

## Chapter 12

# Candomblé's Cosmic Tree and Brazil's *Ficus* Species

John Rashford

**Abstract** Candomblé identifies largely orally transmitted religious traditions in Brazil tracing back to various parts of Africa. This research identifies the species of *Ficus* that serve as Candomblé's cosmic tree. Nineteen religious centers (terreiros) were surveyed and 17 had fig trees. Contrary to the general assumption of a single species, five native figs were identified, including *Ficus elliotiana* (S. Moore), *F. clusiifolia* (Schott), *F. gomelleira* (Kunth), *F. cyclophylla* (Miquel), and *F. tomentella* ((Miq.) Miq.) The most common was *F. elliotiana*, followed by *F. gomelleira* and *F. clusiifolia*. These results suggest that Candomblé has a complex relation with a variety of *Ficus* species, both native and exotic, and a wider survey that includes more rural communities and other urban areas will probably yield many surprises.

**Keywords** Sacred tree • World tree • Tree of life • Iroko • African religions • Tempo • Loko

Candomblé identifies largely orally transmitted religious traditions of Brazil tracing back to various parts of Africa. Its manifestations are everywhere in Salvador, Bahia, especially in association with elaborate calendrical rites and festivities. With the country's rapidly expanding national economy, including the growing importance of domestic and international tourism, Candomblé imagery has become emblematic, not only of Salvador but of Brazil (Walker 1990; Shirey 2009). Celebrated spiritual beings called orixás are the focus of devotees, and through music, dance, and possession, they establish contact with them to access the "energy" that ensures the success of their most important concerns. Approximately 20 orixás are widely recognized, and in addition to their individual drum rhythms, dance steps, and

---

J. Rashford, M.A., Ph.D. (✉)  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology, College of Charleston,  
66 George Street, Charleston, SC 29424, USA  
e-mail: RashfordJ@cofc.edu

R. Voeks and J. Rashford (eds.), *African Ethnobotany in the Americas*, 311  
DOI 10.1007/978-1-4614-0836-9\_12, © Springer Science+Business Media New York 2013

**Fig. 12.1** The *Ficus cyclophylla* at the Instituto Médico Legal Nina Rodrigues, the landscape of which was once a terreiro



familiar songs, all have their place in religious narratives that account for their distinctive personalities, associations with nature and special powers, as well as their characteristic colors, ceremonial attires, emblematic instruments, ritual salutations, and preferred offerings. Their relative popularity is based, in part, on the number of their *children*, as devotees are called in Candomblé, and on their representation in popular culture. Iroko is one of the most overlooked orixás, judging from the number of his devotees, scholarly publications, popular representations, and public art. So too is the cosmic iroko tree which is his domain (e.g., Murphy 1992; Barnet 1999; Verger 2002; Gondim 2004; Falola and Childs 2004; Prandi 2000; Murrell 2010). It is generally assumed that the iroko tree at the center of Candomblé is represented by a single species of *Ficus*, but this is not the case. This chapter presents the results of a survey of 19 religious centers called terreiros where several species of figs were identified (Fig. 12.1).

Some version of the cosmic tree motif, often involving figs, appears in religious cosmologies worldwide (Anonymous 1890; Philpot 1897; Beech 1913; Maguire 1931; Collis 1954; Gautier 1996; Condit 1969; Cook 1974; Reno 1977; Simoons 1998; Altman 2000; Kunwar and Bussmann 2006; Kislev et al. 2006), and the classic view of the cosmic tree owes much to Mircea Eliade, one of the most influential historians of religion, who emphasized its essential nature as the center of the



Fig. 12.2 Spontaneous examples of the cosmic tree motif on walls in Salvador. (a) *Ficus clusifolia*. (b) *Ficus gomelleira*

universe connecting the sky and earth. Summarizing his view of the cosmic tree and its relationship to the religious importance of trees generally, Eliade (1991:44) wrote: "The most widely distributed variant of the symbolism of the Center is the Cosmic Tree, situated in the middle of the Universe, and upholding the three worlds as upon one axis. It may be said, in general, that the majority of the sacred and ritual trees that we meet within the history of religions are only replicas, imperfect copies of this exemplary archetype, the Cosmic Tree. Thus, all these sacred trees are thought of as situated in the Center of the World." This conception has extensive ethnographic support and is widely represented in scholarly publications, especially in encyclopedias and other reference works, but it is limited. If the cosmic tree is truly cosmic, it must be both the center and the periphery, that is, it must be the connector as well as the sky and the earth that it connects.

An alternative perspective, not as widely discussed as Eliade's but cited by researchers for more than a 100 years, is the cosmic tree as cosmic whole. With its branches above and roots below, the tree has been widely chosen to model the universe, most likely because it fits well the human experience of the sky above and earth below. The cosmic whole is the grounding motif of the cosmic tree, and ideas of the cosmic tree as cosmic center or cosmic connector, or as cosmic center connector, are only its varying expressions (Fig. 12.2a, b). For a more coherent understanding of understanding Candomblé, as well as other African-derived religious traditions like Vodou of Haiti and Santería of Cuba, the conception of a tree-like universe provides a more adequate framework than Eliade's emphasis on the cosmic tree as preeminently the cosmic center (Deren 1970:36; Desmangles 1977:15; Rey 2005:1659; Prussin 1999:430).



**Fig. 12.3** (a) A popular postcard of the orixá iroko from a set of orisha paintings by Gil Abelha. (b) The *Ficus gomelleira* tree of the terreiro Ilê Alabaxé in Maragogipe

In Candomblé, Iroko is the orixá of the treelike universe that is his domain, and in the spiritual landscape of terreiros, the iroko tree is set apart from other trees by a broad white ribbon and bow around its trunk called an Oja. It is often surrounded by a low wall that is painted white, and sometimes there are white streamers under its canopy (Fig. 12.3a, b). The intersection of the base of the tree and the earth's surface forms a vertical/horizontal axis that is the center of the universe – the cosmic crossroad – where Iroko's seat and altar are ritually established. Here spirits gather, especially the orixás and ancestors, and cosmic spiritual energy, called Axé, is most concentrated. According to Walker (1990:123–124), “to increase human participation in the *ashe*, the spiritual force of the universe,” is the “raison d'être of ... Candomblé,” and the “concept of *ase*,” writes Abiodun (1994:71), which “has intrigued many scholars of Yoruba culture both in Africa and the African diaspora ... remains foundational for religio-aesthetic discourse in Brazil, the Caribbean Islands, and the United States... [and] is fast becoming a Pan-Africanist term.” Voeks (1997:184–185) rightly notes that the iroko tree is at the “the center of [Candomblé] ceremonies” and this is understandable. As a representation of the universe, the cosmic iroko tree shelters all orixás, whose domains, residences, seats, altars, and offerings are associated with its various parts. The branching trunk, which forms the sky, is the realm of Olorum the Creator, and it is also associated with the orixás Oxalá, linked to high places and the creation of humanity; Xangô, to lightning and thunder; Iansã, to wind and storms; and Oshumarê, to rainbows and snakes. The horizontal axis where the sky and earth meet to form the surface is

associated with Nanã, linked to swamps and ruins; Oxum, to rivers and lakes; Obá, to waterfalls; Iemanjá, to the ocean; Ossaim, to leaves indispensable for healing and the conduct of rites; Oxóssi, to forests and hunting; Ogun, to metals and opening the way; and Exu, to roads and entrances. The branching root, which forms the earth, is the domain of Omulu, the guardian of cemeteries and guide to spirits of the dead.

## Identifying the Iroko Fig

Accepting the assumption that the iroko tree is a single species of fig, Martins and Marinho (2002), members of the well-known terreiro, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, incorrectly identified it as *Ficus religiosa* L. (2002:34), an error that also appears in the work of Lody (1975) and Wafer (1991:172), and is found on blogs and other kinds of Internet sites, including Wikipedia. Prandi (2001) identified the iroko fig as *Ficus maxima* Mill., which he said was "worshiped as an orixá in the old [terreiros] ... of Bahia and Pernambuco" (2001:566). *Ficus maxima* is found in Central America, the Caribbean, and several South American countries, and while Carauta and Diaz (2002:566) identified it as occurring in many parts of Brazil, they did not report it as present in Bahia. The single-species assumption also underlies the identification of Candomblé's fig by the Brazilian common names gameleira (Omari 1989:57; Magalhães 2003:109; Coffey 2005:262) and gameleira branca (Menezes 1949:107; Cacciatore 1977:130; Prandi 2001:566). These names are ambiguous, since some authors treat them as synonyms, while others regard them as referring to different species (Camargos et al. 2001), and the name gameleira is also used as synonymous with the genus *Ficus*, or a subset of the genus *Ficus*, especially strangler figs. From the 1950s to the 1990s, *Ficus doliaria* was widely regarded as the iroko tree (e.g., Bastide 1978; Cacciatore 1977:130; Voeks 1990; Murphy 1994). A specimen of *Ficus doliaria* in the herbarium of the Federal University of Bahia is correctly identified as *Ficus gomelleira* (Kunth & C. D. Bouché), and the species is described by the collector, G. C. Pereira Pinto, as the spiritual tree of Candomblé. Though accurate, this is still a limited description; it assumes *Ficus gomelleira* is the only *Ficus* species that serves as Candomblé's cosmic tree (Fig. 12.4).

## Method

In the summer of 2005, 2007, and 2010, I surveyed 19 terreiros in order to identify the species of *Ficus* used as their iroko tree. The results of this study also incorporate observations of the cultivated and wild figs that are present in Salvador. Eighteen terreiros occurred in Salvador and surrounding areas, and one was located in Recife, Pernambuco. Permission to visit the terreiro for the express purpose of looking at its iroko tree was arranged in advance. Informal interviews were conducted with members of the terreiros, and the primary aim of the interviews was to identify the



**Fig. 12.4** The *Ficus gomelleira* tree of the terreiro Oshumarê



orixás with which the dedicated figs were associated. This was essential, as there were often two or more figs of ritual importance belonging to the same or different species. Given the sensitivities surrounding the religious status of the iroko tree, no voucher specimens were collected. However, where permitted, each tree was photographed and leaf samples were collected from the ground. Dique do Tororó is a green space of historic importance in the heart of Salvador, and to provide a framework for understanding why a number of *Ficus* species and varieties were commonly found in the landscape of large terreiros, a survey was made of all the figs that inhabited the Dique. The scientific identities of the figs discussed here are correlated with the botanical names, descriptions, and illustrations provided by Carauta and Diaz in their excellent book *Figueiras no Brasil* (2002).

## Results and Discussion

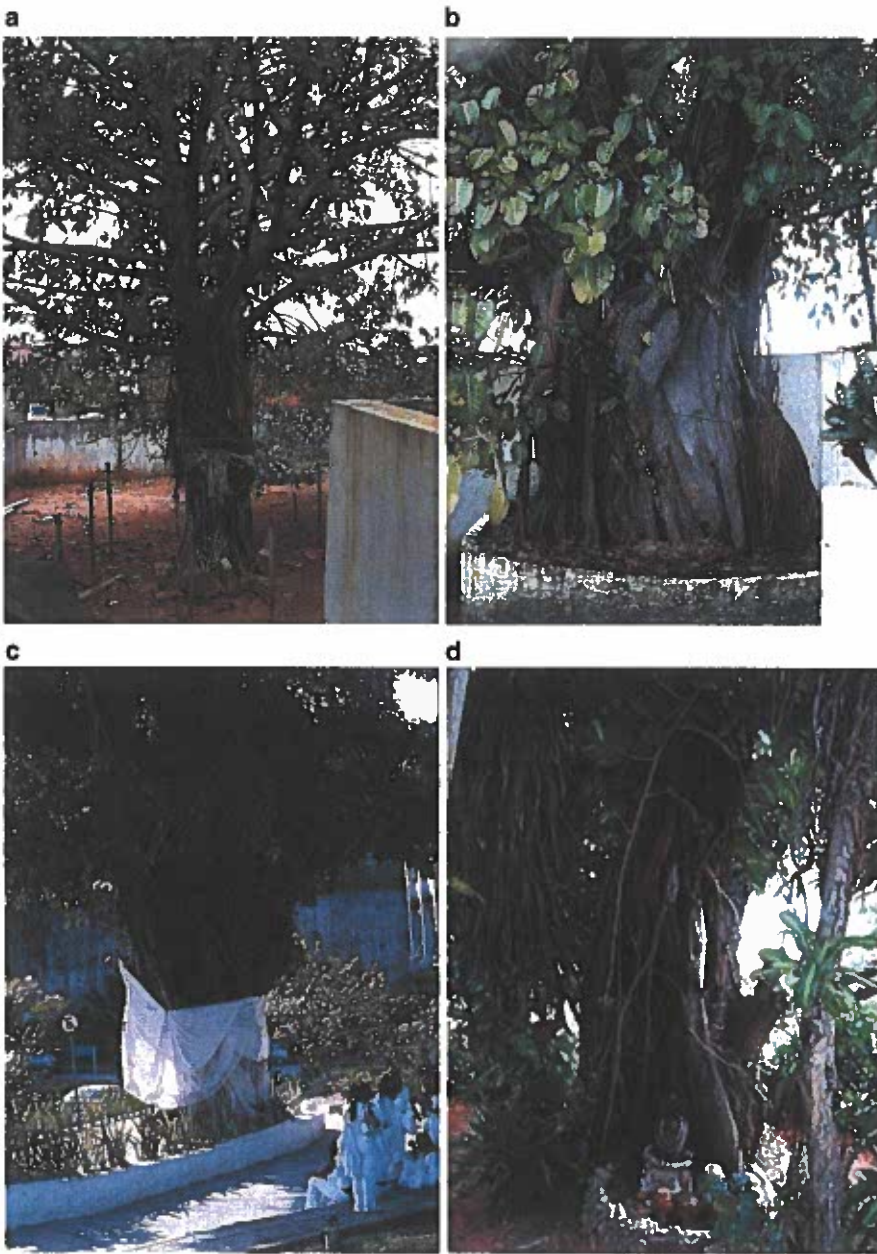
Table 12.1 below presents the results of the 19 terreiros surveyed, and it includes a reference to “nation,” a word that is generally used in Candomblé to identify different traditions with reference to their geographical and cultural origins in Africa (Cacciatore 1977:150). Of the 1,163 terreiros included in the book *Mapeamento dos terreiros de Salvador* (Santos 2007), 57.8% self-identified as belonging to Ketu nation, 24.2% as Angola, 2.1% as Jêje, and 1.3% as Ijexá. The other 14.6% of the

**Table 12.1** The *Ficus* species of 19 terreiros

Terreiro	Nation	<i>Ficus</i> species
1 Afonjá (Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá)	Ketu	<i>Ficus elliotiana</i> S. Moore
2 Aganju (Ilê Axé Opô Aganju)	Ketu	<i>Ficus elliotiana</i> S. Moore
3 Bate Folha (Manso Banduquenque)	Angola	<i>F. clusiifolia</i> Schott
4 Bogum (Zoogodô Bogum Malê Rundó)	Jêje	<i>F. clusiifolia</i> Schott
5 Boiadeiro (Ilê Asé Omim J'Obá)	Ketu	<i>Ficus elliotiana</i> S. Moore
6 Casa Branca (Ilê Axé Iyá Nassô Oká)	Ketu	<i>F. gommeira</i> Kunth & C. D. Bouché
7 Gantois (Ilê Axé Iyá Orni Axé Iyamassê)	Ketu	<i>Ficus elliotiana</i> S. Moore
8 Instituto Médico Legal Nina Rodrigues	Unknown	<i>F. cyclophylla</i> Miquel
9 Manso (Manso Dandalungua Concuazenza)	Angola/Ketu	<i>Ficus tomentella</i> (Miq.) Miq.
10 Mutalombo (Mutalombo Yê Kaiongo)	Angola	none
11 Obakan (Ilê Axé Obakan)	Ketu	<i>F. clusiifolia</i> Schott
12 Obaná (Ilê Axé Obaná)	Ketu	<i>Ficus elliotiana</i> S. Moore
13 Oshumarê (Ilê Axé Oxumarê)	Ketu	<i>F. gommeira</i> Kunth & C. D. Bouché
14 Plataforma (Ilê Axé Kalé Bokun)	Ijexá	<i>Ficus elliotiana</i> S. Moore
15 Portão (Ilê Omorodê Axé Orixá N'Lá)	Ketu	<i>F. gommeira</i> Kunth & C. D. Bouché
16 Sítio de Pai Adão (Ilê Axé Obá Ogunté)	Nago/Ketu/Egba	<i>F. clusiifolia</i> Schott
17 Tanuri ( <i>Tanuri Junçara</i> )	Angola	None
18 Terreiro de Pai Edinho (Ilê Alabaxé)	Ketu	<i>F. gommeira</i> Kunth & C. D. Bouché
19 Terreiro de Valdete (Terreiro Ilê Ewa Olodumare)	Nago/Vodum	<i>Ficus elliotiana</i> S. Moore

terreiros were a combination of nations that identified themselves, for example, as Angola/Ketu, Nago/Vodum, Jêje/Ketu, and so on. In the small sample of terreiros this chapter presents, ten (52.6%) were Ketu, three (15.8%) were Angola, and the remaining five were Angola/Ketu, Ijexá, Jêje, Nago/Ketu/Egba, and Nago/Vodum (Parés 2004; Reis and Mamigonian 2004).

Table 12.1 indicates that 17 of the 19 terreiros had fig trees representing five species (Fig. 12.5a–d). The most common, *Ficus elliotiana*, was found in seven terreiros; both *Ficus gommeira* and *Ficus clusiifolia* occurred in four terreiros; and *F. cyclophylla* and *Ficus tomentella* were each found in only one terreiro. It is noteworthy that *Ficus elliotiana* is the iroko tree of Gantois and Afonja; these are prominent terreiros that value their historic links to Casa Branca, renowned as the oldest continually functioning terreiro in Salvador. All three are proud of their fidelity to African traditions, yet unlike Gantois and Afonja, the iroko tree of Casa Branca



**Fig. 12.5** (a) The *Ficus elliotiana* of Terreiro Ilê Ewa Olodumare. (b) The *F. elliotiana* of Ilê Axé Kalé Bokun. (c) The *Ficus cyclophylla* at the Instituto Médico Legal Nina Rodrigues. (d) The *Ficus clusiifolia* at Oshumarê



is *Ficus gomelleira*. With the exception of *Ficus tomentella*, these are among the most common native figs of Salvador, often found growing on other trees, walls, buildings, and bridges. Seedlings and trees of all sizes can be seen along roadsides and in the city's many green spaces ranging in size from small squares to large areas like Campo Grande, Dique do Tororó, Parque da Cidade, and Zoobotânico (Fig. 12.6a–d).

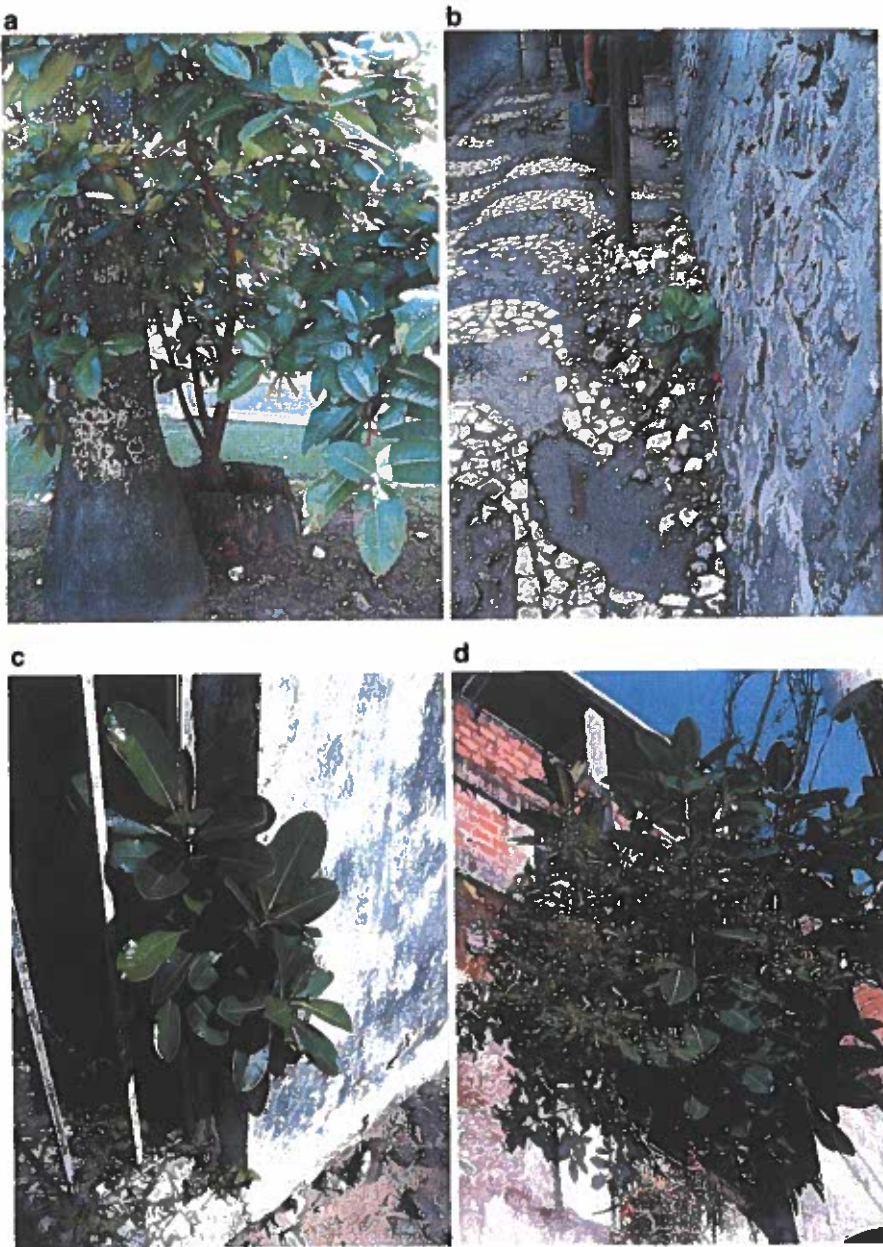
### *Figs That Grow from the Sky to the Earth*

That at least five species of figs have been adopted in Candomblé reveals what has long been recognized. Candomblé communities are not subject to any overarching ritual authority. Nevertheless, these figs have one thing in common. Candomblé's cosmic fig grows from the sky to the earth, and so do these native figs of Salvador. According to Valdina Pinto de Oliveira, a spiritual leader of the Angolan terreiro Tanurí Junçara, widely respected for her knowledge of Candomblé's relation to nature: "Generally people don't plant the iroko tree. It only appears by itself on trees and walls. Old people," she continued, "believe that such a tree has a strong spirit" (see also Cassidy 1961:380; Cassidy and Le Page 1980:200; Allsopp 1996:260; Coffey 2005:262). Her Angolan terreiro, Tanurí Junçara, did not have an iroko tree, and neither did the Angolan terreiro, Mutalombo. Bate Folha, another well-known Angolan terreiro, had a *Ficus clusiifolia* dedicated to Tempo. Most interesting, however, was the Angolan terreiro, Manso, where the figs "chose" the terreiro and not the terreiro the figs. A tropical almond tree (*Terminalia catappa* L.) dedicated to Tempo was colonized by a *Ficus tomentella* and a jackfruit tree (*Artocarpus heterophyllus* Lam.) by a *Ficus clusiifolia* (Fig 12.7a–c).

A situation similar to Manso also occurred at Oshumarê, which had three species of figs. The iroko tree of this well-known Ketu terreiro, as earlier noted, was *Ficus gomelleira*, and the two other species were *Ficus clusiifolia* and *Ficus elliotiana*. Where the *Ficus clusiifolia* now grows once stood a jackfruit tree (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*) dedicated to Ossaim, the orixá responsible for the healing and ceremonial leaves of Candomblé. All attempts to remove the colonizing *clusiifolia* and restore the jackfruit failed. The members of Oshumarê decided to dedicate the *Ficus clusiifolia* to Ossaim, since this was obviously the tree Ossaim himself had chosen. The situations at the terreiros Manso and Oshumarê reveal that the relationship between a particular orixá and a particular species is not only general; it is also specific. Figs that spontaneously colonize particular sites in the terreiro can become associated with specific orixás by virtue of where they grow.

### *The Number of Ficus Species in Terreiros*

The relationship between Candomblé and various species of *Ficus* is far more complex than suggested by the common assumption that the iroko tree is represented by



**Fig. 12.6** Some examples of young wild figs in Salvador. (a) *Ficus gomelleira* growing at the entrance to Palácio de Aclamação. (b) *Ficus elliotiana* along a sidewalk in Salvador. (c) *Ficus clusifolia* on a gate in the Graça neighborhood. (d) *Ficus clusifolia* and *Ficus microcarpa* var. *nitida* growing together on a building in the Piedade



Fig. 12.7 (a) The *Ficus tomentella* of the terreiro Manso Dandalungua Concuazenza. (b) Leaves. (c) The base of the tree

a single species of fig. It is noteworthy that large terreiros had up to four species of figs in their landscape, and in some cases, there were several specimens of the same species present. Bate Folha, for example, had *Ficus gomelleira* and *Ficus clusiifolia*, and both species were of ritual importance. Of the several specimens of *Ficus clusiifolia*, two were ritually dedicated, one of which was the iroko tree of the terreiro. Afonja had three species that, in addition to *Ficus elliotiana* as its iroko tree, included several specimens of *Ficus clusiifolia* and an impressive *Ficus elastica* (Roxb. ex Hornem) (Fig. 12.8a, b). Bogum had five figs representing four species, and two specimens of *Ficus clusiifolia* were associated with different orixás. One was dedicated to Tempo and the other to Exu, and in the latter case, it is noteworthy



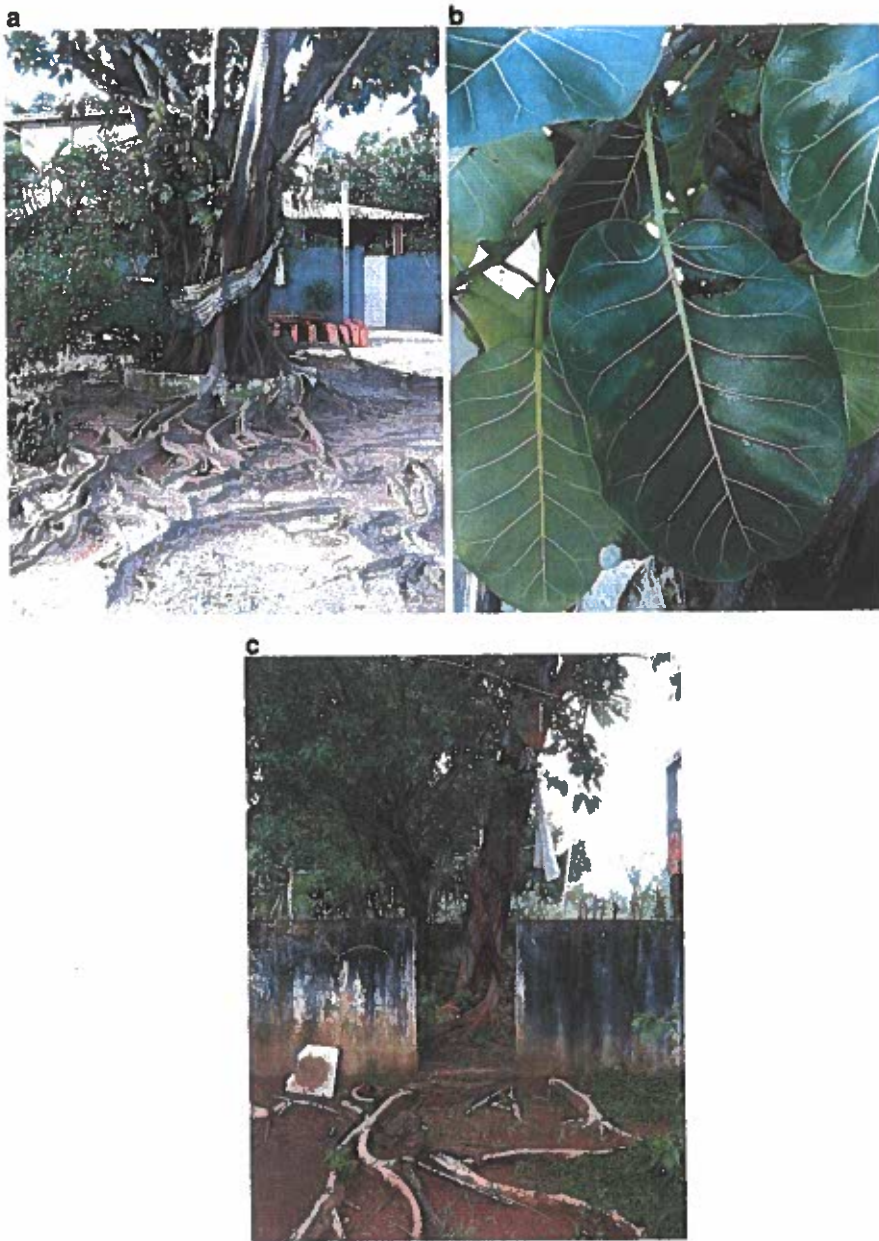


Fig. 12.8 (a) The *Ficus elliotiana* of Afonjá (Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá) photographed on the evening the terreiro celebrated (b) 100 years of Candomblé

that Cacciatore (1977:126) defined “figueira” as a tree “of which there are diverse species” that “pertains to the Exus.” The other two native figs of Bogum were a small *Ficus nymphaeifolia* (Miller) growing on the dead trunk of a caja tree (*Spondias mombin* L.) in the middle of the terreiro and several seedlings of the Asian fig *Ficus microcarpa* var. *nitida* (see Barrett 1949) growing on the inside and outside of the terreiro’s boundary wall. The 12 figs of the terreiro Aganju represented three species comprised of three *Ficus clusiifolia* trees, including a mature specimen dedicated to ancestral spirits and two young specimens in African oil palm trees (*Elaeis guineensis* Jacq.); eight *Ficus elliotiana* trees, of which one of two mature specimens was dedicated to Iroko (Fig. 12.9a–c), and six young trees grew on buildings and in African oil palm trees; and a young *Ficus benjamina* L. used as a Christmas tree. Oshumarê was unique in having three species of figs, each associated with a different orixá. The iroko tree of the terreiro was *Ficus gomelleira*, and one of two *Ficus clusiifolia* trees was dedicated to Ossaim, and a *Ficus elliotiana* to Exu.

Looking at the distribution of figs at Dique do Tororó, a historic green space in the heart of Salvador, provides insights into why large terreiros often have a variety of fig species in their landscape (Fig. 12.10). Dique occupies a special place not only in Candomblé but in the cultural and recreational activities of Salvadorians. It has long been an important site where offerings are made to Oxum in her own right and to Oxum as a prelude to New Year offerings to Yemanjá. Shirey (2009:72) notes that for many years the lake was surrounded by “overgrown trees, shrubs, and weeds” and was generally associated with crime. In 1993, however, it was com-





**Fig. 12.9** (a) The *Ficus elliotiana* of the terreiros Aganju (Ilê Axé Opô aganju). (b) Leaves of *F. elliotiana*. (c) The *F. elliotiana* of Terreiro Ilê Ewa Olodumare

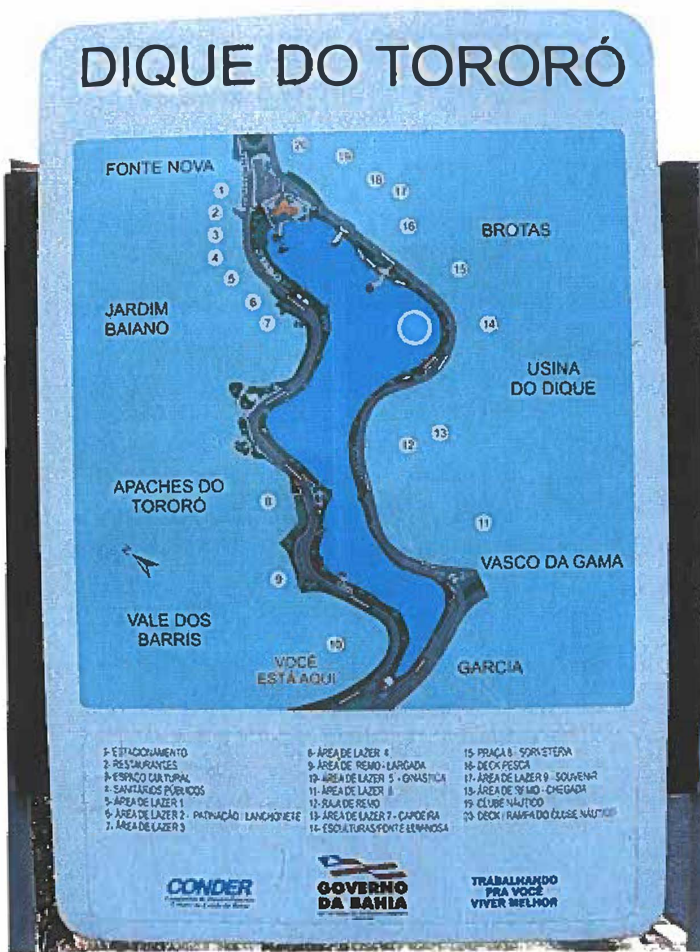


Fig. 12.10 Map of Dique do Tororó

pletely renovated. The lake area and roadsides around the lake were landscaped with a variety of native and exotic plants, and in addition to the orixá statues and fountain featured in the lake and the popular shaded path around it, the renewed Dique also offered public parking, restaurants, event venues, playgrounds, outdoor gym, lakeside seating, boating pier, and fishing decks (Fig. 12.11).

All figs found growing at Dique do Tororó in July 2010 were recorded, and for the purpose of this survey, Dique was divided into three areas: the lakeside, and in the northeastern area of the lake, the palm grove, and the roadside wall bordering Dique. Dique had six species of figs represented by 117 individuals of which 52% were *Ficus cyclophylla*, 27% were *Ficus clusiifolia*, 9% were *Ficus elastica*, 8% were *Ficus gomelleira*, 5% were *Ficus microcarpa* var. *nitida*, and 1% was *Ficus benjamina*. *F. cyclophylla*, *F. clusiifolia*, and *F. gomelleira* were present in all three



Fig. 12.11 The monumental orisha statues in the lake of Dique do Tororó, the work of Bahian artist Tati Moreno, framed by one of several silk cotton trees (*Ceiba pentandra* L. [Kuntze]) around the lake

areas, while the palm grove and roadside wall also had *F. microcarpa* var. *nitida* which was not found in the lakeside area, and the lakeside area had *F. elastica* and *F. benjamina*, which were not found in the palm grove or on the roadside wall. Of the 117 figs, 90% were seedlings. All 12 mature trees were around the lake, including the ten *F. elastica* trees, a *F. benjamina*, and a large *F. cyclophylla* growing on the northeastern side of the lake (Fig. 12.12). This *F. cyclophylla*, which grows across from the palm grove and roadside wall, probably accounts for the fact that more than half of the 117 figs were represented by *F. cyclophylla* – 35 in the palm grove, 14 on the roadside wall, and 12 in the lakeside area. This suggests large terreiros are likely to have many seedlings growing in the vicinity of their iroko tree. It also suggests why we are likely to encounter more than one species of fig in large terreiros when we find that of the 40 palm trees of Dique, 16 were without figs, but 24 were colonized by strangler figs. Of the 24 with figs, 12 had only one species, 11 had two, and 1 had three – half of the 24 palms with fig associates had been colonized by two or more species (Fig. 12.13a, b).

### ***Falling Fig Trees***

Another overlooked aspect of the dynamic relationship between Candomblé adherents and their *Ficus* species is the instability of large fig trees in the confines of terreiros, a concern expressed in many conversations. Mae Mininha of Gantois, for





Fig. 12.12 The mature *Ficus cyclophylla* on the northeastern side of Dique do Tororó

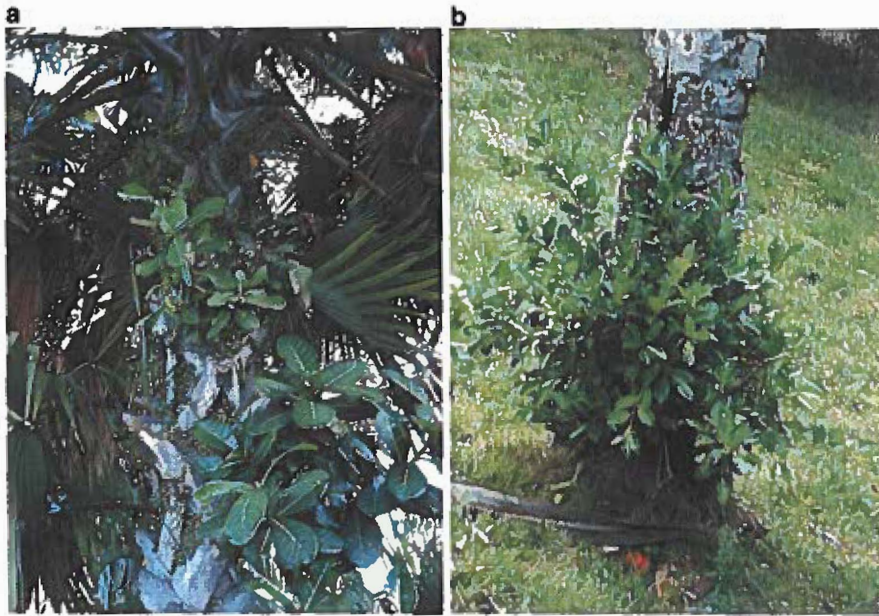


Fig. 12.13 The palm grove of Dique do Tororó. (a) *Ficus clusifolia* and *Ficus cyclophylla* in a palm tree. (b) *Ficus micrcarpa* var. *nitida* at the base of a coconut tree



example, feared the terreiro's large iroko tree could fall, but she said there were many *F. elliotiana* seedlings on the grounds of the terreiro waiting to take its place. The *F. clusiifolia* at Bate Folha fell in 2002 and was replaced in 2005. The same thing occurred at Afonja; the *F. elliotiana* observed in 2002 growing next to the house of Sango was replaced by a young tree in the center of the large open area just beyond the entrance to the terreiro. As previously noted, the iroko fig of Casa Branca is *F. gomelleira*, of which there were two large trees. The one growing on the steep hillside behind the main building of the terreiro was cut down because it posed a serious threat of toppling on the building. The other growing on the hillside in front of the terreiro was cut down in 2005. It had begun to drop large branches and they feared it too would fall. Nevertheless, at the time of this research, many seedlings of *F. gomelleira* could be seen growing in the landscape of Casa Branca.

### ***Ficus gomelleira* in Public Spaces**

*Ficus gomelleira* is a particularly interesting fig with a place of distinction in Candomblé. No other species of fig seems to be as widely represented as a ritual tree in public places. *F. gomelleira* occurs widely in South America and is widespread in Brazil, where according to Carauta and Diaz (2002:59), it is found in the Brazilian states of "Pará, Amapá, Maranhão, Piauí, Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Paraná, [and] ... Mato Grosso." Curiously, they did not mention its presence in Bahia. Yet, as earlier noted, it is common in Salvador. It is significant that this species is the cosmic fig of the venerable *Casa Branca*, and although *F. clusiifolia* and *F. gomelleira* were each found in four terreiros, neither *F. clusiifolia* nor any of the other *Ficus* species of Candomblé seem to be as widely represented as a ritual tree in public places as *F. gomelleira*.

The most significant *Ficus gomelleira* tree outside of terreiros that was frequently mentioned in conversations was the one at the crossroads leading to São Lazaro Church in Ondina, and both the church and the fig were especially associated with the orixá Omulu. Being an orixá who is a source of both life and death, Omulu, paradoxically, is one of the most celebrated and yet most feared. A guide to the spirit of the dead whose Yoruba name means Lord or King of the earth, Omulu's domain ranges from the earth's surface to its depth, and his seat, residence, and altar site are associated with the "crosses of cemeteries." Omulu, correlated with São Lazaro, patron saint of the poor, is the orixá of smallpox and other diseases, especially epidemics, and in his capacity as a life source, he is popularly regarded as the Physician of the Poor who heals as well as offers protection from diseases. But Omulu, as the Master of Death (Magalhães 2003:150), also inflicts individuals with disease as a form of punishment.

The literal and figurative association of roads, especially crossroads, with travel and communication, makes them profoundly important in Candomblé, and the orixás of roads play an important role as mediators in the relationship between humans and orixás. Iroko, as previously noted, is guardian of the cosmic crossroad,



**Fig. 12.14** (a) The dead trunk of the *Ficus gomelleira* that grew on the bank of Dique do Tororó photographed in 2010. (b) A seedling of *Ficus gomelleira* growing on this trunk in 2005 when the photograph was taken

dwelling place of spirits, and a powerful source of Axé. Ogun, the vanguard orixá of war whose element is iron, is traditionally the patron of blacksmiths, and, by extension, all who depend on iron for implements and material, including warriors, farmers, and artisans; today his domain also embraces railroads and metallurgy. In the resistance to slavery and the racial oppression that continued in its aftermath, Ogun's embodiment of the fighting spirit has made him a popular orixá for African communities of the New World where he is regarded as "the opener of the way." Exu is the trickster orixá of communication, indispensable in all Candomblé rites because he guards thresholds, determining the positive or negative outcome of all exchange. And Omulu is guardian of the crossroad of life and death, the destiny of all human beings. While thresholds are generally understood to include crossroads, entrances, and doorways, at a deeper level they include all literal and figurative crossings that make the interaction between humans and orixás possible. The abundant offerings at the São Lázaro fig highlight the importance of these orixás, and they also highlight the importance of the orixá Xangô. Although not generally regarded as an orixá of roads, he is specifically associated with *F. gomelleira*.

The second significant *Ficus gomelleira* in a public area, which also came to light in conversations with members of Candomblé, was described as a "spiritually powerful" tree that grew on the banks of Dique do Tororó. It was cut down by the city, but the stump was still there, and the stump had a *Ficus gomelleira* seedling growing on it when it was photographed in 2005 (Fig. 12.14). According to Dique administrators, it was cut because a large branch fell, killing a pedestrian and crushing a passing car. The newspaper report of the incident said the tree was

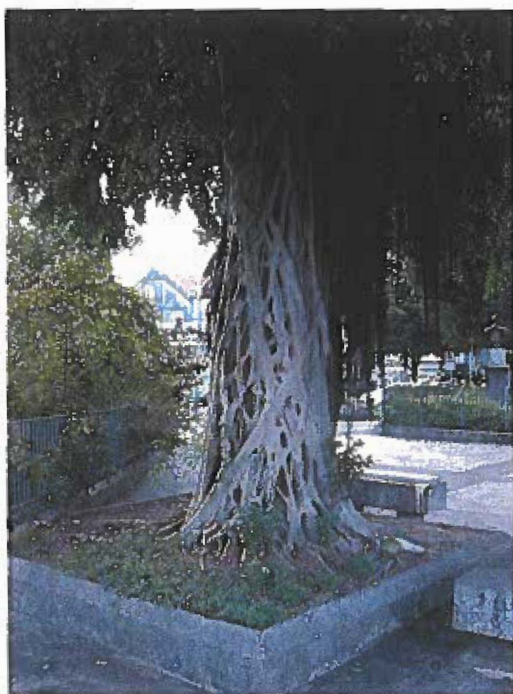
carefully examined by those responsible, who concluded it was a continued risk to the public and could not be saved. Dique administrators blamed the use of candles associated with offerings for weakening the tree. According to some members of Candomblé, the tree was killed because it was a popular place of offerings, and some city officials objected to this because of its African connection and because the offerings, they said, created excessive litter. Whatever reason, it is puzzling that the *F. gommelleira* trees of São Lazaro and Dique do Tororó were both damaged by fire.

Pai Anderson of Recife reported that in large terreiros with sufficient outdoor space for plants, people greet Ogun and Xangô at the iroko tree when they arrive. The epitome of extraordinary power and great humanity, Xangô is the just warrior orixá of lightning and thunder, who is arguably the most celebrated orixá in the Americas. His domain and altar site are quarries, and he is principally represented by stones, the double-winged ax, and fire; the latter accounts for candles being an important part of the offerings presented to him. According to Martins and Marinho (2002:39): "For many ... [the iroko tree] is inhabited by different divinities, as for example, the orixá Ocô as well as some members of the families of Ogun and of Xangô, the 'Senhor' of fire." Is it the offerings to Xangô at the foot of the iroko tree that were responsible for the damage by fire that had affected the *Ficus gommelleira* trees of São Lazaro and Dique?

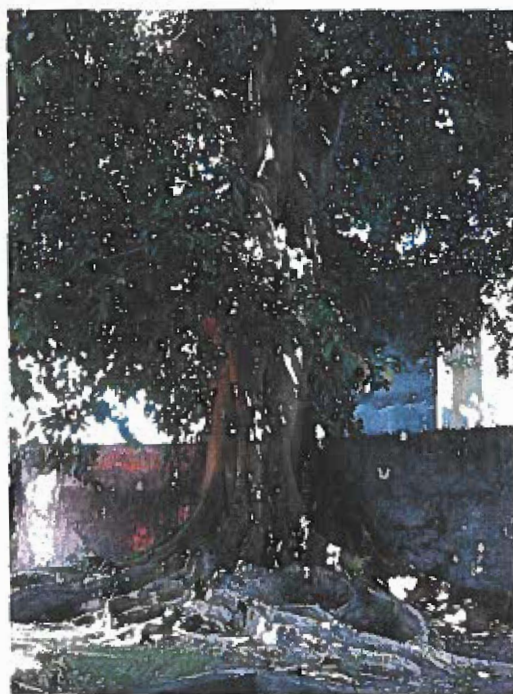
## Conclusion

Candomblé is remarkable for its adaptability as evidenced by the intricate relationships that have been established with the native figs of Brazil. Five native species were found in 16 terreiros in Salvador and one in Pernambuco. Judging from the small sample presented, from the fact that figs sometimes "choose" terreiros, and from the literature, this research suggests we should expect to find more than five species of figs representing Iroko and other orixás in the landscapes of Candomblé. There are over a thousand terreiros in Salvador alone (Santos 2007), and *F. microcarpa* var. *nitida*, for example, is a good candidate for adoption (Fig. 12.15). This native of Asia is now naturalized not only in Brazil but in many parts of the tropics and subtropics, including Florida, Hawaii, and some territories of the Caribbean. It is widespread in Salvador, and if the salient point for Candomblé centers on trees that grow from the sky to the earth, one would expect *F. microcarpa* var. *nitida* to be among the *Ficus* species selected for ritual dedication in terreiros even though it is an exotic. The most likely explanation why this has not happened, as far as we know, is that *F. microcarpa* var. *nitida* only became naturalized after its pollinating wasp was introduced sometime in the decade between 1970 and 1980 (Carauta and Diaz 2002:155). Nevertheless, one can see mature specimens of this species in Salvador, such as the one colonizing a *Pachira aquatica* (Aubl.) tree in Nazaré Park (Fig. 12.16). *Ficus glabra* (Vell.) and *F. maxima* are also good candidates for being found in terreiros even though *F. maxima* was not in some of the oldest terreiros of Salvador as Prandi (2001:566) indicated.

**Fig. 12.15** The naturalized *Ficus microcarpa* var. *nitida* growing in Nazaré Park, Salvador, colonizing a *Pachira aquatica* tree



**Fig. 12.16** *Ficus glabra* in Salvador in the Vitória neighborhood of Salvador





**Fig. 12.17** One of several large *Ficus elastica* trees growing on the bank of Dique do Tororó



Published accounts also suggest other species of figs are to be expected in the landscape of terreiros. For example, Cacciatore (1977:130) reports that in the Batuque tradition of Belem, Pará, *Ficus citrifolia* (Mill.) was the spiritual tree that served as the residence of the Caboclo spirit, *Velho Japetequara*. This species, emblematic of Barbados as the species from which it is said the island took its name (Gooding 1974; Fraser et al. 1990), is common throughout the Caribbean (Little et al. 1974) where it is widely associated with inspirational life. Cacciatore (1977:165) also reports that different species of figs were used to represent the vodun, Loko, of the Jêje nation, who is popularly viewed as correlated with the orixá Iroko in the Ketu tradition, and the inkice Tempo, in the Angola tradition (Cacciatore 1977:235; Wafer 1991:166; Sodré 1995; Coffey 2005:263). In Bahia, she reports Loco was represented by “gameleira branca” (which elsewhere she identified as *F. doliaria*, i.e., *F. gomelleira*); in Maranhão and Rio de Janeiro, by the cajazeira tree (*Spondias mombin* L.); and in the “jejenagô” tradition of Rio de Janeiro, by both the cajueiro tree (*Anacardium occidentale* L.) and “ficus italiano,” the latter being the common name for *Ficus elastica*. It is interesting that Cacciatore says *F. elastica* is found in terreiros of Rio de Janeiro, since this species is an Asian exotic that is not naturalized in Brazil. In Salvador, as earlier noted, a large *F. elastica* was part of the landscape of Afonja, and magnificent specimens can be seen around the city, such as along major thoroughfares, on the campus of the Federal University of Bahia, and especially around Dique do Tororó (Fig. 12.17). None, however, were identified as ritually dedicated or associated with offerings. Nevertheless, this study

has shown that Candomblé has a complex relation with a variety of *Ficus* species, both native and exotic, and a wider survey that includes more rural communities and other urban areas will probably yield many surprises.

**Acknowledgments** I thank all the communities of Candomblé whose support made this study possible. I am also grateful for the support of Dr. Ubiratan Castro de Araújo and Dr. Jocélio Teles dos Santos who served at different times as the Director of the Center for Afro-Asian Studies of the Federal University of Bahia. A special thanks to Valdina Pinto de Oliveira for sharing her love of Candomblé and nature and to my colleagues in Salvador and Recife, especially Cláudia Regina Muniz Barreto, Fernando Batista, and Hernandes Santos Souza, without whose assistance this project would not have been possible. This chapter has benefited from the helpful comments of Moore Quinn, Dee Dee Joyce, Henry Drewal, and Ted and Dale Rosengarten.

## References

- Abiodun R (1994) Understanding Yoruba art and aesthetics: the concept of Ase. *Afr Arts* 27(3):68–78, 102–103
- Allsopp R (1996) Dictionary of Caribbean English usage. University of the West Indies Press, Jamaica/Barbados/Trinidad & Tobago
- Altman N (2000) Sacred trees: spirituality, wisdom and well-being. Sterling, New York
- Anonymous (1890) *Cultus arborum*. Privately printed. Available online through Kessinger Publishing
- Barnet M (1999) La Regla de Ocha: the religious system of Santería. In: Olmos M, Paravisini-Gebert L (eds) Sacred possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, pp 79–100
- Barrett MF (1949) *Ficus retusa* L. *Bull Torrey Bot Club* 76(1):53–64
- Bastide R (1978) The African religions of Brazil: toward a sociology of the interpenetration of civilizations. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore
- Beech WH (1913) The sacred fig-tree of the A-Kikuyu of East Africa. *Man* 13(3):4–6
- Cacciatore OG (1977) Dicionário de cultos Afro-Brasileiros. Forense Universitária, Rio de Janeiro
- Camargos JAA, Coradin VTR, Czarneski CM, Daniela de Oliveira D, Meuerditchian I (2001) Catálogo de árvores do Brasil. IBAMA, Brasília
- Carauta JPP, Diaz BE (2002) Figueiras no Brasil. Editora UFRJ, Rio de Janeiro
- Cassidy FG (1961) Jamaica talk, three hundred years of the English language in Jamaica. Macmillan, London
- Cassidy FG, Le Page RB (1980) Dictionary of Jamaican English. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Coffey J (2005) Orixá Iroko. In: Taylor B (ed) Encyclopedia of religion and nature. Continuum, London/New York, pp 262–265
- Collis JS (1954) The triumph of the tree. The Viking Press, New York
- Condit IJ (1969) *Ficus: the exotic species*. Division of Agricultural Sciences, University of California, Berkeley
- Cook R (1974) The tree of life: images for the cosmos. Thames and Hudson, New York
- Deren M (1970) Divine horsemen: Voodoo gods of Haiti. A Delta Book, New York
- Desmangles LG (1977) African interpretations of the Christian cross in Vodun. *Sociol Anal* 38(1):13–24
- Eliade M (1991) Images and symbols: studies in religious symbolism. Princeton University Press, Princeton
- Falola T, Childs MD (2004) The Yoruba diaspora in the Atlantic world. Indiana University Press, Bloomington

- Fraser H, Carrington S, Forde A, Gilmore J (1990) A-Z of Barbadian heritage. Heinemann Publishers (Caribbean) Ltd, Kingston
- Gautier D (1996) *Ficus* (Moraceae) as part of agrarian systems in the Bamileke region (Cameroon). *Econ Bot* 50(3):318–326
- Gondim AB (2004) Seu guia no Candomblé. Self-published, Salvador
- Gooding EGB (1974) The plant communities of Barbados. Ministry of Education, Barbados.
- Kislev ME, Hartmann A, Bar-Yosef O (2006) Early domesticated Fig in the Hordan valley. *Science* 312:1372–1734
- Kunwar RM, Bussmann RW (2006) *Ficus* (Fig) species in Nepal: a review of diversity and indigenous uses. *Lyonia* 11(1):85–97
- Little EL, Woodbury RO, Wadsworth FH (1974) Trees of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC
- Lody RGM (1975) Ao som do Adjá. Departamento de Cultura da SMEC and Prefeitura Municipal de Salvador, Salvador
- Magalhães EG (2003) Orixás da Bahia. Self-published, Salvador
- Maguire RAJ (1931) Masai water-trees. *Man* 31(July):142–143
- Martins C, Marinho R (2002) Iroko. Pallas, Rio de Janeiro
- Menezes A (1949) Flóra da Bahia. Companhia Editora Nacional, São Paulo
- Murphy JM (1992) Santería: African spirits in America. Beacon, Boston
- Murphy JM (1994) Working the spirit: ceremonies of the African diaspora. Beacon, Boston
- Murrell NS (2010) Afro-Caribbean religions. Temple University Press, Philadelphia
- Omari MS (1989) The role of the gods in Afro-Brazilian ancestral ritual. *Afr Arts* 23(1):54–61, 103–104
- Parés LN (2004) The “Nagôization” process in Bahian Candomblé. In: Falola T, Childs MD (eds) The Yoruba diaspora in the Atlantic world. Indiana University Press, Bloomington/Indianapolis, pp 185–208
- Philpot JH (1897) The sacred tree in religion and myth. Macmillan and Co. Limited, London
- Prandi R (2000) African gods in contemporary Brazil: a sociological introduction to Candomblé today. *Int Sociol* 15(4):641–663
- Prandi R (2001) Mitologia dos Orixás. Companhia das Letras, São Paulo
- Prussin L (1999) Non-Western sacred sites: African models. *J Soc Archit Hist* 58(3):424–433
- Reis JJ, Mamigonian BG (2004) Nagô and Mina: the Yoruba diaspora in Brazil. In: Falola T, Childs MD (eds) The Yoruba diaspora in the Atlantic world. Indiana University Press, Bloomington/Indianapolis, pp 77–110
- Reno SJ (1977) Religious symbolism: a plea for a comparative approach. *Folklore* 88(1):76–85
- Rey T (2005) Trees in Haitian Vodou. In: Taylor BR, Kaplan J (eds) The encyclopedia of religion, vol 2. Thoemmes Continuum, New York, pp 1658–1659
- Santos JT (2007) Mapeamento dos terreiros de Salvador. Centro de Estudos Afro-Orientais, Salvador
- Shirey H (2009) Transforming the Orixás: Candomblé in sacred and secular spaces in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. *Afr Arts* 2009(Winter):62–79
- Simoons FJ (1998) Plants of life, plants of death. The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison
- Sodré J (1995) As histórias de Lokoïrokotempo: a árvore sagrada o Candomblé. Self-published, Salvador
- Verger PF (2002) Orixás: deuses Iorubás na África e no Novo Mundo. Corrupio, Salvador
- Voeks R (1990) Sacred leaves of Brazilian Candomblé. *Geogr Rev* 80(2):118–131
- Voeks R (1997) Sacred leaves of Brazilian Candomblé: African magic, medicine, and religion in Brazil. University of Texas Press, Austin
- Wafer J (1991) The taste of blood: spirit possession in Brazilian Candomblé. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia
- Walker SS (1990) Everyday and esoteric reality in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé. *Hist Relig* 30(2):103–128

Robert Voeks · John Rashford  
Editors

# African Ethnobotany in the Americas

 Springer

2013