CHAPTER 2

The Difference Orùnmilá Makes: Ancestralidade and the Past as Project

We trust the mental aptitude of blacks, and believe in reinventing ourselves and our history. Reinvention of an Afro-Brazilian way of life founded on historical experience, [and upon] the use of critical knowledge and the inventiveness of institutions battered by colonialism and racism. In short, rebuild in the present a society directed towards the future, but taking into account what has been useful and positive in the achievements of the past.

Abdias do Nascimento, O Quilombismo

A ancestralidade é nossa via de identidade histórica, sem ela, não sabemos o que somos e nunca saberemos o que queremos ser.

Ancestrality is our route to an historical identity, without it we do not know what we are, and we will never know what we want to be.

Paulo Cesar Oliveira (Pai Paulo), president of the Centro Cultural Orùnmilá

The term via in Portuguese means “route” or “path,” a way to something or to get somewhere. Via also means “by way of”—a means of realizing something. Pai Paulo’s use of via to frame ancestralidade (ancestrality) reflects both definitions: (1) a historical engagement with identity by way of an ancestral past, and (2) the meanings and practices through which one cultivates, maintains, and realizes these links and a sense of self in new contexts and present circumstances. Ancestralidade is historical and emergent; it involves the past as well as future possibility. It is about being and becoming (Hall 1990). Thus, for black Brazilians, the idea of “knowing what we are” and “what we want to be” through ancestralidade does not simply involve reconstruction of the past to recover “tradition” or an essential identity. Rather, ancestralidade involves reconstruction of the past on one’s own terms, taking a relation to history through one’s own experience, and
maintaining African and Afro-descendant ways of being, values, integrity, and knowledge that coloniality devalues, eliminates, or seeks to colonize and unequally assimilate. This deployment of *ancestralidade*, in its complexity, works toward the very reinvention of a black Brazilian way of life that preeminent black scholar and activist Abdias do Nascimento notes above; it makes possible the rebuilding of a society in the present that is oriented toward a future of black liberation.

*Ancestralidade* is integral to the Candomblé religion. The Centro Cultural Orùnmilá in Ribeirão Preto grounds itself in the historical, cultural, and political possibilities generated through Candomblé philosophies and *terreiro* spaces. In 1984, Pai Paulo and Mãe Neide founded the Egbé Ahô Aṣé Yá Mesan Orun (Community of Worship Axé Mother of the Nine Worlds).¹ Ten years later in 1994, they opened the Cultural Center. Since then, their politics remain situated within, but go beyond *ancestralidade* within communities of worship, as it drives the main focus of their present work: policy advocacy, public protest, cultural workshops (capoeira, percussion, Afro-Yoruban dance, hip-hop—graffiti, breakdancing, deejaying, and rapping—and drum making), activist seminars, *afoxé* performances,² festivals, and other activities. Contra arguments that define or dismiss cultural struggles as default essentialisms, Orùnmilá’s work makes visible the historical, epistemological, and political linkages between these diverse practices as vital to knowledge transmission, cultural survival, and political struggle for Afro-descendant communities. As a political-epistemic challenge, a politics of culture based on *ancestralidade* mobilizes the past not as legacy or “tradition,” but as project for contemporary transformation (cf. Dirlik 1997, Nascimento 1980). The past as project offers one means for black peoples to contest subjugation of their histories, life ways, and means to survival in the present and future. Rather than an identity politics where the struggle to secure an identity drives action and often succumbs to essentialism, reification, and fundamentalism, the past as project involves a future-oriented vision that contests the multilayered effects of coloniality. Here, an identity in politics drives social struggle, rather than a politics of identity (Mignolo 2007b).³

This chapter examines the dynamic complexity of *ancestralidade* as lived theory and cultural practice. *Ancestralidade*’s presence in discourses, political actions, cultural activities, and day-to-day experiences at Orùnmilá reveal its meaning and practice. I analyze its role in shaping the political-epistemic work of the Center and the ways such work challenges structural racism and opens up possibilities for decolonial thought and practice. I first delineate the nature of *ancestralidade* in Candomblé spirituality, from which the logic of the Center’s vision develops. *Ancestralidade* in Candomblé reveals the embodied and reverential engagements with ancestral knowledge and history that drive