

Space and the Ritualization of Axé in Candomblé

Lia Paula Rodrigues*

Independent scholar

Introduction

In this paper I present some reflections on the meaning of space in Candomblé. Candomblé is a widely practiced healing *lived religion* whose membership is largely female; it uses African idioms and spirit mediums. These reflections arise, in part, from three months of fieldwork conducted in 2007 and 2008 in the urban municipality of Salvador in northeast Brazil, among Afro-Brazilian adepts. The rubric *lived religion* is central to the following discussion of Candomblé. Since its inception in the early 1990s, lived religion has served as a conceptual signpost for particular approaches to the study of creeds that concentrate on negotiations of power and identity within: ordinary life, domestic life, ecclesial structures, and a wide variety of ‘public’ spheres (Griffith & Savage 2006, xvi). My intention in this essay is to transcend the coupling of space and *diasporic religion* (Johnson, 2007) – that is to explore how diasporas conserve religious traditions in new spaces.

Before the discussion proceeds specifically to axé in Candomblé (defined in context of the discussion below) I intend to clarify two subjects: the first being *diaspora*; the second, *diasporic religion*. I understand diaspora as a phenomenon not

* M.A in Cultural Encounters, Roskilde University.

simply determined by biological descent or historical imposition. The Candomblé context demonstrates, by contrast, that diaspora is a possible subject position an individual moves in and out of (Johnson, 2007). Regarding diasporic religion, I employ Paul Christopher Johnson's 2007 definition of the term. In his writing diasporic religion conjoins the concept of memories about space – about places of origin, about the distances travelled from them, and physical or ritual returns imagined, already undertaken, or aspired to – where the memories arise *in* space, out of a given repertoire of the available and thinkable (ibid, 3). Johnson's studies are concerned with issues such as a group's dislocation, the incomplete assimilation of that group into a host society, and the ongoing relations of the group with the place and people left behind (ibid, 10).

Even though some of the above issues apply to Candomblé – memories about places of origin and memories *in* space – my focus, in contrast to Johnson's, is applied to the way women use their religious experience as means to *transform* themselves and their social environment rather than *assimilate* into Brazilian society's neo-colonial *raison d'être*. This position entails an epistemological decolonization of academic ways of conceptualizing the *indigenous religious*. Departing from women's experiences related to space, I examine the relationship between space and religious embodied experiences. Concepts like *space*, *place*, and *body* figure in this paper as categories that describe modes of embodied being-in-the-world.¹ The phenomenological concept 'being-in-the-world' encapsulates in my theorizing a "colonial" aspect of being, which fundamentally incorporates race, gender and class as the grounds of experience. My utilization of the concept being-in-the-world is based in Candomblé cosmology, which understands space, body and spirits to be ontologically related. As the empirical material reveals, the relation between body and space is seen as a continuous transit between the material and the immaterial in which there is no such thing as a world "out there", established outside of and apart

¹ This argument is developed in my Master's thesis: "Women in Candomblé: Ritualizing Body, Space and Knowledge" 2008.

from the body.² This paper begins by unfolding the relation between body and space in relation to *axé* cosmic energy. It then proceeds to discuss the implications of the role ritual creation and renewal (of *axé* energy) play in Afro-Brazilians's creation of alternative spaces as a means of continued existence in neo-colonial settings.

'To feel the space'

The quotation below is from a recorded conversation with Rosilda, a well-educated 53 year old *ebomi* Afro-Brazilian woman, whose biography is marked by political activism within various movements. An *ebomi*, in Candomblé's hierarchy, is a devotee who has been initiated for more than seven years. Rosilda lives with her partner with whom she has five children and works as a sociology/geography teacher at a university on the outskirts of Salvador. She is an *ekede* in the Candomblé hierarchy, that is, a devotee who does not manifest spirits, but whose function is to take care of the *Orixá*. *Orixá* is a deity bearer of cosmic energy (*axé*). *Orixás* are also the representation of elements of the natural world like rivers, thunder, wind and so on (dos Santos, 1984). *Ekedes* are much respected in Candomblé because of their status as "experienced elders". An *ekede* is 'born' mature and wise (Rosilda 2008, Claudete 2008, personal communication), that is the reason why they are the *Orixá*'s caretakers. When asked about the relation between mind and body in Candomblé, Rosilda answers:

Candomblé is not only body and mind. It is body, mind and *context*! The meaning of space is very significant [smiles]. For example, when you are within a certain space; when you *feel* the space, you feel *mais fortalecido* [strengthened]. [It] is within space that the various elements are articulated and connected. The space permits the connection, the articulation with the supernatural.

² Mexican activist and anthropologist Sylvia Marcos makes a similar point in relation to the Nahuas in Mexico. For an interesting decolonial analysis of gender in Mesoamerican religion see Marcos (2006).

In these remarks Rosilda presents us with a religious experience in Candomblé where space is seen as a continuous transit between the material and the immaterial; space is the location where the various elements between the spiritual and material world can be articulated and connected. Her words invite us to investigate how space is conceptualized in Candomblé.

Axé Cosmic Energy

It is fruitless to write about the meaning of space in Candomblé without introducing the concept of *axé*. *Axé* is a sacred energy and power that is found in spiritual entities and human beings as well as in spoken words, secret names, thoughts, blood, animal fur, horns, and tails, bird feathers, art objects, crowns, beaded necklaces, ritually prepared clothing, earth, leaves, herbs, flowers, trees, rain, rivers, mountains, tornadoes, thunder, lightning, and other natural phenomena (dos Santos 1984, 41-43; Omari-Tunkara 2005, 35). *Axé* is used to establish and define shrine buildings or architectural complexes in some parts of Africa as well as in Bahia, where they are known as *ilés àse* (Yoruba) and *ilés axés* (casas de axé/ houses of axé), respectively. It is in this sense that shrines and the constitutive *axé* can be accrued, devitalized and otherwise manipulated for specific ends (ibid).

Within the *terreiro*'s physical space – called the house of *axé* – a devotee receives, improves and cultivates her *axé*. To the devotees of the Orixás, the concept of *axé* is essential to maintain a relationship with the deity. Nigerian scholar Rowland Abiodun (1994) introduces ideas of the connotations and capacities of *axé* as it relates to Yoruba art in West Africa – ideas that resonate incisively with Candomblé understandings of the relationship between sacred and *axé*:

In Yorùbá land, depending on the context, the word *àse* is variously translated and understood as “power”. To devotees of the *òrìsà* (deities), however, the concept of *àse* is more practical and immediate. *Àse* inhabits and energizes the awe-inspiring space of the *òrìsà*, their altars (*ojú-ibo*), and all their objects, utensils, and offerings, including the air around them. Religious artefacts are thus frequently kept on the altars of the various *òrìsà* when not being used in public ceremonies. There they contribute to and share in the power of the sacred space, the architectural space where priests and devotees may be recharged with *àse* before undertaking a major task (Abiodun 1994, cited in Omari-Tunkara 2005, 43).

Axé infuses space with a sacred force designed to reconfigure existence, to manipulate the sacred by recasting and regulating the seen and unseen worlds (Omari-Tunkara 2005, 35) or, in Rosilda’s words, by connecting and articulating, through space, the various elements between the devotee and the supernatural. Space in Candomblé theorizing is, therefore, never understood as being dissociated from human beings. The concept reveals ontological value in Candomblé where body, deities, soul and world are bound together by the vital force of *axé*. *Axé* fundamentally connects people with both the natural and the spiritual. The recognition of the uniqueness and autonomy of the *axé* of persons and deities is what structures the Candomblé community and its relationship with the otherworld (dos Santos, 1984).

For Brazilian sociologist Muniz Sodré, the notion of *axé* is a shared ontology within African religious institutions. He argues: “[*Axé*] is the basic cosmivision which places the force of the universe, the power of realization and transformation, at the center of the natural order of things. This cosmic or universal force is known by many names: for Bantus it is *muntu*, for the Yourubas it is *asé*, among the Congos it is *ngolo*, and the Nyanga call it *karamaro*” (Sodré, 1988a, 121). When, for example, Rosilda, says that “feeling space one feels more strengthened”, she presents us with a perspective that assumes the spiritual or the religious experience is contained not only in the systems of belief and institutions of faith, but within the physicality of

experience and within the material of life (Harding 2000, xv). It is the material/physical experience of *axé* energy, through ritual practices, that allows Rosilda to relate space with feelings of strength. Here is a translation anomaly that has to be elucidated. When Rosilda says in Portuguese: *Quando você sente o espaço, você se sente mais fortalecido*”, the Portuguese word “*fortalecido* suggests notions of “vital force”. “Mais fortalecido” is related to ideas of “life” and “endurance” – all concepts closely related to *axé*. In order to clarify my meaning let us return to the concept of *axé*.

According to U.S. scholar Mikelle Omari-Tunkara, *axé* is an external as well as an internal resource, which emanates from the inside. It is at once a signature of the divine in addition to being a product of a person’s own ethical comportment and relations with the world. The net effect of *axé* is the outward manifestation of inner power and the external award of inner force. Citing Rowland Abiodun, Omari-Tunkara writes: “One cannot confer *àse* on oneself. It is for this reason that the Yorùbá say, *A ki I fi ara eni joye* (One does not install oneself as a chief or ruler over a community or group of people) (Omari-Tunkara 2005, 35). Every person is constituted of *axé* energy; however, the energy might not be always active or awake. In order to arouse one’s *axé*, one needs to *receber* (receive) it (dos Santos 1984, 43). *Axé* requests, therefore, transmission and cultivation in order to exist. This vital force is available to human beings through the Orixás, divination, the rituals of sacrifice and spirit manifestation. The Ialorixá (spiritual leader) also plays a fundamental role in the transmission of *axé*. It is through the initiation ritual, administrated by her, that the material implantation of the essence, or energy, of an Orixá into the body of the devotee takes place. After initiation, *axé* becomes an “embodied” energy that connects the devotee with the community, the world, nature, Orixás and self. Or to phrase it differently, besides being a constituent of personal existence, *axé* also places the individual in a continuum with the external world, giving him/her the holistic experience of body, space and spirituality. As stated above, the physicality of

Rosilda's experience, her "feeling" of space, is a reflection of her material/physical experience of *axé* energy.

Embodied Being in the World

Erika, aged 22 was born in a Candomblé *terreiro* and initiated into the religion at the age of six. Like Rosilda, she does not manifest the Orixá but is the Orixá's *ekede*. In answer to the question, 'How do you experience the ritual practice?' Erika reinforces the bond between space, body and spiritual experience:

When one is within the ritual space, one forgets everything else. You are present with your body only thinking of that moment. And then, one receives all that awesome energy that is in that space at that time. One forgets everything else... you are there... worshipping the Orixá.

Erika's religious experience of space has a "situatedness" that carries with it nothing less than the entire predicament of being-in-the-world. From this ontological perspective the body cannot be understood as flesh limited by a wrapping of skin. It makes much more sense to think of the individual body as part of something much more complex, a link in a larger spatial "dance" with other spiritual bodies.

The relationship between space and body in Candomblé, issues from Yoruba paradigms of civilization in Sodrè's writing. That is to state, "paradigms not disassociated from the Cosmic Order, not generative of radical oppositions between subject and object – rather, frankly territorialized" (Sodrè 1988b, 19). Sodrè's views are closely related to the nature of alternative identity in Candomblé; that is, the ways that Africans and their descendants were constantly engaged in the process of creating alternative orientations, which redefined their identities (Harding 2000, xvi). Taking dance as an example of self transformation in colonial history, Sodrè argues:

Dance is a decentering movement, a symbolic re-elaboration of space. Consider the dance of the slave. Moving himself in the master's space, he momentarily stops perceiving himself purely as slave and remakes the surrounding space in terms of another orientation; one which has to do with a symbolic system different from that managed by the master and which breaks the boundaries fixed by dominant territorialisation (1988b, 123).

The concept of space used here can be employed to explore the particular ways Afro-Brazilians enact space; and how spaces are lived in and mediated.

Enacting Space, Creating Place and Transforming Selves

Rosilda comments (in the recorded conversation) upon space and its significances in Candomblé:

One articulates references from a certain space and concretizes it by transforming the space into a place. Yes, one can do it by historicizing space, by concretizing space, by resignifying space. That is what happens in Candomblé. Can you imagine the power that this articulation, this religion has? Candomblé is a religion that had to occult itself and, at the same time, create references in order to preserve itself. Candomblé is here with all its power despite all the obstacles.

These reflections on Candomblé's continued existence in Brazil are closely related to Afro-Brazilians' continued process of transformational engagement with the assigned space imputed upon them by the dominant colonial *and* neo-colonial white Brazilian society. Candomblé is the locale in which collective gathering is among the means to use, or to (re)create spaces where Blacks were/are no longer (colonial) "slave" or (neo-colonial) "subalterns", but where they actually called/call into being. New meanings of self are (re)shaped to contest a place in the Brazilian geographical space

(Harding), Candomblé as a religious institution symbolizes this contested place. This holds true for the self within temporal as well as spatial spheres.

Laura is like Rosilda an *ebomi*. She manifests the spirit of Iansã, the female Orixá who reigns over storm, wind and fire. Living together with her 21 years old daughter who is also initiated in Candomblé, Laura's main occupation is selling Bahian typical food, *acarajé*³, in the streets of Salvador. Laura's views on Candomblé's development as a major institution of the African diaspora resonate with Rosilda's:

First of all I would say that the Candomblé is one of the strongest resistance movements in our [Black people's] history. It is a space that guaranteed not only our physical survival, but also our cultural and religious traditions. And in this sense it teaches us... There is learning embedded in the religion (Laura 53 years old, initiated).

Mãe Val, the Ialorixá (spiritual leader) of *Terreiro do Cobre*, when asked to describe her experience of Candomblé, comments:

Because Candomblé is resistance to all the oppression we suffer, the terreiro is a space where we learn to worship our spirit. We come here to worship; it's a moment that we dedicate to bring spiritual strength to our lives, we gather energy, spiritual energy to help us struggle out there in society. It is here where we collect our energies and empower ourselves to face our individual and collective problems. It is about energy and how to exchange energy.

When Mãe Val speaks about the personal transformations that take place once a person enters Candomblé's universe, she highlights the centrality of the devotional practice, and adds a significant component to our understanding of the transformation

of space. Her words emphasize the importance of exchanging energy in Candomblé. A person gives devotional energy to the deity and in exchange one might get empowering energy, *axé*, from the deity to face one's daily struggle.

Exchanging energy in Candomblé is a culturally elaborated form in which the participants empower their bodies (selves) while simultaneously orienting their bodies (and selves) to the bodies (and selves) of those around them. Orientation here is not only spatial, but also spiritual. Empowerment involves body feeling (receiving the *axé* through ritual practice) and intersubjectivity. The implications of this ontological relation between devotee and deity and among participants themselves are of paramount importance for understanding how the terreiro as the physical location of Candomblé was/is a space where agency is enacted among Candomblé's participants. Mãe Val's conception of space is implicit in Rosilda, Erika and Laura's individual narratives. This conception tells us that the transformation of space into place in Candomblé relies on the relationship between space and memory – not derived from a “national” or “ethnic” sentiment – but because of an ontological bond with Yoruba cosmogony and cosmology, where – according to its epistemology – transformation is part of human beings' journey on earth (Drewal, 1988).

The Salvador Candomblé experience in relation to physical and cultural boundaries is similar to the West African. The many African ethnic groups of the Nigeria-Benin region in West Africa have lived as neighbours and shared cultures beyond what the geopolitical boundaries of any particular contemporary African nation might suggest (Daniel, 2005). The transformation of space into place does not rely on classical anthropological concepts of “territorialized cultures” (Malkki, 1992) where territory is the foundation of a community – an idea also found in the romantic idea of ‘the nation’ – in which the human relation to land is always material and cultural and those dimensions are seen to be inseparable (Johnson 2002, 305). Candomblé's participants are not concerned with repatriation or reterritorialization of a Nigerian identity as synonymous with one's “natural” place in the world. The role

of ritual performances is not linking a group to a land base in order to construct an “imagined community” (c.f. Anderson, 2006). The imagined Africa of the Afro-Brazilian imagined community is not based on ‘territorial continuity’; on the contrary, the endurance of the religion does not depend on national territory or racial tie but on the knowledge of *transformation* through preservation of the vital energy, axé.

In Candomblé ritual ceremony, dancing only occurs through spirit manifestation. Ritual practices and spirit manifestation are a means whereby devotees cultivate their *axé* through deity worshiping. Hence all activities in Candomblé religious practices are centred in the movement of *axé* energy. If the body transforms the space through dance it is because the body, space and consequently the dance, are permeated with spiritual energy. This energy, axé, needs to be recreated, transformed and reenergized repeatedly for its maintenance. This is a religion whose ontology is based on the knowledge of an omnipresent vital energy that connects human beings with nature, space, place, spiritual and other human beings. It is based on the preservation, maintenance and transformation of that same energy in order to promote life and harmony among human beings, and does not limit itself to national and ethnic boundaries. In this manner, space is conceived by women and men in Candomblé as an indeterminate, open domain of possibilities, contained within delimited places (bodies, selves) and extending beyond them. Their idea and enactment of space could be seen, I suggest, as a conscious liberation of such “places” (body, selves) from colonial boundaries that limit being and a separate self from others and the world. The idea of space, and of location, in this context, contains the implication of both boundary and movement. The duality of boundary and movement has the same relationship as the linkage between change and destiny, time and space. These are not oppositional but complementary categories. In order to follow my line of argument, we need to understand the role of ritual practices in Candomblé.

According to Yoruban thought the human spirit is always coming into the world and returning in one unending cycle. Since nothing within this cycle ever

repeats itself – an ontological perspective brought forth by the concept of *axé* – existence in time would be more appropriately conceived in spatial terms as a spiral – that is neither as cyclical, nor linear (Drewal 1988, 46-47). Space is constructed through ritual in relation to the human body and its experience of the physical world. It is ritual practice (the maintenance of *axé*) and its repetitive nature that allows space to be humanized into place. Repetition in ritual, either representing the mythological journey of the soul or the transformation of *axé*, is the materialization of action in Candomblé.

Such an understanding of the relationship between space and time denies the Western assumption of repetition as static and non-progressive (Taiwo 2005, 117). If we move away from a fixed perception of time, which reduces rhythm to the predictable, toward a dynamic perception of “temporal space” (ibid) then repetition is not determined. What repetition provides, like a musical rhythm, is a framework for improvisation. The relationship between body, space and the sacred will always fall in what Margaret T. Drewal terms “the indeterminacy of improvisation”,⁴ that is, “the transformational capacity of repetition itself as praxis in ritual” (Drewal 1988, xv). Drewal develops this idea in her study of Yoruba rituals. According to her work, the performance of ritual is not fixed in form and time within a Yoruba context. Often articulated and represented in Yoruba society as the deity, Esu (Exú in Candomblé), ‘indeterminacy is the very condition of the possibility of free play and is what empowers the players’ (ibid, 17). The improvised nature of rituals in Candomblé, resonate with Drewal’s findings. These findings are verifiable in ritual public ceremonies for Orixá *Exú*. Improvisational dance circles in which the entranced devotees dance inside the circle characterize festivities for *Exú*. Through creative (and improvised) ritual movements for the preservation of *axé*, the body transforms space into place, while the energy present in space empowers and transforms the body

and self. The very *axé* energy is responsible for this multidirectional communication between body, space and the sacred.

Closing remarks

Throughout the paper I have argued that in Candomblé space is seen as a continuous transit between the material and the immaterial. Space is therefore the location where the various elements between the spiritual and material world can be articulated and connected. By focusing on how space is ritualized through the creation of *axé* energy, I argued that devotees of Candomblé bring forth, in this way, new meanings of space, body and being, in which the ritual experience of embodiment does not only collapse the dualities of mind-body, but involves an experience of empowerment. Ritual practices become then a mechanism by which the devotees take action to achieve existential transformations by ritually entering the spiritual sphere to gain *axé* (power) and return with it to everyday material life. Finally, I argued that ritual practice (maintenance of *axé*) and its repetitive nature allows space to be humanized into place.

In conclusion, my intention in this article is to draw attention to the importance of space – not as a symbolic representation but as physical presence imbued with vital energy. This brings forth a perspective opposed to much of what has been written on space in diasporic religion, namely, that not only do people remap the social and cultural terrain in geographies that they (re)construct, they are also committed to transforming spatial orders not necessarily of their own invention, by contesting the very meaning of “space”. My argument is based on the premise that *axé* energy provides a conceptual vehicle that fundamentally allows us to understand how humans connect with space, nature and the spiritual world, and that this connection’s maintenance, through ritual practices, is the materialization of all action in Candomblé.

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