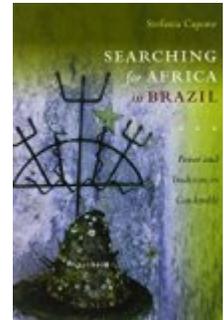




**Stefania Capone.** *Searching for Africa in Brazil: Power and Tradition in Candomblé.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. xiv + 316 pp. \$23.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-4636-4.



**Reviewed by** Heather Shirey

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Following the lead of pioneering scholar Raymundo Nina Rodrigues in the early twentieth century, many of the significant scholarly publications on Candomblé have focused on a small number of *terreiros* (places of worship) located in Salvador da Bahia, associated with the Nagô tradition. Scholars whose work has formed the core of traditional Candomblé scholarship (for example, Nina Rodrigues, Roger Bastide, Ruth Landes, Arturo Ramos, and Juana Elbein dos Santos, and, in the art historical context, Mikelle Smith Omari-Tunkara) have largely privileged three specific *terreiros* in Salvador: Engenho Velho, known as Casa Branca; Ilê Axé Opó Afonjá; and Gantois. This body of canonical scholarship tended toward the presentation of a codified, systematized version of Candomblé, one based on ritual practice rooted in West African, and specifically Yoruba, systems of thought, thereby unifying Candomblé as a singular religion in spite of its lack of a central authority. Stefania Capone's work, in contrast to this dominant thread in the scholarship, views Candomblé as a religion defined by its hetero-

geneity, fluidity, and multiplicity of practice. Capone's *Searching for Africa in Brazil* deconstructs notions of "purity" and "tradition" that are central to a large body of research on Candomblé. Her broad questions about the invention and reinvention of tradition have relevance beyond the study of Candomblé, and may also be applied to other religious traditions in the African diaspora.

Capone's work, drawing on fieldwork experience in Salvador and Rio de Janeiro spanning more than a decade, examines the constructed concepts of orthodoxy and tradition, scrutinizing the roles that various actors, particularly Candomblé's intellectual and religious elite, have played in this process. More specifically, Capone addresses the shifting discourse on Exu as a way of revealing the ways in which notions of the "pure" and the "degenerate" have been constructed in Candomblé. Her extensive exploration of Exu takes her beyond the Candomblé of Bahia and Rio de Janeiro, delving into such traditions as Batuque in Rio Grande do Sul, Tambor de Mina in

Maranhão, and Xangô in Pernambuco and Sergipe. Capone's significant investigation of Exu in Umbanda is particularly rich, contributing to her analysis of the evolution of discourse and practice over time.

Capone acknowledges her significant debt to Beatriz Góis Dantas's influential 1988 publication, *Vovó Nagô e Papai Branco: Usos e abusos da Africa no Brasil* (translated as *Nagô Grandma and White Papa: Candomblé and the Creation of Afro-Brazilian Identity* [2009]), which challenged the concept of "Nagô purity." Dantas argued that intellectuals had played a conscious role in constructing ideas of "purity" in Candomblé. Building on the groundwork that Dantas laid, Capone focuses on the role that Candomblé leaders themselves played and continue to play in this process. Capone argues that an elite leadership within the religion shaped the way that Candomblé has been presented to intellectuals who came from outside the tradition.

From the art historical perspective, it is disappointing that the author does not focus significant attention on Candomblé's complex visual universe, which would have strengthened her argument about Candomblé's essential multiplicity and fluidity. Although Capone does include some illustrations, they are largely secondary to her argument. Her discussion of representations of Exu remains very general, whereas a more systematic analysis of the wide range of materials and forms used to represent Exu's various manifestations would, in fact, be enlightening. Although the lack of engagement with Candomblé's material culture makes the book of limited significance to the general reader in the field of art history, it does indeed open many doors for art historical research.

*Searching for Africa in Brazil* was first published in French in 1999, followed by a translation into Brazilian Portuguese in 2004. This excellent 2010 translation makes Capone's enlightening research readily available to an English-speaking audience. This book is a crucial contribution to

the study of Candomblé from an anthropological and historical perspective. Her overview of the history of Candomblé scholarship is sophisticated, yet accessible to a reader with little previous knowledge of the topic. Some parallel questions about Candomblé have been addressed by such scholars such J. Lorand Matory (*Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* [2005]) and Paul Christopher Johnson (*Secrets, Gossip, and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé* [2005]), and reading these works together would allow for an interesting dialogue to emerge.

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