

CRITICAL COMMENTS ON JOSÉ EDUARDO PORCHER'S *AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIONS*

COMENTÁRIOS CRÍTICOS A *AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIONS* DE JOSÉ EDUARDO PORCHER

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In section 2 of *Afro-Brazilian Religions*, titled “Mythic Narratives and Candomblé’s Supreme Being”, José Eduardo Porcher seeks to interpret some myths concerning the high deity of Candomblé, which emanates from the West African Yoruba religious tradition. Porcher’s decision to use mythical narratives is inspired by his recognition of their importance, yet apparent neglect by many authors as a source of philosophy. Given the relationship between Candomblé and Yoruba, Porcher conceives Candomblé’s Supreme Being (Olódùmaré)¹ as not just African, but distinct in terms of attribute and function from the God of Abrahamic faiths. In spite of the Candomblé belief in a Supreme Being, Porcher does not think Candomblé myths “centre around” (p. 11) such a being, but around the high deities (*orixás*) – namely, Oxalá (Obatalá), Orunmilá (Ifá), and Exu (Porcher, 2025, p. 12).

In 2.2, Porcher identifies three main perspectives on the nature of Olódùmaré in Yoruba and Candomblé philosophy of religion. First, is the view that Olódùmaré is transcendent, omnibenevolent, omnipotent, creator, and omniscient (2025, p. 13). This view is attributed to the earliest African decolonization scholars² such as Mbiti (1970) and Idowu (1962). Second, is the view that Olódùmaré is a limited god, due, for instance, to the existence of mythical accounts that suggest that Olódùmaré is a “creator” who “fashioned the world” from some pre-existing materials (2025, p. 14).³ Olódùmaré’s power to create is thus limited, and there are no myths to support the view that Olódùmaré is omniscient, omnibenevolent, and transcendent. The third view is that Olódùmaré is “first among equals” since “Yoruba belief recognizes other divinities with supreme authority in specific domains” (2025, p. 14).⁴ Those divinities include Obatalá, Orunmilá, and Exu.

¹ Olódùmaré is also called *Olqrn*, names which appear in Candomblé as *Olodumare* and *Olorum*. Although Porcher prefers *Olorum-Olodumare* for easy reference to the Supreme Being (and because he is referring to the Portuguese rendering), I choose *Olódùmaré* since many authors who will be cited in this piece have used it.

² By this is meant such scholars whose decolonization efforts are noticed within the context of African religion(s).

³ Porcher attributes this view to Bewaji (1998), Fayemi (2012), and Oladipo (2004).

⁴ Porcher credits this to Gbadagesin (2013).

In 2.3, Porcher delves into the creation stories of Yoruba tradition. Essentially, three variations of Yoruba myth of creation are discussed, the first of which presents Olódùmaré as “a mass of air” in the beginning, whose movement resulted in a “mass of water” and then “mud”. While the former resulted in the emergence of the deity Obatalá, the latter brought about the deity Èṣù, after the mud was shaped into a vitalized mound.⁵ In the second account, Olódùmaré assigned the task of creating the earthly world to Obatalá, only for the latter to lose the opportunity to the deity Odudua, due to drunkenness and failure to take Orunmilá’s advice to offer pre-creation sacrifices.⁶ Obatalá was then given the task of creating “all living things”, so he “created man and woman” from clay and Olódùmaré breathed life into them.⁷ The third account leaves out Odudua, making Obatalá the “creator” of the world, “equipping [it] with woods, forests, rivers, and waterfalls”.⁸ He, however, got drunk and could not complete the duty of creating humans successfully. For, some of his clay models of humans became defective, resulting in actual deformation of those humans.

Section 2.4 is where Porcher analyzes the myths and argues that: (i) the first view about the nature of Olódùmaré⁹ discussed above is false; (ii) Olódùmaré created the world with pre-existing materials; (iii) Olódùmaré is part of the world; (v) Olódùmaré is not the sole creator of the world (2025, p. 18). On the basis of inference “i”, therefore, Porcher concludes that the problem of evil does not exist in Candomblé and/or Yoruba religion.¹⁰

Questions:

1. The role of Olódùmaré in the affairs of humans

The ordinary conception of God in the Abrahamic faiths is that He is omnipotent, creator, and omnibenevolent, among other attributes. His benevolence, especially towards humans, is in part understood to mean that He provides humans with resources for their sustenance in the world that He created, guides humans, and is always good to them in their daily activities. This implies that humans can attribute specific life experiences or outcomes of their activities to God. However, given Porcher’s explanation that Olódùmaré is only partially good, one wonders about the nature and extent of Olódùmaré’s goodness in terms of human experiences or affairs. What is the role of Olódùmaré in earthly human affairs?

⁵ Porcher draws on Elbein dos Santos (1976/2012) for this rendering.

⁶ See Porcher (2025, pp. 15-16) where he draws on Prandi (2001).

⁷ *Ibid.* Porcher notices an alternative telling of this myth in which Obatalá succeeds in the creation of the earthly world, does not neglect Orunmilá’s advice to offer sacrifices, and does not get drunk. But Porcher thinks that this narrative is only “less of a cautionary tale” (2025, p. 16).

⁸ Porcher takes the third narration from Beniste (2006).

⁹ I refer to the view that Olódùmaré is omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient.

¹⁰ Some African religions do possess a problem of evil, since their Supreme Being is indeed an omni-God. See Majeed (2022; 2014).

2. What is Olódùmaré creator of?

Elbein dos Santos' narration of the Yoruba creation myth suggests that when, in the beginning, Olódùmaré (as a mass of air) moved, it resulted in the emergence of Obatalá and, later, Exu (2025, pp. 14-15). These two deities, therefore, directly originated from Olódùmaré. But concerning what Porcher calls the "creation" of the "earthly world," he depends on the accounts of Prandi and Beniste (Porcher, pp.15-17). In both accounts, it is not Olódùmaré but either Odudua or Obatalá who created the earthly world. And even when Obatalá did not create the world, "he created living beings" (in the words of Prandi). But before he modeled humans for Olódùmaré to breathe into them, he was already told that the world had been created. Someone may ask, what exactly in the earthly world did Olódùmaré create? It may also be explained if the statement,

when Olorum-Olodumare decided to *create* the earthly world, he called on the great *orixa*, the first born, Oxala- Obatalá (p. 15)

implies that Olódùmaré did not play any active role in the said creation.

3. Creation in African philosophy of religion

Wiredu's (1998) idea that the Akan Supreme Being (Onyankopon) fashioned things from pre-existing materials leads him to conclude that Onyankopon is really not a creator. For, creation, in its original Western sense, connotes bringing those things into being ex nihilo. Since Porcher cites the work in which Wiredu makes this point, it would be good to know Porcher's view on the alleged non-creator quality of the African – and thus Candomblé – Supreme Being.

4. The problem of evil

Toward the end of the chapter, Porcher discusses the problem of evil and attempts to provide an answer to the question whether Olódùmaré is Supreme Being or, as Gbadagesin claims, "first among equals" (p. 21). He then states that Gbadagesin's claim is

contradicted by the fact that Olorum-Olodumare is everywhere depicted as the origin of everything and the bestower of life and axé. Thus Olorum-Olodumare *is* the Supreme Being of Candomblé, despite occasional dependence on Oxalá-Obatalá, Orunmilá-Ifá, and Exu (p. 21).

From the myths, it is quite clear that Olódùmaré is the bestower of life. What seems to be problematic or, at least, requires clarification is the idea that "Olódùmaré is everywhere depicted as the origin of everything." How, for example, is Olódùmaré the origin of everything but cannot be blamed for everything evil? Why can Olódùmaré

not be blamed for the evil found in all originated things? In what sense could the “creator” of the earthly world, Odudua or Obatalá, not be seen as the origin of that world? If Olódùmaré is the origin of everything, then, how does Porcher account for the pre-existing material(s) that Olódùmaré is said to have originated things from? Does the existence of those materials not suggest that Olódùmaré did not “originate everything”?

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