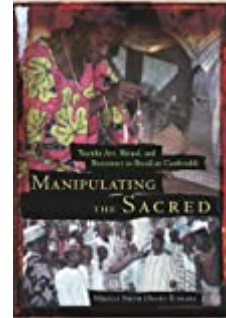




**Mikelle Smith Omari-Tunkara.** *Manipulating the Sacred: Yoruba Art, Ritual, and Resistance in Brazilian Candomblé*. Detroit: Wayne State University, 2005. vii + 169 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8143-2851-4; \$30.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8143-2852-1.



**Reviewed by** Andrea Allen (Anthropology Department, Harvard University)

**Published on** H-AfrArts (February, 2008)

## Sacred Arts and Negotiation in Candomblé

Mikelle Smith Omari-Tunkara's *Manipulating the Sacred* is a rich and detailed ethnography and art history about *candomblé* in Bahia, Brazil. In her succinct, yet thorough, text, Omari-Tunkara draws on her over twenty years of experience as a practitioner and researcher of Yoruba-derived religions in Nigeria, the United States, and Brazil as she analyzes the intersectionality of resistance, agency, and art in the lives of *candomblé* practitioners in Brazil. Her status as an insider/outsider in the transatlantic Yoruba world is an asset, because she is comfortable deploying a hybrid conceptual framework of analysis, *abojá*, that draws on both emic and etic perspectives. According to Omari-Tunkara, the *abojá* model "blends diachronic and synchronic approaches and conjoins an indigenous African sensibility with the Euro-American analytic frames of social history, interpretive semiology, and art history" (p. xxvii).

*Manipulating the Sacred* has several objectives: to compare Yoruba religious rituals and sacred objects in Nigeria and Bahia; to describe the function of can-

*domblé* as not only a spiritual but also a physical space; and to analyze the role of sacred objects, including clothes, sculpture, clay figures and other pottery, and food, as signifiers of Afro-Brazilians' resistance to racism, oppression, and marginalization. To accomplish these tasks, Omari-Tunkara takes the reader on vividly described trips to several cities in Nigeria, including Abeokuta, Ife, and Ekiti, and to the Brazilian city of Salvador and island of Itaparica.

In the beginning of *Manipulating the Sacred*, Omari-Tunkara covers the history of *candomblé* in Brazil with a particular focus on Bahia, because this was the state with the largest enslaved African population and the birthplace of *candomblé*; currently, it is the region with the largest presence of African descendants. According to Omari-Tunkara, practitioners and devotees of *candomblé* gather in sacred spaces that they call *ilés axés*. Typically, *ilés axés* are demarcated compounds that usually include buildings or shrines for the *orixás* (Yoruba deities) of the temple, living quarters for the *iyalorixás* or *babalorixás* (priestesses and priests) of the *terreiro* (temple), sleeping and communal areas for

its members, sacred rooms that have limited access, and the *barracão* (building for public festivals). Depending on the wealth of the temple, compounds can be many acres filled with forests and sometimes small streams. Omari-Tunkara describes the temple where she received her initiation, *Ilã Axã Opã Afonjã*, as being a terreiro that is located on a vast compound. After relating these details, she asserts that these spaces are microcosms, “microarenas,” or “microsegments” of Africa. Fences surrounding the *ilã axã* not only demarcate the boundaries between sacred and profane spaces, but Brazilian and African spaces as well. Spiritually, symbolically, and literally, *ilã axã*s are sites of resistance for practitioners, devotees, and—Omari-Tunkara would add—all Afro-Brazilians.

In her discussion of the origins of *ilã axã*s and *candomblã* *Nagã*, Omari-Tunkara expounds on the legacy of Yorùbá religious traditions through a comprehensive description of Yorùbá cosmology. Kingdoms and subgroups within the Yorùbá region of western Nigeria share, with minor variation, common practices and beliefs that they believe originated in the city of *Ilã-Ifã* in the state of *Osun*. In present-day Nigeria, the United States, and Brazil, the *orixãs* are the focal point of this cosmology as practitioners venerate them, sacrifice to them, petition them, and obey them. Devotees partake in rituals in both communal and individual settings to manipulate the sacred, i.e., *axã*. *Axã* has been described by Omari-Tunkara as well as many other scholars and practitioners as a universal energy or life force that dwells within living and nonliving beings and can be harnessed through ritual, sacrifice, communality, and an individual’s own personhood to affect the world around and within them. This phenomenon is central to the practice of *candomblã*, because *axã* imbues objects with meaning, and as Omari-Tunkara states, it transforms them into sacred objects or sacred art.

For Omari-Tunkara, a semiotic analysis of the sacred arts of *candomblã* reveals multiple and multilayered understandings of the functionality of these “arts” as signifiers with both religious and secular meanings. Omari-Tunkara employs the notion of “double-voicing” to elucidate the hybrid innovations and creations involved in *candomblã*. One of her most described examples of this “double-voiceness” is the *roupa de axã*: sacred clothing that is worn in the *ilã axã*. *Roupa de axã* is a system of signs that signify and mark rank, status, gender, role, and inclusion. Omari-Tunkara describes, in great detail, the various articles of *roupa de axã* that are used in the *ilã axã*. Depending on the occasion,

stages of initiation, or spiritual affiliation, men’s *roupa de axã* are all white, except when they are in trance, and women typically wear the colors of their particular *orixã*. Omari-Tunkara theorizes that these sacred arts are “sign carriers,” as in Petr Bogatyrev’s *Functions of Folk Costume in Moravian Slovakia* (1971), that follow learned grammatical rules of *candomblã*, which communicate myriad messages within a *candomblã* community. These sign carriers also include the sacred clothing worn during trance (*roupa de orixã*), implements and tools, devotional displays, and beaded necklaces. As bearers of *axã*, these sacred objects also become signifiers of agency and creativity in opposition to the larger oppressive environment of Brazilian society.

One critique of Omari-Tunkara’s work is that it is unclear how many Afro-Brazilians are able to fully utilize the potential resources of *candomblã*. Throughout the text, Omari-Tunkara asserts that *candomblã* provides a viable option of empowerment for Afro-Brazilians that is not available for them in the wider society. Notwithstanding the popularity and familiarity of *candomblã* in Bahia, there is a high cost to “active and sustained participation in the sacred”; namely, time and money (p. 125). The initiation processes, which include an individual being sequestered at the terreiro, can last months and sometimes a year, depending on the level of initiation. Depending on the season, initiates can spend an enormous amount of time at the terreiro in preparation for private rituals and public ceremonies. Financially, the clothing, especially the *roupa de orixã*, are expensive and demand upkeep and maintenance; sacrifices, of various kinds, are also a part of initiates’ obligations and can involve the purchase of food, liquor, candles, and other objects. Involvement and participation in *candomblã*, beyond attending public ceremonies or seeking advice from an *iyalorixã* or *babalorixã*, is not a light undertaking, and it would have been useful if Omari-Tunkara acknowledged these tensions.

Despite the lack of information on how individuals negotiate the financial costs and the time issues related to *candomblã* practice, Omari-Tunkara’s work is highly significant because it is accessible to nonexperts of Yorùbá religion, yet also provides sophisticated analyses of *candomblã*, Yorùbá traditions, and the relationship between art and religion. A glossary of words related to *candomblã* and a glossary describing the seventeen *orixãs* honored in Brazil add to the accessibility of the book.

A major highlight of *Manipulating the Sacred* is

the inclusion of sixteen pages of colored plates, which Omari-Tunkara refers to throughout the text. These vibrant pictures are from her trips to Nigeria and Brazil, and include images of practitioners, altar displays, candomblé compounds, and costumes worn during trance. One image, plate 15, of three female initiates representing various stages of initiation at a public festival is particularly revealing because the distinctions between the women's outfits makes visible Omari-Tunkara's contention that clothes are sign carriers and can identify rank and hierarchical status. This visual encapsulates the beauty and complexity of candomblé in a way that words sometimes can not. It is a testament to Omari-Tunkara's dedication to candomblé and Yorùbá religion that she included an abundance of color plates in her book.

*Manipulating the Sacred* is a necessary read for any scholar interested in not only candomblé in Brazil, but other Afro-Atlantic religions as well. It is a noteworthy text that can be used in courses that discuss Afro-Brazilian culture, African diaspora and religion, art history, visual arts, and agency. Although in recent years various works have been published in English on can-

dombblé in Brazil, Omari-Tunkara's work adds a much needed perspective to the field.[1] The descriptions of the rituals, ceremonies, and sacred objects, especially the clothing, provide the reader a valuable framework for understanding the vital role of manipulation and negotiation of religious work. Although other scholars have mentioned the relationship between agency and Afro-Atlantic religious traditions, Omari-Tunkara adds another dimension through her meticulous analysis of the role of art and sacred object as carriers of agentic practices.

#### Note

[1]. J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomble* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Paul C. Johnson, *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomble* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); as well as Yvonne Daniel's ethnography centering on dance in Afro-Cuban, Haitian, and Afro-Brazilian religious traditions, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomble* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-afrarts>

**Citation:** Andrea Allen. Review of Omari-Tunkara, Mikelle Smith, *Manipulating the Sacred: Yoruba Art, Ritual, and Resistance in Brazilian Candomble*. H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. February, 2008.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14175>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).