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J. Lorand Matory: Black Atlantic Religion

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Introduction

THIS IS A STORY OF AFRICA in the Americas. But it is just as much a story about the Americas in Africa, in defiance of the outmoded supposition that internal integration and the isomorphism of cultures with local populations are the normal conditions of social life. This story suggests that lifeways, traditions, and the social boundaries they substantiate endure not *despite* their involvement in translocal dialogues but *because* of it. Candomblé (pronounced cahn-dome-BLEH, with a final vowel sound resembling the *e* in “pet”) is one such lifeway and tradition, which is both the product and one of the greatest producers of a transoceanic culture and political economy known as the “black Atlantic.”

Candomblé is an Afro-Brazilian religion of divination, sacrifice, healing, music, dance, and spirit possession. The only rival to its beauty is its complexity. Though this religion is headquartered in the coastal Brazilian state of Bahia, it has counterparts and offshoots all over urban Brazil. Believers attribute miraculous powers and exemplary flaws to gods known variously as *orixás*, *voduns*, *inquices*, and *caboclos*, depending on the Candomblé denomination. The adventures, personalities, and kinship relations of these superhuman beings are described in an extensive mythology and body of oracular wisdom, which also serve to explain the personalities and fates of their human worshipers, as well as the worldly relations among those worshipers. Through blood sacrifice and lavish ceremonies of spirit possession, the gods are persuaded to intervene beneficently in the lives of their worshipers and to keep the foes of those worshipers at bay.

The Candomblé temple, or “house,” also serves the social and economic needs of its class-diverse and largely urban membership. It is usually the primary residence of the chief priest, some of his or her lieutenants, and their wards, as well as a temporary shelter for fugitives from police persecution, domestic crises, and poverty. The temple is also often a conduit of bourgeois largesse, a source of job contacts, an employer in its own right, and a major port of call for politicians. Yet priests and practitioners, no less than the social scientists and politicians who seek to speak for them, tend to emphasize the ancientness and fixity of Candomblé and of the ritual “tradition” that both constitutes its ultimate purpose and shapes the deepest part of community life.

This book is a sequel to my *Sex and the Empire That Is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Òyó-Yorùbá Religion* (1994; also

forthcoming b), and shares in the intent of that book to understand supposedly local and primordial “folk” cultures and “primitive” religions not primarily in terms of their roots in a pristine past but in the context of the dynamic politics, economics, and long-distance communication that are the lived realities of the “folk.” The five-hundred-year-old black Atlantic is five hundred years older in its translocalism and more than two hundred years older in its disruption of nation-state boundaries than the epoch now fashionably described as “transnationalism,” giving rise to the suspicion that the chief exponents of this term have chosen to disregard Africa or to disregard the past generally. Yet my aim is not to nominate a new date for the beginnings of transnationalism so that it encompasses African history but, instead, to embrace the truths that this term actually highlights about both the African diaspora and the entire course of human cultural history: the isolation of local cultural units has long been the exception rather than the rule, and territorially bounded social groups have never monopolized the loyalty of their members.

The 15th- to 19th-century Atlantic slave trade and European colonialism were the founding conditions of the black Atlantic but were hardly the first moments of dynamism or translocalism in African cultural history. Commerce and migration across the Sahara, across the Indian Ocean, and across the diverse regions of sub-Saharan Africa are among the forces that have long made Africa a cosmopolitan and ever-changing place. Hence, the focus of this project on the past two hundred years is intended to demonstrate not that we can no longer treat geographical isolation as a condition of cultural reproduction in Africa but that we never could, in Africa or anyplace else.

Moreover, far from emerging from the death throes of the nation-state, translocalism long predated nationalism everywhere in the world. Indeed, translocalism was a founding condition of nationalism. I regard transnationalism less as a sudden thirty-, forty-, or fifty-year-old challenge to the nation-state than an analytic focus on how important translocalism *remains*, even at moments when the rulers of a few exceptionally powerful nation-states claim to believe that their territorial jurisdictions are culturally, economically, and politically autonomous. What is most worthy about the recent literature on transnationalism is what it ultimately implies about a very old phenomenon: territorial jurisdictions might command great loyalty from their citizens and subjects, and they might impose significant constraints on their conduct; however, territorial jurisdictions have never monopolized the loyalty of the citizens and subjects that they claim, and they are never the sole founts of authority or agents of constraint in such people’s lives. Such is true of the nation-state now, as it was and is of kingdoms, empires, religions, acephalous republics, and fiefdoms.

By way of illustration, this book documents a series of transnational dialogues—involving West African, Afro-Brazilian, and Afro-Cuban priests alongside European and American slave traders, European imperialists, postcolonial Latin American and African nationalists, black trans-Atlantic merchants, and an international community of ethnographers—in the absence of which the massive changes in the ethnic identities, sacred values, and gendered leadership associated with Candomblé over the past century and a half would have been difficult to explain. Hence, this story defies not only the current fashion to describe transnationalism as a recent phenomenon but also the old chronotope (Fabian 1983) that homelands are to their diasporas as the past is to the present and future. The irony at the core of this story is that diasporas create their homelands. The circum-Atlantic forces that have produced the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé, which range from the slave trade to the return migration of Afro-Latin Americans to Africa, as well as Boasian anthropology itself, have also produced a range of novel West African ethnic identities.

I have chosen to tell a story about the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé not simply because it presents some of the most beautiful spectacles of black divinity in the world but also because it illustrates black ingenuity under duress, an ingenuity that created its transnational, transimperial, and transoceanic networks before the word “transnationalism” was ever known. It is an ingenuity that refuses to be written out of history. Here I will tell a new tale of Candomblé’s old past and its dynamic present, a present of which I myself am a part.

A CHALLENGE TO ETHNOGRAPHY

What would a culture look like, and how would an ethnography look, if we attended consciously to the transnational processes that have constantly informed the meanings and motives of its participants?

The genre of anthropological ethnography began as an effort to understand the deeply local character of meaning and the local institutional context of collective human endeavors. The conventions of the genre consciously demoted history because the only forms of history available for the Pacific island, African, and Native American societies in which anthropologists specialized seemed to be diffusionist speculations about where a local “trait” had come from or evolutionist constructions of how “high” a society had risen in some putatively universal trajectory toward the lifeways best exemplified by northwest European white men. The lack of long-term documentation of these societies’ histories is more easily resolved now than it once was—social

scientists have recognized the utility of oral history, some long-available written sources have finally come to light or been deciphered, and, after a century or more of colonization by Europeans, these societies have typically generated at least a century of written records of major social change.

The classical conventions of the ethnographic genre consciously demoted translocal forces as well, partly because of the speculative nature of early diffusionism and, more important, because the massive translocal force of colonialism itself seemed but a backdrop to or a distraction from the aim of archiving the recently superseded forms of life or potential administrative structures that interested colonial era anthropologists. Nowadays, however, we recognize colonialism as one of the many historical phenomena that, over time, have shaped these essentially dynamic societies. Colonialism and other such phenomena therefore require direct attention in our study.

The translocal, transnational, and trans-Atlantic slave trade and its consequences have, however, been a major blind spot in the genesis of the currently fashionable anthropological models of cultural history. The parallel study of African-American and Native American “acculturation” by Melville Herskovits, Robert Redfield, and others long ago fell by the wayside in American anthropology. Its lessons about the importance of exogenous political and economic inequality were far more easily ignored or taken for granted in colonized Africa and Asia, where the anthropologists’ informants took longer to assert their citizenship rights and thereby open the eyes of anthropologists to the abnormalness of their oppression and of limitations on their movement. On the other hand, it has always been literally impossible to understand the cultural history of Africans and their descendants in America without understanding the massive transnational forces and the massive forced migration that brought them to the Americas. Well within the parameters of the “time-space compression” described by Harvey (1989), the slave trade resulted from and resulted in capitalist-inspired technological changes that, between the 16th and the 19th centuries, enabled the vast acceleration of human movement across the globe.

Hence the reasons for the exclusion of this case from current models of transnationalism must be sought in differences other than qualitative ones. Perhaps those who see transnationalism as new have excluded Africans and their descendants on the grounds of the Africans’ appearance of passivity in the process, or perhaps Africans seemed marginal to the nation-state because of many Africans’ aspirations to transcend, disrupt, or crosscut it. Or perhaps the African diaspora case has been so marginalized in anthropology because it is not widely known or thought of as an important instance of cross-cultural variety, worthy of consideration

when universalizing historical models or theoretical propositions are advanced. However, what remains important and worthy in transnationalism/globalization theory is the challenge it poses: If we can no longer write ethnography as though the present-day Eurasian societies focal to the argument were merely local and territorially bounded, then when and where were anthropologists ever correct in writing according to the assumption of local boundedness? Clearly, no place.

Historians such as Braudel (1992 [1949]), Curtin et al. (1978), Thornton (1992), and Chaudhuri (1990), as well as the art historian Robert Farris Thompson (1983) and the literary critics Paul Gilroy (1993) and Joseph Roach (1996), have clarified the standards of analysis for translocal fields far better for their disciplines than anthropologists have for our own. For example, though it has grown roots in a range of disciplines beyond his own, Thompson is the author of the felicitous coinage the “black Atlantic.” Nonetheless, anthropologists are not without intellectual resources to contribute. Even the prototype of the ethnographic genre in anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), is focused on the translocal phenomenon of the maritime trade in kula valuables. But, with the exception of Ong (1999), there are few models for an ethnography that is truly attentive to both local meaning and transnational context. I have set myself to the task of clarifying a standard of analysis for a translocal field that is both one of the most neglected and arguably the most important in illuminating the central role of transnationalism in the genesis of the territorial nation and of global capitalism itself—the black Atlantic.

TRANCE ATLANTIC: A THUMBNAIL SKETCH OF THE AFRO-BRAZILIAN CANDOMBLÉ

The Atlantic perimeter hosts a range of groups profoundly influenced by western African conceptions of personhood and of the divine. Their religions include Candomblé, Umbanda, Xangô, and Batuque in Brazil, as well as Vodou in Haiti and “Santería,” or Ocha, and Palo Mayombe in Cuba and in all the American countries where Cubans and Caribbean Latino music have traveled. These are religions of spirit possession, divination, and healing that also define peoplehoods called “nations,” which link them with specific places in Africa.¹ A nation avowing Yorùbá origins is called “Lucumí” in Cuba, “Nagô” or “Quêto” in Brazil, and “Nagô” in Haiti.² A nation avowing links to the Ewè, Gèn, Ajá, and Fòn speakers is called “Arará” in Cuba, “Jeje” or “Mina” in Brazil, and “Rada” in Haiti. And then there is the Congo, or Congo/Angola, nation found in Cuba, Brazil, and Haiti.³ In the Americas, well

into the late 19th century, such black Atlantic nations brought their citizens together in work crews, manumission societies, Catholic lay brotherhoods, and rebel armies. Today they are held together—often with tremendous success—by obedience to shared gods, shared ritual standards, shared language, and, in some sense, a shared leadership.

With counterparts in Nigeria, the People's Republic of Bénin, Trinidad, Cuba, and everywhere where Cuban exiles have lived since 1959, Candomblé attracts many nonbelievers with its festivals, where the beautifully clothed gods and goddesses dance before drum orchestras and bring blessings to their earthly devotees. Its African-inspired gods and Native American-inspired *caboclo* spirits are associated with historical characters (kings, queens, knights, and Indian chiefs), with “forces of nature” (oceans, rivers, trees, hunting, rainbows, snakes, and storms), and with particular human personality and body types. The god a person worships personifies elements of his or her character and destiny and prescribes the worshiper's potential roles in the ritual life of the temple. A worshiper also obeys his or her god's food and behavioral taboos. Knowledge of other peoples' gods is taken to illuminate virtually any social situation.

When people are afflicted or in trouble, divination sometimes identifies the source of the problem as a neglected tutelary god, a malevolent spirit sent by an enemy, other people's jealousy, or a harmful “influence” picked up from the street. Candomblé priests command the technology to purify bodies, houses, and other vessels of unwanted influences and to insert, or secure the presence of, the divinities in the bodies and altars of their devotees. The ritual control of what enters and what stays out of people's bodies dramatizes people's situational and lifelong belonging in trans-Atlantic communities that crosscut multiple territorial nations.

Among the instruments of this technology are pots and soup tureens, which, at the time of initiation, are invested with shells, stones, and metal objects representing the divinities (Matory 1986). These and other objects representing a divinity and embodying its protective force must be in the color, material, shape, and number emblematic of the divinity they represent. Moreover, they have been bathed in the herbs and in the blood of animals consecrated to that divinity. Each divinity also demands specific species and a particular sex of animal, as well as cooked vegetable foods specific to that divinity. Well cared for, a divinity guarantees the maximum possible protection, prosperity, mental health, and physical well-being for its sons and daughters. The protocols of Candomblé also create “houses” or “homes” (*casas* or *ilês*) where their members and wards find an alternative to, and sometimes refuge from, the nation-state.

I am not the first non-Brazilian to be swept up in Candomblé's vivid imagery of identity and utility (see, e.g., Harding 2000; Carelli 1993; Wafer 1991; Omari 1984; Bastide 1978[1960]; Cossard-Binon 1970). Yet, even with its paradigmatic status in the study of "African survivals" and of Afro-Atlantic religions, the Candomblé boasts no surfeit of book-length histories or ethnographies in English. What follows is a historical ethnography of the Brazilian Candomblé and of the multifarious "transnational" phenomena that have shaped and been shaped by it.

Geographically, Brazil is now the fifth-largest country in the world, and it is by far the largest country in "Latin America." In population, it is the sixth largest in the world, with nearly 176 million people.⁴ Judging by North American racial definitions, only Nigeria's population of more than 110 million outnumbers Brazil's black population. Because of Brazil's famously ambiguous definitions of race, estimates of its population of African descent range from 58 million to 132 million and from 33 to 75 percent of the national population (Minority Rights Group 1995). By contrast, only about 34.7 million, or 12.3 percent, of the United States' population declares itself "Black," thus constituting only the *second*-largest population of sub-Saharan African descent outside of Africa (U.S. Census 2000). (In the United States, the capitalization of the term is meant to convey more than a shared, externally perceived phenotype; it denotes an internal sense of nationality shared by dark- and light-skinned people of African descent.) However, this triumvirate of black Atlantic powers—Nigeria, Brazil, and the United States—is linked by more than just ancestry. They have long been bound together in an intensely transnational dialogue over race, gender, the environment, and the fate of nations.

The volume to which this is a sequel, *Sex and the Empire That Is No More* (1994; forthcoming a), documents two centuries of changes in the gender conceptions and political uses of *òrìṣà* worship among the Ọ̀yọ̀- Yorùbá, who live in what is now Nigeria. Over a similar period, the present volume traces the activities of an itinerant, trans-Atlantic religious and commercial elite whose lifeways are no more reducible to the conditions of Brazilian enslavement and racial oppression than to some primordial African "origins." Chiefly since the mid-19th century, this elite has been active in renaming, reshaping, and redefining political identities and formations on both sides of the Atlantic. These itinerant Afro-Brazilians have been pivotal actors in the simultaneous formation of the Brazilian, Nigerian, Beninese, Nagô, and Jeje national identities. By their example, I am concerned to restore the Afro-Brazilian subject, or agent, to the narrative of Candomblé's remarkable elaboration and spread over the past two centuries. Although I am interested in the *fact* of Candomblé's impressive continuities with African linguistic and ritual

forms, I am more interested here in the *historical processes and activities* that have created such continuities, privileged some continuities over others, and officially masked numerous discontinuities.

I wish to show that, at the hands of Afro-Brazilian merchants and priests, the remaking of Candomblé's trans-Atlantic nations has paralleled and interacted with the similarly trans-Atlantic processes that made the Brazilian territorial nation.

Transnationalism and Its Neglected Forebears

The global spread of the nation-state idea reached its apogee in the mid-20th century, when scores of formerly colonized countries in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean followed the model of late 18th-century and 19th-century Europe and the continental Americas in declaring independence from sprawling European-centered empires. In theory, the outward movement of European people and ideas fixed an inexorable, if approximate, trajectory for global social change (Anderson 1991[1983]).

After the 1960s, however, the sizable reverse flow of formerly colonized, or "third world," populations into the "first world" even took the academy by surprise. The facility with which migrants and multinational corporations participated simultaneously in the politics, economics, and cultural formations of multiple nation-states sent scholars rushing to identify new analytic units and to name the seemingly novel processes afoot. Since the 1980s, various disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities have produced a sizable bibliography under the rubric of "transnationalism," as well as a series of new journals—*Diaspora*, *Public Culture*, *Positions*, and so forth—that establish the integrity of studying dispersed and supraterritorial sociopolitical units (see Lie 1995; Kearney 1995). This literature teaches a great many lessons about the global interconnectedness of late 20th-century and early 21st-century life, but some of its expositors rely on arbitrary exclusions to emphasize their point. First, translocalisms that preceded the nation-state are usually ignored or diminished rather than analyzed comparatively. Second, the undeniable growth in transportation and communication technology is treated as a recent sea change rather than a millennial trend; before one or another recent historical moment, all changes in the technology or organization of translocal movement are deemed unworthy of notice. Third, momentous transborder communities structured by forces other than "capitalism"—such as Islam and international socialism—are cast outside of this new monocausal grand narrative. Finally, for many theorists, it has become a truism that transnationalism spells the end of the nation-state. They thus define as

irrelevant those forms of translocalism that have either produced the nation-state or subsidized it from the very beginning.

The premise of this book is that such exclusions are more definitional than empirical or instructive. The “transnationalism” rubric invites a useful but neglected range of comparison cases—the Islamic world; the Jewish diaspora and Zionism; the commercial networks of the Indian Ocean; the dispersion of Chinese speakers across Southeast Asia; of South Asians to the South Pacific, East and southern Africa, the Caribbean, and South America; of Irish to the Caribbean and the United States; of Syro-Lebanese to West Africa and South America; and, of course, of Europeans and Africans to the Americas.

Apparently, this last case has so far been too obvious or too overwhelming to be fruitfully compared to what is now conventionally called “transnationalism.” Or, perhaps, it bears characteristics too disruptive of the current theoretical fashion to be convenient. At the time of the Euro-African colonization of the Americas, the nation-state was not a precondition to be disrupted by transnationalism, as the usual story of transnationalism goes; rather, the nation-state was an epiphenomenon of that early colonial dispersion of Europeans and Africans. The late 18th and the 19th centuries were in fact a time when both American territorial units (such as Brazil, Cuba, and British colonial North America) and transoceanically dispersed black ethnic groups (such as the Nagô, Jeje, Angola, and Congo) were becoming “nations” for themselves. Overlapping in the same geographical space and engaged in mutually implicating dialogues, these white Creole territorial nations and these dispersed black Creole nations were simultaneously in gestation.

It is true that a now-outmoded type of ethnography once imagined local communities as though they were bounded. And, in today’s world, any such ethnography silences major dimensions of how the community under study works. However, inattention by much of the older ethnography to translocal forces should not be mistaken, as it is in much current theorizing, for proof that before the late 20th century, most societies functioned in an entirely local field, that every present-day society is equally enmeshed in transnational forces, or that the entire world is becoming a boundary-free whole. While some theorists regard amorphousness, limitless extension, instantaneous long-distance communication, and boundarylessness as the distinguishing features of today’s transnationalism, I submit that earlier flows were no more or less socially and geographically patterned than today’s and that, even today, talk of simultaneity in long-distance communication is much exaggerated. We must be careful not to allow our enthusiastic description of the present to reduce the past to a one-dimensional foil.

Nor must we ignore the ways in which old patterns continue to co-exist with new ones. Indeed, they sometimes complement each other. If we included this range of old translocalisms and transnationalisms in our analyses, what would we learn about the genesis of nation-states and “transnations” (Appadurai 1996), about the long-term relationships between them, about the motives behind these contrary “imaginings” of community, and about the broader sociogeographical contexts in which they operate?

Braudel (1992[1949]) offers a foundational model for such geographical contexts in his treatment of the “Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World,” one such regional system of movement, exchange, and culture formation. A similar regional system has coincided with, subsidized, and overlapped with the spread of the nation-state itself. Philip Curtin and coauthors’ discussion of the “South Atlantic System” (1978), Robert Farris Thompson’s “black Atlantic” world (1983), Paul Gilroy’s “black Atlantic” (1993), John Thornton’s “Atlantic World” (1992), and Joseph Roach’s “circum-Atlantic world” (1996) name the ways in which cultural and political developments at any given locale on the Atlantic perimeter flow from what I call an ongoing “dialogue” with multiple other locales—and nation-states—on that same perimeter.

These processes deserve an ethnographic and historical description specific to the Atlantic perimeter region, which is the main aim of *Black Atlantic Religion*, but the diasporic dialogue around the Atlantic perimeter is arguably the foundation of world capitalism, of the industrial revolution, and of the emergence of the European, American, African, and Asian nation-state. As scholars debate whether “transnationalism” spells the imminent death of territorial nationhood (see, e.g., Glick Schiller, Basch, Szanton-Blanc 1992; Appadurai 1996), we would do well to consider the long record of how diasporas created nation-states and how the two have continuously reshaped each other.

African or Not?

This book also proposes a new kind of solution to a quandary that has been central to the study of New World black populations throughout the time that their worthiness of citizenship in the nation-state has been debated. The question of whether New World blacks are culturally African and the worthiness of their cultures’ integration into the nation-state were debated cross-racially and transnationally not only in movements ranging from abolitionism to pseudoscientific racism and eugenics but also at the transnational intersection among the United States–based Harlem Renaissance, Havana-based *Afro-Cubanismo*, the cultural nationalism of the Haitian Bureau d’Éthnologie, the pan-Francophone

Négritude movement, São Paulo-based Modernismo, and Northeastern Brazilian Regionalismo. These debates co-occurred and overlapped with various bourgeois *indigenismos*, which rethought the Native American presence in the nation-state and flourished particularly in Mexico from the 1930s onward.

Whatever the peculiarities of the Brazilian case, it quickly assumed the status of a locus classicus in the debate over the nature of African-diaspora, or African-American, cultures generally. Its exemplary form, the Herskovits-Frazier debate, concerned whether African-American lifeways were African-inspired or not. Melville J. Herskovits (e.g., 1958[1941]; 1966[1937], 1966[1930], 1966[1945]) argued that African Americans in virtually every American nation-state “retained” some greater or lesser legacy of the African cultural past. Assuming that the cultures of the West African Fòn, Yorùbá, and Ashanti (as reconstructed in the “ethnographic present”) represented the extant “base line,” or starting point, of African-American cultural history, Herskovits’s “ethnohistorical” method, or “social laboratory,” posited that less acculturated African-American groups revealed the stages and intermediate forms through which African cultural traditions had been “transmuted” into their counterparts among more highly acculturated African-American groups, such as the blacks of the United States. Thus, as one such intermediate form, spirit possession in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé religion could be taken to demonstrate the African derivation of “shouting,” or the behavior of those “filled with the Holy Spirit,” in Black North American churches (Herskovits 1958[1941]:220–21). Dozens of scholars have usefully employed similar reasoning in the study of African-American cultural reproduction.⁵ The problem, however, is that Herskovits’s descriptions tend to represent the distinctive qualities of African-American cultures—with their enduring “deep-seated drives,” “bents,” “underlying patterns,” and tenacious “personality characteristics of the African”—as instinctual, giving little attention to their meaning in the eyes of the African-American actors or to the proximate mechanisms of their transmission from one generation to the next.

The eminent sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, who was African-American, sharply condemned Herskovits’s “Africanisms” thesis, generating one of the most central debates in African-American studies. While recognizing the complexity of West African religion and the “fusion of Christian beliefs and practices with African religious ideas . . . in the Candomblé in Brazil,” Frazier emphasizes the processes of capture, abuse, and surveillance whereby “the Negro was stripped of his social heritage,” *foremost* in the United States. In his view, Blacks in the United States retained nothing of African language, social organization, or religion. Frazier summarizes these developments as “The Break with the African

Background” (Frazier 1974[1964]: esp. 10, 15). In important ways, Frazier recapitulated the optimistic narrative of the North American “melting pot,” but he did not always restrict its implications to the North American case. He and Herskovits also clashed over the relevance of African polygyny in explaining the proclivity of Afro-Brazilian men to father children by multiple women (Frazier 1942, 1943; Herskovits 1943).

Twentieth-century scholarship on Afro-Brazilian religions is structured by a similar debate. Many Brazilian and non-Brazilian scholars have found Afro-Brazilian religions interesting insofar as they demonstrated continuity with their African past or proved the capacity of Africans and their descendants in the New World to “preserve” or “remember” African culture (e.g., Herskovits, 1958[1941]; Verger 1970[1957], 1981; Bastide 1978[1960]; Elbein dos Santos 1976; R. N. Rodrigues 1935[1900/1896], 1945[1905]; Ramos 1940[1934]; Pierson 1942; Landes 1947; Carneiro 1986[1948]).

For Bastide, the Candomblé and Xango religions are transplants from Africa whose Africanness owes something to the ongoing traffic between Africa and Brazil, but he adds that their survival in Brazil depended on the social role they have played in redressing urban anomie, joblessness, police persecution, and the absence of other forms of social leadership (Bastide 1978[1960]:171). His conclusion that African religion endures only insofar as it remains “communalistic” and escapes the effects of class and ethnic competition is quite the opposite of the conclusion that I reach here. However, his insightful argument that African culture endures in the Americas only insofar as it finds or creates a social “niche,” in which it can regularly be practiced by organized groups of people, foreshadows the widely cited work of Mintz and Price (1992[1976]). No longer could African culture in the Americas be conceived of merely as a set of “bents” that survive, as if atavistically, without the aid of enactment by living and embattled communities.

Mintz and Price (1992[1976]) have added to Herskovits’s legacy by grasping the importance of the social conditions and processes shaping the selective reproduction and transformation of African cultural dispositions in the Americas. For them, the enslavement of Africans and their arrival in any given American country with ethnically heterogeneous “crowds” of other Africans meant that the African slaves could collectively reinstitute not whole African cultures or concrete African practices but, at most, African “cognitive orientations.” Against Herskovits’s diffusionist hypothesis, Mintz and Price argued that the African origins of any given practice are less important than its role in an African-American community’s process of institution-building and its creation of social solidarity, autonomy from the white world, and meaning. Mintz

and Price argue that the processes by which African-American cultures took form and endured or changed over time must be studied within the specificity of particular American locales, rather than being inferred through speculative devices, such as Herskovits's "social laboratory."

However, Mintz and Price report several recurrent patterns in their comparative study of African-American cultures. First, both African culture and the cultural heterogeneity of American slave populations encouraged "additivity," or the tendency to borrow creatively from numerous cultural traditions rather than to preserve any particular cultural tradition exclusively or purely. Second, the stripping of status that resulted from enslavement encouraged individual expressiveness and the ever-changing creativity of African-American cultures. Third, local African-American cultural systems tended to form soon after the first arrivals from Africa. Thereafter, they remained highly resistant to change under the influence of arrivals from new African locales and of other exogenous events.

Mintz and Price posit that African-American cultures originated specifically in the "slave sector," that social space in which the white masters, who otherwise monopolized power, allowed the black slaves to act autonomously. By giving priority to the "slave sector" as the baseline of African-American culture and the source of enduring "collective memory" and by focusing on African-American creativity, Mintz and Price have inspired or foreshadowed a great deal of exciting scholarly work (e.g., S. Price and Price 1999; R. Price 1983, 1990; Dayan 1995; Gilroy 1993; Palmié 2002).

Though much inspired by Mintz and Price's socially contextualizing approach, Stephan Palmié (2002) shows that even in ethnically heterogeneous black Cuba, the names of Afro-Cuban religious denominations reflect enormous cultural debts to specific parts of Africa. However, Palmié supports Mintz and Price's aim to explain enduringly African names and practices within the more important context of their use within American sociocultural "systems." In Cuba, the religious practices identified with diverse African origins have taken on new and contrasting moral valences specific to their New World context. Yorùbá-identified Lucumí practices and West-Central African-identified Palo Mayombe draw their primary meaning not only from their respective African cultural precedents but from the moral contrasts between them as they are perceived in Cuba—that is, the *contrast* between, on the one hand, a morally laudable Lucumí ethos of "reciprocal interchange and divine initiative" and, on the other hand, an emically amoral or immoral logic of "wage labor and payment, dominance, and potential revolt" characterizing Cuban Congo practices (Palmié 2002:25). This defining contrast is American, not African.

A related Brazilian scholarly trend so emphasizes the constraints imposed by a white-dominated system that it credits contemporary local

Euro-American elites with the power to “invent tradition” in black Brazil. In this model, African-American cultural debts to Africa and agency in the construction of their own traditions are either marginalized or denied, and the power of Euro-Brazilian sponsors to reshape Afro-Brazilian religious practice in their own oppressive interest is emphasized (Motta 1994, 1992; Dantas 1982, 1988; D. D. Brown and Bick 1987; Wafer and Santana 1990; Frigerio 1983; Eco 1986:103–12).

Scholars who study African culture and seek to understand what it has to do with the cultural creativity of oppressed African Americans ignore these Brazilian lessons at their peril. However, these models of white elite domination provoke us to ask when and how people torn from their natal societies, stripped of their accustomed social statuses, cast in with heterogeneous crowds of other Africans, and culturally committed to individual expressiveness also *construct self-conscious traditions and canons*. And what has been the breadth of their freedom to do so in their own interests? In numerous cases, African-American groups have chosen to anchor themselves in nostalgic conceptions of and reconnaissance about Africa that are purist and, in effect, anti-“additive” in their logics. In particular, Mintz and Price’s choice to focus on the culture of rural enslaved people provokes us to ask how urban people, free people, and people with more cosmopolitan social connections are constrained and empowered by their social circumstances. African Americans have long been diverse in their statuses and socioeconomic circumstances. In sum, what social contexts and nonprimordially African “cognitive orientations” have motivated the purist and Africanizing trends that also appear in African-American cultures? Analytic models that represent African-American cultures as encompassed in and constrained by local Euro-American power structures (Mintz and Price 1992[1976]), as reactions against the failed promises of Western modernity (Gilroy 1993), or as locally specific antitheses of Western modernity (Palmié 2002) lay the groundwork for an answer to this question but leave open an important space for Africanists to enter the dialogue.

John Thornton (1992), while implicitly embracing Mintz and Price’s demand for the nonspeculative study of specific social contexts, reaches a different conclusion about the proper scope of that context. For Thornton, the Atlantic world and the commercial geographies that united specific supplying and receiving regions in the slave trade become the relevant sociopolitical context. With the benefit of greater historical documentation of this context, Thornton points out that the captives arriving in any given American locale were seldom as heterogeneous as Mintz and Price had imagined. Slaveholders in any given region and sphere of the economy often preferred one African “nation” over others, and, even where local slave populations were ethnically heterogeneous,

people of the same “nation” could often visit each other or join the same social organizations. Hence, Thornton argues that the endurance of African cultures in the Americas was much more widespread and powerful than Mintz and Price suggest.

However, there are points of agreement among these scholars as well. Along with Herskovits and Mintz and Price, Thornton embraces the view that sizable regions of Africa share sufficiently similar cultural principles or cognitive orientations that such principles have endured as a major element of African-American cultures. Like Mintz and Price, Thornton emphasizes the internal dynamism of African-American cultures, relating it to African logics of communion with the divine—that is, the ability of spirit mediums to convey unprecedented messages from the divine. This tradition of discontinuous “revelation” has shaped African-American religions and promoted their tendency to change continually.

However, I am less committed than Herskovits, Mintz and Price, or Thornton to the view that beliefs, cognitive orientations, and underlying logics are what objectively constitutes the Africanness of African-American cultures. Such Africanness is also constituted by a genealogy of interested claims and practices, available for selective invocation as precedents. The naturalization of these claims and practices is situational and impermanent. In other words, both the explicit, formal practices and the underlying logics of African and African-American cultures can, in my view, change vastly without making those cultures objectively un-African. Rather, African and African-American actors—along with the white scholars who study them, the white nationalists who appeal to their loyalty, and the white slaveholders and officials who oppress them—have regularly debated the meaning of Africanness, claimed and/or renounced it in ways that no African or African-American people has been able to escape. This debate has powerfully shaped the history of African culture around the Atlantic perimeter.

The slave plantation, identified by Mintz and Price as the foundation of African-American culture, is probably the most useful context in which to regard African-American cultures as locally bounded and internally integrated. This context is, no doubt, important, even for scholars who believe that Africa before the slave trade was an equally important foundation. The present study supplements these foundational logics with a third sort of contextualization. The ongoing 19th- to 21st-century dialogue among the massive urban black populations of the Atlantic perimeter has, to my mind, done as much to constitute the Africanity and the creativity of these populations as has any ancestral African or plantation culture. The social contexts of not only Candomblé but also Dahomean/Beninese Vodun, Cuban Ocha, West African and Cuban Ifá divination, Rastafarianism, North American jazz, and black

Protestantisms all over the Anglophone Americas (to name just a few famous instances of Afro-Atlantic “folk” culture) have always had important supralocal, interethnic and cross-class dimensions. In all these traditions, African-American practitioners borrowed from, studied, and communicated with Africa (and strategically manipulated Africa’s image) as they institutionalized their own African-American forms of solidarity and social hierarchy. An African-Americanist cultural history need not assume, even in the context of plantation slavery, that African Americans lacked a means of access to Africa. And they never lacked their own strategic priorities.

At stake in the Frazier-Herskovits debate is just such a strategic question. Were African Americans *dignified* by proof that their cultural legacy links them to a distant place with legitimate cultures of its own, or was evidence of African culture in the Americas also proof of African-Americans’ *inability* to learn the dominant culture? Is proof of the absence of African culture in the Americas proof that Africans and, therefore, African-Americans have no legitimate cultures of their own, or proof that African-Americans are just as American and, therefore, just as entitled to the rights of citizenship as are the descendants of European immigrants (see Jackson 1986)?

At stake in the Brazilian debate is a slightly different political issue. Who is empowered to define what is “African” in these religions, and who stands to benefit from any given definition thereof? A point typically missed in these debates is the role of African-American (including African-Brazilian) agency in creating these forms of cultural representation and self-representation. Something greater than “collective memory,” the endurance of African “logical principles,” white-dominated local contexts, or the passive reception of ideas from the “dominant” race or class has shaped black Atlantic religion—that is, a transnational, Afro-Atlantic dialogue. In the chapters to come, I detail the lives of the African-American travelers, scholars, writers, pilgrims, merchants, and priests who have, since the mid-19th century, profoundly shaped these “folk” religions, who have done so in defense of their own interests, and who, in doing so, have sagaciously interpreted forces far beyond any single country of origin or country of destination.

VISUAL PORTRAITS OF CANDOMBLÉ AND ITS ÒYÓ COUNTERPART

Contemporary Òyó religion and Bahian Candomblé clearly share many of the same West African precedents. Yet these contemporary forms differ in fascinating ways. *Sex and the Empire That Is No More* (1994; forthcoming a) details how a changing translocal political economy and

the strategic responses of West Africans have reshaped the forms and meanings of *òrìṣà* worship in the Ọ̀yọ́-ethnic town of Ìgbòhò. The present volume charts the historical transformation of Bahian Candomblé. Candomblé combines Ọ̀yọ́ precedents with European, Native American, and African precedents from places other than Ọ̀yọ́. No less important, Afro-Brazilians have invented forms and logics of worship all their own. And all these dimensions of cultural reproduction have been constrained and motivated by the political economy of Brazil and of the broader black Atlantic.

The following visual portraits lay the groundwork for recognizing what is useful about these already well-trodden theoretical paths and extends the path toward the more controversial argument of this book: the political economy, iconographic vocabulary, and interpretive discourses that Candomblé has produced and been produced by have never been Brazilian alone, African alone, or Brazilian and African alone. They have always been radically transnational and, particularly, circum-Atlantic, even in the middle of the 19th century.

This case calls for us not to overlook what once seemed clear enough to explain in terms of African “survivals,” “retentions,” “deep-seated drives,” “cognitive orientations,” and “logical principles,” or in terms of African-American “reinterpretations,” “syncretism,” “collective memories,” and “creolization.” Rather, mine is a call to recognize the more encompassing geographical frames, political hierarchies, and networks of long-distance communication that have long made it impossible for cultures to reproduce themselves within the closure of a bounded, self-defining set of social relationships and meanings. Within such a frame, the involuntarism of cultural “survivals” and “cognitive orientations” often gives way to the *strategic* assertion of Africanness in a trans-Atlantic commercial, cultural, and political arena.

Let me offer a few vivid illustrations of the similarities and differences between Brazilian Candomblé and *ẹ̀sìn ibílẹ̀*, or “traditional religion,” in a rural Ọ̀yọ́-ethnic town in West Africa. Figures 1 through 4 represent a present-day religion of spirit possession, blood sacrifice, divination, and healing in the Nigerian town of Ìgbòhò, which lies in the historic heartland of the Ọ̀yọ́ kingdom and ethnic group. At the end of the 16th century, on the eve of Ọ̀yọ́’s growth into the largest royal empire in the precolonial past of the Yorùbá, Ìgbòhò had been the capital of the Ọ̀yọ́ kingdom. Elevated atop earthenware pots, the two calabashes on the altar in figure 1 contain the river stones and shells that represent the river goddess Yemoja. Next to them sits an earthenware pot containing the thunderstones of her son Ẓàngó, god of thunder and lightning. Priestesses present food offerings and the blood of sacrificial chickens to these vessels to strengthen the gods and guarantee protection for the devotees.



Figure 1. The shrine of the goddess Yemoja in an Òyó-Yorùbá palace. The two calabashes contain the sacred emblems of the goddess, while the stones in the neighboring pot (right foreground) are consecrated to Šàngó. Photograph by the author (1988).

Priestesses use kola nuts and, during the New Yam Festival, quartered yam tips to divine whether the goddess is satisfied with the offerings and with the conduct of her devotees. Similar calabashes, earthenware pots, and wooden vessels containing stones and sacred emblems represent other gods—like the river goddess Òsun, the lord of gestation Ọbàtálá, and the farming god Òriṣà Oko—on Òyó altars.

Most possession priests in Ìgbòho and elsewhere in Yorùbáland are women; male possession priests wear hairstyles, jewelry, cosmetics, and clothing that suggest they are like women, in that they are “wives of the god” (Matory 1994b). Whereas newly initiated possession priests of Šàngó, like the one in figure 2, wear women’s blouses, wrap skirts, baby slings, jewelry, and cosmetics, senior Šàngó possession priests like the one posing in figure 3, my friend Adeniran, braid their hair like women and, during festivals, wear skirts of embroidered or appliquéd panels called *wàbì*. Figure 4 shows the Šàngó of a priest named Ogundiran parading in classic *wàbì* during the festival. In figure 3, by contrast, Adeniran models *wàbì* of modern, machine-embroidered velvet.

Counterparts of Šàngó and Yemoja are the most widely and publicly worshiped “African” gods in Brazil. Yet certain features of the West African mythology of these West African gods would surprise Brazilians,



Figure 2. A recent initiate, or “bride” (*iyawó*), of the Ẓàngó. He wears the blouse (*bùbá*), wrap skirt (*iró*), and baby sling (*òjá*) of a Yorùbá wife. Photograph by the author (1988).

who tend to see “purity” as a primordial feature of Yorùbá religion. For example, West African priests describe both of these gods as Nupe (a non-Yorùbá people) or as children of local non-Yorùbá Bariba dynasties’ intermarriage with Nupe women. Indeed, the mythology and panegyrics of the *òrìṣà*, or gods (pronounced OH-REE-SHAH), report



Figure 3. The rear view of Ẓàngó possession priest Adeniran wearing the *wàbì* skirt. Note also his braided hair. Photograph by the author (1995).

the gods' northern or Near Eastern origins. Ẓàngó himself is said to be a light-skinned Muslim, albeit an iconoclastic one. The savanna region in which Ìgbòho is located has had a significant Muslim and/or Arab population since the 16th century, to which the iconography of Ẓàngó



Figure 4. Computer-digitized video image of Şàngó during a festival in Ìgbòhò. Video by the author (1988).

worship and even of the famous Yorùbá Ifá divination system appear to owe a great deal. Hence, much that is classified as “traditional” (*ibílẹ̀*) in Yorùbá life is also highly cosmopolitan in its intentional referents and its historically discoverable sources (Matory 1994a).

The oldest, largest, and wealthiest Bahian Candomblé houses tend to identify themselves as members of the Quêto, or Nagô, nation. Nowadays, the West African cognates of “Quêto”—“Kétou” or “Kétu”—refer to a specific Yorùbá-speaking town in the People’s Republic of Bénin and to a kingdom that cuts across the border of Nigeria and the People’s Republic of Bénin. The West African cognates of “Nagô”—“Nagôt,” “Nagô,” or “Ànàgò”—refer either to a specific Beninese Yorùbá group or, in Beninese parlance, to the Yorùbá speakers as a whole. In Brazil, too, both “Quêto” and “Nagô” have come to be equated consciously with the inclusive Yorùbá ethnic group. Cubans identify the same inclusive Yorùbá group, including its Latin American diaspora, as “Lucumí.”

Figures 5 and 6 depict important buildings on the grounds, or *roça*, of a Brazilian Candomblé house called Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá. The building in figure 5 is dedicated to the Brazilian counterpart of Şàngó, called “Xangô,” and is named in honor of Àfònjá, who, having been a historically important Ọ̀yọ́ royal, is in Brazil regarded as an avatar (*marca*) of Xangô.



Figure 5. Side view of the Xangô house at the Bahian Candomblé temple Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá. Photograph by the author (1987).

Indeed, Johnson identifies Àfònjá as the Ọ̀yọ́ royal military chief whose greed to wear the crown resulted in the collapse of the Ọ̀yọ́ Empire and the departure of hundreds of thousands of Ọ̀yọ́ people for the Americas (Johnson 1921:188–90).

Among Brazilian temples, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá is said to be the most African or most “traditional”; for the same reason, it is the most respected and envied. Like other Candomblé houses of the Quêto/Nagô nation, Opô Afonjá worships gods generically called *orixás* (oh-ree-SHY-eesh) after the Yorùbá term *òrìṣà*, which are also identified individually by names thoroughly recognizable to any contemporary West African Yorùbá person. Among them are not only the thunder god Xangô (cf. “Şàngó”) and the sea goddess Iemanjá (cf. “Yemoja,” a river goddess in Yorùbáland) but also the lord of pestilence Omolú (cf. “Ọ̀mọ̀lúáyé,” a West African praise name for Şonponnon), the hunter god Oxossi (cf. “Ọ̀ṣọ̀ṣì”), and the god of iron Ogum (cf. “Ọ̀gún”). Brazilian priests “seat” (*assentam*) these gods in ceramic, wooden, or calabash vessels containing herbally treated and blood-fed stones and shells, much as West African priests do in Ìgbòhò and other Yorùbá towns.

Though most Brazilian houses identify the Catholic saints to one degree or another with the African gods, the head priestess of Opô Afonjá, Mãe



Figure 6. The *barracão*, or festival hall, of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá.

Stella, is famous for her public denial that the Catholic saints have any legitimate role in Candomblé. She also denies that the Brazilian Indian spirits called *caboclos* (kah-BOH-kloosh) have any place in her house. In figure 7, she is seen on the occasion of her most widely cited pronouncements against “syncretism,” at the Third International Congress of Orisha Tradition and Culture in New York City (Azevedo 1986). At the far left of the photo stands my dear friend Gracinha of Oxum. A further index of Opô Afonjá’s “African purity,” by Bahian standards, is that the head priestess forbids the filming of sacred festivals (*festas*) in the house. Thus I had to find other houses that would allow me to film a festival. More anon.

In Bahia, the dying Jeje nation (whose worship of the *vodum* (voh-DOOⁿ) gods identifies it with the Ewè, Gèn, Ajá, and Fòn speakers neighboring Yorùbáland) is closely associated with the Quêto/Nagô nation. The ritual protocols, songs, and ritual language of the Jeje and Quêto/Nagô nations are so profoundly indebted to each other that local ethnographers describe them as one “Jeje-Nagô” ritual complex (e.g., Costa Lima 1977). There are only a few Jeje houses in Salvador, and even the most respected among them lack the size, name recognition, and national influence of the



Figure 7. Mãe Stella of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá at a conference of *orisha* priests in New York City. Photography by the author (1986).

so-called great Quêto/Nagô houses. Ironically, insofar as the Jeje temples remain “purely African” (which also entails the idea of their resisting assimilation to more populous nations), they also guarantee the eventual death of their own nation. Distinctively Jeje songs are said to be so obscure and complex that normal audiences cannot answer them in the way that proper worship for the gods and a lively festival atmosphere require. Thus, Jeje houses tend to perform large numbers of the highly recognizable songs of the popular Quêto/Nagô nation, thus progressively renouncing their distinctness from the larger Quêto/Nagô nation.

The third major nation in contemporary Bahia is Angola, which has largely absorbed the Congo nation. It claims origins among West-Central African Bantu speakers, who outnumbered West Africans among the captives taken to Brazil in general but were far outnumbered in the state of Bahia by captives from the West African Bight of Benin (Eltis and Richardson 1995:31; see also Curtin 1969; Verger 1976[1968]). Houses of the Quêto/Nagô nation are widely recognized as “more African” and more worthy of respect than are the Congo-Angola houses.

Therefore, even soi-disant Angola houses regularly imitate Nagô ritual practices and must, in order to make themselves understood by the general public, define the *inquice* (cf. the KiKongo *nkisi*, meaning “god” or repository of power) as counterparts of one or another Nagô *orixá* (see, e.g., Paixão 1940). Insofar as it performs its songs and key rituals according to standards regarded as faithful to “Angolan,” or supposedly West-Central African, prototypes, even an Angola house might be recognized as “purely African.” But virtually all the sacred songs of the Angola repertoire are full of Portuguese phrases. Hence, it is precisely the houses that are least preoccupied with “African purity” that are most likely to call themselves “Angola” and to allow filming. Plenty of smaller and geographically marginal but, by local standards, well-administered and ritually orderly houses allow filming, but upward mobility in the world of the “great houses” (*grandes casas*) with name recognition and high-bourgeois clientele tends to involve prohibitions against filming and culminate in decampment from the Angola to the Quêto/Nagô nation.

Figure 8 is a computer-digitized image of a festival for Xangô’s wife—the goddess of wind and storm, Iansã—in the small but elegant and



Figure 8. The goddesses Oxum (left) and Iansã (right) dancing at a festival in Mãe Bebê’s house. Note their billowy skirts and the hybrid style of their crowns. Video by the author (1987).



Figure 9. Recent initiate of Xangô prostrating himself to salute the officiating priest at Ilê Axé Babá Oyá Togina. Itaparica, Bahia, Brazil. Photograph by Christopher J. Dunn (1988).

prosperous house of Mãe Bebê. Though of the Angola nation, her house is clearly well developed in Nagô ritual forms. Its practice of initiating men and allowing me to film a festival violate some local people's definitions of "African purity." However, the highly respected and purist Jeje priest who accompanied me to this festival—my friend Pai Francisco—praised the beauty of the costumes and the orderliness of the ceremony (and praise of other people's houses in the Candomblé does not come cheap!). The main distinctions between this festival and those of the same goddess in the Jeje-Nagô complex were the drum rhythms and the language in which the songs of praise were sung. Visually, however, this festival differed little from its Brazilian Quêto counterparts.

In figure 9, we witness a form of self-prostration now used by juniors to salute their priestly seniors in every nation of the Candomblé. Such salutes clearly share a prototype with similar contemporary West African Yorùbá gestures, but the relationships in which they are enacted transform the conceptions of age hierarchy and gender identity expressed in the West African gestures. That is, first, the most explicit rule about prostration and its abbreviated forms among the West African Yorùbá is that it expresses greeting and respect for the prostrator's seniors in birth age. Besides gods and kings, only people near one's parents



Figure 10. The goddess Oxum dancing at the Ilê Axé Babá Omi Guiã temple. Itaparica, Bahia, Brazil. Photograph by Christopher J. Dunn (1988).

age or older deserve such salutations. In Brazil, on the other hand, the people who merit it, besides gods and the highest-ranking priests of one's house, are one's seniors in *initiatic* age—that is, those who, regardless of birth age, were initiated earlier than the prostrator. It is reasoned that such initiatic elders are more developed in their connection to divinity—that they have more *axé*, a concept I shall explain in chapter 3. The second difference between the West African and the Brazilian forms is that the gesture of obeisance by a West African Yorùbá *male* is prostration flat out on the floor (*ìdòbálé*); by a *female* it is either kneeling (*ìkúnlẹ̀*) or lying first on one side and then on the other (*ìyíkàá*). In the Candomblé, by contrast, the male or female devotee of a *goddess* salutes superiors by lying first on the right side and then on the left (similar to the *ìyíkàá*), and then touching the forehead on the ground; the male or female devotee of a *male god* performs a flat-out prostration (similar to *ìdòbálẹ̀*) and then touches his or her forehead to the ground.

Conventions of ritual salutation in Ocha (or the Lucumí nation of Cuban “Santería” and its diaspora) are virtually identical to those in Candomblé. Moreover, these conventions in Cuban Ocha and Candomblé are different in identical ways from the cognate West African practice. These are among the many similarities between Cuba and Brazil that lead me to believe that communication among Lagos, Brazil, and Cuba has significantly shaped New World ritual practice in ways

from which the Ọ̀yọ́ interior of Yorùbáland was largely exempted, due to its distance from the commercial networks that continuously united Lagos, Brazil, and Cuba.

Comparing figures 2 and 3 with figures 8 and 10, the reader should note the distinctive Brazilian sartorial iconography of godliness. Brazilians explicitly identify their gods as ancient African royals and aristocrats, but their sense of how ancient royals and aristocrats dress is conditioned by a synthetic knowledge of European, Euro-Brazilian, and African historical images (see also D. H. Brown 1989 on Cuban Ocha; Omari 1984 on Candomblé). As is evident in figures 8 and 10, the crowns of the wind-and-storm goddess Iansã and of the sweet-water goddess Oxum combine the tiara shape of European crowns with the beaded veil of Yorùbá royal crowns. The Brazilian gods wear the billowy skirts and starched slips fashionable among the 18th- and 19th-century wives and *mulata* mistresses of wealthy Bahian slaveowners (Omari 1984:33). White versions of these skirts are nowadays worn not only by Candomblé priestesses at the start of a festival but also by the street vendors of ethnically marked food (*comida típica*), known as *baianas*, and by a group of female dancers, known by the same name, who must appear in the procession of every Carnaval club in Rio and São Paulo. In this and many other ways to be detailed in chapter 4 Candomblé and its iconography have entered the heart of the nation-state's logic of race and national identity.

The representation of priests and devotees as wives to mighty, divine husbands and the representation of the sacred in images of the antique are both characteristically West African and European religious practices. However, the 19th-century-inspired attire of Candomblé priestesses reflects specifically Brazilian images of wifeliness and antiquity. On the other hand, the use of billowy skirts to represent the “wives” and “mounts” of the gods is also evident in the dress of senior West African priests of the *òrìṣà* (again see figures 3 and 4) and of the *vodun*. Following sociolinguistic studies of creole languages, the art historian David H. Brown has described such convergences among aesthetic idioms as “remodeling” and “relexification” (see D. H. Brown 1989; Reisman 1970). Hence, Euro-Brazilian forms have been employed in the expression of African ritual and aesthetic logics.

Equally central to the argument of this book, however, is the possibility that some West African forms derive from the “remodeling” and “relexification” of Brazilian ritual and aesthetic logics. In the 1990s, the anthropologist Luis Nicolau collected lengthy video footage of senior Beninese Fòn possession priests wearing billowy skirts that strongly resemble the *saietas*, or short skirts, worn by many male Candomblé possession priests in Rio and in some Bahian houses. Prototypes of this Beninese Fòn skirt may have influenced Brazilian priests' adoption of the

baiana skirt as a representation of divinity. Nicolau showed me this footage and explained its use to me on 14 December 1995. Judy Rosenthal, an insightful student of the Togolese *gorovodu* priesthood, which originated during the colonial period, tells me that the possessed priests of several of these gods—Bangre, Nana Ablewa, and Kunde—also wear billowy skirts that extend to the ankle (Judy Rosenthal, personal communication, 1 May 1996). Such *gorovodu* skirts might also share West African prototypes with those of Candomblé and Beninese Fòn possession priests. Yet, another possibility is worth considering—that African-Brazilian returnees and travelers to the West African coast *introduced* the new sartorial images of divinity that subsequently entered Beninese *vodun* and *gorovodu* iconography in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The nemesis of the “Nagô purists” in Bahia, since at least the 1930s, is exemplified in figure 11. This is a *caboclo* spirit—Pena Branca (White Feather)—manifest in Dona Maura during one of her monthly or sometimes weekly “sessions” (*sessões* or *giros*). The *caboclos* are typically regarded as the spirits of Brazilian Indian chiefs who lived in the distant past, but the term *caboclo* literally refers to persons combining Indian with non-Indian (and usually *European*) ancestry. However, the



Figure 11. A *caboclo* Indian spirit in the small Bahian temple of Dona Maura, inducing possession in an uninitiated client of the house. Video by the author (1992).

category of spirits so named in Candomblé includes an ethnic array ranging from Tupi Indians to mixed-race cowboys, Turks, and Gypsies. Though defiant in her public celebration of her *caboclo*, Dona Maura makes her house no exception to the pattern of *anagonização* (anagonization)—or the juggernaut expansion of Nagô influence—that we have already seen in the prevalence of Nagô ritual forms and mythical references in the Angola and Jeje nations. Dona Maura classifies her house as Quêto, and even her *caboclo* asked me to bring the priestess an entire outfit of the costly Yorùbá woven cloth—“cloth from the Coast”—when I returned from my next trip to Africa. In Brazil, “cloth from the Coast” is conventionally the preserve of senior priestesses (*ebomins*) of the Quêto nation, and such cloth is worn only around the waist. I gladly complied with Pena Branca’s request.

As they grow in size and/or seek recognition in the world of the “great” Quêto houses, upwardly mobile Candomblé houses tend to decrease sharply the public attention they devote to their *caboclos*. For one, *caboclos* lack the authority of being “African” or “traditional” and therefore respectable according to the definitions of the ranking Quêto houses, the newspapers, the tourist agencies, and the public authorities that in recent years have periodically funded temple renovations. But, more important in the life of the average Candomblé house, the *caboclos* represent the kind of charismatic leadership that is useful in the hiving off, founding, and early expansion of a house. On the other hand, such independent leadership is threatening to the routinized and institutionalized authority of the senior priests in a well-established house or centralized family of houses.

In Bahia, the difference between *caboclo* Indian spirits and the African *orixás* is summed up in the dictum that “*caboclos* have no mother or father,” which quality is nearly sacrilegious in those houses where the ranking authorities are themselves addressed as “Mother” (Mãe) and “Father” (Pai). The ranking authorities are “mothers” and “fathers” in the sense that they have given birth ritually to their followers through the act of initiation, which then confers upon them absolute authority over their “children” (*filhos*). Hence, the initiates of a priest are called his or her “children-in-saint” (*filhos-de-santo*), and the initiating priest is called their “mother-in-saint” (*mãe-de-santo*) or “father-in-saint” (*pai-de-santo*). Like only some *orixás*, *caboclos* start possessing their mediums spontaneously. Yet *orixás* expect their mediums eventually to be initiated at the hands of a “mother-” or “father-in-saint.” *Orixás* will severely punish a medium or a called person who delays initiation for too long. On the other hand, the mediums of *caboclos* require no initiations at all. They dare to open up a house and practice their profitable healing craft without authorization by anyone. Unlike

orixás, *caboclos* require no training to dance properly or to speak the sacred words of their craft. The language in their land of origin is but a modified “backwoods Portuguese” (Wafer 1991:65–68).

Orixá festivals are full of gestures of obeisance and gestural indications of rank. Whereas the *orixás* typically *follow* the directions of the drums and of the senior priests, looking lost and on the verge of keeling over when the drums stop, the *caboclos* obey no one. They run the show. Thus, without the elaborate paraphernalia and costly drum ensembles characteristic of *orixá* festivals, *caboclos* can host sessions every week and draw the same loyal and ever-expanding crowds. *Orixás* are infinitely more costly to feed, dress, and celebrate. Their worship relies not only on interclass patronage but also on an elaborate commerce that is coextensive with the typical professional engagements of the “Africans” in the Bahia of the 1930s—butchery, the vending of “African” food and herbal medicine, dressmaking, laundering, and the importation of commodities (such as palm oil and kola nuts) from Africa. Candomblé relied on and subsidized the personal fortunes of many an “African” merchant and craftsman during the century culminating in the 1930s.

In a move recalling the apologetics of the Lagosian tract writers of the 1890s, Mãe Aninha told a visiting anthropologist in the late 1930s that her religion was much like Old Testament religion, that it was a more authentic form of Christianity on the grounds that Candomblé-members “worship nature” rather than the human-made images used in Roman Catholicism (Pierson 1942:294). Decades later, sympathetic outsiders and insider spokespeople have expanded and centralized this message, summarizing Candomblé and its African antecedents as “the worship of nature,” which, to my mind, is more or less like describing Christianity as “the worship of the sky,” since, after all, the Christian high god and his son are said to reside there.⁶ Such summations delete or contradict much of the content of these religions, despite their selective truthfulness. Though many of the chief gods of the Candomblé are associated with rivers, the ocean, lightning, the rainbow, or the wind, for example, some equally important gods are associated chiefly with very human, social, or technological phenomena, such as war, revolution, and iron, the hunt, or medicine. And *all* the gods are simultaneously represented as royals and nobles of the most civilized kind. They are arrayed in the crowns, swords, jewels, money, and sumptuous clothing associated with their aristocratic and cultured social class. These gods are also all associated with human “nature” (also *natureza* in Portuguese)—that is, the diverse personality and somatic types with which each person has been born.

The summation that Candomblé is the “worship of nature,” however, most effectively evokes environmentalist sympathy and the Western

Enlightenment logic that “savages,” “primitives,” and lower-income Westerners are close to “nature” in their often admirable and sometimes abhorrent ways. This is not to deny that Candomblé is the “worship of nature”; the phrase has been repeated so often in and around the Candomblé that it is part of the emic reality. I am saying, however, that this gloss is too specifically ideological a claim to suffice as an analytic or ethnographic description.

A more comprehensive summation of Candomblé’s rituals and motifs cannot fail to mention its themes of spirit possession, animal sacrifice and food offerings, cowry-shell divination, herbal medicine, and metaphysical healing. Underlying these operations is a repeated logic of purification—of removing impurities and heat from the body (and simultaneously from the ritual vessels that metaphorically represent the body), and of inserting or developing contents that associate the person more purely with the gods, with the temple, with the family of temples that ensures its legitimacy, and, ultimately, with its diasporic African “nation.” Food and sexuality are the major idioms in which the purity of the person and of the sacred lineage, or *axé*, is dramatized.

My point is not to disprove that many ritual forms and underlying ritual logics have “survived” the trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery itself. Rather, it is to prove that central features of local linguistic and ritual practice, as well as the meanings and motives that believers invest in them, resulted from a long-distance dialogue with colonial Africa and with other American locales, much of which took place after both the slave trade and slavery had ended.

This book is dedicated to Pai Francisco Agnaldo Santos of Bahia, Brazil—high priest, or *doté*, of the Jeje nation. He has been my friend and mentor since we met in August 1987 and is likely to be blamed for any possible error or indiscretion appearing in the following pages. It is therefore important to point out that my sources of information have been numerous. My interpretation of Candomblé is not Pai Francisco’s. I have done my best to follow my sincerest understanding of what my friends and teachers thought should be kept secret. However, it has been my scholarly obligation to comment on some such matters that have already been published by others. I am moved by matters far more important than formality to assure the reader that any errors and indiscretions here are my own, and that Pai Francisco is chiefly responsible for whatever virtue lies between these covers.

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REVISING THE HISTORY OF BLACK ATLANTIC RELIGION AND CULTURE: ON THE CHAPTERS THAT FOLLOW

So how would a culture and an ethnography of it look if we recognized the long history of transnationalism that has shaped them? This book is offered as both a theoretical proposal and an empirical illustration. It is an effort to understand one Afro-Brazilian religion—Candomblé—both ethnographically and historically amid the transnational flows of goods, people, and ideas that it has shaped and by which it has been shaped. Archaeologists have long studied the role of river basins in the genesis of civilizations, such as Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China. Other sorts of navigable open space serve better to explain the cultural and political might of Greek, Roman, Sahelian, Anglo-Saxon, Swahili, and Yorùbá civilizations. Thus, I situate Candomblé in a supralocal geographical context that is more familiar to historians than to anthropologists, a

sort of context that I call “circum-oceanic” or “circum-desert” fields. Like the Indian Ocean and the great Afro-Asiatic desert at the center of the Islamic world, the Atlantic has for centuries been the focus of enormous flows that cross it and of a veritably global array of tributary flows beyond it.

Though these flows have hardly been an exchange among equals, I am anxious to refute what I take to be two reasons for which enslaved Africans and their descendants are so often overlooked in current theorizing about transnationalism. First, it has been easy for theorists impressed by the post–World War II flood of Africans, Asians, Caribbeans, and Latin Americans into Europe and the United States to forget that flows among Africa, Asia, and Latin America are centuries old and, in many cases, momentous. We must not ignore South-South transnationalism. Second, Africans and their descendants were neither passive nor marginal to the processes by which the territorial nations were “imagined” into being (Anderson 1991[1983]). Nor, as ambivalent participants in these normally racist natural processes, did Africans submit their imaginations entirely to the images of community propagated by nation-states.

The historical ethnography that follows describes the multiple “imagined communities” that overlap among the devotees of the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé religion, the textual forms in which they are articulated, the commercial forms that make different imaginations of community profitable to different degrees, and the ritual forms through which they are embodied. Like many of my informants and their friends, I have, for decades now, experienced this circum-Atlantic field through written and oral history, newspapers, ritual, and travel. These have been important media of collective life in Candomblé in ways that are here documented from the first half of the 19th century. And they continue to provide the idioms in which life is locally negotiated in that religion. At this locus classicus of African diaspora scholarship, I hope to demonstrate, then, that what has long been seen as the most conspicuous passive “survivals” of African culture in the Americas or as instinctual African “bents” are in fact products of ongoing human agency in a circum-Atlantic field, the overall form of which I call the “Afro-Atlantic dialogue.”

The evidence of this dialogue lies not only in the passport records of multiple nations and empires but also in the preeminent print media of national consciousness—the newspapers. Alongside these sources, multiple generations of ethnography and nationalist folklore studies of the Nigeria, Brazil, the Bénin Republic, Cuba, and the United States are used here to reveal that the peoples of the black Atlantic never simply embraced nation-states as sufficient indices of their collective identities. Nor did they suddenly find liberation from them amid a thirty-year-old

transnationalism. Rather, they have always made strategic and situational choices about the long-distance and territorial communities in terms of which they imagined themselves.

Overall, the chapters that follow are organized to proceed from the mid-19th century to the early 21st, from the historical to the ethnographic to the biographical, and from macroscopic patterns to the personal experiences of the interlocutors I met in this translocal dialogue. The discursive styles of these chapters will necessarily change apace.

Chapter 1 explains the trans-Atlantic genesis of the allied peoples known as Yorùbá in West Africa, Nagô in Brazil, and Lucumí in Cuba, as well as the role of literacy—and of the African cultural nationalism known as the “Lagosian Cultural Renaissance”—in making them the most prestigious of Afro-Atlantic nations. Diasporas, I argue, are regularly responsible for creating the cultures and communities that they call their homelands. This chapter explores the ongoing function of self-conscious “purity” in a world that students of the postcolonial have seen as dominated by the “hybrid” and the “creole.” I will argue that the tension between these idioms of collective identity is structural to social life in a transnational context.

Chapter 2 tacks between two genres: straight historical investigation and theoretical debate. Hence, on the one hand, this chapter reconstructs the historical origins of the mysterious Jeje nation in Bahia, which had not been known in West Africa until after the end of the slave trade. I examine the role of the rivalry between French and British imperialists in the brief success of this identity on the West African “Coast,” as well as the apparent role of trans-Atlantic black merchants in resurrecting and reforming a dying nation in the Bahia of the 1920s and 1930s. On the other hand, this chapter confronts the juggernaut conviction in today’s academy that transnationalism is qualitatively and entirely new. This chapter both critiques that claim and, by actually setting it alongside a detailed historical analysis of the past, dramatizes what is systematically missing from the conventional wisdom.

Chapter 3 explains how the themes of African racial and cultural “purity” propagated by the literati of the 19th-century Lagosian Cultural Renaissance and by the trans-Atlantic merchants of the early 20th century are now embodied in Bahian lives through Candomblé ritual practice.

Chapter 4 explores the subnational politics of Regionalism that have motivated the Brazilian nation-state’s embrace of Candomblé, and particularly of its most transnational forms, as symbols of the Brazilian nation in the sphere of international public opinion.

Chapter 5 argues that “matriarchy” in Candomblé arose not from “African tradition,” as is usually supposed, but from the Margaret Mead-like rhetorical strategies of transnational feminist Ruth Landes

and from the international embarrassment of Brazilian nationalist culture brokers over Landes's revelation of the local view that most of the male priests were "passive homosexuals." This chapter illustrates how the propagation and protection of such open secrets define the communal boundaries and hierarchies of overlapping imagined communities—including those of the territorial nation, transnational feminism, and the new Nigerian Yorùbá diaspora in the United States.

Rather than relegating the autobiographical sources of my perspective to the introduction, I have chosen to place them where they belong in the chronological order of this cultural history—at the end. However, my birth, my institutional involvements, my profession, and my translocal friendships are the backdrop, the main proof, and the conclusion of the story I tell about a centuries-old black transnationalism. Chapter 6 could therefore be read first or last among the six main chapters. It might be read as a deeply personal narrative of events that led me to reanalyze translocal history as I do, or it might be read as a dense and ultimate illustration of the thematic points made in each of the previous chapters. Chapter 6 reveals, then, how Candomblé's ritual idioms, the towering prestige of the highly literate Nagô/Yorùbá nation, various old and new transnational flows, Brazilian Regionalism, and the progressive feminization of Candomblé's leadership since the time of Landes's intervention have defined the imaginary and material possibilities in two lives—my own and Pai Francisco's.

I conclude the book with chapter 7, which argues for the utility of circum-oceanic or circum-desert "dialogue" as an analytic metaphor, illuminating a whole range of historically important transnationalisms and translocalisms that have been overlooked in the cultural history of the African diaspora, in the ethnography of every world region, and in the theory of globalization generally.