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Gods dienstwet.

AESTHETIC FORMATIONS

Media, Religion, and the Senses

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Chapter 1

“Don’t Ask Questions, Just Observe!” Boundary Politics in Bahian Candomblé

Mattijs van de Port

When I got stuck in a traffic jam in São Gonçalo do Retiro, a peripheral neighborhood in Salvador in which the *terreiro* (temple) called Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá is situated, I began to realize that my assumptions about the upcoming event had been wrong. From what I had read in the announcement, the *Semana Cultural da Herança Africana na Bahia* (Cultural Week of the African Heritage in Bahia), was going to be yet another one of these rather boring meetings of Salvador’s Candomblé elite, who organize a never ending cycle of (often highly self-congratulatory) seminars, debates, fairs, and *homenagens*. However, judging from what I saw through the window of my car things might well be different this time. Hundreds of cars were trying to make it to the opening night of the Cultural Week, impatiently honking their horns, clutching up ill-lit roads, and floodlighting the street vendors who ran from one car to the next to sell their cashew nuts and beer and silicone bra strings. Policemen were all around, trying to control the traffic and monitor the crowds, who, in a steady stream, entered the central square of the *terreiro*’s compound.

Yes, the Candomblé elite was there. I recognized some of the dreadlocked activists from UNEGRO¹ and Casa de Oxumaré, a Candomblé house with an activist profile; the *chique* ladies with their expensive afro-print dresses and turbans who always seem to be around; just as these men who—whatever the color of their skin—dress up in Nigerian fashion, with

wide, colorful pants, caftan like shirts, and a little hat in matching print. I soon spotted some of the intellectuals and anthropologists who frequently show up at these events (the latter probably commenting on my eternal presence in their field notes). I also identified some of the girls from the terreiro choir, who all boosted new, elaborately braided hairdos and wore identical wine red dresses, the color of Xangô. The rest of the audience must have been made up of a significant portion of the clients, members, and affiliates of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá and—judging from their Bermudas and plastic flip-flops—a great number of people from the local neighborhood. As always, the place was full of gays, people like my hairdresser Adilson (who had alerted me to the event) and his friends, who had come here to have an evening out, to pay their respect to the terreiro, meet up with friends and flirt a bit with strangers.

On a raised platform, behind a long table decorated with African fabrics, raffia, palm leaves, and dried pumpkins on a string, sat Mãe Stella de Oxóssi, high priestess of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, with her honored guests. The priestess was all dressed up for the occasion. Her white turban, many-colored necklaces, and white crinoline dress sparkled in the spotlights—an exotic, queen-like figure, which dulled the appearance of the elderly gentlemen in tie-and-suit who sat to her right and left: Gilberto Gil, the minister of culture in the recently elected leftist Lula government, Antonio Imbassahy, the mayor of Salvador, and two well-known local anthropologists, Julio Braga and Vivaldo Costa da Lima.

The latter was droning up a text he had written for the occasion. It was something about the *obá's* of Xangô, a council of twelve “ministers”—a honorary function this particular terreiro has introduced in the internal terreiro hierarchy. Costa da Lima had made it his task to highlight the authenticity of that move with detailed ethnographic accounts from Africa, where similar institutions seem to exist. It went on and on and on, a stream of words that no one really listened to, but that, as a play of sounds—Portuguese sounds mingling with African sounds—sufficed to convey that Bahia's link with Yoruba culture was being celebrated here.

When Gilberto Gil finally took over the microphone, the chatting and muttering of the audience quieted down. The brand new minister in the Lula government—flown in by helicopter just for the occasion, as I was told—reminded the audience that he too was an *obá*, a minister of Xangô. Accepting his new job in Brasília, he said, had been greatly facilitated by the fact that he already was a minister “at this primary, that is, the spiritual level” long before his current position as a minister of state. He praised Xangô, that “great saint,” and expressed his deepest respect and the respect of all the ministers and members of parliament in Brasília to Mãe Stella, to

the Candomblé community, to the *Roma Negra* that is Salvador, and to his beloved Bahia, the “blessed land of the Orixás.” Time and again, he received a standing ovation from the audience. TV-cameras pushed forward, trying to get as close as possible to the speaker. People in the audience took pictures as well.

The opening of the Cultural Week ended with a presentation of “Xangô Awards” to people whose outstanding support for the community of Candomblé needed to be highlighted. It turned out to be a veritable celebrity show as artists, scholars, actors, and TV personalities from within the Candomblé community handed over the sculpted statues to artists, scholars, actors, and TV personalities from the society at large.

All the while, Mãe Stella remained seated, nodding her turbanted head appreciatively when the merits of the winners were proclaimed, distributing vague smiles to no one in particular. At one point she whispered something in the ear of Gilberto Gil, who was sitting to her right. And she also communicated something to the mayor of Salvador, who was sitting to her left. But that was for us to see, not to hear. For she never addressed the audience. No word of welcome and no word of gratitude. Nothing. Not a single word came from her lips.

“She's very humble” is what Adilson told me when I asked him about her not saying a word. I knew what he was talking about. People would always tell me, time and again, that Mãe Stella is such a humble woman. Common, plain—*humilde e simples*—were the terms they would use. But that was not what I was looking at during this opening night. Amidst the hollow phrases and worn out clichés that make up the soundscape of officialdom, Mãe Stella remained silent, Queen of an Ineffable Sacred, radiating a power and potency that far exceeded the ministers, mayors, and academics.

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. The task of individual terreiros is 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 *mercado dos bens de salvação* (the market for salvation commodities): they generate an income by providing spiritual, divinatory, and curative services to a clientele made up of both cultists and noncultists.²

Such overall similarities among the different traditions notwithstanding, the Candomblé universe is a heterogeneous field. Cultists recognize the traditions of different *nações* (nations), such as Nagô-Ketu, Jeje, and Angola, and within these traditions the autonomy of the individual terreiro

is such that considerable variation is found in doctrine as well as in ritual (Capone 1999; Santos 1995; Wafer 1991; Matory 2005). 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. Cultists retain a strong sense of community, especially now that the cult is threatened by increasingly powerful Pentecostal churches, which have designated Candomblé as the prime site of "devil worship" (see also Oosterbaan in this volume). 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. With historical records that go back to the first half of the nineteenth 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 1999; Dantas 1988; Parés 2006).

Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá is one of these prestigious terreiros in Salvador. Of all the terreiros, it is probably most actively engaged in reconstructing a public face for Candomblé. The Cultural Week was very much part of this effort.

A Polite Request to Please, Shut Up

Long before the Cultural Week took place, Mãe Stella wrote a booklet called *Meu Tempo é Agora* (My Time Is Now, 1993): a curious mixture of autobiography, religious guidebook, and etiquette manual for terreiro life. She wrote:

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:³ don't ask questions, just observe! (Azevedo 1993, 88)

Mãe Stella's proud assertion that her religion is so "strong" and "mysterious" as to garner the attention of outsiders signals the assertiveness of some members of the Bahian priesthood. The opening scene to this chapter illustrates that there are grounds for her pride: from a forbidden and persecuted religious practice of African slaves and their descendants, Candomblé has become a highly prestigious and well-respected religion, which ranks as the prime cultural heritage of the Bahian state, and attracts ever more variegated audiences (cf. Santos 2005; Van de Port 2005a). However, Mãe Stella's performance of silence in front of a huge audience, as well as her explicit call "not to ask questions," is emblematic of a deep concern in certain Candomblé circles that, for all of the successes that have been booked in Candomblé's long struggle for social and political recognition, another kind of threat looms large at the horizon that urges the priesthood to police the boundaries of their imagined religious community ever more rigorously.

Due to the overwhelming interest in Candomblé, the cult has become the object of literary interpretation, artistic elaboration, philosophical meditation, and anthropological explanation (not to mention commercial and political exploitation). There is, in other words, a hyperproliferation of discursive knowledge about Candomblé, and ever more people (and prestigious ones at that) are involved in the production of this knowledge as to what is Candomblé. In the eyes of the priesthood, this development poses a serious threat to what they call the cult's "deep truths": its *segredos* (secrets), *mistérios* (mysteries), and *fundamentos* (fundaments). In Candomblé, it is understood that "deep truth" only reveals itself during the time-consuming path of initiation. Deep truths "come to you with time," as one initiate phrased it succinctly: with submitting one's body to the initiation procedures and the yearly cycle of rituals; with the observation of the many do's and don'ts of terreiro life; and finally, with opening up the body for divine possession. "Deep truth" is an understanding of things that is, in its essence, inarticulable.

Both Mãe Stella's silence and her call "not to ask questions" seek to express this inarticulability: it is a demonstration of the belief that there is an incommensurable difference between saying "the initiation cycle lasts seven long years" (a phrase of seven words, which produce their meaning in a split second) and the experience of living those seven long years of energies given and energies received. Highlighting that difference, instructing outsiders "not to ask questions," is a refusal to surrender to the proliferation of discursivity, to other people's interpretations, explorations, meditations, and explanations of the cult. What should be discussed in this chapter, then, is how the notion of nondiscursive "deep truths," grounded in a prolonged immersion in the ritual cycle, has come to play a

crucial role in the attempts of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá to police the boundaries of its imagined religious community; how the performance of silence (which paradoxically requires a constant breaking of the silence) seeks to contain noninitiates in the role of ignorant yet awestruck spectators, and how priestly power over religious meaning can thus be regained.

The Public Life of Candomblé

In Bahia, Candomblé has always been a public presence, but, for reasons that I have elaborated elsewhere, from the 1920s onward Candomblé has become the “mastercode” of contemporary Bahian culture politics: its symbols, images, myths, philosophies, rhythms, and aesthetics have been endlessly reworked and publicly displayed to signify Bahia’s unique cultural character (Dantas 1988; Johnson 2002; Santos 2005; Van de Port 2006, 2007). Huge statues representing the orixás have been erected at central points in the Bahian capital Salvador, Candomblé terreiros have been put on the list of the state’s historical monuments, and—as can be deduced from the opening night of the Cultural Week—politicians regularly appear in front of the cameras with Candomblé priestesses to make sure that their links with the Candomblé universe are publicly known. On the commercial front, Bahiatursa, the state tourist organization, is fully involved in the dispersion of Candomblé imagery so as to create a recognizable and marketable profile on the global market for exotic travel: a visit to a nightly ceremony of Candomblé is now an obligatory element in the Bahian tourist program. Shopping malls, hotels, streets, and condominiums have been named after the orixás. Advertising agencies time and again seek recourse to Candomblé imagery to sell products as varied as typewriters, apartment buildings, garden furniture, and insurances.

As stated, this overall interest in the cult, and the ubiquitous presence of Candomblé imagery in the Bahian public sphere, has produced a steady stream of visitors to the terreiros, seeking knowledge by asking questions: tourists, journalists, artists, intellectuals, and a large number of anthropologists. Consequently, the cult is inscribed into an ever more colorful fan of narratives as to its meaning and significance. Social movements—blacks, gays, ecologists, feminists, progressive Catholics—have “discovered” the expressive potential of Candomblé, recognizing it as a proto form of their emancipatory struggles and politics, and have come to understand Candomblé as the “exemplary gay friendly religion,” a “site of black resistance,” and “a form of ecological consciousness.” In other circuits Candomblé has been interpreted as a kind of astrology, as the immaterial cultural heritage of the

Figure 1.1 Statue of Iemanjá, Candomblé goddess of the deep seas, in serial production. Photo by Mattijs van de Port.

Bahian state, as an ideal blueprint for the reorganization of business organizations (Vergari and Helio 2000), as a proto particle theory (Correia 1999), and—with the booming of Pentecostalism—as devil worship.

Responses in the Candomblé community to these developments are deeply ambivalent. As the opening of the Cultural Week already indicated, there is a lot to gain by all the attention. The prestige that comes with visiting statesmen, professors, and celebrities opens up alleys for material profit and political influence. Terreiros like Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá openly court these possibilities. In fact, the text that was read by anthropologist Vivaldo Costa Lima at the opening night discussed “the council of the twelve *obás*” and the honorary title of the *oloiês* or *ojoiês* (Yorubá for “friend of the house”)—inventions (or “restorations,” depending on one’s perspective) that help to link ever more influential and affluent outsiders, “writers, deputies, painters, university professors, merchants, industrials, medical doctors and foreigners who live in Bahia,” in da Costa Lima’s words (Lima 1966, 101) to the religious community. Next to these prestigious bonds, terreiros like Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá successfully profit from revenues that follow from being labeled “cultural heritage”: state subsidies to keep up the premises, NGO funding for “social” activities, and revenues from tourists visiting the terreiro compound.

Yet there is also a deep concern about what the new audiences in the public sphere seek to make out of the cult. With indignation Mãe Stella notices that “Candomblé became fashion: the *búzios* (cowry-shells) are thrown [a divinatory practice, MP] in shops and bookstores, the strings of beads and the *ferramentas* (iron symbols of the orixás) are used only because they are ‘beautiful’” (Azevedo and Martins 1989, 20). Worse, at the time of carnival “sacred objects of our rituals are paraded down the avenues, and people behave as if they are possessed” (ibid.). Insisting that Candomblé should be restored to sovereignty, that the cult can only be understood its own terms, she wrote

Since slavery, black is considered to be synonymous with poverty, ignorance, and knowing no other right than to know not to have any rights; the black man has always been the toy of the culture that stigmatizes him, and thus his religion became a play as well. Let us be free, let us fight against what humbles us and disrespects us, against that which only accepts us if we dress in the clothes they gave us to wear. (Mãe Stella, in Campos 2003, back cover)

While this critique concerns society at large, Mãe Stella’s fiercest critiques are directed toward terreiros and Candomblé practitioners who stray from the aforementioned “purity of propositions and rituals”:

There are those who dress up in the garments of the orixá, who improvise, merely “give it a go” (*dá um jeitinho*), who use *garçons* to serve fancy drinks, offer candle light dinners while the Candomblé is taking place and watch on video the latest celebration in honour of the orixás. At present, we even have “computerized priests”... [we too] love candlelight dinners with a good glass of wine, but everything has its place and its time. And this place, most certainly, is not a Candomblé terreiro at the time of a public celebration in honour of the orixás. (1989, 21)

She continues that “in the face of so many barbarisms (*barbaridades*) acted out by people who say they are initiated—some of them being priests—we can’t blame non-adepts for their disbelief” (20). The extent of her worries is probably best captured in a statement that I found in a recently published “profile” of her religious leadership, written by one of her *filhas*:

The worst enemies of Candomblé today are those who practice it in a fluttering way. Those who have no knowledge of the secrets (*fundamentos*), who have no basis or certainty as to what it is that they are doing. They disfigure everything. They are unscrupulous. The police, the state, the church, they are no longer the enemies of Candomblé. Our enemies are the so called adepts, who disfigure everything and destroy Candomblé. [There

are] fanatics in other religions also, but they do not attack us. (Mãe Stella, in Campos 2003, 60)

One can easily see what lies at the heart of Mãe Stella’s concerns. In her perception the Candomblé of the public sphere is moving eerily close to what Jean Baudrillard (2001) would call a *simulacrum*. Not only has the omnipresence of Candomblé imagery outside the terreiro walls severed this imagery from priestly control over the production of meaning; the power of the public forms of Candomblé is such that these forms cannot be dismissed as “mere imitations.” They have become a reality on their own, producing—in the way of the simulacrum—their own reality effects.

Numerous examples come to mind: Joãozinho da Goméia, a priest from Salvador who already in the 1950s stirred up the nightlife in Rio de Janeiro by taking his troupe of initiates to perform their rituals and dances in fancy nightclubs (cf. Lody and Silva 2000); the popular TV talk show in the 1970s, where a possessed medium was invited over, which then sent the whole studio audience—including the talk show host—in trance in front of a nationwide TV audience (cf. Maggie 1992); the initiates who were found singing sacred texts copied from an ethnographic book (cf. Silva 1995); the woman who told me she became possessed by a spirit when listening to a carnival song on the radio in which the name of an orixá was mentioned; the awe-instilling artworks of the Bahian photographer Mario Cravo Neto who makes ample use of Candomblé as a source of inspiration, and who, in the words of one critic, is a “magician” himself, “capable to capture the imponderable mystery beyond the mere images of an initiation religion” (Ildásio Tavares, in Cravo Neto 2004).⁴

In all of these instances, distinctions between “true” and “false,” “original” and “copy,” “real” and “imaginary,” “sacred” and “profane” lose their meaning, causing havoc in the regimes of truth that buttress Mãe Stella’s religious views (Baudrillard 2001, 171).

Seeking to Undo the Work of the Simulacrum

In *Simulacras and Simulations* (2001), Baudrillard describes the responses of societies where the dynamics of simulation are at work as follows:

When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. And there is a panic-stricken

production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production. (174)

It is astonishing just how much of this can be pointed out in Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá's answer to the perceived threat of the simulacrum. Time and again, the terreiro shows vigorous attempts to "draw the line," to instruct the public at large that "Candomblé is not a matter of opinion" but "a religious reality that can only be realized within the purity of its propositions and rituals" (Mãe Stella, in Campos 2003, back cover).

This striving for "purity" takes the form of an antisyncretistic ideology that seeks to restore Candomblé to its African origins. Thus, in 1983, Mãe Stella initiated the penning of a public manifesto to break with syncretism, which she dismissed as "a relic of the past," which may have been necessary to help the cult survive under slavery but is no longer useful in the present time. She called for the removal of all catholic saints from the terreiro's altars (in the little museum at the terreiro's compound, I found them, rather unceremoniously, stored in an old fashioned, glass paned kitchen cupboard). She encouraged the use of Yorubá in liturgy, naming practices, and education; and in the design of the terreiro's Web site, publications, and video productions, icons signaling "Africa" (wax-prints, wood-carvings, shields and spears, leopard skins, etc.) produce an African look. All of this to impress the public at large that "... the religion that we practice is an African religion, it's essence is African. We are Brazilians, but we have a religion of Yorubá origin. African" (Mãe Stella, in Pretto and Serpa 2002, 33).

"Purity" also means calling a halt to the blurring of boundaries between Candomblé as "religion" and Candomblé as popular culture. As will be elaborated below, Mãe Stella is not only crusading against earlier understandings of Candomblé as a "cult," "sect," or "animistic practice," but most of all against the label of "folklore." She repeatedly fulminated against the profanation of sacred symbols from Candomblé in the field of entertainment, commerce, and carnival.

The "second-hand truths, objectivity and authenticity" that—following Baudrillard—are in such high demand when simulation abounds are delivered by a great number of anthropologists who have put themselves at the service of the priesthood. With the prestige of the written word (in what is largely an oral tradition), the prestige of their scientific methods, as well as the prestige of their belonging to the white middle classes, they have become important arbiters in an attempt to shift the "true" from the "false," and the "authentic" from the "degenerated." Their books are widely known by the Candomblé priesthood—especially the work of Pierre Verger, a French anthropologist and photographer who makes explicit comparisons between Bahian Candomblé and the "original" cults in West Africa.

These attempts, however, only exacerbate the dilemmas Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá is facing in its claim to be the one-and-only authentic voice of Candomblé. Mãe Stella seems to be well aware that the public sphere is the arena where the fight for sovereignty has to be fought and although a visibly media-shy figure, she does seek publicity to pursue her politics. She has published a number of books, gives public speeches, appears on TV and in the newspapers, organizes debates and scholarly meetings, has initiated a museum on the terreiro's compound, and has participated in international conferences on the religion of the Orixás. This move to the public sphere forces the terreiro to explain itself in the terms, media formats, and styles that govern the public sphere. In other words, to make her arguments and demands understood to a public at large, she will have to seek recourse to vocabularies and media images she imagines to be understandable for that public at large. And this is where sovereignty sought becomes sovereignty lost. In its attempt to make itself understood, the terreiro constantly resorts to comparisons of Candomblé with a Christian blueprint of religion ("It is clear that we are a religion, because we have a theology, we have a liturgy, and we have dogmas. These are three characteristics of all religions," Mãe Stella, in Pretto and Serpa 2002, 26; see also De Witte in this volume); conceptualizes the orixás in a New Age vocabulary as "ancient energies"; and stresses the importance of education and knowledge (Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá founded a school on the terreiro grounds, and is highly active in organizing seminars and scholarly meetings).

Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá is certainly successful in foregrounding itself as the legitimate representative of Afro-Brazilian religion ("we are now always invited to religious meetings," Mãe Stella says, "we may not always go, but we are always invited!"). Yet the prize that is being paid for public recognition is that the public understanding as to what Candomblé is all about does not transcend the horizons of what the public finds imaginable. This is well illustrated in the following *laudatio* for Mãe Stella that I found in a Bahian newspaper. The text mentions, among other things, that

... the priestess was chosen by the United Nations to represent the tradition of the Orixás in Rio de Janeiro, next to the most diverse religious leaders such as the Dalai Lama of Tibet and Rabbi Henry Sobel. As a recognition of the utmost importance of the cultural and social work that Mãe Stella has done in Bahia and in Brazil she has been invited to conferences at universities and international institutions such as the Brazilian Contemporary Arts in London, Harvard University in Washington, and the Caribbean Institute in New York. The priestess also received the medals "Maria Quitéria" and the "Ordem do Cavaleiro," the trophies "Esso" (a

prize for black writers) and "Clementina de Jesus," and a great *homenagem* (tribute) by the Bahian people in 1995 (...) To foreground her dedication and activities to strengthen the Candomblé religion with its traditions of thousands of years, Mãe Stella has now received from the Federal Government the medal of the "Order of Cultural Accomplishment," and will see her terreiro of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá be declared to be part of the National Historical Patrimony. (Tribuna da Bahia, 20 November 1999)

I can hardly think of a better demonstration of how the simple fact that Candomblé has accessed the public sphere profoundly changed the symbolization of priestly authority—indeed, just how much Mãe Stella became dependent on public criteria to argue her authority as a religious leader beyond the walls of her terreiro: in ethnographies (as well as in Mãe Stella's own publications) the sources of sacerdotal power and prestige—and consequently, authority—are always explained in terms of the seniority and genealogy of a terreiro, the reputation and stature of the priestly lineage, and the length of someone's initiation: authority is with *os mais velhos*—"the oldest," that is, those who are in the know (see Castillo 2005).

In the public sphere, however, the authority of the priestess can no longer be solely based on her having lived up to such religiously defined criteria. If a priestess like Mãe Stella wants to be *publicly* recognized as an authoritative voice, she needs to have recourse to a form of "impression management" that stresses values that a much wider audience is able to recognize and appreciate. And thus we are served this "cocktail of fame" that mixes "worldwide recognition" (Mãe Stella's election by the United Nations, and invitations to travel to places around the world) with academic prestige (Harvard and other universities), state decorations, and the full weight of Culture. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of Mãe Stella with the Dalai Lama and Rabbi Henry Sobel is another clear instance that the resources to construct a public notion of Mãe Stella's authority differ hugely from those that make up the display of authority in her own terreiro: in the *laudatio*, the priestess comes to represent ethnic, traditional, cultural, and socio-political values, rather than religious ones (cf. Van de Port 2005d).

It is hard to miss the irony in all of this. More than anything, it was Mãe Stella's vision to "restore" Candomblé to its status of "African religion" that drove her to the public sphere. Out in the public sphere, however, she had to mobilize all kinds of extra religious qualities so as to create a publicly recognizable profile of authority: what we find, then, is that her authority as a religious leader is rooted in the culture politics of the Bahian state, in her representing Afro-Brazilian culture, and—more and more—in her being simply "famous."

Eloquent Silence

What we find, then, is that, on the one hand, the truth-unsettling work of the simulacrum produces a call for an assertion of the boundaries of the true and authentic community of Candomblé. On the other hand, however, all attempts by the priesthood to produce such an assertion in the public sphere force them to "translate" their religious knowledge in publicly accessible terms, thus fuelling the simulacrum even further.

The call "not to ask questions" is an attempt to deal with these issues: attacking discursivity to bypass the "labyrinths" (as Mãe Stella phrased it succinctly) of meaning production; just as Mãe Stella's authoritative silence in the face of the anthropologist's endless stream of words at the opening night of the Cultural Week was highly suggestive of the priestess having access to greater, deeper truths. And this was indeed the suggestion made by all the priests that I encountered: getting to know us is getting to know our "deep truths," and these can only be accessed through initiation. A closer look at these "deep truths" may be necessary here.

The fact that Candomblé is a religion based on initiation means that its performance of secrecy is crucial. This performance of secrecy is guided by a great many rules and regulations, which determine who has access to what knowledge, and at what time; who is allowed to speak and who is to remain silent; who has the right to tread certain areas of the terreiro; 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, Castillo 2005).

The performance of secrecy is inextricably linked with—or rather expressive of—a very particular understanding in Candomblé circles as to what constitutes religious knowledge and how religious knowledge can be transmitted. Candomblé holds that knowledge can only be obtained through the "lived experience of interpersonal and group relationships, through transmission and absorption of a *força* (force), and a gradual development of symbolical and complex knowledge about all the collective and individual elements of the system at all levels" (Elbein dos Santos 1989, 17). What this means is that year in, year out, the cultists go through the motions of the ceremonies and ritual obligations, and it is only with the passing of the ritual cycles, with feeling the density of time itself, that the experiential knowledge that Candomblé seeks to instill in its adepts "sinks in." Knowledge, in other words, comes with doing: with observing the taboos, participating in the rituals, subjecting oneself to the rigid terreiro hierarchy, respecting one's commitments to the orixás. People from Candomblé are resolute in saying that there is no other road

to religious knowledge than this lengthy, time-consuming path and adepts told me that they were instructed, time and again, not to be curious, not to ask questions, not to sneak to one of the city's libraries to read ethnographies, not to try to run ahead of time, *quemando etapas* (skipping stages). Knowledge would come to them when the time was right for it. Giselle Binon-Cossard, a French anthropologist who became a priestess, explained it thus:

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 *decanter* [...]. 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. (Binon-Cossard, in Silva 2001, 44)

William James' classic description of mystical states as ineffable, noetic, transient, and passive helps to clarify the specific quality of this knowledge. With ineffability, James means that the experiential knowledge of the mystic defies expression. Its "quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others" because "[n]o adequate report of its contents can be given in words" (1904, 371). Adding to the ineffable the "noetic" quality of mystical states, James sought to highlight that while mysticism is a state of being, and the mystic's experiences are insights "unplumbed by the discursive intellect," these experiences are nonetheless to be understood as knowledge. "They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time" (ibid.). The notion of "transiency" signals the fact that mystical states cannot be sustained for long: they fade out, after which their quality can but imperfectly be reproduced in memory. James stressed that transiency does not imply that mystical states are merely interruptive. "Some memory of their content always remains, and a profound sense of their importance. They modify the inner life of the subject between the times of their recurrence" (372). "Passivity," the fourth quality attributed to mystical states of consciousness, expresses that "although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations... the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power" (ibid.).

Inarticulate yet deeply meaningful, inseparably linked to experiences in the here and now, mystical states do not lend themselves for remediation. Immediacy is their alpha and omega. To cast this knowledge in texts, images,

or whatever other expressive forms is—as Mãe Stella maintains—"dangerous, leading into true labyrinths, and with dire results." She certainly does not stand alone in her dismissal of all abstractions from direct experience. A Candomblé priestess told anthropologist Luis Nicolau Parés:

No one can ever really talk with certainty about the mysteries. The mysteries are the mysteries. The secrets are the secrets, and no one will ever know anything. Those who study, those who come to observe, they are observing, but they don't know the deep knowledge. For one says one thing, and another says another thing, and so they only leave one confused. I always leave the researchers dangling... (1997, 2)

This specific understanding of religious knowledge—with its stress on religious practices, rather than exegesis—privileges 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 to gain access to the mysterious *fundamentos*, the "deep knowledge" (Johnson 2002; cf. Van de Port 2005b) that Candomblé holds in high esteem. Statues and images only become meaningful after the bodily intervention of the priest in ritual acts. Words—as Juana Elbein dos Santos made clear—do not have power because of their explicatory potential, but because they are utterances of the body, involving breath, saliva, bodily temperature (1989, 46). Visual and discursive registers of mediation are explicitly declared to be inadequate for the transmission of "deep knowledge"—"mere images, mere words," as one of my interlocutors phrased it.

The performance of silence clearly serves to uphold the primacy of this conception of knowledge over other forms of knowing. Of course, there is other knowledge about the cult, as Mãe Stella's frequent media appearances testify. Terreiros have opened Web sites, published books, launched CDs with sacred chants and rhythms, have worked with documentary makers, and have produced videos. They organize study meetings and festivals to which they invite the press, hoping to get (and often getting) media coverage. There is also an emergent "tradition" of making photo albums and home videos of the important ceremonies that mark the progress of a cultist in the initiation process. Yet all of that is indeed understood as "another kind of knowledge." When asked why Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá opened up a Web site on the Internet, Mãe Stella replied:

As far as the Internet is concerned, we only did it to make public, even abroad, that there is an *Axé* in the way that we understand it, and what it is

that we offer in terms of education, culture, science, all of which can of course also contribute to a person's understanding of things. (Mãe Stella, in Pretto and Serpa 2002, 46)

Yet when I asked the manager of the terreiro's Web site to explain the choices underlying its content, I received a very brief response

We opted for this kind of information on our website. All other knowledge can only be acquired through initiation. References to the orixás, their colors, the days of the week consecrated to them, etc., that is a kind of knowledge that is already widely available. We initiated this webpage to participate on the Web, the importance is to be there. The question of the audience we address, the number of people we reach, our aims, all of that is secondary. I don't know whom you could contact for further information.

When Mãe Stella orders visitors to her terreiro not to ask questions, but simply observe the activities unfolding before their eyes, she voices a concern over a shift in mediation: with ever more people knocking on her terreiro's doors wanting to hear her out—shoot pictures, make documentaries, write books and dissertations, hold interviews, be informed—discursive, rational forms of understanding threaten to outclass the bodily, experiential forms of knowledge that Candomblé valorizes. What is at issue is an attempt to safeguard a passive, time-bound, bodily order of knowledge acquisition geared toward immersion in a world where learning is understood as a fast, active, and efficient process of knowledge exchange geared toward “getting the picture.”

The one example I will explore in greater depth so as to better grasp the troubling aspects of Candomblé having become a simulacrum concerns the Balé Folclórico da Bahia, the state folklore ensemble that puts on stage a spectacularized version of the dances of the orixás. I can't think of a clearer case of the working of the simulacrum as the sheer effervescence that is produced by this dance group, and unsurprisingly—there is no group subject to more venomous critiques from Mãe Stella and her ideological company than the Balé.

The Controversy around the Balé Folclórico da Bahia

The Balé Folclórico da Bahia exists since 1988. The company recruits its dancers “from the street,” as Zebrinha, the company's choreographer and instructor, told me in one of our interviews. If they prove to be talented

they are subjected to a tough regime of training and rehearsal. There is never a shortage of candidates, Balé Folclórico da Bahia is an international success, and travels all over the world. On Pelourinho, the historic center of Salvador, they have a show every night in Teatro Miguel de Santana, where, next to such dances as *samba de roda*, *maculêlê*, and *capoeira*, they give a demonstration of sacred dances from Candomblé. Dressed in the sacred attire of the orixá, the dancers perform the dances of the possessed in a spectacularized way. Another production, called *The Court of Oxalá*, tells the stories of the orixás, and has a central role for the trickster god Exú, here presented in the figure of a madman.

In Candomblé circles, these programs are highly controversial. Time and again, Mãe Stella attacked the Balé Folclórico in the strongest terms

There are these folklore show that exploit what is most serious in Candomblé: the manifestation of the orixá in his sons and daughters. So the tourist will see the show, sees the youngster “dressed as the orixá,” imitating the battle cries [of the warrior spirits], dancing the sacred dances. Then this tourist will decide to go visit a ceremony, and who knows, will find that same handsome lad truly transformed in Xangô, Oxossi or Ogum. What will he think? If he has a bit of good sense, he will conclude that Candomblé is nothing serious, that it belongs to such things as the *samba de roda*, that it is folklore. (1989, 20)

Candomblé is a religion. It has nothing to do with the folklore shows that can be seen in nightclubs, where they put on the orixá's dance, as if the dancer were a *filho-de-santo*... These shows are vulgar imitations. Having to witness how the sacred is profaned on stage, how these dances are performed in a sequence that includes maculelê, capoeira, or *samba de roda* is saddening to all serious people, regardless of whether they are priests or laymen. (1993, 34–35)

Twenty years later, she hasn't moved her position on these productions.

This folklorization is a lack of knowledge and understanding! I once talked to one who dances (or danced) in the Balé Folclórico da Bahia. I said: “You dress like Iansã?” and she: “But Mãe Stella, this is only to pay tribute to my *santo*.” Little does she know, does she? Goes there dressed as Iansã, to dance on stage, and afterwards goes out to have a beer... daughter of Iansã! Drinks whiskey, sleeps around... its folklore, but it is also a lack of respect. If she who thinks that she is paying tribute speaks like this, just think what a layperson would say! (Mãe Stella, in Pretto and Serpa 2002, 39)

Mãe Stella is not the only one to show indignation. In an interview, Antoniel Ataíde Bispo, priest of Candomblé, and for 23 years secretary

general of the Federação Nacional do Culto Afro-Brasileira stated:

... it is a sad fact that neither I nor the Federation have the power to call the Balé Folclórico da Bahia to a halt ... I consider them to be one of the main exhibitors of Candomblé in the world, they show many of the particularities of our religion ... well, this much I must admit: they do not show initiation rituals. But the dances of the orixás! The dances of the orixás! Alas, there is no way to stop them. Every once in a while, one of their production passes on TV. I watch it in horror! The exhibition! I know that in that dance group there are numerous people who belong to the African religion. Without doubt! And they sing and play the "deep" music and words (*músicas e letras de fundamentação*) that they should not be singing and playing. But we can't prohibit it, such is the fact. However, I condemn it with all my might...

Both the artistic director of the Balé Folclórico da Bahia, a man called Vava, and the choreographer, Zebrinha, have been confronted with the critiques. The latter—tall, black, charismatic, a street kid from Caixa d'Água who made it to dance academies in New York and Arnhem (in the Netherlands), and an adept from Candomblé himself—told me that it would simply be no option to leave out Candomblé from a program of Bahian music and dance. Candomblé was the *fundamento* of all the rest. He stressed that, out of respect, they never entered into the "spiritual part of Candomblé." They never performed sacrifices or rituals. "We just take the forms, the specific movements, which we then stylize by exaggeration. For let's face it, the dancing that goes on in the terreiros is far too boring to put on stage!" When I pressed him to respond to the critique of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, he got irritated. "Oh, these religious people. We are artists!" Stretching his muscled legs high up in the air he continued: "... haven't we seen Maria Magdalena spread her legs? Haven't we seen Jesus fucking? Jesus as a homosexual? So what's all the fuss about?" Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, he insinuated, has been taken over by white people. They're the ones to make all this fuss. "Have you heard of Cleo Martins, a white attorney from São Paulo and the long time lover of Mãe Stella? Believe me, she's the one to make most of the decisions over there!"

Vava too stressed that the Balé Folclórico da Bahia showed nothing that could not be also seen in the public ceremonies of the terreiros themselves, where everyone is welcome. "So what are the secrets we're giving away?" And he too was under the impression that Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá had been taken over by the ambitions of "that white women from São Paulo" and suffered from the influence of all the intellectuals who would go there.

I really do not get their policy. They criticize us, but when they want to produce a video about their terreiro they contact us whether we can contract

some dancers. Juanita [Elbein dos Santos, an Argentinian anthropologist who wrote a classic monography on Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, and married the son of Mãe Stella's predecessor, MvdP] caused a scandal when her documentary film on the secret cult of the Eguns was broadcasted on national TV. But when we were invited to stage some of the dances for an international congress on African Religion, with priests and priestesses from all over the country, as well as representatives from African countries, the people from Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá—including Juanita—made a point of ostentatiously leaving the room. The Africans, on the other hand, were very enthusiastic!

He continued by saying that the national ballets of Cuba and Haiti also put on a section of the dances of the orixás in their programs, and that Casa Branca and Gantois (the other "historic" and prestigious terreiros, and the eternal competitors of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá) spoke very positive of the Balé, and never created any problems.

And just look how Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá is accessing the media all the time, seeking publicity, organizing events. If they are so concerned about keeping Candomblé a religion: it is not like they restrict themselves to their religious tasks!

Mãe Stella and her soul mates, however, do not seem to be impressed with such arguments. A priest subscribing to the ideology of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá asked me: "When do we see people dressed up as nuns, monks, and bishops in a carnival parade? When do we get to see the consecration of the Holy Eucharist in Teatro Miguel de Santana? Huh?"

Undoubtedly, painful histories play up in the condemnation of the Balé. Up until 1976, terreiros intending to have a religious ceremony had to register with the city police at a department called *jogos e costumes*: the very desk where brothels, nightclubs, and gambling houses had to register as well. And yet, there must be more to it. For if films, books, anthropological dissertations, and photographs manage to pass the instruction "don't ask questions, just observe" relatively easy, why then the venomous critiques of the Balé Folclórico da Bahia? What might be at stake became clear to me when Zebrinha took me up to the studio to observe a rehearsal of the dance group. The boys and girls had been stretching and flexing their muscles for over an hour in utmost concentration and dedication. Then the drums were beaten, the sacred songs were sung, and the pupils started to dance. The spectacle was nowhere close to the somewhat obligatory-fatigued dancing of initiates one often sees in the terreiros. The movements were exaggerated, stylized, and highly energetic. There was no adherence to any liturgical sequence. The dancer's beautiful and sweating bodies were only dressed in tights and shorts instead of the baroque costumes of *filhos-de-santo* who

incorporate their orixás. Yet for all the obvious differences, the rehearsal produced a genuine effervescence that filled the studio to the brim, transcending the mere rehearsal, producing a spectacle that was as powerful as a religious ceremony of Candomblé.

Dancers told me they would sometimes feel the coming of their orixás during rehearsals, and recalled instances of possession. Yet when I asked Zebrinha about it he flatly denied it, saying "*Orixá é burro?* [The orixá is a jack-ass?] Would not know the difference between a rehearsal and a ceremony? Come on!" For me, however, it was clear that both public ceremonies of Candomblé and the Balé work with the same stuff, the same enchantment, for which in Candomblé terminology there is a word: *axé*, the vital, life-giving force that puts the universe in motion and makes possible growth, progress, and prosperity. In fact, in an interview, this is exactly how Vava, the artistic director of the Balé Folclórico da Bahia, put it: "*o mistério do Candomblé é o encanto do axé.*" The mystery of Candomblé is the magic of *axé*. Given the prevalent boundary politics in Candomblé, the conceptualization of *axé* as a force that does its work both in and out of religious settings cannot but raise grave concerns. For it is here that the simulacrum has appropriated the "ineffable" and "noetic" qualities of ritual and ceremonial practices, the very stuff through which the Candomblé community had sought to ward off its unsettling effects.

Concluding Remarks

I have argued that the public forms of Candomblé—the reworking of its symbols, myths, rhythms, and aesthetics in other than religious frames—have given a new impetus to the performance of secrecy. Creating zones of silence and obscurity, highlighting the "ineffable" and "noetic" qualities of mystical knowledge, and thus framing the talking and writing of others as "empty chatter" are ever so many attempts to discredit new interpretations of Candomblé and immunize Afro-Brazilian religion for the work of the simulacrum.

In conclusion, however, it is necessary to widen our lens and position these findings in a broader picture. For Candomblé's struggles should not be understood as a heroic fight to "ward off" the evil monster of the simulacrum. However much cult adepts themselves may wish to portray it that way, one cannot fail to notice that there is no such thing as a Candomblé that is situated outside of the simulacrum. There is no community that is still "untouched," and that seeks to maintain its purity and authenticity by keeping the forces of the simulacrum out. To the contrary, following

Baudrillard one could argue that such fights (and the dreams that motivate them) are already an *effect* of the simulacrum. In the broader picture, then, Mãe Stella herself, the public interest in Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, the "re-Africanizing" and antisyncretistic movements in Candomblé, as well as the anthropologist contemplating the real of silence, or his being impressed by the ineffable qualities of sacred dance: all of this already belongs to that "panic-stricken production of the real and the referential" that follows an awareness of the unsettling effects of the simulacrum. The assignment "don't ask questions, just observe" is an effect of the simulacrum, just as much as it seeks to fight it.

Notes

1. One of the organizations of the *movimento negro* (black movement).
2. Some people may consider the word "cult" and "cultist" pejorative. I wish to stress that I use the word in a neutral sense.
3. In Candomblé, *axé* is the life-giving force that animates all being, the accumulation of which is central to all activities in the temples. *Axé* is also used to denote the religious community.
4. Interestingly, Ildásio Tavares identifies himself as "poet and Otun Oba Aré of the Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá," which means that he occupies a honorary post in Mãe Stella's *terreiro*.