

Episode 120: Afro-Brazilian Religion

Summary

While in Salvador, Nick and Wendy attended a ceremony of the Afro-Brazilian religion candomblé. In this episode, they talk about the experience and the religion in general.

Transcript

Nick: Last time Wendy and I talked about the city of Salvador de Bahia in Brazil, and in particular, we talked about the Afro-Brazilian culture of the city. And one of the aspects of this culture is a religion, which is called candomblé. Now, of course in Brazil, you think of it as being a very catholic country.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: Which is true, uhh, in general, but in Salvador in particular, candomblé is this alternative religion. So what's it all about?

Wendy: Yeah, and it's not completely disassociated with catholicism either. There are people who practice candomblé and then will also go to catholic mass, and they see them as being, you know, interrelated, and they don't see a conflict, uhh, between the two. In candomblé, you have lots of different spirits or, uhh, divine beings that are called *orixás*. Now, *orixás* are not gods and, umm, the guide who took us to see a candomblé, umm, celebration or ceremony, he made this very clear that they actually only believe in one god. So it is a monotheistic religion, of sorts¹. But then you have these many other spirits, uhh, that come below god and they play a very key role in candomblé.

Nick: OK, so as you alluded to², we were lucky to go to a celebration of candomblé, and this is something that I believe tourists do fairly regularly, but it didn't seem to be well advertised or set up in that way. I remember we went to the tourist office and asked if we could do it. And then they sent us to this, umm, Afro-Brazilian heritage office. And it was a very, kind of, old and run-down place, umm, and we went up these rickety³ stairs. And then there were monkeys that were jumping around in the wooden beams in the ceiling. And there was just this wooden desk. And people didn't seem to be very well organised there. But

¹ of sorts: in a way, of one kind or another

² alluded to: mentioned, made reference to

³ rickety: unstable, dilapidated, in danger of collapsing. See also: Episode 82.

anyway, we went in and said, 'We'd like to go and see this ceremony if possible.' And eventually somebody came and helped as and said, 'Yes, you can do this.' And it seems like other people have asked them that. But it certainly didn't seem like something that everybody does.

Wendy: No. No, and, uhh, so the place, it's called a *terreiro*, is the temple or the place of worship⁴ where you perform the candomblé ceremonies - the one that we went to, there were only two other tourists there that evening, and they were also there with a guide. But, yeah, I got the impression that, you know, of all the tourists that were there in the city, and there were quite a few, I don't think very many of them had gone to see a candomblé ceremony, which, you know, on the one hand I'm glad that it hasn't become too touristy, because I think it's important to keep the traditions alive and authentic. And they did not allow any photography, so you couldn't take photos, you couldn't record any video. And I respect that and I understand why they want to do that. I think if there had been people - as much as I would love to have photos of that evening, because it was an incredible experience and I would love to, you know, have some memories of that and be able to show people - but if we had been there photographing and filming, I think it really would have detracted⁵ from the experience, uhh, certainly for the people who were participating in it.

Nick: Yeah, I agree with that. And it also just kind of added to the mysterious nature of it. It seemed very secretive. Umm, you know, in the colonial core of Salvador, there are many, many churches, but there aren't these places for candomblé really in the centre. But overall in the city, there are apparently more than a thousand of them, these temples. Umm, but they're kind of in the suburbs and on the outskirts and there's a couple of them that I guess are famous and have signs, but other than that, it seems to be almost an annex to a house or something like that, that you can't just rock up⁶ to and find on your own.

Wendy: No.

Nick: Umm, and so it's something that you have to kind of organise through a guide, umm, so that they can take you and they can explain things to you, you know, so that you know a little bit about what you're seeing and then that you can be respectful of what you're seeing.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. And our guide was actually someone who believes in candomblé and follows candomblé and is involved in the religion. So I think that was important to be able to have that, umm, kind of perspective from someone who was looking at it from the inside. Although he was not necessarily great at explaining it to outsiders. Umm, I mean, this was all in Portuguese and we speak

⁴ place of worship: general term to refer to religious buildings of any religion (e.g. church, mosque, synagogue, temple etc)

⁵ detracted: lessened, taken away

⁶ rock up (phrasal verb): arrive without notice or appointment

Portuguese fairly well but he was throwing around a lot of African terms and, yeah, things that I'd never heard of before. And it was a little difficult to kind of make sense of⁷ it all. But I definitely learned a lot that I didn't know about candomblé and then just sitting there and watching the ... watching it all happen, that was amazing as well.

Nick: Right, so the temple that we were in was just one room and it was, let's say, I don't know, 25-30 square metres. And there was this column in the middle. And basically what we saw were people dancing in a circle around this column. And it started out with just four or five people.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. And there was live music as well. There were people who were playing drums and other kinds of percussion instruments.

Nick: And some of the dancers, or most of them, were very well dressed. Most of them were wearing white and they were wearing a lot of, uhh, garments⁸ that had lace and things like that. There was one random guy in jeans and a t-shirt, uhh, for a while. Umm, but some of them were very nicely dressed

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: And at the beginning there weren't very many of them so they had quite a lot of room and we were just watching on. And it was very ritualistic. So...

Wendy: And the white clothing, let me point out, is also important too. And we were actually told that we should wear either white coloured clothing or very light coloured clothing and that we definitely should not wear black. So that is an important aspect of the religion. But, yeah, you're right. Almost all of them were dressed in white and dressed in very beautiful, elaborate⁹ clothes.

Nick: So at the beginning, everything seemed, you know, fairly normal. There were some things that didn't really make sense to us, but were sort of part of the ritual of what they were doing. So for example, some of the dancers would, at a certain point, get down on hands and knees and kind of bow towards the floor and get down very close to the floor. And then they would get up and continue their dancing and then maybe do it again at a different spot in a room. Uhh, sometimes they would touch the column in the middle and then just continue to move on. There was one point, and it only ... we were there for I think two-and-a-half hours or so. There was one point, only one point throughout the whole night that I saw where all of the dancers at the same time did a thing where they put one of their hands on their forehead and their other hand on the back of their head. And they did that for, I don't know, 20 seconds, and then they stopped and then they never did that again.

⁷ make sense of: comprehend, understand

⁸ garments: pieces of clothing

⁹ elaborate: detailed, ornate

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: Umm, so I'm not sure, you know, what the significance is of these certain rituals, but obviously it does have significance for them. And then more and more people started to join, and then it became more and more unusual.

Wendy: Yeah, so one of the girls in particular, who had been dancing, she suddenly started, uhh, shaking and just acting abnormally. And so our guide pointed to her and said, 'She's going to be ... she's going to go into a trance¹⁰ now,' is the way that he put it. Umm, and what happened was that she was possessed by the spirit of an *orixá*. So it was her body, but the spirit ... it was not her anymore, it was the spirit, the *orixá*, who was ... who had control of her body. And, umm, so she was the first one to do this, and then gradually more and more of the dancers started to be, uhh, to go into trance, and to also be possessed by different *orixás*. Umm, so...

Nick: Right, because each of them has one *orixá* in particular.

Wendy: Yeah, every, umm, every practitioner of candomblé has their *orixá*. So this was one of the things that got a little bit complicated when our guide was explaining it. I didn't quite understand. It seems that there are a few different options of spirits that a person could be possessed by. And there are other kinds of spirits in addition to *orixás*, so you could be possessed by one of those. But I think generally, when you go into trance, the spirit that comes into your body is going to be the one that you know is your *orixá*. Uhh, and they all have their ... each *orixá* has his or her way of dressing and their own symbols and things that they hold, so at the end of the night, umm, 'cause the people who went into trance, they would dance around the room for a while, and then eventually they would disappear behind a curtain. And, so, towards the end, it was pretty quiet because they had all disappeared, but then they all came back and they were all dressed as their *orixá*. And they were holding, umm, you know, like, a mirror or a machete, a spear, or different things that would, uhh, you know, were the symbols of that particular *orixá* that had possessed them.

Nick: Right, and before they did that, when a lot of them were still in trance, one of them started to hug a lot of people. Because there were also other Brazilians there watching, like even they're practitioners of candomblé but some dance and some don't dance. So some of them were just sitting around the room. And this, uhh, one man started hugging people, but you could sort of see, I mean, in his eyes and everything, that he was in this trance. And then eventually he got around to us and it was our turn and so we hugged him as well.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. Yeah, so we participated in some sense in the whole ceremony. Umm, yeah, it was like nothing I've ever seen before. At one point the leader came out and started throwing popcorn at us and our guide told us that

¹⁰ trance: half-conscious state

popcorn has healing properties, curative properties in candomblé. So, yeah, it felt a bit like I felt when I would walk into a Hindu temple in India, where there are so many different rituals going on and I'm just, like, 'Wow, this is so foreign to me and I have no idea what any of this means!' And, uhh, that was a bit what it was like, but it was, umm, a real privilege to be able to witness it.

Comprehension Questions

1. How were most of the dancers dressed?
2. How did Nick and Wendy participate - briefly - in the ceremony?
3. How did some of the dancers appear at the end of the evening?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. He said the maths exam was the hardest he had ever taken. He could hardly _____ any of the questions!
2. There's no mosque in the city, so the local Muslims don't have a _____ where they can go and pray.
3. She's a retiree, _____. She still does some freelance work occasionally but she's mostly retired.
4. The Baroque style of architecture is based on extremely _____ decoration, whereas the Renaissance is marked by simplicity.
5. As I _____ earlier, the current state of affairs cannot continue. We need wholesale change in this organisation.
6. You used to be able to just _____ to most sporting events on the day, but nowadays you should buy a ticket beforehand in case it sells out.
7. We went to a very romantic restaurant, but there was a loud tour group at the next table which _____ a bit from the ambience.
8. There's an old _____ bridge nearby, but you're better off walking a bit further downriver to get to the new bridge, which is a lot safer.
9. The hotel will wash your clothes for you, but they charge per item and the price is different for different _____.
10. Whirling dervishes go into a _____ when they dance. If you're ever in Turkey or other places where there are whirling dervishes, it's a wonderful spectacle.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Would you like to attend a candomblé ceremony? Why or why not?
2. Do you think visitors who attend candomblé ceremonies should be able to take photos and videos? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever seen anyone in a trance? If so, what was it like? If not, what do you think it would be like?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. They were mostly dressed in white and often in quite elaborate clothing.
2. They hugged one of the dancers while he was in a trance.
3. They appeared in the form of their *orixá*.

Exercises

1. make sense of
2. place of worship
3. of sorts
4. elaborate
5. alluded to
6. rock up
7. detracted
8. rickety
9. garments
10. trance