Bettina E. Schmidt

The Scars of Enslavement and Remembering as a Journey towards Healing: African-derived Religions in America as Sites of Memory

Abstract: The ongoing impact of the dehumanising transatlantic slave trade, which took place from the 16th to the 19th century, can be still felt today. Karen McCarthy Brown reflected on the powerful experience of how the Vodou priestess Mama Lola began to sob when visiting the Door of No Return monument in Ouidah, Benin. Arriving at the beach memorial, she experienced flashback memories of an ancestor passing through the site on the way to the slave ship. By "heating up" the memories of her ancestors, the priestess pulled them from "their place beneath the waters of forgetting" and restored them.[1] This moment illustrates the significance of Vodou and the other African-derived religions across the Americas as "sites of memory", which have helped to challenge the dominating paradigm of "victimization". But how can these memories be overcome? Is healing really possible? Focusing on African-derived religions such as Haitian Vodou and Brazilian Candomblé, this chapter discusses how religious sites of memory can provide a way of dealing with the dehumanization of enslavement in a post-colonial world. It follows Aleida Assmann's argument that locations such as monuments and memorials are not sufficient if they are not supported by rituals, personal memories and narratives.[2] Based on anthropological research conducted among Caribbean communities and in Brazil, the author argues that these religions with their ceremonies and oral traditions helped to maintain cultural

Bettina E. Schmidt, DPhil (habil.), PhD, MA in cultural anthropology (Marburg University, Germany), professor in the study of religions and anthropology of religion at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, UK, and the director of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre, UK. She has previously worked at the universities of Marburg (Germany), Oxford and Bangor, and has been a visiting professor at the City University of New York and the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo. She has published extensively on Caribbean and Latin American religions. Her academic interests include anthropology of religion, diaspora identity, religious experience, spirituality and wellbeing, and gender. Her main fieldworks to date have been conducted in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, New York City and São Paulo.

1 Brown (1999, p. 153). *Telling a life: Race, memory, and historical consciousness.*
2 Assmann (1995). *Collective memory and cultural identity.*

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memory by becoming sites of memory for people of African descent. While the scars created by enslavement will never disappear, the religions might initiate a process of collective healing.

Keywords: African-derived religions, sites of memory, collective memory, healing, remembering, Brazil

In 1998, the American Museum of Natural History in New York City hosted the exhibition *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, which was organized initially by the Fowler Museum of Cultural History in Los Angeles.[3] It attracted much attention, and the cultural programme that supported the exhibition was also well received. The exhibition coincided with my research on Caribbean religious communities in New York City,[4] and I attended as many events as possible. The exhibition started with the words "Vodou is Haiti's mirror. Its arts and ritual reflect the difficult, brilliant history of seven million people, whose ancestors were brought from Africa to the Caribbean in bondage." This quote illustrates the overarching theme of the exhibition that presented Vodou as the heart of Haitian national culture.

However, the memories of the slave trade were more subtle. Walking from the first room to the next, visitors had to pass through a small passage with mirrors that had an effect as if walking through a short underground tunnel and felt strangely cold. When I asked one of the guides about this, she explained that it illustrates diving into the world of the spirits. The visitors were supposed to feel the cold atmosphere of a world under water, followed by the warmth of rebirth. However, it was lost to most visitors who quickly passed through without letting the emotion surface. At the end of the exhibition I saw shackles on one of the altars, again easily missed. It was evident that the aim of the exhibition was to dismantle the many misconceptions about Vodou and show the colourful side of the religion that aims to help and heal people. The slave trade is at the core of the religion, not just its origin story. The ongoing suffering became apparent in the lecture "Ties that Bind: Race, Memory, and Historical Consciousness in Vodou and Beyond" that Karen McCarthy Brown gave one evening during the exhibition (published later under Brown 1999). Brown spoke about a journey she had taken with Marie Therese Alourdes Macena Margaux Kowalski (usually called Alourdes) and her daughter to Benin to attend a Vodou festival. They had been invited because Brown's monograph Mama Lola had made the Vodou

3 Cosentino (Ed.). (1995). *Sacred arts of Haitian Vodou.*

4 Schmidt (2008). *Caribbean diaspora in the USA: Diversity of Caribbean religions in New York City.*

priestess Alourdes a well-known figure and guest of honour at the festival. However, she was uncomfortable with her celebrity status and even announced "I hate that book. I hate it!"[5]

Despite having used the alias Mama Lola in the first edition of the book, the priestess had become a public figure.[6] However, it was not just the unwilling attention that led to this outburst, but the confrontation with the past. The visit to Benin, which had been one of the main ports for the transatlantic slave ships, had brought the scars to the surface. The central moment was the visit to *La Route de l'Esclave* and the monument to the enslaved people who had passed through the port of Ouidah at the end point of the route. For Brown, the visit had made her even more aware of her background as a white American woman whose ancestors might have been involved in the inhumane system of slavery. For Alourdes, it initiated the path of remembering of which she was afraid.[7] The confrontation with the past brought feelings and pain to the surface that enabled Alourdes to embark on her journey of healing. Brown described Alourdes' emotional reaction to the monument with this powerful recollection:

> Suddenly, Mama Lola threw her arms around the neck of this statue and began to sob. At the time I did not understand what was happening. As she stroked the slave woman she appeared to be apologizing not only for herself but also for all the intervening generations of her family: "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I did not know. We did not know." Later Lola explained that almost as soon as we arrived at the beach memorial, she began having strong flashback memories of someone in her family passing through that very spot in Ouidah, on their way to the slave ships. That someone in her 18th-century family might have been placed on a slave ship in the port of Ouidah is not unlikely. Several names of towns in the old Dahomean Empire appear as words in the sacred, theoretically untranslatable, language of Mama Lola's Vodou practice.[8]

Brown explained that she had never heard of similar experiences, despite a general "human connectedness" within Vodou. While ancestors appear in dreams with warnings or messages, Alourdes had prior to the visit to Benin insisted that her ancestors were French, from Bordeaux, and not slaves. She used to identify Joseph Binbin Mauvant as the founder of the family. He had arrived in Haiti in the middle of the 19th century, when Haiti was already independent and had

5 Brown (1999), p. 148.

6 The full name was revealed in the second edition of the book in 2001, although Alourdes was identified as Mama Lola shortly after publication of the first edition in 1991. Brown (2001). *Mama Lola: A Vodou priestess in Brooklyn.*

7 Brown (1999), p. 153.

8 Brown (1999), p. 150.

ended slavery. However, as Brown pointed out, this storyline ignored the Haitian woman who gave birth to Mauvant's descendants.[9]

This changed in Benin when Alourdes "succeeded in 'heating up' (a technical term in Vodou) the memories of her ancestors, in pulling her slave ancestors up from their place beneath the waters of forgetting, and in restoring them to that kind of 'liveliness' that has long been attributed to the ancestors".[10]

This story reported by Karen McCarthy Brown is my starting point for remembering and the journey towards healing. The transatlantic slave trade was one of the most devastating events in human history and still throws its long shadows today. While numbers and other historical data illustrate the devastation at that time, the human tragedy remains unimaginable. As Aleida Assmann points out, monuments and memories are insufficient if not supported by ritual, personal memories and narratives.[11] I add religions to her list. As this chapter shows, the African-derived religions in the Americas can support the process of remembering that is rooted in the pain of the ancestors and that continues to be felt today, as seen with the opening story.

The chapter starts with a discussion of remembering the past and introduces Pierre Nora's concept of sites of memory. While focusing on African-derived religions, the first section presents the wider theoretical framework with its concepts of memory and remembering. The second section moves to the ethnographic context of African-derived religions in Brazil and presents insights and excerpts from my field diary and interview transcriptions. The aim is to show how African-derived religions can serve as sites of memory. The final part reflects on how religious practices can offer a path towards healing based on the process of remembering the past. While the scars will never heal, the journey towards healing can provide some relief.

Remembering the Past

The French sociologist Roger Bastide argued more than 50 years ago that Brazilian religions conserved memories of the period of oppression and slavery, and helped to fill in the breaks in the collective memory of Brazilian people with a process he called *bricolage.*[12] The African-derived societies in the Americas looked for new

9 Brown (1999), p. 151.
10 Brown (1999), p. 153.
11 Assmann (1995).
12 Bastide (1970). *Mémoire collective et sociologie du bricolage [Collective memory and the sociology of bricolage].*

images to fill the gaps produced by slavery, not through the adaptation of elements, but through a creative process that emerges from a disparate ensemble—something new, with a new meaning, yet without changing the significance of its various elements. In this way, African-derived religions have mobilized collective memory as a way of surviving through using their *bricolage* of ideas and rituals. According to Danièle Hervieu-Léger, like any other form of collective memory, religious memory forms and endures through the processes of selective forgetting, sifting and retrospectively inventing.[13] She interprets religion as the key source of identify formation and maintenance, from personal conversion experiences to collective association with fellow believers. In some communities, drawing on textual, liturgical and architectural heritages are seen as the key to fostering the memories necessary for projections into the present and future. In this way, religions support and maintain the production of cultural memory by embedding it in "cultural mnemotechnic".[14]

The national production of memory derives from an unequal competition among different groups about who dominates the national narrative.[15] And nowhere is this oppressive way of remembering more visible than in the memory of the transatlantic slave trade, which was dominated for a long time by the descendants of the slave traders and owners.[16] Achille Mbembe even argues that the paradigm of victimization still influences the interpretation of the past by ignoring the perpetrators.[17] This colonial remembering of the past influences the way people in the present connect to Africa as the continent where people were forcefully kidnapped and taken across the Atlantic. Only by changing the narrative and cherishing the African past as a creative—and equal—element of the cultural memory can we reshape the process of remembering and begin the long journey of healing. According to Jan Assmann, cultural memory is "a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation".[18] Following Maurice Halbwachs, Assmann distinguishes cultural memory from history, and, going further than

13 Hervieu-Léger (2000). *Religion as a chain of memory.*

14 Assmann (1999). *Das Gedächtnis der Orte [The memory of places].*

15 Trouillot (1995, p. xiv). *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history.*

16 Schmidt (2003) Der Umgang mit der Vergangenheit: Der atlantische Sklavenhandel im kulturellen Gedächtnis. [The approach to the past: The Atlantic slave trade and cultural memory].

17 Mbembe (2001, p. 21). *The subject of the world.*

18 Assmann (1995); Assmann (1988). *Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität [Collective memory and cultural identity].*

Halbwachs, from "what we call 'communicative' or 'everyday memory', which in the narrower sense of our usage lacks 'cultural characteristics'".[19]

That religions serve as realms of memory for African-derived religions is nothing new and can be seen already in Bastide's work. His concept of collective memory was also inspired by Maurice Halbwachs, who in his book *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire (On collective memory)* illustrates that individual memories do not last long, while the memory of a social group can preserve memories of a former life.[20] Bastide applies Halbwachs' concept of collective memory to Afro-American societies but stresses the importance of local influences. As he explains, the process of conserving memory is not mechanical but depends on situation, time and environment, and therefore constantly renews itself. The process of creating memory that he calls *bricolage* occurs in constant movement; it ends and begins again, without losing its verve. The process also includes a view of society which can manipulate the group and has an important influence on the composition of the handicraft.

Although the term *bricolage* was created originally by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, Bastide changes the meaning of the term. Lévi-Strauss introduced the term *bricolage* as a metaphor for the mythical thinking of traditional societies, which he regards as no less scientific than the natural sciences. In myths and rites Lévi-Strauss discovered "the remains of methods of observation and reflection which were (and no doubt still are) precisely adapted to discoveries of a certain type".[21] Such an inventor, a *bricoleur*, represents someone "who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman".[22] Like a do-it-yourself man, mythical thinking uses a limited number of means to develop a solution to a problem in a concrete situation. The creation process is limited to a continuously new arrangement of elements that were used in other situations and with a different function.

Roger Bastide takes a slightly different approach, arguing that *bricolage* helps us to understand the transplantation, the opposition and the adaptation of Africans in America. *Bricolage* does not signify only the specific kind of invention, the *logique de l'imaginaire* (logic of the imagination); it is much more. Bastide defines *bricolage* as a way to describe the rearrangements of African religious rituals in Brazil.[23]

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19 Assmann (1995).

20 Halbwachs (1992). *On collective memory.*

21 Lévi-Strauss (1966, p. 16). *La pensée sauvage [The savage mind].*

22 Lévi-Strauss (1966), pp. 16 – 17.

23 Bastide (1970), p. 97.

Bricolage is the refurbishment of an existent object, such as a chair with a missing leg. Hence Bastide argues that the significance of the existent object remains even after replacing the missing leg with a totally different element, such as an iron chain attaching the two pieces together.[24] In this process local influences are important because the *bricoleur* uses elements at hand. Hence, in extension of Lévi-Strauss, Bastide focuses on the operating subject, whether a group of human beings or an individual, because the composition depends on them. Society influences the process through the situation that produces the changes and through the intention of the changes. In the end, *bricolage* can be understood only in relation to the *bricoleur*, the operating subject. *Bricolage* cannot be compared with a mosaic of colourful stones because it includes a never-ending process. Just as the do-it-yourself man is never satisfied with the result and is always trying to alter something, the composition continuously changes.

It is this form of memory that I see celebrated in the African-derived religions in the Americas. In this way they become sites of memory, not as actual historical artefacts but as ways in which the devotees can honour their ancestors and remember their pain and cherish their home. As Pierro Nora demonstrates in his work, sites of memory refer to symbolic places that are in our memory. They can be of various qualities, from concrete locations such as castles and museums to imagined sites such as novels, songs and ideas. Groups use these sites of memory as connections to the past in a personal, subjective way.[25]

Remembering takes place in a complex manner and is an ongoing process of evolution and change. James Fentress and Chris Wickham even argue that this can happen without the group being aware because "for them, their stock of memories —their techniques, their stories, and their collective identities—seem to be things that have always remained the same. Yet this is only an appearance, a result of the continuous blotting out of memory as it changes."[26] In this way, looking at the religions as a site of memory highlights rituals as an important way to remember, echoing Paul Connerton's three ways in which societies remember—personal memory claims, cognitive memory claims and habit-memory.[27] The latter includes the performative reproduction. As Aleida Assmann points out, sites can be unreliable if the memory is not also embedded in rituals or similar forms of "cultural mnemotechnic".[28] Without them, she argues, sites of memories cannot be maintained. In this sense, the religious practices, whether they remember

24 Bastide (1970), p. 100.
25 Nora (1998). *Realms of memory: Rethinking the French past.*
26 Fentress & Wickham (1994, p. 200). *Social memory*.
27 Connerton (1989). *How societies remember.*
28 Assmann (1999), pp. 59 – 77.

the African past or the colonial past, are crucial for maintaining the cultural memory.

Following Nora, I apply the term "sites of memory" not as a physical location but as an imagined idea, the memory of a utopian Africa and its customs. Religious beliefs and practices can become sites of memory that create a sphere for collective memories. African-derived religions have integrated the memory of Africa into the Americas and passed their knowledge of Africa further on. It is not the continent Africa nor even the African people of today but an image or an idea of Africa that never existed, except in their imagination. As Paul Gilroy states "Blacks are urged … to replace [the slave experience] at the centre of our thinking with a mystical and ruthlessly positive notion of Africa that is indifferent to interracial variation and is frozen at the point where blacks boarded the ships that would carry them into the woes and horrors of the middle passage."[29] This is the idea of Africa that is embedded within the African-derived religions. As Robert Farris Thompson points out, "everywhere across the early black Americas … covert altars encoded the richness of sacred memory to unite servitors in sustaining faiths".[30] The art historian sees this sacred memory still present on altars, shrines, thrones and images used by African-derived religious communities today. Every detail on the altars and the costumes dancers wear during the ceremonies have symbolic meaning and are carefully prepared. They are not just decorations but ways to remember the past.

Remembering the Past in African-derived Religions in Brazil

At the core of African-derived religions is the memory of Africa. When devotees celebrate the African deities, the *orixás*,[31] Africa comes alive. Gonçalves da Silva even describes Candomblé as the "reinvention of Africa in Brazil" (title of a book chapter).[32] The *orixás* are not only worshipped but celebrated in lively ceremonies to which they are invited. Novices learn stories about them, songs

29 Gilroy (1993, p. 189). *The black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness.*

30 Thompson (1993, p. 21). *Face of the gods: Art and altars of Africa and the African Americas.*

31 The term *orixás* follows Brazilian spelling and is used as a name for the African deities, male and female, that are at the core of the pantheon of African-derived religions in Brazil and other American countries. In Cuba, the spelling is *orichas*, while the United States follows the English spelling of *orishas*, all derived from Yoruba.

32 Silva (1994, p. 43). *Candomblé e Umbanda: Caminhos da devoção brasileira.*

and prayers to cherish their powers, and dances and rhythms to call them. The *orixás* are seen as forces of nature that are enormously powerful and influence the destiny of every living being, humans and other than humans. The divine energy, *axé*, connects the *orixás* and the living, but also the ancestors. Without *axé* nothing would exist, and it is present in everything: in places, objects and living bodies.[33] The connection does not end with death but continues. The ancestors can therefore also influence the living, who have to honour them as they must worship the *orixás* with prayers, sacrifices and fulfilment of other obligations.[34] The altars and shrines built to worship the *orixás* therefore also include memories of the ancestors, as Thompson's exhibition *Face of Gods* has shown superbly.[35] But it is not just the material aspect of the religions that reflect the connection to the divine and the past, it is also the performative element, the drumming and dancing, the gestures and prayers. "Sounds, movements and objects enable people to picture themselves near the deities and spirits who 'travelled' with the enslaved Africans to the New World."[36]

Remembering the past in African-derived religions not only involves the memory of Africa but also the memory of the enslavement and the American heritage, as the following story from my research in Brazil illustrates. In São Paulo I met Fernando, a *babalorixá* (priest) of the Brazilian religion Candomblé.[37] He told me that he makes a great effort to highlight his African heritage everywhere he goes, not just in religious ceremonies. One of his ways to celebrate Africa is to wear colourful African-style clothes. He insisted that devotees should not only wear African dress during ceremonies but also outside when shopping in the market or speaking to politicians or representatives of other religions. Only by celebrating African heritage as normal can one overcome the prejudices against Afro-Brazilians:

> I started to buy African clothes, particularly Nigerian ones, because that is where *Oxum* [name of a female deity] comes from. Hence I started to dress as an African native even though I was not born in Africa; I am a native Brazilian, with African inheritance, but I am not a native African. Here, if everybody started to dress similarly, it would call attention

33 Neto, Brooks & Alves (2009). *From Eshu to Obatala: Animals used in sacrificial rituals at Candomblé "terreiros" in Brazil.*

34 Schmidt (2013). *Animal sacrifice as symbol of the paradigmatic other in the 21st century: Ebó, the offerings to African gods, in the Americas*; Schmidt (2024). *Axé as the cornerstone of Candomblé philosophy and its significance for an understanding of well-being (bem estar).*

35 Thompson (1993).

36 Schmidt (2012, p. 445). *'When the gods give us the power of ashé': Afro-Caribbean religions as sources for creative energy*.

37 The name is an alias to protect his identity.

> to the fact that we [Afro-Brazilians] exist. Because if one wears jeans and t-shirt, as you do, then I would not stand out for Candomblé. … I made this my work. I am proud to say that I was one of the first men to enter in the Council Chamber, in the state legislature palace, with drums, cloth on the head and singing for the *orixás.* …
> There are times when I am hot and tired; I just want to dress comfortably. But I say to myself, No, I cannot, I have to go to the market, to the bank, to the fair like this because it is also what a nun, a (Roman Catholic) priest, a Jew and a Muslim would do; I am a *babalorixá* and have to do it too.[38]

His connection to Africa is at the heart of his identity. While being Brazilian, he is linked to Africa via his ancestors. When I asked him why he participated at an event in a local Catholic church, he acknowledged the racism he encountered throughout his life and in this congregation. He felt rejected because of his colour and had to overcome the prejudices of the church members. But as he said, "one should not want Afro-Brazilians only in the Samba school. Afro-Brazilians have the right to go to church too. They are not limited to the ghetto. Are only blacks allowed in Candomblé? No! They meet where they want and practice whatever religion they prefer. Being black and going to the church does not necessitate an abandonment of the real African tradition."[39] When I saw him during a mass in honour of Black Mothers, he cherished the attention he received. He was visible from far away with his colourful clothing and in particular his headpiece. While officially not in charge of the service, he was evidently the star of the event. He drew attention to his African identity and his ongoing stance in the fight against racism.

However, he also celebrates the Brazilian roots and incorporates the *caboclo* Pena Branca (spirit White Feather). He explains that the link to this *caboclo* is a way to honour his ritual lineage, as the priestess who initiated him was linked to the *caboclo.* But more than this it was also a way to celebrate his Brazilianess. The *caboclos* are usually described as a group of spiritual entities who have lived on Brazilian soil. They are different from the African *orixás* that are regarded as divine beings because the *caboclos* are spirits, like the spirits of ancestors, and represent Brazil. This understanding shines through when I asked Fernando about Pena Branca:

> As I am Brazilian, although to have been initiated in an African cult, I have a Brazilian spirit that it is White Feather. … He is an Indian born in the interior of Goiás, inside the bush. According to him [the spirit], he belonged to one another priest who did not take care of

38 Excerpt from the interview on 21 May 2010.
39 Interview on 21 May 2010.

> him correctly. In the end, he [the spirit] gave up and caught me, still a young man. Really, before I made Oxum, this caboclo revealed him in me.[40]

While he knows that several Candomblé communities are rejecting the *caboclos*, he embraces Pena Branca as important part of his identity and places the *caboclos* in his religious pantheon. He even describes the rejection of *caboclos* as discrimination. For Fernando, *caboclos* are part of the Brazilian past and should be honoured as a way of remembering the ancestors. In this way he compares them to the *eguns*, the spirits of the deceased, that form an important part of the Yoruba tradition. *Caboclos* are for him the "men of the interior who had been abandoned, had been in the bush without civilization, without culture [however, they] had contact with Oxalá because of its pureness, its stubbornness of living inside there without talking with the civilization".[41] The *caboclos* represent for him his Brazilian motherland, his Brazilian home. He said, "I am native Brazilian, with African inheritance, but I am not native of Africa."[42]

The inclusion of Amerindian elements in African-derived traditions can be traced back to the 16th century, the early period of slavery in Brazil. Teles dos Santos describes the enslaved Africans in Brazil in that time as living predominantly in rural areas, which enabled, as he argues, contact to the Amerindian population.[43] Teles dos Santos explains that the Amerindian population in these areas had lost their indigenous traditions and adapted to non-indigenous life, which had brought them into contact with the enslaved Africans. At that time the enslaved population was predominately of Bantu origin and not Yoruba, who arrived much later. They are also referred to as Angola tradition, and the *caboclos* are sometimes described as being part of the Angola liturgy in Candomblé. Consequently, Teles dos Santos insists that *caboclos* do not represent a national identity but rather the search for Africa. "If there is a search for identity by the use of regional characteristics, this does not mean that the existence of these entities has become a form of integration in society. Instead, the search for the legitimacy of Candomblé derives from a reaffirmation of the so-called African values."[44]

A similar point is put forward by Lindsay Hole when focusing on the *pretos velhos*, a group of spirits derived from old black slaves and runaways which are

40 Interview on 21 May 2010.
41 Interview on 21 May 2010.
42 Interview on 21 May 2010.
43 Teles dos Santos (1995). *O dano da terra: O caboclo nos Candomblés da Bahia [The damage to the earth: The caboclo in the Candomblés of Bahia].*
44 Teles dos Santos (1995), p. 26.

part of the Umbanda pantheon. Umbanda is a widespread and very popular African-derived religion in Brazil that developed mainly from a mix of Candomblé and spiritism.[45] In addition to the *orixás*, the Umbanda pantheon includes a range of different spirit groups representing various Brazilian populations. Hole sees the *pretos velhos* as a connecting link between the religious practice today and the collective memory of Brazil.[46] In her article she mentions a multiplicity of interpretations of the *pretos velhos*—including the spirit of a resistance fighter against the slave trade in Angola—through which "Umbandistas speak to and embody Brazilian dramas of race and power."[47] She elaborates further:

> What are the themes of these dramas and narratives of slave days, these characterizations of victimization? Father Joaquim exemplifies one theme: rebellion and the price of resistance. *Pretos velhos* also expound on the sexuality of oppression; we will hear the stories of slave women spirits who were abused by lustful masters, with the testimony of spirits who were deprived of their offspring and of the right to choose in matters of romantic love. The hypocrisy of kind masters is another theme, as is the dreaded power of sorcery. But most common of all is the theme of torture.[48]

The multiplicity of interpretations of the *pretos velhos* and the *caboclos* show that both are reminders of the past. While the *orixás* are the divine element, the *caboclos* and *pretos velhos* are remembrance of the supressed history of slavery, destruction, murder and forceful demolition of their cultural heritage. Honouring them is a way of remembering their power of survival and endurance. The ancestors are not victims but survivors. Their scars are visible mementos of their ongoing fight.

Remembering as Pathway to Healing

Healing is a process that leads to achieving a state of wellbeing. Within Candomblé, wellbeing is closely aligned to the idea of an integrated cosmology that puts *axé* and the bond between the human world and the world of the *orixás* at its core. Gomberg argues that wellbeing goes further than physical wellbeing and is

45 Brown (1986). *Umbanda: Religion and politics in urban Brazil.*

46 Hole (1997). *Preto Velho: Resistance, redemption, and engendered representations of slavery in a Brazilian possession-trance religion.*

47 Hole (1997), p. 395.

48 Hole (1997), p. 396.

achieved only with the right balance of *axé.*[49] Seligman even describes the fulfilment of obligations towards the *orixás* as "spiritual investment".[50] However, it is not just the individual but the community that are the foundation. Sacrifices are, as Seligman writes, "a powerful way to shore up the well-being of the terreiro [religious community] and those connected to it".[51] As I wrote elsewhere, the individual is always seen as part of a wider community that includes other humans and other than human beings.[52] Shared rituals are crucial to fulfil the obligations towards the *orixás* and the ancestors, and consequently the only way to achieve wellbeing. This is in line with the wider understanding of wellbeing in Brazil. Translated as *bem estar* (in Portuguese) it signifies being or living well but implies the meaning of "living well together". It is, as Rodríguez writes, "a holistic concept rooted on principles and values such as harmony, equilibrium and complementarity, which from an indigenous perspective must guide the relationship of human beings with each other and with nature (or Mother Earth) and the cosmos".[53] Wellbeing is therefore achieved only in relation to others and rooted in time and place.[54]

Further than White and Rodríguez, I see wellbeing not just depending on living well together with other human beings but also with nature and other than human beings.[55] A participant of a study on spirituality and wellbeing in Brazil described wellbeing as "the feeling of belonging to the whole and that everything is connected. When we understand and practice it, we feel that we are part of something bigger. By knowing this, daily problems become small."[56] Interconnectedness is therefore at the core of wellbeing and crucial for healing. It also complements the notion of "spiritual grounding" that Dianne Stewart

49 Gomberg (2011, p. 144). *Hospital de Orixás: Encontros terapêuticos em um terreiro de Candomblé [Hospital de Orixás: Therapeutic meetings in a Candomblé terreiro].*

50 Seligman (2014, p. 103). *Possessing spirits and healing selves: Embodiment and transformation in an Afro-Brazilian religion.*

51 Seligman (2014), p. 33.

52 Schmidt (2024).

53 Rodríguez (2016, p. 279, endnote 1). Historical Reconstruction and Cultural Identity Building as a Local Pathway to 'Living Well' among the Pemon of Venezuela.

54 White (2016, p. 29). *Introduction: The many faces of wellbeing.*

55 Schmidt (forthcoming, 2025). Wellbeing is the feeling of being "one with the world and my surroundings". Reflection about the environmental dimension of wellbeing in Brazil. In: *Environmental Spirituality and Wellbeing: integrating social and therapeutic theory and practice*, edited by Jeff Leonardi and John Reader, edited by Jeff Leonardi and John Reader. Sheffield: Equinox.

56 #75, Brazil, 54 years old, male. More information about the study in Schmidt (2020). Narratives of Spirituality and Wellbeing: Cultural Differences and Similarities between Brazil and the UK.

introduces in her work about the Yoruba Orisa tradition in Trinidad.[57] Referring to Walter Rodney's text *Groundings* (1975), Stewart describes spiritual grounding as life underground, of "claiming spots of ground for spiritual fixation".[58] She sees the practices of grounding and honouring Mother Earth in Trinidad as a legacy from slavery, which was the time of landlessness and "a haunted *place* of nonbelonging".[59] The ground enables the crucial connection to ancestors, spirits and deities, and addresses the need to belong. Instead of seeing it therefore simply in its physical dimension, I expand grounding with an immaterial dimension of interconnectedness, of belonging to a community which is embedded in the definition of wellbeing linked to *axé*. Superseding a lineal, two-dimensional concept of wellbeing, it even links us with the past and the future, with our ancestors and our descendants.

It is this interconnectedness that is crucial for healing the scars created by the past and relived every day. It cannot be done individually but only in relation with others, human and other than human beings. By placing objects such as shackles on an altar, by embodying spirits such as the *preto velhos* or *caboclos* that represent ancestors of the past as well as the African *orixás*, by acknowledging the pain the ancestors suffered and the pain of having lost the lineage to Africa it becomes part of the cultural memory, of the African-derived religions and of Brazil. As Hole writes, "The indictment of slavery, the depiction by ruined bodies of its real horror as a second crucifixion notwithstanding, and the stories and performances of *pretos velhos* in many cases all critically depict and explore the ambivalences and ambiguities of the 'benign' myth of Brazilian slavery and race relations."[60] Performances of spirit mediums in each *terreiro* bring these stories to the surface and contribute to the collective memories which contradict the national narrative of the past dominated for decades by a colonial way to remember that focuses on plantations.

For instance, Gilberto Freyre's seminal work *Casa grande e senzela (The masters and the slaves)*, in which he celebrated the birth of the Brazilian multicultural society in the slave plantations, became eminent for its discovery of *brasilidade* par excellence.[61] His positive description of a new society with its indigenous, African and Portuguese roots in which people lived together challenged the "racial pessimism" of his times and offered a new image of

57 Stewart (2022). *Africana nations and the power of Black sacred imagination.*
58 Stewart (2022), p. 219.
59 Stewart (2022), p. 219.
60 Hole (1997), p. 399.
61 Freyre (1946). *The masters and the slaves (Casa-grande & Senzala): A study in the development of Brazilian civilization.*

Brazilian society. Referring to the way Portuguese people were used to living under Moorish rule, Freyre argued that the Portuguese settlers in Brazil treated non-white people in a more positive way than elsewhere in the Americas. Though his dichotomy of the colonial society was challenged as ideological construct already in the 1940s, it became so influential that *branqueamento*[62] remained a hegemonic ideology in Brazil until the middle of the 20th century.[63] By glorifying the past, it created misconceptions of the present, prolonging racism and the suffering of the descendants.

The African-derived religions in Brazil challenge this ideology by presenting the struggle of the *preto velhos* and *caboclos*. They highlight the suffering, resistance and agency which illustrate the complexity of remembering the past. They explore, as Hole describes so powerfully:

> ... at times deeply, the existential dimensions of an imagined, historical moment that lasted nearly four centuries. Every one of these stories depicts a working-out of the fundamental existential dilemma of the slave: the loss or denial of full humanity under a regime of domination. Domination is inscribed on the body as physical marks of chronic suffering and acute trauma. The crippling effects of labor and hunger, and the sadism written in the idiom of convulsions and brain damage shape the preto velho's body, producing the posture of an individual worn by accusation. Collective memory is embodied through these performances and is given voice through narratives that speak to betrayal, sexual violation, and utter cruelty.[64]

Crucial for the process of reshaping the memory is to challenge the dominant narrative of remembering. As shown earlier, celebrating the African and colonial past in the present in the *terreiros* of the African-derived religions acts as acknowledgement of the scars. Similarly, exhibitions in the Museo do Africa in São Paulo and other museums that showcase the vibrancy of the African heritage in Brazil can work as a cultural mnemotechnic, to use Aleida Assmann's term, to reshape the cultural memory and initiate a process of healing.

Conclusion

The transatlantic slave trade has left scars in our societies that never can heal. The ongoing impact of the dehumanising human traffic is present across the African

62 The term *branqueamento* derives from the verb *branquear*, meaning "to become white".
63 Hofbauer (2000). *Branqueamento-ideologie: Rassismus auf brasilianisch [Branqueamento ideology: Racism in Brazilian].*
64 Hole (1997), p. 408.

diaspora. However, as this chapter has shown, silencing the past is not the answer, instead we should remember. The African-derived religions practiced in various places in the Americas and beyond offer sites of memory that can support a healing process, at least in part. Through religious practices the memory of long-lost ancestors can be restored. Healing is a slow and painful process and starts in each individual, as this interviewee told me once:

> We do not say that it was a spirit that brought you and healed you. Instead it was you who became aware of yourself, who transformed you. ... Healing is in you. ... Healing is in oneself, and that is my understanding of spirituality.[65]

While the scars created by enslavement will never disappear, the religions can initiate a process of collective healing.

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