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Stefania Capone, *Searching for Africa in Brazil: Power and Tradition in Candomblé*

Emma Cohen

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Book Reviews

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Stefania Capone, *Searching for Africa in Brazil: Power and Tradition in Candomblé*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010

Reviewed by: Emma Cohen, *Research Group for Comparative Cognitive Anthropology, Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, The Netherlands*

A few decades ago, scholarly treatments of tradition in Brazilian Candomblé were centrally concerned with identifying the factors that served to maintain the stability of African cultural forms in Brazil. The quest for the pure elements of original practices, traceable to African roots, led researchers to a handful of religious centres in Brazil's capital of African culture, Bahia. In documenting these practices as authentically African, learned and respected researchers stamped their authority on the teachings and practices of religious leaders concerned with establishing their place in a religious market in which adepts were a chief source of income. In this market, which exists to the present day, claims to orthodoxy formed part of a political strategy of legitimation and power.

In *Searching for Africa in Brazil* (original French edition, 1999), Capone considers the birth and symbiotic evolution of ideas about *tradition* and *orthodoxy* among Afro-Brazilian religious adepts and academic researchers. Her remarkably well-researched ethnographic and historical analysis ultimately critiques, indeed denies, the existence of a pure orthodoxy in Afro-Brazilian religion. Rather than constituting a fixed set of ideas and practices, she argues, core African symbols are re-appropriated, reinvented, and reinterpreted by religious leaders and participants across diverse and changing religious and political contexts. Orthodoxy 'adapt[s] itself to the interests of ritual actors, men and women who live with their spirits, who share their concerns with them, and whose daily lives are pervaded by these spiritual powers' (p. 31).

Although the book presents an impressively comprehensive and thorough description and history of Afro-Brazilian religion and scholarship, Capone's principal focus is on the figure of Exu. Of all the divinities in Afro-Brazilian religion, Exu is probably the one that has created the toughest challenge for religious leaders seeking to authenticate their practice as 'religious' (as opposed to 'magical') and 'orthodox' (as opposed to 'degenerate') via appeals to traditional African roots. Historically identified with the Christian Satan through his perceived association with evil, the importance and role of Exu in the various modalities and manifestations of Afro-Brazilian religion has tended to require special care and exegetical justification on the part of religious leaders. Capone explores the 'metamorphoses of Exu' across variable African and Brazilian religious and political contexts

through the narratives and practices of individual religious leaders and initiates. Her comparative analysis demonstrates in considerable detail how individuals have navigated complex socio-political constraints and opportunities in their re-formulations and reinterpretations of Exu's character and role. The result of this process of cultural manipulation and change is a complex range of concepts and practices across a broad religious spectrum, the diversity of which is not readily represented by the single term 'Exu'. Indeed, the common thread linking Exu-related practice and discourse across these contexts is perhaps not so much found in the interpretations of the 'Exu' concept but in the appeal to traditional authority and, ultimately, African origins in establishing Exu's significance in the religious system.

The final chapters of the book consider more generally the factors that have driven religious leaders' concerns to establish forms of Afro-Brazilian religion as traditional, original and orthodox. Capone presents an insightful and informed historical and comparative analysis but largely misses an opportunity to explore some basic theoretical and empirical questions within a more generalizable explanatory framework. Why is the appeal to African roots in particular so psychologically compelling in claims about orthodoxy and tradition? Examples of alternative (but apparently minority) rationales exist alongside the return-to-roots discourse, perhaps most pertinently summed up in rhetorical question posed by one religious leader, 'After four hundred years here in Brazil, wouldn't [*the orixa*] have learnt to speak Brazilian?' (p. 237; see also pp. 230–1, 244–5). Relevant research within neighbouring social science disciplines, particularly social psychology, could usefully illuminate the mechanisms guiding and promoting the emergence and spread of particular ideas (both among anthropologists and religious leaders) about the construction of identity, the representation of religious purity and authenticity, the use and manipulation of group-level symbols and markers, and the negotiation of prestige and power. A further question concerns the importance of tradition-derived political cache relative to that derived from other sources. What is the impact of leaders' claims to traditional authority in the religious market for prestige (and therefore adepts) relative to alternative or complementary selling points, such as personal characteristics of charisma, generosity, or ingenuity? Pleas for a broader explanatory scope aside, *Searching for Africa in Brazil* is one of the most descriptively rich and analytically insightful treatments of Afro-Brazilian religion to date. Every student and ethnographer of Candomblé will undoubtedly do their research a great service if they read this book.

Julian Brash, *Bloomberg's New York: Class and Governance in the Luxury City*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011

Reviewed by: E. Paul Durrenberger, Penn State University, USA

This book brings ethnographic methods to bear on the motivations, agency and actions of an urban elite and how they form and function in groups. Not since C.