

Gaia, Ronan da Silva Parreira

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Sacra. 2025, vol. 23, iss. 2, pp. 35-51

ISSN 2336-4483 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.83117>

Access Date: 15. 12. 2025

Version: 20251203

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Umbanda, Candomblé and Christianity Between (Dis)Tensions: Intolerance and Religious Racism in the Actions of Bonde de Jesus

Ronan da Silva Parreira Gaia, São Paulo State University, Graduate Program in Social Sciences
e-mail: ronangaia@yahoo.com.br

Paride Bollettin, FSCI MU, Department of Anthropology; São Paulo State University, Graduate Program in Social Sciences
e-mail: paridebollettin@sci.muni.cz

Abstract

This essay seeks to analyze the actions of neo-Pentecostal groups associated with drug traffickers, such as the so-called “Bonde de Jesus”, in Duque de Caxias, Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). We also deepen their relations with Christianity, religious racism, and the destruction of Umbanda and Candomblé *terreiros*, as well as the aggression of religious leaders and the repression against members of these religions. We adopt a qualitative analysis of the descriptive nature of materials available online and in other media. In sequence, we reflect on the racist origin of these practices of religious intolerance and on the work of resistance enacted by the adepts of the *terreiros*, despite the numerous violations of their rights, conquered through a struggle waged for centuries.

Keywords

Afro-Brazilian religions; Christianity; organized crime; religious intolerance; religious racism.

Introduction

Brazil presents a long history of racism and, even considering the recent achievements in terms of religious freedom in the country, addressing the processes and narratives of satanization, demonisation, and folklorization of Afro-Brazilian cults still often seem like a delicate subject. For this reason, many authors have discussed that religious intolerance against religious cultures of African origin in the South American country could be better understood through the concept of religious racism (Flor do Nascimento, 2016; Veleci, 2017; Gaia, Vitória, & Roque, 2020; Gaia, Roque, Carvalho, & Bollettin, 2023).

In Gaia (2021), the author reflected on the disconnection between the statements presented in the Christian sacred book, the Holy Bible, and the countless acts of violence committed by those who call themselves “Christians”, as opposed to

the “people of the *terreiro*”¹. In the same article, we highlighted the lack of knowledge about Candomblé as well as its folklorization, and demonization, grounding our reflection in an analysis of comments on the YouTube platform. In that study, we examined and discussed the intrinsic relationship between physical and symbolic racism against the people of the *terreiro* and the violent actions perpetrated by individuals who claim to act in the name of the Christian God. Other authors in the academic literature have also addressed these debates, including Silva (2007), Nascimento (2016 [1978]), Veleti (2017), Mota (2018), Gaia, Vitória, and Roque (2020), Munanga (2020), and Veiga (2020). All these works provide the basis for the reflections on the topic of religious and state persecution of Afro-Brazilian cults that we will develop in this paper. In addition to critical engagement with existing studies, this goal will also be achieved through the analysis of journalistic articles and testimonies recorded in videos published on the YouTube channel that empirically denounce such problems in this social field.

Afro-Brazilian religions result from a mixture of ancestral/religious rites and practices originating on the African continent, which have been (re)adapted on Brazilian soil during the period of slavery of the black African and Afro-Brazilian population, with the consent of the Catholic Church. All religious manifestations carried out by the enslaved black population were considered inferior to Christian religions as a result of racism and the ideology that black people were supposedly inferior to white people. Their cults were not only conceived as pagan, but also as satanic and demonic (Nascimento, 2016 [1978]; Veleti, 2017; Gaia, Vitória, & Roque, 2020).

Slavery of the black Africans in Brazil and the black Brazilian population was officially abolished on May 13, 1888. However, since they disembarked from slave ships coming from various African territories, this black population was forced to convert to the official religion of Portugal, Catholicism. In order to preserve their ancestral religious rites, those black people and their descendants on Brazilian soil used strategies to perform their rites in secret from their enslavers. In this regard, religious syncretism gained strength in Brazil, giving rise to other religions that blend elements of African rites, Catholicism, Allan Kardec’s Spiritism, Umbanda, and Quimbanda (Gaia, Vitória, & Roque, 2020; Gaia, 2021; Veleti, 2017).

Starting in the 1970s, the Brazilian population underwent intense religious migration. As a result of this migration, the population, which was predominantly Christian (Catholic), gradually shifted toward evangelical religions. According to the 2022 census conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the population that self-identifies as Christian (Catholic) is still the majority (56.7%), but it is declining in favor of evangelical religions (26.9%) that identify as Christian (non-Catholic). This group of evangelical Christians is the majority population in 244 cities across Brazil (Cypreste, 2025).

The spread of these Christian temples is based on a conversion strategy that focuses on the search for “salvation of the soul” and also on the belief that “only Jesus saves”, a quote adapted from the Acts of the Apostles 4:11–14 (Gaia, 2021). The expansion of these Christian churches, particularly in the Brazilian peripheries, is

¹ *Terreiro* is the term that defines places of worship where followers of Afro-Brazilian religions meet to hold festivities and other procedures related to their respective religions.

conducted through multiple strategies, such as visiting prisons to convert the Brazilian prison population. They also engage with the public politically by securing seats in the legislative houses. This political group, made up mostly of right-wing and center-right politicians, is popularly known as the BBB (Bancada do Boi – the Bull – ruralist group; da Bala – the Bullet – armament group; da Bíblia – the Bible – evangelical group) (Gaia, 2021; Ferrari, 2021).

The French psychiatrist Frantz Fanon (2008 [1952]) already discussed how white people are not racialized. Usually, this allows for inferiorizing everything that is produced by the “other”, in other words, the non-white. Fanon’s studies, even though the author did not analyze specifically African and Afro-Brazilian religions, contribute to understanding the attempt and process not only of inferiorizing these religions and ancestries, but also of the search for their annihilation, which we will return to later. Fanon’s concept of “inferiorization” refers to the embodiment of a sense of inadequacy and abasement by the racialized subjects, in this case, the Afro-Brazilian sectors of society. The effects of this process can be observed in the judgment of Afro-Brazilian religions as “satanic” and the consequent rise of proselytism of neo-Pentecostal churches in the Afro-Brazilian communities.

Having this panorama as a starting point, it is relevant to mention that those who commit racism and/or religious intolerance are not necessarily Christians. However, in the context of our analysis, we can find evidence of a significant relationship between the Christian faith and the Christian “reading” of Afro-Brazilian religions, especially Candomblé and Umbanda². It is not uncommon to identify cases of religious intolerance and racism in Brazil, such as the case of Mãe Gilda de Ogum, who died on January 21, 2000,³ from a heart attack after suffering violence during the invasion and vandalism of her *terreiro* by members of an evangelical church (Guimarães, 2019). When searching online about the subject, the actions of a group that calls itself “Bonde de Jesus” (Jesus Tram) stand out. This group relates to evangelical drug traffickers from Parque Paulista, a community in the city of Duque de Caxias, in the Baixada Fluminense region of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Balloussier, 2019).

The term “Bonde de Jesus” refers to a specific group of organized crime in Rio de Janeiro. After its leaders declared that they had converted to Christianity, and specifically to neo-Pentecostal churches, the relationship between many of its members and followers of Afro-Brazilian cults cannot be limited to the violent actions of organized crime against such Afro-religiosities. The growth of Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal movements, specifically those that ground their ideology on racism itself and an overly distorted analysis of the Bible, also contributes to this process. This connection is described by Diseko and Carneiro (2025) and Costa (2023), who, in their studies, describe the Bonde de Jesus members as “Soldados de Jesus” (Soldiers of Jesus). They report how, in the territory dominated by this criminal group, it is possible to see writings on the walls of the houses and establishments of the region with the words “Jesus is the owner of the place”. Jesus, in

² It is worth mentioning that in Brazil, there are different Afro-Brazilian religions besides Candomblé and Umbanda, such as Quimbanda, Tambor de Mina, Xambá and Batuque.

³ In memory of Mother Gilda, the then President of Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, instituted in 2007 the day of the Ialorixá’s death as National Day to Combat Religious Intolerance Law No. 11,635/2007 (Silva & Gil, 2007; Guimarães, 2019).

this frame, is mobilized by the members of this group to self-identify in the larger neo-Pentecostal religion and, through this identification, to affirm their control over the territory. The rejection of other religions is an expression of this control over the territory.

Furthermore, the State's relations with the *terreiros* are often expressively violent, as in the case of frequent police invasions of *terreiros* (Veleti, 2017; Marinho & Borges, 2018; Langlois, 2020) or even the prohibition of Candomblés in the relative recent past, as pointed out in studies by Veleti (2017) and Gaia, Vitória, and Roque (2020). As will be demonstrated, this violence has deeper roots, but its form and intensity were shaped by the evangelical and Pentecostal proselytizing success and their ability to secure power in government structures.

Based on these considerations, this article seeks to reflect on the relationships between organized crime, Christianity, religious racism, destruction of *terreiros*, aggressions by religious leaders, and repression against members of Umbanda and Candomblé. With this aim, we will analyze the case of Bonde de Jesus, connecting it to the historical role of the State in religious racism. To this end, in terms of scientific methodology, this qualitative study employed three main sources of information: a) bibliographic analysis of studies on intolerance and religious racism in Brazil; b) empirical examples found in digital newspapers; c) videos available on the YouTube platform that contain reports of intolerance, racism and physical and/or symbolic violence against followers of Candomblé and/or Umbanda *terreiros*. Thus, the materials identified above formed the basis of the analytical corpus of this study, which focuses on digital sources to understand the lived experiences of people (Horst & Miller, 2012), allowing us to map the connection between digital and in-person violence (Wilson, 2019).

In this direction, the sections below will be organized to reflect on the Bonde de Jesus group, pointing out what the movement preaches and the purposes of their actions. In this first section, we will also address the ethnocentrism substantially present in Christian religions. The Christian soteriological universal message of a possible salvation for everyone⁴ assumes a specific connotation here, portraying the Christian God as the unique possible salvation, with the consequent judgment of other cults, such as the Afro-Brazilians, as inferior and “satanic”. The second section will analyze the dimensions of physical racism⁵ and symbolic racism,⁶ as well as the wider panorama of religious racism in Brazil. The third section will emphasize the relationship of the Neo-Pentecostal movement with the current scenario of religious racism in Brazil. Finally, the fourth and final section, before the final considerations, will present empirical examples found in journalistic materials and reports of intolerance. It will also examine religious racism in videos addressing the subject on the YouTube platform, discussing these issues in dialogue with the analysis of the relevant bibliographies.

⁴ Based on analyses of verses from the Holy Bible, specifically in the New Testament, such as in Mark 16:15-16 and in John 14:6.

⁵ Present in the attacks, deaths, and the prohibition of religious services, in addition to the racist nature of this persecution.

⁶ Implicit in the understanding that Afro-Brazilian religions would be less important and less rational because they are the result of black cultures.

Bonde de Jesus in the name of Jesus?

Balloussier (2019) reports that the members of the self-proclaimed “Bonde de Jesus” are associated with the Terceiro Comando Puro (TCP).⁷ They operate in communities in the State of Rio de Janeiro, breaking up, threatening, preventing, and expelling practitioners and leaders of Afro-Brazilian religious *terreiros* from these regions. This is a group of drug traffickers who are used to frequenting a Neo-Pentecostal church in Duque de Caxias, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.⁸

Jansen (2019) describes that reports of religious intolerance are widely common in Brazil, but they are somehow unique in Rio de Janeiro because they also involve drug dealers and evangelical practitioners. For this reason, the author suggests that the Bonde de Jesus is an unprecedented form of religious intolerance in the state. The cases of attacks have been investigated by the Racial Crimes and Intolerance Police Station (Decradi), created in 2018, which estimated that around 200 *terreiros* were under threat at the time of the publication of her report in 2019. The author explains that although religious intolerance is historically embedded, in the case of Bonde de Jesus, the relationship between crime and churches occurred through the conversion of the TCP leadership to a neo-Pentecostal church. Both he and his partners call themselves “Soldiers of Jesus”, as detailed by Costa (2023). This is the case of a process in which the local drug trafficking boss was ordained as a pastor of a neo-Pentecostal church, after which the attacks against “people of Santo”⁹ in the region increased significantly.

Jansen (2019) also indicates that this is a specific characteristic of this group, with no records of similar actions by other criminal groups operating in the State, such as the militiamen and/or other factions that organize drug trafficking. According to her, this group in particular distorts Christian religious doctrine and commits attacks in the name of an alleged “damnation” of the followers of other religions (see Mark 16:15–16). Despite the various interpretations of the Bible among the different churches in the neo-Pentecostal archipelago, most of the other groups and the prominent evangelical leaders condemn these attacks, which have religions of African origin as their focus or primary objective, exposing how the understanding of the sacred book of Christians by the Bonde de Jesus is controversial, also inside the neo-Pentecostal panorama. The author highlights the speech of Célia Gonçalves Souza, coordinator of the National Center for Africanity and Afro-Brazilian Resistance, who points to the specificity of Rio de Janeiro as a consequence of evangelical activity in the prison system. To better understand this scenario, the following section provides a historical, social, and political context for racism and religious racism in Brazil.

⁷ According to Balloussier (2019) and Jansen (2019), in addition to arms and drug trafficking, their members’ records with the Civil Police include attacks on Candomblé and Umbanda *terreiros* in the region.

⁸ As reported by Balloussier (2019), the aforementioned church promises to know the God of provision, in this way explicating the association proposed by the members of the Bonde de Jesus between their religion as providing to the soul and their control of the territory as providing to the material world.

⁹ Term is used to describe followers of Candomblé and Umbanda.

“Black Thing!”: The Victims and Their Religious and Epidermal Similarities

Flor do Nascimento (2016) points out that one of the effects of Brazil’s colonial and slave-owning past is precisely the complex and confusing construction of the country’s cultural identity. According to him, due to this colonial and slave-owning past, which still leaves its marks, little is known about the African heritage that is still cultivated in large sectors of Brazilian society. The colonial cosmogony that includes the Christian logic of sacred and profane was imposed on the other sectors of the society, with a consequent discrimination and criminalization of indigenous cosmologies and then of the religions of African origin, which were described as primitive and barbaric (Fernandes, 2017). This marginalization of the alternative spiritualities expresses how the Christian religion structured power relations in the colonial settings (Henriques, 2020). According to Flor do Nascimento (2016), the “Western”, or “Christian”, sacred is defined by what is understood as divine or spiritual, that is, something that deserves worship because it is not part of the earthly dimension of our world, and as such, is opposite to the profane. As the author explains, metaphysical logic is substantially different in the case of Candomblés. The idea of profane does not exist, creating a contrast between the two cosmologies and reproducing the associated power imbalance. An imbalance that stems from the previous colonial regime and follows with the current marginalization of large sectors of the population of African origins and adepts of Afro-Brazilian religions.

Therefore, Flor do Nascimento (2016) highlights that Candomblé brings to Brazilians the cultural elements of a way of life inherited from Africa, which was taken from them by the institution of slavery and the process of colonization. However, the imaginations about Candomblé are permeated by racism that demeans, attacks, and exoticizes the existence of these religious cultures, consolidating the so-called religious intolerance (Flor do Nascimento, 2016; Nascimento, 2016 [1978]). Flor do Nascimento (2016) raises the question of why such aggressions do not affect other non-Christian religions as considerably, suggesting that there would be an additional reason for incentivizing this persecution: its African origin. According to the author, the demonization of these religions was constructed through a racist strategy that identifies and defines these religions and their followers as enemies to be fought, whether with physical or verbal aggressions. These aggressions affect the lives of their practitioners, sometimes even resulting in death. For this reason, Flor do Nascimento (2016) argues that such practices of religious intolerance are, in fact, a face of a wider panorama of racist practices and thoughts, proposing to identify them as a case of religious racism.

A timely example of this panorama is the notion that Exu/Êṣù would be an African counterpart to Satan, the Christian devil, a character that does not even exist in African mythologies (Ortiz, 1987). Langlois (2020) points to the 521 sacred objects transferred to the Museu da República [Museum of the Republic] that were collected by the police between 1890 and 1945 during operations against *terreiros* in Rio de Janeiro. These items tell the story of Umbanda and Candomblé, who were terrorized by the Brazilian State that, juridically, criminalized and persecuted their practitioners (Velevi, 2017; Gaia, Vitória, & Roque, 2020; Langlois, 2020;

Gaia, 2021). This and countless other examples throughout the history of Brazil, and even in recent history, offer practical evidence of the dynamics of religious racism committed by society and by the State itself with its historical persecution of everything that was considered “black” or not subject to whitening (Nascimento, 2016 [1978]).

This practice of criminalization and persecution, supported by the Constitution, has been common for years, during the colonial regime, and after the independence of Brazil. According to Langlois (2020), significant evidence of the intolerance practiced by the State during this period, which was based on police “raids”, is the fact that seized sacred objects, before being sent to the Museum of the Republic, were housed in a collection called “Black Magic” at the Museum of the Civil Police of Rio de Janeiro. Nascimento (2016 [1978]) and Munanga (2020) also point to the historical role of the Catholic Church in attempting to erase African cultural heritage in Brazil through subtle and severe aggressions, whether in the form of spiritual, verbal, and psychological violence or physical violence during the slavery period. This attitude that assumes differentiated forms and postures among the various Christian groups, with the increasing attention the Catholic Church has dedicated to social movements (Bezerra de Carvalho & Chaves Flores, 2021), and the emergence of neo-Pentecostal Churches in the political panorama (Oro, 2023). However, the authors state that the very existence and resistance of Candomblés demonstrate the flaws of this epistemicide process.¹⁰ According to Carneiro (2005), epistemicide is the form or attempt to erase the knowledge and protagonism of sectors of society. In our case, this is specifically about the black population in Brazil, whose knowledge and cultural production are being disqualified.

What emerges from this panorama is the role of the State in violating the rights of the people of *terreiro* in Brazil. According to Veleci (2017), Candomblé was historically considered a Satanist religion and was officially persecuted in Brazil for not following Christian dogma, due to religious practices that differed in their forms of worship, way of life, philosophy, and the relationship of its followers to the gods worshipped. At the beginning of the Brazilian Republic, religious traditions of African origin were described as “primitive” and “bloody” using the sacralization of animals.¹¹ To criminalize and demean their followers, an argument still invoked to condemn these Churches in public discourses (Lino e Silva, 2023). The judgment has been and still is applied to the entire black population, directly associated with African cults, serving as a basis for discussions within the scope of State decisions in debates over public policies (Veleci, 2017; Gaia, Vitória, & Roque, 2020). For Veleci (2017), the resistance of Afro-Brazilian religiosities/ancestries¹² against such oppression can be seen as an effort to defend the customs and intellectuality

¹⁰ Similarly, the indigenous resistance to the current evangelization by neo-Pentecostal churches assumes multiple forms of creative individual and collective strategies (Bollettin, 2013).

¹¹ Also known as religious slaughter, it involves the offering of animals (roosters, hens, goats, quails, among others) to deities worshipped in Afro-Brazilian religions. It should also be noted that religious slaughter is not a practice exclusive to Afro-Brazilian religions but is also employed by them.

¹² The use of the terms religiosity/ancestry together seeks to legitimize Afro-Brazilian religions as a religion of black resistance in the African diaspora. Similarly, the term ancestry aims to highlight the importance of preserving procedures and practices brought from Africa and restructured in the Afro-Brazilian diaspora (as in the case of candomblés, as a religion of African origin, structured on Brazilian soil after slavery) (Gaia, Vitória, & Roque, 2020; Gaia, 2021).

of the black population in the country. Such resistance can be described as acting against epistemicide, as well as a fight against racism implicit in the process of forced syncretism that occurred in the past. It is worth highlighting that *Law No. 11,635/2007*, which establishes the National Day to Combat Religious Intolerance, *Law No. 12,288/2010*, which establishes the Racial Equality Statute, as well as *Law No. 14,519/2023*, which established the national day of Traditions of African Roots and Candomblé Nations, present a timely advancement of the rights of the black population, including their religiosity (Silva & Gil, 2007; Silva & Ferreira de Araújo, 2010; Silva, Menezes da Purificação Costa, & Silva, 2023). These achievements are the result of repeated demands made by terreiro populations to the government, which were approved during the government of then-President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. However, it is a constitutional right that is often restricted to the theoretical-legal scope and still not effectively applied, as reported by Gaia, Vitória, and Roque (2020).

The experiences of Afro-Brazilian religious cultures are not limited to the aggressions and persecutions suffered since their consolidation during the colonial regime. These stories are also cemented by struggles and resistance that have earned the respect of many, despite the current scenario. Gaia, Vitória, and Roque (2020) address precisely this issue, stating that the effort to keep such Afro-religious cultures alive is the main reason for the survival of African and Afro-Brazilian cultural memory in present-day Brazil. This is an ongoing work that today confronts the violence practiced by groups such as the *Bonde de Jesus*, the result of the intersection of racism, religious racism, and neo-Pentecostal logic, better addressed in the section below.

(Neo)Pentecostalism and religious racism in Brazil

In recent years, significant instances of religiously racist practices that cannot be ignored are attacks on *terreiros* of African-based religions facilitated by Neo-Pentecostalism. According to Flor do Nascimento's (2016) explanation, the relationship between the sacred and the profane in Christian Neo-Pentecostal logic, as mentioned above, creates a dynamic of combating other religious cultures. Namely, their doctrine is prescribing preaching faith through the imposition of Jesus as the only savior. Assuming Neo-Pentecostalism as a Christian branch, with a specific perspective within a much wider panorama, it is possible to understand the context that gives rise to the accumulated complaints about continuous attacks in Baixada Fluminense (Balloussier, 2019; Jansen, 2019).

Silva (2007) analyzes the similarities and differences between Afro-Brazilian religions and the neo-Pentecostal doctrine, highlighting the effects of this relationship on the construction of the Brazilian imaginary, which is built on Christian colonial values and the imagination of the "others" mentioned above. According to the author:

Neo-Pentecostalism, as a consequence of the belief that it is necessary to eliminate the presence and action of the devil in the world, has the characteristic of classifying other religious denominations as little engaged in this battle, or even as privileged spaces for the action of demons, who would "disguise"

themselves as deities worshipped in these systems. This is the case, above all, of Afro-Brazilian religions, whose gods, mainly the exus and the pombagiras, are seen as manifestations of demons (Silva, 2007: 207).

Neo-Pentecostalism, therefore, believes it continues the work begun by Jesus to combat demons or the works of the devil. These are in racist expressions associated with the deities and cults of African origin established in Brazil (Souza & Silva, 2022), a phenomenon that is not limited to Brazil (Rea, 2021). To understand how this Neo-Pentecostal vision was formed, it is necessary to keep in mind how the doctrinal and theological system of Pentecostalism developed. Silva (2007) describes its emergence in Brazil at the beginning of the 20th century, a period in which it began to gain visibility and expanded and multiplied its denominations and physical churches. The author explains that after this phase, the movement also had two other phases of propagation, which gained strength, respectively, between the 1940s and 1950s and in the 1970s.

Pentecostalism is characterized by a series of practices, including healing, faith, prophecies, and speaking in tongues, among other aspects referred to as charismatic gifts (Silva, 2007). In its second phase, this religious movement distinguished itself by its strategic mass conversion and its focus on the gift of divine healing, which is why Pentecostal churches became known as “healing churches”. This refers, for example, to the healing of “demons” supposedly present in religious cultures of African origin. In the third phase, some churches of the Pentecostal movement in Brazil began to adopt new practices and profiles, classifying themselves as the current term neo-Pentecostal. Silva (2007: 208, own translation and emphasis added) indicates that the prefix “neo” is given using the following aspects.

(...) [the] abandonment (or softening) of asceticism, [the] valorization of pragmatism, [the] use of business management in the management of temples, [the] emphasis on prosperity theology, [the] use of the media for mass proselytism and religious propaganda (...) and [the] centrality of the theology of spiritual battle against other religious denominations, especially Afro-Brazilian ones and Spiritism.

Thus, as the author points out, the attack on religions of African origin is structured on “the role that magical mediations and the experience of religious trance occupy in the dynamics of the neo-Pentecostal system in contact with the Afro-Brazilian repertoire”, in addition to a strategy of mass conversion of people in socioeconomic vulnerability. It is also important to consider that neo-Pentecostalism emerged at a time when other sectors of Christianity were undergoing processes of rationalization and secularization, as well as a shift to an engagement with the social movements, such as the Indigenous and Black movements. A phenomenon that enabled neo-Pentecostalism to occupy a space in the religious scene as a novelty offered a new opportunity to value the experience of religious revival (Silva, 2007). In this process, the author highlights that neo-Pentecostalism becomes a religious experience that promotes embodied experiences of the “spiritual”. This is an aspect that, despite all the cosmogonic distinctions and distances in philosophical and spiritual perspectives, resembles the experience of religions of African origin.

Because of this common trait, the author raises an additional question about the cause of persecution. According to him, the fight against Afro-Brazilian religions can also be understood as a strategy to attract believers who seek religious experiences with a strong, ecstatic, and magical appeal, associated with the social legitimacy that Christianity has. This ecstatic and embodied dimension of the sacred, according to Silva (2007), can constitute a point of encounter between Afro-Brazilian religions and neo-Pentecostalism, giving to the ideological and spiritual fight a dimension of pragmatic and economic competition for the conversion of the “flock”.

Still, what marks the relationship between both religious cultures can be seen in the historical and contemporary Christian intolerance and racism towards the religions of the African matrix, an aspect that is present in all phases of the Pentecostal movement rising in Brazil (Silva, 2007). A peculiar dimension of the current panorama in this historical context, according to the author, is the increasing presence of theories and practices based on the so-called “armies of Christ” aimed at preventing the realization of Afro-Brazilian religious rituals. This current phenomenon reminds us of the efforts of the Catholic Church to convert enslaved Africans with the supposed intention of saving their souls. This issue even served as justification for slavery, a crime committed by the West against Africans (Munanga, 2020). Thus, according to this author, the process of attempting to destroy Afro-Brazilian religiosities began very early, often on African soil, in the baptisms of future slaves on the other side of the Atlantic before forcing them to the Americas. With this process began the genocidal and epistemicidal violence that Abdias do Nascimento (2016 [1978]) also denounces. Likewise, it is worth highlighting the support of legal, medical, and media discourses that contributed to the criminalization of religions of African origin, as well as other cultural practices associated with Africans, such as the so-called “vagrancy”, capoeira, and healing practices (Mota, 2018). As the author points out, these elements were legally criminalized by the Brazilian State, legitimizing the persecution against practitioners of Umbanda and Candomblé that are now reproduced by social groups, such as neo-Pentecostals, as demonstrated by the cases analyzed below.

Religious racism against Umbanda and Candomblé: between (dis)continuities

In the video “VIOLENCE against AFRO religions” published by Canal Preto (2018), Mãe Baiana de Oya’s¹³ speech opportunely represents the scenario of religious racism associated with the new neo-Pentecostal wave described in the previous section. This process is accompanied by real acts of violence. This is especially evident when the Ialorixá mentions that:

You can no longer say that it is a *terreiro* because you will suffer racism, you will suffer stoning, which is what the people of *terreiro* in Brasília suffered, you will see your house burned down with you inside, as was the case with

¹³ Ialorixá of Ilê Axé Oyá Bagan, located in the Federal District (Brazil).

my house that was burned down, in 2015, with me inside (Canal Preto, 2018: 00:00:15–00:00:32, own translation).

The Ialorixá is referring to the stoning that occurred against a Candomblé girl in Brasília, a case of explicit racism similar to the one highlighted by Gaia, Vitória, and Roque (2020) regarding the assault on a 10-year-old girl wearing traditional *terreiro* clothing in Rio de Janeiro. The Mãe Baiana de Oya *terreiro* was also the victim of an invasion that ended in arson and only reopened after 10 months of renovation (Luiz, 2016).

Furthermore, there are plenty of examples of symbolic violence that can be linked to the publication of the book “Orixás, caboclos e guias: deuses ou demônios?” [Orishas, caboclos and guides: gods or demons?] by the evangelical leader and founder of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), Edir Macedo. In this book, he repeatedly associated Afro-Brazilian religions, specifically *umbandas* and *candombles*, with devil worship. In addition, his television channel aired programs with content that was offensive to these religions, which culminated in a public civil action filed in 2004. As of April 2018, the Record Group, to which the television is officially affiliated, was condemned to pay compensation of R\$600,000.00. Moreover, the Record News channel was required to air four educational programs in 2019 (with a total of 12 presentations) as a right of reply on Afro-Brazilian religions (O Globo, 2019).

The Special Secretariat of Culture (2016) also presents the case of the fire at the *terreiro* of Mãe Baiana de Oya, located in the Federal District in the capital city of Brasília, in a video where the Ialorixá reminds that it is not possible to forget what happened and that such an event is not restricted to her *terreiro*. She understands that the violent act she suffered, as well as other similar ones, is the result of racism and intolerance against all Afro-Brazilian culture. The video production also features a report by Frei David dos Santos,¹⁴ who recognizes that the oppression against Afro-religious cultures is related to the place of black people in Brazilian society (Canal Preto, 2018). Babalorixá Rychelmy Veiga¹⁵ makes the following statement.

There is also a growth of other religions, mainly Pentecostals, which attack. So, for example, we have the demonization of Exu that is so used in these other religions... And we try to rescue what this orisha is, who is the messenger, the orisha of sexuality, the orisha of communication (Canal Preto, 2018, 00:01:03–00:01:23).

Here, we highlight the issue addressed by Ortiz (1987) and Silva (2007) regarding the demonization of the deity Exu by many Pentecostals. Also, the Babalorixá Rychelmy Veiga (2020) reflects on this subject in a paper in which he analyzes the demonization of Exu in Brazil, considering how the deity is often presented: with

¹⁴ Franciscan, Christian, founder of the NGO EDUCAFRÓ and activist on racial issues.

¹⁵ Who had his *terreiro*, Ilê Axé Ojisê Oludumare in the city of Camaçari, in the State of Bahia (Wendel, 2019), invaded by armed bandits who also attacked him.

horns, in an assimilation between the deities of Umbanda and Candomblé and the Christian Satan.

In this context, Veiga (2020) also emphasizes that reflections on this subject must consider the mixtures found in religious cults, resulting from the strong religious syncretism prevalent in Brazil. Veleci (2017) recalls that this religious hybridism includes African, Afro-Brazilian, Indigenous, and European beliefs. The essential component is also Kardecist Spiritism, which, although it entered this process of syncretism later, significantly influenced all the religions formed in Brazil at the end of the 19th century. According to this author, Spiritism provided the black-African population with a greater appreciation of their spirituality, as there was a greater similarity between practices. However, the author points out that the Spiritist perspective projects “into the spiritual world the racism and Eurocentrism of the earthly world with the classification of ‘spirits of light’ and ‘low spirits’” (Veleci, 2017: 31, own translation).

Complementing the cases reported by Canal Preto (2018) and expanding this reality beyond the Federal District and the Baixada Fluminense in Rio de Janeiro, in a journalistic article, Marinho and Borges (2018) expose a case of religious racism carried out by military police officers against a *terreiro* in Salvador in the State of Bahia. When the police arrived, they were shooting and occupying a sacred space of *terreiro* members. In addition, they also physically assaulted and accused one member of the *terreiro* of alleged contempt of police after he questioned an act of abuse of authority when the police officer ordered the members of the *terreiro* to kneel (Marinho & Borges, 2018). The authors explain that the police justification for the action was that members of the *terreiro* were suspected of protecting drug traffickers in the region. After the accused tried to photograph the situation with his cell phone, the police conducted a search where they confiscated the device, leaving him without communication before sending him for a few more series of attacks at the police station.

The unproven association between the *terreiro* and drug trafficking described by Marinho and Borges (2018) indicates a socially constructed criminalization without legitimate grounds. It is also worth noting that, according to the authors who heard the detainee’s testimony, the police officers claimed that the action was just an exchange of gunfire, neglecting all the violence and the fact that they were the only ones armed, and in addition, that they had accused the member of the *terreiro* of resisting arrest and contempt. The follower was sent in a patrol car to the police station, where he was taken after being arrested. Yet, the primary victim of this entire situation had to suffer another attack on his religion when the police officer stated that his necklace of Ogum beads was of no use, disdaining his belief (Marinho & Borges, 2018). This police officer represents all the folklorization denounced by Nascimento (2016 [1978]), which culminates in this inferiorization and/or delegitimization. It applies to everything that is of African origin found in the troubled Brazilian culture. This national cultural circuit, as Flor do Nascimento (2016) points out, denies this heritage from the beginning. The police’s attitude can still be understood as a continuation of what Jansen (2019) discusses when talking about the migration of religious articles of Umbanda and Candomblé from the Civil Police Museum to the Republic Museum. Within this, the question remains about the fundamental changes in police work from this period until then.

To report on this recent scenario, Mendonça (2020) highlights the speech of Babalawô,¹⁶ Prof. Dr Ivanir dos Santos, who explains that the demonization of Afro-Brazilian religious cultures has been gaining momentum or increasing in parallel with the growth of neo-Pentecostal religions. According to him, as available in an article by Mendonça (2020), neither the COVID-19 pandemic nor the creation of Decradi inhibited the criminal actions of neo-Pentecostal Protestant bandits against the *terreiros*. The violent actions continued even with the *terreiros* closed (Mendonça, 2020). However, according to the report, during this period, no one was held responsible for the infractions. Despite forming the Brazilian social identity, as previously mentioned, the author also recalls that Umbanda and Candomblé were targets of political and police persecution in the 1910s and 1920s and reinforces that:

“There are many records of centers and terreiros, sacred objects and even followers vilified, destroyed and attacked by those who do not respect faith in Afro-Brazilian religions” (Mendonça, 2020, own translation).

Complementing this discussion, Passarinho (2019) and Diseko & Carneiro (2025), in articles published by BBC Brasil, point to a connection between the Neo-Pentecostal advance and its influence in the political and social spheres among its adherents.

Meanwhile, in 2020, in the municipality of Ribeirão Preto, in the State of São Paulo, an attack on an Umbanda *terreiro* left people injured in an action carried out by 30 attackers accused of religious intolerance. This case was reported by Schiavoni (2020), who explains that the members of the *terreiro* were physically attacked when they tried to leave the space, first attacked by a homemade bomb. When transcribing the speech of the Ialorixá of the invaded *terreiro*, the journalist highlights:

“It was the fourth time they dropped bombs. In this episode, there was a baby who fainted. When we left, they came at us with sticks and stones,” he said.

She reports that one of her sons, (...), who was also at the scene, was surrounded by the attackers and assaulted. He had to be taken by ambulance to a health unit to receive medical care. “They hit my boy in the face, then ripped his mouth open. He started to have convulsions. He was treated at the neighborhood health unit, was hospitalized for a day, and lost all his front teeth,” she said (Schiavoni, 2020, own translation).

These reports present some of the violent cases of racism and religious intolerance in different regions of Brazil. In an audiovisual production published on YouTube, TV Atalaia (2018) presents a case that occurred in the northern zone of Aracaju, the capital of the State of Sergipe, where a Babalorixá was accused of

¹⁶ The etymology of the term Babalawô comes from the combination of the Yoruba terms: Bábá (father) and awô (secret). He is responsible for the cult of Ifá, and Ifá is considered by his followers to be the father of writing (Aderonmu, 2021).

involvement in the death of an 8-year-old boy during his wake, when they decided to invade his *terreiro* before his innocence was proven (TV Atalaia, 2018). According to the report, the *terreiro* was set on fire, and everything was destroyed in yet another case of violence that was directed against institutions associated with Afro-Brazilian religious practices. These acts were justified by condemning this religious practice as an alleged satanic cult. Such justification is feasible only for Christian religions. This is because in Brazil, the long history of slavery, inferiorization, demonization, and erasure of Afro-Brazilian religions both culminates and is affected by racism (Nascimento, 2016 [1978]; Gaia, 2021).

Final considerations

The actions of the Bonde de Jesus in Rio de Janeiro, as well as other cases of religious intolerance and racism all over Brazil, reinforce and strengthen the thesis that what is attacked in the *terreiros* is not only the *terreiro* culture, but black-African culture as a whole. This occurs even when reinterpreted within the Brazilian context, demonizing the cults and turning Afro-Brazilian religions, such as Umbanda and Candomblé, into religions of the antichrist and the profane.

Experiences of violence, attacks, and persecution are an important part of the history of Candomblé, Umbanda, and other Afro-Brazilian religions, ancestries, and cultures. Due to these problems, *terreiros* were established outside large centres to ensure African cultural resistance and provide a place of refuge (Nascimento, 2016 [1978]; Gaia, Vitória, & Roque, 2020). In this way, the *terreiros* were established in places difficult to access and hidden from the suffering caused by the police, often disguised on the slopes of the most distant hills or even inside the forests, thereby avoiding arrest or having their objects stolen. However, these attacks currently reach these places. They are increasingly endangered not only by the hand of the State, represented mainly by the police, but also by groups such as Bonde de Jesus, associated with neo-Pentecostalism and drug trafficking. Baixada Fluminense is a region that exemplifies a space of refuge during the last century, as until recently it was less urbanized, and the main type of spatial organization of lifeworld was that of *favelas* (Gaia, Vitória, & Roque, 2020). This ended up favoring the growth of *terreiros* in the *favelas* that were forming in these cities, precisely where groups similar to the one mentioned have grown.

The resistance of these communities is aptly described by Munanga's reflection and questioning the strength that allows the survival of these Afro-religious cultures:

The question is how they managed to resist, to survive, and become part of the cultural heritage of Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Colombia, Venezuela, among others. Where could the secret of this resistance be hidden, which surprises the world in the face of so much oppressive and destructive force that enslaved Africans and their descendants today have suffered? Everything suggests that, despite the violence they were victims of, they did not give up defending their human dignity, their freedom, and their identity (2020: 10, own translation).

This author demonstrates the complexity of the relationships between resistance, religious racism, neo-Pentecostalism, and everything else discussed so far. From this, we highlight the importance of studies aimed at reflecting on the improvement and new forms of persecution and violence against followers of Afro-Brazilian religions, especially by followers of Christianity, specifically of the Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal branches. In the meantime, what we can observe and conclude is that even with freedom of belief being guaranteed by the Federal Constitution of 1988 and reaffirmed by laws and decrees, Afro-Brazilian religions continue to be persecuted in Brazil. However, these religions continue to resist even in the face of the violent, genocidal scenario that persecutes them fundamentally for their black-African roots.

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