

Secrets, Gossip, and Gods

The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé

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Ritual Two: Waters of Oxalá

- Extension of Keririo
 Space → Street
 Street as Source of axé

The Waters of Oxalá is a ritual that, in the Nagô-Jeje nation of Candomblé, inaugurates the liturgical year by bringing water from outside the house, ideally from a natural source, to replenish and purify the assentamentos (seats at the altars) of all of the initiates and especially to replenish the altar of Oxalá, sky-father of the orixás. Unlike initiation and other individual ritual obligations, the Waters is a yearly rite performed by the terreiro community as a whole. Before describing a specific implementation of the Waters, I will locate it within the terreiro's annual cycle of rituals.

The Waters within the Cycle of Periodic Rituals

The rites of initiation, both the change in status from abiã (waiting to be born) to iaô (bride) and that from iaô to ebomi (elder sibling), may occur at any time during the year, except during Lent. During these forty days after Carnaval, the terreiro remains closed and inactive, and the orixás are said to return to Africa, to be at war, or to be resolving disputes among themselves instead of working for humans. Apart from these periodic rituals, there is also a regular yearly cycle of festas to honor and feed the orixás. During these celebrations, each orixá, or sometimes several related orixás at once, are specifically given offerings of favorite foods and songs, offerings that summon them to dance in the midst of the assembled community. These cyclical festas are public and often well attended by outsiders, including occasional clients, the merely curious, and initiates from other terreiros. The liturgical calendar varies from house to house, but the ideal model as established in many of the prestigious houses of Bahia is that the main festa season begins in September and completes most of its public rites before Christmas, but extends formally until February 2, the house then closing to the public just before Carnaval and Lent. The endpoints, according to this ideal season, are the ceremony in honor of Oxalá in September and that of Yemanjá on February 2; thus the season is bracketed by the father and mother orixás, respectively (Rocha 1995).

For descendants of these Bahian houses in Rio, it is difficult to follow this calendar, however, for several reasons. First, terreiro etiquette and hierarchy demands that the parent-house be allowed to complete a given yearly ritual before its descendant houses follow suit. A second and related issue is that priestesses like Mother B. are supposed to occasionally return to their home terreiros to take part in ceremonies there, to honor the foundational axé of their own initiatory birth. The return is also to replenish their prestige by circulating in the important houses in Bahia, an investment that pays hefty dividends in social capital among adepts of Rio and São Paulo, who view Bahia and its mother-houses as more authentic, African places with deeper fundamentos than those of the southern metropolises. For Mother B., the need to periodically return to Gantois in Bahia and the need to tend her own house together present a recurrent dilemma. One consequence of the demands on her time is that the festa season at her house sometimes begins in June with the anniversary of the house and its patron, Oxalá, and then continues through July and August, so that she can travel north to Bahia by September, when circumstances and finances permit. In December, ceremonies may resume,

with the Waters of Oxalá therefore sometimes performed as late as early December, much later than the ideal calendar.

Description of the Waters of Oxalá (Aguas de Oxalá)

Participants arrived the night before, many around dusk after completing the wage labor of the day. The usual preliminaries were observed, casting water to mark the departure from the street, prostration before Mother B., a purificatory herbal bath, and the change into simple white clothing. Distinct on this occasion, however, was the general rule of silence, which became more stringent as the evening progressed. A few of the men wanted to watch a soccer match unfold behind the static snow on the television screen, and they complied with ritual protocol by diminishing the volume, eventually completely, but obstinately held their ground by insisting on viewing the entire match. As a child in one corner sat on a straw mat and punched the buttons of a beeping video game, the more devout filhos de santo barely concealed their irritation. The sister of the video game player, meanwhile, wore tennis shoes that lit up with a battery-powered red glow when she put her weight on one and then the other foot, and this provoked further hushed debates about ritual protocol. Was it problematic to tolerate this red intrusion into Oxalá's night, the coolest and whitest of orixás? Was this not an egregious agitation, this heat perhaps befitting of Xangô's festa, but certainly not Oxalá's? Her mother defended the girl, "It doesn't hurt anything," and her eyes pleaded with her terreiro sisters to not bring it to Mother B.'s attention, which would surely bring an embarrassing scolding and loss of face. Another fellow wanted to leave the barracão, now a place of confinement and sacred containment, the doors and window shutters closed tight, for a smoke. The women were generally against it, but he went outside to the courtyard anyhow, after first ascertaining that Mother B. was occupied in the back of the house. Eventually, the quarrelsome familia de santo retired on straw mats laid out around the barracão, tonight not a public room but rather constructed as a closed, contained place. All had their vases placed by their heads as they slept, belly down, in loose white garments, close to the ground and the foundations of the house. Two candles lit the way of a few straggling arrivals, who were greeted with whispered reprimands from those who had worked in the house all day. "Who's going to work for you when you have an obligation to fulfill?" an unusually blunt woman wanted to know. Fifteen women and girls on one side, seven men and boys on the other, finally fell into a short sleep. On a night dedicated to the whiteness and purity of Oxalá, such gender division was especially stressed.

The group of twenty-two plus Mother B. filed out of the terreiro before sunrise in descending order of age, gauged not by biology but by years in the saint, dressed in pure white and observing absolute silence. Each secured with one arm a vase, the repository of his stone (otá) which symbolically fused orixá to ori (head), on top of the head. The pace was slow but deliberate past the gate and down the empty, half-lit street. A block from the terreiro, the group halted by a wooden cover over a well in front of a private home, the well fed by an underground stream running down from the surrounding hills. Mother B. filled each one's vase in turn from the well. In the same single-file order, the group returned to the terreiro and entered the courtyard. On this occasion, no gestures of leaving the street were required; the street too had become a set for ritual

action and a semisacred place. In the courtyard of the terreiro, a makeshift throne of Oxalá had been erected out of wooden poles canopied by white sheets. There each emptied her vase into a common basin. The journey to the well was repeated three times, with the vases filled and then poured into the basin before the throne of Oxalá. On the last return, the vases were left full.

With the last entry from the street into the courtyard, Mother B. sat on the makeshift throne, and her shoulders barely shook as she calmly and easily received Oxalá into her body. Each one knelt and touched his forehead to the ground before the king, setting the vase by his head, as the priestess, possessed by Oxalá, switched his back with bunches of leafy branches gripped in her right fist and wetted in the water. The priestess-as-Oxalá dipped the branches into the basin between each son or daughter's approach. After the strafing by Oxalá upon the final return from the stream, each one replaced the vase at the altar of his orixá, now refreshed with new water for the coming year.

Afterward, the main ritual objects from Oxalá's altar, in particular his opaxorô—the long silver staffs with a crown and then a bird at the top—which had been removed from his altar/house and imprisoned in Mother B.'s quarters for several days, were restored to their rightful places. Finally, the respectful code of silence was abolished and replaced by an atmosphere of festivity and celebration. The drums were taken up and a *xiré* began, a dance circle without spirit possession, to celebrate the return of Oxalá to his rightful position.

Interpretation

While it is never made explicit during the performance itself, and while many initiates remain unaware of the fact, the ritual reenacts a widespread Yoruba myth of Oxalá's unjust imprisonment at the court of Xangô and the drought and epidemics that resulted prior to Xangô's recognition of his error. Here is the story:

Oxalá decided to visit his friend Xangô and consulted Ifa before departing. Ifa advised him not to go, that he would meet with suffering and misfortune. Oxalá insisted on going, so Ifa told him to be patient on the journey, never to complain, and never to refuse any service requested of him. Oxalá set out and met Exú—the trickster deity and messenger of the other orixás—sitting by the road with a great pot of palm oil. He attempted to help Exú by lifting the pot to the carrying position on his head, but Exú maliciously spilled the oil all over him, soiling his white cloth. Oxalá did not complain, but went to the river and changed his cloth. This happened three times, and still he did not complain. Finally he came to Xangô's kingdom and saw Xangô's horse, which had run away. He had caught the horse to bring it back to its owner when Xangô's servants appeared and seized Oxalá, misjudging him as a horse thief. He was cast into prison, where he remained for seven years. During those years Xangô's kingdom became infertile—women were barren and crops failed. Ifa was consulted, and he announced that an old man was unjustly imprisoned. The prisoner was found to be Oxalá, who was released, reunited with Xangô, and eventually sent home with bountiful gifts. (Bastide 1978a, 90–91; Apter 1992, 28; Rocha 1995, 50)

In the ritual, participants had reenacted the three visits of the aged Oxalá to the river to cleanse himself after his soiling by Exú; his sacred staffs had been removed from his

home (ilê) to demonstrate his travels; and his ultimate restoration by Xangô and the return to the land's fertility was honored in both the prostrations before his throne to receive his blessing in the new water and the return of his staffs to their rightful room. This particular ritual performance had condensed what is in the ideal model a two-part ritual—the procession to retrieve the waters and the *pilão* (mortar and throne), the restoration of Oxalá, and the return of the abundance—into one event, a ritual condensation I will address in the next chapter.

The myth model also gestured toward the problem of overcontainment. Oxalá was imprisoned, and the result of his imprisonment was the failure of crops and the barrenness of women. Indeed, his return to his rightful position is typically marked by a meal of yams and is associated in Bahia with the harvest of first fruits (e.g., Bastide 1978a; Rocha 1995). Oxalá left his throne to visit Xangô, to circulate his power. Once he was imprisoned, however, axé did not move, and there was no fertility, either of soil or of women. Overcontainment, the myth communicates, is equated with death, and the ritual conveys a similar message to those who perform it.

Considering the Waters of Oxalá in relation to the themes of containment and secrecy, several features of the ritual stand out. The ritual began with secrets, as the bodies of silent initiates were contained in the closed barracão, their closed bodies asleep, belly down, and the pots of their assentamentos beside their heads, carefully tamped. At dawn, this secrecy and containment continued as the initiates filed silently into the street, careful to be out early enough so that no one would see them. They proceeded down the block to a well not usually used for ritual purposes and did not consult its owners. The process of retrieving the purifying waters looked like a stealth mission.

Viewed differently, the morning's openness showed a marked difference from the importance of containment the night before. The house gate was flung open to the street, and once in the street the vases were uncovered to be filled with water. The clothing was of the conspicuous ritual white, marking those of the terreiro off from other religious options in the neighborhood, and the steps were deliberate but not hasty. From this view, there was no danger on the street, no stealth mission; rather, containers must be periodically opened to produce axé. Like Oxalá, axé, and water, secrets must circulate.

The reason for the possible conflict in interpretation is that, during the Waters, the public space of the street is resignified as a sacred place and therefore carries two layers of meaning. The street is not only a site of danger and pollution, but it is also reconceptualized as a source from which power comes. In the largest terreiros of Bahia, the compound includes both urban space—the structure of the terreiro itself—and “forest” space, the wild area beyond domestic borders, where certain orixás like Ogum, Osanyin, and Oxóssi hunt and gather and where the dead still speak (Elbein dos Santos 1975, 32–34). As Elbein dos Santos (34) described the opposition, “The ‘urban’ space, which is domesticated, planned and controlled by human beings, is distinguished from the ‘forest’ space which is wild, fertile, uncontrollable and inhabited by spirits and supernatural entities. . . . The ‘urban’ space expands and strengthens itself by taking elements from the ‘forest,’ which it must consequently ‘pay back.’” In the more humble descendant terreiros of Rio, where there is no such compound divided into urban and forest spaces, with their respective symbolic values of civilized domesticity and wild formlessness, the forest is a role played by the street. The street is the space from which wild force must be drawn into the terreiro to be molded, balanced, and contained. To gain

raw axé, undomesticated force, those at Mother B.'s must go to the street. The “city” without the “forest,” its leaves, animals, water, and soil no less than its spirits, has no source from which to nourish its people and its rituals.

An overcontained city starves. An uncirculated secret withers. Axé must be contained but never hoarded or squelched. Hence the secrets, in the bodies of the filhos de santo, emerged into what is in everyday life the street, public space. The space was dangerous, but also, in accord with the myth model in which the river is where Oxalá purified himself after Exú's defilement, a sacred place. Perhaps we can say that the street during this ritual performance bore less of the Brazilian urban symbolism of the street and more of the Yoruba symbolism of the forest: a site of untamed axé, unknown spirits and ancestors, orixás like Osanyin, Ogum, and Oxóssi, and the abundant natural world, which comprises the raw axé out of which civilizations are made.

Understanding the shifting significance of the street helps when we compare the Waters to the move to the street in the communal ebó. In the communal ebó, initiates entered public space as bodily, corporeal revelations, and there elevated the terreiro center by casting it into relief over against the dangerous, polluting street. But in the Waters, the street became the source of replenishing water and the stage for the dramatization of Oxalá's passage. In the street, now as forest, they harvested wild axé and brought it to the civilizing place of the terreiro, where it could be worked to meet human needs. During the ebó, Mother B.'s and the entire group's anxiety was much higher than it was during the Waters. She was visibly concerned, even frightened, and the movements of transferring the pollution to foods and then to public space were forced and frenetic, distinctly hot in Candomblé's terms. Why, when the pace on the street during the Waters was deliberate but never anything but graceful and cool? Again, it is the historical layers informing the practice of secrecy in Candomblé that account for the difference. ✓

In the Waters, the street was viewed through a Yorubacentric lens. It served as the “forest” space juxtaposed with the terreiro's “urban” zone. In that forest, the river provided the water to rejuvenate the “city.” Sacred space was therefore never left, rather the street was itself made a sacred grove. The ritual was performed just before dawn, from this view, because at that time the streets' silence echoed and extended the silence of the terreiro from the night before. The street became an extension of the terreiro's grounds, just as the forest of the largest terreiros in Bahia actually lies within their compounds. The street was ritually worked according to Yoruba codes and oppositions. —

In the group ebó, by contrast, the street was viewed through the prism of the creation of public space during the First Republic, where African religions were dangerous public health threats and where police wielded clubs. The ritual was performed at night, when cars were cruising the neighborhood and corner bars were still jumping. The street was not silent and white with new light, but rather dark, noisy, agitated, and “hot.” This was the street as ritually configured to receive the pollution of the house, not the street of the Waters, ritually configured as forest and the source of primal axé.

Yet the two movements out from the terreiro to the street shared much in common as well: both relied on the street as a repository of wild force. In the case of the Waters, the street held the raw, primordial axé of creation; in the ebó, the street held the savagery of the violent public spaces of the republic. And both had the group itself as the sole audience. In the sense that rituals can be viewed as dramatic performances, here the actors and the audience were identical, and the street was a stage for the production

and consumption of their own ritual knowledge. The next ritual use of the street I will describe was for the day of Yemanjá, and the audience was not only composed of initiates themselves. In this case, the street was the Municipal Plaza, and the ritual clearly was directed not only to adepts but also to the metropolis, to public Rio de Janeiro and the nation in general.

Before turning to the third ritual, however, let us pause to consider a problem in the interpretation of ritual.

Theoretical Interlude: Whose Meaning?

As there inevitably must be in discussions of a ritual's meaning, we face in these interpretations the problem of whose meaning is in question, and where it resides. Is the symbolism of the house and the street, or the forest and the city, active in the discursive repertoire, or even in the consciousness, of most actors? Do the majority express knowledge of the myth model of the imprisonment of Oxalá in such a way that the ritual can be called its enactment? In both cases, the answer is no. Ritual actors' discourses about the Waters describe it as beautiful, calm (*tranquilo*), and "the most serious ritual." Many describe it as very traditional; several women agreed that they liked it because they felt totally clean and light afterward, "just like Oxalá." There are obvious issues here of elite and common meanings, which are in turn related to house hierarchy, literacy, and relative curiosity about the origins of contemporary ritual events. But the argument of the last chapter was that even without conscious awareness of the myth model or of the historical development of the house-street opposition, codes of secrecy as containment are impressed onto the ritualized body. Catherine Bell (1992, 98) expressed this best in a concept of the ritualized body that relies on Bourdieu (1977, 87-95, 118-120, 124) to claim the following:

A ritualized body is a body invested with a "sense" of ritual. This sense of ritual exists as an implicit variety of schemes whose deployment works to produce sociocultural situations that the ritualized body can dominate in some way. This is a "practical mastery," to use Bourdieu's term, of strategic schemes for ritualization, and it appears as a social instinct for creating and manipulating contrasts. This "sense" is not a matter of self-conscious knowledge of any explicit rules of ritual but is an implicit "cultivated disposition."

Bell perfectly states my contention here: the problem of overcontainment and the need for periodic openness become known as bodily repertoires of action in space. To know does not here denote the ability to reproduce discursive statements *about* secrecy or containment, which would in any case be mere post hoc rationalizations and linguistic translations for what is not first and foremost a linguistic form of knowledge (Bloch 1998, 46-49). Rather, this is technical knowledge of how to manipulate objects and the body in space to achieve experiences of the integration between an idealized world and the lived world. Those sentiments are achieved through carefully applied ritual structures, technical knowledge that is especially attentive to manipulating the contrast between closed and open states of being and the choreography and timing for correct levels of exposure or revelation. As in initiation, there is no information taught in the ritual other than the correct execution of the act itself: the fact that, and the way in

Perhaps this reflects the predominately feminine imagery of possession imagery as bride of the orixá.

10. The exact text is printed in Oliveira 1993, 11.

11. Following Vatican II, the Brazilian Catholic church radically reversed its position and even allowed various forms of African mass services to be held, amalgamations of elements of Catholic and Candomblé rituals as in the inculturated mass (Burdick 1998) or in Milton Nascimento's *Missa dos Quilombos*, performed in 1981 and again in 1995 on the occasion of Zumbi's 300th anniversary, just a few weeks after the kicking of Brazil's black patroness saint, Nossa Senhora Aparecida, by a Pentecostal televangelist (see P. Johnson 1997).

12. Graham (1988, 8) places the seeds of a public sphere, marked by the first sewage systems and tramways, around 1860. It was after the onset of the First Republic, however, that a public sphere became of matter a sustained planning.

Chapter 6

1. The exact wording and Portuguese translation of the song I take from Oliveira 1993, 11. Oliveira contends that Candomblé singing often is onomatopoeic, an imitation of sounds without necessarily understanding the meaning of the words. Clearly this is the case for most initiates of Mother B.'s terreiro. In the case of the priestess herself, it is not clear whether she sings with a content knowledge of the lyrics or rather simply sings sacred words, sacred because they are African and mysterious. For most participants of Candomblé, at any rate, ritual efficacy does not depend on such content knowledge, and singing should be viewed as a form of action rather than as discursive, sentential knowledge.

2. The exact transcription is from Oliveira 1993, 147.

3. The fact that sacrifice, as the means of feeding the orixás, provides the key link in the regenerative cycle, is rarely articulated in Candomblé. I have heard such statements only on rare occasions, always first earmarked as a protected *fundamento*. In practice, most devotees do not regard the orixás with the playful irony expressed by such *fundamentos*, as an exchange in which the orixás depend on humans as much as vice versa. Rather, devotees are more likely to see sacrifice in the light of the authority of tradition; as simply what must be done as a gesture of homage, petition, purification, and expiation, in order to cast out impure, dangerous elements.

4. In the terreiros, Orishanlá/Oxalá is often represented as a gourd with two halves. Bastide (1978a, 80) took the two halves to represent earth, Odudua, and sky, Obatalá or Oxalá, the two condensed in Brazil as the single progenitor/father, Oxalá, now a hermaphrodite or entirely masculine and entirely feminine (Elbein dos Santos 1975, 79). The *axé* of Oxalá depends on the gourd's normally closed status. But the gourd, like the contained head (*ori*) of the *adoxu* initiate, must be opened for creative work to be accomplished.

5. *Oya* is more commonly addressed in Brazil by the name *Iansã*.

6. In Elbein dos Santos (1975, 91) leaves and secrets are identified: "They [leaves] carry the 'black blood,' which is the *ase* of secrecy. [As folhas . . . são e representam o procriado. Elas veiculam o 'sangue preto', o *ase* do oculto]."

Chapter 7

1. Candomblé has also grown dramatically in its homeland of Bahia, from 67 terreiros in the 1940s to 480 in the 1960s to 1,854 in 1989, but this is not a surprising development. Prandi argues that 1960s esoteric quests for alternative models of experience played a role in white São Paulo elites' sudden fascination with Candomblé, as the most available yet undeniably exotic religion.