

# Learning *yorubá* through educational networks in *candomblé* communities: history, African culture and confronting intolerance in schools

STELA GUEDES CAPUTO

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil

## ABSTRACT

The text presents some results of the research about how children and teenagers learn *yorubá*, a live African language practiced in *candomblé* in Brazil. The study developed in a *candomblé* yard at Baixada Fluminense, in Rio de Janeiro, between April, 2012 and September, 2013. We share the same comprehension with Alves (2010), in his opinion, that the walls of schools are imaginary creations and we learn everything in or out of the schools, in other words, in an educating network. We understand that the *candomblé* yard is within this network through songs, foods, leaves, myths and artifacts. The *yorubá* to imbue for all this knowledge, as a language thread that lights, organizes and gives support to the communication of the community's members. The research show us too that cultures knowledge, including one of their languages, may suggest traces of African history teaching, and reduce the religious intolerance in schools.

## KEYWORDS

network educations; *yorubá*; African history; religious intolerance.

## APRENDENDO YORUBÁ NAS REDES EDUCATIVAS DOS TERREIROS: HISTÓRIA, CULTURAS AFRICANAS E ENFRENTAMENTO DA INTOLERÂNCIA NAS ESCOLAS

O texto apresenta alguns resultados de pesquisa sobre como crianças e jovens aprendem yorubá, uma língua africana viva praticada em *candomblé* no Brasil. O estudo se desenvolveu em um terreiro na Baixada Fluminense, no Rio de Janeiro, entre abril de 2012 e setembro de 2013. Partilhamos da mesma compreensão de Alves (2010), para quem os muros das escolas são criações imaginárias e que aprendemos todos dentro e fora das escolas, ou seja, em redes educativas. Entendemos os terreiros como estando nessas redes tecidas por cantos, comidas, folhas, mitos, artefatos. O yorubá perpassa todos esses saberes, como um fio de linguagem que acende, organiza e mantém a comunicação dos membros dessa comunidade. A pesquisa também nos mostrou que o conhecimento dessas culturas, incluindo uma de suas línguas, pode sugerir pistas para o ensino de história da África, bem como diminuir a intolerância religiosa nas escolas.

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

redes educativas; yorubá; história da África; intolerância religiosa.

## APRENDIENDO YORUBA EN LAS REDES EDUCATIVAS DE LAS CASAS DEL CANDOMBLÉ: HISTORIA, CULTURAS AFRICANAS Y ENFRENTAMIENTO DE LA INTOLERANCIA EN LAS ESCUELAS

### RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta algunos resultados de la investigación sobre cómo los niños y jóvenes aprenden *yoruba*, una lengua africana viva practicada en *candomblé* en Brasil. El estudio se realizó en una casa de *candomblé* en la Baixada Fluminense, en Río de Janeiro, desde abril de 2012 hasta septiembre de 2013. Comparte la misma comprensión de Alves (2010), para quien las paredes de la escuela son creaciones imaginarias y todos aprenden dentro y fuera de las mismas, es decir, en las redes educativas. Entendemos las casas de *candomblé* como parte de estas redes, con sus comidas, hojas, mitos, artefactos. El *yoruba* impregna todos estos conocimientos como una cadena del lenguaje que ilumina, organiza y mantiene la comunicación de los miembros de esta comunidad. La investigación también nos mostró que el conocimiento de estas culturas –incluidas sus lenguas– puede sugerir pistas para la enseñanza de la historia de África, así como reducir la intolerancia religiosa en las escuelas.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

redes educativas; *yoruba*; historia de África; intolerancia religiosa.



Photograph: Stela Guedes Caputo.  
Author's personal archives.

## FORE NOTES<sup>1</sup>

*Omolocun ajeun bó, omolocun/Omolocun ajeun bó, omolocum.* This song is sung in *Candomblé terreiros*<sup>2</sup> of *Kétu*<sup>3</sup> for the rounds of *Òrìṣà Logun Edé*. Only one phrase in *Yorubá*<sup>4</sup> repeated twice and it must be considered in its many meanings. *Òrìṣà*<sup>5</sup>, for instance. Many *candomblecists* consider the *Òrìṣà* as forces of nature;

- 1 Some interviews for this article have counted on the collaboration of Marta Ferreira, Master's candidate in PROPED/UERJ, Scholar in the *Ilè Obà Oyó* Project. All the photos, by Stela Guedes Caputo, have been authorized by the children, their families and this *Candomblé terreiro's* *Bàbàlórìṣà*.
- 2 *Terreiro* is the Portuguese name commonly given to Afro-Brazilian houses of worship.
- 3 Tradition experienced in cults to ancestors and *Òrìṣà*. This name has combined many religious expressions of different African groups brought during the slavery period. The meaning of this expression will be dealt with along this text in many other moments.
- 4 We find this term written in different ways by the authors. In our text we have chosen (*y*)*orubá*, as Professor José Beniste (2006) writes. Castro (2001) prefers (*i*)*orubá*. We decided to maintain the spelling chosen by each author when citing their texts.
- 5 As much as possible, we'll use *Yorubá* words in italic in the form that they are written. Beniste (2006) explains that a dot is used under some letters. *O* and *E* have an open sound; without it the sound is closes. The *Ṣ* acquires the sound of *X* [in Portuguese] or *SH*; without the dot it has the original sound of *S*. There is no plural. We choose this method to recognize the importance of the oral form in the maintenance of this language, but also because we believe in the importance of disseminating its written form as an additional element of the rich knowledge that circulates in *Candomblé terreiros*. Authors diverge in this practice. Beniste, for instance, uses the spelling we present here. Castro (2001, p.20) argues that there's no reason for writing *Yorubá* instead of *Iorubá*, or *Esu* and *Sàngó* instead of *Exu* and *Xangô* (in Portuguese), just like in Portuguese we don't write English or Deutsch instead of *Inglês* and *Alemão*, or Saint Patrick and Munchem instead of *São Patricio* and *MunIQUE*. Respecting all those viewpoints, in this article we have decided to mix the spellings and use the style adopted by Beniste and others. After all, English and German are not subaltern languages that almost disappeared in our country. as has *Yorubá* and its written form. It is of fundamental importance to disseminate this information, mainly for us who use it when speaking

others, as Gods linked to such forces.<sup>6</sup> According to Santos (1986), some authors affirm that the *Òrìṣà* are divinized ancestors, chiefs of lineages' or of African clans who, by means of exceptional acts during their lives, transcended the limits of their families or dynasties and come to be worshiped by other clans until becoming entities of national cult. In Candomblé terreiros, it is believed that it is possible to deal with these entities and their energy in different ways. In other words, *Logun Edé* would be an *Òrìṣà*, a hunter and fisher. He is the son of *Òrìṣà Ọ̀ṣọ̀ṣì's* and *Ọ̀ṣun's* and has characteristics of both of them. That's why his myth teaches that he lives half the year in the jungle (his father's domain) and in fresh waters the rest of the year (his mother's domain).

The song that opens this text says that *Logun Edé* "eats all the *omolocum*". *Omolocum* is a ritual food of *Oṣun*, *Logun's* mother. To make the *omolocum*, *Ìyá Bassé* (responsible for the food), gently gathers *erèè* (beans. In this specific case, black-eyed beans), *edé* (shrimp), *àlùbòsà* (onion), *epo didùn* (sweet oil) or *pupa* (palm oil) and *eyin* (boiled eggs), which are cooked.

According to Napoleão (2010, p. 5), *Yorubá* (which we will examine carefully below) is one of the 250 languages currently spoken in Nigeria. "It is also one of the natural languages spoken in other West African countries, including the republics of Benin (formerly Dahomey), Togo and Ghana. Like others, it came to Brazil during the slave period. Its last refuge, according to Beniste (2006) was in the Candomblé communities, so-called fields, houses or ilé, which use Nagô' cultural elements. It has been maintained through song, prayer and various forms of expression.

For example, Yoruba words are used to designate, the functions acquired by initiates, not only *Ìyá Bassé* (who we already mentioned) but all the other positions from *Ìyálòrixà* (literally, the mother who cares for the Orisha, better known as the Saint Mother) or *Bàbálòriṣà* (the Saint Father) to *Abiyán* (one who participates in the *terreiro*, but who is not an initiate). It designates the rituals, like the *Aṣẹṣẹ* conducted when a son or daughter of a saint dies. About these rites we have learned from *Munanga* that various African cultures live with a familiarity with death, which is seen only as a moment of the vital circle that doesn't harm the continuity of life. This does not mean, according to Murango, that death does not cause disorder either in the lineage or in the community of the dead. "Funeral rites serve precisely to symbolically deal with the disorder and restore the emotional balance to the group shaken by death" (Munanga, 2007, p.32).

Researcher Nilda Alves (2010) has long reaffirmed her concerns about the importance of the multiple *spaces-times*<sup>7</sup> in the learning of both students and teachers.

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with teachers. It is not an inflexible position, and we are open to proceeding differently whenever convenient.

6 Translator's Note – A "candomblecist" is someone who practices *Candomblé* rituals.

7 In his work, Alves explains that he uses these terms together to indicate that researches in/of/with the daily activities (in which our research group is inserted) intend to go beyond the things that he considers as dichotomies and limits received from modern sciences. Particularly in our texts we prefer this option only in some expressions, as in this case.

Her main argument is that education occurs in multiple contexts. She insists on the need to recognize that school walls are imaginary creations and we all live and learn inside and outside the schools, that is, through educational networks. We believe that Candomblé terreiros and their historical, material, and symbolic production, their ways of life and culture<sup>8</sup> are part of these educational networks. These networks are composed of dances, songs, foods, prayers, leaves, myths, artifacts, gestures, and secrets. They are networks made of these people's history. Yoruba is one of the languages that conduct this wisdom through a thread of language that ignites, organizes and maintains communication among the children, youth and adults of Candomblé.

## METHODOLOGY

There are different ways to deal with this language and others in terreiros and among their members. Some people understand better than others the meaning of the words they sing or speak, and think this is very important. Other people don't think it's necessary to completely understand the translation of the songs, but believe in the importance of the rituals, even without understanding their entire content. We are in no way interested in judging the practices of each terreiro in this regard. Our intention is to share information about the behavior of the Candomblé house of worship where this research was carried out.

The Candomblés and their languages have been transmitted to us through oral practices. This is true for the history of the houses, their founders, their ancestral links with Africa and the many and different rituals, songs, recipes, and secrets. All of this has been transmitted from candomblecist to candomblecist over generations, carrying these cultures since the slavery period until today. In relation to *yorubá*, in most of the Kétu terreiros, it is most common to repeat the words in prayers, songs or in the daily activities in which the expressions in that language are needed until everyone or nearly everyone is able to speak in a similar way. Researcher Ruy do Carmo Póvoas (1989, p.9) affirms:

The origins of Candomblé in Bahia State are lost in the slave quarters, where black slaves transmitted to their sons the *Òrisàs'* secrets, the faith in *Olórun* and the hope of *Óṣàlá*. These secrets resisted all forms of oppressive Catholic evangelizing, police persecution and all kinds of repression and prejudice. The Candomblé community didn't accept the written form to register and perpetuate the *Òrisàs'* secrets, it only trusted in mouth-ear transmission. And it has been happening this way in Bahia for 400 years, with each generation preserving and transmitting the precepts.

Póvoas also affirms that, when living in a Portuguese-speaking society, the "*candomblecist*" needs to manage the language of his religion to establish a dialog

8 According to Raymond Williams (2007), the notion of culture is involved in the historical, material, and symbolic production of the society and its struggles. In his conception, culture is a way of life.

between humans and divinities. This way, he becomes bilingual (*idem*, p.19). Castro (2001, p.68) also identifies in those communities a great repertory based on *Iorubá*; however, this doesn't mean there is "linguistic competence", she affirms.



Photograph: Stela Guedes Caputo.  
Author's personal archives.

In daily activities of *the terreiros* we see that candomblecists combine a very large vocabulary of *yorubá* words and in general, use them not as a second language, but in a unique mix of Portuguese, *yorubá* and even other African languages, as in this common sentence: "take the *obé* and cut the *ilá*" (take the knife and cut the okra). Our studies are interested in the knowledge networks and meanings found in Candomblé. Nevertheless, at this moment we are concerned about understanding the learning of *Yorubá* and its use in terreiros, regardless of the route taken in learning, teaching and maintaining the language.

As a methodological option for approaching our objectives, we observed (from April 2012 to September 2013) *the Ilé Àṣẹ̀ Omi Laare Ìyá Saba*, a Kétu terreiro located in the neighborhood of Santa Cruz da Serra, in the municipality of Duque de Caxias' in the Baixada Fluminense region of Rio de Janeiro State. All of the sons and daughters of the house of worship have a notebook or diary<sup>9</sup> that they begin to use and experiment with since their initiation, registering rituals, myths, and exchanges. They are even encouraged to describe their dreams. Vocabulary and prayers in *Yorubá* are also registered. Simultaneously, the speech, orality continues to be practiced in *Yorubá*. Orality and writing are not seen in opposition or as a dichotomy, but as complements.

In addition to our constant observation, we have consulted a bibliography on this theme and talked to *Babálórìṣà*<sup>10</sup> Daniel *ti Yemojá*<sup>11</sup>, who is responsible for the

9 There is a study being carried out by Marta Ferreira, a master's student, under my guidance, specifically about these notebooks.

10 Commonly known as "Pai de Santo" (Saint-Father).

11 In *Yorubá*, "ti" is the preposition "of." In Brazil, *Yemojá* is the divinity of salty waters. It is common in terreiros to associate a person's name to his/her *Òrìṣà*.

house. We interviewed four Candomblecists from this terreiro (two children, 8 and 9 years old; and two teen-agers 16 and 18 years old). We recorded conversations and took pictures of the daily activities often mentioned in answers about how *yorubá* is learned in the terreiro, which is not a school, but which is impregnated with educational processes that weave meanings for those who participate in its culture.

At first we believed that the different relations with this language would reveal precious knowledge beyond the imaginary walls of the schools. During the process, we came to conclude that these relations can also become strong indications of how to stimulate implementation of Brazilian Law 10639/2003 which requires including Afro-Brazilian history and culture in the official educational curriculum. In 2008, this law was amended to include the teaching of indigenous cultures (Law 11645/2008). We also thought that perhaps these relations with these languages and knowledge would help to confront religious discrimination and intolerance, strongly present in the daily life of schools'. It is our reflections on these issues that we share in this paper.

### ÀGÒ, MO TÚNBÁ, MO DÚPÉ

“Excuse me,” “I bless you”, “I am grateful”



Ogan Patryck.  
Photograph: Stela Guedes Caputo.  
Author's personal archives.

This is Patryck Malheiros in a Candomblé terreiro. Patryck *ti Ògún*, is 9 years old, and is *Olóyè*, a person who has a title and a function within Candomblé. He was initiated when he was 7 in the function of *Ogan*. He plays the conga drums in

the rituals and also plays other important roles in the terreiro. Everybody calls him *Ogan* Patrick and he is always addressed as “sir.” As emphasized in other studies (Caputo, 2012), the time since initiation is a defining element in Candomblé, that is, the time the person passes as a Saint is more important than his civil age, inverting the adult-based logical conception of society, in general, and particularly schools. It doesn’t mean that elders are not important, to the contrary, but that children and young people are as respected as the others.

*Ogan* Patryck speaks many words in *yorubá*, “mainly in the shed, when we have a function,” he explains. The shed is the place<sup>12</sup> where the festivals, the rituals dedicated to the *Òrìṣà*, take place. “To have a function” means to have a ritual. We asked: “how do you learn it?” “Listening, watching, writing in the notebook, reading, and studying,” he said. “But do you learn by yourself?” – we want to know. “Not by myself. People sing and we learn,” he answers. *Ogan* Patryck also explains that during the rituals he repeats the words in *Yorubá* and afterwards he writes them down in his notebook, trying to learn from the older saint children, mainly *Babá* Daniel, the correct form of writing the words in *Yorubá*. About the moments when he most speaks the African language, the boy says: “In general, we speak normally because the newer people in the house don’t understand. We use *Yorubá* most when we speak with an *Òrìṣà* and in songs.”

The learning process is described similarly by João Vitor, who is 8 and was initiated into Candomblé when he was 4. In the terreiro he is *Omọ Ọba Àṣẹ* João Vitor *ti Airá*, that is, “the son of King Àṣẹ<sup>13</sup> João Vitor de *Airá*.”<sup>14</sup> Like Patrick, his saint-brother, he has learned the language by singing and praying, and mainly with *Babá* Daniel. Always called *Omorobá*, João Vitor emphasizes the most important element of learning at the terreiros. “I watch people and I learn, but I also teach songs and how to play an instrument.” The exchanges that spread through the educational networks’ of the terreiros disseminate knowledge. As we have observed, children, young people and adults participate in these networks in equal conditions, always respecting the hierarchy of their functions and how long the person has been initiated.

Lincoln Ferreira de Mattos, is 16, was initiated when he was 13 and is called *Dofonitinho de Oṣalá*.<sup>15</sup> The term *Dofonitinho* means that he was the second person in his initiation group [known as a *barco*, which means boat in Portuguese]. The

12 We agree with geographer Yi Fu Tuan (1983), for whom the meaning of “space” is more abstract than that of “place.” Something that begins as undistinguished space may become a place as we come to know it better and give value to it. Architects speak about the spatial qualities of a place, but they can also talk either about the locational qualities of space. The ideas of “space” and “place” cannot be defined separately.

13 Àṣẹ is understood as a vital force brought by the *Òrìṣà*. In the place researched, the word is repeated as “*Omorobá*”.

14 In Brazil, *Airá* is referred to as *Ṣàngó* and, summarized once again in an absurd way, this *Òrìṣà* was a king of Ọyó the God of Thunder, and related to justice.

15 According to Beniste (2001), *Oṣalá* is understood as the *Òrìṣà* of the Creation and of human beings, the main *Òrìṣà funfun* – the white divinities.





Omorobá Aşę João Vitor ti Airá.  
 Photograph: Stela Guedes Caputo.  
 Author's personal archives.

first person in the boat is “*Dofono*.”<sup>16</sup> He also emphasizes the daily coexistence as a fundamental condition for learning the language. “People ask for something in *Yorubá* and then we learn by repeating; people explain and then we learn and memorize the words”. But the *Dofonitinho de Oşalá* reminds us that there is a period dedicated especially to learning the practices, dances, prayers, songs and language.

“In *hunkó*, the room where we were sheltered for initiation, we learned the prayers and the songs. We also learn the ritual dances as time goes by. Then the *Babalorişá* teaches or translates for us and we understand more and more.” We asked *Dofonitinho* if only *Babá* does the teaching, and he answered: “Ah, when a brother doesn’t hear something or understand exactly, the other brothers explain the meaning of each thing – ‘it means so and so’ - and then we learn a little more.” We also asked if it is like learning in school, and he said:

16 A group of people to be initiated is simply called a boat. In the ranking (generally established according to the *Orisà* of the house) they are denominated as follows: *dofono* (a), *dofonitinho* (a), *fomo*, *fomotinho* (a), *gamo*, *gamotinho*. In interviews conducted for this article, by e-mail on October 20, 2013, professor of *Yorubá* José Beniste explained that these are the words used in the *Jeje* rituals, but they have been incorporated by all the Candomblés. Before that, he affirms, in the Candomblés *Kétu*, people of the group were identified as the 1st *iyàwó* of the boat, the 2nd *iyàwó* of the boat, and so on. This coexistence has enabled new adaptations. *Dofono*, *dofonitim*, *fomo*, *fomotim*, *gamo*, *gamotim*, *domo*, *domotim*, *vito*, *vitotim* have undergone more adaptations, with diminutives in Portuguese: *dofonitinho(a)* etc., being pronounced like this in most houses of Candomblé (that’s why we use here the form as we hear it and the form as it is written in the terreiros).



**Dofoninho Lincoln.**

Photograph: Stela Guedes Caputo.  
Author's personal archives.

No, because we speak in a formal way in school. It's quite different. In the shed we laugh, play, and talk about other things. It isn't only one person who speaks. Here, a person knows something and passes it to others and others can pass it to the newer ones. In school, only the teacher is the leader who transmits information to everybody. And the pupils don't pass things to their colleagues who were absent. Here, everyone passes to everyone.

Once again a collective learning network is emphasized by the candomblecists.

Once again, we asked *Donitinho* what is the way he likes most to learn in this place. He said; "I like the *itàn*, the African tales, because our *Babalorişá* seems to be living the story while he tells it, and it's cooler to learn like that! I also like the songs that tell what the *Òrisà* did and his myths, everything in *yorubá*, so we learn".

*Dofono* Nicolas *ti Oşalá*, 18 years, talks about the first words that, in general, all the people learn when they begin to experience the space of the *terreiros*. These first words are not random, since they are related to the humble and fraternal behavior expected from each Saint-Son or Saint-Daughter. *Dofone* explains: "*Ágò*, means to excuse; *mo túnbá* is to request and give a blessing; *mo dúpé* is to thank and *ajeum* is to ask if a person wants to eat. We learn from practice and daily experience. Sometimes the *Babá*, the Saint-Father, sits down, usually in the kitchen and gives explanations, but we mostly learn with the practice." *Dofone* also indicated what he considers the most important thing in the learning of the language:



Dofono Nicolas ti Oṣalá.  
Photograph: Stela Guedes Caputo.  
Author's personal archives.

It's like we removed a piece of Africa and brought it to Brazil. It wouldn't be possible to implement a course in *Yorubá* at school, for instance, because in fact we learn by practicing. In school there is a lot of theory. The teacher explains, we get lots of information, but we don't practice. We take notes in our notebook and don't practice in daily life. Here it is different. Here we learn and practice at the same time. It's as if we were born to do things a little more slowly.

#### IF SPEECH CONSTRUCTS THE CITY, SILENCE BUILDS THE WORLD (*African proverb*)

In the preface of the book *As nações Ketu* [The *Kétu* Nations], by Agenor Miranda Rocha (2000), Muniz Sodré recalls the phrase we used in this subtitle. It is a Sudanese phrase, he says, but it represents a generalized attitude in Africa and its diaspora concerning communication. The researcher thinks that there is an ethical valorization of silence as a space for clarification and solemnity, while speech is related to danger levity and confusion.

Only “danger”, is quite clear. The man who practices the tradition is not mute, and silence should not be understood as a mere absence of speech. To the contrary, silence is the reality that generates speech and engenders the word, gives birth to the word, as the power that leads an individual to his own interior and to the emergence of truth. Silence is something from ‘inside,’ while a word is something from ‘outside.’ In the pondered interplay of the two spaces, the balanced communication of the world is realized’. (Sodré *apud* Rocha, 2000, p.9)

The master of oral traditions, Amadou Hampaté Bâ, of Mali teaches that when we speak of tradition in relation to African history, we refer to oral tradition. According to him, no attempt to penetrate the African people's history and spirit will be valid, unless it is based on this heritage of all kinds of knowledge patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, and from master to pupil over the centuries.

Among modern nations, where written language has precedence over orality and books are the main vehicle's of cultural heritage, people without written language have long been considered as uncultured . Fortunately, this unfounded concept began to unravel after the two world wars. (Hampaté Bâ, 2011, p. 167)

About this theme, Hampaté Bâ (*idem*, p. 169) comments:

Oral tradition is the great school of life, covering and connecting all its features. It may seem chaotic to those who don't unveil its secret and dismount the Cartesian mentality that customarily separates everything into well defined categories. In fact, within the oral tradition, spiritual and material aspects are not dissociated. It is simultaneously religion, knowledge, natural science, initiation to art, history, entertainment and leisure, since every detail enables us to go back to the primordial Unity. Based on initiation and experience, oral tradition leads men to their entirety; for this reason we can affirm that it has contributed to create a special kind of man to shape the African soul. Since African "culture is related to the common behavior of men and the community , it isn't an abstract thing that can be isolated from life. It involves a particular viewpoint of the world or, in other words, a particular presence in the world – a world conceived as a Whole, where all things are connected and interact (*ibid.*, p. 169).

In relation specifically to *yorubá* in terreiros, Beniste (2001), highlights that it is an instrument for communication among people in a society where everything that is done is supported by prayers, songs and recitations in that language. Concerned about the transmission and maintenance of the traditions, Beniste emphasizes that *Yorubá* may be used correctly or incorrectly depending on the attention that is given to speech. When it is used correctly, the author assures that it consecrates *Candomblé* rules, but if used incorrectly, it gives origin to misuse of the language and disfigures the language itself.

To confirm this theory, one can just note the differences in the forms of expressing the words of many simple songs, prayers and conversations between one terreiro and another. This is one of the reasons for the difficulties found in translations to know what is sung and prayed. The loss of the original sound of many words and the bad habits now accepted as correct hamper the interpretation of certain words, which when translated don't confer with the desired sense of that moment. This situation has permitted people, in their eagerness to translate, to substitute these words for others that are more convenient, thus totally changing the meaning of what is desired at that moment. (*idem*, p. 318)

Beniste emphasizes that language is the cultural key of a people and, without reexamining its aspects, its origin and its forms it is impossible to constitute a religion, given that it is often not known what is sung and what is prayed.

Its learning will respond to many doubts existing in the religion, not only in the interpretation of chants and prayers as a form of curiosity, but also by the fact of being able to feel more intimately, through knowledge, the high level of religiosity existing in the messages. And its use will be extended longer upon also being employed in human literature and current use. (*idem, ibidem*)

Interviewed for this study, *Bàbálóriṣà Daniel ti Yemonjá* agrees with this thought. That's why he associates an intimate relation between speech and writing in *yorubá* learning in his *terreiro*. He affirms:

If we don't know how to sing, pray and speak correctly, we lose the sense of our language and the rituals also lose their meaning, because everyone needs to understand what they are doing. To disseminate knowledge of a language is to disseminate power, as retaining knowledge of a language is to retain power. Here, the most important thing is to share our knowledge.

Many elements constitute the cultures (the ways of life) of the *Candomblés*. As we have seen, language is a fundamental element. In the introduction of this article, we affirmed that *yorubá* is a language that came to Brazil in the slavery period and became more popular in the black communities. However, we emphasized that there are, of course, other African languages that penetrated Brazil in different periods and various factors that influenced their dissemination and preservation not only in terreiros, but also in the Portuguese language spoken in Brazil. Dalby (2011, p.337), for instance, emphasizes that “although Africa has a population density lower than that of the whole world, it has a level of linguistic complexity higher than any other continent”. Castro has also warned about what she considers to be the weak scientific rigor with which linguistic data are handled in many milieus. They are usually considered as irrelevant for understanding historical, social, and anthropological themes relating to blacks in Brazil. For which reason African languages rarely gain attention.

It's always important to remember that one of the most expressive examples, due to its magnitude and historical importance, was the congress held in 1988 to celebrate 100 years of the abolition of slavery, which brought specialists from around the world, including Africa to São Paulo. The congress did not reserve one moment to discuss the issue of African languages – an omission that could lead to the absurd idea of reinventing the slavery theory of the African people under the inhuman condition, of a “slave-thing” that only began to speak a “human language” that is one that is articulately intelligible to human ears – when he came into contact with one of the languages of European colonization; in this case, Portuguese! (Castro, 2001, p. 67)

In the terreiro researched, the vocabulary used is in *Yorubá*; and for this reason this is the language that moves us in this research. We cannot deal deeply with all the linguistic groups on the African continent (due to a total impossibility and the fact that it is not our purpose in this work). But, as we have seen, the book entitled “*Falares Africanos na Bahia – Um Vocabulário Afro-Brasileiro*” (“*African Speech in Bahia: An African-Brazilian Vocabulary*”) by Yeda Pessoa de Castro (*idem*), is an important study of African languages. It helps contest the colonialist stereotype denounced by the author herself, concerning the idealization of a “Single Africa” speaking a single language. Not *Yorubá*, but the *Banto* group – Castro says, among all the sub-Saharan linguistic groups, was the first to raise the curiosity of foreign researchers, and was studied earlier.

The term *Banto* (bantu: men, plural of *mantu*) was proposed by W. Bleek in 1862, in the first comparative grammar of *Banto*, to designate the linguistic family that he had discovered, composed of several languages that originated from a common trunk, the *protobanto*, which was spoken three or four millenniums ago. Only later did this term come to be used by scholars from other fields to denominate 190,000,000 individuals who lived in the territories below the equator, corresponding to an area of 9,000,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Their territories encompass the African countries of: Cameroons, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Angola, Namibia, the People’s Republic of the Congo (Congo, Brazzaville), The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC or Congo, Kinshasa), Zambia, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, and South Africa. (*idem*, p. 25)

Castro explains that in Brazil *Banto* people were known by many denominations, mainly congos and angolas, which encompass a number of ethnic groups and languages distributed among the present territories of Congo and Angola.

Anthropologist Juana Elbein dos Santos (1986, p. 31) recalls that African people of *Bantu* origin<sup>17</sup> from the Congo and Angola were brought to Brazil during

17 Authors also write the word “banto” in different ways. As we did with the term (y)orubá, we continue to respect the option of each author. Santos (1986), for instance, writes *Bantu*; Castro (2001) writes *Banto*, as does Lopes (2003). Lopes said he agrees with Mário Antônio Fernandes de Oliveira’s (1973 *apud* Lopes, 2003) affirmation that European scholars who wrote the Banto language for the first time, were compelled to use Romanic characters with diacritical signs if necessary. So, when hearing Africans pronounce “bântu” [bātu], Anglophone scientists wrote it as they spoke it; French scientists used the form *bantou*; and the Portuguese preferred “*Bânto*”, provided that in our language the final, unaccented “o” sounds like “u”. In the same way, after Frenchifying it they inflected the word: *bantou*, *bantoue*, *bantous*, *bantoues*. So did the Portuguese: *Banto*, *Banta*, *Bantos*, *Bantas*. Scientific guidance from the Centre International des Civilisations Bantu – CICIBA (International Center of Bantu Civilizations) condemns these uses, defending the use of bantu in all languages, without nationalization or inflections. Yet for practical reasons and better comprehension, Lopes still opts for the written form banto. We will use the form chosen by each author, respecting his or her preference.

the period of conquest, and small groups were spread throughout the large territories of the states of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Espírito Santo and Minas Gerais at a time of difficult communication and with urban centers beginning to grow.

According to Santos, the Nagôs were brought to Brazil during the last slavery period and concentrated in urban areas of the Northern and Northeastern States (Bahia and Pernambuco, particularly in their capitals – Salvador and Recife). Santos affirms that the intense commerce between Bahia and the African coast kept the *Nagôs* in permanent contact with their lands of origin. Santos also explains that all the diverse groups coming from South and Mid Dahomey and Southeast Nigeria, from a large region called *Yoru baland*, are known generically in Brazil as *Nagô*, originating from different kingdoms like the *Kétu*, *Sabe*, *Oyó*, *Egbá*, *Egbado*, *Ijesa*, *Ijebu*. The language of these people is *Yorubá*, which is spoken until today in the terreiros that we have analyzed.

From a historical perspective, Santos's reference is very important, because it places in context the fact that most terreiros in Brazil have a *Nagô* tradition, and it is exactly this Candomblé that has perpetuated most among us. However, Nei Lopes (2003) emphasizes that *Banto* cultures have predominated within the scope of the Afro-Black presence in Brazil, which has contributed to our cultural organization mainly through their languages, such as: quicongo, umbundo and quimbundo. Lopes contests the supposed ascendancy of Sudanese languages, like *Nagô* (*Yorubá*), among the African languages spoken in Brazil during the slave period, which would have modified the Portuguese spoken in Brazil. He agrees with Renato Mendonça who affirms that *quimbundo*, because of its more extensive, and ancient use had greater influence on the Portuguese language than *Nagô* (*idem*, p. 18).

According to Lopes (*idem*, *ibidem*):

In fact, in the vocabulary of the Portuguese language as spoken in Brazil, the terms of *Nagô* origin are restricted to the practices and tools involved in the *Orixás'* tradition, such as music, description of clothes and Afro-Bahia culinary (...). Both in phonetics, morphology and syntax, *Banto* languages decisively influenced the language that is spoken in Brazil today. But it is in the vocabulary that these languages are really more present. In his book "Africanos no Brasil" ("Africans in Brazil"), published in 1938, Nelson de Senna highlighted the insufficiency of the then existing dictionaries in relation to the rich vocabulary of the Portuguese language spoken in Brazil. He attributed this lack to the ignorance of "even educated people in Europe and America concerning the valuable contribution of Indians and Africans to the language of Camões".

Lopes emphasizes that the ignorance pointed out by Senna is, in his opinion, a result of an Eurocentric view that has guided academic studies in Brazil for a long time. He emphasizes:

A university permanently turned toward an imaginary window from which one could appreciate the Mediterranean, the Baltic etc. didn't see and couldn't see what there was behind it, beside it and at its feet: a stunning universe of words

that were being created every moment from the mouth of that negro who was neither *Banto* nor Sudanese, because he is a Brazilian individual. (*idem, ibidem*)

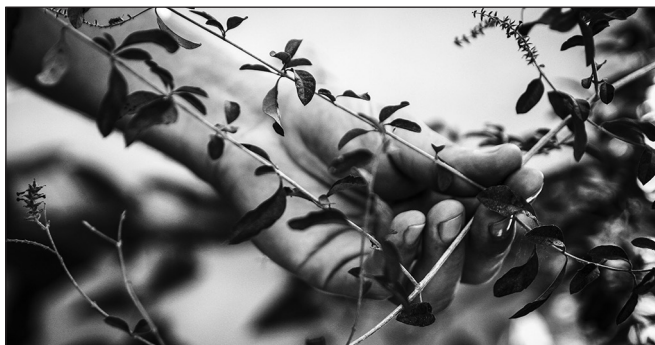
The word Candomblé itself is an example. According to Berkenbrock (1998), it probably comes from “*candom*”, a type of drum. But the “*blé*” ending is not known in Sudanese languages as it is in *Yorubá*. On the other hand, we found *kandombélé* in many *Bantu* languages, in which it means “to pray.” In addition, *samba*, *jongo*, *congadas*, and the Angolan *capoeira* are important aspects of our culture, brought by the *Bantus*.

We don't intend to reinforce a dispute over which is the best, more authentic or more important African legacy in Brazil, principally among those who practice Candomblés. This would not benefit the African-matrix religions. To the contrary, we believe in the importance of all these cultures and emphasize the need for new, increasingly broader studies about the learning of children and young people in the terreiros. We would very much like to visit terreiros of Angolan origin (there are many in Brazil) and see how they learn *Bantu* (*kibundo* and *kikongo*, for instance). They are certainly rich, and similar learning practices.

At the beginning of this text we also said that the language is preserved in the asé (the terreiros), but is not restricted to behind their walls. For a long time we have made daily use of many words of Banto origin outside the terreiros, without considering it. Words like *quitanda* (grocery store), *corcunda* (hump), *carimbo* (stamp), *cachimbo* (pipe), *dengo* (caress), *cachaça* (sugar cane liquor) all originated from Banto and have been incorporated in the daily spoken-Portuguese. *Caçula* (the only term we use to designate the youngest sibling) is a *Banto* word. From *Yorubá* we have adopted words such as: *gogó*, which originated from *gògòngò* (Adam's apple), *jabá*, from *jàbàjábá* (a piece of dried meat). There is, however, a very important word related to our theme: “Faith”, which designates many different forms of feeling, believing, explaining, and acting. It has at times triggered hostility against *candomblecists* (of any nation). The word faith has a Latin origin and means to trust absolutely in something or someone, and to adhere to religious doctrines considered to be revealed by God. But in *Yorubá*, faith simply means “to want,” “to desire.” The history of words tells us about the history of societies, their conflicts, their beauties.



## THE SECRET OF ỌSÁNYÌN



Photograph: Stela Guedes Caputo.  
Author's personal archives.

### POWER AND POETICS TO DISCUSS HISTORY, AFRICAN CULTURES AND INTOLERANCE IN SCHOOLS

To conclude this article we share one of the *itàn* from *Ifá*<sup>18</sup>, which is the literary and philosophical body of the *Yorubá*, according to the writer Luiz Antonio Simas, who affirms it is comparable to the most beautiful thought systems conceived by humankind. In the interviews made during our research, the *itàn* were also considered one of the most important elements in the learning at terreiros.

Simas himself recalls the *itàn*, and tells that Ọsányìn lived in the forests when he received the power from *Olódùmarè* to know the mystery of leaves. So, he hid all of them in a dried squash hung from a tree branch. One day *Yánsàn* was very curious, so he put a spell on the winds so they would knock down the tree branch and spread the holy leaves throughout the forest. Then, the other Ọrìṣà collected certain leaves and came to consider them their own. There was, however, a problem: to become medicine, the leaf had to be enhanced by words and songs. In relation to this, Simas (2013, p.52) affirms that:

Only that enchanted through words is capable of endowing a leaf with its attributes of cure. The absence of words does not strengthen a leaf. The use of the wrong word may change a balsam into a poison.

As we have said, we understand the terreiros as educational networks, places of multiple learning. Among the many forms of knowledge and meanings learned and taught, we emphasize *yorubá*. For the education field, even in isolation, we believe that this is an extremely important aspect. Learning in these conditions and through these experiences is very positive. But during this study we have imagined other aspects and our proposal is not to consider these as isolated and confined forms of knowledge.

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18 As mentioned earlier, *itàn* are stories, myths. *Ifá* is a divinatory consultation system, considered as a divinity in view of its importance.

Law 10639<sup>19</sup>, approved on January 9, 2003, required the inclusion of African history and Afro-Brazilian culture in the official curriculum in Brazil. Gomes (2008) identified the difficulties for implementing that law, even 5 years after its approval.

We still find considerable resistance from state and municipal educators to introducing the discussion. This resistance is not an isolated fact: it is related to the presence of a peculiar social imaginary about the question of blacks in Brazil, related to the myth of racial democracy. The aprioristic belief that Brazilian society is an example of democracy and racial and cultural inclusion causes the demand for pedagogical and political treatment of the racial question to be seen with distrust by Brazilians in general, and by many teachers and educational policy-makers in particular. (Gomes, 2008, p. 69)

Four years after Gomes published this article, Oliveira (2012) identified continued to identify difficulties in implementing Law 10639: a lack of didactic material about African history, and of blacks in Brazil; racism among children and young people; and troubles teachers face discussing a theme that causes “many conflicts.” The researcher affirms that the curricular and pedagogic implications raised by the new legislation take a long route before they effectively reach the classrooms.

Gomes also considers racism and lack of information about African ascendancy in Brazil as serious obstacles to promoting what he considers a collective awareness, based on political action and construction of a more just and egalitarian society for all ethnic, and racial groups in Brazil. The author recalls that the first article of the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (LDBEN/1996) establishes that education encompasses the formative processes found in family life, human coexistence, at work, in educational and research institutions, social movements and cultural manifestations.

If we understand that knowing our African history and heritage is part of the educational process of social individuals, and if we recognize that a significant portion of our historical, and cultural formation concerning Africa and Afro-Brazilian culture has not been satisfactorily presented by schools, we can only confirm the importance of including this discussion in the school curriculum, even if it must be compelled by law. (Gomes, 2008, p. 71)

If, for example, the boy João Vitor – who we interviewed for this article – could discuss in the public school where he studies why he is called *Omorobá* in *the terreiro*, how much study could this inspire? What does the name mean? Which African region does it come from? How many languages are spoken there?

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19 We have maintained the reference of Gomes to the Law 10639/2003 because when he published his article, Law 10639/2003 had not yet been modified by Law 11645/2008, as we mentioned before.

We know that what we are proposing is not an easy task. To the contrary. In 2012 various newspapers<sup>20</sup> published articles revealing that pupils in a school in Manaus (the capital of Amazonas State) refused to work on a project about Afro-Brazilian culture. They alleged religious principles and maintained that the work made apologies to “Satanism and Homosexuality.” Journalist Maria Derzi commented in her article that the students, by themselves and guided by their preachers and parents, prepared a project about Evangelical missions in Africa, which wasn’t accepted by the school. For this reason, the students camped in front of the school and protested against the work on Afro-Brazilian culture., This was considered an act of ethnic and religious intolerance, according to Derzi. The teacher Raimundo Cardoso, who was interviewed, said that pupils also refused to read classic Brazilian books such as *O Guarany*, *Macunaíma*, and *Casa Grande e Senzala* [The Masters and the Slaves], maintaining that these books talk about homosexuality. They argued that the problem with the project was the discussion of other religions, mainly Candomblé and Spiritualism, and the homosexuality included in these literary works. The students proposed to conduct a project based on the Bible.

The situation in Manaus is not unique; similar cases have been raised in many meetings for evaluating the discussion about Law 11645 in schools. In fact, due to difficulties like these, the theme has not been discussed in schools, as indicated by Gomes (2008) and Oliveira (2012).

Therefore, if it’s difficult to talk about African history, even if omitting some aspects of its culture that are dealt with here, why do we propose raising them for regular discussion? Because the “pedagogy of conflict” proposed by Santos (1996) seems to be a good perspective. For Santos, the paradigm of modernity comprises two main forms of knowledge, one as regulation and the other as emancipation. According to Santos, although both forms of knowledge are inscribed equally in modernity, the first has priority over the second. Santos affirms:

This hegemony of knowledge as regulation allowed this line to re-code “knowledge as emancipation”. Therefore, what was considered “knowledge as emancipation” became ignorance, that is, solidarity was re-coded as chaos. And what was considered ignorance became knowledge, (colonialism was re-coded as order). Since the logical sequence of ignorance to knowledge is also the temporal sequence from past to future, the hegemony of knowledge as regulation causes the future, and therefore social transformation come to be known as order and colonialism as a kind of order. In parallel, the past was conceived as chaos and solidarity as a type of chaos. Human suffering could then be justified in the name of the struggle for order and of colonialism against chaos and solidarity. This suffering continues to be afflict specific individuals: workers, women, ethnic and sexual minorities, each of which is considered as dangerous because they represent chaos and solidarity against which it is

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20 See “A Crítica com Notícias” (“The Critic with News”) – November 10, 2012.

necessary to fight in the name of order and colonialism. The epistemological neutralization of the past has been the counterpart of the neutralization and politics of the “dangerous classes”. (*idem*, p. 24)

According to Santos, it is necessary to reanimate the past towards this pedagogic project, which consists in reconstructing the conflict between knowledge as regulation and knowledge as emancipation. The pedagogic conflict takes place between these two contradictory forms of knowledge, he affirms. The first as order and colonialism, the second as solidarity and chaos. Recognizing the asymmetry and inequality within this historic field of struggles, the author warns that it’s a high-risk pedagogy of conflict for which there are no insurance policies. He adds:

The fight is unequal between one form of dominant knowledge – knowledge as regulation – and a form of dominated, marginalized, and suppressed knowledge – knowledge as emancipation that the pedagogic field reconstitutes by means of archeological imagination. Recognition of this asymmetry, however, constitutes the pedagogic experience, from which it’s possible to imagine strategies to reduce this asymmetry in the pedagogic field. This involves inventing retrospective, and prospective exercises that allow us to imagine the field of possibilities that could be opened to our subjectivity and sociability if there was a balanced relation between knowledge as regulation and knowledge as emancipation. (*idem*, p. 25)

For Santos, the dominant model doesn’t recognize other types of relations among cultures, except the establishment of hierarchies based on criteria considered universal, even if they are specific to a single cultural universe – Western culture. In turn, we add that this historical field of struggle in society, particularly in schools, was structurally constituted by racism. If at first many conquests by black, indigenous, and social movements have occurred in society and education (including Laws 10639/2003 and 11645/2008), on the other hand a conservative, and racist response to these conquests also arises with tremendous strength.

In the specific case of black history and cultures, we don’t believe that removing fundamental elements from these cultures – like Candomblé, for instance – would be a solution for understanding the African continent and its relation with our own country.<sup>21</sup> Accepting such a historic, and cultural amputation would mean to once again accept impositions from structural racism and its educational system. If the laws mentioned were great conquests, they cannot be understood as concessions. To the contrary, following Santos’ thinking and his “pedagogy of conflict,” we suggest that bringing these cultures to the center of discussion, is a potent way to incisively unsettle the racism that is often practiced regularly in schools. For us, daily racist

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21 We need to clarify that we in no way defend religious teaching as a discipline in public schools. We defend the right to circulate all modes of belief and disbelief in schools. However, we emphasize that African cultures (and Afro-descendants) are part of African History and cannot be separated from its teaching.

practices need to be discussed and faced with daily anti-racist actions. Even in this article, how many times have we been unsettled by the written form of a language that is so important to our own history, which we hardly know and find strange?

One of Santos' creative suggestions for the pedagogic field of emancipation is the production of "what he calls unsettling images" that may affect the hegemonic model and its hierarchy of cultures and wisdom. These are, he says:

Images created by the dominated, marginalized, oppressed and silenced cultures and with them the social groups that are their carriers. These disturbing images will help to create a pedagogic space for an alternative model of intercultural relationships – multiculturalism. Since it is an emergent model, the kind of communication and relationship established among cultures is still poorly organized, it's more difficult to learn, and for this reason should occupy a central position in the pedagogic experience. (*idem*, p. 30)

In our research group, one of our priorities for more than 20 years has been the production of images of children and young people learning and teaching in the daily activities of Candomblé communities. They are children and teenagers who see themselves as candomblecists, and whose co-production of their own images collaborates to reaffirm their presence and confront intolerance. Perhaps we are all unsettled by the photos that bring to this article faces, artifacts, and gestures. And how much are we unsettled by *Yorubá* myths which are as valuable as Greek ones, for instance, although arguments are invented for not using them. Why can we appeal to Prometheus, Sisyphus, and Eros in history and literature classes and academic works, and not to Ọsányin, *Yánsàn* or *Logun Edé*?

During this research we heard people who practice Candomblé in terreiros and who coexist with a living language, in a living place. Children and young people speak to us about a living tradition that moves them and reaffirms their existence. They use a language full of tenderness, as Lincoln Mattos emphasized, who said *Șàngó* is the *Yorubá* word he loves most. "It's because I love this *Ọrìșà*. I love everything relating to him: *oșé*, *obá*, *àmàlà*, *șeșe*,<sup>22</sup> so I am interested in these words as well. I learned the words in *hunkó* when I knew the *Ọrìșà*; since then I have been connected to one of them, who wasn't my own *Ọrìșà*, but I became fascinated in the daily activities in the shed. When I heard the sound of *Aluja*<sup>23</sup> playing within my heart and of my *Bàbálórìșà*'s *Șàngó* dancing, I fell in love with *Șàngó* and this became my favorite word," said *Dofonitinho de Osalá*.

22 *Oșé* is a double-bladed ax, *șeșe* a rattle; both are symbols of *Șàngó*. *Àmàlà* is his food and *obá* is a king.

23 The *Șàngó* dance.



**Ogan Patryck and João Vitor.**  
Photograph: Stela Guedes Caputo.  
Author's personal archives.

Meanwhile, Patryck, the 8-years-old *ogan*, says that the word he likes most is *orò*, "because it means ritual and ritual moments are the ones that I most like, mainly when I am part of it," he explains. For Nicolas C. Melo, 18 years, who was also introduced here, his favorite word in *Yorubá* is *Ágò* because it is connected to a deep ethical behavior.

This word shows the highest level of education and humility that a person of Candomblé can demonstrate. We say: *Ágò*, I made a mistake; *Ágò*, may I pass? *Ágò*, may I speak? What's beautiful about it is, even when we are right, we can use *Ágò* to avoid a continuous misunderstanding. It doesn't mean that we are inferior or submissive, but when we demonstrate humility and serenity, we are able to avoid disagreements. I like to think of *Ágò* as a word that gives a second chance to the other person, both for the one who speaks and for the one who listens," he comments.

What would happen if this knowledge could be focused, emphasized, valorized and encouraged by teachers of African history and cultures? Hasn't the lack of recognition of these words and wisdom gone on too long? Isn't it possible that the greater the silence, the greater the racism, conservative positions, and religious intolerance? That's why we suggest that, instead of imprisoning this knowledge, it is fundamentally important to spread it like the leaves of *Òsányin* were spread by the *Yánsàn* wind. We should remember, however, that the *Ifá* tale teaches us that it is necessary to strengthen knowledge by means of speech and song. We believe that the words of children and young people from Candomblés from all over Brazil do this and can strengthen education. *Ewé o asà!*<sup>24</sup>

24 "May leaves help me and protect me". Greetings to *Òsányin*.



Photograph: Stela Guedes Caputo.  
Author's personal archives.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

STELA GUEDES CAPUTO has a doctorate in education from the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio). She is a professor at the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ).  
E-mail: stelauerj@gmail.com

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