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# Visualizing the sacred:

## Video technology, “televisual” style, and the religious imagination in Bahian candomblé

### ABSTRACT

Candomblé is an Afro-Brazilian spirit-possession cult, whose splendid performance of “African tradition” and “secrecy” has long prohibited the reproduction of religious activity by modern media technology. Authoritative voices within candomblé have explicitly stated that modern media technology is incongruous with authentic traditional religion, claiming that the body in ritual action is (and should remain) the only medium through which an understanding of the sacred can be reached. Nonetheless, more and more cult adepts seek to portray their religious life through video technology, challenging priestly as well as anthropological discourses on the cult. A discussion of some of the very first video productions made by and for the candomblé community reveals that community members are modern media consumers, taught by TV what is aesthetically desirable and stylistically correct and keen to upgrade the importance of a religious event by “making it look like TV.” My analysis reveals just how much TV has become an authenticating and authorizing agent in the religious field: Endowed with the power to make spirit worship part of the contemporary media society that is Brazil (rather than locate that worship in an imagined “Africa”) and allowing the significance of embodied “deep knowledge” to be articulated in a style that is universally understood and appreciated by media consumers, TV is nothing less than constitutive of the very values people attribute to their religious experiences. [*Bahia, candomblé, media, video, authenticity, style, religion*]

TV images come at us so fast, in such profusion, they engulf us, tattoo us. We're immersed. It's like skin diving. We're surrounded & whatever surrounds, involves. TV doesn't just wash over us & then “go out of mind.” It goes into mind, deep into mind.

—Edmund Carpenter, *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!*

One of my favorite examples of how new media technologies impinge on the religious imagination is the observation that the sophisticated special effects of contemporary cinema have forever changed the religious notion of the “miracle.” With all the computer-animated scenes that viewers have watched in the movies—people flying, people running around invisible, people losing limbs then putting them back on to continue walking, people transmuting into whatever life form one can think of—a miracle can only be imagined as something like a special effect (de Vries 2001:19ff.). This is, indeed, how some of my informants in the Bahian capital, Salvador (Brazil), sought to communicate the miraculous apparitions they had seen. “It was exactly as in *Ghosts*,” one woman told me about her encounter with a spirit called “Maria Padilha” (she was referring to a Hollywood production that is available in all the local video stores, possibly *13 Ghosts* [Beck 2001]). “She appeared and faded away!”<sup>1</sup>

Brazil offers many more examples of how the religious imagination has become entangled with the expressive and communicative possibilities of new media technologies. In her study on Charismatic Catholics in São Paulo, Maria José de Abreu (2005) reports that, at mass gatherings, Charismatic priests instruct believers to be like “antennas” to receive the Holy Spirit, and believers have learned to embody this idea, as they raise their hands high up in the air and report “electric tinglings” in their fingertips. TV pastors from neo-Pentecostal churches argue that, at times of communal prayer and worship, their temples emanate “vital fluids” (*fluidos vitais*) that may be picked up by radio and TV receivers. They therefore urge their viewers to

put a glass of water on the TV set during live broadcasts of prayer meetings to be a receptacle for the Holy Spirit, which infuses the water with curative power (Campos 1999).<sup>2</sup>

I am well aware that what makes these examples appealing is their simultaneous evocation and negation of a grand scheme of things in which the realms of religion and media are taken to be incompatible. The appearance of Hollywood's *Ghosts* and Bahian spirits in a single reality frame produces a pleasurable "grinding" sensation of inappropriateness, similar to the shock effect that surrealist artists sought to produce in their collages, in which they forced incongruous things "into jarring proximity" (Clifford 1988:146). Yet the greater shock to note here is that a rhetorical move that brings into play a supposed incongruity of religion and media still takes effect. For, if media images are all around, "washing over us" and "going into mind, deep into mind," as Edmund Carpenter (1972:62) put it, there is no reason to think that the religious imagination would not be affected by this tidal wave. In a place like Brazil, with its huge media industry, its high rates of media consumption, and a social imaginary that is imbued with media images, styles, and aesthetics (see Hamburger 1998; Mattos 2000), the entanglement of religious and media imaginaries is to be expected—and, indeed, is found, as an emerging literature has indicated (Birman and Lehmann 1999; Carvalho 1994; Montes 1998; Oosterbaan 2003; Segato 1994).

If anthropologists want to understand what is becoming of religion in the age of mass media, the challenge before us is to move beyond the idea that modern mass media are alien bodies (*Fremdkörper*) in the realm of religion. Recent debates have stressed that religion has always depended on practices of mediation in its attempts to render present the transcendental realm to which it refers. In other words, media are constitutive of the religious imagination. Instead of studying the relation between religion and media, scholars would do better to study religion as a practice of mediation (de Vries 2001; Meyer 2004; Plate 2004; Stolorow 2005). This perspective helps one reframe questions about religious change in productive ways: Rather than think about the arrival of new media in the realm of religion as a uniquely modern development, as an encroachment of modernity in the realm of tradition, or as the "colonization of religious consciousness," to paraphrase John Comaroff (1989), one might (alternatively and complementarily) think about it as the opening up of a new register of mediation—with all the creative and destructive energies that the introduction of new media tends to set free (as the history of iconoclasm has shown), with all the problems of authorization and authentication the use of new media tends to entail, and with all the controversy and contestation new media tend to give rise to.

Candomblé, the Afro-Brazilian spirit-possession cult that I have been studying over the last four years is a particularly instructive case for examining the many issues sur-

rounding shifts from one register of mediation to another.<sup>3</sup> Religious practices in candomblé have always privileged the human body as the prime site of what Mircea Eliade (1959) has called "hierophany," the appearance of the sacred. Initiation rituals, animal sacrifice, spirit possession—in all these activities, the human body in performative action is the medium used to gain access to the mysterious *fundamentos*, the "deep knowledge" (Johnson 2002) that candomblé holds in high esteem. Statues and images only become meaningful after the bodily intervention of the priest engaging in ritual acts. Words—as Juana Elbein dos Santos (1998:46) made clear—do not have power because of their explicatory potential but because they are utterances of the body, involving breath, saliva, and bodily temperature. Visual and discursive registers of mediation are explicitly declared to be inadequate for the transmission of deep knowledge—they are "mere images, mere words," as one of my interlocutors phrased it.

Not only do cultists deny the possibility that the mysteries can be known in any other medium than the human body itself but they also promote an active "policy" of secrecy to make sure this does not change. Candomblé's constant stress on secrecy—prohibitions against seeing certain things, talking about what goes on during rituals, or even remembering the ecstatic experiences of possession trance—seeks to bar articulation of this deep knowledge in any other register but the body. Given these understandings, not surprisingly, a professed media shyness characterizes candomblé circles, and many temples or cult houses (*terreiros*) actively seek to keep the media out.

Candomblé's outspoken dismissal of new media's potential to provide a suitable site for hierophany coincides with (and is further backed up by) a powerful discourse in Bahian society that constructs the cult as a realm of "authenticity" and "uncontaminated African tradition." As Beth Conklin has convincingly argued, the designation of peoples and places as "authentic" often leaves "little room for intercultural exchange or creative innovation, and locates 'authentic' indigenous actors outside global cultural trends and changing ideas and technologies" (1997:715), all the more so when the "'authentic' indigenous actors" adopt these narratives about themselves. And this is exactly what one finds in candomblé. Both sacerdotal and society-wide discourses on authenticity, not to mention the discourses of influential anthropologists such as Pierre Verger (2000), Roger Bastide (1978, 2000), and Juana Elbein dos Santos (1998), reinforce the very idea that I question here: the incongruousness of traditional religion and modern media technologies.

Yet, however powerful these discourses and practices are, they stand in sharp contrast to other realities only recently noted in the literature on candomblé. For reasons to be explored below, candomblé has in recent years sought to access the public sphere. In that very move, the cult has been forced to use new technologies of (mass) mediation.

Terreiros have opened websites, published books, launched CDs of sacred chants and rhythms, worked with documentary filmmakers, and produced videos. They organize study meetings and festivals to which they invite the press, hoping to get (and often getting) media coverage. Also emerging as a “tradition” is making photo albums and home videos of the important ceremonies that mark the progress of a cultist in the initiation process.

Understandably, these developments have given rise to much controversy and contestation: Taboos on the use of new media have been questioned and renegotiated, and there is considerable disagreement about whether these representations qualify to render present the sacred. Nonetheless, cultists are now reimagining their creed in the visual and discursive modes of new media, and in the process they are facing many issues that need to be addressed. What can be shown to the eye of the camera? What can be said in public? How—if at all—can new media convincingly represent the embodied knowledge that *candomblé* esteems? What style is to be employed? What aesthetics?

With no religious guidelines that might inform attempts to visualize the realm of the sacred, and with no traditional iconography on which to build, cultists come to depend on the modes of perception and appraisal that they have cultivated as modern media consumers (Hirshkind 2001).<sup>4</sup> In doing so, they have given increasing credit to new authoritative voices—people who may know little about the fundamentals but who know all about “looks,” about what a good video production should look like, or a photograph, or an article.

In the process of exploring the expressive and communicative potential of new media, cultists’ understandings of what *candomblé* is, can be, or ought to be are inevitably changing. To show where things are heading at this point in time, I discuss several videos that I collected during fieldwork in Salvador in 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005, a period covering 21 months in total.<sup>5</sup> All the video productions were undertaken at the request of people within the *candomblé* community. Nevertheless, the different videos demonstrate different ideological strands in the politics of representation, exemplifying very different solutions to the issues at stake. One videotape was produced in 1994 by Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, one of the most prestigious temples in Salvador. This video illustrates the politics of representation as envisioned by the orthodox “traditionalists” who at present dominate the public face of *candomblé* in the Bahian capital: a face that has a solemn, pious, and “African” look. The other three videos that I discuss are best understood as home videos. Each was produced as a souvenir of an important rite of passage in the religious life of an individual cultist and as what one might call a “personal memory bank” (Morris 2002). In other words, these video productions were never intended to circulate beyond an inner circle of friends and relatives (that they ended up in my suitcase—and, thus, in the public

sphere—is a significant detail that I discuss below). As far as content and style are concerned, these productions are strikingly different from the videos produced by Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá. They show an attitude toward the notions of “tradition” and “authenticity” that is extremely different from the one that is evidenced by the traditionalists, and they offer glimpses of a popular version of *candomblé* that is hard to find in the public realm of Salvador. What is most intriguing about these home videos, however, is that they introduce “television looks” rather than “African looks” to authenticate their representation of religious events.

Before I analyze these tapes, however, I present basic facts about *candomblé* and its complicated relation with the public sphere, and I introduce the particular approach I have taken in this research project.

### “Looking awry”: Studying Bahian *candomblé* and media

In Bahia, the term *candomblé* refers to multiple religious traditions of African origin, all of which are centered on the worship of spiritual entities called “*orixás*” (in some traditions they are called “*inquices*” or “*voduns*”), and all of which seek to establish reciprocal relationships between these spirits and their human mediums through such practices as initiation, animal sacrifice, and possession. The task of individual terreiros is—among other things—to oversee the initiation of spirit mediums and to organize the yearly cycle of rituals and festivities in honor of the *orixás*. In addition to such religious tasks, terreiros operate in what Brazilian scholars have aptly called the “the market for salvation commodities” (*mercado dos bens de salvação*): They seek to generate an income by providing spiritual, divinatory, and curative services to a clientele made up of both cultists and noncultists.

Such overall similarities among the different traditions notwithstanding, the *candomblé* universe is a heterogeneous field. Cultists not only recognize the traditions of different “nations” (*nações*), such as Nagô-Ketu, Jeje, and Angola, but within these traditions the autonomy of the individual terreiro is such that considerable variation is also found in doctrine as well as ritual (Costa Lima 2003; Santos 1995; Wafer 1991). The autonomy of individual terreiros is further increased by the absence of a central institution with enough power to impose a canon of *candomblé* orthodoxy. This multifariousness of religious practices does not mean, however, that the *candomblé* universe is heading toward ever-greater fragmentation. The “people of the saint” (*o povo do santo*), as cultists sometimes refer to themselves, retain a strong sense of community, especially now that the cult is threatened by increasingly powerful Pentecostal churches, which have designated *candomblé* the prime site of “devil worship.” Another force that seems to work toward homogenization, rather than fragmentation, comes from a relatively small

number of terreiros belonging to the Nagô-Ketu tradition.<sup>6</sup> With historical records that go back to the first half of the 19th century; with a highly prestigious clientele of artists, intellectuals, media celebrities, and local politicians; and with the “certificates” of purity and authenticity conferred by generations of anthropologists who have studied them, the Nagô-Ketu terreiros have managed to acquire so much prestige and status that their particular understanding of the religion of the orixás is highly influential among the more peripheral terreiros in Salvador. Many of the latter try to mimic the rituals, ceremony, and aesthetics of the more prestigious cult houses and seek to incorporate some of their doctrinal rigor and orthodoxy (on the ascendancy of the Nagô cult in candomblé, see Capone 2000; Dantas 1988; Parés 2005).

Also relevant to the immersion of candomblé’s religious imagination in the world of new media, is that, over the last 50 years, candomblé has become a key symbol of the Bahian state. Candomblé has a long history of persecution and marginalization by state and church authorities (which helps to explain the stress on secrecy and the reserve about making things visible), but in the 1930s, the reimagining of the Brazilian nation as the unique mix of the white, Indian, and black races allowed for a reevaluation of the African heritage on Brazilian soil. Afro-Brazilian cultural practices such as samba and capoeira became popular all over Brazil, and the beauty of Afro-Brazilian religious practices began to be appreciated. Bahia’s (largely white) cultural elite was particularly eager to profit from this renewed interest in Afro-Brazilian culture and began to explore the popular culture of their home state (undoubtedly to upgrade the image of Bahia, which at the time was considered a decaying, provincial backwater). Writer Jorge Amado, artist Hector Carybé (whose depictions of mediums possessed by the orixás seem to have been adopted as the “official” public iconography of the cult), photographer and ethnologist Pierre Verger, and cinematographer Glauber Rocha were among the first to exploit candomblé myth and ritual in their artwork (from the late 1930s through the early 1960s). Their reevaluation of the cult’s aesthetic and expressive potential was picked up by subsequent generations of artists and filmmakers. In the 1970s, the growing tourist industry gave a new impetus to the dispersion of candomblé imagery in the public sphere. In flyers, brochures, tourist guides, and postcards, one finds an endless repetition of the aestheticized images that have become the icons of the Bahian state: the priestesses in elaborate lace dresses, baroque turbans, and colorful jewelry; the floral offerings to the sea goddess Iemanjá; and the statues of the orixás in the center of Salvador.<sup>7</sup>

Having become the “trademark” of Bahia (Santos 2005), candomblé is publicly embraced by groups as varied as black activists, white populist politicians, gays, tourist entrepreneurs, and cultural elites, who use its symbols, myths, and aesthetics to show that they are in tune with Bahian cul-

ture and traditions (cf. van de Port 2005a). Consequently, candomblé finds itself increasingly under siege by non-cultists’ cameras. Responses in the candomblé community to all the media attention are fraught with ambivalence. Many temples are seduced by the idea of finding themselves in the spotlight of publicity. Cameras and microphones are sought for various reasons: for the prestige that being in the public eye implies, for the attention it garners, for the aura of “modernity” it conveys, for the money it may generate, and for the politics that it makes possible. Yet the performance of secrecy greatly complicates an opening up to the public. Moreover, candomblé’s search for respectability triggers fears over what mass-mediated images of Afro-Brazilians going into trance or involved in bloody ritual may provoke in the public eye, just as the ambition to be recognized as a full-fledged “religion” triggers fears that the media will reduce candomblé to mere folklore.<sup>8</sup> These worries over representational matters have created a strong sense among cultists that the public representation of candomblé should not be left to outsiders and that the time has come to go public.

These realities have, of course, not gone unnoticed in the anthropological literature, and a growing number of studies seek to address the formative impact of candomblé’s interactions and exchanges with other social arenas in Bahian society. No longer content to study the cult in its own terms (which, in fact, had always meant in the terms of the priesthood), anthropologists have set out to chart the entanglement of candomblé with other spiritist groups and their doctrines (Shapiro 1995), with anthropologists and anthropological knowledge (Augras 1998; Castillo 2005; Dantas 1988; Gonçalves da Silva 2000), with contemporary art worlds (Birman 2006; Sansi-Roca 2001), with the politics of the Bahian and Brazilian states (Kraay 1998; Maggie 1992; Santos 2005), and with political activism (Agier 1998; van de Port 2005a).

Studying candomblé through its video productions follows a similar line of inquiry or, rather, seeks to radicalize a perspective that acknowledges candomblé’s immersion in the contemporary society that is Salvador. To accomplish this objective, I have always forced myself to look at the candomblé universe from an oblique angle—taking up a perspective that philosopher Slavoj Žižek (1992) once described as “looking awry,” which entails a deliberate attempt to come up with a somewhat cockeyed rendition of this world. This rendition seeks neither to pay tribute to the dominant (self-)images and (self-)understandings of the cult nor to capture the action that goes on center stage. Rather, what it seeks to bring into view is what goes on at the margins of the candomblé universe: the flaws and contradictions, the hitches and breaches in style in what is otherwise a splendid performance of authenticity. This interest in what might be understood as the failure to reach symbolic closure has, in fact, determined much of my research in Salvador, as is illustrated in the following anecdote.<sup>9</sup>

On one of my visits to the old terreiro of Gantois, one of the most revered and prestigious strongholds of the orthodox tradition in candomblé, I encountered Luis, a fellow anthropologist. The occasion was the *feira de Oxum*, the festival of the candomblé goddess of beauty, and the *barracão*, the great ceremonial hall of the temple, had been decorated with garlands and cloths in the yellow and golden colors of the deity. As always, the performance sought to re-create "Africa" on Brazilian soil—with drumming, Yoruba chants, and temple dignitaries wearing Nigerian garments. For some reason, my observer's eye lingered on the floral decorations that hung from the ceiling: little polystyrene balls in which little dried flowers and golden, spray-painted leaflets had been stuck. These floral balls, fastened to the ceiling with velvety ribbons in a soft yellow tone, could only be described as Biedermeier (referring to the all-too-cozy, idyllic middle-class style of early 19th-century Vienna). I am not sure whether I had already made a head-note saying "these quaint little bouquets don't look like Africa to me" when I met Luis's eyes. He clearly had been observing me observing the floral decorations. We both burst into laughter, having seen something to which we, as anthropologists, should not have been paying attention. Clearly, our fieldwork diaries for that day were supposed to mention the ritual sequence of the ceremony, the presence and absence of honorary guests, and the quality of the drumming and the food. They were not, however, supposed to mention the Biedermeier style of the decorations.

Whereas the classic approach to studying candomblé urges one to choose "one's own" terreiro, where a process akin to initiation itself provides the opportunity to describe the cult "from within," I was concerned with understanding cultists beyond the performance of their religious selves, in their capacity as gay-bar visitors; as soap opera (*telenovela*) aficionados and celebrity admirers; as beachgoers; as political activists; as tourist guides; as visitors to terreiros other than their own; as producers and consumers of culture; as fashion victims and shopping-mall addicts; as academics, poets, or civil servants. I was struck by cultists' frequent inability to explain rituals or religious concepts (and I refused to discredit them as valuable informants for that reason). My discussions with numerous priests and priestesses were largely about what one of them classified as "the superficial things" (visibly relieved that I was not going to ask about the fundamentos and that we would not have to infringe on the prescribed rules of secrecy): candomblé's travels beyond the temple walls; the dispersion of its imagery, myths, aesthetics, and rituals into the public sphere; and the new religious formations (religiosities) to which this dispersion gives rise (van de Port 2005a, 2005b).

Although I am aware that I could only afford to look awry because the great many classic studies of candomblé provided me with the basic knowledge of the cult, its interiorities, and central belief tenets, I think the study of candomblé

has much to gain from a move beyond what traditionalists in the priesthood—often in unison with anthropologists—have authorized as "authentic." Indeed, studying candomblé through its video productions is studying a candomblé that is cut loose from the immediate bodily experiences that render present and authenticate the transcendental realm of the spirits. Candomblé's move to the realm of "virtual presence" (Stolow 2005) has necessitated tapping new sources of authenticity. Mother Africa is one such source of authentication. The world of TV is another.

### A "traditionalist" representation of candomblé: The video from Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá

Among the 2,500 cult houses in the city of Salvador, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá is one of the most prestigious.<sup>10</sup> Among its clientele are a great number of celebrities (from the world of politics, entertainment, and the arts), and Mãe Stella, who at present is the high priestess (*ialorixá*) of the house, is known throughout Brazil. The house is a staunch defender of the "African traditions" (which is why I speak about this terreiro as "traditionalist"), and, in fact, in 1984 Mãe Stella penned a manifesto in which she publicly broke with the syncretism that had long dominated the cult. Her house is one of the bulwarks of a so called re-Africanization of candomblé.<sup>11</sup>

The videotape that the house produced in 1994 is entitled *This Is Our Universe, This Is Our Belief* (Oswald 1994) and is reminiscent of what Harald Prins (2002:58) has called the "indigenous self-fashioning" made possible by new media, or the "indigenous media productions" discussed by scholars such as Faye Ginsburg (1991) and Terence Turner (1992). Explicitly produced for public circulation (the tape is shown to all visitors to the little museum in the temple's compound, is sold in the museum shop, and versions are available in Portuguese and English) and resembling something of a manifesto, it self-consciously seeks to "correct" prevailing representations of the cult, and it has a political objective that is explicitly stated on its cover:<sup>12</sup> "Mother Stella's (ODE KAYODE) narrative, a mark of cultural and religious resistance preserving the purity of our religion's rituals—the *candomblé*—as it is understood in ILÊ AXÉ OPÔ AFONJÁ—her house."<sup>13</sup>

I purchased the video produced by Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá from the temple's museum shop. The museum has the resounding Yoruba name Ilê Ohun Lailai, meaning "house of antiquities," and is basically a large room exhibiting ritual objects, garments, and photographs as well as certificates and honorary medals that some of the priestesses had received. Behind the glass doors of an old-fashioned cupboard are the statues of Catholic saints that once adorned the altars. The middle-aged woman who took care of the place at the time of my first visit was not very talkative. Even before I had had a chance to look around, she urged me to sit down in front of a TV, insisting that I watch a video on "the traditions

of the house.” Being an anthropologist, I politely accepted the invitation. It turned out to be the right move. The woman hurried off to fetch the tape while complaining that “most tourists lacked the decency and respect” to take the 20 or so minutes to be informed about her creed.

The message that the video seeks to get across is simple and straightforward: Candomblé is a cult of African origin, candomblé has the deepest respect for the forces of nature, and Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá has been a guardian of the traditions for many generations. The style of the video is what one might call “arty”; it strives to be tasteful and modern and clearly shows the signature of the elitist clientele of the house. Most striking, however, is the video’s representation of candomblé in a highly abstract fashion. It includes no shots whatsoever of rituals or any other religious practices. In fact, the universe that is shown has almost no people in it. The only human figures that appear are a nude black dancer who—in Martha Grahamesque fashion—allegorizes the female orixás; a black man who holds some of the insignia of the male orixás (but who can only be seen in a shadowy profile and remains faceless); and—in the very last shot—a black family (a man, a woman, and two children) entering the barracão, the space in the cult house where public celebrations take place. Again, the viewer only sees these people from the back, never their faces. Moreover, the barracão they enter is deliberately empty and dark in a clear attempt not to give away any image of religious practice to the eye of the camera.

What one does get to see are images taken from documentaries on nature (erupting volcanoes, ocean waves, birds flying over a swampy river, crocodiles, a roaring jaguar, thunderclouds, rain, waterfalls, tropical woods, etc.); African wax prints waving in the wind; African artifacts half hidden in the woods, where a “searching” camera finds them; religious paraphernalia tastefully assembled on white draperies; and the compounds of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, showing the houses of the different orixás, again with pointedly closed doors and shutters. In a voice-over, Mãe Stella explains what is what and who is who in the candomblé universe, using a lot of Yorubá terms—but her speech, too, seems to aim at revealing as little as possible: The text is limited to the barest of facts, and the staccato minisentences spoken by the priestess suggest that she is reluctant to reveal even the little she does.

Having seen the video, I could hardly blame those tourists who did not sit through it to the very end. All in all, the production is somewhat incomprehensible. But I was also intrigued that Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá had actually produced a video on candomblé, for I knew this house to be a staunch supporter of the performance of secrecy and adamantly opposed to the transmission of religious knowledge in any other way than through the initiation process. It soon dawned on me that incomprehensibility was probably consciously sought by the producers: The tape seems to be the result of a public-relations strategy that somehow got

stuck between the idea that Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, as one of the most prestigious temples in town, has to speak out in public about itself (rather than have others represent the house “erroneously”) and cultists’ basic unwillingness to speak out and appear in the public eye.

### Performing secrecy

Secrecy is, indeed, the key to understanding Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá’s curious production (as well as traditionalists’ attitudes toward the use of new media technologies), and a closer look at how its performance interferes with issues of mediation and publicity is instructive. The performance of secrecy takes place within the temple walls and involves all the members of the temple community; between temples as competitors in the mercado dos bens de salvação; and in the interactions between cultists and noncultists. At all these levels, this performance is guided by a great many rules and regulations that determine who has access to what knowledge and at what time; who is allowed to speak and who is to remain silent; who has access to certain areas of the temple and who does not; and who is allowed to see sacred objects or witness ritual practices and who is not. Breaking these rules and regulations may cause the wrath of both priests and spirits (cf. Johnson 2002; and for Bahia, see Castillo 2005).

In my opinion, the performance of secrecy is inextricably linked with a very particular understanding in candomblé circles of what constitutes religious knowledge and, in particular, how religious knowledge can be transmitted. Candomblé, as an initiation cult, holds that knowledge of the secrets and mysteries can only be obtained through lengthy periods of initiation. Knowledge, as I made clear in introducing my discussion, comes with doing: observing the taboos, participating in the rituals, subjecting oneself to the rigid temple hierarchy, and respecting one’s commitments to the orixás. Time is also crucial to the transmission of secret knowledge. Year in and year out, cultists go through the motions of the ceremonies and ritual obligations, and with the passing of time, one gains the experiential knowledge that candomblé seeks to instill. Cultists are resolute in saying that the only road to religious knowledge is this lengthy, time-consuming path. In fact, as all anthropologists who study candomblé know, asking questions, in general, is considered impolite, and asking questions about religious practices deemed secret is outright taboo. Such questioning is considered impolite and embarrassing, and one who perseveres always receives the same answer: If you want to know such things, you will have to be initiated. Giselle Binon-Cossard, a French anthropologist who became a priestess, explained the refusal to answer questions as follows:

In candomblé it is believed that nothing done in a hurry turns out right. By asking, people will only understand this much of a certain notion but they will not assimilate

it. It is only time that will make knowledge sink in. Let's say, it is as with French wine: it gets better by decanting. Intellectually it is the same thing. Things have to get to rest. You learn, but then you leave it at that. And when it has ripened you go back to it, structuring it, balancing it out. [Gonçalves da Silva 2000:44]

This particular understanding of the transmission of knowledge, although seemingly individualist in its orientation, has profound implications for the social organization of the cult, in particular, its internal hierarchies of power. If bodily practices and the passing of time constitute the only road to the knowledge that *candomblé* seeks to instill in its adepts, religious authority becomes dependent on the claims of some cult members that they have more access to this incommunicable "secret" knowledge than others because of the greater length of their initiation. By implication, the impossibility of communicating religious knowledge becomes crucial to upholding the rigid temple hierarchy. For, if the secrets were accessible to all by mere explanation and exegesis, religious authority would evaporate. The performance of secrecy, then, serves to maintain a particular construction of religious knowledge, and it buttresses the rigid temple hierarchies. Thus, the mantra is repeated over and over again to all who want to learn the fast way by asking questions: Initiation is the only way to obtain religious knowledge, knowledge will come with time, and nothing can be forced or hurried.<sup>14</sup>

These notions of how religious knowledge can be transmitted are hardly compatible with contemporary media practices. Cameras and microphones impose a regime of knowledge transmission through immediate sights and sounds. Performing secrecy, in contrast, is all about foregrounding silence, suggesting but not saying, closing off rather than opening up, and veiling rather than revealing. This attempt to create shadows, twilight zones, and a pervasive awareness of that which is absent is ill combined with taking up a position in the spotlight of publicity. Moreover, recording devices diminish the priestly control over the distribution of knowledge that is so central to the performance of secrecy: Priests regularly express their concern that they can no longer decide what is done with images and statements recorded on tape, who will gain access to that information and with what motives.

These are the reasons that every newcomer to Salvador with an interest in the Afro-Brazilian traditions is immediately made to understand that taking pictures of *candomblé* ceremonies—let alone filming them—is not permitted. Tour guides instruct the groups they take on *candomblé* tours that taking photographs, filming, and making sound recordings are strictly forbidden, and cult houses that receive a lot of tourists have signs on the walls to remind visitors of these prohibitions. Visitors who ignore them may be in for serious trouble. Twice, I witnessed *ogãs* (a kind of male initiate) taking tourists' cameras by force and confiscating the film:

In both cases, the tourist had taken pictures of a ceremony through the open window of the temple while standing outside. Tour guides told me they had even witnessed memory cards taken from digital cameras and destroyed. Documentary filmmakers, journalists, and anthropologists have run into similar problems.

I ran into many different explanations when I asked cultists about this prohibition. People told me the presence of cameras and flashes would turn a ceremony into a mere tourist show. Or they said that an uncontrolled circulation of images of animal sacrifice, initiates covered in blood, or adepts in possession trance would fuel age-old prejudices about the primitivism of the cult and of the Afro-Brazilian population as a whole. Or they said it was not right for outsiders to make big money selling images of *candomblé* while never returning any of the profit to the cult house. Sometimes the prohibition was cast in a religious argument. One priest told me that the *orixás* did not like to be filmed.<sup>15</sup> Others maintained that camera flashes scared the spirits away; that making pictures was dangerous for the medium, who might end up paralyzed for the rest of his or her life; or that the *orixá* would not appear on film, and, therefore, that one might as well save one's film and money. Although the prohibition on taking pictures of *candomblé* ceremonies was recognized by all as an issue, the great variety of explanations signaled the absence of a shared view on the rationale for the prohibition. Only when one recognizes the performative character of secrecy, can one begin to understand the immediate yet not-well-argued refusal to appear in the camera's eye.

The reserve toward media technologies that the performance of secrecy generates does not diminish the interest of noncultists in *candomblé*. It is exactly the performance of secrecy by the practitioners of *candomblé* that seems to fuel the interest of the general public. A Brazilian monthly promising its readers "an X-ray of a Bahian terreiro" or a documentary film announcing it can take the viewer into "the secret world of *candomblé*" testifies to what many thinkers on secrecy have pointed out: Wherever there are secrets, there are people trying to reveal them (Bellman 1984; Johnson 2002; Simmel 1906). This is especially the case in Bahia, where visitors from all over the world are instructed that "mystery" is what the city has on offer and where tourist guides and brochures point to the temples of *candomblé* as the places where one can expect to find it.

*Candomblé* cultists seem to be well aware of this dynamic, and their performance of secrecy at times becomes a bit coquettish. An argument can even be made that the very attempts to keep the media out are, in fact, directed toward attracting media attention. Mãe Stella, for instance, encouraged visitors to her temple to be simply puzzled by the mysteries unfolding before their eyes:

Our religion is so strong and so mysterious that it raises the curiosity of those who are outside. They seem to



think that a host of curious questions, sometimes even impertinent ones, is synonymous with knowledge. But I tell you, those ways are dangerous, leading into true labyrinths, and with dire results. I therefore advise the visitors and friends of the *Axé*: *don't ask questions, just observe!* [Santos 1993:88]

This attitude could not have been phrased better: If *candomblé* is to present itself to the gaze of others, it must appear mysterious and impenetrable (cf. van de Port 2005b). In Mãe Stella's view, *candomblé*'s public performance can only be the performance of secrecy.

The few interviews with priests and priestesses that I have seen on Bahian TV are clear examples of this particular politics of representation: The interviewees persevere in their performance of secrecy, the interviewer gets nowhere asking "stupid questions," and the interview ends up being chit-chat about the more folkloric aspects of the cult but never coming close to revealing what the cult is all about.<sup>16</sup> The videotape from Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá is another striking example of this politics. Showing absences, silences, empty spaces, and shadows, it veils and reveals at the same time—enticing outsiders while not giving anything away.

### Candomblé on "home video"

The two tapes that I earlier designated "home videos" both coincide with and digress from the media practices and attitudes toward mediation sketched above. The story of how I obtained these tapes from a man I call "Antônio" is in many ways revealing. It is as much illustrative of how the performance of secrecy has run into trouble in the globalizing world of which Salvador is part as it is revealing of how new media technologies enter the religious imagination in unexpected ways.

I first met Antônio on the occasion of an important ceremony called "deká."<sup>17</sup> This is the rite that marks the change in status from initiate to "older brother-sister" and opens the road for a cultist to establish his or her own temple. Usually it is held after seven years of initiatory experience, but it had taken Octávio—the spirit medium whose rite of passage was being celebrated—14 years to accumulate the necessary financial means ("and wisdom," as the priest who had initiated Octávio later confided to me in private) for the ceremony to take place. The deká was held in the cult house of Pai Luis, a ramshackle construction in a poor and densely populated neighborhood in Salvador. The terreiro was packed, so many visitors had to stand outside in front of the building. When Antônio arrived, he carried a huge TV camera on his shoulder, and a spotlight fixed on top of it lit up the entire terreiro as he entered. The camera was so big and unwieldy that it made me wonder how Antônio would be able to wrestle himself through the crowd. It turned out to be easier than I had imagined. Pai Luis made sure that

Antônio was given all the leeway he needed and could do his work to the best of his capability. Acting as if he were the director on a film set, he pushed people backward against the wall, ordered people out, and shouted angrily at some of his novices who did not help him sufficiently in accomplishing his task. When, after a lot of drumming and singing, Octávio finally arrived—incorporating Ogum, the orixá to which he was initiated—Pai Luis again made sure that no one got in the way of Antônio and his camera.

So Octávio-Ogum danced—swirling, bending, circling, and shaking—and Antônio never left the possessed medium, moving backward all the time to keep the camera and spotlight fixed at the dancing god. Their movements turned into a strange pas de deux. I was unable to say whether the camera was courting the god or the god was courting the camera.

During a break in the ceremony, I walked up to Antônio, who was smoking a cigarette outside. I expressed my puzzlement that he had been allowed to film a religious ceremony of *candomblé*.

"I've always been told one is not allowed to film the orixá."

"I do it all the time," he said.

He explained that his business was producing and selling videos of weddings, birthday parties, and tourists on their tours of the city. As of late, *candomblé* priests and priestesses had begun to ask him to make video recordings of religious ceremonies as well.

"These are important occasions in the life of our people, so they want a videotape to remind them."

He then gave me his card, saying that he would gladly sell me a copy of the tape he was making. I suggested I ask Pai Luis whether he would object to Antônio selling me a copy of the tape, but Antônio (undoubtedly reading the covetousness on my face) brushed aside the suggestion.

"I don't know . . . just give me a call and we can settle this among ourselves. Pai Luis has other things on his mind now."

A week later, I called Antônio to ask about the tape, and he told me he would pass by my house that very same day "since he was going to be in the neighborhood anyway." When he arrived, he installed himself comfortably on the sofa and readily accepted a beer, but he had not brought the video and proved hesitant to talk about his video productions relating to *candomblé*. When I asked him whether he was into *candomblé*, he grumbled "more or less," keeping his eyes averted and clearly not feeling at ease talking about the subject. He told me that he was invited by priests to film "all kinds of rituals," even *matanças*, the bloody animal sacrifices that are usually performed backstage and that only close affiliates of a temple are allowed to witness. But, surely, these tapes cannot be sold? I probed. Oh, well, he had some very interesting tapes, and he might consider selling a copy. Including videotapes of *matanças*? Sure. And what

about temples that do not want their tapes to end up on the market? Well, you know, of course, some temples would order him to shoot a ceremony, and then they would ask for the original tape to make sure that it did not enter into circulation. But others did not care about such things. "Not everybody is the same, you know."

From the tone of his voice I could tell that I had clearly been too pushy. Nevertheless, Antônio's sale of videotapes of candomblé ceremonies so flagrantly contradicted my understanding of the cult as a religious practice steeped in secrecy and my research experience that candomblé cultists are extremely cautious about revealing their religious life that I could not resist asking him one question after another. Yet I was obviously on my way to spoiling my relationship with a potential informant on media technology and candomblé. Having expressed my surprise at his business, I had revealed myself not to be the ignorant tourist he had probably figured me to be: Antônio did not seem at all happy with the direction of the conversation. He cut my questioning short, saying, "Just like weddings, people simply want a tape to remember the happy event," finished his beer, and said he had to go on. Later that week, however, he called me to ask if I still was interested in buying some tapes. He told me the amount of money he expected for a tape and insisted we meet on anonymous ground for the transaction to take place: a gas station in a neighborhood called "Engenho Velho."

When we met, he acted cool. Laughs and jokes and cordial handshakes. But he could not hide his nervousness as he handed over the tapes. I drove back home, a trophy hunter after a successful raid, the considerable sum of money I had had to pay already forgotten. They were mine: videotapes of candomblé religious ceremonies, shot by a semiprofessional video maker from within the community! Secrets materialized! A native's point of view that could be wrapped up and shipped back to my office in Amsterdam!

The videos turned out to be dreadful in quality. They were copies made on tapes that had already been used and that were of the cheapest quality. Having seen their content, however, I could not have cared less.

Of the three tapes that I bought from Antônio, one showed Octávio's deká—the rite at which I had been present (I appear on the tape for a few seconds, a sweating white man standing in a corner chewing gum). It had been edited considerably and, thus, offered me the opportunity to compare the moments Antônio had deemed important in his editing room and the moments that had appeared in my own field notes (a comparison to which I return below). In addition, Antônio had apparently been taken backstage, to shoot the splendor of the food and presents, including an almost surreal marzipan portrait of the spirit Ogum on a huge cake, framed by garlands of little whipped-cream rosettes and with the name Ogum written in syrup.

A second tape recorded a celebration in honor of Iemanjá, a third-year initiate's so-called obligation (*obrigação*) to this African "goddess" of the deep seas. It was shot in a temple that I do not know. This tape showed an even more surreal juxtaposition of incongruities than appeared in the tape of Octávio's deka. The footage of the religious ceremony had been formatted like an episode of a telenovela, or TV miniseries, with priests and initiates announced as if they were actors and important visitors presented as if making "special guest appearances." The woman responsible for the celebration is portrayed in an oval frame (in the full attire of a medium for Iemanjá and quite obviously possessed), and the title sequence shows a collage that seems to have been copied from different sources, showing jumping dolphins, whales in a bay surrounded by snow-capped mountains, surfers riding waves, bikini beauties from Copacabana Beach, tropical fish in an aquarium, and shots from the yearly Festa de Iemanjá, a massive, picturesque gathering at which hundreds of thousands make floral offerings to the goddess on a beach in one of Salvador's suburbs. The third tape was similarly formatted like a TV program, but it concerned a celebration for Ossaim, orixá of the virgin forest and medicinal leaves. Instead of references to marine life, the title sequence showed images of woods, flowered meadows, plants, and trees. When I met Antônio on another occasion later during my fieldwork and asked him about these formats, he said that the priests had requested them. He explained that "my wedding as an episode of a telenovela" was a very successful formula for wedding videos and the priests wanted to have videos of their rituals formatted in the same way.

### Media and the religious imagination

In contrast to the video produced by Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, Antônio's tapes lacked any clear political or educational objectives. These videos were clearly produced for private consumption only—they were meant to circulate within a circle of relatives and friends, rather than in an imagined "world out there" that presumably needed to be instructed about "our universe and our belief" or corrected in its "erroneous views" on candomblé.<sup>18</sup> But what is most intriguing about these tapes is that the candomblé ceremonies they depict have been framed as "televsual" realities. They exploit the style and format of a TV program and unabashedly mix religious ceremony with universal symbols of festivity such as cakes. The most immediate question, of course, is what scholars are to make of them. Why are they produced? What kind of "self-fashioning"—to borrow Harald Prins's (2002:72) term—is evident in them? And what does this self-fashioning say about the effect of modern mass media on the religious imagination?

To gain a better understanding of the self-fashioning that these videos evidence, the videotape of Octávio's deká is worth further examination—especially because my

presence at the occasion allows for a comparison of my field notes with the way Antônio edited the ceremony on his tape.

Quite obviously, the videotape was made for future use by Octávio. The tape enabled him to watch the ceremony at a later time and to show it to his friends and relatives. In fact, when I visited Octávio some weeks later at the ceremonial opening of his altar in his parents' house, the tape was being played in the living room for his old grandmother (from whom I unfortunately could elicit no more comment than that it was all "very beautiful"). That this video was produced for Octávio's "personal memory bank" can be deduced from features that seem typical of the home-video format: The focus of the camera is mainly on Octávio–Ogum, who clearly has the "leading role." In addition, the cameraman is clearly concerned with making sure that the video registers all who are present at the celebration. An opening sequence shows close-ups of all the assembled guests before the ceremony starts and registers the arrival of some honored guests while the ceremony is in full swing (these guests are priests and priestesses from other terreiros). Whether Antônio was able to tell who mattered or was instructed while editing the tape I do not know. Equally important in the home-video format is conveying the splendor of the occasion. Without doubt, the shots of the cake, of salted snacks (laid out nicely on silverware and decorated with velvet ribbons), and of the floral decorations in the terreiro were left in the tape for this purpose.

The videotape follows the basic structure of the ritual in chronological order—the opening-round dance called the "xiré" followed by the first, second, and third comings (*saídas*) of Octávio–Ogum, and, finally, the arrival of the other orixás. The long hours of monotonous dancing have been left out: Apparently the home-video format asks for action, for something to happen. From Antônio's perspective, this principally means religious ritual actions (prostrations, dipping fingers in holy water, Ogum being seated on his "throne," bringing in the paraphernalia and insignia of Ogum in a basket covered with white cloth, Ogum meeting the guests and hugging them, etc.). Yet it also includes fragments that do not belong to the religious repertoire proper: Pai Luis gives a speech, explaining the meaning of the event "according to his understanding of the philosophy of candomblé" and pointing out Octávio's responsibilities in the future, and Octávio–Ogum receives huge bouquets of roses wrapped in cellophane, with which he dances while people throw rice.

My field notes of this event clearly show what was not considered appropriate action for a home video: the arrival of the police to check Pai Luis's license; the effeminate boy who became possessed by an undisciplined spirit (*santo bruto*); the fat girl in a sky-blue tank top who screamed at the top of her voice when a spirit took her; the moment when all the initiates of the house entered into trance; the moment that Octávio–Ogum went around to collect money from guests in his skirt in exchange for embraces; the child

spirits (*êre*) that walked around, thumb sucking and babbling with the guests.

Finally, Antônio did not use any special effects. The only thing that might be classified as such occurs in the final scene, which shows the crown that decorates the central pillar of the barracão: The wind is playing with the floral garlands, and that movement is shown in slow motion and then frozen in a still shot. Later, Antônio told me he had wanted to show the scenes of Octávio being possessed by Ogum in slow motion but he had not found the time to do it.

The recording of the deká on videotape reveals several things about the use of a video camera within the temple walls. To begin with, it demonstrates a lack of concern with the performance of the secrecy principle. Nevertheless, the camera never goes backstage (or outside the hall): All the action on film takes place in the public area of the temple, the barracão. The camera registers the coming and going of initiates, orixás, and priests to and from the areas backstage of the event, but it never follows such movements behind the scenes. In that sense, the boundary between public and secret areas is not crossed, at least during filming. Quite likely, the shot of the food that had been prepared for the celebration had been taken in the kitchen backstage, but it was edited so that the viewer cannot tell when or where it was taken. Possession trance is filmed without any reservation.

What is most interesting is the self-fashioning that this tape evidences. As a self-portrait, the tape obviously seeks to communicate the splendor, success, and prestige of Pai Luis's house. There should be no doubt in the viewer's mind that Octávio's deká was an occasion with  *muito axé*, as it would most certainly be described in local parlance (*axé* being the life-generating force that candomblé seeks to accumulate and transmit). In this respect, the tape is not very different from the one produced by Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, which, although addressing another audience, also seeks to enhance the house's prestige. Where the two tapes differ is in the language of "success" they employ. Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá builds its prestige on such notions as "Africa" and "ancient traditions," whereas the video made at Pai Luis's house employs a radically different language: It borrows its notions of prestige and splendor from society at large, in particular, the world of the popular media. This is most clearly the case in the scene in which Octávio–Ogum dances toward the camera with his arms full of bouquets of roses that he has received from the cultists of the house. This image reads "the beloved superstar after a highly successful performance."

Whereas the tape produced by Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá seeks to correct public representations of candomblé, the video made at the house of Pai Luis attempts to absorb the iconic representations of candomblé that one finds in the public space: The portrait of the orixá Ogum on top of the marzipan-covered cake, for example, is clearly a reproduction of a painting by Carybé. The ceremonial outfits of the possessed mediums also seem to be frozen in time

so as to be compliant with this public “look” of *candomblé*. Apparently, the prestige of the public, that is, that which transcends the idiosyncrasies of any one particular house, is being “contracted” for the greater glory of Octávio’s *deká*. Finally, the presence of the camera during the ceremony is a clear sign of prestige: The leeway given to Antônio to make his shots and the way the camera’s presence was allowed to dominate the event show how media presence may upgrade the importance of a religious event.

This idea that within the temple walls, religious notions are increasingly articulated through (and religious rituals increasingly employ) languages originating in and pertaining to the public sphere plunges the Antônio tapes squarely into debates on media and the religious imagination. The two other tapes that I obtained through the deal with Antônio serve to elaborate this point.

### Mimicking TV

Much more than the tape from Octávio’s *deká*, the videos showing a feast in honor of *Iemanjá* and one in honor of *Ossaim* play with the video’s potential for miming television. As mentioned above, these videos make use of televisual formats and styles in their make-up: They are framed as if they are TV programs, opening with a title sequence and presenting the cultists as actors and others making special guest appearances. As Antônio explained to me, this format was already in vogue for wedding and birthday videos, in which newly wed couples or girls reaching the age of 15 have their special day represented as an episode from a soap opera.

Making the important moments of real life look like TV appears to be a trend in other parts of the world as well. A striking example comes from Korea, where wedding videos as well as photo albums are carefully constructed to look like TV productions, and photographers go to great lengths to be as “authentically” TV-like as possible: The couples are carefully instructed what to wear, how to act, and what emotions to show, and the photographers in charge search out the settings that will provide the perfect backdrops to attain a “soapy” look (Lee 1999). The story that Antônio told me about the video recording he made for the 15th birthday of a girl from a middle-class family in Salvador was reminiscent of “the making of” type of documentary, in which the camera takes viewers behind the scenes of big musical productions or to the sets of major film productions; Antônio followed the girl buying her clothes, being groomed at the hairdressers, and so on.

Such examples really beg the question of how televisual realities affect people’s lives. Why would one aspire to be “just like on TV”? Certainly, the televisual mimicry evidenced in the videos of the *Iemanjá* and *Ossaim* celebrations can be linked to the issue of prestige. The importance and prestige of the televisual medium are used to upgrade the prestige of the celebration. The presence of the camera during the

ritual and the subsequent appearance of the event on the TV screen offer one the delightful fantasy of having been on TV (and, thus, of having been important enough to be in the eye of the nation). Yet, when home videos are contrasted with the *Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá* videotape, one begins to sense that something more might be at stake in such mimetic moves.

Of course, at first sight one is tempted to say that the insertion of bikini beauties and cakes in the depiction of a religious ceremony is evidence that both the producers and consumers of these videos are not at all concerned with questions of authenticity. This is a plausible enough interpretation if authenticity is understood in the sense of a restoration of *candomblé*’s “African roots” and “ancient traditions,” as envisioned by *Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá*. Yet one needs to ask if these videos might seek to produce an authenticity of another kind. Could the source of authentication that these videos draw on be, not Mother Africa but TV itself? In other words, is it possible that these videos seek to inscribe *candomblé* rituals in everyday realities by using televisual styles and formats?

In a thought-provoking analysis of the appeal of the telenovela in Brazilian society, Esther Hamburger (1998) manages to convey just how much this genre has entered the collective imagination of Brazilians. She argues that the telenovela, intended for everyone and, therefore, for no one in particular, is an important ingredient in the glue that holds the Brazilian nation together. Topics raised in telenovelas are debated nationally, and the styles the shows promulgate have pervaded people’s sense of propriety. What Hamburger maintains about telenovelas can easily be extended to talk shows, miniseries, and other TV entertainment: Through these televisual genres Brazilians are taught how to dress, how to decorate their homes, how to celebrate their birthdays, how to seduce their lovers, and how to manage their marriages. Clearly, the great majority of Brazilians encounter many (often insurmountable) obstacles in their aspiration to live up to such televisual teachings, but I can only agree with Hamburger that they continue to try because “in copying the models of telenovelas, TV spectators show that they are ‘into it’ and show their willingness to move beyond the limitations imposed upon them by their social conditions, their identity, gender or race” (1998:484). I can think of no reason to assume that the televisual teachings of what life ought to look like would not extend to the realm of the religious. To stick to the case of *candomblé*, anthropologist Rita Laura Segato has made it abundantly clear that cultists are as avid TV spectators as other Brazilians:

In 1980, during the last period of my fieldwork among the *xangôs* [another Afro-Brazilian spirit-possession cult] of Recife, I found myself hindered by an obstacle that was as unforeseen as it was inconvenient. All

the days of the week, from Monday until Saturday, at eight o'clock at night, the [cultists] would stop their domestic tasks or rituals to watch the telenovela. Whether *toques* [celebrations in honor of the orixás] or *boris*, the ritual washings of the head that open up the complex sequences of the initiation ritual, everything, literally everything, would only start after the last scene of *Água Viva* [the prime-time telenovela of that period] was over. [1994:52]

With people involved in candomblé as enchanted with TV as everybody else, one should not be surprised that in honoring their spirits, they seek recourse to televisual styles and formats. The question of what these styles and formats offer to the religious imagination, however, needs to be pursued further.

### A televisual world of perfection

The Antônio tapes make it strikingly clear that technology never comes in a “purely” instrumental or material form—as sheer technological possibility in the service of the religious imagination. Rather, exactly as Antônio told me, media technologies have been developed and used in other settings and arenas (in Antônio's case, weddings, birthday parties, and tourist outings), so when they enter the field of religion they come with a history. The priests and initiates who ordered Antônio to produce tapes wanted their ceremonies to look something like wedding videos. Introducing video cameras, in other words, implies the introduction of more or less fixed formats and styles, and these, in turn, imply established opinions about what televisual realities ought to look like.

A discussion of the notion of “style” may prove helpful to deepen understanding of why people would want to imbue the important moments of their religious life with a televisual look. A style coordinates all the channels through which meaning is communicated in such a way that unity is achieved at all levels of experience between what is being said and how it is being said (Douglas 2003). Therefore, any style tends to subject all the elements of communication to its demands. Elements that do not “fit” in a style are easily recognized and produce the sensation that “something is not right”: The mediated notion does not convince. In her discussion of the “pentecostalization” of the public sphere in Ghana, Birgit Meyer highlighted the relevance of the notion of “style” for the study of religion and media. Style, she argues, is akin to Michel Foucault's notion of “discourse,” in the sense that it imposes its own regulations and constraints on its users. What links people to a certain style, however, “is not that style's capacity to make true statements about the world but, rather, the mood it radiates. Style, by putting things in a certain way, speaks to, as well as evokes, emotions. Employing an ensemble of recurring key terms and conventions, *style makes people feel at home in, as well as confident with,*

*a particular discourse*” (Meyer 2004:95, emphasis added; for a related argument, see Abu-Lughod 2002).

This capacity of a style to bind people together by making them feel comfortable in a particular discourse underlies the importance of the concept for the social scientist. The effect of a narrative that does not “fit” in a style, or that proves incompatible with media formats, far exceeds an affront to aesthetic sensibilities: It puts the narrative at risk of being unreal.

This point is brought to the fore most forcefully by Michel de Certeau in a discussion of how media produce their own standards of credibility. Media formats and styles—de Certeau speaks of “narrative models”—are far more than the mere “packaging” of a narrative. In contemporary societies, in which people are exposed to nonstop media bombardment, they have a “providential and predestining function” (de Certeau 1984:186). Through constant exposure, people become so accustomed to certain styles and certain formats that these shape people's sense of what is convincing or credible (not to mention their sense of what is hip or old-fashioned, cool or outdated, desirable or distasteful). I can illustrate the idea that a style produces credibility with examples from my own experience. I recall, during fieldwork in Serbia (van de Port 1998), watching the TV anchorwoman of the Serbian eight o'clock news, who had been styled to look like her unimpeachable-looking CNN counterparts but who was instructed to tell such blatant propagandistic lies that it became evident just how much the style in question (both in Serbia and in the Atlanta CNN headquarters) serves to produce truthfulness and credibility (and how much I had been tricked into believing the reporting). I also think of newsreels from the 1940s and 1950s (as I know them from Dutch cinemas): Whereas the reality of the images cannot be doubted, the style and format, even their black-and-white imagery, makes them seem, to the contemporary viewer, completely unreal. What de Certeau maintains, then, is that televisual formats and styles “have the twofold and strange power of transforming seeing into believing, and of fabricating realities out of appearances” (1984:187).

The relevance of these thoughts for religions that seek to access the public sphere—and face the task of being publicly credible—should not be underestimated. Success in the public sphere means accessing broadcast media, and accessing the media requires playing along with the style and format requirements that lend credibility to the mediated message. Following de Certeau, one can assert that a religious ritual, broadcast on TV, convinces first and foremost by looking like a professional TV production, that is, by avoiding any breach of televisual styles and formats. Similarly, a sacred narrative transmitted through radio must be compatible with the dominant styles and formats in radio production. It becomes credible because of its convincing radio format, not because of its content. It is along these lines of thought that Ayşe Öncü, in her intriguing account

of the performance of religious authorities on Turkish TV talk shows, argues that televisual styles profoundly affect the perception of religious authority. The imam who frequents talk shows to “explain” Islam, and who, therefore, becomes a national celebrity, builds up a different kind of charisma than the imam who leads the community in prayer in a local mosque (Öncü 2006). Charles Hirschkind (2001), in his study of (audiocassette) taped sermons in Cairo, makes a similar point as he shows that the Islamic preachers who succeed in what is a highly competitive market are those who have sought to engage the tastes, desires, and sensory experiences of media consumers. In his discussion of the TV-personality spirits (among a wide range of equally fantastic spirits) that appear in the celebrations of the Venezuelan Maria Lionza cult, Rafael Sánchez states that televisual realities have trickled into the cult’s practices from all sides. Spirit possession, says Sánchez, “literalizes TV,” as the spirits greet their audiences with formulaic statements reminiscent of the statements made by anchorpersons on Venezuelan TV; and all during their performance, they use “the codified speech patterns, bodily language, and dress styles that the media has popularised for a large gallery of characters” (2001:422).

So how does one describe the particular styles that make up the Brazilian “televisuals” that media consumers in this country have grown accustomed to—so much so that they feel “at home” in them? What is the “ensemble of recurring key terms and conventions” that makes up the televisual style? Searching for an answer to these—admittedly somewhat grandiose—questions, I consulted a Brazilian manual for TV production and direction (Bonasio 2002), assuming that in it I would find the basic guidelines Brazilian TV producers work with. Reading chapters on writing, aesthetics in the media, presenting and acting for television, and lighting for television, I concluded that I could, in fact, have picked any manual from any place in the world: The language of TV making seems entirely universal. Nonetheless, reading the manual was a revealing exercise, as it conveyed a clear sense of what is particular to televisual styles.

*Perfection* is the word that probably best captures what Valter Bonasio’s readers should strive for when producing TV programs. The televisual world is a world of perfection. Take the telenovela. Whereas telenovela characters are victims of the most capricious whims of fate, living tumultuous lives full of drama, stylistically they are never out of control. These characters never mumble or stumble over their lines but always articulate their words clearly. They may be thrown out of their homes and end up living in the gutter, but they never have pimples on their faces or dripping noses. The kitchen sink in a character’s home may be a mess—if that is what the story line requires—but it is never a dirty mess (let alone a stinking mess). It is a well-arranged mess. On talk shows the situation is no different: Conversations should be smooth, messages should be clear, and although drama is

sought and produced (a lot of crying goes on during Brazilian talk shows—with the talk-show host often joining in), guests should at all times produce coherent stories. Needless to say, tissues should always be within reach, and weeping guests should show concern over their mascara and other makeup.

Defining television as a most “intimate” medium that is watched “in the intimacy of the home, from only a few metres distance,” Bonasio’s manual puts great stress on “looking natural.” One reads, “For television, it is absolutely essential that the presenter acts in an easy going and comfortable style. Naturalness is the key word for you to appear well on TV” (Bonasio 2002:203). The way to achieve this “natural look,” however, is not through relaxation but absolute control. Over and over again, Bonasio instructs TV producers and directors to be in full control of every single detail: Do not use office chairs, as the presenter will move and turn unnecessarily. Do not use jewelry that might tinkle, and do not use it excessively. Do not gesticulate. If people refuse makeup, take a shot and show them what they look like in the studio lights. Use discreet colors, because they look better on TV. If you want to be taken seriously on television, dress yourself in accordance with the style and format of the program “because clothing speaks about the person even before a single word has been spoken” (Bonasio 2002:143).

What this TV manual brings to the fore is that televisual realities radiate perfection, and *perfection* may more accurately sum up televisual styles than other possible descriptors such as *modern* or *urban*. The cultists who hired Antônio to make a video of their rite of passage and asked him to make the event look like a telenovela wanted to position their future remembrance of this important moment in their religious life in this same world of perfection.<sup>19</sup>

The person who came closest to expressing this during my research was Clarice, a middle-aged medium. We were watching a videotape made during the celebration of the 16th anniversary of the bond between a spirit called “Martim Pescador” and Clarice’s sister. Referring to the way she was dressed for the occasion, Clarice said, “For my orixá I only want the very best.” Her “very best” was a green evening gown—green is the color of the orixá Oxossi—a glittering and glamorous affair that could have been taken out of a 1950s Hollywood production. Clarice’s “very best” was not something she learned from the dominant voices of candomblé in the public sphere, who are busy redefining candomblé as an African religion, and who would probably have wanted Oxossi to look like an indigenous hunter, with feathers, wax prints, and raffia. Clarice’s notion of the “very best” was rooted in the glamorous world of perfection that she watches every night on television.

### Concluding remarks

My discussion of some of the first moves by those in Bahian candomblé circles toward the use of video technology to

represent their universe has brought to the fore that cultists have begun to explore the expressive potential of “televsual” formats and styles to represent their religion. As I have explained, in *candomblé* the use of video technology to replicate religious activity is deeply contested. It clashes with prevalent notions that the experiencing body of a possessed cultist is the one and only medium capable of rendering present the divine and that *candomblé*’s deep knowledge can only be transmitted through the embodied practices of the initiation rituals. Moreover, the thought that religious activity is now technically reproducible by means of a camera triggers fears that “the secrets will be out on the streets,” as one priest phrased it. Yet for all of these hotly debated issues, one cannot but conclude that the appeal of new media proves hard to resist. Certainly no consensus exists among cultists how, when, and where to allow the cameras in, but their deployment in *candomblé* circles is ever more ubiquitous.

In conclusion, I briefly discuss what these developments signal, both for the study of *candomblé* and for the broader anthropological discussion about the relationship between religion and new media technologies. The home videos that I have discussed counter both sacerdotal and anthropological portrayals of the cult as a sovereign universe that is somehow immune to the world in which it operates. They unmistakably speak to a desire on the part of cultists to bring their religious activities into consonance with their daily life worlds (rather than locate these activities in an imagined “traditional Africa”). Employing a televisual language and style—that speaks to the tastes and aesthetic ideals of Brazilian media consumers—these tapes signal the cultists’ wish to make their enthusiasm for, faith in, dedication to, and love of *candomblé* known and understood to an imagined public that is located beyond the strict confines of the temple—a public, moreover, they reckon themselves to be part of. In other words, what these tapes seek to communicate is that one may impress some re-Africanizing hardliners (and the odd anthropologist) by dressing up in Nigerian garments—but one’s mother, neighbors, and colleagues from work will definitely be more impressed when a celebration marking an important moment in one’s religious life “almost looks like TV.”

The broader relevance of this finding is that it confronts scholars (once more) with the extent to which TV emanates an “aura” that is all its own and bestows blessings on all that is caught in its blue lights. What is more, in a thoroughly mediatized society such as Brazil, TV has become the authorizing medium par excellence, the site at which the shift is being made between what matters and what does not, between what is noteworthy and what can be ignored, between what is merely of individual interest and what should be brought to the attention of the nation. Whatever is processed and emitted by TV gains importance, prestige, and status. And whatever seeks to mirror TV’s forms

and styles may expect to appear larger than itself. TV, in other words, is a major production site of social value and the locus at which individuals and groups alike seek to realize themselves.

The observation that the expressive potential of modern mass media is used to both authenticate *candomblé* (by inscribing it into the reality of the cultists’ everyday life world) and authorize *candomblé* (by expressing its value in a language of prestige that is universally accepted and understood) clearly calls for a revision of ideas still current in many religion and media studies, among them, that the presence of modern mass media in the realm of religion is largely understood in terms of a secularizing agent, destined to “cheapen” authentic messages and to dissolve religious identities shaped within the confines of “traditional” settings. Clearly, the material that I have presented here does not allow for such an antagonistic and one-dimensional portrayal of the relationship between media and religion. The spheres of modern mass media and *candomblé* are linked in unexpected and complicated ways. New media technologies open up new possibilities for the religious imagination, just as they cast existing practices of mediation in a new, and not always favorable, light. Jeremy Stolow’s remark that media and mediation constitute “inherently unstable and ambiguous conditions of possibility for religions signifying practices” (2005:125) is, therefore, accurately phrased and an important reminder of what one should expect to find when studying the relationship between religion and media: an ongoing struggle over the proper way to render present the sacred.

In *candomblé*, the introduction of video technology has certainly not produced a shift away from the body as the privileged site of hierophany. When Clarice showed me the video of her sister’s celebration in honor of the spirit *Martim Pescador*, she took my hand and put it on her arm: “See, its cold! See the goosebumps? My cowboy spirit (*boiadeiro*) is calling me!” In this example, one is tempted to say, the body is mobilized to authenticate and authorize the religious significance of the televisual images. Yet the televisual images, in turn, allowed Clarice to communicate the importance and relevance of that bodily experience beyond the immediate confines of the *candomblé* community, in terms that are understood by all television spectators who have found themselves moved and touched by the images on a TV screen. It is this inextricable entanglement of religious and media imaginaries that should guide studies of religion in contemporary media societies.

## Notes

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1. Throughout this article, all Portuguese to English translations are mine.

2. Campos 1999 rightly points out the Kardecist origin of these ideas. For a discussion of the widespread influence of Kardecist spiritism in Brazil, see Hess 1991.

3. I am aware that, to some ears, the words *cult* and *cultists* may have pejorative overtones. I obviously do not intend any negative implications. I feel that the alternative words *religion* and *believers*, although probably more prestigious and politically correct, are suggestive of “religion” and “belief” as universal categories, whereas Talal Asad (1993) has convincingly argued that these are, in fact, very Christian notions.

4. Paul Christopher Johnson (2002) recently characterized candomblé as a “religion of the hand,” an expression one of his informants used to underline that the things that really matter in candomblé only exist in the doing, in bodily action. For a long time, Johnson argues, “the orixás [the spiritual entities worshipped in candomblé] were not discursively framed so much as ritually worked” (2002:170). The vast ethnographic literature on candomblé, which by now covers a period of more than a century, has little to say on visual representations of religious concepts. Nina Rodrigues, researching candomblé temples in Salvador in the late 19th century, commented on the “ephemeral constitution” of the orixás and noticed that, “for the moment, they are still represented by inanimate objects such as water, stone, shells, iron, etc. or by trees, or fruits, which are chosen simply because of their special form, or some other accidental feature. The Negroes are not at all concerned with these objects resembling a human being” (1935:37). Rodrigues found “idols” in places of worship; these were not “images of the gods, but simply objects in which the gods had chosen to live” (1935:59). Edison Carneiro (1961:98) noted that in 1948 he only found a few anthropomorphic figurines in wood, horn, or clay (called “oxês”); these were not representations of the African gods but statues of priests or initiates possessed by the orixás, which again seems to point out the primacy of possession as the medium through which the divine makes itself known.

5. In this article, unless otherwise noted, all references to “videos” and to “tapes” are to videotapes that can be viewed with a videocassette recorder.

6. These temples are Casa Branca, Gantois, Ilê Axé Opô Afonja, and Alaketu.

7. Conspicuously absent in this imagery are the elements of the scandalous, the uncanny, and the primitive that had dominated the public representation of candomblé in earlier times and that still hover in the minds of many Bahians. Thus, in Salvador, the public image of the cult shows the immaculate white of the clothes adherents wear, not the human bodies drenched in the blood of sacrificial animals. It shows the rhythm of the dance, not the spasms of trance. It shows the elaborate philosophies of the priest, not the obscene language that some of the “Indian” *caboclo* spirits manage to produce. Outside of Salvador, however, particularly in the mass media controlled by Pentecostal churches, this “other side” of candomblé is depicted.

8. Several past scandals have shocked the candomblé community, most notably the publication of photographs by Henri-Georges Clouzot in the French periodical *Paris Match* in 1951, showing initiation rituals, and an article in the Brazilian family monthly *O Cruzeiro* by José Medeiros the same year, again showing initiation rituals under the sensational title “The Fiancées of the Bloodthirsty Gods.” For

a discussion of these and other scandals, see Castillo 2005. Geraldo Sarno’s documentary film *Iao* (1976), which revealed scenes of initiation, met with fierce criticism. Jana Bokova’s documentary *Bahia of All Saints* (1994) is a telling film in its failure to make priests and cult adepts speak about their religion in front of the camera: Time and again, the filmmaker crashes into a wall of silence and sheer refusal. The aversion in candomblé circles to cameras and publicity is well illustrated by an anecdote told to me by TV journalist Lílina Reis. Her very first assignment was to report on one of the more orthodox (and media-shy) temples in town. “It was obviously a question of my boss putting me to the test. He knew perfectly well these people do not want to be filmed, yet he made it my first assignment!”

9. I have elaborated on this particular perspective elsewhere (van de Port 1998). For a similar approach, see Ginzburg 1980.

10. This figure of 2,500 was given to me by a leader of the Federação Nacional dos Cultos Afro-Brasileiros, who claimed that it was the number of registered cult houses. I have not found independent sources to confirm that the number is accurate.

11. For a full discussion of the so-called *reafricanização*, see, for example, Dantas 1988 and Capone 2000. The role of anthropologists in this process is intriguing: The French ethnographer Verger informed worshippers of the orixás on both sides of the Atlantic about each others’ existence, and he became an important provider of knowledge for the Bahian priesthood. The issue cannot be discussed fully in this article. I refer readers to the Brazilian film about Verger, *Mensagem entre dois mundos* (Hollanda 2000) as well as a long review of this film by Edgardo Krebs (2002).

12. In one of her publications, Mãe Stella had already made public her dissatisfaction with outsiders’ representations of the cult (Santos 1993:88).

13. Notwithstanding the “activist” profile sought in such a text, the credits mention that the video was “winner of the public concourse of videographic projects organized by the Cultural Foundation of the Bahian State”—a sure sign that the project received financial aid from the Bahian government.

14. Secrecy is also important in the dominant historical narrative of the candomblé community, which holds that it was only through secrecy that the cult managed to survive centuries of oppression and persecution by state and church authorities.

15. Somewhat gleefully, he recounted that a U.S. film crew had wanted to film a celebration in his temple and that he had agreed on condition that the orixás be consulted first and give their permission. Every day he threw the cowry shells to divine the wish of the gods, but they never consented, and after a week, the film crew had to pack its bags and return to the United States.

16. See, for instance, the interviews with Stella de Oxossi (1993) and Olga de Alaketu (1995) on the talk show *Frente a Frente*, made available on video by the Instituto de Radiodifusão Educativa da Bahia (IRDEB).

17. For a description of the deká ritual, see Costa Lima 2003.

18. As Vagner Gonçalves da Silva has remarked for São Paulo, photographic or video recording of ritual events is already a common sight in the Afro-Brazilian religions and is done not only by those researching the temples but also by the temples themselves. He noticed that videotapes and photographs are not only souvenirs for the participants in the ritual but are also used as a kind of “proof” that the event happened, and one can use them to counter allegations that one is a charlatan priest who never was initiated (Gonçalves da Silva 2000:63). These remarks correspond with my own observations and experiences. Sometimes I was allowed to take pictures (because “I was a friend of the house”), and at one point, when I was invited to witness an animal sacrifice (a so-called



matança, which is by all accounts—and certainly in my perception of things—a ritual that outsiders have no access to), the priest was very disappointed that I had not brought my camera. One is tempted to conclude that the prohibition on mediation is best understood as yet another dimension of the performance of the secrecy principle.

19. “Future remembrance,” of course, refers to the documentary film on Ghanaian studio photographers by Tobias Wendl and Nancy du Plessis, *Future Remembrance: Photography and Image Arts in Ghana* (1998).

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