ABDIAS NASCIMENTO:
Artist, Activist, Author
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April 28 – June 21, 2014

Amy H. Winter, Elisa Larkin Nascimento, and John F. Collins, Editors

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Abdias Nascimento, 2002. Photo by Bia Parreiras
Poet, artist, scholar, dramatist, and Pan-African activist, Abdias Nascimento created the Black Experimental Theater (1944) and the Black Arts Museum (1950-1968), organized the National Convention of Brazilian Blacks (1946), the First Congress of Brazilian Blacks (1950), and the Third Congress of Black Culture in the Americas (1982). Professor Emeritus, State University of New York at Buffalo, he was the first African Brazilian to champion black people’s human and civil rights in the National Legislature, where in 1983 he presented the first Brazilian proposal for affirmative action legislation. He served as Rio de Janeiro State Secretary for the Defense and Promotion of Afro-Brazilian People and Secretary of Human Rights and Citizenship. He received national and international honors for his work, including UNESCO’s special Toussaint Louverture Award for contribution to the fight against racism, granted to him and to poet Aimé Césaire in 2004. He was officially nominated for the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

So many people, across hemispheres and times, have contributed to the exposition at Queens College of Abdias Nascimento’s powerful art and ideas. Singular thanks are due Elisa Larkin Nascimento, whose generosity, foundational work, and expert assistance have made this exhibition possible. We are indebted also to Amilcar Maceo Priestley of the Proyecto AfroLatin®, who has worked with us hand-in-hand to develop the numerous programs accompanying this exhibition.

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We thank many of our academic colleagues for their enthusiastic participation and enrichment of the exhibition with lectures, round tables, and panels: James Moore, Christopher Winks, Anahi Vladrich, Julie Skurski, Nina Angela Mercer and Cheryl Sterling of Queens College, CUNY and Medgar Evers College, respectively; Vânia Penha Lopes of Bloomfield College.

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We are especially grateful to members of the Queens College administration for their support and contributions to all aspects of the Year of Brazil and this exhibition: James Muyskens, Elizabeth Hendrey, June Bobb, Jeff Rosenstock, Eva Fernandez; Dedi Firestone, Vivian Charlop, William Najarro Maria Terrone and Maria Matteo and the staff of the Office of Communications have been instrumental in making this exhibition a reality.

In addition to all those who played a role in the financing, design, installation, and production of the exhibition, catalogue, website, and many community discussions surrounding our celebration of the artwork and contributions of Abdias Nascimento and his collaborators like George Priestley, we would like to offer special thanks to Brita Helgesen, Elizabeth Hoy, and Jennifer Sanchez of the Godwin-Ternbach Museum; Eglis Liranzo and Ramona Perez of the Program in Latin American and Latino Studies; and Cecilia and Araldo Britez of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Queens College.

Amy H. Winter, Director and Curator
John F. Collins, Director
Godwin-Ternbach Museum
Latin American and Latino Studies
The present exhibition is possible because IPEAFRO carried out the organizing, cataloguing and digitizing of these collections. We thank photographer Miguel Pacheco e Chaves, who produced quality digital reproductions for printing in the original sizes; and for their support we thank the Ford and Kellogg Foundations; Petrobras, the Brazilian oil company; and SEPPIR, the President’s Special Secretariat for Policies Promoting Racial Equality.

We thank Professor John Collins and Godwin-Ternbach Museum Director Amy Winter for the invitation to show these images. It has been a pleasure and an honor for IPEAFRO to work with CUNY and the Godwin Ternbach Museum to make this exhibit come to life here in Queens!

Elisa Larkin Nascimento, Ph.D.
Director and Curator
IPEAFRO, Afro-Brazilian Studies and Research Institute
The Afro-Brazilian Studies and Research Institute (IPEAFRO) was founded by Abdias Nascimento in 1981, organized the Third Congress of Black Culture in the Americas (São Paulo, 1982), published the bilingual journal *Afrodiaspora*, carried out the first field research project on quilombo communities in Brazil, and organized an international seminar on Namibia in Brazil in 1984.

Dedicated to educational work with African history and culture in Brazil, IPEAFRO offered the Sankofa university extension course for educators at the Catholic University of São Paulo and the State University of Rio de Janeiro from 1983 to 1995 and organized the First and Second Forums on African Civilization and History in Public Schools in 1991 and 1993. Retrospective exhibitions on Abdias Nascimento’s life and work have enriched IPEAFRO’s forums, colloquia, and workshops for educators in Rio de Janeiro, Brasília and Salvador, where the exhibition was part of the Second World Conference of African and Diaspora Intellectuals in 2006.

In partnership with the Brazilian National Library, U.S. Library of Congress, Center for Research Libraries, Ford Foundation and Kellogg Foundation, and with support from Petrobras, the Brazilian oil company, and from the Brazilian Federal Government, IPEAFRO has been carrying out the organization, archival description, microfilming and digitization of Abdias Nascimento’s archives and arts collection, and making the contents available to researchers via internet through its website.

IPEAFRO has published books and exhibition catalogues and produced documentary videos, available on IPEAFRO’S website. There you will find books, theses and dissertations and other information on African history and culture and on Abdias Nascimento’s life and work, as well as images of documents contained in his archives. With the generous collaboration of photographer Chester Higgins, Jr., IPEAFRO developed the Time Line of African Peoples and Teachers’ Supplement shown in this exhibition. They are also available on the website, www.ipeafro.org.br
I first encountered Black Latin America in Mexico City in 1999, when I saw a poster for an exhibition about Black Mexico. I realized suddenly that there was a Black Mexico and that a Caribbean pulse beats deeply in Latin America. While experts remain divided as to whether the Olmecs—the “mother” culture of Mexico who lived in the states of Veracruz and Tabasco on the edge of the Caribbean Sea—had contact with Africans, the physiognomy of their colossal stone heads seemed to point me in that direction.

It was a revelation for me, which I soon learned in travels to Peru was not isolated to Mexico alone, but present in all of Latin America. In my love of Latin American music, particularly Brazilian and Cuban, I realized I was discovering an entire history for the first time. The sheer beauty of the music could not be hidden from the world for as long as its creators had been hidden—the musicians of Black Peru, Black Cuba, Black Brazil—in short, Black Latin America.

Why was this something I hadn’t previously thought about? I was aware, of course, of the stain on human history that is slavery. But in my mind, it was restricted to what I’d been taught: the history of the United States and some Caribbean Islands, and the history of African slavery’s demise, which I learned on my own. Little by little I understood that slavery had left its mark everywhere in the Western hemisphere—for the worst but also in terms which promise a special overcoming in legacies like its music.

In his writing, as no doubt was the case in his dramatic roles, Nascimento’s godlike voice speaks through him in all forms: in his invocation or “Padê to Exu,” an orixá and one of the chief deities of Brazil’s Candomblé religion deriving from African Yoruba religion; and in his sage, scholarly voice that shares its wisdom about “My Art and Candomblé.” Like his writing, his enchanting archetypal art enables the empowerment of African diaspora people everywhere, helping them to step out into the light from centuries of repression and obscurity and proudly reclaim and express their culture. The Time Line of African Peoples, created by IPEAFRO included in this exhibition, helps to recover that heritage and its history.

This exhibition is not only a celebration of Abdias Nascimento, the man and his life. It is a celebration of his priorities, achievements, and vision, made evident in his artworks, which are visual odes to the orixás, the forces of nature and the universe pictured as personifications and abstract symbols of the cosmology of Candomblé. Rejoicing in the wonder and color of nature’s creativity and the mysteries of the universe, Abdias Nascimento has embraced the essence of his religion and put it back onto the canvas of history.

The Godwin-Ternbach Museum is honored to present and explore the work of Abdias Nascimento, and to have worked with a group of remarkable people dedicated to freedom, justice, and human rights. Foremost among them are Elisa Larkin Nascimento, John Collins, and Amilcar Maceo Priestley.

Amy Winter, Director and Curator
Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College
INTRODUCTION

In fall 2012, while attending a presentation by Elisa Larkin de Nascimento, I looked up to a stirring picture of Abdias Nascimento seated at a long table at the Third Congress of Black Culture in the Americas. One of the men to his right looked remarkably familiar. And Elisa soon revealed why: Listening intently was the activist and scholar George Priestley.

As the current Director of Queens College’s Program in Latin American and Latino Studies and a researcher of racial politics in Brazil, I am honored to participate in the Godwin-Ternbach Museum’s 2014 exposition of works by noted artist, intellectual, and civil rights leader Abdias Nascimento. In doing so, I am delighted also to join forces with many people, including George Priestley’s son, Amilcar Maceo, and wife of more than 40 years, Marva Wade Priestley. As many of those reading this catalogue know, George was a leader in the Westindian Panamanian diaspora living in New York, Professor of Political Science at Queens College, the founder of the civil society organization Proyecto Afrolatin@, and the Director of Latin American and Latino Studies from 1982 until his untimely death in 2009. Thus, to someone who has had the double honor of engaging the ideas and cultural production of Abdias Nascimento, and working since 2012 to live up to George Priestley’s legacy as Queens College Director of Latin American and Latino Studies, today’s exposition of Abdias’ artwork seems a crucial nexus and a promising path in disseminating the achievements of these two diasporic activists.

The paintings that Elisa Larkin Nascimento and IPEAFRO have so generously made available draw on the mythology and iconography of the orixás, African Brazilian and West African figures who come to possess and transform certain of those who participate in the religion known as Candomblé. As Nascimento makes so clear in his essay republished below, Candomblé mobilizes African myth and symbolism in “adventures of spirit” that are “more a vital imperative than an artistic or academic exercise.” It is this calling down, this ritual of self-possession, restoration, and hopeful transformation, which we seek to nurture in Flushing, and across New York, today. We hope to do so, in part, by means of the exposition of Nascimento’s artwork at Queens College, a key node in New York’s public educational system and the global struggle for social justice.

As Nascimento knew so well, and depicted so beautifully, people may encourage and call down the orixás. But in the end it is they who possess us—with a force that summons the full experiences of histories both glorious and violent through movements that convert humans into vessels of the gods. As transformative beings, these orixás seem apt figures for the process of producing knowledge, and clear-eyed citizens of the world, in one of that world’s largest public educational systems. These Black Atlantic figures’ power and irruptive presences highlight the extent to which political causes and world historical events seize hold of us, calling out for participation and passion so that they might be nurtured as positive forces for the collectivity.
In 1964, Andrew Goodman, then a Queens College undergraduate, was murdered alongside James Chaney and Mickey Schwerner while registering black voters in Neshoba County, Mississippi. Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner are important to the actual practices, as well as the enduring memories, that gird the U.S. Civil Rights struggle. Likewise, albeit in different manners given his lifelong activism and active engagement in the arts, his time in Brazil’s Federal Senate, and the specific national context in which he worked, Abdias Nascimento remains a critical force in struggles for racial equality. Godwin-Ternbach Museum Director Amy Winter and I thus hope to bring together the ideas, work, and families of Nascimento and George Priestley at a CUNY college whose motto “we learn so that we may serve” honors the sacrifices of young people like Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner. In this way we strive to do justice to the legacies of these pioneers, and leaders like Nascimento and Priestley, while pushing their agendas into new struggles for social justice engineered by today’s CUNY students.

In this and all respects, we are honored to work with our invited commentators, IPEAFRO, the Proyecto Afrolatin@, the New York Consulate of the Federal Republic of Brazil, the Queens College Foundation and the Year of Brazil, and an array of people and institutions across New York City simply too large to enumerate smoothly here. And yet all their contributions are appreciated: We trust that the paintings hanging in the Godwin-Ternbach museum, like the brilliance and the sacrifices of all those involved in the transnational fight for human dignity, will foster a climate of cooperation and respect. We hope also that, in this environment, political struggles and enduring beauty produced in Brazil and the United States may come to influence all peoples’ options, civil rights, and appreciation of the sacrifices and the victories of Afro-descendent peoples across the Americas.

John F. Collins, Queens College, Department of Anthropology
Director, Program in Latin American and Latino Studies
When we first learned of the Abdias Nascimento speaker series commemorating the Year of Brazil, we were excited to hear that the commitment Queens College made to Latin American studies lives on. My father, Dr. George Priestley, chaired the Latin American Studies department from 1982 until he passed away in June 2009. In 2005, under a Ford Foundation grant, my father founded the Afrolatin@ Project. With the institutional support of Queens College, the Project focused initially on Afrolatin@, Latin@, and Black solidarity in the U.S. It later went on to conduct the first of its kind HIV/AIDS Prevention Study of Afrolatin@s in the Americas. The appointment of Dr. John Collins and his commitment to leading the program in a direction my father pursued has been refreshing.

When I think of Dr. Abdias Nascimento, activist, scholar, artist, and legislator, I am transported to a formative time in Latin America. Through my father, I was fortunate enough to have grown up in the midst of the forefathers of the diaspora social movements in the Black Americas. He tirelessly dedicated his life’s work to organizing and helping articulate the goals of these movements. As part of the group of architects of recent Afrolatino socio-political history, Drs. Nascimento and Priestley would cross paths on many occasions in the 1970s and 1980s. Together with a small army of collaborators, intellectuals, researchers and activists, they would
lay the groundwork for much of the activism that has developed in the Black Americas over the last 30 years. They mobilized around issues of political solidarity with African independence movements, aesthetics, political and economic activism, antiracism and anti-apartheid, gender equality, religious and cultural preservation, health, education and technology.

As founder of the Museum of Black Art in Brazil, Dr. Nascimento long recognized the need for cultural preservation and a space for the celebration of black artistic expression and its relationship to political resistance and spirituality. In 1983, Dr. Nascimento and IPEAFRO, the NGO he co-founded with Dr. Elisa Larkin Nascimento, hosted the 3rd Congress of Black Culture in the Americas in São Paulo, Brazil. The third conference was preceded by the 1st Congress held in Cali, Colombia in 1977 and the 2nd congress held in 1982 in Panama City, Panama.

_Afrodiaspora: The Journal of Black World Thought_, vol. 1, no. 2, co-edited by Dr. Nascimento and Dr. Elisa Larkin Nascimento and published after the 3rd Conference, noted that the 1977 Cali Conference was the “first successful effort to bring together Afrodescendant representatives...in a broad regional encounter.” _Afrodiaspora_ itself became an important body of work, as it served to help document and preserve the movement’s efforts and the organizational proceedings of the Congresses of Black Culture in the Americas.

Dr. Priestley served as an active collaborator and participant in each of these regional conferences, including being elected as the Vice-President for Central America for the 4th Congress. The conferences also inspired him and his colleagues in Panama to organize the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Congress of Black Panamanians between 1981 and 1987.

Since we relaunched the Afrolatin@ Project in 2012, our mission has focused on helping to bring the collection, documentation and preservation of Afrolatino cultural heritage, history and oral history into the digital age. The Project also conducts research at the intersection of technology and the socio-economic and political realities of the Black Americas. Dr. Nascimento’s IPEAFRO, which continues under the direction of Dr. Elisa Larkin Nascimento, serves as a source of inspiration in this new digital space, having digitized much of Dr. Nascimento’s life’s work.

With the groundwork laid by these historic figures, the cultural heritage, religious preservation, artistic creativity, and social, economic, and political mobilization of Afrolatino will take on new strategies and forms of expressions. As we enter the upcoming United Nations declared Decade of Afrodescendants 2015-2024, technology will become an increasingly important tool in documenting and preserving these centuries-old struggles for equality and recognition in the Black Americas.

Amilcar Priestley, Director
The Afrolatin@ Project (www.afrolatinoproject.org)
April 2014
INTRODUCTION TO ABDIAS NASCIMENTO’S ART

Abdias Nascimento’s artwork explores and interprets symbolic images coming out of different African world contexts, from the primordial matrix of ancient Egypt to Haiti’s vodou and the Adinkra ideograms of West Africa. But the orixás of Yorubaland and Brazil are his central focus, in settings that evoke the heroes and principles of the fight for freedom in Africa and its Diaspora.

Abdias dedicated his life to the mission of recovering his people’s human dignity, recalling the story of Osiris, who reigned sovereign along with Isis, his sister. They brought agriculture and civilization to Egypt and the world. When Osiris was murdered and his body shredded and scattered over the earth, Isis set out on the impossible search for the pieces, put them together and restored to them the breath of life. Likewise, African people took culture and knowledge to Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Recent times of slavery shattered a living matrix, and the current moment is one of bringing pieces together, re-establishing connections and restoring life.

Abdias Nascimento has been part of this moment since his time in exile from his native land. During that period, he found that by painting he could communicate, beyond spoken language, with friends and peers abroad and in Brazil. His canvases convey the ideas of cosmic harmony and the unity of life, principles dear to the universe of African Brazilian tradition and to human artistic and spiritual life. These are values that are as intimately African Brazilian as they are perennial and universal.

Elisa Larkin Nascimento, Ph.D
Director and Curator
IPEAFRO, Afro-Brazilian Studies and Research Institute
MÃE BEATA DE YEMONJÁ - THE ART OF ABDIAS NASCIMENTO

Abdias Nascimento is not only an activist for political causes, but first and foremost a living archive of our African history and culture. With his artistic work, he brings back the force and the colors of this intense Brazil. He portrays this black and Brazilian intensity in his coming and going from the distant past of Mother Africa to the present times of Brazil’s children, separated by the Atlantic, who keep her flame alive thanks to this veritable modern-time griot. Child of Oxum, a charming and affectionate deity, the lady of sweet waters, he undoubtedly makes her proud. With his brush he transmits to us the simplicity and sensitivity that only the waters of Oxum can express...subtle and expressive lines that give visibility and respect to our black culture.

A strong piece of work this book of yours, Abdias, the work of a strong man. May Olorum bless you, may the sweet waters of Oxum always nourish your black and human hands.

Ora iê iê ô, Iya fideremo (Oxum, Mother of Goodness, who gives her children gifts of bronze)

Mãe Beata de Yemonjá
Iyalorixá, Ilê Omi Oju Aro
Chief priestess, House of the Waters of Oxossi’s Eyes
Miguel Couto, Baixada Fluminense, Rio de Janeiro State
Your sister in the waters
MY PAINTING AND THE CANDOMBLÉ
Abdias Nascimento

First Thoughts

The orixás portrayed in these canvases are the outcome of my own contemplations and adventures of spirit; they are more a vital imperative than an artistic or academic exercise. I am not interested merely in aesthetic forms, the distribution of volumes in space, or the relative tones of colors. What is important to me are the spiritual and cultural vicissitudes of Africans and African Brazilians: the history and deities of the religion my ancestors brought with them into exile.

My orixás are living and vivifying beings that inhabit Africa, Brazil and all the Americas, right now. They are part of our daily secular life, a legacy of history and the ancestors. That is why I have named them after living people: they defend our heroes and martyrs and are committed to our people’s search for identity, freedom, and dignity.

The Orixás

Laroiê Exu!

The beginning was Olorum. And Olorum was one, creator of the cosmos, true essence of unity later shattered.

At Ile-Ife, in today’s Nigeria, Obatalá descended from Orum, the heavens, to carry out the mission his father Olorum, the Lord of Orum, entrusted to him: create the earth and populate the universe. Separated from the primal unity, Obatalá, who is called Oxalá in Brazil, embodied the principle of male/female duality. The upper part of his symbolic gourd represents the male Orum, the bottom part the female Aiyê, earth: Oduduwa.

To prevent chaos from prevailing after its original unity was shattered, the cosmos was divided into four parts: the world of the orixás; the world of Osanyin or Ossaim, reign of ritual flora and pharmacology; the world of human beings; and the world of the ancestors, Egungun (Egum in Brazil). These are the major regions of the visible and invisible worlds, Aiyê and Orum.

To integrate these worlds, sustaining the constant process of exchange and communication among them, is the spiritual, philosophical, and material basis of the practice of our religious tradition, Candomblé. Its main flux is the transmission, perpetuation, and reproduction of axé, the life force inherent and necessary to every being. Axé is also the foundation that supports the spiritual authority and practice of each house of worship.
Harmony among the four cosmic regions composes Candomblé’s intrinsic environmentalist perspective, extremely contemporary to the world and moment in which we live. That the act of founding a Candomblé house of worship is called planting axé is not happenstance, for our tradition’s link with land, soil, vegetation, and all aspects of nature is vital.

Indeed, the orixás are, themselves, the very forces of nature and protagonists of the mythic-historical world of our ancestry, the first of whose references is ancient Egypt, cradle of African and Western civilization.

In Brazil, the state of Bahia alone has more than a thousand houses of Candomblé worship, called terreiros. They are entirely autonomous, a fact that results in rich variation among customs, traditions, and legends from one house to another. Thus the general description we give here will not correspond in exact detail to all terreiro communities.

A high priestess and community leader is known as Iyalorixá, literally “mother of the gods,” translated in Brazil as mãe de santo – mother of saints. A high priest is known as Babalorixá and pai de santo – father of saints. They hold spiritual and secular authority over the house of worship and the community of the faithful. The predominance of Iyalorixás and female initiates in Brazil shows women’s high standing in African culture.

There is a hierarchy of many distinct liturgical functions in Candomblé. The first is the Babalawô – literally “father of the secret” – priest of Ifá, orixá of divination, who knows the past, present, and future. Master and communicator of the literary corpus containing Yoruba spiritual and philosophical wisdom, Ifá represents at once the equivalent of all that is contained in Western tradition in the words of prophets, apostles, disciples, the Bible, and principal writings revealing the tradition’s philosophy and knowledge. Ifá priests, Babalawôs, carry all of this in their memory, which is transmitted through oral tradition. This priestly order is outside the realm of the Iyalorixá or Babalorixá’s authority. Babalawôs preside over the reign of the human person. In Brazil, the order seems to be disappearing, almost extinct. Until 2005 its only living representative was Mestre Agenor, who died that year in Rio de Janeiro.

Also not subject to the Iyalorixá’s authority are Babalossaim, priests of Ossaim, who preside over the reign of nature, ceremonial leaves and medicinal plants, and Babalojé, priests of Egungun, domain of the ancestors. In Brazil as in Africa, summoning of the Egungun is a secret ceremony and society, found only in Bahia, where its supreme authority is Alapini Mestre Didi (Deoscóredes Maximiliano dos Santos).

Under the Babalorixá or Iyalorixá’s command, there exist other functions in the liturgical hierarchy. The Axogum practices the sacrifice of two-legged or four-legged animals; the Pegi-Gã presides over the house’s administrative council; the Alabê, chief musician, plays the rum, one of the sacred drums; the Ogan (male) or Ekede (female) assist initiates, who are called filhos de santo (daughters or sons of saints); the Oba are ministers of Xangô (this post was created by Mãe Aninha at the Ile Axé Opô Afonjá in Bahia).
The Iya Basse are the gods’ cooks. Each of the orixás has a favorite dish. Candomblé’s cuisine is rich, varied, delicious, and extremely popular outside the religious communities. It is internationally consecrated as Brazil’s gastronomical trademark. Dishes like xinxim de galinha, Oxum’s favorite; Xangô’s maala or caruru, Obatalá’s white rice; abará, vatapá, acarajé, and so many others, can be found in restaurants and dining rooms from New York to Porto Alegre.

The drums – called rum, rumpi and lê in diminishing order of size – are mediators or intermediaries, calling forth the deities and taking believers’ petitions to the gods through special rhythms peculiar to each orixá. The drums are mystical beings, and they “eat” sacred food: palm oil, honey, sacramental water, and the blood of hens.

Among Candomblé’s foremost characteristics is initiation. All the liturgical functions require initiation, through which the candidate comes to participate in some of the secrets of sacred knowledge. In addition to the spiritual responsibilities it involves, initiation also has serious implications for the candidate’s secular life.

Both private and public ceremonies always begin with the Padê, invocation of Exu, the keeper of cosmic order and balance. Courier of axé, he is the only orixá that moves from one cosmic dominion to the others.

Trickster genius of the paths and crossroads of the universe, interpreter of the gods’ languages and those of human beings, Exu personifies contradiction, dialecticizes human existence, ritualizes the perpetual movement of the cosmos and the history of men and women. He is the phallic deity that presides over the sexual act, his phallus functioning symbolically as the constant effort to restore cosmic unity. His colors are red and black, his animals the rooster, goat, and dog. He rarely visits the terreiro, and when he does, the community salutes him by saying “Laroïè!”

Pomba Gira, whose name is of Bantu origin, is Exu’s female companion and counterpart.

Candomblé’s liturgical week begins with Exu, as do all its ceremonies. Monday is dedicated to Exu and to Omolu or Obaluaiê. Orixá of sickness and health, life and death, earth and sun, he is the poor people’s physician. God of smallpox, replete with sores, his face and body are always covered. His greeting is “Atoto,” and he symbolizes earth and sun.

Tuesday is the day of Oxunmaré, serpent god in the seven colors of the rainbow, who alternates gender. Her/ his task is to manage and supervise the cycle of rains and mists, evaporating water from lakes, rivers, and oceans to slake the thirst of the fiery clouds surrounding Xangô’s abode. Nananburucu also belongs to Tuesday. She is the wife of Obatalá, and like her husband she is a deity of procreation and the perpetuation of divine and human species.
Xangô, orixá of lightning, thunder, sun, storm, and fire, is the patron of justice. His colors are red and white, his day Wednesday. He lives in rock and his double-headed axe is made of meteorite.

Xangô’s mate Iansã or Oya, orixá of lightning, wind, and storm, is also god of Wednesday. Her colors are red and white, and her greeting is “Eparrei!” Aside from Exu, she is the only orixá who deals with death and the Egungun. Sovereign of cemeteries, she is one of the choreographical conductors of the secret ceremony of Egungun summoning.

Eruossaim, the other female participant in Egungun worship, wears two masks, one in front of the face and another behind the head, representing past and future.

Thursday is the day of Oxossi, god of the hunt: he reigns over forests and is greeted with the word “Okê!” His colors are green and yellow. His worship honors the Native American Indians, first dwellers of the lands that became Brazil.

Ogum, god of war and of just revenge, anguish, mystery, and tragedy, also presides over Thursday. Defier of existential terror, Ogum breaks through cosmic barriers, forging new paths of progress and knowledge. His color is blue, and he particularly requires palm wine.

Obatalá or Oxalá the elder, father of creation and of all the orixás, is the hermaphrodite deity who presides over Friday. His color is white; he lives in the celestial dome and reigns in peace. Oxaguiã, the younger Obatalá, is revered on Friday as well.

Saturday is dedicated to the water goddesses, Yemanjá and Oxum. Yemanjá, orixá of the sea and protector of fishermen, is fond of pink and light blue. Oxum, goddess of sweet waters, symbolizes love and fertility. Wed to Xangô, her color is gold. Except for Exu, she is the only orixá with powers of divination and the ability to use Ifá’s iron throwing chain, the Opelê, to look at past and future.

Sunday is dedicated to all the orixás. We have not mentioned Oba, the first and eldest of Xangô’s wives, who is a warrior goddess, nor did we speak of the twin children, Ibeji.

Candomblé public ceremonies are the magic moment when we join together, in a specific physical space, the four reigns of the African cosmos. The ceremony opens with Exu and closes with Obatalá. The goal is to bring our collective past and the history of the orixás to life by speaking and staging myth. Here lies the importance of pantomime—gestures, poses, dance. Everything is deeply symbolic, nothing coincidental. The ceremony reaches its height of intensity when the filhas de santo embody their respective orixás. In trance, they seem to lose their balance and are transformed into entirely different beings. They are receptacles of deities: horses of the saints, as we say in Brazil. “Mounted” on their respective horses, incorporated in their bodies, the orixás arrive at the ceremonial venue to visit the community of humans.
At this point, the intensity of the ceremony diminishes. Assisted by Ekedes, the “horses” possessed by gods are taken to the inner chamber. There, they dress in the liturgical vestments of their respective “saints”.

When they return, duly costumed, they are no longer persons, but deities. Each orixá is received by the group with the appropriate salutation. The phenomenon of trance causes a total transformation of the “horse’s” personality. A simple house servant becomes Yemanjá, holding the abebê, a ceremonial fan, which she waves in slow rhythms while she executes a dance that is at once maternal and reminiscent of the rhythm and movement of ocean waves. The audience salutes her: “Odomi, Odoceia!” The humble factory worker now exhibits the stature of a king—he is Xangô. He carries a double-headed axe and is received with shouts of “Caô Cabecile!” A washerwoman by profession now becomes the goddess of love, Oxum, and her dance, replete with dignity, displays the sensuality of a loving woman: “Ora iê iê ô!” The dignity of this dance radically distinguishes it from the vulgar eroticism internationally popularized in the novels of certain commercially successful Bahian writers.

Ogum, the warrior god, brandishes his exquisite sword, the agadâ, restorer of freedom: “Ogunhiê!” Face hidden by a mask, body covered with straw and carrying the xaxarâ, a short staff artistically decorated with cowrie shells and beads, Obaluaï or Omolu arrives: “Atoto!” Obatala or Oxalá shows us his opachorô, a phallic emblem of great finesse and beauty. Thus the ritual symbols parade by and mystery hangs in the air, condensing in masks as well as expressive faces. Gestures, drumbeats and dance steps dense with meaning choreograph the unique dance of each orixá. All of this weaves together in a mystical, swaying atmosphere, creating an ambience of powerful, colorful, and intensely engaging poetry.

Just as the cosmic domains complement each other, the deities’ roles and functions are also complementary. And while Exu keeps watch over the cosmic order in all its aspects and Obatala presides over the perpetuation of the species, African people move through centuries of pain and joy, worshipping their ancestral gods, in this magical meeting with the orixás.

Somewhere between Orum and Aiyê there is an area of mystery ignored by futile human rationality. That is where my painting begins, in the effort to rescue and recover some of the symbolic images from this supernatural and historic path that has brought us from a mythical past to a fully human present and future.

I paint Ogum and communicate with the god of just revenge, companion in arms to all those fighting for freedom and dignity. By evoking Yemanjá, I celebrate the one who looks out for our people’s fertility, alert against the contained aggression of certain birth control programs. I portray Xangô, practitioner of justice and commanding officer of all movements to restore our basic rights. I call forth Ossaim, who cultivates medicinal plants and teaches mother Africa’s traditional pharmacology, protecting our people’s health and the purity of our environment. Oxunmaré sums up our people’s colorful vital joy, expanding our playful and creative nature.
Oxum, generous giver of love, enriches our lives with her golden sweetness. Obatala, in his male-female duality, constructs the primal egg of the species’ creation and procreation. And from beyond, far beyond the clouds of Orum, Olorum watches over us...

Axé!
O Exu
by candles’ witchflicker
I watch you eat your own
mother
pouring out black blood
that blackens your white blood
which warms the red blood
in human veins
in menstrual discharge
at the crossroads of
your three bloods
I set down this ebó
Prepared for you

You offer?
I do not refuse to taste your honey
smelling midnight of
strong rum
white blood foaming
from slender palms
I drink from your silver bowl
where semen saliva sap
float still fresh
on the black blood that spreads in ironcore
and explodes in blue ilu

O Exu-Yangui
prince of the universe and
last born
take these birds and
the animals with paws that
I brought to satisfy
your ritual voracity
smoke these cigars
from African Bahia
this flute of Pixinguinha’s
is for you to weep
chorinhos for the ancestors
I hope these offerings
will please your heart and
make your tastebuds happy
a happy heart is

a satisfied stomach and
in the contentment of both
is the best predisposition
for fulfillment of the
laws of retribution
that assure us
cosmic harmony

I implore you Exu
to plant in my mouth
your verbal axé
restoring to me the language
that was mine
and was stolen from me
blow Exu your breath
to the bottom of my throat
down where the voicebud
sprouts so the
bud may blossom
blooming into the flower of
my ancient speech
returned to me by your power
mount me on the axé of words
pregnant with your dynamic grounding
and I shall ride Orum’s
supernatural infinity
roam the distances
of our Aiyê made of
uncertain dangerous terrain

Shut off my body against dangers
take me away on the wings of your
expanding mobility
enlarge me into your lineage
of irony preventive
against my indomitable passion
mature me to your
insolent idiom
we shall shock puritans
unmask hypocrites
sons of bitches
by this catharsis of
cultural obscenities
we shall exorcise the gesture’s
submission and others
inflicted on our African people
I am your fist
Exu Pelintra
your contempt for police
as you defend the defenseless ones
victims of the criminal
death squads
treacherous switchblade in a
White Hand
we are murdered because they judge us
orphans
scorn our humanity
not knowing we are
African men
African women
proud sons and daughters of
Orum’s Lord
Olorum
Our father and yours
Exu
whose winged offspring you are
communication and message

O Exu
one and omnipresent
in all of us
take to our Father
in your shredded flesh
scattered through this world and the
other
the news of our devotion
snapshot of our calloused hands
empty of just retribution
overflowing with tears
tell the Father we have never
had rest from travail
this endless doing
with leisure forbidden
filled exploiters’ coffers
in return for our sweat’s surplus value
we received our
humanity’s deficit value
in their societies
our stomachs growl with
hunger and revolt in
other people’s kitchens

in prisons
in whorehouses
show the Father
our hearts
slashed with anguish
our backs whiplashed
yesterday
on slavery’s pillories
today on the pillories of discrimination

Exu
you who are master of
our people’s freedomways
you know who has brandished your redhot irons
against injustice and opprobrium
Zumbi, Luíza Mahin, Luiz Gama
Cosme, Isidoro, João Cândido
you know that in every African heart
pulsates a kilombo
in every shanty
another Palmares crackles
Xangô’s fire
lights up our struggle
yesterday and today

I bring you Exu
the ebó of my words
in this padê consecrated to you
not by me
but by my and your
brothers and sisters in
Olorum
our Father
who is
in Orum

Laroië!
Abdias Nascimento, Padê de Exu
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1988
IPEAFRO Collection
IF YOU BELONG TO AXÉ

“The African Colors of Brazil” was the title of Nigeria’s 2013 Lagos Black Heritage Festival, featuring an exhibition of Abdias Nascimento’s artwork. The title not only brings to mind the essence of the artist’s work, it also sounds as a clarion assertion of something the Brazilian nation celebrates today in new and positive ways as a result of black people’s efforts and persistence over centuries and against enormous odds. Abdias Nascimento was one of those who persisted in that effort. His canvases show the colors of an African tradition that is a living tribute to the ancestors who kept and developed it over centuries. They triumphed over the stigma and opprobrium that marked the path of their people and their tradition, which were both targeted by social, cultural, economic, and police persecution. Until the latter part of the 20th century, their houses of worship were required by law to register with the police, who frequently subjected them to violent invasions, arrests and confiscations. In this context, the faithful established the habit of identifying with the official religion—Christianity—when questioned by authorities. Thus, statistics reflect a tendency parallel to that of demographic data: underrepresentation of religions of African origin corresponds to the underestimation of the black population that resulted from the social stigma of dark skin color. At the time of the 2000 Census, the campaign “Don’t let your color pass for white” encouraged people to assume their identity, and today a clear majority of Brazilians classify themselves as black. During the 2010 Census, the slogan “If you belong to Axé, then say you do!” called on those of African tradition to declare their religion, and it still rings clear.

Hiding their religious identity from the powers that be was a way for the faithful of black religions to protect themselves and their communities against repression. Such a stance is not strange to their theology, in which protection often comes with what is secret. These traditions are not evangelical; they do not seek to convert. Their houses of worship receive, accept and shelter those who seek or are willing to follow the teachings needed to delve deeply into the relationship of human beings with cosmic mystery. Salvation is not their concern because they do not postulate original sin. Rather they occupy themselves eminently with the ethics of social and environmental responsibility as a function of mutual and collective protection. The faithful not only practice their religions, but they live them wholly, in dynamic communities with specific forms of learning, expressing, making and doing. Their ways of being in and of the world constitute knowledge, philosophy, and epistemology. This is a recurring theme in all of Abdias Nascimento’s work.

For a long time African traditions received the West’s attention as objects of study, something exotic and curious, outside the norm of “true” civilization, which supposedly was that of the West itself, raised to the status of “universal” by force of arms and colonial imposition. But Western ethnocentrism has been challenged critically by those it seeks to exclude from the category of “universal humanity,” and Abdias Nascimento gave thunderous voice to this challenge. Orixá tradition was consistently a basic reference in his creative expression.
and political assertion of black people’s human and civil rights and their culture. The Black Experimental Theater (TEN), which he founded in 1944, was the first Brazilian civil rights organization that made African culture and black identity mainstays of its political action.

Abdias Nascimento was raised in a Catholic family just two decades after the abolition of slavery in Brazil. During his childhood and adolescence he had no contact with African religious tradition. As an adult, discovering its grace and beauty, he became close to outstanding spiritual leaders like Joaozinho da Gomeia of Caxias and Mae Senhora of Bahia. When he asked Mae Senhora about initiation, she said: “My son, you have another mission. Your work is not inside the house of worship, but you will do much for us on the outside.” He dedicated his life to that mission. Poet, artist, writer, dramatist, professor and Pan-African activist, he organized the National Convention of Brazilian Blacks (1946), the First Congress of Brazilian Blacks (1950), and the 3rd Congress of Black Culture in the Americas (1982). He acted as curator of the Black Arts Museum project (1950-68). In the National Legislature, House and Senate, he was the first political leader to champion African peoples’ human and civil rights. In 1983 he presented the first proposal for affirmative action legislation. He served twice in Rio de Janeiro’s State Government: as Secretary for the Defense and Promotion of African Brazilian People and as Secretary of Human Rights and Citizenship.

In all these capacities, he gave voice to African spiritual tradition in Brazil, a country that is officially Catholic despite its theoretical juridical assertion of a lay State. Legislative sessions in both houses are opened with the phrase “Under the protection of God.” From the day Abdias took office in 1983, he began each of his speeches by saying “Under the protection of Olorum,” telling the world that he and his people belong to axé.

Earlier, during his exile from Brazil’s military regime, he had developed his own artistic work and exhibited his paintings widely in the USA, bringing the orixás to audiences all over the country. It was another way, a means beyond words, to express belonging to axé. He also participated in international Pan-African movements. In 1976-77 he spent a year as Visiting Professor at Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, and participated as an uninvited observer in the Colloquium of the 2nd World Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture. I say “uninvited” because, although he had been designated earlier as a keynote speaker by UNESCO and by coordinator Pio Zirimu of Uganda, the Brazilian regime made every effort to exclude him and veto his words. African and diaspora intellectuals like Wole Soyinka, Ola Balogun, Molefi Asante and Maulana Karenga defended his right to speak, and the independent Nigerian press published his work.

To explore the orixá tradition with Abdias Nascimento through his paintings is to open our horizons and deepen our knowledge of Brazil. The ethical precepts, cosmic adventures, and implications for arts, education, and living in community that emerge from the orixá tradition interpreted in these images are deep and significant roots of Brazilian culture.
The paintings communicate unique and contemporary reflections on principles like peace, justice, power, and creation. In a cosmology that brings together the living, the ancestors, generations yet unborn, and the forces of nature, these values always look to the future. Environmentalism is a living and integral part of its religious practice. Creatures of forests and waters populate Abdias’ canvases in a constant process of exchange: fish swim in the sky, winged beings crawl on land or swim at sea, flowers sprout from feet or arms, leaves and branches extend out of wings or fins. This co-habitation of sundry spaces is a visual metaphor of the essential unity among all forms of life. Exu is intensely present in these works, presiding over the flux of energy that makes possible the dynamic continuum of unity through exchange and transmission of axé. This process of inter-nourishment is consigned and practiced in the principle of Ebó (offering). Thus three principles – Exu, Axé, and Ebó – emerge in these images depicting the dynamics of nature’s elements interacting. Water, land, air, and fire, in their co-mingling manifestations, represent the continuing mystery of life as mediation between the sacred and the mundane.

It is important to recall that African religious tradition was the cradle and shelter of all forms of African Brazilian cultural expression. Musical groups called circles of chorinho and samba developed into community organizations that are now the basis of a lucrative tourist industry. Capoeira circles grew from protective martial arts groups to one of Brazil’s main forms of cultural presence all over the world. Jongo and tambor de crioula, among other dance traditions, are just a few examples of the cohesive force of African cultural expression that grew out of the religious tradition. When one begins to get a notion of the elasticity and capacity for organizational innovation that this tradition has helped consolidate in the Brazilian people and culture, its positive contribution to the nation’s capacity for self-renovation becomes more than evident. And by extension one can only imagine how much African tradition still has to contribute to the indispensable undertaking of rethinking our human ways of being in and of this earth, in order to safeguard our survival and that of the planet in the future that awaits us.

As these tendencies emerge and develop, along with Abdias Nascimento, those who belong to axé will say they do – with the pride and humility of those who build the world.

Elisa Larkin Nascimento
Rio de Janeiro, 2013
CELEBRATING THE REMARKABLE GENIUS OF ABDIAS NASCIMENTO

Long before I knew Abdias Nascimento he had made his mark on the world with commitment, genius, and fearlessness. As a young professor I went from UCLA to SUNY Buffalo in 1973 where I encountered Abdias’ brilliant anti-racist and anti-oppression discourses as well as his non-discursive works in art and symbol. In fact, I became an informal student of his, seeking to know more about the conditions, ideas, music, culture, and philosophies of the African people of Brazil, especially his appreciation of the orixás, and his understanding of their evolution in Brazilian society. He was an unending fountain of knowledge, full of contagious charisma and ineffable joy at the possibility of freedom. I once became so enraptured that I said to him, “Abdias, you are like my father.” With his fraternal and youthful spirit he replied, “No, Molefi, I am like your elder brother.” And so it was, he was my elder brother. I was to discover through his history and activism that his life and rhetoric, his art and argument, made him the most significant African influence on African Brazilian history for three-quarters of a century. I count him as one of my mentors in Pan-Africanism and the Yoruba culture we both shared.

During Nascimento’s exile in the United States, no one provided a more sensitive, penetrating, and revealing insight into the interiority of the Brazilian soul. Not only was he the leading interpreter of the African Brazilian to the United States, he was a one-man battalion on a mission to break down all walls between the African peoples of the Americas. In some senses, although he was born in Brazil, he saw himself as a child of the Americas and a citizen of the world. He was received this way wherever he went because his intention was to shake the foundations of any and every racist establishment that had sought to hold back the freedom of African people. His friends and audiences and readers received him and receive him now in the same spirit, as he was convinced that the more we got to know each other the more we would appreciate our unity.

Abdias Nascimento, therefore, was the living icon of the African diaspora embodying in his life and experiences all of the hopes, dreams, ambitions, and contradictions of the American sojourn of Africans. Emerging as he did from rural São Paulo state he became the international logo for a brand of African unity that would influence and impact not just the Americas but the African continent, where he would challenge and provoke political and academic leaders. Thus, his work had two agendas: he was dedicated to an academic-artistic transformation but also to an ethical-social revival among African people. In some ways the two massive panoplies of his life’s work must be seen as determining the environment he created to carry on his political mission.

Nascimento was a revolutionary. When you are living in a dictatorship and you are anti-dictatorial, you are either crazy or a revolutionary. He was not crazy. When you call for reconstruction of the lives of the masses in a society that seeks to maintain power for the
oligarchs, you are revolutionary. As Brazil was transformed and its politics became more
democratic, Abdias was happy to return from exile and to continue the work of raising the
consciousness of his people. In a sustained and rational way, Nascimento worked his way from
the Black Experimental Theater in Rio de Janeiro to the Senate and Presidential Cabinet in Brazil,
not in a straight line, there were many detours and feigned movements; exile and restlessness
also marked much of his time, yet he maintained his loyalty to the causes that had shaped him
during his early life.

I have come to see that Nascimento was a very deliberate man, although he was not unfamiliar
with serendipity. He did not arrive at his decisions without calculation and without historical
understanding; consequently he was preeminently a person of history. This consciousness of
history, that is, of his own and the impact he would have on the larger vision of African history,
occupied his academic-artistic side as well as his ethico-social side. Nascimento orchestrated,
or better yet, coming from the theater experience, directed the course of his historical moment.
The set was his design and in many ways so were the characters who took the form of bandits,
progressives, opponents, racists, and collaborators. Blacks and whites were all on same theater
stage. However, the principal actor was Abdias Nascimento on the stage of life. What this
means to me is that no one can ever be as deliberate as the one who plans and directs the
actions of others toward one major objective. This person may be the director of a space
mission, the president of a nation, the research administrator of a large health grant, or a fire
chief seeking to keep a large building from burning to the ground. Wherever people are in
charge of a mission, an objective, or an action that comprises the work of many people, you
have the work of a director. In some cases, the times find the director and in other cases the
director may organize aspects of the times. I am not quite sure what the case was with Abdias
Nascimento.

There is one person, Elisa Nascimento, who spent more time with him than anyone who could
answer this question. In some respects, the choice of Elisa as his partner, beyond the genuine
romance of this relationship, was critical to Nascimento’s recognition in the English-speaking
communities of the world. Elisa saw to it that his causes and missions were translated to the
black communities of Canada, the United States, the Caribbean, and to the nations of Nigeria,
Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Namibia, and Egypt, in ways that extended Nascimento’s reach
into the African diaspora. No other African Brazilian had ever achieved so much fame in the
Anglo-speaking world. Of course, Nascimento did not see his accomplishments as his alone.
He brought many African Brazilian scholars, writers, and artists to the United States to be
introduced to a receptive African American (African United Statian) population.

Abdias Nascimento was a man of ideas. He struck me as being eager to learn what he had
been unable to learn about Africa and Africans as a young man, although he had found bits
and pieces of what was going on in the rest of the black world while living in Rio de Janeiro. He
had famously met Katherine Dunham and Leopold Senghor. He knew the names of some of the
more popular actors, but in the United States he soon found the nationalist and Pan Africanist
circles that inspired him with ideas, concepts, and facts that would eventually lead him to
create his own philosophy. Wole Soyinka, Haki Madhubuti, John Henrik Clarke, Ivan van Sertima,
Maulana Karenga, and others became his friends and acquaintances. Nascimento would
represent Brazil in 1977 at the 2nd World Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture (FESTAC)
in Lagos, Nigeria, despite the objections of the Brazilian Foreign Ministry and the official
Brazilian delegation. But because of his support from the international black communities in
the United States and Nigeria he held a legitimacy that none of the official representatives from
Brazil could have. Nascimento was the man of the hour when he spoke with vigor about the
conditions of the black people in Brazil. The speech was a resounding success and was shown
on Nigerian television. From that speech onward he was enthroned into the community of
Pan-Africanists and Afrocentrists who had to be studied and supported in their work against
oppressive elements in society. What Nascimento shared with the English speaking Africans
was knowledge of the necessity for speaking your own truths to the world from your own
perspective.

I met Nascimento in the early 1970s but I did not publish the first Afrocentric book,
*Afrocentricity*, until 1980. This means that the numerous conversations, and rap sessions of
African Brazilian and African American history, impacted my work and Nascimento’s. I came out
with the theory of Afrocentricity and he was developing Kilombismo. This is a historical moment
that must be recorded, because here we were sitting in Buffalo, New York, two Africans of the
Americas, he the elder and I the younger, debating the histories of our people, pointing out that
our particular whites were more racists than the others, challenging the more commonly held
notions that blacks were just darker copies of whites; Nascimento and I sought insight from our
own particular reference points for a new sense of agency. Thus, Afrocentricity was born and
Kilombismo was born. I believed that there was nothing more correct for Africans in the United
States and other places than our own historical experiences. Nascimento had come to the same
conclusion, and he believed that the African Brazilian history contained within it the seeds of
black transformation based on the early formation in the Palmares Republic.

Molefi Kete Asante
Philadelphia, 2014

Dr. Molefi Kete Asante, founder of the theory of Afrocentricity, is Professor and Chair, Department of African
American Studies at Temple University, where he created the first Ph.D. Program in African American Studies
in 1987. Asante has published more than 500 articles and essays; his 74 books include *As I Run Toward Africa: a
Memoir, The African American People, The History of Africa: The Quest for Eternal Harmony*. The second
edition of his high school text, *African American History: Journey of Liberation*, is used in more than 400
schools throughout North America.

One of the ten most widely cited African Americans, Asante was recognized by *Black Issues in Higher
Education* as one of the most influential leaders in the 1990s. A graduate of Oklahoma Christian College, he
completed his M.A. at Pepperdine University in 1965, received his Ph.D. from UCLA in 1968, and was appointed
full professor at the age of 30 at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He chaired the Communication
Department at SUNY-Buffalo from 1973 to 1980. He worked in Zimbabwe as a trainer of journalists from 1980
MEMORIES OF ABDIAS

Sitting at a small round table at George & Harry’s café in New Haven in the winter of 1969, I was reading and drinking hot tea with lemon when a picturesque couple entered: she tall, thin, wrapped against the cold and with very expressive hands and face; he an unforgettable figure with the bearing of an African king: salt and pepper beard, large forehead, shining eyes—I thought for a moment that it might be Ras Tafari himself before remembering that it was autumn 1968, and the Coptic Emperor was already an old man while this fellow seemed full of energy and in an actor’s resonant voice was speaking...Portuguese! Hearing again the beloved language, my heart beat like a tambourine in Mangueira’s carnival parade. I had just come back from Olinda, Pernambuco after serving two years as a representative of the North American Peace Corps and was hearing the Brazilian language spoken in public for the first time since my return. Banishing any trace of timidity, I introduced myself to the couple before they had time to order at the counter. The “Lion of Judah” doppelganger looked at me a moment without saying anything. He seemed stunned.

“But you speak Portuguese!”
“Yes, sir, I do.”
“How is it possible? I have to give a lecture to the Yale Drama School tomorrow and all I speak is a few words of English! Will you be my interpreter?”
“Yes, sir, I will.”

With a resplendent smile, he gave me his hand.

“I am Abdias Nascimento and this is my wife, Isabel. Oxalá be praised, you have appeared at the right hour! Let’s have some coffee and I’ll explain everything to you right away...”

So began my adventure with one of the most influential people I ever met. The following day, we were standing on the proscenium of the Yale University Theatre, Abdias lecturing about the history of the Black Experimental Theatre (TEN) which he founded in Rio de Janeiro in 1944 and me trying to absorb everything: the facts, the names, his voice, his rhythm of speaking, his dramatic gestures, so I could reproduce them syllable by syllable and gesture by gesture. I had never before attempted a consecutive interpretation, nor did I know anything of the history he was explaining in a powerful, emotional voice. Abdias did not speak from notes or bullet points—he knew it all by heart. But his confidence and the power of his ideas transported me in a magnetic flow so that I didn’t worry about making mistakes. There was a powerful affinity between us: we were theatrical beings who knew a lecture to be a theatrical spectacle as well. After an hour of collaboration, I was trembling with adrenaline. The story that he told about founding TEN took place in 1944, the year that I was born. But he described it as if it had taken place the day before yesterday. I could see the long lines of “housemaids wanting to be stars” after the first announcement of the company’s formation appeared in the Rio de Janeiro papers. I could also feel the emotion with which Abdias read Eugene O’Neill’s letter, granting TEN the rights to his play The Emperor Jones and also to his other works, which TEN performed in following years.
I interpreted Nascimento’s talks on various occasions. However, I didn’t appear before the Black Panthers because they didn’t believe that a ‘white’ interpreter was capable of understanding, much less transmitting the resonant verities of Abdias’ revolutionary rap. That was painful for me since I would have preferred to die rather than mistake a single fact or forget a single detail of his gripping narrative, whose anti-racist argument, full of the humanity and depth of Afro-Atlantic culture, was so moving to me.

I was with Abdias when he acted as guide to the black choreographer Katherine Dunham at Yale. I translated Nascimento’s explanation of an exhibition of altars, banners and ritual objects that the police had confiscated from Brazilian Candomblé and Umbanda houses in the 1940s and 50s. While at Yale as a Visiting Scholar, Abdias asked me to translate Sortilégio (mistério negro), a play he had written for the Black Experimental Theatre. The English version was published ten years later as Sortilege (Black Mystery) by the Third World Press.

In Manhattan in 1968, I became acquainted with his earliest paintings when I visited the apartment of his friends, the Bagleys, with my friend Adger Cowans, an accomplished African-American photographer and painter who had visited me in Pernambuco. Had we the means, we would have been among the first U.S. collectors of his striking, iconographic orixás.

I arranged a breakfast for Abdias and Isabel with my father, who was born the day before Abdias in 1914. Hans was a great admirer of Haitian art and culture and had, on the walls of his Gramercy Place apartment, some beautiful paintings by the painters J. Enguérrand Gourge and Philomé Obin. My father, inspired by Abdias’ presence, spoke French so I didn’t have to interpret. Years later, reading the diaries of Albert Camus, I learned that Abdias had been his guide in Rio de Janeiro in 1949.

I remember that Abdias and Isabel’s daughter, Yemanjá, was born during the mutiny at Attica, a New York State penitentiary, when he was Professor at the State University of New York (SUNY) Buffalo campus. The rebellion ended with the death of many prisoners, most of them black. I wrote a poem to Abdias commemorating the simultaneity of the two events—one so negative and the other so productive: the advent of a Pan-American daughter, namesake of the goddess of the sea.

I didn’t want to lose touch with Abdias and his family when they transferred to SUNY Buffalo. When I came to Los Angeles in 1982 to follow my career as an actor, I was frequently reminded of my mentor by the climate and the spirit of the place. Then I met his eldest son, Henrique Cristóvão, an agronomist and environmental engineer who had put down roots here. Henrique gave me his father’s address in Rio and our friendship was renewed. When he was a federal Senator, Abdias sent me a beautiful poster of an exhibition of his paintings in Brasília as well as a bimonthly edition of the wonderful journal, Thoth, replete with biographies of African Brazilian artists, poets and thinkers accompanied by his eloquent explanations of their exemplary importance, speeches full of the same energy and broad-based experience as those I had translated into English thirty years before.
In the second issue of the journal, I found a “speech made in the Federal Senate on the 8th of May, 1997, in posthumous tribute to the educator Paulo Freire and the actor Anselmo Duarte.” It touched me deeply. I am one of the founders of the Paulo Freire Institute at UCLA. My doctoral dissertation depicts the lives of half a dozen Brazilian teachers and researchers who, in accordance with his ultimate desire, “reinvent Freire” posthumously. Abdias remembers Paulo in Africa:

Coherent and faithful to his principles, he also taught in Guinea-Bissau, where, several times, I witnessed his figure leaning over students studying under the trees on the streets of the city, recently freed from Portuguese colonialism. The country still did not possess an educational system. Paulo Freire was working on the organization of this instruction, expanding the consciousness that only education liberates. I record this with pride and emotion, paying tribute to a Brazilian of singular pedagogical competence and of incomparable sensitivity and human solidarity. (Thoth, no. 2, August 1997, p. 49)

These words apply to Abdias Nascimento as well: an artist, visionary and pedagogue so charismatic that he turned the Senate floor in Brasília into an auditorium where he regaled his colleagues with the precious legacy of Brazilian culture, in black and white.

Abdias, I salute you on the hundredth anniversary of your birth.

Peter Lownds, Ph.D.
Los Angeles
April 7th, 2014

Peter Lownds is an educator, translator, polyglot poet and voice actor. A native of Manhattan, he sought refuge in Los Angeles more than thirty years ago. His passion for Brazil was ignited in 1960 by Black Orpheus, a landmark film in which Abdias did not appear but which he influenced in many ways. From 1966-68 Peter was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Olinda, Pernambuco and, in 1969, began his teaching career at The American School of Rio. Now he teaches Creative Speaking at the Art Institute of California and mentors and assesses doctoral candidates in Education at Walden University. His favorite languages, other than English, are Portuguese, Spanish and French. He recently narrated his 2003 translation of Cuban author Pedro Juan Gutiérrez’s Tropical Animal as an audiobook for 48 Windows Audio.

His degrees are from Yale (B.A.) and UCLA. (M.A. and Ph.D.). He is a member of Fake Radio Theater, an actor, coach and director and, with his wife Terre, owns and operates Catalina House a restored 1923 boardinghouse in Koreatown. Peter will be seventy in August and continues to be inspired by the longevity, creativity and sagacity of Abdias, whom he considers seu mestre inconteste (his incomparable teacher).
That this exhibit comes to CUNY’s Godwin Ternbach Museum in 2014 is significant because this year is a threefold landmark. Abdias Nascimento would have been 100 years old on March 14, and IPEAFRO held a ceremony honoring the ancestors at the archaeological site of the Valongo Wharf, where close to a million enslaved Africans entered Brazil. The original stone structure was discovered during excavation for re-urbanization of Rio de Janeiro’s waterfront area. Shortly after his 97th birthday, Abdias Nascimento was hospitalized at the Public Servants’ Hospital alongside this site, precisely at the time when the city authorities were being petitioned to preserve it, an action that he supported. There he joined the ancestors in May 2011. To celebrate his life and work, IPEAFRO organized a tribute at the Valongo Wharf site, headed by distinguished professors Wande Abimbola of Nigeria, Awise Awo ni Agbaye, former Senate leader and former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ife (Obafemi Awolowo University); Olabiyi Yai of Benin, Ààre Alasà, former Ambassador of UNESCO and former President of UNESCO’s Executive Council; Anani Dzidzienyo of Ghana, Professor of Africana Studies and of Brazilian Studies at Brown University; and Kabengele Munanga of the Congo, Professor Emeritus, University of São Paulo, author of seminal works on race and education in Brazil. A roundtable discussion featured Professors Dzidzienyo and Munanga with scholar and activist Sueli Carneiro of Geledés Black Women’s Institute and Leda Maria Martins, Professor of Letters at the Federal University of Minas Gerais. Music and performance presentations complemented the interfaith ceremony led by Awise Agbaye Abimbola and Ààre Alasà Olabiyi Yai; Babalawô Ivanir dos Santos of the Center for Articulation of Marginalized Populations (CEAP), Rio de Janeiro; Iyalorixás Mãe Beata de Yemonjá of Ilê Omi Oju Aro and Mãe Edelzuita of Ilê Obá N’lá, with libation by professors Dzidzienyo and Munanga, and with officiates from Christian, Jewish and Bahá’í faiths.

In 2014, we also commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Black Experimental Theater (October 13) and 30 years of IPEAFRO’s constitution as a not-for-profit organization in Rio de
Janeiro. The numbers are symbolic: 70 plus 30 equals 100!

In 1950, under Abdias Nascimento’s leadership the Black Experimental Theater (TEN) organized the 1st Congress of Brazilian Blacks, which issued a resolution on the need for a Black Arts Museum. TEN took on the project, working on two fronts: with African Brazilian artists, combating stereotyped categories like “naïf” and “primitive”; and with Brazilian artists on the origins of modern Western art in the encounter with African aesthetics. The project built a collection of some 700 artworks, donated by many of Brazil’s most prominent artists. IPEAFRO holds this collection in addition to 167 works by Abdias Nascimento.
ARTWORKS
Efraín Bocabalístico: Oxossi-Xangô-Ogum
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1969
IPEAFRO Collection
Hermaphrodite Orixá
Acrylic on canvas
New York, NY, USA, 1969
IPEAFRO Collection
*Metamorphosis no. 4 - Ankh, Double Axe of Xangô and the Cross*
Acrylic on canvas
New York, NY, USA, 1969
IPEAFRO Collection
Ogum no. 2
Acrylic on canvas
New York, NY, USA, 1969
IPEAFRO Collection
Ossaim
Acrylic on canvas
New York, NY, USA, 1969
IPEAFRO Collection
Oxum’s Abebê with Ifá’s Eye
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1969
IPEAFRO Collection
Theme for Léa Garcia - Oxunmaré
Acrylic on canvas
New York, NY, USA, 1969
IPEAFRO Collection
Oxum-Fish
Acrylic on canvas
Middletown, CT, USA, 1970
IPEAFRO Collection
Peace and Power
Acrylic on canvas
Middletown, CT, USA, 1970
IPEAFRO Collection
Pomba Gira - Female of Seven Exus
Acrylic on canvas
Middletown, CT, USA, 1970
IPEAFRO Collection
**Pink Mulatto Woman - A Study for Osum**
Acrylic on canvas
Middletown, CT, USA, 1970
IPEAFRO Collection
Xangô Rodrigues Alves
Acrylic on canvas
Middletown, CT, USA, 1970
IPEAFRO Collection
Young Egum
Acrylic on canvas
Middletown, CT, USA, 1970
IPEAFRO Collection
The Arrow of Guerreiro Ramos - Oxossi
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1971
IPEAFRO Collection
Double Personality of Oxunmaré no. 2
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1971
IPEAFRO Collection
The Holy Warrior Fights the Dragon of Evil - Ogum
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1971
IPEAFRO Collection
**Oxunmaré Rises**
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1971
IPEAFRO Collection
Afro-Brazilian Theogony (Iansã, Obatalá, Oxum, Oxossi, Yemanjá, Ogum, Ossaim, Xangô, Exu)
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1972
IPEAFRO Collection
Façade of a House of Worship
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1972
IPEAFRO Collection
African Symbiosis no. 3
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1973
IPEAFRO Collection
The Cathedral
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1973
IPEAFRO Collection
The Creation no. 2 – Obatalá and Exu
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1973
IPEAFRO Collection
The Dream no. 2
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1973
IPEAFRO Collection
Mediation no. 1 - Apis, the Sacred Bull
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1973
IPEAFRO Collection
Mythical Bird no. 2
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1973
IPEAFRO Collection
Opasoro, Cosmic Phallus
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1973
IPEAFRO Collection
The Freedom Totem
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1974
IPEAFRO Collection
The Donors of Technology - Ogum and Xangô
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1975
IPEAFRO Collection
Oxum in Ecstasy
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1975
IPEAFRO Collection
The Horse and the Saint – Yemonjá
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1975
IPEAFRO Collection
Xangô no. 2
Acrylic on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1978
IPEAFRO Collection
Offering for Exu
Oil on canvas
Buffalo, NY, USA, 1980
IPEAFRO Collection
Roots no. 2 – Tribute to Aguinaldo Camargo
Acrylic on canvas
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1987
IPEAFRO Collection
Ancestral Mask
Acrylic on canvas
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1988
IPEAFRO Collection
Knowledge and Greatness
Acrylic on canvas
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1988
IPEAFRO Collection
Padê de Exu
Acrylic on canvas
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1988
IPEAFRO Collection
Adinkra Ideogram
Acrylic on canvas
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1992
IPEAFRO Collection
Omnipotent and Immortal no. 4 (Asante Adinkra)
Acrylic on canvas
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1992
IPEAFRO Collection
Sankofa no. 2 - Recovery (Asante Adinkra)
Acrylic on canvas
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1992
IPEAFRO Collection
Towards Orun no. 2
Acrylic on canvas
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1997
IPEAFRO Collection
Abdias Nascimento (1914-2011) was an outstanding Brazilian human rights activist who dedicated his life to combatting racism and advancing the cause of African descendants. He was also a scholar, artist, actor, poet, playwright and director of theater. He served as Congressman and Senator in the Brazilian Federal Legislature, and twice as Secretary of the Rio de Janeiro State Government.

Nascimento participated in São Paulo’s early civil rights movement, the Brazilian Black Front, in the 1930s and helped organize the Afro-Campineiro Congress in 1938. As a young man he traveled in the Amazon region and in various South American countries with a group of intellectuals—poets, journalists, researchers—called the Holy Orchid Brotherhood. In Lima, Peru, upon watching a production of Eugene O’Neill’s play *The Emperor Jones* with a white actor in blackface playing the title role, he decided to create a black theater when he returned to Brazil as a tool or weapon to combat racial discrimination.

Upon returning to Brazil, he was arrested, having been convicted *in absentia* in a previous incident of resistance against racist aggression. Imprisoned at the Carandiru Penitentiary, he created the Convicts’ Theater in 1941, in which participating prisoners created and performed dramatic texts and musical presentations.

Upon leaving prison, he founded the Black Experimental Theater (*Teatro Experimental do Negro* – TEN) in 1944 in Rio de Janeiro. The TEN broke the color barrier on the country’s stages and formed the first generation of black actors and actresses in Brazilian dramatic theater. In addition, TEN encouraged and provided a forum for the creation of African Brazilian dramatic literature.

Nascimento worked as a journalist for major Rio de Janeiro daily and weekly newspapers. He founded and edited TEN’s newspaper *Quilombo: Problems and Aspirations of Black People*.

Under the leadership of Abdias Nascimento, TEN organized historic events including the 1st Congress of Brazilian Blacks (1950) and the National Convention of Blacks (1945-46), which formulated public anti-discrimination policies and proposed the definition of racial discrimination as a crime against the State. On Abdias Nascimento’s request, Senator Hamilton Nogueira presented these proposals to the 1946 National Constituent Assembly (they were not incorporated into the Constitution, under the allegation that there was no proof that racial discrimination existed in Brazil).

In 1950, TEN undertook the Museum of Black Arts (*Museu de Arte Negra* – MAN) project, under the curatorship of Abdias Nascimento. The MAN opened its first exhibition in 1968 at the Museum of Image and Sound in Rio de Janeiro. Shortly thereafter, Nascimento traveled to the United States to visit and develop exchange initiatives with organizations of the American
black movement. He was in New York when the Brazilian military regime closed Congress and instituted a period of severe political repression. Target of several Military Police investigations, Nascimento stayed in the U.S., where he continued his activism and cultural engagement. Soon he was invited to lecture at the Yale School of Drama. He was named Visiting Scholar at Wesleyan and Full Professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo. During this period, he developed his own artistic work (begun earlier in Rio de Janeiro), painting canvases that convey essential values of classical African civilization, African Brazilian religious tradition, and the human rights struggle of African peoples worldwide. He exhibited widely in the United States. In Africa, the U.S., South and Central America and the Caribbean, he continued his work as a black activist, participating in several meetings of the international Pan-Africanist movement. In 1978, he received his first nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize.

While still abroad, he participated in rebuilding Brazilian Labor as a political force along with Leonel Brizola and other leaders. After 12 years in exile, he returned to Brazil and participated in the democratic reorganization of the country. His work in the Democratic Labor Party (PDT) assured that it was the first to adopt the fight against racism and racial discrimination as a platform priority and the first to create a specific internal agency, the Black Movement Secretariat.

For Nascimento, anti-racism was a supra-party issue and he always engaged in non-party politics. He participated in the founding and development of national movements like the Memorial Zumbi and the Unified Black Movement (MNU). His writings and activism inspired and influenced other national black movements such as CONEN, CONNEB, Black Pastoral Agents, National Kilombo Community Movement, and countless local and regional black organizations. As Congressman, in 1983 Nascimento drafted the first bill of law instituting affirmative racial equality policies. He continued to defend the proposal in the Senate, where he was in office during the periods 1991-1992 and 1997-1999, and as founding Secretary of two Rio de Janeiro State government agencies: the Secretariat for Defense and Promotion of the Afro-Brazilian Population (SEAFRO) and Secretariat for Human Rights and Citizenship (SECID).

Abdias Nascimento was editor and author of several books and publications: poetry, drama, essays, and research. Among his most significant works are O negro revoltado (Blacks in Revolt) (1968/1982), Axés do sangue e da esperança (Orikis) (poetry, 1983); Sortilégio (Black Mystery) (drama, 1959, new version published 1979; both versions available in English); Dramas para negros e prólogo para brancos (Dramas for Blacks and Prologue for Whites) (anthology of theater, 1961), O genocídio do negro brasileiro (The Genocide of Brazilian Blacks) (1978), Quilombismo (1980, 2002).

Abdias Nascimento was awarded national and international honors, such as the African World Heritage Award, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library (2001); the Toussaint Louverture Prize (2004) and the Human Rights Award for Culture and Peace (1997), both from UNESCO, and the United Nations Human Rights Award (2003).
Professor Emeritus of the State University of New York, Abdias Nascimento was granted Honorary Ph.D.s from the State University of Bahia; the University of Brasília; the State University of Rio de Janeiro; the Federal University of Bahia; Obafemi Awolowo University of Nigeria. He was officially nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010 because of his defense of civil and human rights of African descendants in Brazil and worldwide. The nomination letter and letters of support are available online at IPEAFRO’s website in Portuguese at:
http://www.ipeafro.org.br/home/br/acervo-digital/45/79/181/indica%C3%A7%C3%A3o_ao_premio_nobel_da_paz/

In early 2011, Abdias Nascimento was admitted to the Civil Servants’ Hospital, adjacent to the site of the Valongo Wharf, over which close to a million enslaved Africans entered Rio de Janeiro in the 18th and 19th centuries. Many of them did not survive the Atlantic crossing and died upon arrival or shortly thereafter. They were referred to as “the New Negroes” and their remains were heaped like trash in the vicinity by a slave regime of unspeakable cruelty. At the time Abdias was admitted to the hospital there, historians, archaeologists, and civil society were petitioning the Rio de Janeiro City Government to preserve the remains of the Valongo Wharf, discovered during renovation of the waterfront area. On May 23, at the age of 97, Abdias Nascimento died there and joined the ancestors. See The New York Times obituary at:
http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/world/americas/31nascimento.html?_r=0

While alive, he had expressed the desire that his ashes be taken to the Serra da Barriga, the historic site of the Palmares Republic in Alagoas State, where Africans and their descendants in Brazil built their life in freedom and resisted for over a century the armed attacks of Portuguese, Dutch, and Brazilian forces. On 13 November 2011, his family and IPEAFRO performed a burial of his ashes with the participation of black activists and organizations as well as local and state authorities, the Office of the President’s Special Secretariat for Policies of Racial Equality and the Palmares Cultural Foundation (Ministry of Culture).
http://www.ipeafro.org.br/home/br/acervo-digital/43/64/845/abdiasvive_serradabarriga

Nascimento’s family and IPEAFRO held ceremonies at the Valongo site on the seventh day, and one year after Abdias’ death, as well as his centennial on 14 March 2014. Interfaith ceremonies and cultural events took place in the Dom Pedro II Docks building, headquarters of Citizens’ Action Cultural Center.
http://www.ipeafro.org.br/home/br/acervo-digital/43/64/853/brnagem_abdiasnascimento_iphan

http://www.ipeafro.org.br/home/br/acervo-digital/24/69/841/um_ano_abdiasnascimento_noorum

http://www.flickr.com/photos/foradoeixo/sets/72157642469914123/
Abdias Nascimento was honored at the time of his death by poets and artists. We share three of these tributes in English: “Days of Kizomba,” by poet and novelist Conceição Evaristo; “Abdias Nascimento,” by artist and writer Iara Rosa of Buzios; and “Nine Pelicans,” by writer and educator Peter Lownds.

KIZOMBA DAYS / DIAS DE KIZOMBA
Ab(dias/days) of luta/struggle and not days of luto/mourning
Conceição Evaristo, May 2011

A man like Abdias,
fiery star,
doesn’t die.

His beam of light
black color zagaia
wounded the white non-conscience
of a null and vile
racial democracy.

A man like Abdias,
Nascimento star,
eternalized Zumbi,
does not die.

His fight
zigzagaias
from Africa to Diaspora
sowing Baobab seeds
in each one of us.
One of my father’s sisters was very much like Abdias. She had a strong look full of tenderness, a face that was weightless, handsome and gentle, where an air of poetry softly roamed.

My aunt worked as a cook. She earned very little and spent almost all her wages buying birds in cages that were sold in the town’s open air markets.

She would carry the cages to a wood near her house and there, with great joy, she would release the birds, watching their flights to freedom.

One day my aunt Maria got sick. My mother said that Maria didn’t take care herself, wasting all her money on birds. That she would die in some hospital as a vagrant. My father said:

“This death thing is not for Maria.”

Irritated, my mother said:

“So you mean your sister is going to turn into a seed?”

And my father answered proudly:

“She already is a seed. Maria the seed.”

Abdias is a Seed. He created many trees in various corners of the planet. In his strong eyes there was great tenderness. In his weightless face the poetry of all the poets. This death thing was never for Abdias. Abdias the Seed.
Nine Pelicans
(For Abdias Nascimento)
Peter Lownds

Nine pelicans
Fly at sunset
In a tenebrous line
Over the silver sea.
Below the horizon
In the orishas’ gaze
Sailboats lifted
By the western breeze
Cross the infinite.
The false moustache
In his houndstooth coat
Roams the smooth strand
In search of his star.
And there she is, a slender
Dark woman in a swimsuit,
Beauteous Rosalind, barefoot,
With the legs of a stork
And a little velvet butt.
The moustache stops, looks, palpitates
But here comes her companion,
A little blackamoor
Looks like a pygmy,
Hands her a fig leaf
Filled with balm
And lovely Rosalind goes
Running through the purple waves
In the leftover light of the day
That just passed.
The ersatz moustache watches
All unfold peripherally
While singing the praises
Of Ogun-by-the-sea.
She canters through the foam
Her energy exploding,
Leaping on her hooves,
Bucking like a crepuscular ram.
The pygmy waits by the side
Of the sea, patient, motionless,
The large green leaf in his hand
A calm smile on his lips.
When finally she ceases,
Panting from the effort,
The courtier approaches
And baptizes her with the
Green leaf, anointing the
Siren’s salty hair with
The pomade he made.
Thrice she plunges into the
Ebb-tide and emerges as if
Her spine were a whip,
Spraying water into the air
As she arches, every drop
Visible to the naked eyes
Of the mustachioed fake,
Agog at the sight.
The pygmy controls the
Sodden princess, leading
Her languidly toward a
Raffia mat on the sand
While the moustache
Shudders and rapidly
Splits the scene.
But he gazes from afar at
The two small, dark figures
Whose movements suddenly
Transform into the steps of
A pagan ritual he must pursue.
Now the beautiful unclothed
Woman is departing, the pygmy
Behind her, moustache lifts his
Farewell hand but sees that they
Stop at the public shower where
His mortal eyes fill with the glory
Of the ebony princess in a torrent
Of sweet water, all hail to thee
Oxunmaré!
Below the moon, she bathes.
The fake moustache comes closer,
Begins to salivate, goes mad.
Suddenly, approaching her luscious body,
He feels his heart.
He crumbles in a heap, poor boy
Within reach of beauty, life eludes
Him, the dream vanishes.
While, singing loudly,
The dark mermaid wets her tail,
Sends everything and everyone to the devil,
The nine pelicans
Are floating in the bay.
Abdias Nascimento
Exhibitions of Original Artwork

Individual

The Harlem Art Gallery, New York, 1969
Crypt Gallery, Columbia University, New York, 1969
Yale University School of Art and Architecture, New Haven, 1969
Malcolm X House, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT, 1969
Gallery of African Art, Washington, DC, 1970
Gallery Without Walls, Buffalo, NY, 1970
Puerto Rican Studies and Research Center, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1970
Department of Afro-American Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 1972
Musem of the National Association of Afro-American Artists, Dorchester, MA, 1971
Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 1973
Langston Hughes Center, Buffalo, NY, 1973
Fine Arts Museum, Syracuse, NY, 1974
Gallery of Howard University, Washington DC, 1975
Inner City Cultural Center, Los Angeles, 1975
Ile-Ife Museum of Afro-American Culture, Philadelphia, 1975
Galeria do Banco Nacional, São Paulo, Brazil, 1975
Galeria Morada, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1975
Museum of African and African-American Arts and Antiquities, Center for Positive Thought, Buffalo, NY, 1977
El Taller Boricua and Caribbean Cultural Center, New York, 1980
Galeria Sérgio Milliet, National Arts Foundation (FUNARTE), Ministry of Culture, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1982
Palácio da Cultura (Prédio Gustavo Capanema), Ministry of Culture, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1988
Salão Negro, Brazilian National Congress, Brasília, Brazil, 1997
Debret Gallery, Paris, France, 1998
National Archives, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2004-2005
Athos Bulcão Gallery, National Theater, Brasília, Brazil, 2006
Caixa Cultural Center, 2nd World Conference of African and Diaspora Intellectuals, African Union and Federal Government of Brazil, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, 2006
5th Bi-Annual Exhibit, National Student Union, Rio de Janeiro, 2007
Federal Justice Cultural Center, Rio de Janeiro, 2011
SESC São Jão de Meriti, Brazil, 2011
Biblioteca Leonel de Moura Brizola, Duque de Caixas, Brazil, 2011
Município de Cultura, Maricá, Brazil, 2011-2012
Kongi’s Harvest Gallery, Freedom Park, Lagos, Nigeria, 2013
Group Exhibitions and Permanent Collections

Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY, 1972
Galeria Salomé, New Orleans, LA, 1973
Rainbow Sign Gallery, Berkeley, CA, 1975
Artists ’79, United Nations Headquarters, New York, 1979
Permanent Collection, Museum of African and African-American Arts and Antiquities, Buffalo, NY
Permanent Collection, Latin American Studies Institute, Columbia University, New York.
ABDIAS NASCIMENTO
SELECTED PUBLISHED WORKS

Books


*Combate ao Racismo* (Fighting Racism – Parliamentary Activity, Speeches and Bills of Law), 6 vols. Brasilia: Chamber of Deputies (Brazilian Federal Congress), 1983-86. (Approximately 120 pages in each volume.)


Periodicals (Editor)


Contributions to Anthologies and Collections


“Reflections of an Afro-Brazilian,” *Journal of Negro History*, vol. LXIV, no. 3 (Summer 1979).


“Carta Aberta ao Festival Mundial das Artes Negras” (Open Letter to the First World Festival of Negro Arts ), *Tempo Brasileiro*, vol. IV, no. 9/10 (April-June 1966).


“Mission of the Brazilian Negro Experimental Drama,” *The Crisis* vol. 56, no. 9 (October 1949).

More information:
http://www.ipeafro.org.br/home/br
http://www.abdias.com.br
GLOSSARY

Abebê — Ceremonial fan, circular in shape, made of tin, bronze or other metal, used by Oxum or Yemanjá.
Adarrum — Drumbeat rhythm of increasing intensity, designed to overcome the deities’ resistance and call on them to join the human group and incorporate in their respective mediums.
Afoxé — (pronounced ah-foh-sheh). A secular form of religious festivities characterized by processions of song and dance to the sound of atabaques.
Agadá — Ogum’s cosmos-rending ceremonial sword, unique in shape and specific to his use.
Ajaká — Another name for Ogum.
Aiyê — Earth, the world of the living, the physical universe.
Alapini — The highest priest of Egungun (ancestor) worship.
Alibi — Chief musician of Candomblé who plays the rum.
Atabaques — Ceremonial drums used in Afro-Brazilian ritual; originally, it is said, war drums in Africa. There are three, called rum, rumpi and lê.
Atoto — Ceremonial greeting of Obaluaiyê / Omolu.
Axé — Cosmic energy, vital force which gives life and movement to all beings. Used also as a salutation, similar to “long life!”
Axé Babá — Obatalá’s ritual greeting.
Axexê — Funeral ceremony whose goal is to free the soul from the material world and send it back to its original generic existence in Orum.
Axogum — Priest in charge of animal sacrifices.
Babalawô — Priest of the Yoruba oracle Ifá, he reads the opelê, interpreting individuals’ fates.
Babalarixá — High priest of a Candomblé terreiro (male).
Babalossaim — Priest in charge of ceremonial herbs and leaves.
Bantu — The peoples of central and southern Africa whose languages have distinguishing characteristics that led to their being grouped together by Western linguists. In Brazil, Eurocentric scholarship minimized the influence of these peoples and their cultures, branding them inferior to other, supposedly more “developed” African groups. This process stigmatized African Brazilians in general, since central and southern Africans were by far the majority of Africans to arrive in Brazil. In fact, their cultural input in Brazil was enormous.
Bori — Ceremony of “feeding the head,” in the initiation process of a filha de santo.
Candomblé — Name of Bantu origin for the African tradition in Brazil whose liturgy is mainly in Yoruba. The term also refers to the physical space of the house of worship.
Caô Cabecile — Ceremonial greeting of Xangô.
Cavalo — Literally “horse”, this word refers to the medium (filha or filho de santo) whose body the deity “mounts” in order to make a ceremonial visit to the community of human beings.
Chorinho — Literally “little weeping,” this is the name of a modern Brazilian musical genre emphasizing wind and string instruments.
Dilogum — Process of divination using cowry shells. Exu responds to the consultation thus made.

Dobalê — Greeting executed by the filha de santo of a female Oríxá, consisting of prostrating oneself and then turning on one side and the other, supporting oneself on the respective arm.

Ebó — Offering or sacrifice to an Oríxá; in the vernacular, dispatch (despacho). All ceremonies begin with an ebó to Exu called the padê.

Ebamim — Filha de santo; initiate who has completed the initiation rites.

Ebomim — Filha de santo; initiate who has completed the initiation rites.

Egum or Egungun — Spirits of the ancestors. Egum is the Brazilian form.

Ekede — Female assistant to the iyaloríxá and filhas de santo.

Eparrei — Ceremonial greeting of Iansã.

Erê — Childlike projection of the Oríxá. Also mild intermediate trance-like state between normality and trance itself.

Eruossaim — Deity or priestess of Egungun summoning.

Exu — Oríxá who personifies the principles of good and evil, contradiction and dynamics. Courier of axé and master of the crossroads and highways of the universe. The Yoruba trickster god.

Exu Pelintra — Originating in Rio de Janeiro’s Candomblé, he is the most irreverent of the several versions of Exu. Dressed in white suit and hat typical of Rio de Janeiro street culture, he systematically confronts the conventional socioeconomic, political, cultural, and social structures in force, and therefore is particularly a favorite of the poor and those living on the fringes of society.

Fado — The national traditional music of Portugal, with heavy Moorish influence. The word also means “fate” or “destiny”.

Filha de santo — Priestess-medium, in whose body the Oríxá incorporates through trance in order to make the ceremonial visit to the community of human beings. In Candomblé, most of them are women, therefore we use the female gender generically, but male filhos de santo are also common.

Horse — Cavalo, filha de santo.

Iansã — Queen of lightning and wind, wife of Xangô. Warrior goddess, who has powers over the reign of the ancestors, participating in the secret Egungun summoning. In Africa her name is Oya.

Ibeji — Child-deities, twins.

Ifá — Oracle, Oríxá of divination, who reads the individual’s destiny through the opelê. Ifá literary corpus is a summary of Yoruba traditional history, science, literature, and knowledge. By consulting the opelê it is discovered which oríxá has chosen a given person to be his or her horse.

Ijexá — City in Nigeria, seat of Obatalá’s worship.

Iká — Greeting by medium of a male oríxá. Consists of prostrating oneself.

Ilu — Indigo, aniline.

Inquices — Equivalent of oríxá or vodun in Bantu language and religion.

Itaparica — Island near Salvador, Bahia, where Egungun worship developed.
Ixé — Center pole of the terreiro (house of worship); liturgical sign or symbol.
Iyá bassê — Priestly function as cook, preparing food for the gods.
Iyalorixá — Highest priestess of a Candomblé terreiro, she exercises full authority over the devotees and the terreiro community.
Iyawo — Initiate, someone in training as medium. Filha de santo.
Laroíê — Exu’s ceremonial greeting.
Lê — The smallest and highest-toned of the three ceremonial drums in Candomblé, the others being rum and rumpi.
Mãe de santo — Iyalorixá.
Nagô — Yoruba.
Nananburucu — The eldest of the female orixás, wife of Obatalá and goddess of procreation.
Obá (1) — First and eldest wife of Xangô, warrior goddess, orixá of the river Oba.
Obá (2) — Post in the hierarchy of religious and secular functions of Candomblé; one of Xangô’s ministers. The post was created in Bahia, therefore specific to Brazil.
Obaluaiyê (Omolu) — God of smallpox, of sickness and health, and by extension of life and death; the poor man’s physician.
Obatalá or Oxalá — Male deity, whose female counterpart is Oduduwa. At times portrayed as hermaphrodite, he is the orixá charged by Olorum with the creation of earth and of human beings and is also the god of procreation.
Odidê — Bird linked to the myths of Oxum.
Odomi Odoceiaba — Yemanjá’s ceremonial greeting.
Ogã — Male assistant to the Iyalorixá and filhas de santo.
Ogum — Deity of metals and metallurgy, warrior king of just revenge, he challenges cosmic terror and breaches the gulf that separates the realms of the cosmos; he forges new paths for human experience of cosmic reality.
Ogunhiê — Ogum’s ritual greeting.
Okê — Oxossi’s ceremonial greeting.
Olorum — Supreme God, Lord of Orum and creator of existence.
Omolu — Obaluaiyê.
Opá — Oxalá’s staff or walking stick.
Opachorô – Ceremonial staff or walking stick of white metal used by Obatalá the elder (Oxalufã).
Opelê — Sanctified necklace made of ceremonial articles used by the priests of Ifá to consult the oracle of divination.
Ora-iê-iê-ô — Oxum’s ceremonial greeting.
Ori — Head, in the sense of identity, intelligence, and personality.
Orixás — Deities who embody the forces of nature and ethical or philosophical principles that guide and assist humans in their journey through life on earth (Aiyê).
Orixalá — One of Obatalá’s several titles, meaning “Great Orixá”.
Orum — Heaven in the sense of supernatural or spiritual space, meaning the part of the cosmos that is the dwelling of the gods, the ancestors and those yet unborn.
Ossaim — Orixá of liturgical leaves, ceremonial and medicinal plants. He or she presides over all
nature.

Oxaguiã — Version of Obatalá as a youth.
Oxalá — Obatalá.
Oxalufá — Version of Obatalá as an elder.
Oxossi — Orixá of the hunt and the forest, also known as the king of Ketu.
Oxum — One of Xangô’s wives, she is the orixá of creativity, love, and aesthetics and the patroness of fertility and of children. She takes the form of woman fish and bird woman. She presides over the sweet waters, lakes and rivers, and symbolizes the female principle.
Oxunmaré — Rainbow god, he/she presides over the weather. He or she is represented as a serpent, sometimes male, sometimes female, sometimes represented alternately (in periods of six months for example) as female, then male.
Pachorô — Opachorô.
Padê – Propitiatory ceremony; all rituals and festivities begin with a padê for Exu.
Pai de Santo — Babalorixá.
Palmares — Free republic founded by Africans resisting slavery in the Serra da Barriga, Alagoas, Northeastern region of Brazil. Palmares resisted against the colonial wars of Portugal and Holland for more than a century (1595-1696).
Pegí — Shrine.
Pegí-gä — Office of the terreiro presiding over the administrative council.
Pomba Gira — Companion and female counterpart of Exu, her name is of Bantu origin.
Quilombo — Maroon society; community of Africans, often with very large populations, that resisted slavery and built their own social systems, often based on African models, to live as free people in Brazil. Many resisted military attacks under adverse conditions, one of the most outstanding examples being the Palmares Republic.
Rum — The largest and deepest-toned of the three ceremonial drums in Candomblé.
Rumpi — The middle, in size and tone, of the three ceremonial drums (the third is Lé).
Xangô — King of Oyo, patron of justice, god of lightning, storm, and thunder.
Terreiro — The sacred physical space of the Candomblé temple; place of worship and community.
Veve — Ceremonial designs and drawings used to summon Orixás in Vodun worship.
Voduns — Equivalent of Orixás in Fon language and religion. Vodun worship (Vodou) is prevalent in Haiti but also found in Northeastern Brazil in the state of Maranhão.
Xaxará — Ceremonial object symbolic of Obaluaiyê.
Yemanjá — Mother of the waters, mother of the orixás. Deity of fertility.
Yoruba — Name of a West African people (Nigeria, Benin) whose culture and language are of vital influence in the African Brazilian tradition.