

THE SKIRT AS A PORTAL AND THE BODY AS AN ALTAR: REFLECTIONS IN PROGRESS ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE OF THE SKIRT THAT DRESSES THE BODY IN CANDOMBLÉ

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DOSSIER WORLDS IN PERFORMANCE: 20 YEARS
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The considerations of this essay¹ constitute reflections that have been presented since my PhD completion, which focused on the performance studies of women's skirts in the space-time of Candomblé sacred spaces traditions. From my *iaô*² perspective, a Candomblé initiate, I understand it as a cultural and epistemic complex, in which the sacred draws our devotional relationships and constructions of belonging to an afro-diasporic ancestry.

As a religion, Candomblé is part of a group of diverse African culture cults (Ligiéro 2011) in Brazil, such as Tambor de Mina,

1. This essay is part of the sharing of the considerations presented at the panel Performance AfroAmérica: Matrixes and motives, held on December 08, 2021 by NEPAA/UNIRIO researchers Prof. Dr. Zeca Ligiéro, Prof.ª Dr.ª Denise Zenicola, Prof.ª Dr.ª Juliana Manhães and Prof.ª Dr.ª Alissan Maria. Alissan Maria, as part of the program of the event Seismology of Performance: Napedra 20 years (USP).

2. Candomblé terms with ancestry inform the Yoruba language or and some daily expressions will be/were maintained in the text with spelling in a "Brazilian" or in Brazilian Portuguese according to our experiences and realities. Footnotes will accompany them only when essential. About *iaô*, it means they are the initiated people in Candomblé. (Translation note).

Umbanda, Quimbanda, Xangôs, Batuques, Terecô, among many others, which are still configured in a very wide range of diversities in their multiplicities, crossings, and intersections. In this way, as Barros (2003, 59) points out, I consider myself as a subject belonging to one of the many sacred spaces communities that “have been constituted as privileged *locus* of maintenance of an Afro-Brazilian identity, significantly contributing to the preservation of African memory in Brazil.”

In this way, this study is primarily interested in the long and twirled skirts that became part of a set of significant elements in the composition of the traditional dress of sacred spaces women, built by Africans and their descendants, from the context of the African diaspora in Brazil. As forms of expression and existence lived within the traditions of the *terreiro*, the *saias de ração*³, skirts used in the daily life of the *roça*⁴, and the *baianas* – or even the circle or party skirts, as they are also known – used during the *xirês* (our public parties) by the *iaôs* (initiates), had not yet been properly investigated and recognized as triggers of knowledge that perform specific cosmoperceptions (Oyêwùmí 2021a).



FIGURE 1

Details of *saias de ração*, Ilê Axé Omin. Research collection. March 2019. Source: Alissan Maria.

3. The term *Saias de ração* may be translated literally by feed skirts. There are a few possible explanations for this name. One is that the fabric of these skirts in the past could be reused flour sacks. Another is that because they are skirts used in everyday work, when they get dirty, they would also be “eating” since in Candomblé everything that is sacred eats. The *baianas* are the skirts worn for parties and their name alludes to the enslaved Black women who performed street commerce during colonial Brazil and have been eternalized by IPHAN (Brazilian National Historic and Artistic Heritage Institute) as the heritage of the craft of the *baianas de acarajé* (translation note).

4. *Roça* could be literally translated by a piece of land in the countryside or farm, but we kept the word in Brazilian Portuguese since it is used as a synonym for the Candomblé’s *terreiro*. This name is related to domestic and everyday tasks and chores practiced in the countryside and farms, and may allude to the lives of enslaved people in *diásporas* (translation note).

Thus, as an integrated and active subject of the researched universe, I place myself as someone who investigates with, and not about, the performance of these *saias*. This further intensifies the crossroads⁵ of investigating the premise that one learns to “be” a woman in Candomblé sacred spaces by using these skirts. For this reason, this “being” a woman through the *saia* is revived (Schechner 2003) each time the *saia* is performed – worn –, which extrapolates strict notions of merely “costumes” or absorbed European heritage that ignores the complexities sewn into the hemlines of these skirts.


The reflections are still ongoing, therefore there are multiple times in one, just like the sacred spiral drawn in space by the *saia* in twists and turns. So, this is a continuum study since it lives in me, learning to be an *iaô*, and, at the same time, in the body of so many other Candomblé followers who have different identities and subjectivities.

In this context, we are examining the concept of “being through the skirt” as a way to explore the diverse range of existences that identify themselves as women and view the “female body” as an embodiment of their lived experiences. While the categorization and hierarchization of gender relations are constructs from Western thought rather than the Yoruba conception of thought (Oyêwùmí 2021a), we have to consider the relations imposed by coloniality since the diaspora.

I glimpse here that many of the activities, functions, and certain ritual differentiations in Candomblé preserved by the *awo* (secrets of tradition) are not exactly guided by gender but rather by what Oyêwùmí (2021b, 72) proposes as *anasex* (anamale and anafemale). These are notions articulated by the physiology of our anatomies and not by social hierarchization based on binary gender identities. According to the author, “[...] a new set of constructs arose from the recognition that, in Western thought even so-called biological concepts such as male, female, and sex are not free from hierarchical connotations.”

However, sometimes, in so many other assignments and functions, the roles of the “feminine-woman” and “masculine-man,” guided by the dual hierarchical westernicity, also is imposed in the behaviors and

5. The crossroads is invoked here as to highlight the processes involved in constructing knowledge within sacred spaces. We are immersed in cyclical processes in which our understanding of existence is based on our ways of being in the world. It is a continuous flow without ends, interruptions, or predetermined boundaries between who we are/ become, as well as how we express our knowledge in the world, including within academic contexts. As a space-time activated by Exu, the crossroads represents the principle of dynamic movement that devours everything necessary to it. However, this principle is not about domination but rather about nurturing diverse forms of knowledge. We learn to exist by embracing our being, to act by engaging in doing, and therefore, we find ourselves at the crossroads.



interpretations of knowledge from tradition, as it is also part of the conflicts that characterize the challenges of the colonization process heritage. In this sense, although it is not exactly the specific focus of this essay (but possibly of others to come), the debate about *saias* and gender identities within the Candomblé spaces – as the body that is energized and crosses its existence through the skirts – cannot be ignored.

In this study I consider that a woman is the one who understands herself as such. It is time that this must become the foundation of our existence in the sacred spaces. However, I would like to highlight that it is necessary to consider the existence of singularities that constitute each sacred space such as the offspring of their specific traditions, their diverse realities, their political and relational perspectives, the access to their own tradition (re)knowledge, as well as the interpretations of their leaders and members.

Therefore, at the present time of this essay, from the conception of Yoruba thought, I elaborate that the anafemale (Oyêwùmí 2021b) represents a primal allegory of the possibility of continuity by the anatomical characteristic of procreation, but this is not the end of the story. The feminine in Black-African philosophical conceptions is not gendered. Its creative power does not reside in the anatomy of a body, belonging to all, bearing in mind the principle of complementarity (Oliveira 2003).

However, it is here that I glimpse the transgression for knowledge from the performance of the skirt that dresses the body of the anafemale, which in colonial territories was understood as the body of the female body.

In the Americas, the round skirt starts to be dressed by a body subordinated by racial and gender social relations: the Black woman. In this way, the anatomical characteristic of procreation as a literal possibility of continuity does not act as biological determinism, but as a body capable of sheltering the idea of gestation in a diversity of meanings. It is not an allegory of gender in motion, but an allegory of time in motion or the time movement that contains, but it is not exclusively contained by, the capacity to maintain life, to generate, to gestate, to create, to give birth, and continue processes and existences.

Therefore, what is fundamentally in question is not exactly the gender that inhabits the skirt, but the multiple times in one that this body – which for us, crossed by coloniality, we postulate as “feminine” – concretely allegorizes time. A time that is also inscribed in the transgression of transforming European fabrics, ribbons, and embroidery into Yoruba markers of a Yoruba time: being, therefore, a spiral.

FIGURE 2
Hemline details in
the skirt sewing
process. Research
collection. 2018.
Source: Alissan
Maria.



In general, the notion of “axé Skirts” intends to contribute to the investigation of the performance of multiple skirts that present circular movements in a network of memory and belonging, revealing a range of epistemes woven in the sphere of the relationship with Black-African tradition and ancestry. Therefore, we propose that the conceptual relationship – Skirt-Woman-Candomblé – considers the “feminine” Black body as the author and axis of perpetuation of traditions that keep alive “body and soul”⁶ in unison (Moura 2000) through the spirals of time.

According to Martins (1997, 31), “in the sacred spaces of Candomblé, Africa and Europe touch, rub, and cross each other, but do not necessarily merge or get lost in each other.” I trust that there are stories written on these skirts. These stories represent encounters and mismatches of different cultures, singularized by the performance of Black bodies that restore ritual behaviors (Schechner, 2003) from an ancestral Afro-Diasporic logic throughout time.

6. I would like to highlight the search to underline traditions that persist in diaspora, resisting the dichotomous colonial thought. Accordingly, the notion of duality makes no sense in the ways of thinking of African traditions and, precisely because of this, there is a supposed relationship between “body and soul”, which keeps alive “body and mind” existences that restore themselves and defy the adverse conditions of coloniality. The construction of thought follows Martins (1997) to emphasize that, in Candomblé, the frictions and crossings between Europe and Africa never merged them or made their notions of existence lost in each other. In this essay, we adopted the idea that the skirt begins to dress the existence of a body that coloniality sought to unite with the soul. By transgressing this unified notion, the skirt itself undergoes its own process of restoration.

The body dressed in the insignias and vestments of the sacred assumes itself as an altar of devotion to the Candomblé tradition. With the initiation process, the body also becomes space of the sacred and we could say that the *axé* is planted in the *orí*. *Axé* is the-power-to-make-things-happen, as Thompson (2011) calls it, and the *orí* is the head, being considered as important as a deity. The initiations are cults and offerings to the head to reestablish the body-mind balance, which is crucial for followers to be able to fortify their attitude, be strong in life, be balanced, and improve their relationship with the gods. Therefore, it is precisely by the *orí* that the skirt dresses the body, as my sister Priscila – Preta de Oguian⁷ – so lucidly observed about the singularities of our dress during the process of dialogues and field research that compose this research.

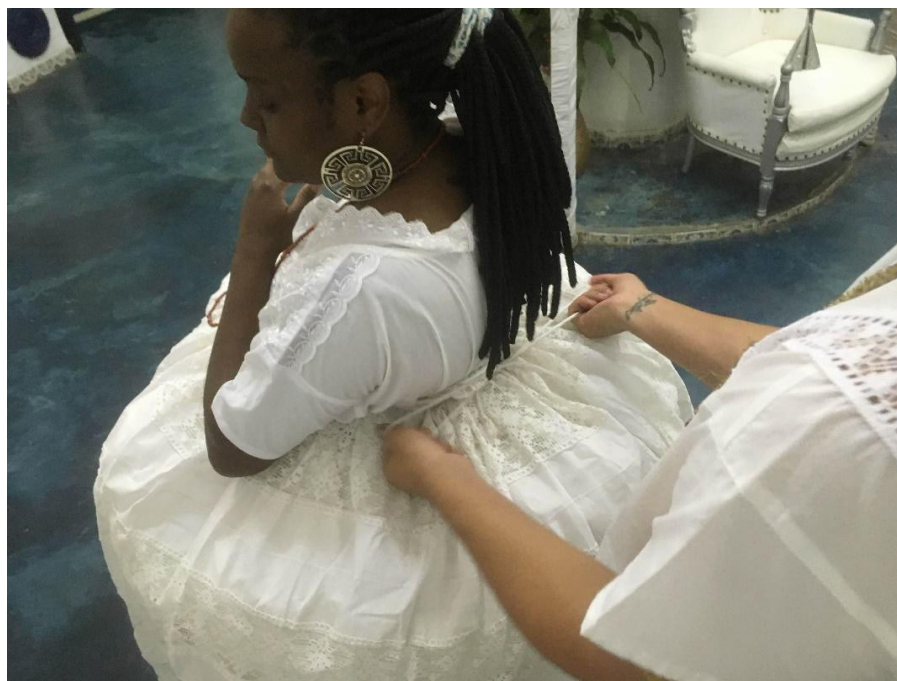


FIGURE 3

Dressing details –
Ebome Michele and
Romulo de Oyá, Ilê
Axé Omin. Collection
of the research.
2018. Source:
Eduardo Birchler.

The skirt that dresses the body worn in Candomblé, like a portal, is uniquely dressed by the *orí*, tied to the body at the waist, at the height of the navel – an ancestral link that reminds us of matrilineality, matrifocality, and matrigestation. Body-skirt: one.

The *saia* becomes *axé* since it becomes an extension of the body and that is also expanded diametrically. In turn, the extension of this female body

7. A nickname that means “Oguian’s Black Girl”, emphasizing the belonging relationship between the follower and deity – Oxaguian (translation note).

also becomes an extension of the movement that is understood to be circular, despite not literally dancing in spins all the time. This twirling movement, inspired by the concept of afrography (Martins 1997) in this performance, expresses the sacredness of a spiral temporality. Therefore, the *axé* skirts, integrated in the body-skirt unity, act as “portals of inscription of knowledge of various kinds, among them the philosophical” (Martins 2002, 72).



FIGURE 4
Body-skirt twirling
– Mariana de
Obaluayê, Ilê Axé
Omin. Collection of
the research. 2018.
Source: Eduardo
Birchler.

The body, as a dynamic force of movement, dynamizes the *axé* cycle. However, as we are all embodiments of the body – *bára* – the individualization of the skirt highlights the significance of this dynamic principle of life. It represents the very maintenance of life, making us as a concept of spirals in movement with “names, surnames, and identities”, as expressed by my oldest *ebome*⁸ Michele de Oyá, responsible for the continuity of life itself, thus *iaôs*-women-spirals.

As bodies singularized by skirts that singularize bodies, we, *iaôs*, carry time in our own bodies like a portal. We are, like Yemonjá – the one who gave birth to Exu – the dynamic principle of life and owner of the body that resides inside a spiral shell, the *ogó*. Maintainers of mysteries, we

8. An elder, as a person who is initiated in the religion more than 7 years, so it's responsible for the maintenance and teaching the younger ones.

are mothers of the movement of a “performance of spiral time” (Martins 2002). The analysis of this moving image articulates, therefore, with the performance of a skirt that, by dressing the body, unify it as a space of the sacred, and that is also singularized by it. The body singularizes the *saia* due to the movement it provides; after all, as Ligiéro (2011, 131) postulates “the body is the center of everything” in performances of African origins.

The spinning skirt, or the concept of the spinning skirt, makes their performance represent the emanation of energy, an important aspect of this sought-after balance. Thus, this performance is like the water that springs from the source, a waterfall, like the voice that, as an extension of the body, reaches the other in communication, like the sacred sound of the *adjá*⁹ that makes me return to live multiple times in a single time, as my father taught me. It is like the *doburu*¹⁰ and the *ebô*¹¹, as my little-mother taught me, they multiply after being cooked and can feed everyone – humans and divinities. Therefore, this makes the *saia* a possible sign of *axé* emanation that, in its whirls and waves, guards the mysteries of time: the birth of a new life and, and also of a life in rebirth – the *iaô*. I am Alissan Maria, daughter of Lucas Minervino of Oxaguian, granddaughter of José Flávio of Oxaguian, great-granddaughter of Iyá Nitinha de Oxum¹². I am little-daughter of the Oxaguian *equede*¹³ Raquel de Oyá and the *ogan* of Nanã Julinho de Ayrá. I am the *gamotinha*¹⁴ of a boat of eight *iaôs* reborn in Ilê Axé Omin Iwin Odara. I am the consanguineous daughter of Maria de Oxum and of Amancio de Xango, who, although they did not continue their lives in religiosity, also overflow in me through the skirt that dresses me – my ancestry.

Consequently, I believe in a connection between the circular shape of the skirt and the feminine within this cosmoperception. In the diaspora, this connection allegorically manifested itself through the woman’s body filling the skirt and propelling waves of movement through space. One more symbolic strategy in singularization is the restoration of behaviors and elements that at first were not part of the woman in this form. The

9. Metal musical instrument, with two or more bells, considered sacred in Candomblé (translation note).


10. Popcorn. A sacred food (translation note).

11. Cooked white corn. A sacred food (translation note).

12. Candomblé is marked by the reconstruction of an extended family notion that demonstrates which tradition the subject descends from. In this way, the author names her lineage as a way to emphasize this notion, as well as to make visible the protagonisms of these social actors, announcing her father (the *babalorixá* – priest); her grandfather (priest of the *babalorixá* – who founded the *terreiro*) – in this way, he is always remembered as an ancestral; her great-grandmother (*iyalorixá* of her grandfather – Nitinha – who is known as one of the most important priests in Rio de Janeiro), as well as presenting his mother and little father, responsible for his growth process in the *terreiro* (translation note).

13. *Equede* (woman) and *ogan* (man) are important positions in the Candomblé hierarchy and may assume several functions as the priests’ right hand (translation note).

14. There is a denomination for each member that will mark their order – from oldest to youngest – in the boat of initiates (translation note).



skirt, in what is hers – her body –, expresses her cosmoperception – circular – and her genesis – anafemale anafemale/woman/feminine that generates – in movement – afrography – in the reversed times of ancestry – spiral. In this way, I try to engage with the performance not of the movement of the body that wears the skirt, but rather the knowledge that comes from the performance of the skirt whose movement is generated from the feminine that dances.

The aesthetic value of the curvilinear movement goes back to the circularity as a form of expression of a world perception. The spiral built by the moving image of the body-skirt unit is set for a relationship that sanctify the body which, in turn, sanctify the skirt as a wheel that constitutes itself, it is like a spiral extending the body and expanding the movement that is spread by the vibration emanated from the body.

The skirt that dresses the female body in Candomblé, which could be understood as just one of the pieces that constitute a traditional religious dress, actually composes complex poetics of existence reflected by moving aesthetics: the skirt that, when twirling extends the body and its movement, is an expression of cosmoperception, drawing in space-time the harmonization and restoration of *axé* tradition.

Thompson (2011, 23) points out that Yoruba people “evaluate all things aesthetically—from the taste and color of yams to the qualities of a dye, to the clothing, and to the behavior of a woman or a man.” Additionally, novelty and improvisation were appreciated as composing concerns evident in their works of art that celebrate religion. The process of investigating how these skirts were stitched together in their shapes, beading, embroidery, and the behaviors that their moving aesthetics perform, denote that it was not only devouring the “enemy” to just take its power, but to use that power to make their own power, submitting contents and forms under their own cleverly, apparently “copying” but rather establishing their own authorship, spelled out between the lines that readers were not proficient enough to read, thus constituting a unique cultural complex in Brazil.

The notion constructed, therefore, is that spirality, as an aesthetic value expressed by the sacred twirl of a woman’s skirt in Candomblé, is rooted in the concept of an ancestral time in which the performance of *axé* expansion is allegorized in the woman’s body as the feminine expression, as the continuity of life and, therefore, as the *axé* itself since it is the vital force that sustains existence in these ways of reading and acting in the world. The *axé* skirt – understood as being filled with the feminine that is worn by it and that makes it move – transforms its shape, sewing, and adornments into elements of an aesthetic composition that spins, drawing spirals in space, like vortices.

Martins (2002, 81 e 82) points out that one of the ways that African American cultures write the body is also in the various adornments that dress the subject, underlining the concave shape of many of the artifacts used. These adornments, aligned in certain contiguous positions and order, act as complex texts, transforming the body into both concept and form.

FIGURE 5

Detail of the weight
(internal skirt trim)
of *equede Sinha* –
Casa Branca Health
Fair, Salvador.
Research collection.
2018. Source:
Alissan Maria



FIGURE 6

Baiana, Ebome Lili
de Oyá, Ilê Axé
Omin. Research
collection. 2017.
Source: Eduardo
Birchler.



The hem of the Candomblé skirt, with linear ribbons and pleats, finished internally by the so-called “weight”, provides stability to the movement of spinning as well as protection to the female body, as a sacred mystery. With the skirts filled with petticoats for the *xirê*, when initiated, we become like domes, like large concave shells.

The pleated frill, so important for tradition, is established as a metaphor for the folds of time, as mysteries that will be learned and preserved by these women, guardians of an ancestral mythical time. Ribbons, types of fabric, lace, in combination with sewing and embroidery techniques sign the progression of time in the trajectory of the initiated.

These lines of ribbons, successively, give rhythm to the body-skirt as a work. Time draws the movement. Like a rhythmic drawing provoked by the circular movements, the lines continue their way through infinity and expand in this skirt as a space-time reterritorialized by the initiate’s body. Thus, while the skirt gestates the woman of the sacred spaces – dressing in *saia de ração* simplicity until the moment she turns into an integral part of the circle, as an initiate – it is also gestated by the woman in its sewing and dressing processes.



FIGURE 7

Featured *ebome* Michele de Oyá, dressed as a *baiana*, ready for the *xirê*, Ilê Axé Omin. Collection of the research. 2018. Source: Eduardo Birchler.

When dressing and equipping ourselves, we are always ready. For the deities, for the sacred, always the most beautiful since to the *axé* – “power-to-make-things-happen” (Thompson 2011) – the principles of beauty are linked to the cultural logic that the being is not connected to the divine but is part of it – the being is contained in it but does not contain it – composing “spirals of time” (Martins 2002), with the principle of movement seen as perfection, or the gods themselves in various cultures.

In this sense, as part of an analytical process in progress, I have been proposing to entangle my threads in the loom of the “spinning of the wheels” (Barros, Teixeira and Santos 1985) of Candomblé. Up to this point, wearing a skirt, I have been perceiving in the learning of learning to “be”, that the space of the *xirê* circle, made spiral by the repeated turns danced by and for the *iaôs* that compose it, as well as the repetition of the ribbons on the wheels of our skirts, compose the construction of a great portal sung-danced-*batucada* (Fu-Kiau 1980, Ligiéro 2011). Women are a complete part of the circle, and our expression of the feminine in the circularity of our bodies act as altars that, when sacralized by the rotation of our rolling portals, are the emblem of an ancestry in continuous movement since we are potential propagators of life. Our bodies can harbor the reversibility of time, not only by trance, as in every *iaô*, but also by the possibility of promoting the spirituality of gestating continuities. Time, expression of ancestry as epistemology, is made space reterritorialized by the spinning of the wheels of our skirts in a circle. We are the mothers of the secret: *Iyá Awô*.

TRANSLATION
Yan Vinicius Freitas
Bento.

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ABSTRACT

This essay reflects on the body-skirt relationship, analyzing the role of *saias* during the *axé* performance. It is proposed that the *axé* skirt, worn by women in Candomblé, acts as a portal to establish a relationship with the sacred, with the body as an altar. The body is drawn into space as a spiral by the *saias*' articulated formats and adornments, along with their twirling expression of movement. The whirling of *saias* makes them an extension of the body and its movement, thus expressing a spiral cosmoperception in which the feminine is underlined as a continuity of tradition.

KEYWORDS

Performance; Body-skirt; Altar; Portal; Candomblé.

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