

CANDOMBLÉ PHILOSOPHY IN LIGHT OF NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

A FILOSOFIA DO CANDOMBLÉ À LUZ DA TEOLOGIA NEGATIVA

Ana Maria Correa Moreira da Silva

In *Afro-Brazilian Religions*, José Eduardo Porcher offers a richly detailed and thoroughly referenced study of Candomblé, a family of Afro-Brazilian religions that emerged in Brazil, primarily during the 19th century. The work delves into its ritual practices, mythologies, and a completely unique conception of knowledge, providing fresh insights into the depth and diversity of this religious tradition. At the outset, Porcher emphasizes the need for an expanded methodological framework to incorporate these non-Western traditions into contemporary philosophy of religion. He cites Kevin Schilbrack's critique that the field is overly *narrow*, *intellectualist*, and *insular*, disproportionately engaging with Christian theology and overemphasizing doctrinal aspects at the expense of lived experiences (Porcher, 2025, p. 1).

Elsewhere (Silva, 2022, p. 103), I analyzed similar criticisms presented by J. Aaron Simmons (2017) in *Contemporary Debates in Negative Theology and Philosophy*, where the author explores the future of the philosophy of religion in the face of its primary objections, including *cognitivism* (prioritizing belief over practice), *narrowness* (focusing on Christianity while excluding other religions), and *insularity* (lacking collaborative engagement with other disciplines). According to Simmons' metaphilosophical approach, a potential way to address these challenges lies in acknowledging the limitations of religious language and the conceptual inadequacy of fully comprehending the nature of God. This is the central premise of apophatic or negative theology, whose foundational texts include *On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology* by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, a Christian theologian of the late 5th to early 6th century. In a logic that surprises us today, Pseudo-Dionysius posited that by simultaneously affirming and denying the Creator's nature, one can attempt to grasp ineffable transcendence as an *icon* rather than as a concept confined to rational discourse. While cataphatic theology seeks to describe divine attributes theoretically, apophatic theology provides a method of approaching transcendence rooted in intellectual humility and profound spirituality.

Confronted with the intricacies of the philosophy of Candomblé, depicted as a "subtle thought (...) not yet deciphered" (Roger Bastide *apud* Porcher, 2025, p. 10), we observe that the same constraints of human understanding in perceiving the nature of God might also apply to Afro-Brazilian deities. For this reason, apophatic theology could serve as a valuable framework for engaging with religions that, as Porcher describes, "are not codified, text-

based, institutionally centralized, and do not have a theological tradition as input” (2025, p. 2). This is particularly true for Candomblé, whose multifaceted nature challenges conventional interpretations of the complex phenomenon of religiosity. Thus, I propose interpreting the philosophy of Candomblé through the lens of negative theology, with the aim of evaluating the merits of this methodological stance in religious traditions beyond Christianity. This proposal is supported by two arguments drawn from Porcher: one concerning the concept of God in Candomblé, and the other addressing the mystical essence of this religion.

In the first case, regarding the concept of God, we may pose the following question: if contemporary philosophy of religion struggles to comprehend the essence of the Christian God—whose nature is sufficiently detailed in the dogmatic church texts—how can it approach the deities of underrepresented traditions like Candomblé, whose theoretical foundations are sparser and found primarily in oral myths and ethnographic sources? In this context, Porcher outlines three possible perspectives on Candomblé’s Supreme Being, Olorum-Olodumare, rooted in potential interpretations of the divine essence (Porcher, 2025, pp. 13-4). The first view describes Olorum-Olodumare as an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent creator, akin to some perspectives on the God of Abrahamic religions. The second view contends that Olorum-Olodumare is a limited deity, lacking some of the classical attributes of an “omniGod”. The third view proposes that Olorum-Olodumare should be understood as “first among equals”, recognizing the supreme authority of other divinities within their specific domains.

The first view, Porcher argues, is not supported by mythic narratives and represents an unfounded attempt to “Christianize” other deities. What about the other two views? Here, we observe a gradual diminishing of the Deity’s power, which suggests the need for a different approach to the plurality of perspectives on Olorum-Olodumare. The hermeneutical task of interpreting religious language highlights the challenge of reconciling diverse and even contradictory concepts. Thus, applying negative theology to this debate entails refraining from attempts to define the Supreme Being through positive attributes, in a humble recognition of divine ineffability. Rather than conceptualizing Olorum-Olodumare as a perfect or limited god, this approach emphasizes the mystery of the Creator beyond human categories. An example of this kind of “decategorization” could be found in the assertion that Olorum-Olodumare is generally considered to be “genderless or beyond human gender” (Porcher, 2025, p. 12, fn. 10). The *unfathomable* nature of the Supreme Being could also be reflected in the Yoruba belief that humans cannot grasp the types of sacrifices required to appease Olorum-Olodumare. Consequently, there are typically no shrines or sacrifices dedicated to him either in Brazil or in Yorubaland, due to the deity’s unknowable nature (Porcher, 2025, p. 12).

In the second case, concerning mysticism in Candomblé, we observe that the mystical dimension is inherent in all religious experiences and, therefore, shares a mutually grounding relationship with negative theology, as argued by Simon Hewitt (2020). We thus argue for a profound connection between the mystical practices underlying the apophatic method and the rituals performed in the *terreiros*. Both approaches seek a deeper connection with the

Sacred through rites engaging the body, emotions, and submission to transcendence. Central practices such as blood sacrifice, dancing, singing, and spirit possession play a vital role in fostering communion with the African deities known as *orixás*, and in sustaining the community's and the practitioners' *axé*. The only way to access the deities in Candomblé would be a mystical experience achieved through the long process of learning, culminating in the acquisition of “embodied knowledge”, the key to accessing and internalizing *axé*, the spiritual life force that permeates everything and everyone.

Concerning the notion of embodied knowledge, we observe that it entails a profound self-transformation, in which “learning involves exercising discretion, knowing how to balance the desire to learn with the respect for the secret and unknown, with a contrived indifference to the action taking place” (Porcher, 2025, p. 55). This kind of knowledge reminds us of the “learned ignorance” present in negative theology, which preaches ignorance as the only means to transcend ignorance (Simmons, 2017). Moreover, the dialectic in Candomblé between materiality and immateriality (Porcher, 2025, p. 39) mirrors the paradoxical tension in the apophatic method, where affirmation and negation complement each other.

In describing embodied knowledge through spirit possession, Porcher observes that it is common for the possessed individual to have no memory of the events during incorporation, while acknowledging that their actions were guided by a consciousness distinct from their own (Porcher, 2025, pp. 7, 60). These experiences of incorporation resemble those of mediumship, involving a form of self-emptying that parallels the mystical surrender in apophaticism, wherein one renounces the conscious and rational understanding of God. Additionally, we must not overlook the social and cultural role that Candomblé plays in society, offering, through dance, a bodily experience that bridges religious and non-religious understanding (Porcher, 2025, p. 49). Again, a similar outcome is achieved in apophaticism, which emerges as a philosophical framework capable of fostering both inter-religious and intra-religious dialogue, as well as meaningful conversations with secular humanists. Finally, interpreting mythic narratives in light of apophaticism could provide the desired *thick description*—both critical and contemplative (Porcher, 2025, p. 63). The description is critical because it acknowledges the unknowable nature of the divinity, while it is contemplative because it is imbued with profound mysticism.

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Ana Maria Corrêa Moreira da Silva is Researcher in Philosophy at the University of Brasília, Brazil (Ph.D. Philosophy, PUC-Rio). Her research focuses on metaphysics and philosophy of religion.

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