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Fulbright Group Project Abroad – Brazil 2022

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## Health and Well-being: The Role of Tradition

### **Introduction**

During the last two decades, the United States has experienced an increase in the number of immigrants from Brazil. In addition to Brazilians being one of the fastest growing immigrant groups in the United States (Migration Policy Institute, 2022), African Americans are also increasingly traveling to Bahia to ‘find their roots’ (Matter of Fact, 2019). These immigrants bring their cultural traditions with them. It is inevitable that we will encounter these cultural traditions in places of learning as well as health care. Developing an awareness of these traditions is integral to providing competent care as well as creating spaces and places of belonging on our campuses.

Diversity is everywhere in everyday interactions. People who come from different countries practice religion in diverse ways, even if it is a religion that is known by the mainstream population. When these religious traditions and practices are rooted in cultural traditions, a sense of well-being is linked to a sense of belonging. Health professionals therefore have an obligation to develop a greater understanding of the values of the diverse populations they serve. While differences are recognized and celebrated, health professionals must serve their clients/patients from a place of respect and awareness of any cultural uniqueness.

In my role as Assistant Dean, Diversity, Inclusion, Community Innovation, and Student Success, in the College of Health Professions at University of Detroit Mercy, part of my

responsibilities includes creating an environment of inclusive excellence. The [\*Critical Concerns of the Sisters of Mercy\*](#) and the [\*Universal Apostolic Preferences\*](#) of our founders, The Sisters of Mercy and the Society of Jesus, unite us in our mission of educating “competent, compassionate leaders ready to serve in a vulnerable world” (University of Detroit Mercy, n.d). This project is aimed at promoting conversations among our university community on cultural competence in the promotion of health, well-being, and a sense of belonging. The project also supports the University’s strategic plan of a healthy and supportive campus environment for students and employees by embracing a campus culture established on principles of mutual respect, civility, appreciation of diversity and diverse perspectives, and healthy communication.

The project is based on my experiences during four weeks in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, as well as limited research due to project timeline. During the time spent in Brazil, I explored the impact of African traditions on well-being among Afro-Brazilians. The pandemic called attention to the struggles, anxiety, and uncertainty within communities that have a history of being ‘invisible.’ This GPA experience provided context for how Afro-Brazilians engage in cultural practices surrounding wellness and resilience and provided me with tangible and intangible tools for strategizing appropriate initiatives in prioritizing the advancement of student success. I used unstructured and informal interviews to develop a basic understanding of Candomblé and its connection as a healing art. I attended a Candomblé ceremony that was open to the public and participated in a cleansing ritual. I also benefited from everyday conversations.

Integrated in the history of Brazil is the history of slavery. Brazil began the import of enslaved people in 1530 (Meade, 2010) and the trade officially ended in 1888 (Omari-Tunkara, 2005). The state of Bahia, Brazil has the largest African population outside of Africa. This is as a result of the number of slaves that were sold to Brazil – as much as ten times the number that

was sold to North America. Most of the population of Bahia is descended from African Slaves. African culture has thrived and permeates the culture of Brazil.

The enslaved brought their cultural practices with them. Many of those traditions have persisted and flourished. One of the traditions that has survived slavery and has flourished in Brazil is the African-based religion of Candomblé. However, Candomblé is more than a religion – it is a resistance place. According to Claudia Santos [Mean Mahenduka] “Candomblé is a way of life... we are not only a religion, we are a people” (Personal Communication, July 13, 2022). Candomblé is a critical element of Afro Brazilian culture, manifested in food, clothes, music, dance and other artistic expressions, ethics, rituals, etc. (Omari-Tunkara, 2005). One of the persons, I interviewed (Alaye Brito) thinks that people continue to overcome adversities and inequities because of their engagement in Candomblé.

Spiritual well-being is a critical component of overall-well-being. A report from the Pew Foundation indicated that approximately 84 percent of the world’s population claim identity with a particular religious tradition (Pew Religious Landscape Study, 2018), and according to Diener et. al. (2011), 68% of people in the world say that religion is a significant part of their daily lives. In Brazil, Candomblé serves as both a place of religion and a health center. Many people go the Candomblé houses (terreiros) for physical and mental healing.

## **Project Goals**

This GPA project has provided an in-depth understanding of the importance of the history of the African diaspora as a social political, and religious feature of current western culture. The goals of this project are to educate by building awareness and an understanding of cultural traditions, particularly Candomblé, an African-based religious practice maintained in Salvador, Bahia. An

awareness of this cultural practice will contribute to an understanding of others and provide tools for building cultural competency in creating places and spaces of belonging, and the provision of health care

### **Learning Objectives**

- Be able to articulate that a Candomblé is an African-based religion practiced in Brazil.
- Develop an awareness that the practice of cultural and religious traditions is necessary for students' well-being and a sense of belonging.

### **Guiding Questions**

- I. What is the role of Afro-Brazilian traditions in coping and resilience among Afro-Brazilians?
  - a. What are those traditions?
- II. Is there an interconnectedness between spirituality, resilience, and well-being among Afro-Brazilians who practice Candomblé?
- III. How is health/mental health perceived in the practice of Candomblé?

### **Potential Presentation Venues**

This project is designed for in-service training. Audiences include:

- Science, Technology, and Race Learning Communities
- College of Health Professions and McAuley School of Nursing full assembly
- University of Detroit Mercy Colleague Development Days

## References

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