

AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIONS: AN OVERVIEW

AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIONS: UMA VISÃO GERAL

José Eduardo Porcher

Afro-Brazilian Religions invites philosophers of religion to take seriously traditions that have long remained outside its range of attention. Published in the series Cambridge Elements in Global Philosophy of Religion edited by Yujin Nagasawa, it argues that to do conceptual justice to them, the discipline must expand both its sources and its methods. Instead of proceeding from theologies and other written texts, it must learn from myth, ritual, and embodiment, and from the ethnographic accounts through which such forms of life become accessible. The book's central claim is that a genuinely global philosophy of religion must become a philosophy of religious practice. This entails a methodological reorientation: rather than applying philosophical categories to alien materials, it must let those materials modify the categories themselves. Afro-Brazilian religions provide an exemplary setting for this shift because they articulate a world in which cognition, agency, and divinity are not abstract notions but lived relations embodied in dance, sacrifice, and possession.

The opening section frames this demand against the background of the discipline's narrowness, intellectualism, and insularity—borrowing Kevin Schilbrack's terms. Narrowness refers to its restricted diet of examples, almost entirely drawn from Christian theology. Intellectualism refers to its focus on belief and doctrine to the exclusion of practice, gesture, and material mediation. Insularity designates its reluctance to engage other disciplines that study religion empirically. Drawing on Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's exhortation to "take seriously what Western intellectuals cannot take seriously," the book proposes a corresponding philosophical practice: one that approaches ritual and myth as vehicles of thought rather than as data awaiting interpretation. Afro-Brazilian religions, and Candomblé in particular, call for such an approach because they lack the very features that have defined philosophy of religion's object of study: scripture, centralized authority, and systematic theology. What they offer instead are practices through which a subtle and sustained reflection on life, power, and relation is enacted rather than stated.

The first section presents these traditions in their historical and social setting: the forced uprooting of Africans across the Atlantic, the formation of *terreiros* as autonomous ritual communities, and the emergence of a pantheon of *orixás* whose worship is reconfigured when different deities from different places and families are all summoned together by the necessities imposed by the circumstances of enslavement. Candomblé, the main focus of the book, is presented as a paradigmatic instance of a religion without formalized doctrine

and yet rich in conceptual density. It is held together not by propositions but by ritual actions that produce belonging and knowledge. Initiation, possession, and sacrifice are not symbolic enactments of prior beliefs, but the media through which meaning and personhood are constituted, while secrecy functions as a technology of spiritual containment that protects and concentrates *axé*—the vital force that pervades all existence. The section begins the work of arguing that to think philosophically about such a world one must take narrative and ethnography as legitimate philosophical sources, since only they can disclose the ways in which knowledge and ontology are lived.

The second section turns to the mythic corpus of Candomblé. Drawing from Yoruba sources and their Brazilian developments, it reconstructs the creation myths featuring Olorum (Olodumaré), Oxalá (Obatalá), Odudua, and Exu. These narratives present a cosmos that comes into being not by fiat but through breathing, delegation, error, and repair. The Supreme Being is the source of all life yet remains immanent to the world's processes; the deities are powerful but finite, morally ambivalent, and capable of failure. From this emerges the conception of a limited high god, supreme but not transcendent, creator but not omnipotent, and above all not bound by moral perfection. The absence of any problem of evil follows naturally from this vision, since conflict and imperfection are constitutive of creation rather than exceptions to it. The section shows that these stories are not proto-philosophical curiosities but genuine exercises in reflection on being, causation, and value. They reveal a mode of thought in which the divine and the material interpenetrate, and where creation is continuous with transformation rather than a completed act.

The third section examines sacrifice as the central practice through which humans and *orixás* exchange *axé*. Ethnographic accounts of blood offerings, *ebó* and *bori*, are treated not as external illustrations but as indispensable to philosophical interpretation. The act of offering up life is understood as restoring the circulation of energy that sustains the cosmos. To honor the *orixás* is to participate in this economy of reciprocity. The meaning of sacrifice, then, is not representational but ontological: it maintains the permeability between visible and invisible domains. The section argues that such practices compel philosophers of religion to rethink their own procedures. Concepts like “agency,” “obligation,” or “worship” acquire new sense when the relation between human and divine is mediated by material exchanges that literally transfer vitality. Without ethnography, this dimension remains invisible; with it, philosophy gains access to a thicker conception of religious life as a system of embodied transactions.

The fourth section explores how objects participate in the constitution of persons. During initiation the novice becomes *feito*, “made,” through a series of acts that bind their head (*ori*), body, and personal *orixá* into a single configuration. Stones, metals, and ritual implements are not mere symbols but seats of presence. The person who emerges from initiation is inseparable from these material mediations: one's *orixá* exists only in its embodied manifestation, and individuality is a product of that relation. By tracing these processes, the book suggests that Candomblé articulates a view of personhood as relational and compositional, where being is always the outcome of interaction among spiritual and material ele-

ments. The philosophical stake is that ontology itself must be reconsidered from within these practices rather than applied to them from outside.

The fifth section turns to dance, drumming, and spirit possession as exemplary forms of embodied knowledge. In Candomblé, the descent of an *orixá* is a literal event that transforms both the medium and the surrounding community. Possession suspends ordinary self-awareness and replaces it with another form of agency, one that is neither purely divine nor purely human. The book draws on ethnographic and phenomenological studies to argue that such states disclose a conception of knowledge that is practical, affective, and bodily. To know, in this context, is to enact. The dancing body is not expressing a belief but participating in a divine rhythm that constitutes understanding. Through these analyses the book thus sketches the outlines of a philosophy of religious practice grounded in the embodied and situated character of human life.

The conclusion draws together these threads to suggest that the philosophy of religion must learn from such traditions if it is to remain viable. Expanding the field is not a matter of simply adding new examples but of transforming its procedures. Afro-Brazilian religions show that reflection on the divine can take place through movement, sound, and offering, and that philosophy of religion's categories look provincial when measured against the diversity of human religiosity. To engage these traditions requires us to practice a different kind of philosophy: one that listens as much as it analyzes, that recognizes in ethnography a partner rather than a supplement, and that treats the lived body as a site of conceptual insight.

The symposium that follows gathers nine responses from philosophers and scholars of religion who approach the book from different angles. Some focus on the theology that Candomblé evinces, others on its treatment of embodiment and ethnography, and others on its implications for the future of the discipline. Together they extend the invitation issued by *Afro-Brazilian Religions*: to imagine a philosophy of religion capable of "playing well with others" and of taking seriously the forms of thought embodied in practices that have long been excluded from its canon. The reply to commentaries that closes this symposium aims to continue that conversation in the same spirit of openness and dialogue.

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