

SEATING AND VISITING: DIVINE PRESENCE IN AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIONS

ASSENTAMENTO E VISITAÇÃO: PRESENÇA DIVINA NAS RELIGIÕES AFRO-BRASILEIRAS

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José Eduardo Porcher's *Afro-Brazilian Religions* (Porcher, 2025) is probably the first book-length discussion of philosophical ideas operative in the Afro-Diasporic traditions of Brazil. As he notes, some anthropologists prepared the way by noting their distinctive metaphysical and epistemological ideas, but systematic philosophical discussion has largely been lacking. The book is therefore pioneering and presents a lot of new insights. Porcher also enters metaphysical discussions on how philosophy should relate to anthropology and whether Western philosophical categories are applicable to Afro-Brazilian religions. He also notes that its deities have different attributes than those commonly discussed in philosophy of religion. Understanding the deities of Afro-Brazilian religions philosophically therefore requires new philosophical concepts. One domain where new concepts are called for is divine presence. Afro-Brazilian deities are not omnipresent, and their presence is much more multi-faceted. Below, I focus on Porcher's account of 'seating' where deities take residence in material objects and in human persons.

SEATING OF DEITIES

Possession episodes, where a subject's personality is taken over or replaced by that of a deity or spirit, are one of the most striking features of Afro-Brazilian religions. While a large number of other religious traditions know similar phenomena,¹ the practice tends to be marginalized or frowned upon.² Adherents of Afro-Brazilian traditions actively pursue possession and deem it highly valuable. Possession raises all sorts of philosophical questions, most notably, what it reveals about the nature of the human mind and its openness to other, divine minds.

Porcher notes a parallel between possession and how deities inhabit material objects. *Orixás* can become 'seated' in both in similar ways. In both cases, seating leads to an individuation of the deity, where a new form of the deity is 'created' in its new vessel. The process of seating is a complex one that encompasses preparatory rites, like purification, where the

¹ Christianity knows of demonic possession, adherents of Indian traditions (mostly tantric) report possessions by gods and demons, and various folk-traditions also know the phenomenon.

² See Van Eyghen (2023) for a discussion on spirit possession in various other traditions.

receptacle is prepared for the seating of the deity. The preparatory work can take a long time for humans while it is usually much shorter for objects. Preparation is followed by the actual seating. During a ritual, the deity is firmly seated in the object. In the case of humans, seating is called ‘initiation’³ and the deity is placed in the human’s head. When seated, the deity can exert influence or power over the person’s life. Seating in objects tends to involve some manipulation of the object. Seated objects can be used in rituals or other religious practices. Deities seated in humans not only exert influence over that person’s behavior and personality but also take over the person’s body during possession episodes. Seating in humans thus encompasses much more than possession, yet possession is an important element.

Apart from the similarities, there are differences between seating in material objects and humans. Seating in humans is followed by a co-presence, or hybridization, of minds. The human mind and its personality do not disappear but is joined by a divine mind. The original human personality is altered by the initiation and the continued presence of the *orixá*, but remains an active force. This is not the case in objects. Seated objects do not have a co-presence as no mind or agency was present before. Seating in objects can therefore be regarded as an ‘enminding’ or perhaps ‘ensouling’ of objects. After seating, objects obtain a form of agency which is usually preserved for beings with a mind. Its capacities remain more limited than those of human minds.

Another difference is that divine presence in humans knows degrees. For most of the time, the seated deity is present and exerts a (mild) influence on the human. The deity’s presence can grow more intense in ritual activity. It gets most intense during full possession episodes. Here, the original mind of the human loses all hold on the body and motor functions. As Porcher notes, this can result in conflicts between the deity and its host when the deity engages in strange, sometimes inappropriate behavior. The divine presence in objects appears to be much more stable. The influence exerted by seated objects may be stronger during ritual activity, but the presence of the deity therein remains mostly stable.

VISITING OF DEITIES

The fact of different intensities of presence in objects and humans also points to another way how *orixás* can become present. Possession is actively sought by humans where a deity is seated. Seating is, however, not a requirement for possession. In most Afro-diasporic traditions, uninitiated persons can get possessed as well. Possession can occur suddenly. Sometimes possession can also ‘spill over’ during rituals. When one person gets possessed, another can feel a deity taking over as well. Anthropologist Matthijs van de Port describes how he himself felt a deity encroaching and feared being possessed, even though he did not believe that deities had such powers (Port 2005). This suggests a different mode of co-presence between human and

³ As Porcher (2025, p. 45) observes, the term ‘initiation’ is the etic term. The emic term, used by practitioners, is ‘making the saint’ (*fazer o santo*) or, simply, ‘making’ (*feitura*).

deity. For uninitiated humans, the deity ‘visits’ rather than ‘sits’ in their mind. The intense presence is very temporary. Beyond the possession episode, the deity also does not exert the same influence or control as in initiated humans.

This suggests another mode of divine presence in Afro-Brazilian (and likely broader Afro-diasporic) religions, that of ‘visitation’. While deities ‘sit’ in material objects and persons after being properly seated, deities also visit humans who have not been initiated. Visiting is usually much less expected and more intrusive than sitting. Visits are also less stable. It is not clear whether deities also visit material objects. Objects used in divination or other ritual practice appear to go through a process of preparation and seating. Many other religious traditions do make mention of supernatural forces being temporarily present in objects. Adherents of ancient Roman religion looked for divine signs or messages in objects (Linderski 2016). The Old Testament also makes mention of God being present in the burning bush⁴ and the tabernacle (Jedwab 2015). At this point it is not clear whether Afro-Brazilian religions share a similar concept of temporary divine presence in objects.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Porcher’s book rightly points out the need for new philosophical concepts to understand Afro-Brazilian religions. He posits one way of divine presence in how deities seat in material objects and human persons after initiation. Another mode of presence where deities temporarily ‘visit’ persons can be posited as well. The scope and details of both modes of divine presence remain avenues to be explored further.

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⁴ ‘There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up’ (Ex 3:2 NIV).

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