Research Article

Leandro de Paula*

Candomblé in Public: How Religious Rites Become Civil Technologies in Salvador, Brazil

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Abstract: In 2019, right before arriving in Salvador, Brazil, to develop missionary activities, an international Protestant organization declared that this city – the center of the black culture in the country – was "known for its people's belief in spirits and demons." The statement soon triggered indignation from activists and devotees of Candomblé, the Afro-Brazilian religion that is a key element of the city's history and identity. This article analyzes the transformation of this case into a public problem, which demanded different forms of reparation and affirmation of religious differences. The text debates the extension of Candomblé's semiotic community in Salvador and how the circulation of its symbols in different social contexts furthers the dissolution of boundaries between "religion" and "politics." I pursue such ideas by describing a form of civil protest that moves liturgical forms from the Candomblé temples to public spaces. Such civil protest technology engages music, dance, and a set of materialities, presenting an instructive performance of the constitution of "religion" and the "public" in a post-colonial landscape.

Keywords: Candomblé, Bahia, publics, religious intolerance, religious racism, civil protest

> The babalaô[1] had cast the cowrie-shells and the orixás had responded. To guarantee her peace of mind, free her from the evil eye, from any illness, from the threats of the non-conformist egum[2] luring her to his death, Dona Flor had to fulfill a major obligation. It was not a simple dispatch, it was not just any ebó.[3] Exu, head of the deceased one, had put himself against her, on the warpath. Dionísia had told the ojé[4] not to regulate expenses. As a matter of life and death, and with an armed and displeased Exu, money didn't count and there was a hurry, a lot of hurry: her friend, Dona Flor, could barely stand up. The açobá[5] himself had advanced his money for the most urgent expenses; one sheep, two goats, twelve roosters, six guinea fowls, twelve yards of cloth. Not to mention the rest, a long list written in pencil on kraft paper, used for wrapping. Each purchase with its own cost plus twenty mil-réis reserved to the peji of Ossaim[6] so that he can open the paths through the jungle where Exu hides.[7]

1 A male priest.
2 A spirit.
3 A ritual offering.
4 A religious position in charge of caring for the spirits.
5 A religious position in charge of caring for ritual elements.
6 An altar/reserved space to orixá Ossaim.
7 Amado, *Dona Flor*, 439. My translation of: "O babalaô jogara os búzios e os orixás tinham respondido. Para lhe garantir tranquilidade, livrá-la de olho-mau, de qualquer doença, das ameaças do egum inconformado a atraí-la para sua morte, dona Flor devia cumprir obrigação de monta, não um despacho simples, não um ebó qualquer. Exu, cabeça do finado, se pusera em contra, em pé de guerra. Dionísia dissera ao ojé para não medir despesas. Sendo caso de vida ou morte, e com Exu em armas, de través e pelo avesso, o dinheiro não conta e corre pressa, muita pressa: sua comadre dona Flor mal se mantinha em pé. Diante de tudo isso o próprio açobá adiantara do seu para as despesas mais urgentes; um carneiro, duas cabras, doze galos, seis conquéns, doze metros de pano. Sem falar no resto, extensa relação escrita a lápis em papel pardo, de embrulho. Cada compra com seu custo e mais vinte mil-réis destinados ao peji de Ossaim para ele abrir os caminhos pelo mato onde se esconde Exu."

*** Corresponding author: Leandro de Paula,** Institute of Humanities, Arts, and Sciences, Federal University of Bahia, Salvador, Brazil, e-mail: psleandro@ufba.br

Only a powerful dispatch would free Dona Flor from the spirit of her deceased husband and calm down the orixá that owned his head. Sometime after Vadinho suffers a sudden illness during the Carnival parade, he responds to Dona Flor's secret longing. He reappears naked on the bed she now shares with the sober pharmacist Teodoro, confusing her life and moral convictions. That pointed out that Exu got furious, demanding a special offering from Dona Flor: as the cowrie-shells indicated, her peace depended on the sacrifice of several goats, roosters, and guinea fowls.

"Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands," one of the greatest successes of one of the most famous Brazilian writers, was released in 1966 and adapted to cinema and television in the following decades. Jorge Amado's novel exemplifies a literary genre that seeks to build a particular idea of Brazilian people by taking inspiration from "the daily life of the low-income groups, the multiple ethical and cultural resources with which they ingeniously cope with oppression and humiliation."[8] The novel thus praises characters and local symbolic practices marginalized or even repressed by the dominant classes in the 1940s. An excerpt comparing the worship practices of black people from Brazil and the US illustrates such endeavor: "[Brazilian black women] danced in respect to the orixás, the joyful and intimate black gods coming from Africa and more and more alive in Bahia. Black American women, by their turn, addressed their prayers to their owners' austere and distant white gods, imposed on enslaved people in the lash of the whip."[9]

The intention of describing the "people" occasionally led this literary genre into controversial framings. From anthropologist Osmundo Pinho's perspective,[10] for example, Jorge Amado's work "carries all the contradictions and incoherences of the political unconscious mind that informs it," as it takes part in the process of "invention of Bahia" in the national imagery. That would make "Dona Flor and her Two Husbands" one of the many items of the "ideological discourse on *baianidade*," the sense of uniqueness of the Brazilian state of Bahia as promoted by diverse political and cultural platforms.

Candomblé, a religion repressed by State forces in Bahia until the 1970s, emerges in the novel as a frequent target of interest. Its ritual practices appear everywhere in the narrative, not as exclusive habits of black people, but as symbolic treasures available for wide consumption.[11] "Dona Flor and her Two Husbands" seems to portray Candomblé as the cultural bond of a "racial democracy," i.e., the supposedly peaceful management of racial differences in Brazil, according to an influential ideology.[12] Such a perspective on Candomblé may be found in Jorge Amado's[13] literary works, but also in several culturalist approaches addressing the black culture in Bahia, such as those offered by photographer/ethnologist Pierre Verger and anthropologist Ruth Landes, to name a few. Each in their way,[14] they contributed to including Candomblé into the discourse on "baianidade" and transforming such a religious universe into part of the regional and national identities.[15]

Paul Johnson[16] argued that, throughout the twentieth century, the increasing number of academic research, artworks, touristic approaches, and media products about this religion gave rise to "Public Candomblé." This term refers to a specific inflection: the *ritual transmission of secret*, which underlies this religious practice, would have begun to compete with the *discourse about the secret*, as Candomblé came out in different forms of visibility. The discourse about ritual secret, or *secretism*, would not be a mere translation of what is experienced in the terreiros – the Candomblé temples – but a set of representations fostered by

8 Coutinho, *Cultura*, 198. All translations to English under my responsibility.

9 Amado, *Dona Flor*, 179.

10 Pinho, "A Bahia," 117.

11 For example: Vadinho is initiated into the religion as a son of a "reigning Exu" (p. 366); Norma has "a desperate will to attend a Candomblé ceremony" (p. 141); Dona Flor, by her turn, demands the services from Didi – "wizard of Ifá, guardian of the house of Ossaim." Excerpts from Amado, *Dona Flor*.

12 See: Pinho, "A Bahia;" Hartikainen, "A Politics."

13 Amado's involvement with Candomblé even led him to political action: serving as a Federal Deputy in the 1940s, he proposed amendment 3.218, included in the 1946 Brazilian Constitution, to defend the right to religious freedom.

14 In addition to the several books he authored about Candomblé, Verger became himself a religious initiate and took on the name "Fatumbi." Landes saw Salvador as a "city of women," once Candomblé terreiros gave black women the dignity and recognition historically denied to them in the Brazilian society.

15 Calvo-González and Duccini, "On 'Black';" Teles dos Santos, *O poder*.

16 Johnson, *Secrets*.

journalists, scholars, artists, political allies, and the Candomblé's practitioners themselves around the religious *authenticity*.[17]

Written in the 1960s, "Dona Flor and her Two Husbands" somehow prefigured the social spread of Candomblé's language. Detached from the terreiros' exclusive possession, it would have gradually become intelligible also for nonnative audiences as part of popular culture: "the social and discursive boundary of secrecy remains within the terreiro, but the semiotic system of Candomblé has leaped the barrier and is out and available for endless possible interpretations."[18] The very religious authorities have been part of such an integration of their tradition into a broader cultural repertoire. Mãe Stella de Oxóssi, for example, the famous Mother of Saint (priestess)[19] of Terreiro Opô Afonjá, wrote many books and acted as a columnist in Salvador's press. According to Johnson's argument, the inflation of the religion's semiotic community would have resulted from the dissemination of its symbols across time and space beyond their original *loci* of creation and use: "the knowledge of Candomblé is now materialized not only in the ritualized body, the closed calabash,[20] and the seat of the saint but also in the objectified forms of text, film, and television, which are easily transported and reproduced outside the terreiros."[21]

Much criticism has already been addressed to such an approach of Candomblé existing outside the religious spaces.[22] Miriam Rabelo, for instance, argued that "the information spread in books and websites, no matter how detailed, does not replace the practical experience of the terreiro."[23] From another perspective, Ordep Serra[24] relativized the power of intellectuals in shaping the terreiros' reflexivity and underlined the agency of Candomblé's leaders and devotees before their political and academic allies. More recently, Elina Hartikainen[25] drew attention to a growing skepticism among terreiros from Salvador about nonnative scholars' mediation. She pointed out that this trend derives from the expansion of academic training opportunities in Brazil, which aroused the demand for native specialists to speak on behalf of their groups. Candomblé communities have been the target of either academic and artistic interest or religious[26] and political[27] persecution, having thus had many reasons to establish an ambivalent relationship with the world outside the terreiros.

The long-lasting debate on the relationship between Candomblé and the "public" informs this article. The text addresses a form of civil protest recently emerged in Salvador, the capital of Bahia, which mobilizes religious symbols (garments, music, materialities, liturgical forms, etc.) in public space. Such a political tool, called "collective ebó," has been employed by a local social movement inspired by the legacy of Makota Valdina (1943–2019), a key Candomblé activist and spiritual authority. As part of the representations circulated by "Public Candomblé," "Dona Flor and her Two Husbands'" narrative portrays "ebó" as a ritual that negotiates favors with supernatural forces. The "collective ebó" seems to re-appropriate and racialize such an understanding by claiming justice and denouncing cases of "religious racism," an ascending political category to describe violence against religions inspired by African cosmologies in Brazil.[28]

17 Van de Port, *Ecstatic*.

18 Johnson, *Secrets*, 166.

19 This article employs the term priest/priestess to generically allude to Candomblé's spiritual authorities, although some devotees and activists refuse such a designation. They understand that the diverse terms to name the Mothers and Fathers of Saint among Candomblé's nations (like *tata*, *iya*, *mameto* or *baba*) are more accurate, once they express the role of parenting a religious community. See Pinto and Harding, "Afro-Brazilian."

20 In Candomblé and other cosmological traditions originated in Africa, the fruit of the gourd plays a prominent role in healing rites. According to such beliefs, Ossaim, the orixá who knows how to manage the power of plants, would have kept within the calabash the secrets of faith and the *ofó*, or enchantment.

21 Johnson, *Secrets*, 157.

22 A debate on this topic engaged influential Brazilian anthropologists a decade ago in response to the arguments Mattijs Van de Port raised in the article named "Candomblé," included in References section. To access the whole debate, see: Debates do Ner, "Debate."

23 Rabelo, *Enredos*, 105.

24 Serra, *Águas*.

25 Hartikainen, "Candomblé."

26 See, for example: Reinhardt, *Espelho*; and Santos, *Marchar*.

27 In the Brazilian state of Bahia, Law n. 3097/1972 required that the Afro-Brazilian religious temples be authorized and regulated by the Police. The law remained in force until 1976. For a discussion on the topic, see Silva Jr., "Notas."

28 Morais, "Povos;" Almeida, *A luta*; Camurça and Rodrigues, "O debate."

This article analyzes the political background, performative means, and public effects of a "collective ebó" that happened in November 2019, in response to an insult against Salvador's population made by a foreign Protestant NGO. Methodologically, it seeks to analyze "how religious publics actually emerge through shared images, texts, sounds, and bonding styles."[29] I argue that the described political circumstance manifested Candomblé's particular manner of handling the boundary between the "public" and the "private." Civil institutions, the media, and supporters from different fields could then engage with the Candomblé's "bonding style" in the face of intolerance, an old social wound in the city. Following the research on public controversies,[30] the article assesses how an emblematic situation highlights the "mediation processes in which categories from a discursive field move to another, producing translations and, consequently, new meanings."[31] Taken as a heuristic resource, the idea of "public controversy" prescribes attention to the multiple standpoints gathered in a dispute, their incommensurability, and the agency of not only religious or even human actors in the case description.

The data discussed in this article were derived from public sources, such as newspapers, television news, social media content, and documents from government bodies. Furthermore, I attended the protest at Salvador's port as a supporter and had brief and informal interactions with some protesters. The article thus does not comprise an ethnography of the social movement, whose trajectory has already been tracked back by other research endeavors.[32] I seek to sketch, on the other hand, an analysis of discourses and publics shaped by the controversy and identify how some of Salvador's public sphere leading players echoed the social movement's agenda at that moment. This undertaking focuses on the political effects of the Candomblé's semiotics in the capital of Bahia, while new forms of Afro-religious activism ascend across Brazil.[33]

Probing religious trends through their expressions in the secular public sphere is a research endeavor I have been carrying out for some years.[34] In the specific case of this article, such a positionality is also shaped by my lens as a migrant from Brazil's Southeast region, impressed by the insightful and pedagogical way the Afro-religious movement undertakes its struggle for rights in Salvador. In the past few years, I have been interacting with Candomblé's communities and activists in civil and academic contexts like "Seminário Enfrentando a intolerância e o ódio religioso,"[35] "Fórum Direito e Liberdade Religiosa,"[36] and the project "Pluralismo Religioso e Direitos Humanos,"[37] which prompts activities with local religious communities addressing their understandings on citizenship. These have been fundamental opportunities to figure out the political scene in which Candomblé takes over some forms of publicity. My standpoint regarding the "collective ebó" is thus also informed by other inspiring alliances between secular politics and religious experience that emerge from the Afro-religious movement in Salvador.[38]

Section 1 reviews the anthropological literature on the ebó ritual, presents some aspects of Makota Valdina's biography, and discusses the more recent politicization of the Afro-religious field in Brazil. Section 2 deals with the controversy that gave rise to a broadened public of Candomblé's discourse in Salvador, as commented earlier. Section 3 approaches some political and aesthetic dimensions of civil-religious movements nowadays.

29 Meyer, "Going," 154.

30 Anthropologist Paula Montero is a key reference of this research agenda in Brazil. See Montero, "Controvérsias;" Montero, *Religiões*. My research work has also extensively employed this methodological perspective to analyze conflicts concerning public policy. See Paula and Ayala "Contrapublicidade;" Cid et al., "Um governo."

31 Montero, "Controvérsias," 178.

32 Souza, "Vozes;" Tavares, "Sobre a;" Tavares et al., "Intolerância."

33 See: Miranda, "A política;" Almeida, *A luta*.

34 See: Paula, "Entre;" Paula, "A alma;" Paula, "Um rio."

35 An event held by NGO Koinonia to share information and assess initiatives to combat religious intolerance.

36 An event held by the Order of Attorneys of Brazil in Bahia, dedicated to discuss the right to religious freedom.

37 An extension project I have coordinated since 2018 at the Federal University of Bahia. See Paula, "Sagrados;" Paula, "A multiplicidade."

38 See Paula, "Sagrados."

1 Alive Offerings

Ebó is a word in Portuguese derived from the Yoruba Ẹbọ, which means *offering*. In Candomblé, ebó is a ritual offering to the spiritual forces – the orixás[39,40] – that requires materialities and procedures prescribed by priest/priestess divination. These offerings are found in regular purification rituals, spiritual initiation processes, and liturgies seeking favors from the orixás, such as love, health, or prosperity. The traits just mentioned place the practice of ebó close to Victor Turner's definition of *ritual*: a "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers."[41] This brief picture of ritual certainly does not do justice to diverse manifestations of the phenomenon, nor even the consequences of Turner's reflection itself on that topic.[42] However, it sufficiently illuminates the suspension of routine, the transcendent appeal and the prescriptive character of any ritual, helpful ideas to discuss the discursive transit of ebó between the religious and the political fields.

The ebó ritual regards orixá Exu as an emissary connecting the intentions between the reigns of the *àyié* (the earth) and the *òrun* (the spiritual realm). His role is conducting the energy concentrated by the ebó and re-establishing the balance of forces between humans and deities/cosmic energies. Ebó is thus a propitiatory act of negotiating power between the visible and the invisible. The ritual reorganizes spiritual relationships to renew and strengthen the *axé*, the vital energy that moves the world and circulates across different manifestations of nature, according to Candomblé's beliefs.[43]

"Like a formula prescribed by a physician, the ebó conciliates a set of symbolic elements (in terms of qualities and quantities, modes of offering, and destination) consistent with the problem it must solve."[44] The cowrie-shell divination determines the use of elements from vegetable, mineral, or animal origin. Such organic resources have a common feature with the idea of energy in Candomblé: impermanence. Ebó assumes that ingredients like manioc flour, beverages, leaves, and blood of sacrificed animals ferment, deteriorate, and/or disappear over time, showing that the axé is not enclosed in a unique way of being. Luciana Novaes sets up an approach to ebó as *technology* to underline how it unfolds Candomblé's ontological assumptions: "ebó materially translates the movement of temporal change due to a particular technology that activates the vital energy present in biological beings through processes that alter their physical form and chemical constitution."[45]

I draw attention to two dimensions of ebó in the ritual economy of Candomblé. The first one is that the offering is a way of caring for and strengthening the interdependent relationship between human beings and orixás. Thus, ebós frequently privilege the spiritual demands of one *person*[46] since it responds to a particular energetic situation. Indeed, those requesting the ritual must count on someone's help: "There will always be someone to sing, clap, help to prepare and clean up [things] in the course of the religious 'service'."[47] However, the propitiatory logic depends on the circulation of axé between the elements offered as a sacrifice and the orixá summoned by them, the owner of powers addressed towards the situation experienced by a counselee.

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39 "Orixá (orisha) is a Yoruba language term used to denote specific sacred energies, elements of the natural world, universal spiritual presences; sometimes understood as deities or divinized ancestral forces." Pinto and Harding, "Afro-Brazilian," 78.

40 The word "orixás" is used in terreiros Keto/Yorubá, while in Angola/Bantu terreiros, such spiritual energies are known as "Nkisis," and in Jeje ones as "Voduns." These names suggest, however, divine forces that fulfill a similar function in these different traditions.

41 Turner, "Symbols," 150.

42 Turner addresses how rituals manifest latent conflicts within a group, favoring social cohesion. However, by highlighting the idea of "belief" over the "practice" of a ritual, his definition underestimates the moments in which such dimensions may dissociate. For a critique of Turner's conception of ritual, see Grimes, "Victor."

43 Verger, *Notas*.

44 Silva, *Orixás*, 240.

45 Novaes, "A tecnologia," 288.

46 Although, even the individual pursuit of interests "through the mobilization of divine partners does not occur in an ethical vacuum, but amid taken (or inherited) commitments, the cost of assumed responsibilities, the need of making assessments and taking positions," according to Rabelo, "Os percursos," 106.

47 Duccini, *Diplomas*, 172.

Ebó may then be seen as a kind of agreement "established through offerings, between the one who requests it (the counselee), the one who has the legitimacy to carry it out (the priest/priestess), its divine recipient (the orixá) and the place specified by the latter to sign the pact."[48] Although it requires social mediations, ebó emphasizes the uniqueness of a moment in life, or rather, the circumstance of axé in a life trajectory, to promote *expiatory restitution* for healing, cleaning, unloading, etc.[49] Such traits have made ebó more than a technique handled by those spiritually initiated in Candomblé. As pictured in Jorge Amado's novels, ebó also became a service requested by the "population outside the religious group."[50] Prandi even asserts: "the middle-class client who goes to a Candomblé terreiro looking for cowrie-shell divination and ebós is the *bricoleur* who has also sought many other non-rational sources of meaning for life and healing for all sorts of ills. Certainly, this client's Candomblé is very different from the initiated devotee's, but neither of them contradicts the meaning of the other."[51]

A second highlighted aspect of the rite is its manner of negotiating the boundaries between the terreiro and the external environment.[52] According to the directions given by the oracle, the baskets ("balaios") with remaining materialities are generally dispatched in forests, beaches, waterfalls, streets, crossroads, etc. The material elements' fermentation and deterioration, even their disappearance due to the action of time and weather, are considered part of the ritual once they indicate the circulation of the vital energy.[53] Thus, the ebó dispatches may escape from the terreiro's boundaries that guaranteed the privacy of the ritual until then. Nevertheless, delivering the materials to nature does not reveal the purpose or the mystical means of the ebó. Even though the materialities are reachable to lay curiosity, the ritual keeps committed to secrecy.[54] One must, "avoiding profane glances, place it [the dispatch] in a desert site"[55] to make it available to the sacred energies of nature.

Shortly, the ebó ritual seems to correspond to a concert between human and more-than-human forces. It responds to an *imbalance* in the circulation of the axé, experienced in life circumstances demanding help from the supernatural.[56] Importantly, secrecy makes up the act: from consulting the oracle to dispatching materials in indicated places for their decomposition, everything seems committed to not revealing human purposes or transcendent mechanisms of the offering. However, materialities – the sacrificial elements – frequently escape from the boundaries of the terreiro's privacy.

Lying down the baskets with remaining materials in urban/public spaces has been a challenging task for many devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions.[57] The dispatches may trigger disgust from people who do not follow such religious practices, given the unique way ebós concatenate matter, human intentions, and supernatural agency, making a mystery come to the senses. Actually, those who do not understand the meaning of the offerings – averagely informed by a Christian-biased prejudice – may even be afraid of them: they believe that "something from the mystical force continues throbbing in these dead chickens that people find when returning home or when they are out for a walk."[58] This issue turned into a political battlefield in Brazil once Christian/Evangelical politicians sought to prohibit the disposal of materials from religious rituals in urban areas, initiatives which the Afro-religious movement has fought against.[59]

48 Silva, *Orixás*, 241.

49 Elbein dos Santos, *Os Nagô*.

50 Prandi, *Herdeiras*, 20.

51 Ibid., 28.

52 Many Afro-diasporic religions draw on human interaction with nature. In Brazil, the circumscription of Candomblé's ritual practices to the space of terreiros is part of colonial history and religious racism. Makota Valdina addresses the environmental dimension of Candomblé in Pinto and Harding, "Afro-Brazilian." Carla Nogueira deals with terreiro Bate Folha's environmental resistance, which preserved an area of 15 hectares of Atlantic Forest in the urban area of Salvador, in Nogueira, *Fé*.

53 Novaes, "A tecnologia;" Silva, *Orixás*.

54 Bastide, *O candomblé*; Elbein dos Santos, *Os Nagô*; Prandi, *Herdeiras*; Novaes, "A tecnologia."

55 Querino, *A raça*, 63.

56 Elbein dos Santos proposes a typology between "normal" ebós, adopted by devotees as periodic rites, and "crisis" ebós, which respond to specific situations. See Elbein dos Santos, *Os Nagô*.

57 See, for example: Duccini, *Diplomas*, 141; Silva, *Orixás*, 243.

58 Bastide, *O candomblé*, 212.

59 Copelotti, "As controvérsias."

The attributes commented on so far define an identity of ebó as a *ritual* and as a *symbol* in "Public Candomblé," a semiotic repertoire surely also boosted by academic scholarship.[60] Such images have been reframed in the recent politicization of the religious movement in Salvador, as discussed below.

Educator Valdina Pinto used to say that the community in which she was born in 1943, the Engenho Velho da Federação neighborhood in Salvador, was an "extended family, beyond the blood family,"[61] once it was composed of many Candomblé terreiros. She had her spiritual initiation in 1975 and was later appointed a *makota*[62] in the hierarchy of a terreiro called Tanuri Junsara. The religious journey made her confront hegemonic cultural standards in Brazilian society, as she understood the importance of Candomblé "in enabling Afro Brazilians to resist dehumanization, resist slavery and create a more healthy identity."[63]

Her political awareness led her to join several civil organizations, like the Centro de Educação Ambiental São Bartolomeu (São Bartolomeu Environmental Education Center), which she helped to create aiming to protect a nature reserve in Salvador. Makota Valdina's political engagements always drew upon her religious and cosmological understandings: "Nature is the essence. It is the base of our belief and our relation with the world that we see and the world that we do not see."[64]

As the educator gained national prestige as a spokesperson of Afro-Brazilian religions, she stressed the role of language in the fight against racism, drawing attention to the link between Candomblé practices and black political action in Brazil.[65] She once coined the idea of "collective ebó," meaning that the resistance of the black people during Brazil's history was an offering to the orixás in the pursuit of justice and reparation. Such an understanding echoed Makota Valdina's approach to the specific power of Candomblé to create forms of belonging: "the 'família de santo' (ritual family) in Candomblé … is composed of people who come from individual blood family lineages to recreate a collective spiritual family."[66]

The ability of Candomblé to build a sense of collectiveness and forms of ethical bonding[67] seems to have inspired the meaning of *collective ebó* as the action of "Candomblé folks, black men and women who build Salvador and Brazil daily, political bodies aware of the historical and sacred resistance of Afro-Brazilian religions."[68] Such an idea expands the contextual uses of the term *ebó*. On the one hand, it shifts the religious/ritualistic meaning of the word toward the political field; on the other hand, it claims the existence of a mystical agency resulting from the civil engagement of the black population.

The social movement that bears Makota Valdina's name emerged right after the educator died in 2019, aged 75. During a public session at the Salvador City Council, councilman Marcos Mendes proposed a minute of silence in tribute to the religious leader's memory. Then, councilwoman Marcelle de Moraes requested that a reverent moment should also honor the memory of an animal that had died in the Salvador Zoo.[69] Candomblé devotees and activists, who were mourning Makota Valdina' death, got outraged by such a moral parallel and organized an immediate response. A demonstration on April 15 brought together dozens of protesters in front of the City Council. Lindinalva de Paula, one of the leaders, summarized the initiative: "the collective ebó is to say that we are aware of racism, of hatred. One cannot compare human and animal life, although both are important. An agent from that institution [the City Council] must be ethical. … It is religious racism."[70]

60 Van de Port, *Ecstatic*, 100.
61 Pinto and Harding, "Afro-Brazilian," 77.
62 Makota is a leading role in the terreiros' hierarchy, performed by women who care for the orixás.
63 Pinto and Harding, "Afro-Brazilian," 83.
64 Pinto, *Candomblé*, 1–2.
65 Morais, "Povos;" Camurça and Rodrigues, "O debate."
66 Pinto and Harding, "Afro-Brazilian," 81.
67 Rabelo, *Enredos*.
68 Frente Nacional Makota Valdina, "Manifesto."
69 See https://bahia.ba/politica/vereadora-aproveita-minuto-de-silencio-por-makota-valdina-para-lamentar-morte-de-rinoceronta/. Accessed on Nov. 9, 2023.
70 Available at: https://www.correio24horas.com.br/noticia/nid/com-ebo-coletivo-atividades-protestam-contra-vereadora-em-frente-a-camara/. Accessed on May 13, 2023.

She then emphasized the idea of *religious racism*, a category employed to characterize the violence historically imposed on followers of Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian religions.[71] Makota Valdina was one of the leading advocates of this political category. In 2013, the educator established the meaning of the term by differentiating it from "religious intolerance," an expression "that does not take into account the degree of violence that affects territories and traditions of African origin. This violence constitutes the most perverse face of racism, as it denials any positive value to African traditions."[72] By characterizing the most perverse face of racism in the realm of religious belonging, Makota Valdina furthered the link between the discourse of the black movement and the Afro-religious movement.[73]

In Salvador, the political articulation of Candomblé terreiros catalyzed in 2000 after the death of Mãe Gilda, the spiritual leader of terreiro Abassá de Ogum, whose image was publicly defamed by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God.[74] Suffering constant attacks from Pentecostal groups, Candomblé communities "[assumed] a unity and capacity for organization and mobilization unprecedented in their history."[75] Mãe Gilda's biological daughter, Mãe Jaciara Ribeiro, explained the purpose of the collective ebó: "[we are here] to sing, ask the Councilwoman for retraction and balance. … Here, ebó is about speech, singing."[76] Such ascending interpretations of "ebó" suggest another way of facing an *imbalance of forces*. In the liturgical context, the ritual summons more-than-human beings to re-establish the circulation of axé in a particular life. When it comes to the political field, the ritual has a collective pleader and is designed to say something. It is an act "of speech, of singing," involving demands for retraction that result from a vigilant attitude concerning religious racism.

By realizing the success of the demonstration,[77] the organizers decided to create a social movement to take Makota Valdina's legacy forward.[78] Such a movement is part of a broader trend in the Afro-Brazilian religious field, which Ana Paula Miranda called *terreiro politics*.[79] In the last two decades, devotees of Candomblé, Umbanda, and other Afro-Brazilian religions have employed new tactics to denounce racism, struggle for their right to religious freedom, and make visible the many forms of persecution by the State and Evangelical/Pentecostal groups. They have then developed different protesting grammars in which "the deities' agency power is invoked when they sing to [orixás] Exu and Xangô in the Parliament, but old-fashioned political articulation is not left aside."[80]

Several studies on *terreiro politics* have arisen in Brazil. Ivanir dos Santos,[81] for example, deals with the Caminhada em Defesa da Liberdade Religiosa (Walk in Defense of Religious Freedom), in Rio de Janeiro, comparing it to Marcha para Jesus (March for Jesus), a huge event annually held by evangelicals, highlighting the different political messages of "marching" and "walking." Rosiane Rodrigues de Almeida[82] draws on an ethnography of the Fórum Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional dos Povos Tradicionais de Matriz Africana (National Forum of Traditional Peoples of African Origin for Food and Nutritional Security). Such

71 Camurça and Rodrigues, "O debate."

72 Morais, "Povos," 67.

73 Morais, "Povos;" Teles dos Santos, *O poder*.

74 See Reinhard, *Espelho*.

75 Reinhard, *Espelho*, 160.

76 Available at: https://tvservidor.com.br/ebo-coletivo-nao-passa-de-ato-politiqueiro-define-marcelle-moraes-mae-de-santo-aponta-que-evento-e-da-paz/. Accessed on May 13, 2023.

77 While the activists were protesting, left-wing Council members defended the legitimacy of that civil manifestation to their peers inside the building. Calling attention from the City Council's political forces, the local press, and the religious communities in the city, the protest emerged as a unifying element of the agenda of fighting religious racism.

78 Souza, "Vozes," 140.

79 Miranda, "A política."

80 Ibid., 28. Before the first collective ebó, the activists presented a request to public authorities, asking for reparation of Makota Valdina's memory. Echoed by the local press and the activists' social media, such efforts to make religious hatred episodes visible have an essential role in political positioning, regardless of the adequate criminal liability of offenders, according to Miranda, "A política."

81 Santos, *Marchar*.

82 Almeida, *A luta*.

organization has sought to identify Candomblé communities not as "religious groups," but as "traditional peoples," making their claims more politically viable. Based on the analysis of the national Afro-religious movement and her fieldwork in Minas Gerais, Mariana Morais[83] analyzes the situational uses of the categories "religion" and "culture" as means of legitimizing Umbanda, Candomblé, and other traditions in the public sphere. Izabella Bosisio[84] probes the occupation of public space in Porto Alegre by Catholics, Evangelicals, and Afro-religious people, and discusses how the Marcha Estadual pela Vida e Liberdade Religiosa (March for Life and Religious Freedom) has found its way of confronting religious racism.

Despite their local specificities, these movements are part of the same scene of politicization of the Afro-religious field, which is not just a Brazilian case. N. Fadeke Castor,[85] for example, coined the term *spiritual citizenship* to explain how diasporic religions have claimed civil rights in Trinidad. They have drawn on Yoruba cosmological practices to defend their contribution to the national imagery and interact with transnational activist networks. Castor's argument dialogues with Giumbelli's reading of the political path historically taken by the Afro-religious field in Brazil: marking off its public presence drawing less on "its adequacy to a generic model of religion (based on Catholicism) and more on an ethnicizing conception of the religious."[86]

In the past few years, political uses of the category "religious racism"[87] have been a crucial feature of this process of ethnicizing the religious and claiming spiritual citizenship. It seems to have been making the violence experienced by Afro-religious people more legible to nonnative audiences. In such a historical and political context, the collective ebó could reach new audiences by affirming its hybrid condition of a religious *and* political ritual, as presented in the next section.

2 "The Ship of Religious Racism"

Operation Mobilization (OM) is a transnational NGO headquartered in Germany, with a protestant profile despite not having a denominational identification. Since the 1970s, it has circulated worldwide ships that work as bookshops, one of the NGO's actions on global evangelization.[88] OM affirms to have already traveled to more than 150 countries. The ships stay docked in each port for some days or weeks to host the local population for book sales and cultural activities. In the NGO's words, this initiative offers "many visitors their first opportunity to buy quality educational literature."[89] After almost 30 years without including Brazil in its routes, the ship visited the ports of Santos, Rio de Janeiro, Vitória, Salvador, and Belém between August and November 2019. Several Brazilian media outlets announced the tour and highlighted the ship's activities as a leisure opportunity for families. In addition to selling books, the vessel counted on theatre shows, a cafeteria, and the appeal of its crew, composed of about 400 young Christian volunteers from 60 countries.

After successful stays in the Brazilian Southeast's ports, the ship's multicultural discourse evanished on arriving in Bahia, in late October 2019. A post on OM's social media asked its followers to pray for "protection, strength and wisdom for the crew during their stay in Salvador, a city known for its people's belief in spirits and demons."[90] The comment soon reached antiracist networks from Salvador and was immediately received as an allusion to the city's status as the center of black cultural traditions in Brazil.

83 Morais, *De religião*.

84 Bosisio, *Quando*.

85 Castor, *Spiritual*.

86 Giumbelli, "Cultura," 21.

87 Regarding the uses and differences between the ideas of "religious intolerance" and "religious racism," see: Camurça and Rodrigues, "O debate."

88 https://om.org.br/navios/. Accessed on May 14, 2023.

89 Ibid.

90 From the original: "Pray for a safe departure and a straightforward two-day sailing to Salvador. Pray for protection, strength and wisdom for crew members during the ship 's stay in Salvador – a city known for people 's belief in spirits and demons. Pray for the events team as they prepare for a new port and that God may be glorified through each of the events coming up." Available at:

The demonization of alternative cosmologies by Christian agents is a recurrent and well-documented phenomenon worldwide.[91] In such processes of religious interaction, the figure of the devil usually has a central role. It is a necessary element for the effectiveness of the evangelistic enterprise since it encodes the other through a grammar that, being strange to them, escapes their epistemic intervention. When analyzing the historical relationships that led German Protestant missionaries to convert natives in the current territory of Ghana, Meyer underlined that "to state that the Ewe religion was a work of Satan made it meaningful in the light of Christianity, and subordinate to it."[92] The image of the devil thus served as a mediation between religions *and* between ways of living that the conversion process aimed to operate, to include the local population in a new political, economic, and cultural diagram. A logic that the ship Logos Hope echoed by claiming the mission of offering "quality literature" to Salvador, a city whose people supposedly believe "in spirits and demons."

The Public Prosecutor's Office[93] in Bahia soon rebuked the NGO, as part of the endeavor of combating racism in the state coordinated by Prosecutor Livia Vaz,[94] a key figure for the legal framing of the case. OM then deleted the insult and published a retraction that attributed the injury to a "personal, unqualified opinion." The new social media post stated that the previous one would have been "published in error and we apologize unreservedly for any offense caused."[95] The text also praised the respect for cultural diversity supposedly showed by the NGO's work and its concerns on "esteeming, serving and showing love to others all over the world, regardless of background, status, gender or belief."[96] The statement was complemented with a photo of members of the ship's crew dressing in clothes that alluded to different cultures.

I learned about the Logos Hope case through some indignant speeches of people linked to social movements from the city at the "Fórum Direito e Liberdade Religiosa,"[97] on October 28, 2019. They invited me to an event to denounce the ship's discriminatory gesture, which would take place a few days later in Salvador's port, where the vessel had already docked. That act happened to be the second edition of the collective ebó, to which the Makota Valdina National Front chose an astute slogan: "You are the ones who bring the demon! Bahia belongs to all saints, voduns, nkisis, orixás!"[98]

The activists' ability to synthesize made the slogan condense quite complex ideas into a few words, denouncing the incommensurable belief systems gathered in that controversy. Remembering that Salvador is surrounded by the so-called Baía de Todos os Santos (All Saints Bay), the slogan asserted a cosmological gap distinguishing Christians and followers of Afro-Brazilian religions. If the international NGO tried to capture the difference by demonizing the African legacy in Salvador, the activists promptly responded that they would not accept any conceptual colonization. They affirmed that, for African cosmologies, there is no equivalent for something like "demons": ideas of "good" and "evil" refer instead to how life, the highest of values, is favored or disfavored. Therefore, "good" and "evil" are not dualistically divided ontologies but principles entailed in all things.[99]

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https://midia4p.cartacapital.com.br/navio-livraria-pede-oracoes-pela-equipe-na-cidade-conhecida-pela-crenca-em-espiritos-e-demonios-e-causa-indignation. Accessed on May 5, 2023.

91 Meyer, *Translating*; Boaz, "Introducing."

92 Meyer, *Translating*, 84.

93 I use this expression as a tentative translation of "Ministério Público," an instance of the Judiciary in Brazil. Ministério Público is a State body representing society's interests, which investigates facts and assigns responsibilities according to the rule of law.

94 From 2016 to 2021, Vaz headed the Special Action Group for the Protection of Human Rights and Combating Discrimination, a body of the Public Prosecutor's Office in Bahia.

95 Available at: https://www.facebook.com/omships/posts/pfbid0nUcsFJ42w5C6h725h2wadSYH55uLJor9QoeGN4MeoHWpQj95GdjB9jBJiS8oGdPdl?_rdc=1&_rdr. Accessed on May 24, 2023.

96 Same as the previous note.

97 An event held in Salvador by the Commission to Combat Religious Intolerance, a body of the Order of Attorneys of Brazil in Bahia. Organized by the Commission's President, attorney Maíra Vida, the Forum hosted several panels discussing the right to religious freedom. At the event, I shared with Prosecutor Livia Vaz a panel on Brazilian secularism.

98 Available at: https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2019/11/navio-cristao-que-se-apresenta-como-livraria-chega-a-belem-apos-polemica-em-salvador.shtml. Accessed on November 9, 2023.

99 Meyer, *Translating*, 86.

On the eve of the protest, the Makota Valdina National Front released a manifesto explaining the movement's standpoint:

> by associating the sacred symbols of African peoples with evil, the vessel's social media post denies the role and existence of a history of black people, the same racist ideology that justified the slave ships. We reiterate that the notion of demons and evil forces does not exist within Afro-Brazilian religions. Evils and demons never belonged to us. We are communities organized in the refined articulation between the sacred existing in ourselves and nature, and we continue to resist and recreate our cosmology that survived oceans and violences in the diaspora.[100]

The manifesto thus relied on the defense of a cultivated legacy still misunderstood by the colonialist logic. For the group, that case was not dissociated from other tragedies that the Brazilian population witnessed in 2019. The socio-environmental disasters during the first year of the Bolsonaro administration would be the result of a political "platform that preaches religious fundamentalism, the destruction of nature and the persecution of historically abused groups."[101] Thus

> the criminal fires in the Amazon rainforest and the unexplained oil spilled on the beaches of northeastern Brazil are serious violations not only of the environment and Brazilian society, as well as of the sacred that we worship in Afro-Brazilian religions. The ship Logos Hope comes together with the oil that damns the beaches and people of the Northeast and offends Iemanjá, herself the sea, indispensable for the environmental balance and the sustenance of thousands of families along the country.[102]

The manifesto thus linked the environmental crisis to racism and targeted the federal government as an antagonist. Even without directly mentioning the religious identity of former President Bolsonaro's allied groups, the text indicated a general idea of "fundamentalism" as its major opponent. The populist discourse based on Christian morality was a strategy handled by the Jair Bolsonaro administration (2019–2022) and intensified the violence against terreiro communities in the past few years.[103] Therefore, the broader political radicalization in the country also shaped the urgency of the protest in Salvador. As the manifesto showed, even without having apparent links to Bolsonaro's political group, the Logos Hope ship was immediately connected to the misfortunes brought by his administration. The analogy was not artificial: Bolsonaro's racial politics did threaten the public recognition of Candomblé as part of the national identity, as shown by controversies in Palmares Cultural Foundation during his mandate.[104] The activists thus associated the offense from Logos Hope with a particularly tough situation for the black population in Brazil.

The manifesto also urged specific local groups to attend the demonstration: "[...] the racist social media post and the silence on the part of (Bahian) artists make us problematize the use of sacred symbols and signs in songs, during Carnival or on February 2,[105] when it is pretty 'cool' to take a sympathizer stand regarding Afro-Brazilian religions. If the whole city belongs to Oxum,[106] we count on all men and women to fight against religious racism."[107] The group thus put under criticism a clear dimension of "Public Candomblé": the presence of sacred elements in the broad cultural repertoire, though the everyday violence suffered by the devotees remained untouched. The group demanded "from public authorities in charge the necessary measures to punish the Logos Hope ship's crime" and announced: "On Monday, November 4, the day of Exu ... we will praise orixás, minkisis, and voduns to ward off all evils brought by the ship of religious racism."[108] The

100 Frente Nacional Makota Valdina, "Manifesto."
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
103 Miranda et al., "Terreiros."
104 Paula and Ayala, "Contrapublicidade."
105 The day to celebrate orixá Iemanjá.
106 This is a reference to a very popular song in Salvador, entitled "É d'Oxum," composed by Geronimo, which states that the whole city belongs to orixá Oxum.
107 Frente Nacional Makota Valdina, "Manifesto."
108 Ibid.

manifesto ended with the promise of "delivering" the II Collective Ebó at Salvador's port, as if it was a dispatch, insisting on the ritual meaning of the word.

Among the materials promoting the event, such as banners and digital cards, the art drew attention to the choice of symbols: the showy image of a rooster illustrated the title "Collective Ebó." In my perspective, that seemed another skillful way of reifying the religious meaning of the demonstration by suggesting animal sacrifice. Fowls are frequently associated with the imagination around Candomblé ritual offerings, as seen in the cited works of Jorge Amado and Roger Bastide. However, that ritual would happen in daylight in the city's port, an area of intense circulation of people. The art thus shuffled signifieds surrounding the sign "ebó," addressing people inside and outside Candomblé communities.

Despite those potential semiotic suggestions, the second collective ebó occurred on rainy November 4, 2019, without animal sacrifice. People from different terreiros in the city used the microphone to protest, but also drumming and liturgical dances to express their feelings. The bookstore ship, which had registered long queues of visitors in the previous days, remained closed to the public on that day. Some crew members, apparently astonished, observed from the ship's windows what was happening at the port's area. For those who attended the act, the collective ebó's frame was thus composed of two capital elements. The background comprised the ship's grandeur, docked as a symbol of transnational business enterprises labeled as evangelistic ministries. In the foreground, a group mostly composed of black women and men dressed in white religious vestments, singing, dancing, and claiming they were unaware of demons. The narrative of antagonism was furthered by the vessel's name – Logos Hope –, which suggested, in that political landscape, the vain assumptions of colonial reason.

The speeches targeted different aspects of the experience of religious racism and built the political dimension of the event. One of the priests invited to the microphone declared: "like Xangô, I will be brief and blunt: if we had a (State) governor who respected himself, this ship would not be docked here."[109] Another protester stated that "the demon that we see is the same that plagues everyone in this society: it is colonialism."[110] A priestess insisted: "we have to own what is ours. We don't have the mere function of decorating the State of Bahia, upon arrival at the airport. We are not exotic people, we are religious people and we want to be respected."[111] Activists leading the protest also pointed out the importance of socializing the privilege of speech among all the attendees: "even if it is just to get here and ask your orixá for a blessing, let's circulate [the microphone] among us. We were not raised with this perspective of using a mechanism as powerful as a microphone. Let's overcome such constraints."[112]

On the other hand, ritualistic performances played the role of underlining the religious nature of the act and calling the attention of passers-by and media reporters. There were two main strategies employed in this sense. First, the *xirês*, a ritual dance popular in indigenous and Afro-Brazilian communities, when the atabaques' beats salute the present ones, organized in a circle according to their positions in the religious hierarchy, praising the spiritual forces. In the middle of the Avenida da França, one of the main thoroughfares of Salvador's center, the ialorixás sang chants and, holding hands, evoked supernatural entities.

Another protest performance also interrupted car traffic in the region: the *padê* ceremony, a liturgical practice to please Exu, the orixá mediating the earthly and divine intentions gathered in the ceremony. In padê, beverage and food are offered so that Exu fulfills his part in communicating the realms of àyié and òrun. With live liturgical music resonating, the priestesses poured water and blew pemba[113] powder on the asphalt

109 Available at: https://m.facebook.com/story.php? story_fbid = 651249952068028&id = 401114527349403&sfnsn = mo&d = n&vh = e. Accessed on May 8, 2023.

110 Available at: https://m.facebook.com/story.php? story_fbid = 651249952068028&id = 401114527349403&sfnsn = mo&d = n&vh = e. Accessed on May 8, 2023.

111 Available at: https://m.facebook.com/story.php? story_fbid = 651249952068028&id = 401114527349403&sfnsn = mo&d = n&vh = e. Accessed on May 8, 2023.

112 Available at: https://m.facebook.com/story.php? story_fbid = 651249952068028&id = 401114527349403&sfnsn = mo&d = n&vh = e. Accessed on May 8, 2023.

113 This is a material similar to chalk, used in many Candomblé rituals to sacralize objects and spaces.

Image 1: The avenue's asphalt, marked off to Exu.[114]

of the avenue, while impatient drivers honked their horns for the lane to be cleared. Such elements on the already rain-soaked ground played a specific function in public: prolonging the ritualistic moments beyond their duration by leaving yellowish marks on the floor as a vestige of the material sacralization of that space (Image 1). In a plea for peace, white pigeons were released during the act, which gathered an oscillating audience of about 50–60 people, including Candomblé's leaders and followers, as well as supporters, reporters, photographers, and onlookers.

The media coverage resonated the activists' discourse about the event. TV Globo's Bahia Meio Dia, the main local daytime news program, broadcasted live flashes of the protest and praised "the peaceful manifestation of these religious people, demonstrating that our belief [in Salvador] is in everything good: love, peace, hospitality, and above all religious tolerance."[115] On the following day, the collective ebó was a cover story for the three major newspapers in the city: "A Tarde," "Correio," and "Tribuna da Bahia." The reports showed a well-known shift of the local press attitude toward Candomblé: from a long history of persecution[116] to a more recent stand committed to instructing the readers with respectful views of the religion.[117] The way journalists dealt with the collective ebó was thus faithful to the political *and* religious meaning claimed by the activists, as they recurred to Candomblé's devotees and/or researchers to describe the act's references. The report published by "Correio" is a clear example:

> Every Monday is Exu's day. He is everywhere, searching what is offered to him, as Candomblé priests defend. Not by chance, the offering dedicated to the orixá yesterday consisted of living bodies. The Makota Valdina National Front's black bodies shaped the collective ebó. And they offered themselves symbolically to Exu, in Salvador's Port. There was no [animal] killing or dispatch, but disapproval of the demonization of the Lord of the Body [Exu].[118]

One of the activists interviewed by the media pointed out that "religion is like a garment. The garment that fits you well and [makes] you feel good. So, if you belong to any other religion and the clothing suits you well, it's not up to me to judge you. Belief is individual and we have to respect it. I will always respect it."[119] His speech suggested that Afro-Brazilian religions have a unique feature among other ethical alternatives: they accept

114 Picture captured by the author. Avenida da França, Salvador, Brazil, November 4, 2019.
115 Available at: https://globoplay.globo.com/v/8058768/. Accessed on May 8, 2023.
116 Santos, *O poder*.
117 Van de Port, "Candomblé."
118 "Corpos em oferenda pela paz," press report by Tailane Muniz for Correio. Edition: November 5, 2019, p. 3.
119 "Ebó coletivo em frente ao navio livraria protesta contra intolerância," press report by Poliana Antunes for Jornal Tribuna da Bahia. Edition: November 5, 2019, cover page of section "Cidades."

differences in the way the world is understood and experienced. Such feature is a crucial dimension of what Hartikainen calls the *politics of respect*, i.e., the idea that "in contrast to other religions, [Candomblé's practicioners] not only respect but also welcome all, irrespective of religious commitment, economic means, sexual orientation, or physical ability."[120] Such respectful acceptance of difference is intertwined with the theology Afro-Brazilian religions follow, since the worshiped deities are as diverse as the people they are willing to embrace. Furthermore, this trait would qualify the politics carried out by the terreiro communities as a democratic mission, for its role in instructing other publics in the various struggles for reparation and rights.

However, not only the Afro-Brazilian field claimed a religiosity able to match democratic precepts during the controversy. One suggestive stand in the construction of the public problem came from the Bahian Ecumenical Council of Christian Churches, joined by the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church and several churches of the Protestant spectrum, including Baptist, Presbyterian, Anglican, and Lutheran denominations. A public note declared the Council was indignant "with yet another act of religious racism towards our Bahian sisters and brothers of Afro-Brazilian religions."[121] Making a distinction between the Council and the ship, the note stated that "even though we have no connections with the organization mentioned above, we humbly apologize to all Bahians, to all men and women following African-inspired religions for this aggression. … Our ancestors brought the weird accusation that these were 'Devil religions."[122] Referring to the legacy of the colonial process – the historical birth of Christianity in Brazil – the Ecumenical Council ended the note by saying that "once again the 'demons' arrive in these lands by ship. Five hundred years ago, the 'demons' came from Portugal 'to rob, kill and destroy' the people of this land. Once again, the structures of sectarianism and hatred – which certainly do not come from God or heaven – are approaching our port."[123]

On the same day of the collective ebó, the Public Prosecutor's Office in Bahia and Logos Hope organizers signed a "Termo de Ajustamento de Conduta" (Behavior Adjustment Term), a form of agreement to repair the violation of a collective right without the execution of a judicial process. The document highlighted the "social repercussions and indignation generated by the [ship's] message, especially among social movements associated with the terreiros peoples, denoting the occurrence of moral damage of a collective nature."[124] Logos Hope organizers committed to carrying out two actions, both subject to prior approval by the Public Prosecutor's Office in Bahia. First, they should circulate "an apology in the press media, in two newspapers with large circulation in the city."[125] The published note argued that the vessel's statements on social media "were not based on a comprehensive awareness regarding Salvador's people. … We apologize unreservedly for any appearance of ignorance or religious intolerance that the comment has created."[126] The text thus mentioned "religious intolerance," not citing the racist meaning of the social media post.

The adjustment term also required the organization to create and disseminate a 3-minute video whose script "should focus on the phenomenon of religious racism against religions of African origin and the importance of respect and inter-religious dialogue."[127] The video should capture "testimonials from priests/priestesses from different religions based in Salvador, preferably dressed according to their religious beliefs and in their worship spaces."[128] In addition to being exhibited on the ship's social media and institutional channels, the video should also be reduced to a 30-second format, "for dissemination in two of the main local

120 Hartikainen, "A Politics," 92.

121 Conselho Ecumênico Baiano de Igrejas Cristãs, "Nota."

122 Ibid.

123 Ibid.

124 Available under consultation on the website: https://sicop.sistemas.mpba.mp.br/Modulos/Consulta/ConsultaPublicaProcessos.aspx. Accessed on May 15, 2023.

125 Available under consultation on the website: https://sicop.sistemas.mpba.mp.br/Modulos/Consulta/ConsultaPublicaProcessos.aspx. Accessed on May 15, 2023.

126 Advertisement published in the newspapers "Tribuna da Bahia" (page 10 of the section "Cidade") and "Correio" (page 11 of the section "24 h"), both on November 6, 2019.

127 Available under consultation on the website: https://sicop.sistemas.mpba.mp.br/Modulos/Consulta/ConsultaPublicaProcessos.aspx. Accessed on May 15, 2023.

128 Available under consultation on the website: https://sicop.sistemas.mpba.mp.br/Modulos/Consulta/ConsultaPublicaProcessos.aspx. Accessed on May 15, 2023.

TV outlets, at times of great audience, and for one week."[129] At the end of November 2019, when the ship had already left the country, the TV ad circulated, bringing testimonials from priests and priestesses linked to the inter-religious movement in the city. With a didactic focus and without mentioning the ship's controversy, the video script pointed out the many vices of "a history that perpetuated religious racism. This reality urges the Judiciary and society to be attentive to fostering inter-religious respect and guaranteeing equal freedom of belief for all people."[130]

The controversy involving the Christian ship is illustrative of the diverse uses of "religious racism" as a category by activists, the press, the inter-religious movement, and the Judiciary. Even though that feeling of injustice primarily reached Candomblé's devotees and communities, it also touched several other publics in Salvador at that moment. The collective ebó was thus a very singular way to embody that feeling, bringing the "religious" (its ritual forms, music, objects, etc.) to the "public." In this sense, we should not overlook that the act occurred at the beginning of "Black November," a key season for antiracist activism in Salvador. The experience of belonging to a civil environment increasingly aware of such discriminatory gestures was well described by a priest during the protest: "What they [those responsible for the ship] don't know is that they messed in an anthill."[131] In the final section, I discuss some of the conditions for the effectiveness of the protest within this controversy, getting back to the discussion on the relationship between Candomblé and the public environment in Salvador.

3 "We Have to Own What is Ours" – Final Considerations

Luana Souza's research[132] shows that the Makota Valdina National Front has continued to hold collective ebós, even during the pandemic, in an online format. In July 2021, the group resumed on-site protests to oppose the Bahian government's proposal of privatizing São Bartolomeu Park, a reference site for Afro-religious people in the city. In February 2022, a demonstration at the City Council made a stand against a bill seeking to change the name of Lagoa Dunas do Abaeté (Abaeté Dunes Lagoon), another important place for devotees, to "Monte Santo Deus Proverá" (God will Provide Mount). As part of *terreiro politics*, the movement has developed its manner to transform religious offense into motivation for civil action. Interestingly, although its political tune, the cosmological rooting of the collective ebó allows it to claim the nature of a religious ritual, according to that triple dimension proposed by Victor Turner:[133] (1) an act of a prescriptive nature that (2) suspends the routine and (3) mediates with mystical beings or powers.

The rise of collective ebó as civil protest technology suggests the role the category "religious racism" has been playing in the political and legal confronting of attacks frequently suffered by Afro-Brazilian religions. This denunciation vocabulary reorganizes social struggle fields, giving legibility to such forms of injury and triggering more effective actions by State institutions compared to appeals against "religious intolerance."[134] *Hermeneutic resources* are thus a crucial part of social movements' endeavor of inscribing a lived experience into a particular moral frame. According to Cardoso de Oliveira,[135] even physical violence depends on a symbolic order to be interpreted as aggression against a person. In this sense, every offense depends on a repertoire of references to make that damage intelligible for the subjects of the experience and the different publics its reparation demands. The historical development of human rights' grammar has triggered a

129 Available under consultation on the website: https://sicop.sistemas.mpba.mp.br/Modulos/Consulta/ConsultaPublicaProcessos.aspx. Accessed on May 15, 2023.

130 Available at: https://web.facebook.com/LogosHopeSalvador/videos/722322344943614. Accessed on May 15, 2023.

131 Available at: https://m.facebook.com/story.php? story_fbid = 651249952068028&id = 401114527349403&sfnsn = mo&d = n&vh = e. Accessed on May 23, 2023.

132 Souza, "Vozes."

133 Turner, "Symbols."

134 Morais, "Intolerância."

135 Cardoso de Oliveira, "Existe violência."

refinement of such discursive forms to enunciate social suffering. This enterprise has counted on the participation of concerned actors, activists, social movements, research centers, lawyers, the media, etc. More broadly available, such denunciation keys challenge current conceptions of justice, as illustrated by political and epistemic struggles denaturalizing iniquities caused by gender, race, or sexuality.[136]

The social circulation of the category "religious racism" is a historical effect of the law that regulates prejudice based on color or race (Law 7.716/1989), revised in 1997 to comprehend religiously motivated discrimination. This legal framing results from the organization of black movements and responds to a gap in executing the Brazilian Criminal Code (1940). The penalization of crimes against "religious sentiment" (article 208) has historically collided with the interpretations given by law enforcement agents, who tend to reduce the intolerance episodes to mere forms of opinion disagreement.[137] In this context, the injuries suffered by devotees of Afro-Brazilian traditions have become better understood as collective moral damage when re-elaborated as racist attitudes.[138] Such a phenomenon has also made it possible to defend the civil rights of minority religious groups in other political landscapes, as shown by the case of Muslim immigrants in European countries.[139]

Nonetheless, an injury's discursive and legal translation may be not enough to persuade the different publics which a social transformation depends on. Other conditions also seem necessary for gathering a more generic community around a cause and enabling essential commitments to effective political action. Indeed, the collective ebó not only reflects the hermeneutic assimilation of the category "religious racism" in Salvador's political context but also exemplifies a second dimension of social movement procedures: the use of *performative resources* that speak to the emotion, the sensorium and the attention of an audience, presupposed as part of the desired social change. Collective ebó seems to be a successful civil protest technology as it affects politically influential groups in the city (the press, the Public Prosecutor's Office, the interreligious movement, etc.) by employing new forms of public performance, as seen in other social mobilizations triggered by the *terreiro politics*[140] and *spiritual citizenship*.[141]

The art of civil protest encompasses a *dramaturgical composition*[142] once it transcends the episodic offenders and facts by positioning them as parts of a broader moral plot, whose display is necessary for the damage to be atoned. In other words, to engage dispersed and socially relevant groups in transforming private suffering into a public problem, an injustice should be *felt* as so, a feat that laws cannot accomplish alone. Social movements' claims succeed when they master both the State institutions' vocabulary *and* the ideal forms of staging a *dramatic action.*[143] This is what enables their different audiences to imagine or even feel, in the first person, a specific experience of suffering. Disseminated by different media, protest performances embody a problem whose answer requires a shift of the moral community's consciousness. Involving social actors who are not directly affected by the injury thus requires not only rationally organized demands, but also a perception engraved in affective and emotional layers of experience, in the political scene that assesses damage.[144]

Some studies on the relationship between the public and the private in Afro-Brazilian religions suggest the ambivalence of historical efforts to make their cosmologies understandable outside the terreiros.[145] First, such analyses acknowledge that the dialogue of those religious traditions with the State corresponds to their inclusion – even if late and controlled – into public recognition frames, as exemplified by the political

136 Sliwinski, "Inventing."

137 Silva Jr., "Notas."

138 Hartikainen, "Racismo;" Almeida, *A luta*.

139 See: Modood, "The Liberal." Saba Mahmood deals with the secular premises informing such a political process and framing the religious belief or sentiment as speculative. See Mahmood, "Secular."

140 Miranda and Almeida, "A galinha."

141 Castor, *Spiritual*.

142 Alexander, "A Tomada."

143 Eyerman, "Performing."

144 Butler, *Notes*.

145 For example: Johnson, *Secrets*; Selka, "Candomblé público."

initiatives to incorporate Candomblé terreiros to the national cultural heritage. On the other hand, such literature also points out that this attempt entails a dangerous consequence: the gradual adjustment of terreiro communities to the conception of "religion" legible through the State's lens. In this regard, claiming the status of religion "often means talking about Candomblé according to a Protestant Christian model that shifts the focus from ritual practices, historically more important for Candomblé communities than elaborate beliefs."[146]

Nonetheless, by creatively bringing Candomblé's ritual elements to the public, the collective ebó seems to go in another direction: it outlines what should be "an inter-religious conviviality in an enchanted public space."[147] This civil protest technology may illustrate an *alternative democracy*,[148] i.e., the possibility of reimagining the public sphere and remodeling citizenship through religiously oriented values. Such idea was suggested by the Makota Valdina Front's Manifesto,[149] which placed Candomblé's devotees as guardians of the sacred nature against the fundamentalist groups supporting the Bolsonaro administration. Such an argument implies a conflict articulated not in terms of transcendent truth. Instead, the highlighted point is the greater or lesser ability of the different religious platforms to engender civic virtues, by translating their theological assumptions into secular political experience.

As this article sought to indicate, the semiotics behind the uses of the word "ebó" may be part of a specific history of restoring the *political* inherent to the *religious*.[150] When Candomblé's practitioners claim the right "to own what is theirs" in the public sphere, they seem to depict ebó as *a sacred resource to manage forces in the search for balance*. Following Makota Valdina's teachings, such mobilization of religious symbols thus suggests a shift. In the twentieth-century "Public Candomblé" repertoire, ebó ritual was not rarely portrayed as a self-interested spiritual good for wide consumption, as seen in "Dona Flor and her Two Husbands'" narrative. In the semantic dispute analyzed in this text, ebó reappears as a sign that racializes the ritual and reappropriates its cosmopolitical heritage for the terreiro communities.

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146 Selka, "Candomblé público," 80.

147 Carvalho, "Um espaço," 15.

148 See Hartikainen, "A Politics."

149 Frente Nacional Makota Valdina, "Manifesto."

150 See Paula, "Sagrados."

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