

The Development of Yoruba Candomble Communities in Salvador, Bahia, 1835-1986.

Miguel C. Alonso. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 200 pp.

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In this book, Miguel C. Alonso provides a detailed and engaging English language overview of the development of Yoruba religious communities in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. The book's contribution lies in Alonso's analysis of the gender dynamics in the Yoruba compounds, and the particular modifications made by Yoruba leaders in Bahia to define the Candomblé religion in specific and lasting ways. By incorporating the extensive secondary literature on the history of the Yoruba, the Oyo Empire, and African religions, he provides the backstory to the arrival of Yoruba captives in Bahia, who at that time did not identify as a cohesive ethnic group. He then explores the nineteenth-century history of slavery and formation of African "nations" (*nações*) in Bahia, with a focus on the emergence of particular Afro-Brazilian ethnic groups that developed within the Catholic brotherhoods, informed by trans-Atlantic connections. Drawing upon previous arguments by J. L. Matory, Rachel Harding and Kim Butler, Alonso shows how the Yoruba became the primary example of African culture in Bahia, founding a religious system in the mid-nineteenth century upon which all future Candomblé houses would build.

Alonso's most interesting arguments emerge in the middle chapters of the book. In Chapter Three, "The Institutionalization of Yoruba Female Power," he argues that women's roles in Yoruba society, as financially independent market women and holders of tradition through the *oriki* songs and the *gedede* ritual performances, facilitated the rise of priestesses as the spiritual leaders and public personalities of Candomblé, despite the constraints of a "heavily Europeanized" and male-dominant society. The fifth chapter counters the focus on exclusively female-led temples to also consider the participation of male priests in Candomblé, claiming that despite the substantial presence of male-led leaders, the legitimacy of the religious practice was based on the ability of male leaders and other temples to trace

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their spiritual lineage back to the first-established, female-led Yoruba Candomblé temple, Engenho Velho, or one of its founders. He also highlights the important role of *ogans* as the male protectors of the temples, created by the “Big Women” as a self-defense strategy to negotiate with the public sphere. This role was crucial given the state repression the religion faced in the twentieth century, and allowed for the “Big Three” Yoruba temples to thrive.

Alonso utilizes a method of “historical osmosis” through his personal contact with Candomblé houses, particularly Pai Agenor and the Pilão de Prata Temple, though he does not incorporate ethnography or oral history. In the introduction, he notes the lack of primary source research integrated into the final product. Indeed, the book draws heavily upon previous research and literature on the subject from both Brazilian and international scholars. Alonso does not include new research by Lisa Castillo and Luis Nicolau Parés that uses oral histories alongside Bahian and West African primary sources to track the lives of the Africans who founded Engenho Velho, likely because he wrote and researched before its publication. Castillo and Parés highlight the important role of men alongside the female leaders and the sustained familial and spiritual networks between Bahia and Africa into the early twentieth century.

Among the most intriguing source material deployed by Alonso are the Herskovits Papers, which include the permits of Candomblé temples alongside other sources like newspaper articles, police records and interviews from Herskovits’ research in 1940s Salvador. The materials cited by Alonso often provide cases of male-led or non-Yoruba houses, offering a window into a broader and less-studied field of Afro-Brazilian religion in twentieth-century Brazil. However, Alonso does not pursue the details of those figures and temples; rather, they remain peripheral to and in service of the story of “The Big Three.”

The field of Candomblé Studies began with studies of the “Big Three” Yoruba temples in Salvador, but by now scholars would do well to investigate cases of other temples, perhaps male-led houses or other “nations,” such as the Jeje, Angolan and Caboclo traditions, with as much detail and rigor (something that Nicolau Parés’ book, *The Formation of Candomblé*, initiated). Doing so may break the cycle, pointed out by previous generations of scholars—and first by Beatriz Góis Dantas—through which academics reinforce the importance of the Yoruba in Bahia and uplift it as the primary example of Candomblé in Brazil. Throughout the book, Alonso cites classic studies of Candomblé, from Nina Rodrigues to Roger Bastide and Pierre Verger, without critically engaging with the

production of the material and the possible source biases, reinforcing a recursive feedback loop between academia and “The Big Three.”

The book addresses many of the most contested themes in the field of study, including syncretism and tradition, authenticity and purity in Candomblé, as well as the longstanding debate on continuity and change in the African religious diaspora. The book successfully engages the case of the “Yoruba” as a specific ethnic group in Bahia to tell a particular story of Yoruba families and the development of a uniquely Brazilian *orixá* religion. Alonso meticulously synthesizes the large and ever-expanding literature on Candomblé and provides an engaging, concise and readable narrative with helpful footnotes for students to learn more on the subject. This work may especially enrich an undergraduate course on the African Diaspora, Afro-American Religions, Latin American Culture, or Black Atlantic Studies.

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