Afro-Brazilian Religion, Resistance and Environmental Ethics

A Perspective from Candomblé

Valdina Oliveira Pinto*
Teacher and practitioner of the philosophical and healing traditions of the Afro-Brazilian religion
valdinapinto@gmail.com

Rachel E. Harding
University of Colorado Denver, CO, USA
rachel.harding@ucdenver.edu

Valdina Oliveira Pinto is an extraordinary woman. A teacher and practitioner of the philosophical and healing traditions of the Afro-Brazilian religion, Candomblé, for many years she was the Makota Ngunzu (ritual elder responsible for training new initiates and transmitting sacred knowledge) of the Tanuri Junçara Candomblé terreiro in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. Makota Valdina, as Pinto is respectfully known, has recently assumed a similar function, Mameto ma Ngunzu at the Nzo Oniboyá Candomblé terreiro. There, together with her sister, Maria Angélica, Makota Valdina continues a family legacy of spiritual leadership based in the community where she was born and raised.

Makota Valdina, is also an environmental ethicist, esteemed community scholar, and tireless advocate for the human rights and religious freedoms of people of African descent. She travels widely—throughout Brazil and internationally—as an eloquent spokesperson for devotees of Afro-Brazilian religious traditions. She has received numerous honors and recognitions of her work, including, in 2005, a “Grassroots Wisdom Master” award from the Gregorio Mattos Foundation.

In April 2011, Makota Valdina spent a week as scholar-in-residence in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado Denver. During her visit, she presented a public lecture that interwove her personal history with the

* Lecture by Valdina Oliveira Pinto, translated and edited by Rachel E. Harding.
I’m very happy to be here again in this city. I would like to thank the University of Colorado Denver and all the institutions and individuals who enabled me to be here so that I could share with you all a little of the traditions, the practices of African-based religion that were brought to Brazil by enslaved Africans. But I also believe some part is here in the United States among African Americans.

I see some faces that I know; some people who have heard me a few times before. But I also see a lot of new people—and I’m happy for the opportunity to meet them and to make new friends. So, for those who have already heard me, please be a little patient, because you may hear something you’ve heard before. But I need to make an introduction for those who have not heard me previously.

To talk about Candomblé, for me, is to talk about my life. Even before I was initiated in Candomblé, I lived Candomblé. I was born into a family in which my mother practiced Candomblé. I was born into a community that was an extended family, beyond the blood family. Mine was a neighborhood where there were no Catholic or Protestant churches but where we had a lot of Candomblé temple communities, terreiros. I grew up in my family and in my neighborhood, with this practice, with this culture, with these traditions.\(^1\)

I was initiated in Candomblé in 1975. At that time, I realized that many things, many words, many ways that I had first encountered as a child in the neighborhood where I lived, still existed within the Candomblé religious communities. But because of “progress,” outside influences and television, we were losing those things, we were losing some of these traditions.

\textit{So what is Candomblé?} Candomblé is the traditions, the rites, the practices that we Afro-Brazilians recreated in Brazil, from what the Africans who were enslaved brought with them. We recreated and gave new meanings to those African rites, rituals, traditions and worldviews and made Candomblé. For us, Black people in Brazil, Candomblé is much more than just a form of spirituality or a religion. Candomblé is an expression of resistance. It is a way of affirming

\(^1\) Makota Valdina was born in 1943 and raised in the community of Engenho Velho da Federação, a working-class area which, at the time, lay just on the rural edges of Salvador, the capital city of the state of Bahia.
an identity that was taken through the process of enslavement. Candomblé is a way of reconstructing a family that was dispersed through the slave trade. Candomblé is a way of life that differs from Western visions of the world. Today in Brazil, we descendants of Africans are working to insist that the society give our religion the respect that it gives to other religions.

In contemporary Brazil, we have cultural, ritual and linguistic remnants of at least three groups—three large African groups. We have survivors of various African ethnic groups that are known today, collectively, as Bantu peoples: the Bakongo, Luba, Lunda, Chokwe, and many other groups. Some of the Bantu groups are from the old Kongo Kingdom—the region that is now Angola. Who knows, maybe some are from Mozambique too. We also have traditions brought by the Kimbundu and the Ovimbundu peoples. All of these are people who speak Bantu languages. We also have survivors from the Old Dahomey Kingdom, which is present-day Benin. And we have as well, traditions that have survived from perhaps the best known, or most-studied group, which is the Yoruba ethnic and language group.

Generally speaking, when people outside of Brazil hear about Candomblé, they think in terms of the Yoruba model—the tradition of the orixá. But it’s important to have a historic understanding. Maybe the emphasis on the Yoruba influence in Candomblé comes from the fact that the Yoruba were the last large group of Africans to be brought from West Africa to Bahia, so their influence on Candomblé was the last before the end of the slave trade. But the groups that are understood today as Bantu-speaking peoples were brought to Brazil as slaves from the very beginning of the trade [in the 16th century] until the end of the trade [in the mid-19th century]. And they contributed significantly to the peopling of Brazil and to the creation of the culture of Brazil.

For example, the Portuguese we speak in Brazil is different from the Portuguese of Portugal and even from the Portuguese of Angola. Because Brazilian Portuguese had the influence of these Bantu-speaking ethnic groups, the influence of the Amerindians (the indigenous people of Brazil), and of the Portuguese people—these groups together created a particular form of Portuguese language, Brazilian Portuguese.

I’m saying these things, because in order to really understand the importance of Candomblé, in order to understand the importance of the spirituality of Candomblé, we have to understand this larger context of Brazil. In order to

---

2 Orixa (orisha) is a Yoruba language term used to denote specific sacred energies, elements of the natural world, universal spiritual presences; sometimes understood as deities or divinized ancestral forces.
understand Candomblé we have to understand the history of the development of slavery in Brazil, you have to understand the way in which Africans and their descendants used the religion to resist slavery, you have to understand the help that the caboclos (the indigenous people) gave to the Africans who were escaping slavery. All of this is important for understanding what Candomblé is.

When I speak at conferences and give lectures, when people ask me to talk about Candomblé, the way that I speak about the religion is influenced by my own history. When I entered the religion in the 1970s, when I was initiated, we in Brazil were influenced by what was happening here in the United States—by the Black Power movement and by the Civil Rights struggles, so all of that affects my perspective on the religion. And in that same period, as we Blacks in Brazil (especially in Bahia) were organizing ourselves more in terms of the movement for rights and justice in our country, I was deepening my encounter with the spirituality of the orixás, the nkisis, the voduns.

I began to be more and more conscious of the way academics in Brazil were misinterpreting our culture and our spirituality to project an image of us, Afro-Brazilians and our practice, as exotic, as black magic, as something superstitious, as something folkloric. They proclaimed that this is who we were and I knew we were not that.

So I decided at that time (and I was already a primary school teacher then) that I would lift up the banner as a black activist who is also a religious devotee of Candomblé. I decided I was going to speak for myself, I would encourage others from my religious community to speak for themselves, and we would define our worldview, our philosophy, Candomblé, in a way different from the scholars. So that’s why I’m here today.

Of the different groups of Africans who arrived in Brazil, each brought their traditions, their language and aspects of their culture. And I believe that the first moment, the beginning of African religious expressions in Brazil came in the quilombos (fugitive slave communities). The first forms developed without buildings, without walls, without the physical structures we now have in Candomblé terreiros. But we had nature. We had earth, water, plants, stones, the animals. We had the essence. We didn’t have physical temples. Our temple was the natural world. We have no documents of this, but the first moment of Black freedom in Brazil came as enslaved people escaped from slavery, escaped from the slave quarters and founded quilombos, African maroon communities inside the forest.

From that point until now, guided by our oral tradition, Candomblé communities have increased in number, and today in Brazil you will find what we call “nations” of Candomblé. What is a nation of Candomblé? A nation of Candomblé is a group that preserves the gestures, the sacred songs, the ways
of doing things, the prayers offered in a particular ritual language. So, in the Angola Candomblé terreiros, the ritual aspects that predominate are from the Kongo and Angola traditions. We cultivate what we call the “nkisis.” In the Nagô or Kêtu candomblés, (which are the Yoruba-based candomblés) we cultivate the “orixás.” And in the candomblés of the Jêje nation—which is the nation that holds the cultural traditions that were brought from the old Dahomey kingdom, present-day Benin—we cultivate the “voduns.”

In Africa, there are some differences among these various cultures. Even in Brazil there are specificities that distinguish each nation of Candomblé. But for us in Candomblé, when we speak of nkisi, orixá, and vodun, we’re talking about the same thing. Because earth is earth. I call it terra in Portuguese. You all call it earth in English. And for as many languages as there are in the world, there are that many names for the earth. But the essence of the earth is one. Water is water. Plants are plants. Animals are animals. And human beings are human beings.

We might see differences in the soil based on different climates or different plants related to conditions in different locations. And the way we look as human beings might change from place to place based on climate and other factors. But all of these are natural elements—including us, human beings, because we are part of nature—we all live in the same house.

The chemistry that makes life possible (no matter what the climate, no matter what the culture) is present in every place to give the people of that place what they need to survive, to live, to flourish. The Creator—God or Goddess of everything—knows very well what those who lived before us needed, what we who are here now need, and what those coming after us will need.

Plants, water, the mineral and vegetal life, even the animals that we say are “irrational”—they all are our ancestors. We arrived here after them. All of those life forms had to exist first in order for us humans to exist. Sometimes we think we are so special, so remarkable, but we’re not. We need the natural world. We need nature.

And for the little time that we humans have been here on this earth, on this planet, we have destroyed so many possibilities of life here. We must save ourselves. Nature is nature. And nature is still revealing itself, still developing in spite of so many injurious things we’ve done. We’re witnessing in these times the revolting of nature. I would say, in a way, that the revolt of nature is the revolt, the rebellion, of the orixás, the nkisis, the voduns.

There is no Candomblé, there is no cultivation of orixás, nkisis, voduns, or encantados (Amerindian indigenous spirits) without the natural world. There is no book that can truly speak of them, that can teach you the essence of the nkisis, the orixás, the voduns. What speaks of the orixás, nkisis, voduns and of
the spirits that are in the world around us, is nature. Nature communicates their essence. The essence of the orixás, nkisis, voduns is the plants; the essence is the land; the essence is water; the essence is a stone. The essence is the animals—even if it’s just a little bitty animal that is so small we don’t see, it’s still present in the world. Nature speaks to us. Inside the phenomena of nature, that’s where the orixá, the vodun and the nkisi are.

We talk so little about what really has life power and potency. We may not know anything about cultures of the orixás, voduns or nkisis. But wherever there are human beings, there are also plants. There is a river. There is sun. Anyplace you go on the planet, you’ll see the sun. The moon—you’ll see it anywhere you are. And the stars—you’ll also see the stars.

And you can speak to the stars. Have you ever tried to get up early as the sun is rising and talk to the sun? Has anybody here done that? Each one of us is a sun. Among the Bakongo people, when a child is born, the child is seen as a dawning sun; a sun that will rise and open and shine and have being in the world. Try to talk more with the sun. The dawning sun says something to us, brings a lot to us. But when we have something that weighs heavy on our mind, that hurts us, that makes us feel bad—we can talk to the setting sun. So that when the sun rises once more, we too will rise, renewed.

Does anyone here talk to the moon? The waxing moon, the waning moon, the full moon, the new moon—all of this has to do with us, with our lives, with what we do, with what we want, with what we plan. We need to believe more.

This natural environment—the plants, the earth, the air, the animals—are all very important. But every human being who exists in this environment has a great importance as well. The environment begins in the first cell of the family. That’s the first environment we know as people. And so family has a great importance. We can see this in terms of the importance of the família do santo (ritual family) in Candomblé—it is composed of people who come from individual blood family lineages to recreate a collective spiritual family.

So what would I say, what have I come here to say, about Candomblé and the environment? There are the people who practice Candomblé. There are also people who may not practice, but who feel an affinity with Candomblé. And there are people who respect Candomblé. But there are also people in this environment that we all share, who attack Candomblé.

In the 1970s, when we began in Brazil to struggle for the rights of Afro-Brazilians, to struggle against racism, to struggle against prejudice and to affirm our identity, little by little we were able to give more visibility to our culture, to our traditions and to our history. But the 1970s was also the period when (having
passed through a long history of domination by the Catholic church in Brazil),
the country began to be invaded by neopentecostal evangelical Protestant
groups.

And today, we live a very terrible environment in Brazil. We see many indi-
viduals and families of African descent denying their identities because of the
influence of neopentecostal Christian churches. We see alienated young people
who don’t want to know anything about their history, who don’t want to know
anything about their ancestral roots [because they have been told African reli-
gions are demonic].

Even with the advances we’ve been able to make as Black people in Brazil,
we still have to struggle against religious intolerance. I’m saying this because it’s
very important for you all to know that institutions here in the United States
often give support to the churches in Brazil who act in this way. You need to
know about this. You need to be aware of this.

Nkisi, vodun and orixá—people sometimes say that they are spirits. They
are not spirits [in the sense of the souls of deceased people]. I have this physical
body that one day will transform into something else. I have a spirit, a soul, that
we in Candomblé believe is eternal. But I also have an energy, a life-force, that
I call orixá, nkisi or vodun that acts on this body and that spirit.

The spirit of someone who has died, the spirit of an ancestor, the spirit of a
person who has passed on, is one thing. And orixá, nkisi, vodun is something
else. Sometimes people find it hard to understand—they’ll say, “How is it that
a human being can manifest/incorporate the energy of the orixá? It must
be that they are manifesting the spirit of a dead person.” But it’s not. In our
understanding, the Creator chose some humans to manifest the energies of
these sacred natural forces (the orixás/nkisis/voduns) in the world.

There are a lot of other things I could say but time is short and I would like
to hear you all. I would like to hear your comments, your questions. And I think
maybe I’ll stop here and if there is something that you would particularly like to
know about that I haven’t spoken about, you can ask me. Thank you very much
for your attention.

1 Questions from Audience Members and Makota Valdina’s
Responses

Question: How does a person enter into a Candomblé community?

Makota Valdina: Sometimes people join a Candomblé community because
they are born into a blood family where relatives are already initiates or devo-
tees of orixás, nkisis or voduns. In that case, they come with an understanding that there is already a connection. Sometimes people may simply go to a terreiro to observe and enjoy the public ceremonies and when they are in the temple they may have an experience of incorporating the sacred energies. Sometimes people come to Candomblé because they are experiencing an illness that Western medicine cannot identify or resolve and in some cases, through divination, they are shown that the problem has a spiritual source.

The process of initiation is constant. Well, there is a distinct initiatory period when you first enter the community—and this period can vary in duration according to the nation or community you join.3 In the past, this period of retreat and training for beginning initiates was longer than it is now because people had more autonomy about how they worked. Often people would be in retreat 3 to 6 months, having contact only with people who were already initiated in the community. Speaking for the Congo-Angola tradition today, in order to complete the basic initiatory rites, one must remain in retreat for at least one month. But I would say that initiation is continual, constant.

I consider myself an apprentice in Candomblé. I consider myself as having a lot more to learn in Candomblé. Of course, over the years, I’ve gathered a great deal of information that I didn’t know when I first started. But as far as I’m concerned, I’ll continue to learn in Candomblé until I die. While you’re living, you’re always learning.

**Question:** Given the violence and harshness and slavery, would you say that Candomblé and the quilombos are the reason Afro-Brazilian culture has survived until today?

**Makota Valdina:** When I say that I decided, at a certain point to become a social justice activist grounded in Afro Brazilian religion, it is because I recognized just what you are saying—the importance of Candomblé, beyond the rites of cultivating the orixás, nkisis and voduns. Candomblé had a tremendous importance in enabling Afro Brazilians to resist dehumanization, resist slavery and create a more healthy identity.

For example, we—that is our ancestors—were not even allowed to be called by our African names. When we were made slaves we were not called by our names. We were baptized with other names in Catholic ritual; names given by

---

3 This is not dissimilar from the novitiate period in Catholic and Buddhist monastic orders when new members first take their vows and are traditionally kept separate from people outside of the ritual community for a period of time.
slaveholders. But when we enter into Candomblé, we reclaim African names. When I was initiated in Candomblé, I received the name Zimewaanga. That’s an African name—Zimewaanga.

Another important thing, where resistance is concerned, is language. The Candomblé communities have an important role in maintaining African languages, even in fragmented form, even when they are primarily ritual or liturgical languages—Kikongo, Kimbundu, Ovimbundu, Yoruba, Ewe, Fon. It was because of Candomblé spaces and traditions that people have been able to hold onto specific African languages in Brazil. In fact, when scholars want to study those languages in Brazil, they go to terreiros because that’s where the languages are still spoken. They go to the quilombos because that’s where the languages are still spoken.

Also significant in Candomblé is the sense of family. I don’t agree with people—even people within the Candomblé communities—who use the terms “priests” and “priestesses” to talk about the religious leaders in Candomblé. We know our religious leaders as the fathers and mothers of the community, so for me, it’s stronger and more meaningful to say iya, baba, tata, nengua, mameto. These are words for “mother” and “father” in the various Candomblé nations and they speak to the real role of those who lead the ritual communities. The leader is the mother or father of a family we have reconstructed through our religiosity.

In addition, when people die, there is a ritual. And in the Angola nation, in the moment of that ritual, it is as if we, in a way, give back an African identity to the person who has just died. We sing funereal songs of the Angola nation, but we also sing songs in the Yoruba language and in the Ewe language. In the rituals we do when a person passes on, we sing all of the funeral songs that we know in all of the African languages that we know. So if we have any sense of the way in which we remain connected to a Yoruba, or a Kikongo or an Ewe-Fon identity in Brazil (even in mixture)—it is because of Candomblé.

That was my banner, my mission: to show the value of Candomblé, the importance of Candomblé, and to demonstrate this to Candomblé devotees themselves—who, unfortunately, sometimes treat their own religion in the way the colonizers have perceived it, as something exotic or folkloric in nature. But I insist, “This is important. This is important because it is our identity.”

**Question:** How did you come to Candomblé and on which side of your family is the connection? How far does it go back?

**Makota Valdina:** From the time that I was a child, I lived among people who were Candomblé devotees. My mother was a Candomblé initiate. I saw my
mother incorporate her orixá (or “her saint” as we called it) many times. Her mother, my grandmother, was also an initiate. My father also had Candomblé influences in his family, but he wasn’t initiated. And even in my family today there are some of us who are initiated and some who are not, but all of us believe in Candomblé. I have brothers and sisters who practice Spiritism. I have some family who don’t go to church and don’t practice any particular faith, but they also believe because we know that we have this legacy in our family. We have my mother’s orixás on a family altar which we keep and care for together. I was initiated in a terreiro, but in my family we have this legacy too that we cultivate because of my mother.

My mother also had a lot of influence of the indigenous people of Brazil (my family is a complete mixture—we have black, white, Indian, everybody). So, in my family we not only cultivate the African energies, the nkisis, voduns and orixás, but we cultivate the caboclos, the indigenous Indian energies, as well!

**Question:** It seems like slaves in Brazil carried on their traditions and legends in ways slaves in the US didn’t. I wonder about why that is.

**Makota Valdina.** I think we have to recognize and consider what the colonization process was like in Brazil and what it was like in the United States. That is to say, how the culture of the Portuguese differed from the culture of the English. I think that’s important. I believe that the process happened in different ways [in the two colonial situations]. But Blacks in the United States practice a Christianity, for example, that is distinct from mainstream white Christianity. And that is where you will find some of the Africanity in Black American culture. There are customs that families practice, there are foods—like soul food, and southern cooking—that are distinctive. Why is that? The ways I’ve seen children raised in Black communities here are distinctive. The African mark is in the distinctiveness of African American culture. There are specific things in African American culture—such as music and dance—that mark the culture and are evidence of the connection to Africa.

**Question:** What do the orixás and nkisis and caboclos say about the natural disasters the world is experiencing now? Is there a message?

---

4 Spiritism is a belief system influenced by 19th century French philosopher Alan Kardec and popular in many Latin American countries. Central tenets include mediumship and communication with the spirits of those who have passed on, reincarnation and the belief that human existence is essentially of a spiritual nature.
Makota Valdina: Whenever these energies—the nkisis and voduns, and especially the indigenous energies, the caboclos—manifest, they consistently draw our attention to the care we need to take with plants, with the natural world; the care we must take with the sources of life. They do tell us. But what I think they have indicated most often for us, what they have emphasized most is human interaction, the love we must have for each other, the help human beings are to give to one another, the way we should learn from one another and teach one another. That we should both give and receive from one another. That we should be good companions for each other. They often talk about this. They say this is what is most needed.

We human beings are human, we are imperfect, no matter where in the world we are. It’s the same in Candomblé. We’re not perfect. But there is a beautiful lesson the nkisis and the orixás offer to us at times when they manifest. If they come at a moment when there is some discord in the temple community, when one person within the terreiro is not getting along with another, or when someone is talking behind someone else’s back (the mãe or pai de santo may not even know about the problems) there is something the orixás will often do. At the moment when they are about to leave the humans’ bodies, at the transition moment when the humans are about to come back into their own consciousness, the orixás of the two fighting people will embrace so that when the humans “wake up” [from the trance state] they are holding each other, they have their arms around a person they were previously at odds with. This is a common thing for the orixás to do.

But I want to bring something else to your attention. Even if you’re not a practitioner of a religion that cultivates the orixás, the nkisis or the voduns ... you may be Christian, you may be Muslim, you may be of whatever belief. It doesn’t matter; we’re all here today. We’re living here in the world. We are witnessing what’s going on in the world today—the imbalances the world is suffering. We should put whatever work we do—whether we’re lawyers or doctors or teachers or artists—put your activity at the service of peace. Put it at the service of creating a better life for everyone—for yourself and for others. Every person who is here in the world has an important role. Nobody is here just by chance. You have a mission. Everybody has a reason for being here. Don’t play with life. We’ve been given it freely, and it is the most precious thing in the world.