

Ewé òòò, á sà—Elogiar as folhas— Praise the leaves

Scott Alves Barton

The seasonal shift in springtime brings a sense of rebirth along with the buds, solstice, and the accustomed Easter/Passover rituals. In early springtime 2013 on an island in Bahia, Brazil I was invited to a weekend of rites in homage to the *Candomblé* deity *Ossain*, the naturopathic medicinal *orixá*; the god of the leaves. *Candomblé* a monotheistic religion honoring a diverse community of divinities is dominated by ideologies of the Yoruba ethnic group, the last and largest group of enslaved Africans imported to Brazil.

The resultant short film *Food for the Gods* addresses two key points for me. Initially I was drawn into the unique supramundane nature of life in a rural *Candomblé terreiro*, temple, a defacto cloister of African-Brazilian spirituality. The temple sits back in the woods approximately one half of a mile down a rutted dirt road overgrown by vegetation. While there is minimal electricity the majority of the ordinary tasks of daily life are executed by hand heightening the importance of the work to provide food and offerings to the *orixá*, which may also feed the supplicants. There is a purposeful order to tasks such as wood gathering and chopping to cook sacred or quotidian meals, grinding foodstuffs in a mortar or a hand cranked meat grinder or preparing the slaughter for ritual practice that follow the rhythm of the day's light and the ceremonial needs.

This story prioritizes the apparently mundane quotidian practices of cookery in daily religious life. Beyond its role to sustain and nourish, food is also cause

Scott Alves Barton is a doctoral candidate in NYU Food Studies program. His doctoral work is focused on the intersection of secular and sacred cuisine as a marker of ethnic and cultural identity in Northeastern Brazil, using documentary film and written text. Grant funding from the Council on Culture and Media, CLACS, Steinhardt's Dean's Grant and the Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship, NY Culinary Historians, Julia Child Foundation, André and Simone Soltner Foundation, the American Philosophical Society and the Ruth Landes Foundation have financed Scott's research. Scott has worked for more than twenty-five years as an Executive Chef, Restaurant and Product Development Consultant, and, Culinary School Teacher, and was recently featured on the PBS program, *A Chef's Life*. Scott currently is an adjunct professor at NYU and a culinary instructor at the Institute for Culinary Education, (ICE).

for celebration or a tool in ritual practice. The multiple vectors within the matrix of food provide distinct narratives related to the importance and role of food and foodways in different cultural/spatial spheres.

My larger project looks at the intersection of sacred and profane foodways in African-Brazilian communities that are engaged in *Candomblé* practice. Where the confluence of race, gender, politics, and religion all fall within the lens of production and consumption of food. These themes are utilized as an interlocutor in engaging with racial, gendered, and religious discourses. One of the two points that I would like to develop here relates to the evolution of a mediated image created in a *Candomblé terreiro*, in a kitchen, through allusion to consumption, or spiritual practice has the ability to transform the original mediated image to a second generation through the process of remediation. The first-generation mediated images were created from practices strongly rooted in the “pre-discursive” experiential body, in this case via food and cooking leading to the embodiment of the *Candomblé* deities.

I am interested in the transformations that occur when these media migrate to media practices that are more discursive (texts, images)—thus producing ‘*Candomblé*’s absent presence in media circuits’. The images seen on the internet or in home movies and photographs offer a glimpse into the ephemerality ever present in the expressive culture associated with the religion rife with pageantry, dance, round singing, drumming and trance. Many images obsess on trance and the negative implications associated with it as opposed to the plasticity of the deities in flux. Other images create a mythic stature to the deities and religious practice that potentially obfuscate rather than clarify the religious practice. Transformation connotes metamorphosis (Connerton 1989, 48–50; Fraser 1990; Stam 1989, 41).

Within the cosmology of *Candomblé* oral narratives are placed in motion as visual media informing the performance of ritual culture as visual/aural texts. Borrowing from the aural traditions of song and sounds, there are three primary components of a sound or song: the attack, sustain and decay. The initiation of sound is the *attack*, breaking a silence with its own intrinsic precision. At the peak of that sound expression the sound/song will *sustain* contingent upon the energy emanating from the source of the sound. At the moment of sustain, the sound can be manipulated or modified to evolve the sound or create a new sonic expression. The reduction of the sonic vibration relative to its diminished amplitude will cause the sound to *decay*. Within the decay secondary and tertiary sounds may occur via echo or loss of audibility.

The mediated visual text can have the same arc of evolution, mutation and in-betweenness becoming something distinct from its initial attack—performed presentation. Briefly considering the arc of hip-hop sampling as a point of reference, early songs left enough of the sustain intact to link the new composition to historical roots within the lexicon of African-American popular music.

'Thou shalt not steal has been an admonition since the dawn of civilization', Judge Duffy informed Biz Markie in the 1991 lawsuit following Markie's *I Need A Haircut* sample of Gilbert O'Sullivan's *Alone Again Naturally*. That moment transformed a short history of extended sustains into an embrace of sonic decay distancing the new composition from its roots due to the dictates of copyright laws (Mott 1990:53-70; Newton 2008).

Therefore the effect of media and mediatization on the presentation of Afro-Brazilian identity and *Candomblé* has great potential to enlighten and to denigrate the religion and its performative culture. Aside from my work in northeastern Brazil on food, faith and *enskiled*¹ performative practices I am intrigued by the manner in which media circulates in the public sphere. The act of presenting this film acknowledges my participation and culpability in the mediatization of this religious practice.

The circulation of images and visual texts radically alters the resonances and decay of images and their related narrative con/text creating an inter-medium engaging *Candomblé* practice and foodways, affects the production and reception of each medium. In many cases caricatures and stereotypes have been developed from those early media circuits. Both *Candomblé* practice and Afro-Brazilian identity have to confront reification of the imaginary existent in media circuits. Issues of power whether: personal, gendered or collective as well as racial and sexual stereotypes are rampant. Food and consumption themes provide simple equations for reductive constructions of black, female, and spiritual identity. Concurrently, the remediation has exposed local, national, and international audiences to this region and its culture (Barber 2007:137-170; McCallum 2011; Mazzarella 2004).

This film's visual narratives index relationships to food, race, religious dogma, gender roles/behaviors, knowledge, hierarchies of access and power, resistance, and celebration. Observing and critiquing the narratives associated with sacred and profane foodways has become the most salient mediation device for my larger project. The work is located within publics that still rely on orality, story telling, and modeled behavioral learning. Narratives are parsed based upon hierarchal relationships, levels of fealty/allegiance to specific clergy and years

¹ *Enskilment* is derived from Harry Collins redefinition of skill as the site at which technology, history, social relations, and political economy converge. This concept further problematizes the idea and perception of globalization as a predetermined discourse, implying the demise of traditional skills and handmade products in deference to the power and efficiency of modern technology. The notion of *enskilment*, a term coined by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, encompasses the harnessing of specific information, bodily practices, and dexterity associated with labour and physical production. *Enskilment* is seen as the critical moment of socialization of new actors through apprenticeship, in specific 'communities of practice,' and as a fundamental mechanism of situated learning.

of service. Narratives within the sacred sphere are also riddled with secrets, half and mistruths as a protective device for a religion that has suffered centuries of discrimination and as a means to restrict knowledge sharing. Therefore the presentation, critiquing and definition of narrative and its various iterations within the study are fundamental to aspects of the film and to the larger study (Barber 1991:10-25; Barber 2007:67-102).

Geographies of Gustatory and Spiritual Tastes

Within the performative narrative of *enskiled* food preparation, a meal and *ebó*, offerings are made and dispatched for Ossain. In *Candomblé* practice *filhos de santo*, children of the saint/s observe permanent dietary recommendations and prohibitions relative to the gustatory wants and desires of the deities that rule their head. Without scurrying too far down the rabbit hole of religion the ideas of fasting, feasting, abstinence and real or metaphoric sacrifice are rife throughout many religious traditions, particularly the Judeo-Christian-Abrahamic matrix. Fasts are undertaken as a penance for sin, redemption in the eyes of god, and as ligation to the memory of the departed. The Lenten tradition of fasting and abstaining is a correlative of the signification of suffering.² Regarding Yom Kippur, Leviticus 23 instructs the faithful,

On that day, God instructs the people of Israel,
You shall afflict your souls.³

The rabbinical interpretation for ‘soul affliction’ is a prohibition on physical pleasures of eating, bathing/washing, anointing, sexual abstinence and luxury. Fasting is endemic to Islam as well. The Q’uran says,

In the eye of Allah, fasting enjoys a grace unparalleled by other acts of piety and worship... All the deeds of Adam’s sons (human beings) are for them, except fasting, which is for Me, (Allah) and I will give the reward for it...⁴

² Lent is intended to prepare men for the celebration of the death and Resurrection of Christ. Only with a purified mind and heart can one hope to truly relive the mystery of Christ’s rebirth. Through purification men may be weaned from sin and selfishness through self-denial and prayer, thus by creating the desire to do God’s will and to make His kingdom come from within their hearts (Catholic 2003).

³ Milgrom, Jacob. “Leviticus 23-27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (The Anchor Bible).” (2001): 1952-3.

⁴ “Whoever fasts during Ramadân out of faith, seeking no reward, will have all his sins forgiven. Whoever breaks the fast even for one day in Ramadân without any legitimate reason cannot compensate for it by a period of fasting at any other time of the year.” Khulī, al-Bahī, and Shawqī Sukkarī (1980).

Fasting from sunrise to sunset allegedly helps the feal surrender to God by appreciating their bodily frailties and correlating their need/s to the creator, unifying their relationship to God thus initiating *tawīd*, the process of unification with the divine. Consider the construct of observing the mundane, in other religious practices consider the Jewish practice of removing *chametz*, the home cleansing to remove leavened products before Passover, followed by a koshering of the home. Putting this practice in conversation with the similar Islamic custom pre-Ramadan cleaning and the culinary and religious preparations in the film raises an interesting set of ideas.

Purity, freedom from corruption or those agents that can provoke desire and a fall from grace, thereby ‘souring’ our inner life as yeast sours the flour and water dough destined to become bread. Temptation in the case of bread for the Jews, stimulants such as coffee or cigarettes must be eliminated from view. While fasting is fundamental to Ramadan as well as certain Jewish holidays, so is entertaining—closing the body and opening the house. From a Greco-Roman philosophical posture the house could be analogized to one’s heart or soul as an organizer of one’s daily life. This would allow it to be a simulacrum for the intellect that orchestrates one’s thoughts and ideas. The conscious separation of bodily sense from mental sense is well represented in the canon from Timaeus, Aristotle, Plato, Kant, Hume and others.⁵ Within Candomblé there is no separation of the physical, or lower bodily stratum from the intellect or soul, their relationship is symbiotic.⁶

Òrìsà bíí ikùn kò sí: Ojoojúmón ló ñ gba ẹbo
 There is no orixá as lucky as the stomach:
 since the stomach receives daily offerings⁷ (Mason 1999:14)

⁵ Historically the Greek philosophers, Timaeus and Plato related the ‘high’ senses to aesthetics that have a cognitive relationship to the object being received, via visual and auditory perception to the mind. The ‘lower’ senses: touch, taste and smell had a more proximate relationship to the pleasures of the physical body. Our flesh is linked to passion and appetite/s, is thus seen as an encumbrance to the soul and not linked to the rational intellect that connects to the divine. Aristotle placed smell at the midpoint as a bridge between the high and the low (Korsmeyer 1999:12-28; Averroës, ., Taylor, R. C., & Druart 2009).

⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of dialogism and the carnivalesque provide a platform for discourse across classes and social groups. The carnivalesque, particularly the lower bodily stratum, which refers to union of the genitalia, the digestive, and the excretory systems as the intersection of life-giving, consumption, and elimination processes, provides an intersection for Mikhail Bakhtin’s work to speak to gender, power, food, and foodways, and illustrates an alternative means of knowledge production (Bakhtin 1968, 85–86; Bakhtin 1981, 324–325 and 342).

⁷ A Yoruba proverb evidently relating to the *orixá Exú*, the liminal spirit of the crossroads that effects all change between the living, dead and the deities.

The body as landscape of cultural memory refers directly to the 19th century aphorisms of author and gourmand Brillat-Savarin and philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach: 'Dis-moi ce que tu mange, je te dirai ce que tu es,' 1825, and 'Der Mensch ist, was er ißt',⁸ 1850, explicitly direct the subject towards self identity via their consumption habits. This comment requires food to communicate from different registers of our consciousness. Iconic and quotidian dishes honor slave creativity, ingenuity, and the legacy of Africans struggling in colonial Brazil. The inference suggests that in addition to nourishment and gustatory pleasure consumption engenders an African presence within our own bodies. Specifically food can be an interlocutor between particular deities fostering a dialogue between the supplicant and their *orixá*. Thus within the cosmology of Afro-Brazilian sacred cuisine, gustatory taste exists in realms of both lower and higher senses. Therefore the apparently mundane repetitive practice of preparing, serving and consuming food can invoke a virtual narrative reinforcing identity formation through a collective cultural conscience engendered by commensality (Brillat-Savarin & Fischer 1971; Shapin 2014).

Bibliography

- Averroës, ., Taylor, R. C., & Druart, T.-A.. *Long commentary on the De anima of Aristotle*. New Haven: Yale University Press, (2009).
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and his world*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, (1968).
- Bakhtin, Mikhail and Michael Holquist. *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press, (1981).
- Barber, Karin. *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women, and the Past in a Yoruba Town*. Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, (1991). Print.
- . *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2007). Print.
- Brillat-Savarin, J. A., & Fischer, M. F. K.. *M.K.F. Fischer's translation of the physiology of taste: Or meditations on transcendental gastronomy*. New York: Knopf, (1971).
- New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Detroit: Thomson/Gale, (2003), Print.
- Collins, Harry M., Gerard H. de Vries, and Wiebe E. Bijker. "Ways of going on: An analysis of skill applied to medical practice." *Science, Technology e³ Human Values* 22, no. 3, (1997): 267-285.
- Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, (1989). Print.

⁸ Translated as, 'Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are'; '(Man is), You are what you eat,' respectively.

- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. New York: Praeger, (1966).
- Douglas, Mary. Deciphering a meal. *Daedalus*, 101(1), 61-81. (1972).
- Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: a Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text*, (1990): 56-80. Print.
- Khūlī, al-Bahī, and Shawqī Sukkarī. *Al Siyam: "fasting"*. Cairo, A.R.E: Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, (1980). 15-18. Print.
- Korsmeyer, C. *Making sense of taste: Food e³ philosophy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, (1999).
- Lave, Jean, and Etienne Wenger. *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1991).
- Mason, John. *Ìdáná fún òrìṣà: Cooking for selected beads*. Brooklyn, N.Y: Yorùbá Theological Archministry, (1999), Print.
- Mazzarella, William. "Culture, Globalization, Mediation." *Annual Review Anthropology*. (2004). 33: 345–367, Print.
- McCallum, Richard. Micro public spheres and the sociology of religion: An evangelical illustration. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26.2: 173–187, (2011).
- Mott, Robert L. *Sound Effects: Radio, Tv, and Film*. Boston: Focal Press, (1990). Print.
- Newton, Matthew. Is Sampling Dying?: How greenbacks and red tape are tearing the heart out of hip-hop. *SPIN*, (November 21, 2008). <http://www.spin.com/2008/11/sampling-dying/>.
- Shapin, Stephen. "you Are What You Eat': Historical Changes in Ideas About Food and Identity." *Historical Research*, (2014). Print.
- Stam, Robert. *Subversive pleasures: Bakhtin, cultural criticism, and film*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University, (1989).



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike International 4.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA