

EMBODIED EPISTEMOLOGY, INTEROCEPTION, AND CANDOMBLÉ: A COMMENTARY ON PORCHER'S *AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIONS*

EPISTEMOLOGIA CORPORIFICADA, INTEROCEPÇÃO
E CANDOMBLÉ: UM COMENTÁRIO SOBRE
AFRO-BRAZILIAN-RELIGIONS

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One of the main achievements of José Eduardo Porcher's book lies in its adoption of a new theoretical framework to explore Afro-Brazilian religions. His alignment with the recent movement to broaden the scope of the philosophy of religion—which aims to bring to light traditions historically marginalized by philosophical analysis—places the book at the forefront of contemporary studies in this field. In particular, Porcher offers convincing arguments to demonstrate the necessity of renewing the philosophy of religion in light of recent developments in the philosophy of mind. In Chapter 5, he draws upon various elements of 4E cognition to explain different aspects of Candomblé. This Afro-Brazilian religion is marked by a variety of bodily performances that constitute different meaning-making processes. In relation to these aspects, traditional theories in the philosophy of mind that emphasize disembodied cognitive processes show limited explanatory power.

In Candomblé, the body stands as a source of learning and knowledge. It is not merely a passive vehicle for stimuli processed by the cognitive system; rather, it acts as the very generator of learning itself. It is an active body that carries within itself a range of religious meanings. This means that novices do not adopt the stance of mere passive observers of the actions of religious experts. Nor is it a matter of instruction through the reading of sacred texts. Practitioners learn the precepts of Candomblé by engaging in exploratory activities within ritual contexts. These contexts involve dance, bodily movements that reveal spirit possession, dietary practices, and others. Thus, the apprehension of relevant aspects of Candomblé fundamentally depends on the body in action.

Secondly, Porcher examines the shared elements present within the ritual contexts of Candomblé. Here, he considers not only the body in isolation but also the elements of the environment with which agents are in constant interaction. Beyond embodiment, Porcher highlights the situated nature of mental processes. This trend is also evident in contemporary philosophy of mind: the embodiment of cognitive and emotional processes always occurs in specific situations, whose constituents—objects and their various relationships—play a central role. Situated cognition occurs prototypically in triadic situations, where at least two individuals share objects in a given context. In such situations, which are characteristic of

Candomblé, the novice and the expert coordinate their actions, regulated by norms, around relevant sacred objects. These objects are considered affordances, as they present themselves within the space of coordinated action among subjects. Objects must be manipulated in specific ways, revered through particular postures, and meaningfully arranged within the ritual context. Thus, objects serve as scaffolds for affective experiences: affective and cognitive states, manifesting in the moving body, extend into these objects. This shared situation can therefore be conceived as an affective niche that supports and regulates the emotional and cognitive states of participants.

The considerations outlined above are related to processes of learning and information transmission among practitioners of Candomblé. As these processes involve diverse sources of knowledge, notably perception and testimony, Porcher appropriately ventures into the field of epistemology in Afro-Brazilian traditions (2025, 5.4). For reasons of coherence, it becomes necessary to seek an *embodied epistemology* that acknowledges the body as a constitutive dimension of knowledge. The aim in this section is thus to identify an epistemological framework capable of adequately analyzing the forms of knowledge present in Candomblé.

Porcher convincingly argues that the traditional epistemology of the philosophy of religion, committed to providing reasons that justify religious beliefs, is insufficient to account for Afro-Brazilian religions. A first point to note is that such epistemology—whether understood from an internalist or externalist perspective—simply does not apply to Candomblé. According to internalism, the subject must reflect, from a first-person standpoint, on the reasons that justify belief. This is a cognitively demanding model that is incompatible with the type of knowledge conveyed in Candomblé.

However, as Porcher observes, even externalism, at least as conceived by Hans Van Eyghen (2023), does not provide an adequate explanation for Candomblé. For externalism, a subject may be justified even without first-person access to reasons. By reducing the cognitive burden on subjects, this position clarifies how testimonial beliefs might be justified. At first glance, this concept of justification might seem appropriate for explaining knowledge transmission in Candomblé practices. However, Porcher notes that according to Van Eyghen's externalism (2023), sensory experiences of spirits would be justified provided that entities manifest *externally* to the subject. Yet, in Candomblé, spiritual experiences typically involve the possession of the medium's body. Hence, it is not a case of exteroception, but rather of interoception. The medium is informed interoceptively about the internal states of their organs, muscles, and bones, which can be interpreted as signs of possession by particular spirits.

The question, therefore, is how interoception might illuminate cases of possession in a manner compatible with the 4E cognition framework. Although Porcher does not aim to develop this point in detail in his book, he advances some arguments towards an answer in the final paragraphs of Section 5. Drawing from Elizabeth Perez (2022), he exemplifies how sensations experienced in the gut, muscles, and other parts of the body are not mere bodily signals but are construed as signs of spiritual possession:

Through somatic experiences and muscle memories, practitioners of Afro-diasporic traditions develop intimate relationships with their protecting deities, and gut feelings become the media for communication between these entities and human beings. (Porcher, 2025, p. 61)

I am very sympathetic to Porcher's suggestion. Nevertheless, future approaches will need to provide further arguments to accommodate interoception within the 4E cognition framework. A first difficulty lies in reaching a unified conception of interoception (Schoeller et al., 2025). Once a clear notion of interoception is established, the following problem arises: if interoception is understood as monitoring of internal signals, it becomes difficult to avoid an explanatory model centered exclusively in the brain. Unlike exteroception, where the active role of the body is evident, it is less clear here what the constitutive role of bodily activity would be. It might seem that explaining interoception requires only an appeal to specific brain structures, such as the insula, which are involved in processing and representing internal bodily states (Craig, 2009). In that case, an internalist explanation of spirit possession might suffice.

However, as discussed, the main objective of the 4E cognition framework is precisely to extend cognitive explanations beyond the confines of the skull. It is not coincidental that proponents of 4E cognition typically emphasize exteroception: it is easy to illustrate how bodily engagement with the environment constitutively shapes perception. By contrast, relating interoceptive processes to the active role of the body appears much more challenging. It would be necessary to argue, for instance, that experiences such as hunger or pain are not merely passive monitoring of internal states but dynamic, relational processes involving the subject's engagement with broader contexts. In other words, it would be crucial to defend the idea that interoception is not a passive modality where the subject is merely informed about internal events.

Furthermore, discussions of interoception often highlight elements such as the authority and incorrigibility of first-person reports, which may point toward a disembodied view of this perceptual modality (Corns, 2022). The central problem here is that these elements can suggest an introspective model of interoception—that is, a capacity for self-monitoring that depends on metarepresentations. Given that metarepresentations require higher-order cognitive capacities, there is a risk of reintroducing an intellectualist model, which proponents of 4E cognition seek to avoid. Once again, the risk is that epistemic internalism could reassert itself as the explanatory model.

As Porcher aptly notes, an epistemology based on interoception—one that departs from traditional theories—remains to be fully developed. The good news is that research on interoception within the philosophy of mind, neuroscience, and cognitive psychology has advanced significantly in recent years. Yet, as discussed, the challenge is to accommodate these findings within the 4E cognition framework and thereby use them to illuminate cases of spiritual possession in Candomblé. Readers are left with the anticipation of Porcher's future explorations, which, if as rigorous and insightful as those presented in this book, promise to chart important new directions in the epistemology of Afro-Brazilian traditions.

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