Opening

> I'll teach you differences.
>> Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act 1, Scene 4

Responding to Richard Rorty's verdict that "Western liberal intellectuals should accept the fact that we have to start from where we are, and that this means that there are lots of visions which we simply cannot take seriously" (1991, 29), Eduardo Viveiros de Castro confronts the prevalent ethnocentric bias within Western philosophy and defines his own discipline, anthropology, in reactive and starkly contrasting terms: "taking seriously what Western intellectuals cannot, so Rorty tells us, take seriously" (2011, 133). In this Element, I propose to follow through Viveiros de Castro's directive and apply it to the philosophy of religion by exploring mythic narratives, presenting the practices of sacrifice, initiation, and spirit possession as they occur in Afro-Brazilian traditions, and by considering some of the methodological expansions required for the philosophy of religion to genuinely acknowledge and engage with these practices and traditions, which have thus far been overlooked.

In the last fifteen years or so, the philosophy of religion has withstood mounting attacks on its methodology, scope, and motivations, but it has been slow to change. Many see it as a discipline in which, on the one hand, outside influences, such as upbringing and education, play a pernicious role, and on the other, a tendency to explore and even formulate its questions solely in terms of its own practitioners' traditions is prevalent (De Cruz, 2018). The titles of recent monographs and edited volumes have announced its end, questioned its purpose, called for its renewal and reconfiguration, and wondered what its future might look like. To date, perhaps no work has more forcefully argued for overhauling the philosophy of religion than Kevin Schilbrack's *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (Schilbrack, 2014).

Schilbrack diagnoses traditional philosophy of religion as narrow, intellectualist, and insular. Narrowness refers to the fact that it suffers from a very restricted diet of examples. Even though attention to traditions other than Christianity has been growing, the two main branches of the discipline – natural theology and epistemology of religion – engage disproportionately with Christian theology. Intellectualism refers to the fact that the philosophy of religion is biased toward the analysis and assessment of religious beliefs to the exclusion of other practical religious phenomena, such as rituals, pilgrimages, feasts, and dietary laws. Finally, insularity refers to the lack of connection between the philosophy of religion and other disciplines in the academic study of religion and even from different fields within philosophy. Traditional philosophy of religion, Schilbrack remarks, does not "play well with others" (2014, 20).

In ignoring so many traditions, the questions philosophers of religion ask (and the answers they offer) reveal a degree of religious illiteracy that throws doubt on its relevance to the academic study of religion and on whether it even deserves the name philosophy of *religion*. The discipline must thus expand its current focus to become a global form of critical reflection on religions in all their varieties and dimensions in dialogue with other branches of philosophy and with other disciplines of the academic study of religions. As Timothy Knepper maintains, if one wants to philosophize about religion, then "one needs to understand religion in all its messy cultural-historical diversity. Insofar as one considers only a limited set of traditions or reasons, one's philosophy of religion is limited" (2013, 76). Yet, as soon as we try to bring new religious traditions into the fold of the philosophy of religion, especially ones that are ritual-focused and orally transmitted, we are faced with the question of how to go about this task. The discipline has paid almost no attention to ritual, even the ritual life of those religions that have received pride of place within it. Philosophers will not be able to rely on the same sources when thinking about religions that are not codified, text-based, institutionally centralized, and do not have a theological tradition as input (Porcher, 2024).

While Afro-Brazilian traditions are not text-based and have not developed systematic theologies, cultural anthropologists and ethnographers have attended to them for nearly a century. To contemplate these traditions, then, it is thus not a matter of choice but of necessity to do philosophy of religion that engages with narrative and ethnographic sources and that pays attention to the non-doctrinal dimensions of religion. Taking this direction means expanding and re-evaluating the discipline's methodology and raising questions that can be an antidote to narrowness, intellectualism, and insularity. For instance: what does it mean to consider the religious person as an embodied subject? How should the material, affective, and social aspects of religious rituals figure in an explanation of religious cognition? How can we engage philosophically with religious practices without sanitizing or homogenizing them? In this Element, I will explore these questions to begin doing conceptual justice to Afro-Brazilian religions[1] while sketching a methodology for a philosophy of religious practice.

In Section 1, I begin to present Afro-Brazilian religions, their social and historical context, and their prototypical features, almost all of which have fallen outside the scope of traditional philosophy of religion. In Section 2,

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[1] The term is synonymous with "African-derived religions in Brazil" (and the Portuguese "religiões brasileiras de matriz africana"). I choose "Afro-Brazilian religions" for brevity, while acknowledging that it encompasses a spectrum of traditions. Some of these are more directly derived from African traditions, while others are less so, but all explicitly incorporate African elements.

I draw on the oral literature of Candomblé and on extant discussions within African philosophical scholarship to offer a first look at the theology borne by its mythic narratives. In Section 3, I turn to ethnography to locate the meaning of the fundamental practice of blood sacrifice and to begin homing in on the emic concept of *axé*, the spiritual life force believed to permeate everything and everyone. In Section 4, I delve into material culture as it relates to initiation, drawing on cognitive ethnography and cultural anthropology to support an interpretation of Candomblé's view of ontology, personhood, and agency. Finally, in Section 5, I focus on the embodied, situated, and materially extended practices of dance and spirit possession to defend the adoption of a theoretical framework in the philosophy of religion that recognizes such practices as forms of embodied knowledge.

1 Afro-Brazilian Religions

Between 1500 and the 1860s, upward of four million enslaved Africans were forcefully taken to Brazil, a remarkable figure that accounted for nearly 40 percent of all individuals made to endure the transatlantic journey, surpassing the number sent to the United States by more than tenfold (Bergad, 2007).[2] These individuals, hailing from diverse African ethnic backgrounds, became intertwined, notably in Brazil's early capitals, Salvador and Rio de Janeiro. They brought their languages, deities, rituals, cuisine, dances, and music, which blended with traditions from other enslaved groups and with the Roman Catholicism introduced by Portuguese colonizers. This intricate amalgamation gave rise to variegated families of traditions such as Candomblé in the state of Bahia, Xangô in Pernambuco, Tambor de Mina in Maranhão, Batuque in Rio Grande do Sul, and others.

In Brazil, the diasporic worship traditions of enslaved Africans underwent significant transformations due to the profound disruption of their previous social, political, and religious structures by the exigencies of slavery. Forced to adapt to an entirely different societal context as laborers and confronted with the eradication of their former organizational frameworks, they also had to navigate the practice of their religion within a hostile environment while preserving their cultural customs within the constraints of oppressive slave culture. Nonetheless, the persecution persisted even following the abolition of slavery in 1888, intensifying during the Third Brazilian Republic from 1937 to 1945. Legal safeguards for religious freedom in Brazil were not established

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[2] SlaveVoyages.org, a database hosted at Rice University, gathered data on 34,948 transatlantic slave voyages from 1501 to 1867 and estimates the number of enslaved Africans brought to Brazil at 5,848,266.

until 1946 but, regrettably, even after the enactment of these laws, challenges to Afro-Brazilian religions persist to this day. Consequently, Afro-Brazilian religions stand as a testament to a history of resistance and the evolution of Black and Afro-descendant identities, as diverse African ethnic groups reshaped their practices in the diaspora to sustain daily life under oppressive conditions (Engler and Brito, 2016).

These traditions possess no central authority with the power to determine doctrine and orthodoxy. Each temple (*terreiro*) or community of practitioners is ultimately autonomous, approaching the religion in ways informed by their tradition and leadership. Yet, in some cases, there are clearly delineating boundaries between lineages, each more or less closely linked to specific African ethnic traditions. Thus, the landscape of Afro-diasporic religions in Brazil is richly varied, and includes traditions such as Babassuê, Batuque, Jarê, Omolocô, Pajelança de Negro, Quimbanda, Tambor de Mina, Terecô, Umbanda, Xambá, Xangô, and others. Pride of place, however, is usually given to Candomblé for historical, cultural, and demographic, if not simply chronological, reasons. Candomblé is a family of religious traditions, subdivided into "nations," that developed in Brazil mainly during the nineteenth century. It will be the main focus of this Element, even though I will also discuss traditions such as Xangô and Batuque (in Sections 4 and 5) which developed in parallel to Candomblé and to which the morals I will draw in the course of this investigation also apply.

Two main ethnic groups were predominantly brought to Brazil during the transatlantic slave trade (Carneiro, 1948/2019). The first group, often referred to as the Western "Sudanese," included the Yoruba (known as Nagô in Brazil), the Ewe and Fon peoples (referred to as Jêje), and the Ashanti. They originated from present-day West African nations like Nigeria, Ghana, Benin, and Togo, and primarily arrived through the port of Salvador and worked in northeastern sugar mills between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The second group, pertaining to the Bantu ethnolinguistic grouping, consisted mostly of the Angolans, Kasanje, and Mbangala from present-day Congo, Angola, and Mozambique. They primarily arrived through the port of Rio de Janeiro and worked along the Brazilian coast and in interior regions, particularly between the present-day states of Minas Gerais and Goiás. Each lineage or nation seeks to maintain its own deities, rituals, songs, drumming rhythms, and ceremonial customs, with practitioners primarily affiliating with one of these nations. Nevertheless, there has been significant intermingling between nations, to the point that many *terreiros* identify as Jêje-Nagô, for instance (Lima, 1977).

Candomblé ritual worship centers on the invocation and celebration of African deities most commonly referred to as *orixás* (from the Yoruba

òrìṣà),[3] as well as semi-divine ancestors (*eguns*), and powerful spirits.[4] These constitute a pantheon of deities who were either created by or emerged from the Supreme Being, Olorum (also known as Olodumare).[5] As we will see in Section 2, although there are no specific myths, shrines, or ritual practices centered around the high god of Candomblé, the Supreme Being nevertheless plays a significant role in myths related to the origins of existence and the creation of the earthly realm. In that pre-creation state, only the spiritual realm existed. Following Yoruba mythology, Candomblé envisions the spiritual realm as comprising two distinct spheres: a higher and a lower one. The higher sphere is where the Supreme Being resides. The second heavenly sphere exists in close proximity to the earthly realm and serves as the abode for the *orixás* as well as the ancestors (Elbein dos Santos, 1976/2012).

Candomblé teaches that every human being is governed by specific *orixás*. Most *orixás* are associated with specific elements of nature believed to possess and impart the energy of that specific deity. In Candomblé worship, key female deities include Oxum (associated with freshwater), Iemanjá (related to the sea, see Figure 1), Iansã (also known as Oiá, connected with the wind), and Nanã (associated with mud). Among the main male deities are Ogum (the deity of war and iron), Xangô (linked with quarries and thunder), Oxóssi (related to hunting and forests), and Obaluaiê (also known as Omulu, associated with healing and infectious diseases). Moreover, each of these deities has been syncretized with particular Catholic saints who have been the object of popular devotion in Brazil since colonial times. The prevailing narrative among practitioners asserts that the Afro-Catholic syncretism in Afro-Brazilian religions was a response to the prohibition against enslaved Africans worshipping their own deities. For instance, Oxóssi, often depicted with a bow and arrow, was syncretized with Saint George in Bahia and Saint Sebastian in Rio de Janeiro. Such syncretism is thus commonly likened to a mask, as enslaved Africans would have incorporated Catholic saints into their religious practices to disguise their worship of African deities, thereby safeguarding their traditions. As Ayodeji Ogunnaike (2020) notes, recent decades have witnessed a movement among Candomblé practitioners to "re-Africanize" their traditions by symbolically removing the

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[3] All subsequent parenthetical additions to Brazilian Portuguese words in the vocabulary of Candomblé will refer to the Yoruba words from which they originate.

[4] The deities are also referred to as *voduns* (from the Fon and Ewe languages) in Candomblé Jêje and *inquices* (from the Bantu *nkisi*) in Candomblé Angola – the two main nations of Candomblé along with Queto (Nagô). In this Element, I will employ the Yoruba-derived terminology of Candomblé Nagô. I choose this terminology because of its widespread usage and for brevity.

[5] This method of worship forms the basis of several religious traditions born in the context of New World slavery, such as the Cuban tradition of Lucumí (also known as Regla de Ocha or Santería) and the traditions of Haitian Vodou and Dominican Vudú.

Figure 1 Feast of Iemanjá in Rio Grande do Sul (2017)
Photograph by Wagner Ludwig Malta. Used with permission.

white masks from their deities and, in many cases, effectively removing every
last shred of Afro-Catholic syncretism from their practice.

Rita Amaral (2002) underscores the significance of celebration (*xirê*) in
Candomblé, emphasizing its role in fostering community engagement, transmit-
ting values, and shaping devotees' worldviews. These celebrations are integral to
Candomblé's identity, symbolizing the connection between the divine and
the human, with an emphasis on experiencing the sacred as a source of
sensory delight. Furthermore, Yvonne Daniel (2005), in describing dancing in
Candomblé, appeals to the concept of embodied knowledge as transformative,
leading to a profound shift in perception and spiritual inspiration. As we will see
in Section 5, embodied activities of dancing, singing, and drumming serve as
a means of connecting with history, divinity, and ancestry through one's body.

Significantly, the *orixás* are believed to take literal attendance during cere-
monies. Spirit possession (or incorporation) entails the temporary displacement
of a person's conscious self by a more powerful, immaterial being during a state
of trance (Seligman, 2014). Spirit possession mediums forge lasting connec-
tions with the entities, facilitating their periodic emergence in the earthly world.
As a result, these mediums frequently undergo profound transformations
in their self-awareness and physical autonomy. During trance states, their

everyday self-awareness temporarily fades, and their bodies operate devoid of personal intent. It is common for the medium to later recount having no memory of the events during incorporation. Yet, they recognize that their actions have been guided by a consciousness distinct from their regular identity and intentions.

As we will see in Section 4, however, the entity that "comes down" during possession and engages with humans is not perceived as an abstract entity but as one of its myriad manifestations, existing solely within the tangible embodiment of a specific individual (Segato, 2005, 98). For instance, when someone is discussing the actions of the *orixá* who has descended in incorporation, they will never refer to them in general but will always specify the *orixá* of a particular person: "Julio's Xangô did/said . . ." The personal nature of each person's *orixá* becomes apparent in how they are envisioned by their respective followers, where the *orixá* of each person possesses a distinctly unique visage and physical characteristics (Schmidt, 2016, 113). Furthermore, the degree of reverence shown to an incorporated *orixá* is closely linked to the hierarchical position held by the incorporating medium.

While generic *orixás* exist in a dimension beyond human space and time, a person's *orixá* is "born" when the medium is initiated, something which is reflected in the fact that initiation is called *feitura* (the process of being "made," *feito*). Marcio Goldman (2007) observes that an individual is not born ready-made but is rather constructed during the prolonged initiation process. More than that, the initial possession experience serves as the catalyst for shaping both the individual and the *orixá*. Goldman's assertion revolves around the idea that the generic *orixá* only gains individuality when it incorporates in a human being. The ultimate result of this initiation process is that "an individual, previously undifferentiated, transforms into a structured person, and a generic *orixá* is brought into existence as an individual *orixá*" (2007, p. 112).

The initiation process spans several days (or weeks), with the initiate sequestered within the temple, and includes ritual baths and cleansings (*ebós*) for purification and protection. Simultaneously, the initiate strengthens their head (*ori*) through a meal offering (*bori*), as we will see in Section 3. With the head fortified, the main initiation ceremony follows, involving head-shaving, ritual consecration, and often an animal sacrifice, with blood symbolically extended to the material representation of the deity, known as its seat (*assento*) or settlement (*assentamento*) – most often stones or metal tools, depending on the "saint," as we will see in Section 4. This seals a sacred alliance among the initiate, the *orixá*, its sacred symbols, and the overseeing priestess or priest.[6]

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[6] For the sake of brevity, from now on I will shorten this to "priestess."

After the sacrificial act (*orô*), the initiate, now an *iaô*, exits seclusion and is publicly introduced in a celebration during which the *orixá* is fully adorned before engaging in their inaugural dance (see Figure 2). Initiation ceremonies strengthen group identity and emphasize the sacredness of the knowledge held within the community. This sense of exclusivity empowers individuals, granting them a unique and revered status.

Because of its initiatory character and the fact that its racialized identity was forged in resistance to institutional racism, secrecy in Candomblé serves a multifaceted role, encompassing several critical dimensions, acting as a criterion for membership, a measure of authority, and a determinant of ritual and initiational efficacy. Additionally, it plays a vital role in the construction of the power of sacred entities and serves as a means of advertisement and market positioning within the tradition. Initiates bear the responsibility of safeguarding sacred knowledge, ensuring its protection from dilution or misuse, thereby nurturing a strong sense of belonging and exclusivity among practitioners. However, as Paul Christopher Johnson (2002) observes, secrecy extends beyond

Figure 2 Inaugural dance of Oxum in a terreiro in São Paulo (2010)
Photograph by Bettina Schmidt. Used with permission.