2024, the creation of the *Ronda Omnira de Proteção à Liberdade Religiosa*<sup>73</sup>, a police patrol aimed at combating religious intolerance and responding to victims of these crimes. The Omnira Patrol – Omnira meaning "freedom" in Yoruba – is an initiative of the Permanent Working Group for Racial Equality within Bahia's Military Police Department of Social Promotion. It is a specialized administrative and operational service for addressing crimes related to African heritage terreiros in Salvador.

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<sup>71</sup> <https://aabccaxe.org/symposium/>

<sup>72</sup> <https://aabccaxe.org/event/ori%e1%b9%a3a-o%e1%b9%a3un-the-essence-of-life-evolution-revolution-and-resistance/>

<sup>73</sup> Omnira Patrol for Religious Freedom Protection

Additionally, the Casa Branca do Engenho Velho terreiro, one of the oldest in Salvador, was registered as a municipal historic landmark in 1984 through the efforts of leaders like Mother Menininha do Gantois (Campos, 2020).

Through this multifaceted political engagement, Candomblé leaders have secured important legal protections and cultural recognition for their religious traditions. As they continue to advocate for their place within Brazil's public and institutional spheres, they help dismantle misconceptions and promote a more inclusive understanding of Candomblé as a fundamental aspect of the nation's diverse heritage.

### ***3. Future Directions for Policy and Afro-Brazilian Advocacy***

As the Candomblé community navigates enduring socio-political obstacles, the future of Afro-Brazilian advocacy is poised to advance beyond preservation, pioneering pathways toward deeper inclusivity, social equity, and cultural valorization. Rooted in a history of resistance and revitalization, Afro-Brazilian leaders, cultural institutions, and advocacy organizations' collective efforts catalyze transformative movements across cultural, healthcare, and political domains.

These initiatives embody more than traditional advocacy; they aim to create a cohesive societal framework where Afro-Brazilian spiritual traditions and cultural identities are officially acknowledged, respected, and celebrated as vital components of Brazil's national identity. Future policies will focus on ensuring strong protections for Afro-Brazilian religious practices, improving healthcare access tailored to the community's unique needs, and increasing political representation to elevate Afro-Brazilian voices in governance.

In doing so, these efforts work towards securing a resilient future for the Candomblé community within Brazil's socio-political landscape, championing an inclusive national identity that honors its Afro-Brazilian roots.

#### **3.1 Integrating Afro-Brazilian Heritage into the National Identity**

Incorporating Afro-Brazilian heritage into Brazil's national identity remains both an essential and challenging undertaking. This endeavor involves acknowledging Afro-

Brazilian communities' historical and cultural contributions, particularly those connected to the Candomblé religion, which embodies a unique and enduring spiritual legacy. Despite legal measures, such as Federal Law 10.639/2003, mandating Afro-Brazilian history and culture within the educational system, the consistent implementation of this law has often faltered due to structural challenges in the educational system, including inadequate teacher training and insufficient learning materials. While the exact implementation rates vary across regions, studies by educational researchers have consistently highlighted gaps between the law's requirements and its practical application in schools. However, innovative initiatives like "*A Cor da Cultura*"<sup>74</sup>, a partnership between educational institutions and media outlets, have demonstrated the potential for widespread impact, reaching millions of students through multimedia educational resources about Afro-Brazilian heritage.

To meaningfully integrate Afro-Brazilian heritage into Brazil's cultural narrative, future policies must address these challenges through multi-level educational reform and increased public recognition of Afro-Brazilian symbols, figures, and sites. While past initiatives offer important lessons, they also provide blueprints for future nationwide implementation. The Municipal School Malê Debalê in Salvador, despite its eventual closure, demonstrated how educational institutions can successfully integrate cultural heritage into formal education. As the first and only school established within an Afro-Brazilian carnival block in Salvador's municipal education network, it created a model that could be adapted and improved upon across Brazil's educational system. The school's approach to implementing Law 10.639 through direct community engagement and cultural immersion offers valuable insights for future policy development. While the school ceased operations after a decade, its experience highlights the need for sustainable funding mechanisms and stronger institutional support frameworks in future cultural education initiatives.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> "The Color of Culture is an educational project focused on valuing Afro-Brazilian culture, born from a partnership between Canal Futura, Petrobras, Cidan – the Center for Information and Documentation of Black Artists, Fundação Palmares, TV Globo, Seppir – the Secretariat for the Promotion of Racial Equality, and the Ministry of Education (MEC). Launched in 2004, the project has since produced audiovisual materials, cultural activities, and collective actions that aim to promote positive practices, celebrating the history of this segment from an affirmative perspective."

<sup>75</sup> <https://meussertoes.com.br/2024/03/19/a-escola-municipal-male-debale-auge-e-declinio/>

Building on such experiences, programs like "Jovens Cientistas Cariocas"<sup>76</sup> in Rio de Janeiro's favelas demonstrate how cultural integration can be successfully merged with STEM education. This innovative approach could serve as a template for national policy development, particularly in creating culturally responsive STEM education programs. Future educational policies could establish similar programs across Brazil's diverse regions, adapting the model to local cultural contexts while maintaining its core emphasis on connecting scientific literacy with cultural heritage. To ensure sustainability and broader impact, policymakers should consider:

- I. Developing standardized frameworks for cultural-scientific integration that can be adapted to different regional contexts.
- II. Creating dedicated funding streams for schools implementing comprehensive cultural integration programs.
- III. Establishing mentor networks connecting successful programs with new initiatives.
- IV. Implementing robust evaluation systems to measure both academic and cultural impact.
- V. Fostering partnerships between educational institutions and local cultural organizations.

These policy recommendations draw from both the successes and challenges of past initiatives, aiming to create more sustainable and impactful programs nationwide. By learning from the Malê Debalê experience, future policies can better address institutional sustainability while maintaining strong community connections. Similarly, the success of programs like "Jovens Cientistas Cariocas" in connecting cultural heritage with contemporary education can inform the development of more comprehensive and sustainable cultural integration policies.

Beyond educational reforms, the integration of Afro-Brazilian heritage into national identity requires reimagining how cultural symbols and spaces are woven into Brazil's collective consciousness. The recognition of historic terreiros as national heritage sites -

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<sup>76</sup> "Jovens Cientistas Cariocas" (Young Carioca Scientists) is a program that promotes science and scientific outreach in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

exemplified by Salvador's Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá's recognition by IPHAN - represents more than preservation; it symbolizes the acknowledgment of these spaces as fundamental markers of Brazilian identity. These sacred spaces, along with traditional celebrations like the *Festa da Boa Morte*<sup>77</sup> in Cachoeira, Bahia, demonstrate how religious syncretism and Afro-Brazilian traditions have shaped Brazil's unique cultural fabric. Future initiatives for identity integration should focus on the following:

- I. Incorporating these cultural spaces and traditions into Brazil's national narrative and symbols.
- II. Recognizing Afro-Brazilian heritage sites as spaces of national, not just cultural, significance.
- III. Celebrating syncretic traditions as distinctive features of Brazilian identity.
- IV. Promoting these spaces as living cultural centers that actively shape contemporary Brazilian culture.

Integrating Afro-Brazilian heritage into the national identity of Brazil calls for a significant shift in how Brazilian society views itself. Instead of seeing Afro-Brazilian elements merely as contributions to culture, they must be acknowledged as fundamental to what it means to be Brazilian. This transformation involves rethinking national symbols, cultural narratives, and public spaces to embody this new understanding. For instance, Salvador's extensive mapping<sup>78</sup> of Candomblé terreiros, which documented over 1,100 sacred sites across the city, illustrates how effectively recognizing Afro-Brazilian cultural spaces can reshape collective identity. If we expand such initiatives across the entire country, we could change Brazil's self-perception from a nation that merely includes Afro-Brazilian influences to one that is deeply shaped by its African heritage.

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<sup>77</sup> The Feast of the Good Death, or Feast of Our Lady of the Good Death, is a traditional Afro-Brazilian religious celebration held annually and organized by the Sisterhood of the Good Death. It takes place in the municipality of Cachoeira, Bahia.

<sup>78</sup> The Mapping of Candomblé Terreiros in Salvador was a project aimed at identifying, locating, and assessing the land status of Candomblé terreiros in Salvador, the capital of the Brazilian state of Bahia. According to the organizers, this initiative also seeks to support the land regularization of sacred spaces, thereby reducing prejudice against Afro-Brazilian religions. The project registered 1,165 terreiros in the capital, making the mapping available on a virtual portal.

This shift would place Afro-Brazilian cultural expressions at the heart of Brazilian identity rather than treating them as secondary additions.

### **3.2 Expanding Healthcare Integration and Social Welfare Programs**

An inclusive approach to healthcare and social welfare for Afro-Brazilian communities is essential for fostering equity and culturally sensitive care within Brazil's healthcare systems. Historically, Afro-Brazilian communities, including Candomblé practitioners, have encountered significant barriers in accessing respectful, competent medical care. Mainstream medical practices often overlook the holistic worldview deeply embedded in Afro-Brazilian culture, where health is understood as an interconnected balance of physical, spiritual, and communal well-being. In this approach, the body is linked to the spiritual realm, and practices such as herbal medicine and community-based care are fundamental to maintaining holistic health.

Future healthcare integration policies must, therefore, build upon these traditions by establishing systematic partnerships with Afro-Brazilian healers, mães-de-santo (priestesses), and community leaders who understand the complex relationships between body, spirit, and community health. Training healthcare providers in culturally responsive practices should become an essential part of medical education and professional development, incorporating formal advisory boards that include both traditional healers and medical professionals. By developing standardized cultural competency training programs, healthcare systems can ensure that providers respect and understand these practices. Additionally, creating dedicated spaces within healthcare facilities for traditional healing practices and fostering collaborative research programs to document and validate these methods would further support integration. Such protocols would enable traditional healing practices to be formally incorporated into mainstream healthcare delivery.

Social welfare programs within Candomblé communities, which often operate as self-organized support networks, also require formal recognition and sustainable support mechanisms. Terreiros have historically served as informal centers for social welfare, offering resources such as food distribution, child support, and mental health assistance, typically on a volunteer basis. This critical role has recently gained official

acknowledgment, with the Conselho Nacional de Saúde (CNS)<sup>79</sup> Resolution 715 of July 2023<sup>80</sup> explicitly recognizing terreiros as complementary health promotion spaces within the Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS)<sup>81</sup>:

46. Recognize the manifestations of popular culture of traditional African-rooted peoples and the Traditional Territorial Units of African Matrix (terreiros, terreiras, barracões, houses of religion, etc.) as health-promoting and healing facilities complementary to the SUS (Unified Health System), in the process of health promotion. They serve as the first point of entry for those most in need and as spaces for healing from mental, psychological, social, and nutritional imbalances. This approach respects the inherent complexities of African-rooted cultures and peoples, aiming for preservation, as outlined in public health policies, and combats racism, rights violations, and religious discrimination, among other issues.<sup>82</sup>

By viewing health through a biopsychosocial lens, terreiros address wellness comprehensively, understanding that emotional and spiritual imbalances directly impact physical health. As religious leaders like Daniel Pereira, a Babalorixá, emphasize, these spaces often function as vital "social first aid" centers, providing support not only to community members but also to occasional visitors seeking assistance. Despite their crucial role, systemic racism and historical marginalization have long prevented full recognition of these communities' healing practices.

Recognizing this role, future policy directions should focus on establishing official partnerships between terreiros and municipal social service departments to solidify their role as vital community resources.

Mental health services merit particular attention, as Afro-Brazilian communities frequently face compounded effects of racial and religious discrimination. Future mental health initiatives should, therefore, prioritize training professionals in culturally specific trauma and healing practices, with an emphasis on supporting community-based mental health programs led by terreiros. By developing therapeutic approaches that incorporate both traditional and contemporary healing methods, the healthcare system can provide a

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<sup>79</sup> National Health Council

<sup>80</sup> <https://conselho.saude.gov.br/resolucoes-cns/3092-resolucao-n-715-de-20-de-julho-de-2023>

<sup>81</sup> Unified Health System

<sup>82</sup> GUIDELINES FOR THE 2024-2027 MULTI-YEAR PLAN AND THE 2024-2027 NATIONAL HEALTH PLAN BASED ON THE DIRECTIVES APPROVED AT THE 17th NATIONAL HEALTH CONFERENCE FROM JULY 2 TO 5, 2023 (my translation).

more comprehensive response to these challenges. Additionally, specialized support programs for individuals who have experienced religious and racial discrimination would provide necessary relief and validation for these communities.

For the successful implementation of these initiatives, robust institutional frameworks and sustainable funding mechanisms are vital. Establishing dedicated budget lines for culturally integrated healthcare programs would secure ongoing support, while oversight committees that include both healthcare professionals and community leaders would ensure that programs meet both medical and cultural standards. Developing comprehensive evaluation metrics that consider not only clinical outcomes but also cultural appropriateness, along with regular community feedback mechanisms, would ensure that the programs are both effective and aligned with community needs.

The transformation of healthcare and social welfare delivery in this way would empower Afro-Brazilian communities and enrich Brazil's overall healthcare system through the integration of diverse healing traditions and community-based support networks. Such success would rely on a sustained commitment from healthcare institutions, policymakers, and community leaders, working collaboratively to create an inclusive and effective healthcare model that bridges traditional practices with contemporary medical care.

### **3.3 Strengthening Political Representation and Policy Advocacy**

Afro-Brazilian political representation is a significant challenge in Brazil, highlighting the ongoing exclusionary mechanisms within the country's democratic framework. Although Afro-Brazilians make up the major portion of the population, they are significantly underrepresented in federal, state, and municipal government structures, where decision-making power is concentrated. This political marginalization reflects systemic racial biases and the historical socio-political processes that have limited Afro-Brazilian communities' access to institutional influence.

As seen earlier in this work, the latest data from the Supreme Electoral Court reveal that a disproportionately low percentage of federal parliamentarians identify as Black, highlighting a stark contrast between the country's legislative makeup and its

demographic reality. This underrepresentation is further complicated by a lack of policy engagement on issues directly impacting Afro-Brazilian communities, such as cultural preservation, religious freedom, economic empowerment, and social equality. Addressing these gaps demands a comprehensive empowerment strategy that tackles the political inclusion of Afro-Brazilian citizens and the substantive transformation of institutional spaces and policies.

To foster meaningful political representation, it is essential to establish formalized pathways that ensure Afro-Brazilian leaders and advocates, particularly those connected to traditional religious communities like Candomblé, have access to legislative influence. One proposed model involves creating advisory councils that include respected Black community leaders and Afro-Brazilian religious representatives. These councils would act not merely as consultative bodies but as deliberative platforms with real influence over policy-making processes. By involving voices from within these communities, particularly those of religious leaders who hold cultural authority and social influence, policy decisions can be better aligned with the realities and needs of the Afro-Brazilian population.

In addition, strengthening political representation requires targeted programs in political education for young Afro-Brazilians. These programs should transcend technical training in legislative and governance practices by fostering a critical awareness of the institutionalized mechanisms that perpetuate racial inequities. By engaging youth in discussions around power structures, representation, and systemic racism, these initiatives can cultivate a new generation of Afro-Brazilian leaders who are equipped to navigate and challenge existing political frameworks. Programs of this nature could be developed in partnership with educational institutions, community organizations, and even religious terreiros, which are historically significant spaces of learning and cultural transmission for Afro-Brazilian communities.

Another crucial aspect of this strategy is the legal protection of religious territories, specifically Candomblé terreiros. Beyond their role as spaces of worship, terreiros serve as powerful symbols of cultural resistance and identity affirmation within Afro-Brazilian communities. Recognizing these sites as political territories is an act of preserving not only physical spaces but also the intangible cultural heritage that these spaces represent.

To this end, policy measures should advocate for the allocation of funds toward the maintenance and security of terreiros while simultaneously and widely enacting strict legal protections against acts of vandalism, prejudice, and religious intolerance across the country. By safeguarding these territories, the government would demonstrate respect for Afro-Brazilian spiritual traditions while reinforcing the broader narrative of cultural and political resilience.

For these strategies to be effectively implemented, they must be supported by a substantive institutional commitment to reshaping political spaces in a way that transcends mere representational inclusion. This necessitates an ongoing process of institutional reform aimed at decolonizing governance frameworks and promoting equitable access to political agency for historically marginalized communities. Decolonizing political spaces involves confronting and dismantling long-standing barriers to participation, challenging narratives that render Afro-Brazilian contributions invisible, and fostering environments where diverse identities can shape national discourses. Such transformation requires robust policy support, sustainable funding models, and a commitment to structural changes within the very fabric of Brazilian governance.

A truly inclusive approach to political representation would also entail regular engagement between elected officials and Afro-Brazilian communities, ensuring that policy agendas remain responsive to community needs and concerns. By creating channels for consistent feedback, legislative bodies can foster trust with Afro-Brazilian constituents and respond more dynamically to emerging issues. This type of ongoing dialogue would empower communities to hold their representatives accountable, reinforcing the importance of representation that is not only symbolic but also practically impactful.

Ultimately, strengthening Afro-Brazilian political representation and policy advocacy is a multifaceted endeavor that involves creating inclusive entry points into the political arena, protecting cultural spaces, and fostering youth leadership. By investing in these areas, Brazil can begin to address the systemic imbalances that have excluded Afro-Brazilian voices from the national political narrative. Such efforts would lay the

groundwork for a more equitable society where Afro-Brazilian culture, spirituality, and identities are celebrated as integral components of Brazil's social and political landscape.

### **3.4 Advancing Public Awareness and Cultural Exchange Initiatives**

Public awareness and cultural exchange initiatives offer significant potential to transform societal perceptions of Afro-Brazilian culture and address long-standing stereotypes that often lead to discrimination. Despite the enduring influence of Afro-Brazilian cultural expressions, like music, dance, and literature, negative stereotypes persist. These biases often reduce complex cultural practices to mere symbols or conflate Afro-Brazilian religions with superstition. By investing in public awareness and educational campaigns, Brazil can foster a deeper appreciation for Afro-Brazilian traditions, their historical significance, and their modern relevance.

National media campaigns showcasing the diversity of Afro-Brazilian contributions, particularly in cultural and religious domains, would help bridge the understanding gap. Documentaries, interviews with community leaders, and public discussions on Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian practices could demystify these traditions for a broader audience. Additionally, cultural exchanges and events that bring together Afro-Brazilian leaders, artists, and activists with representatives from other communities could promote dialogue, foster mutual respect, and enhance cultural pride. Events such as museum exhibitions on Afro-Brazilian history, cross-cultural festivals, and workshops led by Afro-Brazilian artists and religious leaders would further amplify this impact.

International cultural exchange initiatives could also reinforce Brazil's position within the African diaspora and strengthen global solidarity. Collaborative programs with African nations and other countries in the Americas with African diasporic populations would allow Afro-Brazilian communities to share their experiences, learn from others facing similar challenges, and advocate for their rights on an international stage. By establishing ties with other diasporic communities, Brazil can foster a network of cultural pride, shared learning, and a broader movement for Afro-diasporic recognition and empowerment.

## CONCLUSION

Venturing into the field of academic research is a challenging endeavor. This journey becomes even more demanding when studying religious phenomena within Religious Studies, particularly focusing on religions with African origins. Throughout this research, we have examined how the Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá's practice of Candomblé's cosmovision intersects with and influences broader socio-political dynamics in Bahia, Brazil, while also investigating its historical evolution and engagement with governance institutions in shaping human rights promotion and Afro-Brazilian cultural identity.

With an extensive body of literature on the Afro-religious universe, selecting a bibliography proves challenging due to the abundance of contemporary works, as each contains aspects worthy of reflection and analysis. Much of our understanding of Candomblé has been transmitted through oral tradition, a fundamental characteristic of African religious knowledge systems that has been preserved in Brazil. This oral transmission has been gradually documented through academic research, creating a rich tapestry of written records that complement the living oral tradition.

Since their forced arrival in Brazil, African people and their culture have been the subject of observation and study, including their religious legacy passed down to their descendants through both oral and written forms. Candomblé, as a rich heritage developed on Brazilian soil, has been meticulously examined by classic authors like Pierre Verger, who tirelessly worked to expose the severe discrimination against Candomblé in the country while also documenting its oral traditions and practices.

Focusing on the cosmological universe of Candomblé, an oral tradition emerged as a crucial element in sustaining the religion built on Brazilian soil, a topic of significant importance in studies by leading Brazilian researchers. This body of work reveals how oral tradition became highly valued, becoming an identity marker of the religion. However, scholars such as Juana Elbein dos Santos<sup>83</sup> have emphasized that orality should

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<sup>83</sup> Anthropologist and General Coordinator of the Society for Black Culture Studies in Brazil.

not be seen as diminishing the religion's complexity. Rather, it reflects a multifaceted method of teaching and learning that involves a dynamic and highly interpersonal web.

Research by Juana, and later by historian José Beniste<sup>84</sup>, enriched and highlighted the philosophical depth of Candomblé, underscoring the significance of its structure, which is based on myths and rituals, and establishing it as a robust religion. Due to this stability, Candomblé has also influenced the realm of popular Catholicism, illustrating exchanges between distinct religions. This fact dispels the misconception that the Jeje-Nagô religious culture played only a passive role in the process of religious syncretism.

Throughout this study, we have seen how the terreiro transcends the boundaries of a conventional religious institution. Its leaders, from Mother Aninha to Mother Stella de Oxóssi and Mother Ana de Xangô, have consistently advocated for Afro-Brazilian rights and visibility within a complex social fabric. Their efforts to gain legal recognition and protection for Candomblé practices have fostered a greater awareness of the intrinsic value of Afro-Brazilian culture within Brazil's multicultural society. These initiatives underscore the terreiro's impact as a site of advocacy, challenging systemic discrimination while nurturing a robust sense of pride and belonging among Afro-Brazilian practitioners.

The terreiro's engagement with multi-level governance institutions is exemplified through its educational and cultural programs, such as the Escola Municipal Eugênia Anna dos Santos and Biblioteca de Los Sueños. These initiatives demonstrate how religious spaces can function as agents of social change, actively shaping public policy and institutional practices. By fostering a culturally affirming learning environment that emphasizes Afro-Brazilian history, language, and arts, these programs promote anti-racist education and contribute to reshaping public perceptions of Afro-Brazilian identity.

The cultural and religious preservation strategies employed by the Terreiro, particularly through its partnerships with governmental and cultural institutions, reflect an adaptive approach to safeguarding Afro-Brazilian traditions. In a globalized world where cultural homogenization often threatens local traditions, the terreiro's dedication to

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<sup>84</sup> Ogã, a Brazilian historian and researcher focused on African-rooted religious practices, who was initiated into Queto Candomblé in 1984 by Ialorixá Mãe Cantu de Airá Tola of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá.

cultural resilience offers a model for other Afro-diasporic communities. By elevating Afro-Brazilian narratives and advocating for inclusive policies, the terreiro reinforces the importance of recognizing diverse religious expressions within national cultural heritage frameworks.

Looking forward, the terreiro and its leaders face ongoing challenges, including the need for policy reforms that protect Afro-Brazilian religious rights and address social inequities. With increased visibility and legal support, there is hope for greater acceptance and understanding of Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian religious traditions. Yet, the terreiro's work is far from complete; future initiatives must continue to adapt to evolving social conditions, ensuring that Candomblé remains a living and dynamic force in the struggle for human rights, equality, and cultural recognition.

In conclusion, this research has demonstrated how the Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá's practice of Candomblé's cosmovision has become intrinsically woven into the fabric of Bahian socio-political life, while its historical activism and institutional engagement have significantly shaped human rights discourse and governance practices in the region. As a symbol of Afro-Brazilian resilience, identity, and spiritual continuity, the terreiro affirms the transformative potential of cultural heritage in advancing social justice and human dignity. The legacy of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá stands as a testament to the power of faith, community, and tradition in creating a more inclusive and equitable society, while demonstrating how religious institutions can effectively engage with governance structures to promote lasting social change.

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