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Cover Page Footnote

Afro-Brazilian communities have built and tended the knowledge presented in this article across diasporas, space, trauma, and time. May these offerings live their meaning for us as we cultivate love and liberation within and beyond higher education.

Afro-Brazilian Cosmology as Praxis for Student Affairs

Catarina E. Campbell

This article offers a friendly introduction to several orixás, the archetypal forces of nature in Yoruban and Afro-Brazilian cosmology, as a means to explore the liberational applicability of their teachings within the realm of student affairs. For this purpose, each orixá comes with a teaching story, series of reflection questions, and a tangible pedagogical practice. These offerings have the potentiality to catalyze self-development, sense of purpose, and breadth of perspective for both for our students and ourselves, all while elevating and celebrating the wisdom, struggle, and brilliance of black students and communities within in higher education.

Keywords: Orixás, Afro-Brazilian, Higher Education, Mentorship, Liberation, Pedagogical Practice

Introduction

O vento que te trouxe é o que te leva para o mar. — Afro-Brazilian saying
The wind that carries you is that which brings you to the sea.

Afro-Brazilian communities have protected and held these stories sacred across diasporas, space, trauma, and time. In this article, we highlight three principal orixás to explore how we in higher education might integrate these Pan-African teachings to illuminate and guide growth and change processes for our students, with particular attention and love for our emerging black scholars. May these offerings live their meaning for us as we cultivate love and liberation within and beyond higher education.

The stories come to me directly from my ancestors, specifically those from Nigeria and West Benin. My ancestors brought these frameworks and stories with them from their countries of origin to Brazil and eventually to me. A bright hope exists in my heart that others will bring to light their own versions of these stories and their meanings in future discourse and publication.

Catarina Campbell (they/them and she/her) is an intersectional feminist, queer woman of color, indigenous, fat-celebratory person with a disability and a survivor. Honoring and celebrating our right to be embraced for all of who we are, Catarina strives to bring joyful and meaningful connection their communities by tending to interpersonal connection and cultural exploration as conduits for social change.

Exu

Figure 1.

[Image of Exu in red, yellow, and black alongside his various symbols and tools]



Note. From *Diálogos da Fé* [Painting]. (n.d.). cartacapital.com.br/blogs/dialogos-da-fe/exu-nas-escolas-exu-na-ciencia-exu-na-politica/

We begin with one of the most foundational figures in the Yoruban orixá pantheon: Exu. Sometimes associated with the devil, certain people fear Exu because he is known as a trickster and consider him malevolent because he is not known to “take a side”. Others celebrate him as one of the ultimate liberators. Exu is the messenger, the grand communicator who makes all exchanges between humans and divinities possible. Tirelessly navigating at the crossroads of communication, between us and each other as well as between heaven and earth, Exu prods us to consider what we might be missing, to examine all possibilities, to learn through play, and to investigate our certainty in what we believe we know.

The energy of knowledge as play, as jest, as an iterative process, lovingly challenges our Euro-Western approach to academic/social instruction within higher education. It is customary to always begin rituals with gratitude to Exu, as he is the great connector to the other orixás. Continually invoked by our ancestors across time, welcoming Exu into our pedagogical practice signals to our black and African students that the academic realm can become sacred and transformative, in alignment with Africanist teachings and contexts.

Exu’s Teaching Story

Walking along the crossroads one day, Exu decided to teach some passersby a lesson. In other words: he decided to start some trouble. He painted himself red on one side and black on the other. He called two people to him and asked them to settle a bet. “If you can agree on what color I am, I shall reward you handsomely,” he said.

The two stood and argued for hours until it finally became dark, each sticking

firmly to their own perception: “He is black as night, I say!” declared one. “No. He is red as the sun, for sure!” shouted the other. Exu finally burst out laughing, “How will you ever know what I am if you don’t turn me around?!”

He then slipped into the night and continued his journey along the crossroads, leaving the two arguers unrewarded and scratching their heads.

Reflection Questions

Below are introspective prompts for our students after learning this story from Exu. These questions have a propensity of be effective for facilitation across a broad array of disciplines and quandaries to bolster student development of consciousness and self-integrity:

- I. What might be missing from my understanding of this story?
- II. How can I change my vantage point to this situation?
- III. Am I willing to take in information without judgement?
- IV. Do I believe in the power of communication to resolve problems?

Pedagogical Practice

Paint a stone half black and half red. Show the stone to your student(s), covering one half of the stone with your hand at a time, so those viewing can only see one color. Ask the group what color the stone is and witness what happens. Be ready to practice some compassionate facilitation; binary-based disagreements are rampant in many cultures. This exercise calls that tendency directly into question, challenging Euro-Centric ways of being with Black/Collectivist modes of meaning-making. Guidance through the reflection questions comes after sharing the story of Exu and the two travelers. This exercise models the value of perspective taking, communication, and collaboration across difference in the search for understanding.

Iansã

Figure 2.

Iansã é o orixá dos ventos, raios e temporais.



Note. From *Yalorixá Bianca* [Painting]. (n.d.). yabianca.com/orixa-iansa

Iansã is the spirit of lightning, of climate, of storms, and of wind. She is known as the woman warrior and as the great maternal protector. Her spirit heralds new possibilities, making her a trusted guide for those navigating uncharted territory of self or path. Often coming to show us where the problem lies, illuminating our sense of direction, her lessons are not subtle, but come with great love.

In the spirit of transparency and celebration, I will share that am I a *filha*, or daughter, of Iansã. This is to say, that she is the entity recognized by my ancestors and teachers as the predominant guide/force within my spirit. There are so many gifts and lessons she has taught and continues to teach me. If it seems that I hold a particular affinity for this orixá, it is because I do!

Teaching Story

Iansã saw Omulu, orixá of cure and illness, lonely and covered with smallpox sores. Used to having others react to him with disgust and fear, Omulu was surprised when Iansã asked him to dance. The two twirled and swirled, laughing and celebrating together. She held him close in friendship and love, unafraid of his illness and open sores. As gratitude for the encounter, Omulu gave Iansã power over the dead. This gift established her role as guide and communicator between ancestors, also known as *egun*, and death.

Reflection Questions

Below are introspective prompts for our students after learning this story from Iansã:

V. Could I be the first _____?

- VI. What do I protect and love with my whole heart?
- VII. Do I grant myself permission to radically change?
- VIII. How will I embrace connection over fear?

Pedagogical Practice

Invite your student(s) to engage in a writing exercise and reading ritual. Ask them to write creatively where they imagine that they are the first ever to do something, it can be anything from past or present. They can imagine doing something that someone has already done or a novel feat of their choice ranging from the mundane to the fantastical.

You can offer as much time for responding to the prompt as you like. One can encourage a spontaneous energy with a shorter time or one can allow for more premeditated reflections. The imperative is that each person identify their “new” venture and allow themselves to imagine being the first ever to live that experience or achievement. For many of our Black and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) student communities, being the first directly correlates to their choice to pursue a degree in higher education, which creates an additional impetus for and reward in this type of exercise.

Invite the student(s) to talk about being the first in their chosen endeavor as if it is happening in present time. Once they have shared, encourage them to notice what happened to their voice, within their body, and in their sense of possibility as they told the story. Ask all listening to celebrate and cheer wildly for each presenter after they relay their accomplishment. These readings can be done with the individual reading to themselves, with students reading to each other in small groups, or individuals presenting one by one to the whole group. This exercise may be particularly relatable to and salient for first-generation and immigrant students who are well versed in “being the first”.

Omulu

Figure 3.

O orixá da terra, do fogo e da morte.



Note. From *iQuilibrio* [Painting]. (n.d.). iquilibrio.com/blog/espiritualidade/umbanda-candomble/tudo-sobre-obaluaie/

Omulu is the spirit of illness and cure, in one; he is known as the father of the earth, of fire, and of death. As an infant, Omulu was thrown into the sea where he was rescued and adopted by the Great Mother, spirit of the oceans, Iemanjá. Later becoming infected with smallpox, he grew gravely ill and developed scars all over his body. It is said that this “ugliness” and suffering cultivated within him a deep insight to the traumas of man and the realm of sickness. His experiences ultimately shaped him into a doctor of the poor, with both the ability to cause plagues and cure them.

Always covered in attire of raffia or straw, many legends exist about why Omulu hides his body and face. Some say that Mother Iemanjá made his apparel to spare him from the shame of his scars and deformities. Others say that he is not hideous at all, but that the beauty and radiance of the sun hides beneath his raffia; it is believed that he cannot show his face because it is far too beautiful and would cause blindness, like the luminosity of the sun.

Reflection Questions

- I. Could the problem and the solution be different aspects of a shared source?
- II. How can I transmute my suffering into healing?
- III. What does it mean for a situation to resolve in death, or ending?
- IV. Can what I find ugly also be beautiful, be brilliant?

Pedagogical Practice

This practice can be done alone in front of a mirror, with you, or with class-

mates/peers. Invite your student(s) to cover their eyes with their hands and exclaim words which mean “wow, you are beautiful!” either to themselves or to another. After rotating in pairs or after having an opportunity to engage in self-practice, question your student(s) about what it felt like to be recognized as beautiful while also being unseen.

Conclusion

Exu, Iansã, and Omulu are just three of a powerful team of orixás whose purpose is to connect us with the elemental forces of nature, transformation, and self-actualization. It is said that there exist hundreds of orixás within the original Yoruban pantheon, but only those deemed especially gifted for the task of liberation from slavery and colonialism were cultivated in depth by Afro-Brazilians. These orixás serve to uplift people in the here and now, making them powerful conduits of internal development and social change for our students and beyond.

Teachings from the orixás bring a decolonial spiritual energy to our work within systems of higher education, which were founded primarily to proselytize indigenous communities. Secular higher education is a myth; which is to say, the container and content of higher education largely center on a Euro-Christian paradigm. By inviting the spiritual forces and philosophies of our Black ancestors into the Academy we amplify the cosmological perspective of our relationships and classrooms. The orixás will do as they have always done: develop resilience and resistance in the face of modern-day slaveries and colonialisms, all with the joyous affirmation that Black Lives Matter in Higher Education.

Resource List

This offering is written largely from memory and lessons derived from an extensive oral tradition. While helpful to guide current scholars in their understanding and research, APA does not lend itself to honoring the myriad forms of communication and knowledge sharing required to tell stories of the orixás and our history as embodied people of a Pan-African past.

As such, I offer a resource list to guide others in their search for meaning within these lineages as opposed to citing each aspect of every story. May these resources guide you on your own journey of consciousness to integrate these teachings into your practice within student affairs and higher education.

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