


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Axé as the cornerstone of Candomblé philosophy and its significance for an understanding of well-being (*bem estar*)

Bettina E. Schmidt 

Centre for Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter, UK  
Email: [b.schmidt@uwtsd.ac.uk](mailto:b.schmidt@uwtsd.ac.uk)

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## Abstract

According to Candomblé, *axé* is present in every living being and is necessary to life. To develop and maintain a sense of well-being, one must maintain a balanced level of *axé* which is linked to a reciprocal relationship between human beings and *orixás* (African deities). This article will explore the link between the spiritual force *axé* and well-being (*bem estar*) within Candomblé philosophy. Starting with explaining *axé* within the context of Candomblé and its concept of personhood, the article will reflect in the latter part on the concept of well-being from the perspective of *axé* and put forward an argument for the inclusion of Candomblé in philosophy of religion.

**Keywords:** Candomblé; African-derived religions; Brazil; anthropology of religion; well-being

## Introduction

The concept of *axé*<sup>1</sup> is difficult to grasp. Like the concept of soul, it is embedded in a religious context and cannot be separated from it. I came across the word *axé* (though in its English spelling *ashé*) the first time in 1992 when I was in Puerto Rico for my PhD research on the Cuban religion Santería (also called Lucumi religion) and the Puerto Rican *espiritismo*. As the focus of my PhD was on identity, I didn't discuss the theological core of the belief but, instead, focused in my conversations on impact, belonging, and practices. I must have encountered the term *ashé* in my reading but failed to grasp its importance until I came across the Puerto Rican artist Ángel Suárez Rosado, whose art featured in the exhibition *La Tercera Raiz* in San Juan, Puerto Rico. I became fascinated by his bricolage, so visible on the altars he created. In the catalogue for the exhibition *Sites of Recollection: Four Altars and a Rap Opera*, which was organized for the Williams College Museum of Art in Williamstown, Massachusetts, Rosado defined *ashé* as creative energy without which he would be unable to create. 'It is a power to transform, to make beauty, or to create a new reality' (Rosado, cited by Mandle 1992, 94, 97). This understanding of *ashé* echoes what other scholars have written about Santería, a view that has become widespread in the USA, particularly among African Americans, but also among others. Joseph Murphy, for instance, describes *ashé* as a current or flow, and highlights the possibility of reaching *ashé* during dance (Murphy 1993, 131). And Miguel Santiago, a dancer himself,

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writes that it is through dance that the connection between humans and the orishas<sup>2</sup> is manifested because the dance 'brings the power of *ashé* – that vital, special energy that *santeros* understand as the life force of the deities and nature' (Santiago 1993, 97). Consequently, the art historian Henry John Drewal defines *ashé* as the 'performative power', even a specific African theory of agency that forges distinctive artistic worlds (Drewal 2000, 241). However, as I learnt later during my research among the African derived religion Candomblé in Brazil, *ashé* (or *axé*) is not only the source of creativity but also the source of healing and well-being (Schmidt 2009, 2012, 2023). The key to this shift is captured very well by the philosopher Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, who describes *ashé* within Yoruba thought as:

the principle of intelligibility in the universe and in humans . . . as rationality itself. It is creative power, the word, reason, the logos which 'holds' reality. More specifically, *ashé* is that principle which accounts for the uniqueness of humans; it is the rational and spiritual principle which confers upon humans their identity and destiny. (Eze 1998, 173)

His definition of *ashé* echoes what I learnt from my conversations in Brazil and is crucial for understanding the importance of *axé* for healing.

The article is divided into three sections. Its first part explains the concept of personhood within Candomblé, which provides the religious context of *axé*. The following part shifts to well-being (*bem estar* in Portuguese) and reflects the importance of *axé* for healing and well-being. The last section then discusses why I view *axé* as the cornerstone of Candomblé thought. Each section includes observations and excerpts from interviews I undertook in Brazil. As an anthropologist, I am enchanted by religious practices and keen to learn from participants – priests as well as other initiated members of the communities. I will share some of my observations and conversations about *axé* and the *orixás* to illuminate my findings. I follow Burley's demand for an 'ethnographically informed philosophy of religion' (Burley 2023), taking the same general direction as he, but on a slightly different path.

However, before I start, I need to clarify the use of the term 'philosophy' in my article. I am trained primarily not as a philosopher but as an anthropologist whose starting point is always the information I gather from my conversations with religious participants. My study reflects their worldviews, ideas, and practices. While Tim Ingold describes anthropology as 'philosophical inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of life in the one world we all inhabit' (Ingold 2018, 158), the relationship between anthropology and philosophy has not been easy. The term 'philosophy' is a rather Western, even Eurocentric term, and even philosophy of religion is preoccupied, as Burley states, 'with a narrow range of questions concerning an ahistorical and decontextualized "theism"' (Burley 2018, 1–2). Its 'fixation on a homogeneous theism' (Burley 2018, 2) does not represent the messy and contradictory ideas anthropologists collect from the field. Anthropologists also emphasize more the importance of practice than belief as Edward E. Evans-Pritchard highlighted decades ago with the phrase 'religion is what religion does' (Evans-Pritchard 1965, 120). More recently, Manuel Vásquez made a similar point in his book *More than Belief* (2010), which established the shift towards material religion within the study of religions. Consequently, anthropologists have always struggled with philosophy, even avoiding the use of the term. But this focus does not mean that people we encounter in our research do not have big ideas and thoughts about the world, the divine, and our place in the cosmos. Anthropologists also have made contributions to the way we think about the world. For instance, Irving Hallowell characterized Ojibwa ontology with his now famous phrase 'human and other-than-human persons'

and explained that ‘the more deeply we penetrate the world view of the Ojibwa the more apparent it is that “social relations” between human beings (anícinábek) and other-than-human “persons” are of cardinal significance’ (Hallowell 1960, 23). By narrating anecdotes from the field, Hallowell pointed towards a different way of thinking about the world that is not just at the heart of Ojibwe ontology but also other cultures. Another example of how anthropologists develop a different way of thinking based on ethnographic insights is Eduardo Viveiro de Castro, who successfully challenged our anthropocentric perspective in *From the Enemy’s Point of View* (1992), based on his ethnographic study of the Amazonian Araweté. And I could continue this list of ways in which anthropological studies questioned Eurocentric concepts by showing a different way of thinking. There might be even a case for a philosophical anthropology, as Thomas Schwarz Wentzer and Cheryl Mattingly argue, inspired by the way in which anthropological discourses teach us ‘more about what it means to be human’ (Wentzer and Mattingly 2018, 145).

In this article I will follow Ingold’s position when he claims that ‘anthropology is philosophy with people in it’ (Ingold 1992, 696). To some degree it is in line with a new shift among philosophers of religion who have argued against the narrow understanding of philosophy. For instance, Timothy Knepper points out that ‘if one wants to philosophize about religion, then one needs to understand religion in all its messy cultural-historical diversity’ (Knepper 2013, 76, cited in Burley 2018, 1). Knepper’s point follows a development among modern philosophers who argue increasingly for diversifying philosophy. Eze, for instance, who promotes the engagement with African philosophical traditions, argues that ‘African philosophy may indeed be considered a representative voice of counterhegemonic histories of modern philosophy’ (Eze 2001, 207). Like Burley, Eze highlights the value of ethnographically enriched philosophical analysis (Eze 2001, 206–207) and challenges the disciplinary boundaries between philosophy and anthropology (Eze 1999, 56). Eze even points out that the encounter with other people in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, which I see as the birthplace of anthropology, paved the way for a new philosophy as the discovery of radically different peoples and cultures ‘raised new questions about the destiny of man’ (Eze 1999, 52). Eze’s African philosophy is conceived ‘with multi-cultural and international philosophic dialogues in mind’ (Eze 1998, ix), which is inspiring for anthropologists.

### The religious context of *axé* and the concept of personhood in Candomblé

The following reflection about *axé* and its religious context is based on the ideas people discuss within Candomblé. The starting point for this article is my research on a practice that is usually labelled spirit possession and trance, though these terms are highly contested (Schmidt 2016). My aim was to understand what happens when people embody a spirit or *orixá*.<sup>3</sup> I asked routinely how it felt the first time and how they would know which spirit or *orixá* would approach. With the community leaders, the priests, and priestesses, I also discussed why spirits seem to be able to incorporate in different people, in different ceremonies at the same time. However, I learnt quickly that what we (using a ‘classical’ Western philosophical approach) call spirit possession does not exist – at least not in Candomblé. As one of my interviewees, a Candomblé priest, explained, the human body would explode if an *orixá* were to attempt to incorporate itself in it. Human bodies are too fragile to hold the power of the *orixás* which he described as forces of nature. When humans are struck by lightning, we die. How can we even think we could incorporate an *orixá*? While the rejection of the term ‘spirit possession’ is wide reaching across many traditions because of its negative connotation linked to demonic possession as well as its inaccuracy in describing the practice of mediumship, this conversation led me on a path to learn

more about personhood within Candomblé thinking, which is linked to the creation story and ultimately to *axé*.

### *Candomblé worldview*

Candomblé – in common with the Cuban religion Santería mentioned earlier – derives largely from the West African Yoruba tradition. Yoruba is an ethno-linguistic term for approximately 20 million people in Nigeria, Benin, and Togo speaking one of the Yoruba dialects. The group has a long history, going back to the fifth century BCE (Pemberton 2005). The empire around the city Ile-Ife can be traced back to the ninth century CE and produced much-admired terracotta and bronze sculptures.

The traditional Yoruba religion is based on an integrated cosmology where humans, ancestors, and deities coexist. The universe is described as fluid. While divided into different levels, humans, spirits, and deities can interact with each other. Human destinies are influenced by ancestor spirits and deities so that human beings must honour them in ceremonies to maintain a good relationship.

These fundamentals also characterize Candomblé. However, the number of *orixás* worshipped in Brazil is lower than in West Africa. The transatlantic slave trade and the inhumane treatment in the time of slavery during which African religious practices were suppressed, caused a disruption in the chain of memory. Ultimately, it led to loss of knowledge about religious practices and beliefs. In the end, the worship of only some *orixás* survived. Moreover, ceremonies had to be adapted to the new surrounding and living conditions. Nevertheless, at the core of Candomblé is still the integrative worldview and the interconnectedness between humans and non-human agencies that have already characterized Yoruba beliefs as shown above.

The core aspect, which they hold in common, is *axé*, the divine energy that pervades the universe and ensures creation. Pemberton writes that it ‘invests all things and all persons and, as a warrant for all creative activity, opposes chaos and the loss of meaning in human experience. Thus, for the Yoruba the universe is one’ (Pemberton 2005, 9912). *Axé* connects everyone in the universe and is therefore not restricted to human beings but is part of every being, living as well as supernatural. Without *axé* nothing would exist. Eze even writes that ‘within the Yoruba tradition, thought has its origin in *ashé*’ (Eze 1998, 173). He defines it as ‘a concept that designates the dynamism of being and the very vitality of life. . . . it is the power-to-be, the principle in things that enables them to be’ (Eze 1998, 173). But, ‘like matter, *axé* can neither be created nor destroyed’ (Seligman 2014, 33).

Nivaldo Léo Neto and his co-authors even describe *axé* as ‘a mystic force that is present in some places, objects or certain parts of the animal body, such as the heart, liver, lungs, genitals, riverbeds, stones, seeds and sacred fruits’ (Neto et al. 2009, 3). All living beings receive *axé* by birth but the amount in a body fluctuates during one’s life. We constantly spend it but we can also regenerate it, for instance by participating in ceremonies in honour of the *orixás*. Sometimes the *orixás* are perceived as personifications of *axé*. However, more often it is linked to the creation and particularly to Oludumaré who can be described as the supreme *orixá* that breathes life into the physical shape created by another *orixá* named Oxalá. Without Oludumaré there would be no *axé*, that is, no living beings. If we lose too much *axé* by living in an unbalanced way, we run the risk of becoming ill or encountering problems. But we can gain *axé* when attending ceremonies and fulfilling our obligations towards our ancestors and the *orixás*, who would give *axé* as a reward. We live therefore in a reciprocal relationship based on the exchange of *axé*. And one of the most important ways to regenerate *axé* is by honouring the bond to the *orixás* with the initiation ritual, which includes the embodiment of an *orixá*.

### Candomblé personhood

To explain what happens during this initiation ceremony we need to start by explaining the concept of a human being within Candomblé thinking. Human beings consist of various elements that need to remain in harmony with each other. The physical body that returns to earth after death contains the breath (*emi*) which gives life, intelligence, or consciousness (*ori*), as well as a divine element, something from the *orixás* (Berkenbrock 1998, 285–286). This divine element is like a resonance of the *orixás* and stays in the human body after the initiations. Hence, only the trance during a ceremony provides us with a moment of harmony because all fragments are temporarily unified (Schmidt 2016, 112). Marcio Goldman (1985) even argues that the initiation is the moment when a human being is truly created. Before this moment the creation has not finished yet, it is incomplete, and a person is ‘close to Non-Being’. Only the initiation finishes the creation and makes a person (Goldman 2007, 111–112). Goldman describes a person as ‘presumed to be multiple and layered, composed of agencies of natural and immaterial elements’, which also includes a resonance of the main *orixá* and a number of secondary *orixás*, ancestral spirits, and a soul (Goldman 2007, 111). The crucial point here is that the embodiment of an *orixá* marks a transformation from a generic and imperfect being that just exists to a person with individuality and personality. One could see here some similarity between Morton Klass’s distinction between a biological organism and personhood (Klass 2003), though Klass regards personhood as a characteristic of every human being and not the result of this transformation during the initiation.

To illustrate the importance of this point, I refer to my conversations with a Candomblé priest whom I call Pai Z. It was he who had made the point that neither spirit possession nor incorporation exists in Candomblé, as the *orixás* are too powerful for human beings to incorporate or be possessed by. Instead, he speaks about the transformation that takes place during the event. I was able to observe part of an initiation ritual in his *terreiro*, the compound of his community. I noticed how he demonstrated the correct movements to the novice in a state of unconscious trance, the right way to walk, to greet, to bow, to dance, and so on. The novice didn’t acknowledge anyone around her and sometimes even stumbled. Afterwards I asked Pai Z. about it, and he explained that at the first contact ‘the body is not accustomed to that energy; similarly, the energy is also not accustomed to the body. At these times the person exists in a state of shock and can fall or have very strong spasms’ (23 April 2010). The first contact can be extremely difficult as the link between the human and the *orixá* is not yet formally established. The human person ‘loses the notion of the body, the notion of everything trembles, and falls. This is a sign symbolizing that the *orixá* by knocking down the person to the ground is showing that it [the *orixá*] has (yet) to be initiated in that person.’ This first contact can take place anywhere and is regarded as the call to become initiated. The initiation process must be guided – and guarded – by a priest due to the danger to the novice. Anyone who goes through the process is seen as innocent and ignorant, like a child. With time the movements improve and the novice gains confidence, though the initiation is only the first step. It takes usually up to seven years before a novice is seen as a full member. Pai Z. explained the importance of learning the right movements. Every house has its own style and

as much as the person learns, the *orixá* as well will learn. They will learn how to move, the dances and the rituals. They are taught to do everything according to the tradition of the house, because each nation, each house, each place tends to keep to a specific form. Each house has its tradition, each house has its way to deal with the *orixás*, and the *orixá* needs to learn how to carry them out.

His explanation surprised me as it stands in tension with the generally accepted divine nature of the *orixás*. However, learning later about the concept of personhood I presented above, I was able to clarify the apparent contradiction. As also Pai Z. elaborated, during the initiation, the *orixá* is firmly placed in the body of the novice and something, like an echo, will remain in the body, which concludes the creation that started with birth. This is the final transformation of the body and the start of a new beginning. During every ceremony afterwards, the *orixá* rises from within the human body to the head to take control. The *orixá* does not come from the outside but from within the body due to the link established during the initiation. While his explanation challenges the widespread notion that incorporation is like being ‘mounted’ by an *orixá* like a horse, the idea of transformation through the merger of two generic entities is in line with the concept of personhood in Candomblé. Pai Z. elaborated further that the connection between a human and an *orixá* exists from birth, and the priest must find out which *orixá* is linked to the novice before the ceremony can take place. During the first step of the ceremony a seat will be established for the *orixá*, sometimes also a ‘nest’ for a second and even third *orixá*. During the seven years following the ceremony the novice must learn how to control these *orixás* before being accepted as a full member in the community. Pai Z. said that ‘at times the person can be in a semi-conscious state; however, after many times, and after the person is initiated, the *orixá* takes the consciousness of the person . . . sometimes completely, depending on the sensitivity of the person’. The transformation that started with the first merger is complete (Schmidt 2016, 111). The human body becomes a vehicle for the communication as Barros and Teixeira write. According to them, Candomblé ideas elide the division of body and mind: the body has a non-material dimension by including a spiritual aspect while the soul has also a material dimension, and consequently, the deities are not just phenomena of the mind and the body is not just a material entity (Barros and Teixeira 2004, 110). Seligman confirms this point when she describes initiation ‘as a way of cultivating the spiritual-material connection . . . Through these material practices, initiates are imported with, and come to embody, ritual knowledge and *axé*’ (Seligman 2014, 79). This point bears relevance for health and well-being, as the next section will show.

### **Axé and its significance for *bem estar* (well-being)**

Seligman describes spirit possession as a process of self-transformation that has the potential to heal ‘because it affects both embodied processes, including psychophysiological ones that may contribute to symptoms of bodily affliction, as well as discursive and meaning-related processes that [. . .] may transform bodily experiences from symptoms to illness, to markers of spiritual capacity’ (Seligman 2014, 10). Before I turn to healing, I will begin by explaining how well-being is perceived in Brazil before returning to *axé* in Candomblé.

#### *The Brazilian understanding of bem estar*

After my research on spirit possession and trance I began a study in spirituality and well-being. In contrast to my usual approach, I started with an online survey, followed a while later by in-depth interviews with a few of the participants. I wanted to understand how people working in a health care context as well as people on the other side (i.e. patients) perceive well-being and the importance of spirituality for them within it. One of the first questions was to define well-being. The answers were rather telling. One of the main characteristics of these definitions was the combination of mental and physical health that most participants highlighted. One participant wrote that well-being is ‘Physical, mental,



and emotional health. Inner peace even being in a disturbing environment' (#2, Brazil, 41 years old, female). Several people referred specifically to feelings and wrote that well-being is being satisfied with one's life, to be happy, or to be in tune with the world. For instance, one described well-being as a 'state of full satisfaction, balance and harmony between body, mind and spirit' (#3, Brazil, 49 years old, male). While I expected these replies as they are also reported in other studies, the second main characteristic was perhaps more revealing as many participants mentioned communities and relations, on earth but also beyond. For instance, one participant wrote that 'Well-being is to feel well with oneself and at the same time to know that one is not alone. It is to feel supported although we don't see those who take care of us' (#31, Brazil, 45 years old, female). Several referred explicitly to non-human beings when referring to the need to be part of a community. One described well-being as being in 'Communion with God, with others and with oneself' (#9, Brazil, 59 years old, male). Another wrote that 'Well-being is the feeling of belonging to the whole and that everything is connected. When we understand and practise it, we feel that we are part of something bigger. By knowing this, daily problems become small' (#75, Brazil, 54 years old, male). To live in harmony with others was also mentioned: for instance, well-being 'is to feel happy and satisfied with what one has. The harmony with people and the peace should walk hand in hand' (#29, Brazil, 20 years old, male). Overall the answers support a definition of well-being as 'living well together' which is the predominant perception of well-being in Latin America.

The shift towards well-being reflects the definition of health by the World Health Organization as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' (WHO 2005) in its constitution, adopted already in 1946 with a few amendments added later. The definition promoted globally a growing discourse of well-being, which is usually translated in Portuguese as *bem estar*. The Portuguese term means literally 'being well', in contrast to 'living well' of Spanish *buen vivir*. The Portuguese term involves both *boa disposição* (good mood) (such as comfort, contentment, happiness, satisfaction, health, safety, tranquillity, joy, etc.) and *boa condição* (good condition) (such as fortune, independence, prosperity, etc.).<sup>4</sup> Reflecting on well-being in Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America (*buen vivir*), Rodríguez describes it as 'a holistic concept rooted in principles and values such as harmony, equilibrium and complementarity, which from an indigenous perspective must guide the relationship of human beings with each other and with nature (or Mother Earth) and the cosmos' (Rodríguez 2016, 279, n. 1). Other studies refer to 'living in harmony' (*vida en armonía*), living a full life (*vida plena*), or even coexisting well (*buen convivir*) (Villalba 2013, 1429). Fatheuer argues therefore that it should be translated as 'living well together' instead of just 'living well' (Fatheuer 2011). While these scholars explain the definition as based on Andean cosmology, the holistic perception of well-being goes further; it reflects an understanding of human existence as communal being, living in this world side by side – and interconnected with – other entities such as God, spirits, and deities such as the *orixás*, depending on the various belief systems (Schmidt 2020). Illness or any form of lack of well-being occurs when this connection is broken or, as explained in the previous section, never established.

### *Bem Estar within Candomblé*

Candomblé, which is based on the idea of an integrated cosmology, puts the bond between the human world and the world of the *orixás* at its core. Well-being is coupled with the right balance of *axé* and goes further than physical well-being (Gomberg 2011, 144). If a person has too little or too much *axé*, well-being is disturbed which can cause physical, mental, or social problems. *Axé* derives from God and can be regenerated by fulfilling

obligations to the *orixás*. Seligman calls it ‘spiritual investment’ which is made partly via material investments, namely, sacrifices, as they are ‘vehicles for the transmission of *axé* between gods and humans’ (Seligman 2014, 103). Focusing more on healing, Gomberg characterizes the ritual obligations towards the *orixás* as remedies for the treatment of illnesses culminating in the initiation into the community (Gomberg 2011, 143). Becoming initiated into a Candomblé community reinforces the bond between the individual and their particular *orixás*, though the link was established at birth. As described above, the multilayered concept of personhood becomes complete with the initiation ritual that establishes a seat for the *orixás* in the human body and makes it complete, in perfect harmony. However, the connection exists already and consequently it is not only initiated members of a Candomblé community who must fulfil obligations towards the *orixás*: everyone should. Similarly, healing ceremonies are also open for everyone, initiated or not. Gomberg, for instance, points at a communal ritual called *Olubajé* which he describes as a ‘large collective sacrifice’ (*ebó*) (Gomberg 2011, 170). The main objective of this complex ceremony which contains several large public elements and lasts for days, is to restore the health of everyone present, initiated members of the community and other, non-initiated participants. I was able to attend one of the public ceremonies in 2018 and was impressed by the organization that enabled a large number of participants to attend. Their main objective was the consultation with a medium, who would then prescribe a remedy for the problem such as a specific tea or bath but also honouring the ancestors and the *orixás*.

The most important obligation is honouring the *orixás*, for instance by participating in ceremonies but also observing taboos. These are seen as a sacrifice (*ebó*) that one must do to honour the *orixás* and live a life in harmony with them. Neglecting these obligations leads to a loss of *axé* whereas observing them increases *axé*. Nivaldo Léo Neto and his co-authors (2009) state that the main purpose of the sacrifice is the fortification and feeding of the *orixás*. While they write that their interviewees used the verb ‘to eat’ to describe the sacrifice, one needs to understand it in a symbolic way. A sacrifice can be observing taboos such as not eating certain food or wearing clothes in specific colours, performing, or sponsoring a ceremony, as well as a blood sacrifice. Neto et al. (2009) give especial significance to the blood sacrifice in which animals are offered to the *orixás*. They argue that blood transports *axé* in a living being and is therefore the most important offering. Seligman describes animal sacrifice as ‘a powerful way to shore up the well-being of the *terreiro* and those connected to it’ (Seligman 2014, 33). While the *orixás* do not actually eat the animals, they gain energy (i.e. *axé*) of the sacrificial offering (Schmidt 2013). Every animal that is ritually sacrificed and offered to the *orixás* on an altar becomes sacred, even the dishes and bowls that contain the food.

I remember how carefully the members of the community – with whom I spent days participating in an initiation ceremony – distinguished the dishes in the kitchen, so that they didn’t mix with the normal dishes and implements. Only specific members of the community were allowed to slaughter the animals. The blood was collected and put on the altar together with the parts dedicated to the *orixás* that were considered high in *axé* (i.e. the head). Other parts of the animals were used to cook a meal which was regarded as therapeutic due to its high level of *axé* and handed out in small portions to the members attending the ceremony. This shared meal at which humans and *orixás* feast together is the most important part of every ceremony, not just initiations. It usually takes place in private, with only members of the *terreiro* involved, before the public presentation of the novices.

While what Gomberg describes is part of a treatment, a remedy to restore the balance and regenerate well-being for members of the Candomblé communities, it is a sacred act. Every movement, every sacrifice has meaning. No blood can be shed in vain as every drop



contains *axé*. The importance given to blood reinforces the notion of *axé* as key to ensuring well-being. Imbalance causes disturbances, physical as well as mental and even social, as everything can be traced back to the spiritual energy of *axé*. In a sense, it is the responsibility of each individual to maintain a balanced life and preserve or regenerate *axé*. Consequently, one could argue that the perception of well-being as ‘living a good life’ reflects a neoliberal view on well-being (see Schmidt 2022). However, it would be too simplistic to reduce well-being within Candomblé in such a way. While the individual has indeed the responsibility to live in a correct way, it is the obligations towards the ancestors and *orixás* that characterize how to live a good life. The individual is part of a wider community that includes non-human beings. At the same time, shared rituals in which mediums embody the *orixás* contribute, as Seligman writes, ‘an embodied dimension to the way in which they bring the rest of the community closer to the *axé* – helping lay-people to really *feel* the presence of this powerful force’ (Seligman 2014, 133).

### *Axé and spiritual healing*

At this point I will widen the discussion and reflect on the importance of *axé* for healing. Spiritual healing is widespread in Brazil and part of several traditions. Diagnosis and cure are embedded in the religious context, as noted above. In this sense healers are intermediaries between the patient and the divine from whom they received the ability to heal. Healing is often the predominant feature that attracts new members to a community. Toniol even includes spiritual healing as a form of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) (Toniol 2018), although it is usually seen as ‘one of the more “fringe” complementary therapies’ (Benor 1995, 234). In a new development, the Conselho Nacional de Saúde approved in July 2023 a resolution which – though not legally binding – marks an incremental institutional recognition of the contribution of African-derived traditions as complementary healing therapies (Conselho Nacional de Saúde 2023).

But despite the diversity and attraction of spiritual healing in Brazil, it is usually not a question of either/or. People seeking help often use biomedical as well as spiritual treatment. It is important to understand that religious practices are not a ‘toolkit’ to solve problems but part of a holistic experience that affect ‘every corner of one’s existence’ (Orr 2018, 135). As already mentioned, *axé* is the force that maintains well-being. We can increase it by following the obligations to honour the *orixás*. But we can also suffer a decline of *axé* when we neglect them. However, this is not so straightforward, and we often don’t realize the reason for a problem.

The first step in healing is therefore the consultation with a priest and priestess, usually called affectionately *pai* or *mãe de santo* (father or mother of the saint). They are not only the leaders of their communities and in charge of the ceremonies but also available for private consultation during which they will consult the *orixás*. The diagnosis is done through different divination techniques. The most common one is *jogo de búzios*, which uses a set of cowry shells to consult the *orixás*. The remedy to restore the balance can be the initiation: however, there are also other healing rituals in Candomblé (Gomberg 2011, 143–184). These rituals are interconnected and sometimes follow in increasing order. For instance, the first step can be a sacrifice, or the participation in a ceremony. The client usually gets a shopping list that lists, for instance, candles in a specific colour, perfume, flowers, eggs, animals, and so on. Apart from the animals that need to be bought in a market, the other items can be found in a *botânica*, a small shop located in most neighbourhoods in Brazil. They must bring the listed ingredients back so that the priest or priestess can conduct the sacrifice. The list can sometimes be very detailed and long as this depends on the diagnosis. If this didn’t help, one must participate in (i.e. co-sponsor) a ceremony. If still unsuccessful, the *bori*-ritual will follow.

While the emphasis again seems to be on the individual, the role of the priesthood is important in finding the reason for the problem, recommending the remedy, and guiding the individual through it until the problem has diminished and harmony and balance restored. As Seligman points out, ‘those with the most *axé* [sic] are those who reside within the innermost circle of the Candomblé hierarchy’ (Seligman 2014, 34): the priests and priestesses. They oversee the rituals and have, as Seligman writes, ‘the most intimate relationship with the deities’ (Seligman 2014, 34). Though healing comes ultimately with receiving *axé* from the *orixás*, the priesthood facilitates it. In this sense Candomblé is a ‘relational tradition’ (Seligman 2014, 36) with a focus on communal practice despite putting so much emphasis on the responsibility of each individual to live a good life. This is reinforced with the kinship terms used among members of each *terreiro*. The priests and priestesses are addressed as parents and the members as children. The senior priests are at the heart of each community and often have charismatic personalities. People come to consult them on personal recommendation, not just by chance or advertisement. In my conversations people often referred to the influence of the priests on their lives, how they helped them to overcome obstacles, how they inspired them to learn more and become a better person. They are seen as people with high *axé*, good people of high standard. While this position can lead to abuse (e.g. the case of John of God, see Rocha and McPhillips 2019), it emphasizes not only the power structure but more importantly the communal aspect of healing derived from *axé*.

### Conclusion: *axé* as cornerstone of Candomblé

The conclusion takes me back to the title of the article that identifies *axé* as the cornerstone of Candomblé philosophy. As mentioned above, Eze sees *ashé* within Yoruba thought as the key principle of humans (Eze 1998, 173). The same can be applied to Candomblé thought.

Candomblé is often described as worship of the *orixás*, even an embodied praxis. Roberto Motta for instance described Candomblé and the other African derived traditions in Brazil as a religion of the body (Motta 2005, 301). And Mark Münzel compares the ritualistic embodiment of the *orixás* in trance with the performance of a dressage horse guided by the rider through elegant and difficult figures (Münzel 1997, 153), an equally physical quality. I want to highlight here a different side, the ideas at the heart of Candomblé. Ethnography is often accused of being anti-philosophical (Hammersley 1992, 4), with a strong focus on practice and ethnographic description rather than theoretical reflection. However, this is rather overgeneralizing and misleading as not only Burley (2023) points out. Many anthropologists use their ethnographic insights as a starting point for a wider theoretical discussion that challenges preconceived ideas. Burley uses ethnographic fieldwork to ground his philosophy. Inspired by Clifford Geertz (1973) he promotes ‘a thickly descriptive philosophy of religion’ as a way to acknowledge the diverse forms of religions within and across traditions, that is, a ‘radical plurality’ of perspectives, worldviews, or ‘ways of being human’ as he wrote elsewhere (Burley 2020, 1; see also Burley 2018). I take a slightly different approach as diversity in any culture is one of the guiding features in anthropology. Instead, I have sought to show in this article that ethnographic insights can be used to reflect on cross-cultural analytical concepts such as body and well-being. By doing this, my approach to Candomblé has shifted and has become less focused on the practice and more on the ideas. Consequently, it has shown that while *orixás* are important as the core divine agencies and means to revive *axé*, they are the means to an end. It is *axé* that links humans and non-human beings, and lies at the heart of the integrated worldview. In this way, my discussion reflects on the human condition, which represents the area where the interests of philosophers and

anthropologists intersect, as Jason Throop points out (Throop 2018, 197). For anthropologists 'any productive engagement with the human condition necessarily involves both participation in and observation of lived situations and actual events' (Jackson 2018, 185). Candomblé is at its core a religion of the body with a strong experiential dimension (Seligman 2014, 140). But it also provides a sophisticated way of seeing the world with a material-spiritual dimension which stands in contrast to religious and philosophical ideas routinely discussed in the West. It can be seen therefore as a way to enrich philosophical understanding of religion. When Eze argues for the need of philosophy to 'upgrade', he points towards the necessity 'to engage, in whatever ways we know, colleagues who work in countries as far as Japan, Egypt, Ghana, Iran, and South Korea or as near as the Caribbean, Brazil, and Mexico' (Eze 2006, 55). And in Brazil – at least for Candomblé practitioners – *axé* is the cornerstone of understanding this different worldview. It is the energy that binds the body with the immaterial spiritual dimension of our existence, which cannot be conceived without an understanding of *axé*. While I am an anthropologist and am inspired by what I see and observe, *axé* has captured my interest, perhaps because it is so different from more Western- or Eurocentric ways of perceiving the world.

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## Notes

- 1 The term *axé* has various spellings, depending on the language. *Axé* is the Brazilian spelling, while most English language publications use *ashe* or *ashé*.
- 2 English spelling for the African deities, the *orixas*.
- 3 Brazilian spelling for the African deities, called in English *orishas* and in Spanish *orichas*.
- 4 My thanks to Steven Engler for pointing this out.

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