Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé

Reviewed by Michael Iyanaga

In *Black Atlantic Religion*, J. Lorand Matory offers his take on some of the long-standing debates about the Brazilian religion of Candomblé by engaging current globalization and transnationalism discourses. Matory, a professor of anthropology and African and African-American studies at Harvard, has conducted extensive historical and ethnographic research in Nigeria, the U.S., and Brazil. In this "historical ethnography" (7), Matory masterfully deconstructs some of the most widespread scholarly assertions about Candomblé by examining the current Candomblé community and tracing—through scholarship, documents, ethnography, and commodities—the historical events that have led to its formation. *Black Atlantic Religion* demonstrates Matory's bravery (if not audacity) in simultaneously challenging and problematizing a wide range of topics. His research is stunningly thorough and his arguments, analyses, and interpretations are powerful and convincing. His most interesting accomplishment is the demonstration of how individuals (priestesses, merchants, and academics) can and do influence the entire Candomblé religious practice through individual ideas, interests, and motivations. Rather than present some abstract assertion about transnational flows, Matory gives us particular names, dates, and actions (as well as the consequences of those actions), showing us the agency of those (especially Afro-Brazilians) who have constructed the Candomblé community we know today, with its distinct nations (*nações*), rituals, and fame as a matriarchy. At the end of most of the chapters, Matory reflects on his ethnographic and historical data to address a broader theoretical question, among which the most important are: the "oldness" of transnationalism, the non-teleological nature of globalization, the way in which diasporas can create multiple "territorial identities" or help consolidate nation-states rather than necessarily deterritorialize the world, and the malleability of community.

Although Matory does not do so explicitly, I divide this seven-chapter book into three sections: (1) transnationalism (Chapter 1 through 3); (2) influence of writing on popular practice (Chapters 4 and 5); and (3) a basic summary of points ("Introduction," Chapter 6, and Chapter 7). The "Introduction" is helpful in setting up Matory's position: he concisely summarizes a tremendous amount of information about basic Candomblé facts as well as a historical perspective of the academic discourses, current transnationalism discourse, and similarities between Candomblé and contemporary Òyó-Yorùbá culture in Nigeria. He also outlines his methodological plan: "[The book] is an effort to understand one Afro-Brazilian religion—Candomblé—both ethnographically and historically amid the transnational flows of goods, people, and ideas that it has shaped and by which it has been shaped" (34).

In Matory's own words, "Chapter 1 documents the transnational role of the Coastal (West African) literary discourse, and chapter 2 documents the role of transnational commerce. [The third chapter] explores the influence of a community's transnational dispersion on its choice of 'purity' as its preeminent ritual idiom" (117). In addition to the literary discourse, principally that of the decidedly black-nationalist Lagosian Cultural Renaissance, Matory uses his first chapter to highlight the importance of individuals—the so-called "English professors of Brazil"—in bringing this literature and ideology to Brazil. Matory convincingly argues that because the Yorùbá language and identity did not exist in Africa before the 19th century, the Bahian "purity" discourse based on a Yorùbá identity that arose in the early 20th century is a direct result of the transnational movement of ideas, not African "survivals." Matory points out that "the African sources of the Bahian Candomblé are . . . often closely related to major cultural developments in Africa that postdated the end of the slave trade" (63). Chapter 2 looks at the back-and-forth movement of the all-too coincidental "creation" of Djedji identity in West Africa and the resurgence of the Jeje Candomblé nation, suggesting that Brazilians created a West African identity, while this had a reverse influence in Bahia. The last chapter of this "section" underscores the role of purity in Candomblé practice. By comparing Candomblé with Òyó-Yorùbá culture (considered the root culture of the dominant Nagô Candomblé nation in Bahia), Matory demonstrates how ideologically driven individuals were able to institutionalize the novel emphasis on cleansing and "purity," such as in the "Waters of Oxalá" ceremony.

Chapters 4 and 5 begin with the central theme of scholarship's affect on popular practice. Chapter 4 looks at how the Brazilian Regionalist literary movement, led by Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre, appropriated Candomblé (and Afro-Brazilian culture generally) to use as national symbols. Matory shows how this translated into official State use of Candomblé as a national symbol and how this led to the State's involvement in helping the "purest" Candomblé temples with security from the police and sponsoring, for instance, trips to Africa. Chapter 5 looks more specifically at the influence of academic writers on the religious tradition itself. Matory illustrates the way in which

American anthropologist Ruth Landes and Brazilian ethnographer Édison Carneiro portrayed Candomblé as a matriarchy, “despite demographic and historical facts to the contrary” (195). Matory then convincingly demonstrates how these academic discourses, which subsequently enter into popular media, affect Candomblé practitioners’ behavior and their conceptions about gender roles in the Candomblé tradition.

Chapter 6 is a look at his principle “informant.” The author uses a description of the life of Pai Francisco—a light-skinned, heterosexual male priest—to illustrate a number of the questions raised throughout the book: “purity,” transnationalism, Candomblé and gender, national identity, and State influence on the religion. This is also a reflexive portion of the book, in which Matory candidly discusses his own life and academic trajectory. The final chapter summarizes all of his main points: Candomblé has been (and is being) constructed through the trans-Atlantic movement of people, commodities, and ideas; transnationalism is nothing new; globalization is not teleological; diasporas do not eliminate the nation-state; community is malleable; and Afro-Brazilians have always been active agents of change. Matory then skillfully broadens the conversation, relating his points to the whole Black Atlantic as well as to the wider context of general diasporas and transnational movements.

My extensive use of superlatives throughout this review should make it clear that I find the book to be invaluable and extraordinarily well researched. With that said, *Black Atlantic Religion* is not for the reader interested in the spiritual and/or practical side of Candomblé (e.g., practices/rituals, theology, internal hierarchy, etc.). In fact, I would argue that by focusing on the humanity of the practitioners (their interests, desires, strategies, and ideologies), Matory depicts Candomblé more as a political organization than a religious one. The book is designed for those who are looking to understand the historical side of Candomblé (and Black Atlantic religions in general) as it developed within its larger Brazilian society and is aimed, though not explicitly, at readers who are already fairly familiar with Candomblé practices and with the dominant Candomblé discourse. Although *Black Atlantic Religion* is accessible to those unfamiliar with Candomblé (or Black Atlantic religions), Matory’s references to esoteric facts and practices with little to no explanation may confuse some readers. Each of the three sections I outlined earlier may actually attract readers of specific interests. For instance, the first three chapters are wonderful for those interested in historical questions of transnationalism, trans-Atlantic communication, or African cultural history. The middle section (chapters 4 and 5) will best serve those interested in the Candomblé matriarchy (and questions of gender more broadly) or Candomblé’s interaction with the political and literary climate from the 1930s on. This wide range of topical discussion is what makes Matory’s book so fantastic. Perhaps expectedly, there is little mention of music (he briefly mentions Dorival Caymmi) or ethnomusicological theory, but this should not dissuade any scholar interested in agency and transnationalism, especially regarding the Black-Atlantic (and the African diaspora), or even those who are simply interested in reading a phenomenal historical ethnography that demonstrates how real people (with names and faces) evoke structural change.

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