Makota Valdina Pinto: Candomblé Cosmology and Environmental Education  
(from a 2002 lecture at the Iliff School of Theology)

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One thing I'd like to share today is the vision, the concept of the world, that is at the base of the practices of people of African descent in the Candomblé terreiros (temples; religious communities). If you all arrived at a Candomblé terreiro and asked about "cosmology" or "cosmovision," some people, especially the elders who have not had the formal study that we younger ones have had, would say to you, "Cosmology? What's that? No, I don't know about that." But their daily practice is completely permeated with a specific cosmology, a typical worldview. And what worldview is that? How do they see the world? How do they conceive of the world? And how do they interact with this world? What is this world for us?

Let's think about those of us who are here in this room today. Some of us have things in common at the level of spirituality or beliefs, but we also have different points of view among us. But we are all here together, linked in a single world. And what world is that? It is a world of material things that we can see, touch, smell, sometimes eat. For example, we have here (I can feel it) a carpet under our feet but [picking up a glass of water] I wish I could pour a little of this water onto the ground.

[Picking up various objects on a table, one by one, Makota Valdina continues] We have clay in this world, we have plants, we have a rock, we have something made of wood, we have cereal grains, and many other things that the earth gives us. And we have here a wooden figure of an animal. All of us, regardless of color, regardless of race, regardless of culture -- whether poor, whether rich, whether we believe, whether we don't believe - - all of us are all of this. This is our ancestry. Because we found all of this already here when we arrived in the world. We found the Earth, our planet, our world. We found water already here. A rock doesn't speak any of the languages that human beings speak in any part of the world, but the rock speaks. The rock has a language. Plants too. Birds, animals, even they have a kind of speech. All of the apparently silent things, speak.

In addition, we believe that along with the properties contained in each plant or mineral or animal that modern science is able to tell us about (for example, that this leaf has this or that, this mineral is composed of this and that); for us that is not what matters. For us, what matters is that the rock is alive, the plants are alive, the earth is alive. Water is alive. Animals are alive. We ourselves are alive because of all this. There is an energy in the plant that nourishes us, that cures us. And this cure can be in the form of a tea, a
syrup, something you drink, something you rub on your skin, something that you inhale. But also, you can take a leaf, for example, and you can say a few words and pass that leaf over someone’s body, because we believe that the leaf is not just the leaf that we see -- this form, this color, this texture -- but an energy that exists in the leaf is capable of interacting with your body, with you, even with your mind. We are nature. Nature is the essence. It is the base of our belief and the base of our relation with the world that we see and the world that we don't see.

There is a physical plane, a natural plane, and there exists a spiritual, supernatural plane and both exist. We are here but we are not here by ourselves. We are here with all our ancestors; those we know and those we don’t know. Each of us is here with our personal energy, the energy that animates us, but there is also a familial, ancestral energy. Each of our individual families has an energy, but there is also an energy that is common to all human beings. Because if each of us goes back, back, back in time, we are all descendents of Him or Her who created nature and created us. We are descendents of this first living energy that gave us life. I call that energy Nzambi, some call it Olorum, others call it Mawu, Allah, God, Deus, whatever... As many names exist as there are languages in the world.

Nature is our essence. Nature is our essence. Nature is our essence. And we are part of nature, and we need the earth, the water. Oh, how we need water! Our body is mostly water! We really need water; we need rocks. We need more earth on the ground and less concrete, less asphalt. We need the right conditions for plants to grow. We have to create the right conditions for plants to grow. Who knows, there may be a seed in the ground, placed there by the Creator which has not yet risen up toward us, and that perhaps may not rise for our generation, but perhaps is meant for future generations. And if we lay concrete all over the place, it will prevent this seed from having a place to sprout; and perhaps this seed is the medicine to cure illnesses that will come in the future, and perhaps we ourselves are creating these illnesses. Nature is our essence and we need nature.

And what do religions have to do with this? Every religion, I believe, must point the way for people to cultivate their spirituality, to think in terms of our connection to nature, because we are nature. If what we have here disappears -- water, plants, earth -- where are we going to get nourishment? Where will we get air to breathe? Humanity has constructed ways of living that don't always correspond to these needs.

We all need the same things to live, in whatever part of the world. We need air to breathe, we need water, we need earth, animals, and we need each other. We need our different ways of seeing the world. We need our different ways of interacting with the
environment according to our cultures -- but we must always remember that what is basic to life is true everywhere in the world...

We have created some very cruel ways of living in the world, ways that have brought great imbalances. What can we do and what must we do about that? Think a bit more about what is basic to life. Each of us, independent of the language we speak, the race we belong to, the religion we practice, it is important that each of us fight for what is basic in life, because if we don't, we will disappear, regardless of the riches we may have, regardless of the good things we think we have created, it will all end.

We need life and life means fighting for this, but it also means to fight for human relations, for better interactions among human beings in the world. The environment, fighting for the environment, is also this, because imbalances in human relations -- in the family, in the community closest to us -- cause imbalances in the world. This is Ecology, from the perspective of indigenous African tradition. Ecology has always existed, even if it didn't have the name Ecology, but it is Ecology, because it is harmonious, balanced interaction with the natural world and with people. We have to find ways of restoring this equilibrium to the world.

I started thinking about these things more when I was initiated in Candomblé. My practice, my living, and my search came through the traditions that are the foundation of my religion. My religion is based in African traditions, especially in traditions of peoples that today are known as Bantu peoples¹, who greatly influenced my Candomblé community of the Angola nation. What I researched and found about these groups considered "primitive" and "savage" were marvelous lessons that so-called "civilized" people must learn. I began to share much of what I read and what I learned with other people within my own Candomblé community so that they might begin to better understand the roots of what they practice. And I began also, to talk with others outside our community so that they can start seeing us, not as descendents of "primitives" or "savages" but descendants of people who have a wisdom, who have values that benefited and still benefit the world; values that the colonizers didn't consider valuable and left by the wayside.

So then, I began to see the issue of racism as an environmental issue. I began to work with other people who were fighting for environmental issues and the preservation of

¹ Bantu is a general term describing hundreds of ethnic groups in Central, Southern and Eastern Africa – many of whom speak mutually intelligible languages and share certain basic philosophical understandings about the world. Bantu means “human beings” or “people.”
an important nature reserve [the Saint Bartholomew Park, which is surrounded by a community of economically and politically marginalized people in Salvador Bahia] and I began to observe that those people were talking about the preservation of nature -- the woods, the waterfalls, the lakes -- but in a way that separated nature from any interaction with people of the locale. It was as if they were saying, "Let's have a park that people can go visit to see plants, to see the Atlantic forest, a park that has that waterfall, that has this lake." But what about the people who live around it and have a relationship with that place? People who attribute a meaning to that place? The people were left aside!

And furthermore, this was a space in Salvador, Bahia, that had a great deal of meaning for Afro-Brazilian culture. It is a space that has a lot of significance because of its connection to our history, to the history of the Bahian people, that is related to the first inhabitants there, the indigenous people who were there before the Portuguese arrived, before the Blacks were taken there. It is a place that also has great meaning for the blacks who escaped slavery and used part of the forest in that place to establish a quilombo (fugitive slave community).

So a group of educators, environmentalists, artists and others began a movement to defend that place which had been designated a park by law, but only on paper. We created the Saint Bartholomew Environmental Education Center and began to construct a model of environmental education that would be used in the schools and that would be different from the kind of environmental education that is generally taught. Our environmental education model was not just about preserving plants and water. We initially worked with nine public schools situated around this park. We worked with the teachers and their students, focused on the park, but from the perspective of their physical, social, economic and political location in relationship to the park. Many of the teachers used to go into class each day to teach but they didn't know anything about the park. They taught ecology, environmental issues, in an abstract way. They would even talk about other places, other parks, but not the one that was right there, the place where the students would pick fruit and climb trees and play in the waterfalls, where they went to make their ritual offerings. The schools didn't talk about this. Primarily because there is currently a large movement of emerging [evangelical] Christian churches who work diligently against the [traditions of the] black community. Many blacks participate in these churches but develop low self-esteem, a negation of themselves and a rejection of the traditions of their ancestors.

We were observing all these things and we began to construct intervention projects from the perspective of the students and the professors. And we began to see that to fight for that park, for that space, was to fight for the rights of the students of African
descent -- who were all the students. They needed to know their culture, in an unprejudiced manner. We wanted to teach in a way that valued the wisdom of the families of the students, of the neighborhood members who went to the park to collect plants to make medicines or to do offerings; and we began to construct an environmental education model that talked about plants and water and animals, but that also talked about cultural differences, about the variety of worldviews, about the religious pluralism that existed there and which the school didn't address.

That was how, more and more, I became aware that the issue of the environment passes through the struggle against prejudice, against racism, and through the struggle to bring forth the wisdom kept by people who may not have gone to school, who may not know how to read or write, but who have knowledge -- and this knowledge is life.

I was always pointing these things out to the group. I was saying that many of our issues had to be situated in terms of the environment.

I began to see with greater clarity. And I believe that through the actions of the Nkisi, my ancestors, I was understanding more about what the world is and what it means to be in the world and what I had to do in the world. Because each of us has a responsibility in the world. Each of us is like the sun that rises, expands, declines and goes into the ancestral world and is reborn. We are in the world to be like the sun that comes up each day. Each day we wake up and we have to awaken like the sun, and grow like the sun and fade like sun and fall into the ancestral world and be reborn. Each of us is in the world to be in the world, to act in the world, to receive from the world but also to give to the world.