

Student Information Sheet: Candomblé and the Roman Catholic Church

By 1530 the Portuguese began the cruel and exploitative practice of enslaving Africans for labor on the sugar plantations in Brazil. During enslavement, captive Africans were baptized into the Catholic Church and forbidden by the Portuguese to practice their African religion, which became known as Candomblé (pronounced kahn-dom-BLAY).

Since belief in intermediaries between God and man was common to Catholicism and Candomblé, the Africans viewed qualities of Catholic saints as being similar to their orixás (o-ree-SHAS) or gods. They worshiped in Catholic churches, but secretly honored their African gods; for example, Omolu (pronounced o-mo-LU), the god over epidemic diseases was also St. Lazarus, a Catholic saint who was healed from leprosy. Caboclo (pronounced Kah-BO-klo) was the spirit of the Native American who was also included with the orixás; the Caboblo also represented allies who helped Africans escape to freedom.

During Candomblé ceremonies, initiates become entranced and are overtaken individually by a spirit of the orixás. The believers dance to the drumming and are honored as embodiments of the orixá. They know that axé is a powerful force that comes to the individual through the orixás filling them with strength, energy, force and protection.

Some enslaved and free Africans formed confraternities or *irmandades* (pronounced ear-mahn-DAH-jees). These were brotherhood and sisterhood organizations during the 18th century. They began as burial societies but also served those in financial need and helped to purchase the freedom of the enslaved members. Irmandade de Boa Morte (pronounced ear-mahn-Dah-jee dah Bo-a MOR-chee) or Sisterhood of the Good Death began in the 1820s and continues today in the town of Cachoeira. An annual celebration occurs on August 15, The Feast of the Assumption of Mary in heaven. The feast blends the Assumption of Mary and African Brazilian practices of spirituality. Visitors from around the world come for this three-day festival.

One church that connects the practices of Roman Catholicism with those of Candomblé, is the Igreja do Senhor do Bonfim (pronounced i-GRE-ja do sen-Your do Bone-FEEM meaning Church of Our Lord of the Crucifixion).

Jesus Christ or his counterpart in Candomblé, Oxala, (pronounced o-sha-LA) is respected and honored at this church. In celebrating the Festa do Bonfim in February, Baianas (women from Bahia) wash the steps with fragrant water while chanting in the Yoruba language. The celebration lasts for ten days and ends with a mass and a grand feast.

Built in Salvador in the state of Bahia, the Church of the Bonfim is also known for its curative and healing powers. Millions of Catholics and devotees of Candomblé come to pray for miracles and removal of diseases or danger. To express their gratitude for miraculous healing, believers leave ex-votos, wood or cast wax forms made to look like arms, legs, feet or heads. Letters, notes, and photographs are also left in this church museum.

Religions organized around worship of the orixás are still actively practiced in West Africa today and in various forms throughout the New World: Candomblé and Umbanda in Brazil; Santería in Cuba; Obeah in Jamaica, Vodou in Haiti, Voodoo in Louisiana, and Hoodoo in Southern USA.

Think about . . . ?

Name one belief that is common to both Catholicism and Candomblé.
Explain.