



Candomblé Ketu in Italy: Dialogues and Adaptations

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Abstract

Migratory phenomena and global flows have changed the religious diversity in Europe. The resulting processes of accommodation of religions and practices within new social contexts are characterized by complex dynamics of preservation/adaptation of religious elements. This paper aims to discuss the ways Afro-Brazilian religions, specifically Candomblé Ketu, have been introduced into and adapted within an Italian context. Based on fieldwork that took place in 2013–2016, it analyses the religious/spiritual paths of Italian practitioners in order to understand how they approach Candomblé and how their observance of both Afro-Brazilian religions and so-called therapeutic practices promote dialogues and re-significations of some religious/spiritual elements.

Keywords: Afro-Brazilian religions, Candomblé, therapeutic practices, transnationalism, Italy

Słowa kluczowe: religie afrykańsko-brazylijskie, Candomblé, praktyki terapeutyczne, transnarodowy, Włochy

Introduction

In recent decades, migration and global flows have changed the Italian religious diversity. According to Garelli,¹ Italy represents an exceptional case among Western countries because of its historical and cultural links with Catholicism. In fact, the majority of Italians declare themselves as Catholics even though, as demonstrated by Garelli,² there are new characteristics of “being Catholic” that indicate a more complex, and sometimes contradictory, scenario.³

¹ *Religione all’italiana: l’anima del paese messa a nudo*, F. Garelli (ed.), Bologna 2011.

² *Ibidem*.

³ D. Hervieu-Léger demonstrated how the religious dimension has changed in the modern world and how it is characterized by the movement, using in her analysis the figure of the pilgrim, which represents the religious nomadism, and the convert, which embodies the abandonment of the religious tradition; D. Hervieu-Léger, *Il pellegrino e il convertito – la religione in movimento*, Bologna 2003.

The presence of other religions is not a new phenomenon nevertheless the migratory flows of the 1970s have led to a bigger religious diversity. Nowadays, Italy is home to a multitude of religions that give life to a varied and multifaceted reality. Recent studies, such as by Pace⁴ and Saggioro, Russo,⁵ highlight different aspects of this reality, such as religious territorial distribution and religious pluralism in a specific context, in the city of Rome. The presence of Afro-Brazilian religions in Italy, such as Candomblé⁶ and Umbanda,⁷ has remained unknown to most Italians, but there are a few studies related to them carried out by Prof. Luisa Faldini, an anthropologist who has accompanied the formation of these communities from the beginning, and Giovanna Capponi and Tatiana Golfetto⁸ in their PhD theses. Even though the presence of these religions has increased considerably in recent years, as it will be seen in this paper, it is establishing slowly in Italy. Even if it still remains a minor entity, it is a phenomenon that could exemplify wide changes in Italian society in matters of religiousness and spirituality.

Candomblé has Afro-Brazilian origins and was, for a long time, linked to a specific context, the city of Salvador, and a specific ethnic group of African slaves and their descendants. How could their expansion in Italy and, more generally, outside Brazil be explained? To answer this question, it is essential to consider another important fact: that today globalization and the development of faster means of transport and communication have increased interactions and the circulation of all kinds of goods among different regions of the globe. The circulation of ideas, values and practices do not necessarily involve the definitive migration of people but, with the development of technology, it can also take place in a virtual way, through the Internet.

This scenario provides an opportunity to understand the dynamics that emerge during the accommodation processes of religions and practices inside a new social context. It is clearly not a simple transposition of these elements from one context to another, but it is a process of reinterpretation, resignification and reconfiguration of them, according to local needs and beliefs. At the same time, and paradoxically, there is an effort to preserve and to maintain the “purity” of these elements, especially in groups seeking legitimacy. It is the tension between the preservation/adaptation processes that makes such accommodation possible within a new context.⁹

In order to discuss that, the present study will examine the case of Afro-Brazilian religions in Italy and will concentrate specifically on the case of Candomblé Ketu¹⁰

⁴ E. Pace, *Le religioni nell'Italia che cambia*, Rome 2013.

⁵ A. Saggioro, C. Russo, *Roma Città Plurale*, Rome 2018.

⁶ Candomblé is an Afro-Brazilian religion based on the cult of African deities.

⁷ Umbanda is a Brazilian religion that incorporates Afro-Brazilian, Catholic and Spiritism elements and worships not only the *orixás*, but also Brazilian entities such as the spirits of black slaves. See: R. Prandi, *Città in transe. Culti di possessione nella metropoli brasiliana*, Rome 1993.

⁸ T. Golfetto, *Il candomblé keto in Italia: Storia, flussi, adattamenti*, Rome 2016–2017 [manuscript].

⁹ S. Capone, R. De La Torre, A. Mary, K. Argyriadis, *Religions transnationales des suds: Afrique, Europe, Ameriques*, Louvain-La-Neuve 2013.

¹⁰ The *nação* Ketu is one of the many Candomblé's *nações*. The term 'Ketu' is a reference to the kingdom of the Yoruba city of Ketou, a region in the present-day Benin. In this case it designates the ritual modality.

because it is the *nação*¹¹ with the largest number of places of worship in Italy. The analysis is based on interviews with “fathers and mothers of saints” (*pais de santo/mães de santo*)¹² and other practitioners conducted during fieldwork for my PhD thesis between 2013 and 2016.¹³ One of the aspects that has interested me is their religious/spiritual path. I call a religious/spiritual path all the religious/spiritual experiences the practitioners had before their initiation¹⁴ into Candomblé or still have besides it. In fact, it does not mean that their paths are necessarily a progressive line that takes them to Candomblé. The interviews have demonstrated that, in most cases, they observe all kinds of traditions and practices, even after their initiation into Candomblé, illustrating the options available in the Italian religious/spiritual milieu. As it will be seen, they do not only attend to both Candomblé and other practices, but also make connections among them.

The expansion of Afro-Brazilian religions

Candomblé Ketu is an Afro-Brazilian religion based on the cult of the *orixás*,¹⁵ deities linked to natural elements from Western Africa, specifically from areas of present-day Nigeria and Benin. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, these regions, which became known as the “Slave Coast,” and others like present-day Angola and Congo were affected by the transatlantic slave trade as their populations were reduced to slavery, forced to cross the ocean and work in sugar cane plantations, mines or the colonial cities of Brazil and other parts of America. The necessity for these Africans to reorganize their beliefs and practices while socially marginalized and living in precarious conditions led to the formation of Candomblé, in the first half of the nineteenth century in Salvador, State of Bahia.

Despite persecution by the Brazilian authorities during the first half of twentieth century, Candomblé of different *nação*, including Keto, has expanded to other regions of Brazil. In recent decades, Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian religions such as Umbanda and Batuque¹⁶ have expanded beyond Brazil’s borders. The expansion in the Latin American context has been the subject of many studies, such as by Frigerio,¹⁷ who analysed the presence of Batuque and Umbanda in Argentina. The author highlights how the so-called Popular Catholicism has worked as a cognitive bridge for new

¹¹ It means literally ‘nation’ and is the ritual modality.

¹² When I refer to the Afro-Brazilian religious terms, for example, the place of worship, I use the Portuguese form. *Pai de santo*, or just *pai*, literally means ‘father of saint’ and is used to refer, if male, to the highest priest of a Candomblé place of worship. *Mãe de santo*, ‘mother of saint,’ or just *mãe* is used if the priestess is female. Saint is related to the *orixás*, the Candomblé deities.

¹³ I have interviewed the *pais* and *mães de santo* from the five Italian *terreiros* and practitioners from all of them. It’s important to note that almost all the practitioners are Italian.

¹⁴ For a description of the initiation rituals see: R. Bastide, *O candomblé da Bahia (rito Nagô)*, São Paulo 1961.

¹⁵ In English, Orishas.

¹⁶ Batuque is an Afro-Brazilian religion which has characteristics similar to Candomblé.

¹⁷ A. Frigerio, *A transnacionalização como fluxo religioso na fronteira e como campo social: umbanda e batuque na Argentina*, “Debates do NER” 2013, no. 23, pp. 15–57.

practitioners to approach the Afro-Brazilian religions. The Argentinian *pais* and *mães de santo* interviewed by Frigerio explained what Umbanda was to the new practitioners using elements in common to Umbanda and popular Catholicism. For example, the belief of the existence of spiritual beings that could help in the resolution of one's problems. For popular Catholicism, these would be the Catholic saints, and for Umbanda, the Umbanda spirits. According to Frigerio, the religious elements considered unfamiliar and outside of their experience, like the trance, would be presented at a later opportunity. Thus, by using common beliefs and categories already known, these *pais de santo* would facilitate the process of "conversion," helping them to translate their categories into new ones, and favouring a gradual approach to these religions.

Popular Catholicism has played an important role in the expansion of Afro-Brazilian cults in other contexts as well, like the Portuguese, as highlighted by Pordeus Junior¹⁸ and Bahia,¹⁹ who also highlighted how their expansion in Portugal was facilitated by their association with Portuguese popular practices and beliefs, like the *bruxaria*.²⁰ Their recent expansion in other European countries reveals other characteristics and other possible dialogues in these processes. Bahia,²¹ who also analysed the presence of Afro-Brazilian religions in the German context, reports the case of Pai Murah, a Brazilian *pai de santo* who has a Candomblé *terreiro*²² and a cultural association that provides, among others, Afro-Brazilian music and dance courses in Berlin. It is important to note that during these classes Pai Murah provides some information about Candomblé, and this is how many German practitioners come into contact with it.²³ In some cases, the *pai de santo* uses metaphors, approximating the *orixás* to the gods from Greek mythology,²⁴ instead of the Catholic saints, and this could be because Catholicism in Germany is less expressive than in Portugal, for example.

The Italian context analysed in this paper will reveal that the translation and explanation of Afro-Brazilian religious concepts can be made, not necessarily using elements from Italy's religious tradition, but instead from new practices and traditions present in the spiritual/therapeutic field, such as those from the so-called New Age.

Afro-Brazilian religions in Italy

Candomblé arrived in Italy during the 1990s, a time of increased Brazilian immigration. It is hard to establish the first Italian *terreiro* due to the lack of documentation

¹⁸ I. Pordeus Junior, *Portugal em transe – transnacionalização das religiões afro-brasileiras*, Lisbon 2009.

¹⁹ J. Bahia, *Exu na mouraria: a transnacionalização das religiões afro-brasileiras e suas adaptações, trocas e proximidades com o contexto português*, "Revista METIS: historia & cultura" 2015, no. 28, pp. 111–131.

²⁰ It means 'witchcraft.' See: *ibidem*.

²¹ J. Bahia, *As religiões afro-brasileiras em terras alemãs e suíças*, Lisbon 2013.

²² *Terreiro* is a Candomblé house of worship. It could also be called *casa de santo* (house of saint).

²³ J. Bahia, *As religiões...*, *op. cit.*, p. 347.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 354.

and studies about that period. The only *terreiro* of Candomblé Ketu from that period that still exists is located at Arborio, North Italy and is run by an Italian *pai de santo*.²⁵

It is important to note the role and the contribution of Pai Taunderan, whose real name is Gerson Gonçalves Marques, a Brazilian *pai de santo* from São Paulo²⁶ who was responsible for the initiation of most of the Italian *pais* and *mães de santo*.²⁷ In the 1990s, Taunderan worked with the *jogo de búzios* divination²⁸ in Europe, especially in Italy, at the Latin American Festival in Milan, where he met his first Italian *filho de santo*,²⁹ Mauro, who is currently the *pai de santo* of the above-mentioned *terreiro* at Arborio.³⁰ Taunderan has been going to Italy once a year for over 20 years to help his *filho*, who has become *pai de santo* to initiate new practitioners. In fact, without the help, teachings and support of their Brazilian *pai de santo* it would have been impossible for some Italian *pais* and *mães* to realize new initiations.³¹

The ability of the *pai* or *mãe de santo* to attract new practitioners is crucial for the expansion of Candomblé. A practitioner who has accomplished the seven-year *obrigação*³² can open a *terreiro*, and this means that the more practitioners there are, the more likely it is to find more places of worship. It is important to notice that the presence of these religions in Italy has increased considerably in the past five years, even if it is still a minor entity. There are currently five *terreiros* in Italy,³³ and the majority, four of them, are of Candomblé Ketu which have family ties with *terreiros* in São Paulo and respect the Casa de Oxumarê tradition in Salvador.

The religious/spiritual paths: some considerations

To understand the expansion process of the Afro-Brazilian religions in Italy and to analyse how they adapt to the Italian context, it is useful to consider the religious/spiritual paths of the Italian *pais*, *mães* and other practitioners. These paths illustrate not only the options present within the Italian field but demonstrate how Candomblé relates to these. In fact, in the interviews the practitioners explain what motivates them to explore these options, making evaluations, interpreting their choices and thus revealing the meanings of their experiences and of their changes.

²⁵ For further information about this *terreiro*, see Capponi in this volume.

²⁶ For further information about the *pai de santo* and his Brazilian *terreiro*, see L.P. Faldini, *Biyilu. È nato per la vita. Costruzione dello spazio e della persona in un candomblé di Juquitiba, Brasile*, Rome 2009.

²⁷ From the five *terreiros*, Taunderan was the one responsible for the initiation of three Italian *pais de santo*.

²⁸ Cowrie shell divination, the Candomblé divination system.

²⁹ It means literally 'son of saint' and is used to refer to the practitioner.

³⁰ Due to some conflicts, Taunderan is no longer Mauro's *pai de santo*.

³¹ This is because they have recently become *pais* and *mães de santo*, so there is still the need to learn some rituals and prayers related to the initiations to the various *orixás*.

³² It means literally 'obligation' and indicate the periodical rituals that follow the initiation.

³³ I set this number during my PhD research.

Candomblé's Italian practitioners have taken highly diverse religious/spiritual paths, but with a common characteristic: the search for spiritual teachings and experiences outside of Catholicism. Italy is a country with a strong Catholic tradition and identity. In fact, only one of all the practitioners interviewed said that he and his family have never been Catholics. All of them recognize that Catholicism is part of their culture, but they do not consider themselves to be Catholic. Baptism and Confirmation were mentioned as signs that they were once Catholic, even if the majority do not consider themselves as practicing Catholics, mentioning the fact, for example, that they did not use to go to mass, except on special occasions such as weddings or baptisms. Despite that, the majority does not see Candomblé and Catholicism as incompatible, like Maria,³⁴ who also adds that being a Candomblé practitioner does not mean a disrespectful attitude towards the Catholic Church.

A second characteristic of their religious/spiritual path that is important to highlight is related to the first one: their interest in and approaches towards other religions and practices. Some practitioners have claimed an approach to other religions such as Buddhism. Before their initiation into Candomblé, the majority have experienced, and still experience, therapies and practices which could be situated within the large and heterogeneous movement of New Age.³⁵ These kinds of practices have in common an emphasis on self-improvement and the search for wellness, happiness, balance and tranquillity that one could achieve through practices such as *reiki*, meditation, yoga, therapeutic massages and so on. In fact, according to Lewis and Melton,³⁶ the message of the New Age movement is its hope in transformation. Everyone could be transformed and there are "very real spiritual energies available to create change, and numerous techniques function to harness that energy to produce change,"³⁷ techniques that include body work and spiritual disciplines, as mentioned above.

It is important to note that the Afro-Brazilian religions and the practices mentioned do not necessarily represent different stages of the religious/spiritual path. This is the case of Silvia, for example, who, after having started to attend the *terreiro* of Mãe Viviana at Casal Palocco near Rome, decided to take a first-level *reiki* course. These religious/spiritual paths and generally the whole New Age and "alternative spirituality" universe are characterized by mobility, so their practitioners frequently move among the various practices and traditions.

It is important to highlight the fact that initiation into Candomblé does not exclude other practices or traditions, because one of the consequences of "accumulating" different teachings is the act of relating them and comparing their elements. In other

³⁴ Not her real name. All the practitioner's names are invented, for privacy.

³⁵ Some European scholars prefer to use the term "Next Age instead" of "New Age." Introvigne describes the Next Age as "the passage of the New Age from the third person to the first person," in other words, for the scholar, there was in the 1990s an individualistic withdrawal from and an abandonment of the utopian phase characteristic of the New Age. So, for the Next Age, Planet Earth will not enter a "New Era" of happiness, instead every single person can privately find health, prosperity and well-being through certain holistic practices and disciplines such as *reiki*; M. Introvigne, P.M. Zoccatelli, *New Age Next Age – una nuova religiosità dagli anni 60 a oggi*, Florence 1999.

³⁶ J.R. Lewis, J.G. Melton, *Perspectives on the New Age*, New York 1992.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

words, it is a process of interpretation, in which some religious/spiritual elements are translated and sometimes re-signified according to the local needs and beliefs.

The case of the two Roman *terreiros*

Studies such as that of Gomberg³⁸ have demonstrated that people often approach the Afro-Brazilian religions looking for relief from all kinds of illnesses. During the interviews, many Italian practitioners have mentioned situations of incurable pain, stress, or allergies that led them to search alternative therapies that could heal or at least relieve the pains, as it happens in Brazil. In the Italian context, however, this kind of appeal is not initially addressed to the Afro-Brazilian religions, since they remain unknown to most Italians. In most cases, practitioners approach Candomblé and Umbanda after looking for solutions in New Age practices.

Among the Italian Candomblé practitioners, there are several holistic therapists, but also among the Italian *pais* and *mães de santo*,³⁹ whose role in the expansion and the explanation of the Afro-Brazilian religions is clearly very important. In fact, it is usually the practitioners who are also holistic therapists who present these to their customers in cases of need.

To understand how it happens, we will focus on the two Roman *terreiros*: Ilê Axé Alaketo Dana e Ewá, where I have done most of my research, and Ilê Axé Alaketo Ogum Aio, recently founded, both located at Casal Palocco, near Rome. The *mães* and *pais de santo* of these *terreiros* are holistic therapists who offer different kinds of massages and therapies.

The massages done by them are usually of various types and depend on the customer's problem. In some of these massages, the therapist works by putting pressure on some parts of the body to restore the body's energies, as in the case of *shiatsu*. Therefore, they are not just simple massages, but have also spiritual value, as they work with people's energies, in an attempt to put the individual in contact with his or her own "profound self." In the consulting room, during a session, it may happen that the customer "feels something" and in this case the therapist would explain to the customer what the energies are, who the *orixás* are, and talk about some Candomblé concepts and, if he thinks it is necessary for solving the customer's problem, would invite the person to attend a public Candomblé ceremony. In this sense, Giulia's case is emblematic. In a very stressful period, as she described, during a session and while the therapist/*pai de santo* was massaging her, she felt a "vibration" in her abdomen. The therapist/*pai de santo* decided then to talk about the *orixás* and invited her to a Candomblé public ceremony. This is how Giulia began to attend the *terreiro*, first as a guest of the public ceremonies, then as a practitioner. In many cases, this sensation

³⁸ E. Gomberg, *Hospital de Orixás – encontros terapêuticos em um terreiro de candomblé*, Salvador 2011.

³⁹ Of the five Italian *terreiros*, three of them are run by a *pai* or *mãe de santo* who is also holistic therapist. Holistic therapists work with techniques such as *reiki*, aromatherapy, and *shiatsu*.

of experiencing the energy in their own bodies is decisive for making the decision to initiate into Candomblé.

It is important to highlight the fact that, in both Roman cases, the consulting room used for the massages is in the same physical space as the *terreiro*.⁴⁰ Therefore, the place has multiple functions: it is the *mãe* or *pai*'s private house, a *terreiro*, and a wellness centre. The separation between spaces is unclear: the same rooms are used, according to the occasion, sometimes for therapeutic practices, sometimes for religious activities. This does not mean that there is no separation between both, as they are perceived as distinct activities. As matter of fact, the rituals and the ceremonies are organized on different days than the massage appointments. The flexibility of the place of worship reveals a singular configuration of the *terreiro* and illustrates the coexistence of religious, spiritual, and therapeutic practices in the same place.⁴¹

In the accommodation processes of Afro-Brazilian religions in new contexts, it must be considered whether adaptations are accepted by a Brazilian *pai de santo*. Every *terreiro* is autonomous; on the other hand the practitioners are part of a strict hierarchy that supposes the respect for the “elders.” Conflicts could emerge if something threatens the authority of the *pai de santo* or contradicts the Candomblé tradition.⁴² It is a process of negotiation and depends on the situation, so each case must be considered separately.⁴³ In this case, the presence of the therapeutic practices inside the same physical space as the *terreiro* is tolerated because they are considered external elements. In addition, in this context, it is often through these practices that one approaches Candomblé, so it is a way to attract new practitioners.

The Afro-Brazilian religions and the therapeutic practices

The closeness of both Afro-Brazilian religions and therapeutic practices do not only characterize the Italian context. In fact, other European contexts, such as the Portuguese,⁴⁴ the German,⁴⁵ and the French⁴⁶ demonstrate what seems to be a tendency in Europe, and this certainly needs further study.

⁴⁰ This does not happen in the other *terreiro* run by a *mãe de santo*/therapist: the place of worship and the wellness centre work in different places.

⁴¹ It is important to remember that there is no specific architecture that characterizes the *terreiros*, so they could be very different from each other. Despite the fact that some spaces must be present, like the *barracão*, the room used in public ceremonies, every *pai de santo* adapts the *terreiro* according to his needs and especially to his economic situation.

⁴² A. Vallado, *Lei-do-santo. Poder e conflito no candomblé*, Rio de Janeiro 2010.

⁴³ In fact, other adaptations were not tolerated by the *pais de santo*. For example, one Italian *pai de santo* wanted to do the initiations for free, without charging a fee. Despite the high costs of initiation, the concept of give and receive is very important in Candomblé.

⁴⁴ C. Saraiva, *Energias e Curas: a umbanda em Portugal*, “Revista Pós Ciências Sociais da UFMA” 2011, no. 8, pp. 55–76; J. Bahia, *Exu na mouraria...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 111–131.

⁴⁵ J. Bahia, *As religiões afro-brasileiras...*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ V. Teisenhoffer, *Umbanda, New Age et psychothérapie. Aspects de l’implantation de l’umbanda à Paris*, <http://ateliers.revues.org/872> [access: 23.07.2015].

Some aspects of Candomblé could explain this closeness. The notion of body, for example. The body has a central role in the Candomblé system of beliefs, as it is a vehicle for communication with the sacred. Bahia⁴⁷ demonstrates how the Afro-Brazilian body practices, like the *orixás* dances, help people approach these religions in the German context. In fact, these body practices offer new ways of considering their own body, in a different *modus operandi*, for example, through the notion of the close relationship between the body and nature.⁴⁸ In Candomblé, the body is seen as something close to nature, and the dance and the body gestures, for example, would help the practitioner to connect with his own *orixá*, which is, as it has already been seen, related to natural elements. This concept is in line with the ecological awareness, the naturism and the harmony towards the world that are characteristics of the New Age movement.⁴⁹

It is important to consider another aspect of Afro-Brazilian religions that can be found in many contexts: the fact that they present themselves as a therapeutic option among those available.⁵⁰ This is because the Afro-Brazilian religions offer not only a world view, but also provide practical solutions aimed at regaining spiritual and physical health through rituals. The concept of “health” in Candomblé is linked to the balance between the person and the energies of nature, in particular, with one’s own *orixá*.⁵¹ One important aspect is the belief that each person descends from an *orixá*, from whom one inherits behavioural characteristics. Consequently, the “illness” is caused by a lack of fulfilment of an obligation towards one’s own *orixá*, which leads to an imbalance. The purpose of a series of rituals, for example, the *ebó* (the offerings) and the *bori*⁵² is to restore this balance and thus the well-being of the individual. The most appropriate ritual in each case will be determined by the *jogo de búzios*, but all rituals involve the movement of *axé*.⁵³ Consequently, Candomblé offers a holistic and expanded view of the binomial health/disease⁵⁴ and of the person, connecting body–mind–spirit. In these cases, “there is a very practical side to the adherence to such religions, that is directly linked to how individuals perceive what ‘being well’

⁴⁷ J. Bahia, C.M.V. Dantas, *Música, corporalidade e recreação diaspórica no candomblé da Alemanha*, “Revista Ciências Sociais e Religião” 2018, no. 28, pp. 82–98.

⁴⁸ However, Bahia demonstrates that when it comes to possession, many Germans have problems coming to terms with it, and this usually leads them to leave the religion; J. Bahia, C.M.V. Dantas, *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ M. Introvigne, P.M. Zoccatelli, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ For the Brazilian context, see, for example, M. Rabelo (*Enredos, feitura e modos de cuidado. Dimensões da vida e da convivência no candomblé*, Salvador 2014) or E. Gomberg (*op. cit.*), which refers to the *terreiros* as “hospitals of the *orixá*.” For the Portuguese context, see C. Saraiva (*op. cit.*) and for the French context, see Teisenhoffer (*op. cit.*).

⁵¹ E. Gomberg, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

⁵² For a description of the *bori*, see R. Bastide, *op. cit.*

⁵³ In this case, the *axé* is the vital energy that pervades all things, all living beings and all *orixás*. The *axé* of the deities must be kept constant since it is dispersed and it is a human being’s responsibility to nourish the *orixás* and to restore their vital energy. The *terreiro* is the place where the *axé* is produced through ritual action.

⁵⁴ E. Gomberg, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

means.⁵⁵ The idea that the individual is at the centre of the process of healing and his or her problem is considered in a holistic way is also present in many practices linked to the “therapeutic practices” and the New Age. In addition, the concept of the *axé*, the vital energy that pervades all things, is in line with the concept of energy present in practices like *reiki*, which is a very popular practice among the Italian Candomblé practitioners. This Japanese technique used for reducing stress is based on the idea of a universal energy called Ki that flows throughout the universe and in all living beings. After initiation into this practice, the so-called first level, the person activates the channels of his or her own body which receive this energy.⁵⁶

Therefore, some concepts present in these practices, such as that of energy, can help the new practitioners to understand those from Afro-Brazilian religions. Also, the practitioners make analogies and use metaphors. To illustrate that, we will see an analogy made by Chiara,⁵⁷ a practitioner who is also a physiotherapist and a holistic therapist.⁵⁸

The analogy is between the *juntós* and the *chakras*, which are the vital energy centres of the human body, an important concept in many therapeutic practices. Each *orixá* of the *enredo de santo* is linked to a *chakra* and is responsible for guiding a specific part of the person, such as the material or the sentimental one. It is important to remember that Candomblé is flexible, so respect for the rules and the theory is equally flexible, including what is presented as obligatory. Although in theory there are seven *juntós*, in practice this number is almost never reached. In this case, however, the number seven of the *juntós* is important and is emphasized by Chiara because it corresponds numerically to the seven *chakras*.

During her interview, Chiara explained the process of self-discovery that has been possible by Candomblé: to discover each *juntó* is to discover what energies the individual is made of, and consequently, one discovers some parts of his or her own character, its “facets.” The process of discovery and self-awareness is also a process of acceptance: as Chiara declares, “accepting your personal *orixá* is accepting yourself.”

Therefore, the path of Candomblé is understood as a process of personal development.⁵⁹ On many occasions and in different contexts, the practitioners use the

⁵⁵ C. Saraiva, *Afro-Brazilian Religions in Portugal: Bruxos, Priests and Pais de Santo*, <http://etnografica.revues.org/292> [access: 18.09.2016].

⁵⁶ A. Menegotto, *La “quasi religione” del reiki*, [in:] *Identità religiosa, pluralismo, fondamentalismo*, M. Aletti, G. Rossi (eds.), Turin 2004, pp. 169–176.

⁵⁷ 24.07.2016.

⁵⁸ First, it’s important to note the Candomblé belief that every person would be composed by a certain number of *orixás* that would form one’s personality. In theory, this number would be seven (M. Goldman, *A construção ritual da pessoa: a possessão no candomblé*, “Revista Religião e Sociedade” 1985, no. 12, pp. 22–54): besides the main *orixá*, the so-called “*orixá* of the head” because is linked to the head of the individual, there would be six others, the so-called *juntós*, which are identified by the *jogo de búzios* during the *obrigação*. These *orixás* are part of the so-called *enredo de santo*, the “personal pantheon” of each individual. The person would be “built” gradually from the initiation and in the course of the following *obrigação*, over a period which, in theory, would be 21 years. In fact, after the initiation, there are an *obrigação* after 1, 3, 5, 7 and, more rarely, 14 and 21 years. Although this is the theory, in practice the obligation of doing the *obrigação* after the 7th year depends on the *terreiro*.

⁵⁹ Umbanda and its entities would also take part in this process.

expression “personal growth” to describe this path. It is also important to note that the personal *orixá* is presented as “the essence of the person” by some practitioners/therapists, just as in the French context analysed by Teisenhoffer.⁶⁰ The idea of “essence of the person,” recurring in various therapeutic practices, is linked to the belief that there is a divine particle, a “perfect being” within each individual. This “essence,” this divine particle, can be developed through a series of practices. In this way, the personal growth is understood as a long path towards the discovery of one’s “essence” and therefore the discovery of one’s *orixá*. Consequently, to help this process of self-discovery, *reiki* and other practices are seen by the practitioners/therapists as complementary to the Afro-Brazilian religions. As Teisenhoffer⁶¹ affirms for the Umbanda in Paris: “*En ce sens, l’adhésion à l’umbanda peut contribuer à la confirmation de l’efficacité des pratiques antérieures et, à l’inverse, les expériences spirituelles antérieures peuvent constituer autant de preuves de l’efficacité de l’umbanda aux yeux des adeptes.*” The complementarity is evident during the massages and the appointments. Saraiva⁶² describes consulting rooms in the Portuguese context:

In these consulting-rooms the mixture of alternatives practices/healing traditions is present, and many show images of Catholic saints and *orixás* together; the priest/priestess are tarot cards and runes readers, as well as shell diviners, which they use to diagnose the client’s problem, and masters of *reiki*, quantic healing and hypnosis techniques, which they use to cure. In the conceptualization the *pais/mães de santo* make of such combinations, everything is intertwined and permitted, all these techniques of healing are part of a whole, directed from the above by the Afro-Brazilian divinities, as one of them explained: “Our head is our guide. The *orixás* help us if we know how to handle them. Our head is our guide, the centre of everything, in Candomblé as in other therapies connected with the head, such as hypnosis and *reiki*...

Regarding the Italian context, Mãe Viviana, who is also a holistic therapist, attributed the direction of these practices to her Umbanda entities: “I didn’t want to believe that I was *mãe de santo* before I became one, but there were so many people that, maybe I couldn’t do an *ebó*, [...] but in my work as therapist, somehow, I was already doing the *mãe de santo*, unconsciously, always helped by my entities.”⁶³ The two roles, those of the *mãe de santo* and the therapist, are connected. Furthermore, Viviana claims that the fact that she is a Candomblé practitioner is an advantage for her profession as a therapist because knowing the *orixá*’s characteristics helps to better understand the client’s problems. It is important to remember that in the healing process, *reiki* and other therapeutic practices consider not only the physical aspect of the person, but also the psychological, including discomforts and emotions. Viviana, who also has an important role in Candomblé as a *mãe de santo*, has in-depth knowledge of the characteristics of each *orixá* and therefore of people’s behavioural characteristics. Thus, she is able to more easily individualize some aspects of their characters and give “more targeted help.”

⁶⁰ V. Teisenhoffer, *Umbanda...*, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ *Ibidem.*

⁶² C. Saraiva, *Afro-Brazilian Religions in Portugal...*, *op. cit.*

⁶³ Translated from Italian, 24.07.2016.

Final considerations/conclusion

Migratory phenomena and global flows have changed the religious diversity in countries like Italy: religions considered linked to a specific context have expanded to other regions of the globe. In the reterritorialization process, these cultural elements meet the local realities, and the contact between alterities brings about interaction among local, familiar cultural elements and those considered distant, “exotic,” and strange. In these complex processes, new religious identities are configured, allowing the individuals to live new experiences.

The expansion of Afro-Brazilian religions outside the Brazilian borders is a great example of this phenomenon. This study has analysed the Italian context and is based on the religious/spiritual path of the practitioners. These paths are not considered a progressive line that have taken them to Candomblé but are characterized by multiple attempts at different religions and practices. The mobility through these practices is an important characteristic not only of these paths but also, in general, of the New Age or Next Age universe and the “alternative spirituality.” The singularity of the two *terreiros* of Rome, which also work as a wellness centre, demonstrate different uses of the place of worship and how it becomes more flexible, hybrid, and permeable to different instances, even if the religious/therapeutic activities are perceived as distinct.

The presence of Afro-Brazilian religions in Italy has increased considerably in recent years, even if it is still a minor entity. However, it is important to note a singular characteristic of this context: the expansion process is carried out by Italian *mães* and *pais de santo*, and not Brazilian ones. Among the five Italian *pais de santo*, three of them are also holistic therapists, and their strategy to attract new practitioners is significant: they present Candomblé and Umbanda during a massage session in the consulting room, if that would help to solve the customer’s problem. Although not all the Italian *terreiros* have a therapist *pai de santo*, most of the practitioners are holistic therapists themselves or are consumers of these practices. Their religious/spiritual paths have demonstrated their search for spiritual teachings and experiences outside of Catholicism. Therefore, the places of worship would represent an authentic alternative to the Italian Catholic tradition.

The closeness of Afro-Brazilian religions and therapeutic practices results in a process of interpretation, in which some religious/spiritual elements are translated and sometimes re-signified. During the interviews, for example, some practitioners offered analogies, such as that already mentioned between *orixás* and *chakras*.

The concept of “health” in Candomblé, as it has been seen, is linked to the relation of balance between the person and his own *orixá*. Consequently, the “illness” could be caused by a lack of an obligation towards one’s own *orixá*, which leads to an unbalanced situation. Therefore, it considers the relations between the biological and the supernatural aspects. As a result, Candomblé demonstrates a particular notion of wellness/illness that is perfectly in harmony with that of therapeutic practices, which takes a holistic view in the process of healing.

For some practitioners, the path in Candomblé is considered a process of self-discovery: to discover each *juntó* is to discover what energies they are made of, and consequently, one discovers some aspects of their own character. The concept of energy, so important for some practices such as *reiki*, is re-signified as *orixás* energies. What seems to characterize the Italian context is that the therapeutic aspect, although present in Candomblé in Brazil,⁶⁴ is more stressed by the Italian practitioners.

The presence of Afro-Brazilian religions has recently increased in Europe. The Italian case analysed in this study compels us to expand the field of analysis and to consider not only the religions, but also include the spiritual/therapeutical experiences in order to understand the new phenomena in the contemporary society. The relations between the Afro-Brazilian religions and the therapeutic practices seems to be a key to understanding the success of these religions in Europe, but only future studies could prove this.

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