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MELBA JOYCE BOYD
Department of Africana Studies, Wayne State University

RONALD BROWN
Department of Political Science, Wayne State University

MANIPULATING THE SACRED

Yorùbá Art, Ritual, and Resistance in Brazilian *Candomblé*

MIKELLE SMITH OMARI-TUNKARA

WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS DETROIT
2005

Chapter 4

Yemanjá/Yemọjá

Mother, Water, Ruler, River, *Àjẹ́*

Yemanjá (also known as Yemọjá and Iemanjá) was one of the most influential *òrìṣàs* accompanying the enslaved Yorùbás in their forced migrations to the former Dahomey and to Brazil from about 1538 through 1850 from southwestern Nigeria. There she was and remains known as Yemọjá (the goddess of the Ogun River), one of 401 members of the Yorùbá pantheon.[1] Art forms and ritual practices honoring her were and still are some of the most pervasive constituents of Yorùbá-derived religious systems in other parts of South America, the United States, and the Caribbean. In this respect the veneration of Yemanjá/Yemọjá is transcultural and international. In Brazil and beyond, Yemanjá/Yemọjá's charisma has surpassed the borders that demarcate class, ethnicity, and race to embrace everyone.

Yemọjá in West Africa

In Africa, Yemọjá is venerated as queen, mother, protectress, provider of fertility, and àjé. Her many ritual and mythological roles are addressed in a rich variety of daily, weekly, and annual ceremonies and discourses, with their attendant visual lexicons. Yemọjá's name is derived from Yeye Ọmọ Ẹja (the mother of fish children) and is a metaphor for bodies of water where fish abide, including ponds, lakes, and the ocean. She can be historically traced to the Ẹgba polity of the Yorùbá people, located in the region between the town of Ilé-Ifẹ̀ and the city of Ibadan. There, she

was the goddess of the river Yemọjá, which no longer exists. In the early nineteenth century, internecine wars between diverse Yorùbá kingdoms compelled the Ẹgba to migrate west to the city of Abeokuta. With them, the Ẹgbas transported the *aṣẹ* Yemọjá (sacred objects and foundation of Yemọjá) and transformed the Ogun River—now situated in Ogun State, Nigeria, into the new abode of Yemọjá.[2]

Although her worship extends to many major sites throughout Nigeria, Ṣaki and Abeokuta are the Yorùbá towns where the power of Yemọjá is most salient. In Ṣaki (Shaki), in the interior of Yorùbá territory, Yemọjá is still regarded as "'Mọjẹlẹwu," the "wife" of the *okẹre* (king) of Shaki, and the Ifá divination verse, *ogbe-eje ogunda,* preserves her royal role as Queen:[3]

> Pon is the *awo* of Aro, *òrìṣà* is the *awo* of outside. Ifá divination was performed for Ifin. Ifin was in want of a child. By the time she was to give birth, she gave birth to 'Mọjẹlẹwu, a female. Ifin was asked to make sacrifice to Ifá, Ifin made sacrifice. The husband also was asked to make sacrifice, only the wife did make the sacrifice, the husband did not. When Ifin was to give birth to the child, she gave birth to a female child. The time came when the child was to be given her name. The parents said, well, there is no other name we can give to it than to say—Ọmọ jọ ẹlẹwu, Ọmọ jọ ẹlẹwu ('Mọjẹlẹwu) and that is why the child's name is Ọmọjẹlẹwu. 'Mọjẹlẹwu became of age. My right hand performed divination for Ọṣun, the *awo* of Aso-Oke, divined divination for *oke* (hill). Tell me your don'ts [forbidden words or behaviors], I'll tell you my don'ts. Performed divination for 'Mọjẹlẹwu, wife of Okẹre. Okẹre was to give marriage to 'Mọjẹlẹwu. Okẹre called 'Mọjẹlẹwu. He told the wife, look, sit down. It is better for us to know our don'ts and I know your don'ts as you will know mine, that we will not offend one another. The wife said to the husband first: "Well, you see me as I am, I have very fat breasts. Should you never abuse me with it." And that's what we call Yemọjá. Ọmọjẹlẹwu was a dyer. Okẹre was *onisegun* (a native medicine man) and a hunter, a bold hunter. He had many medicines. The husband told the wife—"Look at this small house, should you ever enter it, don't enter into this room, NEVER!"
>
> Okẹre also cared for pigeons. (As you know, some people have an interest in keeping chickens; instead of keeping chickens, this Okẹre keeps pigeons). One day, one of the pigeons of Okẹre went out to spread the remains of the dye material of 'Mọjẹlẹwu, what 'Mọjẹlẹwu used to dye cloths. One of the pigeons went out just to scatter them. 'Mọjẹlẹwu took up a stone and threw it at the pigeon. As Okẹre saw the action of the woman, he said, "Aah! 'Mọjẹlẹwu, and you did this?" Before he finished the sentence, he remembered what the wife had told him—her don't. He stopped, Okẹre stopped, Okẹre stopped, maybe he wanted to abuse the wife. Immediately he stopped, he didn't pronounce what he wanted to say. The wife was not happy about it, she knew fully well what he wanted to say, but she kept it within herself.
>
> The time came when the Okẹre went to war, but before he went to war . . . he spread out all his medicines outside to dry them. . . . He put them in the sun. Later, there was evidence that there would be rain. The medicines of the Okẹre were outside . . . in the sun, just to have them dried. . . .'Mọjẹlẹwu was at home, doing her dyeing work. Then she realized that, "Aah! If this rain has to fall, these medicines will be spoiled and will become bad." She began to think on what to do, thinking, remembering the "don'ts," that she should never touch or go to the one inner room. She began to pack all the medicines. Okẹre also had realized that there would be rain (there were some people in the old days who had the power of getting to any place they would want to touch anytime). So Okẹre seeing that "Aah!" he had put those things in the sun. If this rain had to fall, there is no alternative, all those things have to spoil. Then he immediately realized it and got all things together, trying to come back home.
>
> Then he saw 'Mọjẹlẹwu, as she was trying to pack all those medicines inside. Then a far off, he said: "'Mọjẹlẹwu, as I've told you, you should NEVER enter this small room or even touch any of the medicines, YOU, THIS FAT BREASTED WOMAN!" 'Mọjẹlẹwu became annoyed, and what she did was to begin to pack all her belongings. This is the story of how Yemọjá became the River Ogun—and became Yemọjá is what we are narrating—So, 'Mọjẹlẹwu got all of her properties, everything she had and she began to walk away with them. Then Okẹre said, "Hah! There is no need of deceiving yourself! There is no place where you can go, you cannot go ANYWHERE!"
>
> Okẹre was a good medicine man, somebody who knew a lot of medicines. He was a powerful man in medicines. 'Mọjẹlẹwu began to run, she was just going away from the husband's house. Then the Okẹre began to pursue the wife. As soon as they got to a tall hill, he said, "Oh, you people, Agbele is the *awo* of Aro that he called Iyere, *òrìṣà* is the *awo* of outside. He performed divination for Ifin who was in want of children, she was to give birth, she gave birth to 'Mọjẹlẹwu as a child . . . of my right hand, *awo* of Otun, performed divination for Osun, the *awo* of Ese Oke (that is the foot of a hill) performed divination for a hill. Tell me what you don't like, I tell you what I don't like. [*Awo* Ese Oke] performed divination for 'Mọjẹlẹwu, wife of Okẹre, performed divination for Okẹre who was to give marriage to 'Mọjẹlẹwu as wife, YOU BIG HILL, STOP 'MỌJẸLẸWU FOR *AWO*, CROSS HER, DON'T LET HER TO GO TO THE PLACE SHE WANTS TO GO, BIG HILL! STOP 'MỌJẸLẸWU FOR *AWO*" (that is, for Okẹre). . . . Oke (hill) heard this and it rose, it rose higher than it was before. . . . There was no way for 'Mọjẹlẹwu to go, she had been crossed, and so 'Mọjẹlẹwu

fell down. 'Mọjẹlẹwu, too, became very tall but when there was no other way for her, she, too, just went down, like that, flatly (men and women of old days had such powers . . . supernatural powers that very few people have now).

So, 'Mọjẹlẹwu, after falling down, became a river, but broke the hill into two . . . it broke the hill into two and through it there was water, 'MỌJẸLẸWU BECAME WATER, RIGHT FROM THAT PLACE . . . Yes, Agbele is the *awo* of Aro, *òrìṣà* is the *awo* of outside, performed divination for Ifin who was in want of a child, when she was to give birth, she gave birth to 'Mọjẹlẹwu as a child . . . IGBORIMIRIMI . . . of my right hand, the *awo* of Ọsun performed divination for Osùn . . . IGBORIMIRIMI . . . the *awo* of a foot of a hill, performed divination for a hill, tell me your don't I'll tell you my don't, performed divination for 'Mọjẹlẹwu, wife of Okẹre of Ṣaki . . . and that's how 'Mọjẹlẹwu became the river Ogun and became known as Yemọjá.

Now . . . her children began to worship her, just to appeal for her love, so she will be able to give them all they think they need. That is the beginning of the worship. Because Yemọjá, that is, 'Mọjẹlẹwu, had to call on her children . . . she said that anytime they would want a place of call in the river (a place of worship, it can be called also, as in *ojúori* for a departed father or mother, where they are buried, you can go to that place if you want something, call on him or her and make some *ẹbọ* or some sacrifice). . . . That is the beginning of the [Yemọjá] worship. ('Fayinka, *babaláwo*, chief, Gbajura quarter 1983, personal communication, Abeokuta, Nigeria [trans. Bayo Akanbi, 1983, Ife, Nigeria])

Although the *okẹre* is a Muslim, he is still careful to pay special ritual attention to Yemọjá in the ceremonies associated with his office. For example, Yemọjá must be invoked during the coronation ceremonies before the king of Ṣaki can be considered to be properly installed in office. This spiritual requirement was honored by the current *okẹre* and his officials despite the strong Muslim contingent connected with the palace.

In Abeokuta the devotion to Yemọjá was still active and was also associated with a royal context when I conducted my research in 1983 and when I returned in 1991. Yemọjá's major shrine is located in the Ibara district close to the palace of the paramount chief (also king), known as the *olubara*. In Ibara, Yemọjá is seen as not only a queen but as the mother of many other gods and goddesses and as an àjẹ́. She is believed capable of controlling and facilitating fertility and procreation on a human as well as a generic biological level, and her power is believed to encompass even some aspects of nature. While I was there in 1983, Abeokuta and

the general area had been experiencing an unseasonable dry spell that caused quite a lot of hardship for the farmers. This minidrought was a frequent topic of conversation at the *afin* Ibara (palace). The *olubara* and his Ifá diviners and other priests finally decided that Yemọjá must be the cause of all the water drying up. When they divined, they found that she wanted a major sacrifice—a cow. Once this was accomplished, miraculously or coincidentally (however we may look at it) the rains came and the dry spell was ended. I was surprised to note the king's high respect for traditional Yorùbá religion and for the worship of Yemọjá, despite the fact that he was Western-educated and a professed, devout Christian.

There are several references in the literature about the Yorùbá in West Africa to Yemọjá's role as àjẹ́ or *iyami*—our mother (or witch in Westernized thinking). According to Peter Morton-Williams (1960), Yemọjá is the mother of witchcraft. In his classic study, *Black Gods and Kings*, Thompson quotes two high-ranking priests who emphasize the close connection with Yemọjá and Gẹlẹdé, a society devoted to placating *iyami:* "Gelede is the worship of Yemọjá, goddess of the sea and river. The masks of Gẹlẹdé represent her and her female descendants," and "Yemọjá is owner of Gẹlẹdé."[4]

In Ibara, Yemọjá is thought to reside in the various tributaries of the Ogun River, which are located in the precinct, and she may be invoked by speaking the different names that recall these distinct watery dwellings. She is worshiped through blood and food sacrifices, *ọfọ àṣẹ* (words charged with spiritual power through ritual chanting), and other means in two major shrines located near the tributaries (fig. 4.1). Although Yemọjá is honored regularly in daily, weekly, and monthly ceremonies, the most elaborate ceremonies are the annual festivals beginning in late April or early May that usually last nineteen days.

During the annual festivals all the images of Yemọjá are taken from their individual household or compound shrines and brought to the major shrine in the royal Ibara district shrine. Here, they are lined up on the long veranda of the interior shrine courtyard (plate 17) in front of the secret, sacred precinct where the most powerful symbols of Yemọjá are housed. These images—*ère* Yemọjá—receive a portion of all food and animal sacrifices and are believed to be reactivated during this period. Contemporary images are enamel-painted wooden carvings that usually depict a female with very large breasts suckling one or more children and often surrounded by other children. The carvings signify the role of Yemọjá as nurturing mother, vigilant protectress, and agent

Fig. 4.1. Ìyálòrìṣà Omileye, the head priestess of the Yemọjá Shrine uttering sacred words during a ritual, Ibara district, Abeokuta, Nigeria, 1983. Photograph by author.

of fertility. A special necklace consisting of multiple strands of tiny clear crystal beads secured by two or three larger red, white, and blue Venetian trade beads serves as a symbol of Yemọjá in Ibara and is represented on the sculptures that conform in style to the typical Yorùbá canon.

The most important events of the annual festivals in the Ibara district in Abeokuta, besides the private sacrifices, involve the public processions from the major shrines to the Ogun River tributaries to retrieve the sacred water necessary to replenish the *aṣẹ* of Yemọjá. The consecrated pots in the shrines are carried to the river on the heads of devotees designated by divination (fig. 4.2). Later, in the evening, the Yemọjá images are paraded throughout the district on the heads of initiates. The images are taken to visit each of the individual houses, market stalls

Fig. 4.2. Priestess of Yemọjá leading a procession to the Ogun River in order to replenish sacred water for the shrine, Ibara district, Abeokuta, Nigeria, 1983. Photograph by author.

(plate 18), and the palace in Ibara for the collecting of gifts of food, drink, or money. Yemọjá expresses her pleasure and bestows her blessings by incarnating one or more of the devotees during these processions (plate 19). The possession trance is an extremely important element in these processions. The festival ends at dusk and everyone returns to the main shrine where the possessed devotees have their trances lifted by the priestess.

In the town of Ilé-Ifẹ̀ in Nigeria, Yemọjá is regarded as a daughter of Olokun, the goddess of wealth, and as the personification of the sea. She is accessible to her devotees because of their understanding of her behavior and feelings as comparable to that of earthly women: Yemọjá's first husband was Ọ̀rúnmìlà—the *òrìṣà* governing divination. She later

married Olofin, the *ọni* of Ifẹ̀, with whom she bore ten children, whose names correspond to the names of other *òrìṣàs*, such as Oṣumare (rainbow) and Ṣango. The *oríkì* (praise poems) of Yemọjá refer to her connection with Olokun and suggest that the Yorùbá in Africa assigned moral and physical characteristics and personality traits to Yemọjá that are comparable to those associated with her in Bahia:

> Queen of the waters who comes from Olokun's house
> She wears a dress of beads in the market
> She waits proudly seated, in front of the king
> Queen who lives in the depths of the waters
> She walks all around the city
> Displeased, she demolishes bridges
> She owns a copper rifle
> Our mother of the tearful breasts. (Verger 1981b, 191)

The phrase "tearful breast" is a metaphor for the leaking of milk from the swollen breasts of a nursing mother and signifies the characteristics of nourishment and nurturance associated with Yemọjá. The emphasis on large breasts is ubiquitous.

Yemanjá/Yemọjá in Bahia

In the Yorùbá diaspora, and especially in Bahia, Yemọjá is polythetic (Barnes 1989, 12–13)—that is, she is named and defined through a combination of features and meanings rather than through one monotypic attribute. A very popular deity, she is known variously as Yemanjá, Yemọjá, Iemanjá, Iara (water nymph of the indigenous Indians), and Senhora (madame or lady). Her images are also disparate and multiple. For some she is a mermaid with long, flowing hair, with the torso of a human and the lower body of a fish (fig. 4.3) For others, she is Nossa Senhora de Conceição da Praia—Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of the Beach, a version of the Virgin Mary depicted standing atop the heads of angels with long, cascading black hair, pure white skin, wearing a gold or silver crown, and clothed in embroidered blue and white velvets and laces (fig. 4.4). A popular chromolithograph used by *candomblé* initiates and the general populace alike portrays Yemanjá as a glamorous princess or queen, dressed in blue and rising out of the blue sea, sheltered by a blue sky (plate 20).

Fig. 4.3. Aluminum foil mermaid called Yemanjá; decorating the Yemanjá Restaurant, Sugar Loaf, Rio de Janeiro, 1980. Photograph by author.

Ilê axé initiates understand Yemanjá as a beneficent mother figure, a general protectress, and a goddess of all saltwater, as in Africa, whose *àṣẹ* is localized in starfish and seashells that sit openly on the altar (plate 5) or in ocean or river stones housed in blue porcelain basins. In Brazil each deity is honored weekly on the day dedicated to him or her. Yemanjá's sacred day for *osse* (weekly or monthly veneration) is Saturday. On that day she is prayed to and may be offered her preferred foods—duck, mutton, and delicacies prepared from a base of white corn, oil, salt, and onion.

Attributes of Yemanjá

In Bahia an assortment of features delineate the *àṣẹ* of Yemanjá, features expressed in seven types of the goddess:

> Yemowo—wife of Oxalá (Obatala—deity of creation) who rests in a lake in the interior far from the ocean and likes jewels and luxurious clothes

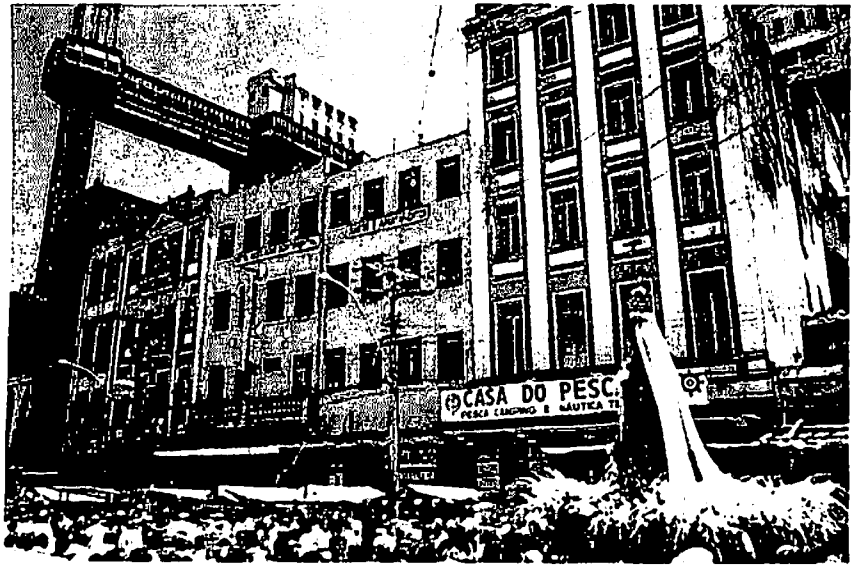

Fig. 4.4. Sculpture of Nossa Senhora de Conceição in a procession after a High Mass celebrating her holy day, December 8, in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. Photograph courtesy of Arquivo Bahiatursa, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil.

Iyamasse—mother of Xango (Shango, deity of thunder and lightning and former king of Oyọ)
Olossa—lake into which the rivers drain
Yemanjá Ogunte—married to Ogum Alagbede and is aggressive and often violent
Yemanjá Assabá—limps, constantly spins cotton, is willful and sometimes dangerous (plate 21)
Yemanjá Assessu—lives in soiled, turbulent waters and is very headstrong and formidable.

Bahian oral literature featuring Yemanjá combines many of the above attributes:

> The youngest and most beloved wife of Oxalá is Iemanjá [Yemanjá/Yemọjá], identified with the Virgin Mary. Voluptuous, she is represented with vast breasts and large, sexually potent buttocks. As she also lives in the waters near Oxalá, Iemanjá's colors are [crystal] white and [light] blue. She is well loved among women, especially the stout ones. . . . [While] Oxum is believed to live on the surface of the waters, and Nanan in depths, Iemanjá lives in the middle.
>
> Although Iemanjá possesses some of the caprices of feminine vanity, she does not have the same [extravagant] requirements of Oxum. She is especially docile and tractable, complacent and accommodating, and causes gentle breezes on fishing trips and tranquility within the family. . . . Even though she is confused with European or indigenous [Indian] myths, she does not have the voluptuousness of the mermaids or the perversity of the *iaras* [mythological river sirens]. (Seljan 1973, 26)[5]

Many personality traits of the goddesses conform to the mythical attributes of Yemanjá and her variants and thus Yemanjá may be considered an archetype. The composite portrait of Yemanjá is of a goddess/initiate who is alternately obstinate, yielding, inflexible, adaptive, protective, passionate, courageous, haughty, and sometimes arrogant; possesses a keen sense of rank and hierarchy and commands respect; is fair but formal; is a devoted friend and frequently puts friendships to test; finds it difficult to forgive an offense and rarely forgets the wrong. The goddess/initiate is preoccupied with others, is maternal, and serious. Despite the fact that vanity is not a salient trait characterizing Yemanjá, her initiates love luxury, ostentatious blue-and-white, or sea-green textiles, and costly jewels. They prefer sumptuous lifestyles even if their everyday circumstances do not permit them such luxury.

Axô Yemanjá: Sacred Symbols

In Bahia, sacred art objects, dance, ritual, and trance are the fundamental means used to commune with the gods and manipulate the sacred. Yemanjá manifests herself in her *adoxu* or *olorixá* (generic terms for all initiates able to experience possession trance; mediums) during the rituals and *matanças* (sacrifices) held in the Yemanjá shrine preceding the public festivals of the *ilê axé candomblé* Nagô. During these private ceremonies, slight rearrangement of the initiates' clothing signify their states of possession trance.

In the *ilê axé,* public festivals known as *xire* are arenas for splendid displays of art. In Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá—the *candomblé* I researched most thoroughly—these *xire* began when the *olorixás* leave the Casa de Xango (principal shrine house) and, led by the head priestess, proceed single file to the *barracão.* At other times, at a pre-designated hour, the *olorixás*

proceed from their homes to the *barracão*. At the ritual leader's signal, they immediately form a *roda* (circle) and dance counterclockwise as the drummers and singers *tirar cantigas* (sing the triad of specific songs for each deity to elicit the possession trance). At this juncture, the initiates wear elaborate *roupa de barracão* in the appropriate colors to signify the *olorixá*'s connection with the *orixá* who "owns their heads."

Once the initiate enters into the trance of his or her *orixá*—the *transe pesado* (or deep trance), the initiate's actions and behavior are believed to be those of their deity. The initiate's clothing is rearranged to signify the trance and they dance for a while in the center of the *roda*. They are then led backward into a back room of the *barracão* where they are dressed in the elaborate, expensive, and sumptuous formal ritual apparel reserved for use only by those who are in the deep trance of their deity. The initiate then reenters the dancing space backward, led either by the head priestess or her assistant, who constantly rings the *agogo* (the silver-colored ritual bell believed to inaugurate and continue the trance state). In this state, the initiate is believed to be the *orixá* incarnate and so reenacts the myths and the *axé* of his or her deity for the benefit of all present. When Yemanjá danced in the *barracão*, I was struck by the common sight of spectators and initiates eagerly awaiting her embrace. She accomplished this by opening her arms widely and closing them tightly around the recipient, touching the initiates' chest with the left, then the right shoulder. I could not ascertain the significance of the gesture beyond the fact that recipients believed that the *axé* of the *orixá* was transferred to them (Nivalda, 1983, personal communication).

The accoutrements (*axó* Yemanjá) Yemanjá wears and holds synthesize African and European elements which have symbolic functions (plate 22). This formal ritual ensemble conceptually recalls Yemanjá's status as a queen in Ṣaki, Nigeria, as recounted in the *odù* above. The ensemble varies only slightly for different *candomblés* and fundamentally consists of a silver-colored metal crown (often fringed with beads), bead necklace(s), blouse, skirt, fan, crown, sword, heavily starched underskirts, silver-colored metal bracelets, armlets, and skirt bangles.

The crown (*adé*) is the object most closely associated with the authority of Yorùbá kings and female regents treated as male in West Africa, and is an important attribute of Yemanjá as well as other *ayabás* (female *orixás*) in Bahia. Yemanjá's metal crown probably recalls male Yorùbá royal symbols transposed symbolically to a female goddess. The *adé* represents Yemanjá's sovereignty over the sea and, according to some

initiates, all water. (The crown appears in Europeanized versions of Yemanjá such as Dona Janaina, who is so popular on Bahian chromolithographs.) Images of Nossa Senhora de Conceição de Praia syncretized with Yemanjá also wear similar crowns. (The Catholic crown may refer to the Virgin Mary as a "queen" among all women; Padre Oliveira, Oct. 1981, personal communication, Bahia, Brazil) The use of the crown by the incarnated *orixá* Yemanjá may also refer to the earthly interpretation of Yemanjá as queen and wife of the king of Ṣaki. This would, however, be a free African Brazilian adaptation of a male Yorùbá symbol. The fringe of tiny crystal beads that often characterizes Yemanjá's crown is symbolic of water and serves to veil the face of the *orixá*. Similar fringes are found on the beaded crowns of Yorùbá kings. According to Thompson: "the crown incarnates the intuition of the royal ancestral force, the revelation of great moral insight in the person to the king, and the glitter of aesthetic experience. . . . Indeed, the prerogative of beaded objects is restricted to those who represent the gods and with whom the gods communicate: kings, priests, diviners, and native doctors" (1972, 227–29). In this context, the beaded veil may both indicate the presence of the supernatural and visually communicate social and political rank. Only those Yorùbá kings who can trace direct descent from Odùduwà (now worshiped as an *òrìṣà*) may wear the beaded fringed veil, a symbol of supernatural kingship. Only incarnated *orixás* wear the *adé* Yemanjá, as it symbolizes the force and royalty of the spiritual presence. According to Mellor (in Thompson 1972): "the beaded crown with veil is the essential sign of kingship." In *candomblé* Nagô the only *orixás* who wear beaded veils are Oxalufon (Obatala in his aspect as father of all *orixás* and rightful king of Ilé-Ifẹ̀), Yemanjá (queen of Ṣaki and mother of other *orixás* except Loko, Omolu, and Oxumare), and Oxum (queen of river, freshwater, and fecundity in her role as *iyami àjẹ́*, or witch) (Verger 1981b, n.p.). These three are linked more deeply with mythical royalty and power than any other *orixás* in the pantheon except for Xango, and the beaded fringed veil may symbolize the special relationship between sovereignty, civil influence, and spiritual power.

The fan (*abẹ̀bẹ̀*) of silver-colored metal is another important attribute of Yemanjá, and is received at the completion of the initiation to the level of *ebomin* (seven or more years after initiation as Iyawo). It refers to her beauty and status as the cherished younger wife of Oxalá. Although I did not find round fans in actual use in Ibara (site of the Yemọjá shrine in Abeokuta), fans are mentioned in a verse from the

ancient literary corpus of Ifá divination as a symbol of Yemọjá (Thompson 1983, 7). In Africa, Yemọjá's power to bring peace and coolness to the world is expressed by the back-and-forth movements of the *abẹbẹ*. Bahian initiates use the *abebe* Yemanjá in ritual dances in movements recalling the motion of waves to expel negative forces (dos Santos, n.d., 94). The *abẹbẹ* and *adé* are kept on the altar for Yemanjá when not in use. The *ilẹke* that Yemanjá wears invoke the cool transparency of water and are worn by initiates in single strands as daily insignia of the *orixá*. Twelve-strand or sixteen-strand necklaces are worn for festivals. Crystal and white metals such as silver symbolize the clarity and surface reflections of water—the natural element associated with Yemanjá—and her calm, virtuous moods.

The *saias* are made of expensive material and are reminiscent of the skirts worn by wives of slave masters, the types of skirts depicted in many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century illustrations of European and American dress (Debret 1840). This mode may have survived as a cultural memory or may have been copied by the Bahian upper-class wives or the mulata mistresses of slave owners and apparently appropriated by Africans as early as 1859 for festival and *candomblé* use. According to the illustrations, slaves and liberated blacks wore different styles of skirts.

The *saia* Yemanjá is made of six meters of cloth and decorated with rosettes, tiers of ruffles, flowers, and ribbons, in the manner of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century models. The extreme fullness is achieved by using two or more petticoats—*anaguas*—made of thin muslin (*murin*) edged with a border of lace ten or more centimeters wide. These petticoats are heavily starched using a technique employed by the slaves who did this work for their mistresses. This starching technique was handed down from mother to daughter by descendants of slaves and today is used solely within the confines of *candomblé* (Tia Clarisse, Ebomin of Omolu 1982, personal communication, Salvador). The starching process is time-consuming and difficult. In the *candomblé* where I lived, only two women knew how to starch "properly"; neither too much, leaving the *anagua* stiff, nor too little, leaving the petticoat limp, which is considered *feia* (ugly). The *anaguas* were individually starched in a large black iron pot over a wood fire built in the courtyard of the *adoxu*'s house. Chunks of starch were dissolved in boiling water and then the water was stirred vigorously to prevent lumping. The *anagua* was thoroughly immersed, pulled out with a heavy stick, and suspended over the pot to cool before being wrung out to remove the excess starch. After drying on the grass in the sun, the petticoat was ironed, an arduous job requiring much pressure because of the stiffness.

In 1983 the usual price for starching one *anagua* varied from 1,000 to 1,500 cruzeiros, a costly sum considering that the minimum wage at that time was only 20,000 cruzeiros per month, the equivalent of $35.00. All initiates who could pay or barter for the service had their petticoats starched because it was a sign of beauty and prestige. The more bouffant the *saia* became by using many petticoats, the more beautiful it was considered to be (Ọdẹbwa, *adoxu* of Oxossi 1982, personal communication, Salvador). The petticoats were carefully put on and taken off and were worn as frequently as possible before being restarched, often until they were noticeably dirty. The pleasing aesthetic effect of the *orixá*'s skirt (*saia de orixá*) was partly or strongly dependent upon its fullness.

The blouse (*blusa*) of the *axô* Yemanjá is called *bordado* after the embroidery that embellishes it. Cut-and-drawn thread floral patterns are painstakingly embroidered along the edges in a very slow and tedious process. The cost of this garment varies according to the intricacy of the design, ranging from fifty dollars for a simple design to three hundred dollars for a blouse or skirt entirely covered with *bordado*. Liturgical vestments made using this technique are highly prestigious and are worn by the *orixá*, the *iyalorixá*, the *iyakekere*, or high-status *ebomin*. I have known women to save for a year or more to purchase one piece of *bordado*.

The two scarves (*ojá*) follow an African antecedent when worn wrapped on the head. Wrapping the *ojá* around the upper torso and tying it into a big bow on the front of the chest appears to be an indigenous innovation; When used for the *axô* or *roupa de orixá* I know of no African or European prototypes for this style. The chain at the waist of the *axô* Yemanjá and the metal symbols hanging from it are called *pinca* (*iba* in Yorùbá). *Pinca* are earned only after the seven-year ritual marking the transition from *iyawô* to *ebomin*. Silver-colored objects signify Yemanjá and brass- or gold-colored objects represent Oxum, while copper or copper-colored pieces are reserved for Yansan. Initiates believe that the metal's color reflects the nature of the *orixá* represented: Yemanjá—cool; Oxum—warm; Yansan—hot (Dona Hilda 1981, personal communication, Salvador; Pai Crispim 1982, personal communication, Salvador). All of the silver-colored items on the *pinca* Yemanjá

are symbols of Yemanjá's favorite possessions: combs, fans, mirrors, slippers. These may be given to her as gifts during the annual transclass and ethnicity festival, Presentes de Yemanjá.

The silver-colored sword (*espada*) represents an aspect of Yemanjá called Iya Tanan, which is venerated at Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá. This *orixá* is believed to reside in wells two hundred feet or deeper. Iya Tanan is symbolized by green crystal beads in Afonjá. I have not seen green crystal used as a color symbolic of Yemanjá anywhere else except in the *egún terreiro* ritually linked to Afonjá, on Itaparica Island. According to the head priestess of Afonjá, this variation of Yemanjá comes from the Grunci (probably the Gurunsi of Upper Volta) nation, the reputed ethnicity of Iyá Oba Biyi, the first ritual head of Afonjá. Iya Tanan is characterized by a personality that suddenly alternates between hotheaded aggressiveness (symbolized by the sword), suggesting a warrior aspect, and coolness, gentleness, protectiveness, and motherliness (symbolized by the fan, implying her more feminine aspect). Yemanjá Iya Tanan is regarded in Afonjá as mother of all *orixás* not borne by Nanan. In this capacity she must be invoked along with Oxalá during all phases of initiation, especially those involving evocation of trance, creation of a new being, and the relearning of routine tasks and behaviors (*quintanda* or *panan*). As important as Yemanjá is in African Brazilian religion and pan-Brazilian culture, there are very few people in whom she chooses to manifest, whereas there are a great number of initiates for *orixás* such as Ògún, Yansan, and Oxossi. There are usually only one or two *adoxu* Yemanjá in any *candomblé*, and mediums of this type are sometimes actively recruited.

In the shrine of Yemanjá in Afonjá, the residence of Yemanjá Iya Tanan is symbolized by a round well rim 36.22 inches high and 60.24 inches in diameter, made of cement and encrusted with cowries and seashells. It is located in the Ilê Yemanjá (house of Yemanjá—two rooms adjoined to the northern facade of the Casa de Oxalá containing that *orixá*'s shrine). The proximity of Yemanjá's shrine to that of Oxalá may symbolize their mythical relationship as wife and husband and as mother and father of most *orixás*. Although several *orixás* may be placed together on the same altar in the same building, I know of no other architectural shrines each dedicated to single deities juxtaposed in this way.

Participants in private weekly rituals and sacrifices at the Iya Tanan shrine must be initiates. During the ceremonies, they remain in the outer room, kneeling with their heads resting on their hands. The only persons allowed into the inner shrine are the *iyalorixá*, her assistant, the *axogun* (men who perform the sacrifice),[6] *ebomin* Yemanjá, and the manifested *orixá* Yemanjá. The inner room (the actual shrine area) is where Yemanjá's favorite fowl—duck and guinea hen—is sacrificed. Here, divination with kola nuts (*obi;* an African fruit cultivated in Bahia) is also performed. *Osse* and *matanças* are performed at 5 or 6 A.M. on the day of the great annual festival. Spiritually, these rituals are very important since they activate and redistribute the *axé* Yemanjá.

Festivals for Yemanjá

In Brazil festivals and rituals for Yemanjá take place in both sacred and secular arenas, and in many instances these spheres overlap. In the sacred context, religions of both African and Luso-Brazilian derivation honor Yemanjá on February 2 and December 8, respectively.

The most important African-derived Yemanjá ritual takes place on the relatively isolated island of Itaparica, high on a remote hill known as Bela Vista. The primary participants in the nonpublic portion of this ritual are priests of Ilê Agboulá (*oje*) who care for the *egún* and their wives, children, and other relatives. Spectators who are loosely affiliated with the ancestor society, or who are present on the beach by coincidence, participate in the public segment.

About two weeks before the public festival for Yemanjá, the *oje* perform an *osse* to Baba Bakabaka, one of the patron ancestors of Ilê Agboulá. This is done in order to obtain permission to hold the festival observances for Yemanjá at the appropriate sacred sites. During the day on February 2 the *egún* of Yemanjá (plate 23), distinguished by the color blue and other visual attributes, makes an appearance in order to bless the presents previously assembled in the festival building. After dancing for about an hour, the *egún* exits to its sacred shrine. Next, initiates dressed in white liturgical costumes make their way singing and dancing down the hill to the sea in a long procession accompanied by drummers. The initiates carry baskets with gifts, food, and floral offerings on their heads. After crossing the length of the beach several times, singing the praises of Yemanjá and invoking her presence, the initiates, drummers, and *egún* priests begin to board the boats that will carry them and their presents out to sea where they will make contact with Yemanjá. The gifts are deposited on the third wave. If several Yemanjá initiates are possessed by trance, that is interpreted as an indication that Yemanjá

is satisfied with her presents and will bestow blessings and protection on her worshipers during the coming year. When the boats return, the crowd follows the initiates, the incarnated *orixá* Yemanjá, and the other participants to a small church where they dance until dusk. The festival ends when the trances are lifted from the initiates.

In the city of Bahia, Yemanjá is worshiped on December 8—the Roman Catholic holy day of Nossa Senhora de Conceição, the patroness of Bahia, fishermen, and business enterprises (fig. 4.4). The adoration of Yemanjá has evolved into national proportions. On this day, after an early mass, a huge procession parades through the streets with the image of the saint. A few days before this, the area around the church dedicated to this saint, which was painstakingly built with Portuguese stones and tiles, and the Mercado Modelo (a craft market and tourist attraction) are decorated with colorful lights and streamers in much the same manner as for Carnaval or other popular, profane festivals. Hundreds of temporary wooden shacks bearing names of the *orixás* (e.g., barraca Yansan) or Christian proverbs serve as bars and eateries for the thousands of people who participate in this street party called *festa de largo.* (A characteristic of Bahia that attracts tourists from all parts of Brazil and other countries is this coincidence of street festivals with annual religious holidays, masses, and processions of saints.)

Even though the visual images are European, the participants I interviewed considered themselves to be honoring both the Virgin Mary and Yemanjá. According to Pierre Verger (1981a, 74), a German traveler documented this syncretism as early as 1859:

> A small procession came out of the Church of Nossa Senhora de Praia on December 8, causing great excitement among the passersby especially because of the blacks [in the procession] who produced the most unique impression. It [was] a great day [for] the people [of] color. The black men and women enthusiastically danced in front of the church and in the streets. . . . [It was] an original, genuine African picture. I was unable to force myself to refrain from looking at [the] black women . . . some perfect beauties from the Costa da Mina [the area along the African coast, including Nigeria, Ghana, Republic of Benin]. Some of them exquisitely carved in basalt, in complete negligence, with the bust seminude on one side, splendidly erect, rounded . . . flexible shapes of a brilliant black, many with bare shoulders. They displayed rich necklaces of coral, genuinely African, with gold decorations, around their black necks. Many of these wore thick gold chains adorning their waists and their elbows. It appears to me, however, that the majority of them were carefully dressed in a manner consisting of a turban wrapped around the head, a heavily embroidered white scarf, a finely embroidered shirt, and a pleated, fringed, full round skirt.

This eyewitness account is important because it documents the early association of Africans with Nossa Senhora de Conceição and suggests that a symbolic association between the Virgin Mary and Yemanjá existed in Bahia well before 1888, when slavery was abolished. Further, it shows that the prototypes for the *roupa de axé* were already in use: *saia rodada, pano da costa,* and *ojá.* It seems likely that the African participants were both slaves and freed blacks. The present-day festival is remarkably similar to the 1859 event described above. The participants are still predominantly of African descent. The crowds are intense, the music is deafening, and the revelry and samba dancing last until dawn

The largest and grandest secular festival for Yemanjá is the annual one which takes place on February 2 in Rio Vermelho in Salvador. Although this day is technically reserved for Nossa Senhora das Candeias (syncretized with Oxum), it has been taken over by the devotees of Yemanjá, with the justification that because Yemanjá is the queen and ruler of all water, she should also be honored on this day. Even though it is primarily secular, this festival includes a genuine *candomblé* religious ritual, a semireligious presentation of gifts by thousands of devotees on the beach, and a huge secular street party.

Before 5 A.M. on the festival day, there is a private ritual offering to Yemanjá by *adoxu* or *olorixá* from different *candomblés* (fig. 4.5). The *ebo* of boiled white corn mixed with clear vegetable, olive oil, or palm oil and onion is considered the favorite food of Yemanjá in the *ilê axé.*[7] A temporary structure built of wooden posts and wide palm leaves houses the drummers and some of the initiates who sing Yemanjá's praises and dance in an attempt to evoke her presence. In a small white house near the rocky shore, fishermen clear space for the thousands of individual gifts to be taken from their temporary structures, placed in large wicker baskets (*cestas*) in the white house, and finally, taken out to sea. As the sun rises, a long line of devotees begins to form. Some of the devotees go directly onto the rocks or into the water to pray and offer their individual gifts (plate 24).

This annual ritual can be said to transcend all class and racial barriers. The secular Presentes de Yemanjá festival has even attained national

Fig. 4.5. Candomblé ritual preceding the Presentes de Yemanjá festival held in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, on February 2. Photograph courtesy of Arquivo Bahiatursa, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil.

significance. The reasons for this phenomenon may derive from the amalgamation of the African goddess Yemọjá with an aspect of the Virgin Mary. Most of the upper- and middle-class individuals I interviewed while they stood in line to offer gifts supported this conclusion: the devotees believed they were giving gifts to and obtaining blessings from both entities. Each gift thus served a dual purpose and reaped double spiritual benefits. Offerings included any feminine articles that a woman might desire: perfume, special soaps, face powder, flowers (fig. 4.6), ribbons, mirrors, and combs. Some offerings were extremely elaborate floral arrangements set in baskets with dolls. I even saw a boat made entirely of flowers with a toy doll (representing Yemanjá) on top. Notes of thanks or specific entreaties for help from Yemanjá accompanied all the offerings. The most common requests were solicitations (*pedidos*) for spiritual aid with matters of health and well-being and with problems regarding children, employment, and love.

Fig. 4.6. Flowers for *orixá* Yemanja, São Gonçalo do Retiro, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, 1998, Photograph by author.

In Nigerian shrines or other sacred spaces, the goddess Yemọjá is simultaneously represented by natural objects, wooden sculptures (fig. 4.7), and human containers (plate 25), but in Bahia, Yemanjá has been actualized in only one wooden sculpture to my knowledge (fig. 4.8). She is presently represented most often by natural objects such as stones or conch shells but most importantly by a human medium, who when in possession trance and incarnating Yemanjá temporarily functions as a living artistic creation or sculpture (see plate 22).

Yemọjá has remained a powerful spiritual force throughout the centuries on the African continent and in the African diaspora. Her images are many: in Africa, they include *axé*-imbued sculptures, beaded necklaces, bracelets, human bodies in trance, and natural objects such as river stones. In contrast, in Brazilian *ilês axés,* Yemanjá's visual repertoire

Fig. 4.7. Household shrine of Yemọjá, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1983. Photograph by author.

consists of African-derived sculptures, natural objects, ancestor masquerades, and humans in trance wearing liturgical vestments and carrying implements. Outside the *ilẹ axé*, among the general Brazilian populace, Yemanjá is represented simultaneously by chromolithographs of Dona Janaina—a crowned woman dressed in blue and walking on the blue sea, by silver and polychrome mermaids, and by forms of the Catholic Virgin Mary.

The power of Yemọjá/Yemanjá has, despite her changing image and ritual, remained steady and pervasive. In contemporary Bahia she is no longer venerated as an enchantress, but she is still regarded as queen, mother, protectress, and provider of fertility. Because of its geographical spread and diachronic depth in the New World, I think it safe to assume that the veneration of Yemọjá, along with its accompanying myths and rituals, formed an important part of the cultural baggage of Yorùbá slaves in the transatlantic slave trade. Especially in Brazil, the conceptually African worship of Yemọjá and its associated art objects have not

Fig. 4.8. African Brazilian sculpture for Yemanjá. Courtesy of the Verger Institute, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil.

only continued but have, in many instances, invaded the beliefs, practices, and imagery of the dominant white social strata. This system and its manifestation of the continent and in the African diaspora provides intriguing opportunities to investigate issues surrounding the imbrication of cultures, continuity, and change as embodied in creative practices, their resultant products, myth, and ritual. Finally, the art objects associated with Yemọjá worship are also extremely valuable as historical, social, and political documents of the conceptual and material interpenetration of the diverse cultures they encode.

3. "Double-voiced" is a term employed by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988). Although Gates used the term to refer to the double heritage of African American literature, in the sense that it contains both African and hegemonic Anglo-American elements "double-voice" is applicable to visual and performing arts as well. Indeed, as early as 1906 W. E. B. Dubois noted in *Souls of Black Folk* that this "sense of two-ness . . . double-consciousness of being . . . both . . . American and Negro" was endemic in the black American's psyche.

   In other recombined components, indigenous Indian or Caboclo design elements are evident (an example is the Egún caboclo discussed in chapter five).
4. While the Yorùbá blouse (*bùbá*) has been characterized by wide sleeves in recent decades, sleeve length and styles have varied in recent times as well as through the centuries.
5. I am grateful to Maria José Barbosa for bringing this reference to my attention.
6. The *òjá* (baby sash) and *gèlè* (head tie) are distinguished from each other by the Yorùbá in contemporary times, although they may be used interchangeably (Lawal, May 2000, personal communication). *A Dictionary of the Yorùbá Language*, published and reprinted from 1968 through 1983 in Nigeria by University of Ibadan Press, defines *òjá* as head tie, sash, belt, and girdle.
7. Yansan is the African Brazilian name for Ọya, the Yorùbá goddess who rules the Niger River and tornadoes and is one of the wives of Xango. Yemanjá is the designation for Yemọjá, goddess of the Ogun River, mother of other *orixás*, and in charge of maternal love and fertility. Oxum (Ọ̀ṣun) is the goddess of the Ọ̀ṣun River, another of Xango's wives and in charge of fertility, sensuous love, and beauty. Oxossi (Ọ̀ṣọ́ọ̀sì) is the god of hunting and a former king of Ketu (Mae Stella, Pai Crispim, 1983, Salvador da Bahia, personal communication). Obatala (Oxalá) is a god of the Igbo people, the indigenous inhabitants of Ilé-Ifẹ̀. Obatala was later incorporated into Yorùbá mythology to honor the original owners of the land (Idowu 1962, 71–75).
8. This complex of objects is commonly known as *assento* or *assentamento*, seat or foundation in Portuguese.
9. That this tendency predates the transatlantic slave trade is clearly seen in the bronze and terra-cotta art forms of ancient Ilé-Ifẹ̀.
10. These individuals are also known as *filhas-de-santo*, or daughters of the saint, or *filhos-de-santo*, sons of the saint.

Chapter 4

1. The data presented here are based on extended research periods of approximately three and one-half years in Brazil spanning 1980–83, 1986, 1990, 1998, 2000, and 2001; a year and a half in Nigeria from 1980–1983, 1986, and 1991; and three months in the Republic of Benin (1982–83).
2. The river Ogun should not be confused with the deity Ògún who is the god of iron, blacksmiths, motorists, and war.

3. In the translation, I have attempted to remain as close to the spoken rhythm of the chant as possible, with only slight editing.
4. The first quote was collected by Thompson from a Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́ priest in Lagos and his second reference was also from a Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́ priest based in Ibara quarter, Abeokuta.
5. *Candomblé* Nagô mythology considers Yemanjá to be the mother of all *orixás* except the children of Nanan. This is explained by a myth in which Aganju (Yemanjá's son) sexually molests her. While running away, Yemanjá trips and falls, giving simultaneous birth to many *òrìṣà* and to the Ogun River in Nigeria (Nina Rodrigues [1896] 1935, 222–23)
6. Women cannot shed blood through the ritual act of sacrificial killing in either Africa or Brazil.
7. This recalls the ègbo—mashed white corn mixed with white oil—a favorite food for Yemọjá in Ibara district, Abeokuta, Nigeria.

Chapter 5

1. Dos Santos's assertion of a strict separation between gods and ancestors in African Brazilian religion contrasts with the situation in many parts of the Yorùbá in Africa, where *egúngún* is thought to be an *òrìṣà* as well as a deceased ancestor (Obadẹrin Egúnjobi, 1981, personal communication, Ketu, Benin; Táíwò A. O. Nipado, 1982, personal communication, Ileṣa; Babayemi 1980, 1–4, 25).
2. Since that time, I have received reports that other *terreiros* to honor the ancestors have been founded in Bahia, as well as in Rio de Janeiro (Anibal Méjia, Adoxu Oxum, personal communication, Tucson, AZ). My daughter and I attended a ceremony for the *egún* in July 2000 at Ilê Aṣipa, located in the outskirts of Bahia and headed by Didi Dos Santos.
3. While *egúngún* rituals entail ancestor veneration, some *òrìṣàs* are considered ancestors (Lawal, May 2000, telephone conversation).
4. *Àwòyó* translates as a physical thing that brings joy and contentment when viewed (Lawal 1996, 39).
5. There is a close spiritual link between the *candomblé* Nagô *orixás* of the Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá of São Gonçalo do Retiro in Bahia and the *candomblé* Nagô Egún of Ilê Agboulá in Itaparica. The exact nature of this link is unclear. According to Flaviano dos Santos (a male *orixá* initiate and now head of his own *candomblé*, who holds posts in both *terreiros*), in order to participate in *egún*, one must also be initiated into the cult of the *orixá* (Oct. 1982, personal communication, Itaparica). The connection may go back to the late Mãe Senhora, world-renowned head priestess of the *candomblé* dedicated to the deity Afonjá (warrior manifestation of Xango) and cofounder of Ilê Axé Agboulá.
6. The same simple type of uniform is worn for all internal ceremonies dealing with birth, death, rebirth, and renewal; only the placement of the *pano da costa* varies. The absence of embellishment symbolizes the essential core of "pure" human existence, stressing natural rather than social or man-made elements.