

An Insider's View into Candomblé

Review of:

Mikelle Smith Omari-Tunkara, *Manipulating the Sacred: Yorùbá Art, Ritual, and Resistance in Brazilian Candomblé*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005. 208 pages, 36 color plates, 44 black and white figures, 2 maps ISBN 978-0-8143-2852-1 | paperback | \$39.95

The Transatlantic slave trade shifted a large portion of diverse African populations to North and South America as well as the Caribbean. Being deprived of all material belongings, the slaves brought with them only their culture and memory. These few 'possessions' served as the foundation for the re-creation of their religious ideology within their new environments. Over time, these religious beliefs grew into a syncretic system. Modern Western culture may be most familiar with Santería, a fusion Afro-Cuban cult which incorporates both elements of Yorùbá religion and Catholicism. However, in her book *Manipulating the Sacred: Yorùbá Art, Ritual, and Resistance in Brazilian Candomblé*, Mikelle Smith Omari-Tunkara acquaints readers with Candomblé, its Brazilian Spiritist counterpart which evolved differently due to local and indigenous influences.

As the title suggests, the author is primarily concerned with the ability to wield religious prowess which empowers individuals to construct a preferable social order inside the candomblé in direct contrast with the social order outside. In this way, the religious precinct allows for the creation of an idealized and artificial society, often 'Africanized', in which religious initiates, priests, priestesses and participants cultivate modified roles. The sacred can be manipulated not only through achieving or earning religious status through initiation, but also through artistic ability (such as the ability to dance and sing well) and artistic patronage.

In chapter 1, the author introduces Brazilian *ilês axés* or candomblé (the terms can be used interchangeably), most generally defined as shrines/sacred spaces; the closest analogue in Western culture is the word 'church'. Candomblé Nagô, considered as the purest form of candomblé by the author, is used throughout the book. Omari-Tunkara focuses her study primarily on the Bahia state of Brazil, as it was a major disembarkation port for the transatlantic slave trade. Although initially a liminal religion, the popularity of candomblé grew until it became accepted and fashionable even with the indigenous and European populations in Bahia. Prior to its mainstream popularity, candomblé provided a microcosm for an 'Africanized' social order that was not available to slaves in Bahia during the legal era of slavery.

The second chapter gives a brief, esoteric discussion of Yorùbá cosmology and divination. To further her argument in the first chapter, Omari-Tunkara points out that in order to most fully understand Yorùbá society one must have an understanding of the religion. With religion playing such a central role in everyday society, it is no wonder that candomblé Nagô presented the opportunity for a functioning social system for slaves or marginalized Others.

In the third chapter, a discussion of the nature of art in the candomblé Nagô is begun. While the art found in use in the candomblé Nagô is quintessentially similar to the traditional

art of African Yorùbá, the art in Bahia is also an ever-advancing experience. That is, it is not rooted in strict canon; in many cases an adapted version of an object or costume evolved into the norm. These dynamic changes were triggered, in part, by a lack of familiar natural materials and the need to syncretize with Catholicism. Omari-Tunkara has a fascinating analysis of the resulting ritual costumes in which she utilizes the theories behind Petr Bogatyrev's study of costumes as communication.¹ As a Structuralist, Bogatyrev looked at folk costumes as the 'sign-carriers' or symbols of cultural language; in other words, each item of clothing has a meaning that may be understood in the context of how or by whom it is worn. Omari-Tunkara sees this theory in action among initiates in the candomblé. She uses the example of the ojá, a long narrow piece of fabric generally used as a headdress which is a part of the ritual costume. When an individual is possessed, the ojá becomes part of the ritual language. The ojá is removed from the head and wrapped around the body in one of several ways to signify the trance as well as the gender of the possessing divinity. In some cases, the position of the ojá reveals the identity of the actual divinity. The integral use of color in ritual costuming is another fascinating facet. Color is used to signify the allegiance to a specific god corresponding to the god's natural element(s). For example, a goddess of water is allied to the color blue and her initiates are signified by blue bead necklaces or articles of clothing. Initiates engaged in a trance and 'entered' by this goddess may be visually transformed by donning a costume made of rich blue fabric, so that the trance is visually manifested.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are all case studies into candomblé culture. Chapter 4 delves into the origin and role of Yemanjá/Yemojá, the mother goddess of the orixàs (as gods are called in the candomblé Nagô). The author considers her role among Yorùbá speaking people as well as within the Bahia candomblé. The later includes a discussion of the goddess's syncretic role in Luso-Brazilian society. In Chapter 5, ancestor veneration and gender are addressed. The author discusses the egún society, a male religious order which functions as a cult of ancestor veneration. Women are not allowed to be a part of the egún society; however, their participation in the rituals of veneration is critical. Art plays a vital role in the egún society, as male ancestors are 're-animated' in cloth costumes which can be quite elaborate. Notably, the costumes for newly deceased ancestor spirits which are worn to conceal the in-trance individual manifest as visual voids. They are generally squares of fabric that cover the individual and are white (for the most newly deceased) or a dark color signifying the unknown and dangerous nature of the newly deceased spirit. Chapter 6 deals with twin veneration, both in image as syncretized saints Damian and Cosmas and the Yorùbá orixà Beje/Ìbejì and in practice in both Yorùbá society and Bahia culture.

As Omari-Tunkara is examining primarily religious art, it is important to keep in mind the role of performance art as a part of religious art. Many of the objects that the author describes, although they may have an aesthetic, are not strictly 'l'art pour l'art.' Rather than being static, they have a purpose and a function which is always in flux and in use. This is a rather simplified version of one of the many facets of anthropological understanding of art. In fact, the growing popularity of the anthropology of art/performance art/theatre may signal that

¹ Bogatyrev, Petr, *The Function of Folk Costume in Moravian Slovakia*. Approaches to Semiotics 5, The Hague: Mouton, 1971.

Omari-Tunkara's book is a significant part of a new chapter in anthropology. She is effective in not only a clear, concise narration of what she is seeing, but also lends cultural insight as to the 'why'. Reading this work from the multi-dimensional prism of art/religion/anthropology, it is likely that it would have benefited from referencing Johnson's *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé*.²

Omari-Tunkara sees herself at once both an insider as a member of the candomblé Nagô (she was initiated into the Ilê Opô Afonjá in Bahia) and an outsider as an academic anthropologist with scholarly aims. Part of this is based on the author's resonance with the concept 'outsider/within,' found in Patricia Hill Collins's essay.³ One of the key elements of the 'outsider/within' is the ability to move and to observe almost unseen between various social spheres due to a largely liminal position in the society-at-large. The ability to understand this position and to utilize it in order to gain important data is certainly a welcome skill in the field of anthropology and Omari-Tunkara does it very well. She is able to describe in detail the private ceremonies in which she has been involved and to gain access to closely examine art within the sacred precinct. In the end, the reader may wish that Omari-Tunkara shared more of her personal experience; in fact, the author states quite clearly in the introduction that she is perhaps guilty of being overly cautious in order to present an accurate description of the material. Unlike its predecessors, this book contains a number of plates and photographs of objects not normally accessible to outsiders. This is certainly a benefit of the author's privileged position in the candomblé. While this is an important element for any book discussing art, many of the plates and photographs are meant to show detail but are too small to understand what the author wants to show. Also, some of the plates and photographs are dated and it would be interesting to see more recent versions.

Generally this book would be of scholarly interest to those studying the ritual arts of Yorùbá West Africa and Bahia Brazil as it brings a unique 'insider's' perspective to the field. Furthermore, it joins a body of literature published in English whereas the previously available corpus was published in Portuguese. Omari-Tunkara's work is an early part of what is shaping up to be a most interesting wave in Afro-Brazilian ritual art scholarship.

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² Johnson, Paul Christopher, *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé*, USA: Oxford University Press, 2005.

³ Collins, Patricia Hill, 'Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought' In *(En) Gendering Knowledge: Feminists in Academe*, ed. Joan E. Hartman and Ellen Messer-Davidow, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991.