

Coins for the Dead, Money on the Floor: Mortuary Ritual in Bahian Candomblé

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Abstract. This paper examines the exchange of money, commodities, and services among religious adepts and between humans and their ancestors in a Candomblé mortuary ritual in Cachoeira, Bahia, Brazil. In the *axexé*, profits from secret ceremonies fund communal devotions. Communal devotions tie initiatic kin together through reciprocity. Mortuary rituals sever these ties when initiatic family members die. Parties in the service of benevolent deities bring fame to houses. Fame attracts clients. Clients pay to undo the malfeasance of their enemies or to make them suffer. Their money in turn funds communal devotions. Evil underwrites good. Concealment underwrites spectacle. The dead become the livelihood of the living.

Ela já vai embora

Brasilina Queiroz de Almeida was born in Cachoeira on 22 March 1950 and died on 23 February 2005 in Feira de Santana, Bahia, Brazil. She died of a heart attack related to her diabetes. No one seemed to know her full name before then. She was simply Brasília. Or perhaps not so simply since at different times she was also the Eré, Flor do Dia, Caboclo Oxossi, Yansan, and Yemanjá.¹ Maria, a *mãe de santo*, or Candomblé priestess, had seated these Orixás in Brasília's head fifteen years before in the Ketu initiation ritual. Long before that Maria's father, Sr. Justo, had performed a series of *obrigações*, or rituals of allegiance to the Orixás, that wedded Brasília to the life of the Prison Alley *terreiro*, an old temple of Candomblé in Cachoeira, Bahia.

The connection would prove durable. For as long as I knew her, Brasília was Maria's most devoted and loyal *filha de santo*, or daughter, in Candomblé's ritual kinship system. And this connection would last for generations. Her daughter Rita, known for the past few years as Iyawô de Oxossi, underwent initiation at Maria's hands, as did her granddaughter Sheila, now known as Iyawô de Yansan. But the mortuary rituals that Maria would undertake were destined to sever the personal connections between Brasília and the surviving members of her ritual family.

Brasília died during Lent. Maria suppressed her grief and launched into logistical action, calling friends, relatives, and ritual kin to notify them of the death and assembling the money that she would need to put on the funeral. She told Valdecí, her second in command at the temple, to get the oldest razor and pair of scissors from the *roncor*, or initiation chamber. These were presumably the ones used in Brasília's initiation to the cult of the Orixás. She also instructed her to cook up hominy and the steamed pyramids of white corn flour called *acaçá*. These would go into an *ebó*, or propitiatory sacrifice, that would be cast into the Paraguassú River that runs through Cachoeira. It was the first of a series of sacrifices that would set things right after Brasília's death.

The next day a huge procession accompanied Brasília's coffin from her house in the Rua da Feira (Road of the Market) to the cemetery on the Rua da Saudade (Road of Longing). It was led by a phalanx of Orixás in the bodies of her brothers and sisters *de santo*, who scattered hominy and *acaçá* at every crossroads.² The coffin was borne through the streets by *ogans*, the male officiants of Candomblé, as well as male friends and family. A doleful crew of mourners, mostly dressed in white, brought up the rear.

Preta, another Candomblé priestess and inheritor of the oldest Ketu temple in Cachoeira proper, led the singing.³ At the graveside, as the coffin was lowered into the red *massapé* soil she sang:

Ela já vai, ela já vai, ela já vai

Já vai embora.

[She is now going, she's now going, she's now going

She's going away.]

This was more of a hopeful exhortation to the undeparted soul than a statement of fact. To send Brasília away in proper style would require an *axexé*, a series of mortuary rituals that dislodges an initiate to Candomblé from this

world and transforms her into a benevolent Egum, or ancestral spirit, in the temple's private pantheon.⁴

Two nights before Brasília died, Maria, Jana (another of Maria's *filhas de santo*), and I all had dreams that were interpreted to have presaged her passing. One of Maria's many responsibilities as *mãe de santo* is to interpret the dreams of people in her community. She looks for communications from the divinities of Candomblé about their lives and those of the rest of her ritual family. Maria dreamt of dirty clothes, which are supposed to signify a corpse. Jana dreamt of Maria's deceased mother saying that someone would soon join her. I dreamt of winning a lot of money shooting dice. The money was all in coins. Coins also signify death in dreams in Candomblé because of their association with Eguns and the *axexé*.

Death and the transformation of value

The *axexé* is a mortuary ritual performed for senior members of Candomblé initiatic hierarchies. It effects a transformation in the subjectivity of the deceased from a potentially dangerous wandering spirit invested with the powers of Candomblé to an Egum cultivated in the temple compound, controlled and invoked in instrumental earthly work. It is the ultimate transformation of the personhood of an initiate to Candomblé and it completes a cycle begun many years before.

The path to Candomblé initiation usually begins with a problem, perhaps a sickness or malaise not susceptible to medical treatment. This leads the sick person to seek out a Candomblé priestess. The priestess performs a divination ceremony called the *jogo de búzios*, or shell-throwing. This divination is intended to discover the root of the problem that is afflicting a person's life. It is performed by a *mãe de santo* at the behest of a client and is usually paid for. Often the client's problem can be resolved with a sacrifice (called an *ebô*) to the slave deity Exú or to an Egum, an herbal bath, or an offering to one of the Caboclos, a pantheon of backland cowboys and Indians. But in a small number of cases an Orixá lets it be known through the shells that the client must be initiated into their cult and serve them through the rest of her life.

The Orixás are the high gods of Candomblé, a pantheon of deities related to those worshipped by Yoruba- and Gbe-speaking peoples of West Africa. Initiation to their cult entails a radical transformation in the subjectivity of the initiate. It involves a long period of confinement and training, and lengthy prohibitions on eating certain foods and engaging in sexual activity.

It also involves sacrifices of animals, other foods, and elements of the initiates' own body. She is adopted into a ritual family with strict rules of hierarchy, deference, and submission. Initiates to the role of *vodunsi* or *filha de santo* give over their bodies to the Orixás to whom they have been consecrated. These deities possess them in public and private ceremonies. Initiates owe periodic obligations to their tutelary Orixás. These take the form of private sacrifices followed by public feasts and spirit-possession parties. Initiates also have obligations of deference and submission to the senior members of their ritual families. Public and private ceremonies for the Orixás trace and reinforce the contours of ritual hierarchies.

In return for these elaborate and expensive honors rendered to the Orixás and their superiors, the initiate gains the power to enjoin the deities of Candomblé to work on her behalf on earth. The Orixás themselves do no work but they extend their divine mantle of protection over their devotees. Work is done by Exús who are problematically identified with the Christian Devil, as well as Egum ancestral spirits and Caboclo cowboys and Indians. Candomblé adepts marshal their divine powers through their own offerings or with the mediation of their *mãe de santo* or ritual mother.

Sometimes Candomblé adepts are sought out to perform spiritual work for others. When instrumental, earthly work is undertaken for clients, it can bring profit to the practitioner. Money earned through such magical manipulations should be reinvested in part in the cult of the Orixás. Values are transformed from the spiritual plane to the temporal one and back. Ritual action is work. In the communal ceremonies for the Orixás it reproduces ritual families. In the individualized services for Exús, Eguns, and Caboclos, it produces value for practitioners.

This essay explores the transformations of value entailed in expenditures for mortuary rituals and the use of coins in the *axexé*. I borrow the phrase "transformation of value" from Nancy Munn, who uses it in reference to exchanges, mortuary rituals, and witchcraft on the Melanesian island of Gawa. In Munn's formulation, prestations of cooked foods are the first term in a series of exchanges that allow Gawans to extend their reach and their influence across ever-widening domains of space and time in the regional Kula ring. In my formulation, exchanges with deities allow Candomblé devotees to expand their earthly powers. In both, value has strong positive and negative poles. Exchanges undertaken with care and savvy can potentially bring fame and fortune to those who initiate them. But those who refuse to

give trading partners their due or who are overambitious leave themselves open to the depredations of supernatural forces. It is only through generosity with the products of one's own labor that one can advance, either as a Gawan Kula trader or as a practitioner of Candomblé.

Axexés are extremely expensive endeavors. But they are necessary to maintain the good will of the family dead and the working relationship that allows the living to mobilize their power in rituals of healing. Uncared-for ancestors can be dangerous, especially those who were initiated into Candomblé during their lives. They can return to the realm of the living as malevolent Eguns that sicken and even kill, or close off people's paths to financial success, love, and happiness.

But well-cared-for Eguns are powerful allies. Their influence, when mobilized through *ebós*, can counteract the malfesance of wandering spirits of the dead on behalf of the living. They can bring in clients for priestesses and offer wise counsel to their descendants through dreams and apparitions. They provide a link to the power of the past that Candomblé practitioners can ignore only at their own peril.

Exchange and the obligations it creates harness divine powers in the service of everyday undertakings. This essay examines the multiple logics of exchange at work in the *axexé* mortuary ritual. Marketplace transactions for foods, animals, and durable goods are necessary to prepare for an *axexé*. Some of these objects and animals are rendered to the dead, through blood sacrifice and destruction. The ritual use of money commercializes relationships between living members of the temple community and their ancestors. Token payments for ritual services among the living participants in an *axexé* trace the outlines of temple hierarchies. Propitiations of Exús and Orixás guarantee the benevolence or benign neglect of these pantheons. And the *quid* of the dead repays practitioners for all of their labor and sacrifice.

Different logics of exchange characterize practitioners' relationships with the different pantheons of deities in Candomblé and different moments in an initiate's lifecycle. Candomblé adepts make promises to Catholic saints, fulfill obligations to the Orixás, feed Caboclos, demand services from Exú and pay for them, and there are even rumors of pacts with devils. Exchanges with Orixás, especially those entailed by initiation, follow the reciprocal logic of the Maussian prestation. Instrumental sacrifices to Exú look more like commercial transactions. This essay focuses on exchanges with Eguns, which are perhaps the most complex of all. Webs of ritual kinship built up through years of communal sacrifice to the Orixás must be dissolved lest they become

dangerous to survivors. The relationships among family members that were once reciprocal and cemented by ritual commensality must be transformed into a commercial, working relationship with the Egum. This is accomplished through the ritual rendering of coins to Egum in the *axexé*.

The public face of Candomblé's devotions are the ceremonies in honor of the Orixás. At these lavish parties the gods possess their devotees and appropriate their bodies to dance. They are adorned in the finest cloth and fêted in the finest style that their humble children can afford. Animals slaughtered for the Orixás are cooked and distributed to members of the ritual family and their guests. But the business of Candomblé, the daily work of healing and witchcraft, is carried out with Eguns and Exús. These spirits are called upon to afflict or assuage priestesses' clients or their clients' enemies. Clients pay dearly for these services. These payments underwrite the cult of the Orixás.

Rituals for healing and witchcraft are called *ebós*. They are carried out in private and often in secrecy. Clients usually want to keep their own participation hidden from the public eye. Candomblé is a much maligned religion and private visits to priestesses are held by the laity to be solicitations for malicious magic or the undoing of its effects. The deities that priestesses call on in *ebós* are Exús and Eguns. They are not the Orixás who are worshipped in public ceremonies. Priestesses' services are compensated with cash. The deities are compensated with their favorite sacrificial offerings and token payments of coins.

Feasts for the Orixás are public, spectacular, communal, and commensal. Non-initiates attend without fear since Orixás are not implicated in works for evil. But *ebós* are private, hidden, powerful, and potentially dangerous affairs. Eguns and Exús may harm as well as help and in either case they must be carefully controlled by the priestess and her flock. The two types of ritual are interdependent. Money made in rituals for Egum underwrites the ceremonies for the Orixás. The aim of the *axexé* is to transform a late friend and ritual relative into a powerful spirit with whom one can work.

Ebós for Exú can be made to further some earthly project such as finding a job or seducing a lover. But Eguns cannot be put to work in this manner. They only afflict. Sacrifices to Egum are either propitiations intended to purge a person of Eguns' deleterious influences or else willful acts of sorcery intended to plague the life of the client's chosen victim. *Ebós* of the first type invoke the powers of Eguns of the house, those who have been brought into the priestesses' personal pantheon through the *axexé*. *Ebós* of the second type call on Eguns of the road, the unquiet and dangerous deceased.

Juana Elbein dos Santos has argued that the *axexé* effects a transformation in the relationship of the deceased person to the members of her initiatic family. A living initiate to Candomblé is enmeshed in a web of reciprocal obligations to deities and members of her temple community. These particular, earthly relationships are severed by the *axexé*, which moves the deceased from the earthly plane of particular existence to the spiritual plane of generalized existence. Their personality is dissolved. The deceased *mãe* ("mother"), *irmã* (sister), or *filha de santo* becomes simply Egum.

The *axexé* is the most important in a series of mortuary rituals designed to sever the reciprocal connections between an initiate and her temple community. These connections are built through years of communal sacrifices to the Orixás. But after an initiate's death these personal connections become dangerous. A person who was once a partner in a reciprocal relationship becomes a sacrosanct and dangerous deity with whom one enters into contractual obligations through the *ebó*. I argue that this transformation is effected through the exchanges between the living members of the temple community and the spirit of the deceased. Some exchanges symbolize the personal relationships that are being severed; others create the generalized relationship of contractual obligation that ought to exist between an Egum and the membership of a *terreiro*.

Objects in the first category, those that symbolize the individual nature of the deceased person and her particular relationships to the kin that survive her, are like Weiner's inalienable possessions. They carry in them some facet of the personhood of the deceased. In the *axexé* these include dresses, beaded necklaces, ritual implements, photographs, and other trinkets of an earthly life now ended. These are delivered to Egum in forests, rivers, and cemeteries and exposed to the depredations of time, weather, and water. Their slow destructions destroy the personhood of the deceased and her claims on the living.

Objects in the second category, those that establish a generalized relationship between the deceased and the temple community, include the standard fare of Candomblé sacrifices: food, drink, fowl, and especially money. The living give coins to Egum to keep themselves safe. David Graeber says that "money presents a frictionless surface to history" (94). It is pure potential and as such it is anonymous. Social identities need not play any part in a transaction involving money. "Rather than serving as a mark of distinctiveness, it tends to be identified with the holder's generic, hidden capacities for action" (Graeber 94). Money rendered to deceased friends and family

renders them generic and hidden. Their capacities for action are mobilized through the *ebó*, which is more like a commercial transaction than a favor for a friend or relative.

The personal claims of the dead on the living are dangerous and require ritual means to sever. Countless people in Bahia find themselves sickened by the proximity of loving but overly attached dead relatives. The ritual transaction of money between the living and the dead dissolves these claims. The coins for Egum move the spirit from the kin-based realm of general reciprocal exchange and the relationships it entails to the balanced realm of exchanges mediated by money between an individual and a powerful, dangerous deity.

We can see in this unending cycle of exchanges a system for the transformation of value. Profits from secret ceremonies fund communal devotions. Communal devotions tie initiatic kin together through reciprocity. Mortuary rituals sever these ties when initiatic family members die. Parties in the service of benevolent deities bring fame to houses. Fame attracts clients. Clients pay to undo the malfeasance of their enemies or to make them suffer. Their money in turn funds communal devotions. Evil underwrites good. Concealment underwrites spectacle. Contractual transactions underwrite reciprocity. The dead become the livelihood of the living.

Shopping for Egum

The *axexé* could not begin until Lent and the violent revelry of Good Friday had passed. As the date approached, Maria was already more than seven hundred *reais* in debt.⁵ The expenses of the funeral, some of the locally available supplies for the *axexé*, and everyday expenses like the phone bill (higher than usual because of all the calls she had to make after Brasília died) had depleted her already meager savings. And so many expenditures remained. She traveled to Feira de Santana to buy the full complement of fowl that would be sacrificed in the *axexé*. White doves, guinea hens, white ducks, and white chickens are all more expensive because merchants know that white fowl are in high demand for Candomblé.

Then came the crockery: she had to buy porcelain plates and clay bowls to hold the offerings and the clay vases and platters that stand in for the drums. Several of these disposable musical instruments would be broken each night of the ceremony. Cloth, beans, grains, calabashes, palm oil, olive oil, honey, alcohol, *cachaça*, *conhaque*, wine, candles, kola nuts, and fire fans were all purchased for the dead and the Orixás and Exús who accompany them.⁶

And the living must be fed as well. She would call her scattered *filhos de santo* together and they would eat and sleep in her house for at least three days. She would bring in a crew from another *terreiro* more experienced in this kind of ritual. They would also need to be fed. The *axexé* would end with a breakfast, luxurious and delicious, and as expensive and important as any other phase of the process. She would need cases of beer and liters of liquor. There must be plenty to drink during an *axexé*. Finally, she would need to rent a van to bring it all home to Cachoeira.

Her *ogans* and *filhos de santo* bought up meters and meters of white poplin cloth in the market. They set aside any five cent coins that came their way and traded their *real* notes for coins to numbers-runners of the *jogo de bicho* gambling network. Dona Tuca, another of Maria's *filhas*, stayed up late sewing the new white clothes that her ritual kin would have to wear. She expected no recompense and received little. But this was her contribution to the *axexé* since her straitened financial circumstances precluded a monetary donation.

On the morning of the day the *axexé* was to begin, Maria was in Salvador, scouring the São Joaquim market for the imported African items she would need. One of these was raffia palm fiber. This would be braided into the *contraegum* bands that would chafe our arms and protect us from wayward souls.⁷

Her *ogans*, *filhas*, and friends began to trickle up the hill. Maria canvassed them for contributions. One who lives and works in Salvador was asked for twenty *reais* and gave fifty. Another who sells clothes in the market came up with ten. No one had much to spare. Everyone did what they could. Collaboration came from as far away as Mundo Novo in the *sertão* (Bahia's desert interior) and São Paulo where people who would not attend made wire-transfers into Maria's bank account. Initiation to Candomblé creates a bond of kinship not just between the *filha de santo* and her *mãe* but to an entire ritual lineage and the entire family of its descendants. People contributed not only because of their affection for Brasília but because their house and the ritual and social life it anchored were at stake.

The hurly-burly of preparations eclipsed some of the sadness about Brasília's death. Even her daughter, Iyawô de Oxossi, could be coaxed into smiling. Beans and grains were roasted, corn was popped. One of the dresses of Brasília's Orixás and some of her other personal effects were placed in the center of the *barração*, or public area of the temple. The food offerings were arrayed on porcelain plates around them. Clay bowls called *alguidares* were filled with *amací*, a broth made from macerated leaves used for ritual cleansing. Calabashes were placed inverted in clay bowls. These would take the

place of the *rumpí* and *runlê*, the two smaller drums of the Candomblé percussion ensemble. A large clay vase, half filled with *amací* and played with a fire fan would take the place of the *rum*, or largest component of the drum orchestra. These instruments would be destroyed and left in the forest. Nothing used in the *axexé* could remain in the temple once it was over. When the assemblage was complete, they covered it with a new white cloth and waited for the arrival of Preta and her crew from the temple Ilê Axé Alaketu Oxum.

Padé and axexé

Preta cut an imposing figure as she lumbered out of a broken-down car. Her sharp tongue, her jovial nature, and her obscene sense of humor did nothing to diminish her position as the ranking *mãe de santo* in Cachoeira. The older women of her *terreiro* rode up the hill in a car while the men who would cut, carry, drum, and dance trudged up behind.

Preta's arrival galvanized everyone into action. We donned our white clothes and scrounged up the first night's portion of coins. Brasília's blood relatives, for whom dancing would be too dangerous, crouched on straw mats in the corner. The *axexé* began with this song for Exú:

Ina ina mojubá e e ina mojubá

Ina ina mojubá é

Ina mojubá.⁸

The ceremony opened as many Candomblé ceremonies do, with a *padé* for Exú. The *padé* is a propitiatory offering that ensures Exú's benediction for and noninterference in the ceremony that was to follow. The Egum offerings were uncovered. The Candomblé rhythms were played slow and solemn on the calabashes and the vase that stood in for the *atabaque* drums. High-ranking female initiates scattered manioc flour mixed with oils, water, and honey in front of the *terreiro* and down the street for twenty meters. Neighbors saw that the ceremony was in progress and pulled their children inside. In the *barracão*, the ritual was performed with the tense urgency of an *ebó*. Exú's acceptance or rejection of this first offering would portend well or ill for the outcome of the next three nights of ritual labor. Preta performed the first divination by cutting a kola nut into quarters and throwing it on the floor. The quarters all landed on their convex backs. This meant that the offering had been accepted. We clapped with palpable relief but the night was young.

Exú and the white owl of death were praised, propitiated, and sent on their way. We began to sing for Egum.

Axexé axexé onan.

Preta danced first and placed coins in the percussion instruments as well as in the *alguidar* ("clay bowl") that sat at the head of the offering. People danced in order of seniority, women before men. As a non-initiate in ambiguous relation to the temple hierarchies, I danced last. As each person danced, the others brought coins that they passed over their bodies in the motions of a *limpeza* and put them in the dancer's hands.⁹ Each person took their turn at dancing by saluting the door and the central rafter post and then genuflecting in front of the person dancing. That person would then throw a few of her coins into the *alguidar* at the foot of the offering, give the rest to her substitute, and throw some of the fine beach sand from a little pile over the offering.

Someone said to me years ago, after another *axexé*, that "when you're doing an *axexé*, Egum is there, on his feet in front of you. No one wants to dance with Egum empty-handed." The coins protect the dancer from Egum's influence while she is dancing, but she offers them on behalf of others. The Egum with whom she dances is the particular Egum, ripe with power and danger for the person he confronts.¹⁰ The dancer starts off empty-handed and receives coins from others as she goes. Everyone knows the dangers attending on their participation in the *axexé* and they use their coins to periodically purge themselves of Egum's influence as they go. The dancer confronts Egum, "on his feet" in front of her. She carries the coins laden with the burdens from the bodies of her brothers and sisters and remits them to Egum in his calabash.

The danger here derives from the personal relationships between the living members of the temple community and the deceased. These relationships are born of blood kinship and the ritual kinship cemented through the blood sacrifices of Candomblé initiation. They are reinforced through commensality in the rituals of obligation to the Orixás that punctuate the life-cycle of an initiate. Currency is passed over the body in an attempt to sever these ties. Offerings of coins move the relationship from the commensal to the commodified. The balanced nature of the commercial transaction takes the place of the reciprocal, kin-based nature of the communal meal in the presence of the gods.

But it was only the first night of the ceremony and Brasília was not yet banished from the realm of the living. She was glimpsed by the dancers at

the head of the offerings as they danced. The most adventurous of the ogans clowned around and made faces as they danced to amuse Egum and show their own fearlessness. Other deceased members of the temple were sighted by ogans standing watch at the door. This was no joking matter. The officiating priestess dispatched Orixás and Caboclos to patrol the street in front of the temple with *dendê* palm fronds to keep other departed souls away from the ceremony in Brasília's honor.

The first night of the *axexé* ended with songs for Yemanjá, Brasília's personal tutelary Orixá, and Oxalá, the high god of the Candomblé pantheon. Then participants adjourned for sweet coffee and Brazilian vodka. The presence of such distinguished liquor at Brasília's mortuary ritual was held up as evidence of her earthly splendor.

Money on the floor

Maria showed up at my door the next day. For once she was not there to give me cryptic warnings from her dreams but just to get out of her house and get a few things off of her chest. Who could blame her? She had a house full of tired, scared, mourning, and angry people to deal with all day and all night. My house, two doors up from the temple, offered a measure of solace.

She had asked Valdecí to call and collect from two of her clients from the desert interior west of Cachoeira for whom she did a *trabalho* in October.¹¹ They hadn't paid her yet. Like so many other clients, the couple is more regular in their needs for her services than in their payments. I don't know what the price she set was but it must have been something in excess of 300 *reais* since Maria was willing to settle for that if they could get it to her immediately. She needed the money to pay the floor the next day when they would perform the sacrifice for Egum. Preta was not charging her but Maria cannot kill on that scale without paying the floor.

Dinheiro do chão, or "money for the floor," is the ritual payment that must accompany any blood sacrifice to Orixás, Exús, or Eguns. It is a payment to the deities that inhabit the floor of the house and a guarantee of the continued power of the spirits that dwell therein. The money is placed on the floor while the sacrifice is being performed. The bills are often speckled with blood. When the sacrifice is complete, the *mãe de santo* divides the money among the *ogans*, *ekedis*, and *filhas de santo* according to their participation in the sacrifice.¹² The *ogan* who does the actual cutting usually gets the most, while smaller shares are parceled among those who hold the animal as it is being

cut, those who carry the offering, those who become possessed, and those who sing, prepare the food, and care for the Orixás who may appear.

The eventual distribution of *dinheiro do chão* among participants does not take the form of payment for services rendered. Money from the floor is an *agrado*; “gratuity” might be the closest English translation. It is a gesture of thanks and good will. The floor is sacred space in a Candomblé temple, consecrated to the tutelary Orixá of the house. A Candomblé house must have certain secret, sacred objects buried in its foundation before it can be opened. Placing money on the floor pays obeisance to the deities that inhabit the ground. This guarantees not only the continued financial success of the temple, but the harmony among its members that is as tenuous as it is necessary to the temple’s functioning.

When a *mãe de santo* gives one of her flock a share of the *dinheiro do chão*, she places it on the floor in front of her. The money must not change hands directly. The *filha* asks her ritual mother’s blessing and only picks up the money after receiving it. This keeps the exchange from taking on the character of a commercial transaction or the alienation of commodified labor. The begging of blessings and the ritual prostration that often accompanies it is the most common way to demonstrate submission to one’s superiors in the Candomblé hierarchy. Prostration puts the receiver-of-blessing’s body in contact with the floor, which is the dwelling place of the ancestors and tutelary Orixá of the temple. The way in which a person begs a blessing depends upon and also signals the relationship with the person whose blessing is being begged. It underscores differences in initiatic age and rank as well as generational differences between initiating priestesses and their ritual children. Unlike the coins for the dead, which sever kinship relations, the ritual transaction of money on the floor reaffirms them.

Maria wanted at least 277 *reais* to put on the *chão* on the last day of the *axexé* when the killing would take place. This was not a payment to Preta. When Preta travels to other towns or to the capital to perform *axexés* her fees run to the thousands. But Maria and Brasília were cherished friends of hers and her late mother’s. She had waived the fee for herself and her flock. However, Preta had no right to waive the payment to the floor in the Prison Alley temple, even though she would receive the money and distribute it as she saw fit. The floor had to be paid out of respect to the powers of Maria’s own house. Maria herself had to come up with the money or else risk the wrath of the gods she serves, or worse, their negligence.

The coins for the dead work on the principle of the universal equivalence of money to transform a particular relationship into a generalized one. As coins are deposited in her calabash, Brasília slowly ceases to be Brasília and becomes simply Egum. But the money on the floor traces, highlights, and strengthens the reciprocal relationships among the living members of the temple community. They receive a grateful token payment for the work they have performed. Its distribution follows the axes of Candomblé hierarchy. The way in which it is received underlines the submission of the receiver to the *mãe de santo* who is doling it out. She must ask her blessing, as Bahian children do of their parents, slaves once did of their masters, and juniors do of their seniors in Candomblé.

By the same token, accusations of improper distribution of the *dinheiro do chão* can be the source of great rancor between *ogans* and *mães de santo*. If the *ogans* feel that their services and their position in the temple are not adequately recognized with ritual payments they may threaten to withdraw their services, or even the shrines to their Orixás from the *terreiro*.

Men, candles, and beer

The third and final night of Brasília's *axexé* began and ended with a holocaust.¹³ The heap of fowl Maria had purchased had their blood spilled over the shrines of the family Eguns and the new shrine for Brasília. All of us present brought plenty of coins and tied fresh strands of shredded palm fronds (called *mariô*) around our wrists to protect ourselves from Eguns. When the cutting was done we threw our coins and improvised bracelets into the *alguidar* that would go into a new basket with the corpses of the birds.

When an animal is sacrificed in an offering to an Orixá, an Exú, or a Caboclo, its blood is let over a shrine and the internal organs that constitute its *axé* are arrayed around the seat of the god.¹⁴ The rest is usually eaten with great gusto by the participants in the ceremony. The only exception is when a bird is used in a ritual cleansing. But beasts rendered to Eguns must rot in cemeteries or stands of bamboo or be carried away by rivers. No one wants to eat with these fearsome entities. Hubert and Mauss identify the sharing of food in the presence of the god as the climax of a sacrifice. *Obrigações* to the Orixás in this house culminate with participants' heads being anointed with the blood of the sacrificed animal and with the sharing of food in the festival that follows. But blood sacrifice for Egum is for Egum alone. The refusal of ritual commensality is one way in which ties formed through initiatic sacrifice are severed.

The *padé* and divination ceremony were carried out as before, but when we began to sing for Egum, someone turned out the electric lights. Two lonely candles would illuminate the *barracão* until dawn. It was not long after we started when midnight struck. We took a break and had another drink to let this dangerous hour pass.

We reconvened and sang a cycle of seven songs for each of seven Orixás before the second holocaust began. Some sang the songs that had accompanied Brasília's coffin to her grave while others smashed the plates, calabashes, and the clay pots that had contained the offerings to Egum and served as his percussion instruments. They gathered the palm fronds that had protected the doors and the *peregún*¹⁵ leaves that had adorned the walls. They swept the floor to catch any scraps and dirt collected during the *axexé*. They discarded the palm-frond brooms and tied them up along with the offerings and everything else in a big white sheet. No trace of the offerings rendered to Egum could remain in the *terreiro* once the *axexé* was over. Those who were not involved in breaking and gathering up the offerings covered facing the wall, covering their heads with their arms. The Eguns were on the loose and despite all the ritual precautions they still posed a danger to the living at the climax of the ritual.

There was just a hint of gray light in the east when they tied up the bundle and sent the *ogans* to carry it down the valley. It was awkward and weighed well over fifty kilos but there were six or seven able-bodied *ogans* and a well-intentioned *gringo* to carry it. We went down the steep, muddy path to the Caquende creek at a jog, in the rain, in the dark with the bundle wrapped in white cloth and slung from a wooden pole.

Our instructions were to bring it to a stand of bamboo next to the creek, where it would not attract undue attention. Everyone was falling all over themselves on the mud and wet rocks so we did not go far. We left it at a suitable clump of bamboo in a part of the valley that does not get too much traffic. The *ogans* and I took a quick bath in the stream, counting on the flowing water to wash away traces of our offering to Egum. Then we headed back up the hill, chilly and relieved.

At the door of the *terreiro* we passed water over our heads and threw it on the ground to remove any lingering influence of Eguns and Exús. Then we sat down for another round of drinks. There was the usual animated post-*ebó* conversation among the men and anxious questioning about whether the bundle had gone to a suitably discreet location from Maria and Preta.

We drank, smoked, dozed, snacked, and sipped coffee as the day broke. The *Padre* who had promised to say a Mass for Brasília's soul at Maria's chapel never materialized, but Maria is more than capable of performing Catholic services herself. *Mães de Santo* are often leaders of the popular Catholic devotions of their local communities. These ceremonies are integral parts of Candomblé mortuary ritual in Cachoeira. Maria does not consecrate the host but she led her flock in prayer for Brasília's soul. When the "Mass" was over we got back together for a giant breakfast of traditional Bahian foods. Brasília's plate went under the table next to a lighted candle. She received her food on the floor, the symbolic dwelling-place of Orixás and ancestors.

A delegation of *ogans* was dispatched to the woods to get the leaves and branches that would be used to cleanse Maria's house and the participants in the ceremony. We lunched on fish and white rice; Brasília's plate again went under the table. Then the housecleaning began to the sound of a doleful chorus:

Sarayeyé ibokunum

Sarayeyé bojoúm.

This couplet was repeated over and over in call and response between Preta and everyone else present for more than half an hour. Eight men made their way through the several houses of Maria's compound scattering popcorn and hominy, beating the walls and the corners with branches, and swabbing a young rooster around the house. These would absorb traces of the Eguns' influence into themselves and out of the house.

Then the *ogans* took a fresh pile of branches and formed a gauntlet. We lined up in order of seniority. *Ekedis* prepared dishes of the same types of dry foods used in the *ebó* de Egum, each with a coin in it. We all underwent a *limpeza* or ritual cleansing. The *ekedis* passed the dishes over us. The *ogans* beat us with the branches with great enthusiasm and hilarity. When it was all over, the consecrated foodstuffs and the young rooster were swept up, bundled, and brought to the river by another delegation of *ogans*. Lingering influences from all Eguns were purged from the temple and the participants in the ceremony.

The *axexé* was complete. The mood was self-congratulatory. Brasília had gotten her due. Exhaustion, camaraderie, and alcohol showed in everyone's good spirits. Meanwhile, Preta had collected all of the coins that had been tossed into the calabash as we danced over the previous three nights. The *dinheiro do chão* had already been discreetly distributed.

I had been to *axexés* before and enjoyed the moment when the coins for the dead were handed out. Each person who had cut, carried, or become possessed was entitled to a share. Each person knelt before the *mãe de santo* and asked her blessing before receiving theirs. But the coins they received still bore the stain of their association with Egum. You could not just spend them, or even mix them in your pockets with other coins. Coins for Egum had to be set aside, but spent quickly. The only thing you could buy with them was candles, to be lit for Catholic or Candomblé santos.

Candles for the Saint (*velas pro santo*) is a euphemism often used for money received in exchange for Candomblé work.¹⁶ It implies that the money received will be rendered directly to the Orixás and illuminate their altars. But in this case the meaning was literal. Risky undertakings, from participation in *axexés* to the performance of black magic, require that participants do something to shield themselves from potential negative effects. An offering to one's tutelary Orixá may absolve or at least ameliorate the ill effects of the business. Those who deal with Eguns and Exús to the neglect of their Orixás do so at their own peril. The coins in the *axexé* thus serve a double protective purpose. They shield singers and dancers from contact with Egum while the ceremony is in progress. Then they purchase candles for Catholic and Candomblé santos who will extend their protection to their devotees after the ceremony is over.

Here we see one of the principles of the transformation of value in Candomblé writ small. Money earned in the service of Eguns and Exús must be funneled into the cult of the Orixás. Through this spiritual money laundering, the power and danger and the inherent capacity for evil in the cult of these deities is tamed and made safe for the practitioner and the community of which she is a part. Those who fail to do so are liable to accusations of shirking their obligations to the Orixás and even of charlatanism. This particular set of coins was so suffused with the influence of Egum that they could not be used for anything but this sort of spiritual prophylaxis.

Preta surveyed the crowd who had participated in Brasília's *axexé*. She did a quick and dirty calculation of how many people were owed shares of the take in coins as she counted up the pile of currency. Each share would be quite small, not enough even to purchase a packet of candles. Furthermore, people were already disappearing back to their jobs and their beds. So she made an executive decision to ensure parity even if it implied a break with tradition. In life, Brasília was sweet, friendly, and benign. No one had any reason to expect different from her in death. Her *axexé* was complete, beautiful, and performed

with a good heart. Those who took part in it had nothing to fear. An inequitable distribution of the meager stack of coins could give rise to rancor and gossip. She decided that the candles for the saints could be forgone. With the heavy work of the *axexé* completed, the day could proceed in a festal rather than a devotional atmosphere. But the logic of the blessing that underlies religious hierarchies at the end of the *axexé* could not be forgotten.

Preta traded the coins from the *axexé* for a case of cold beer from a bar down the street. Then she let those who had worked receive their cups and her blessings one by one.

Life after death

It has now been more than two years since Brasília died. Soon her bones will be exhumed from her rented plot in Cachoeira's ornate and segregated cemetery and destroyed. But her connection to the Prison Alley *terreiro* will last much longer than her remains. She will always be fondly remembered by the members of her ritual family, which includes her blood daughter and granddaughter. But her connection to the temple goes much further than that. Brasília has become Egum. She is now a sacrosanct deity in the temple's private pantheon. Her powers can and will be mobilized, along with those of Maria's father and the rest of the family dead, to cure the sick and afflicted clients who arrive at Maria's door.

The *axexé* that we performed on her behalf transformed her subjectivity in a manner as radical as the transformations involved in her *feitura* or initiation to the cult of the Orixás. In initiation her head was consecrated as the vessel of Yansan and Yemanjá and the Eré and Caboclos who accompany them. The blood of sacrifice that was shed on her body and on her behalf was transmuted into the fictive blood of ritual kinship, making her a daughter and a sister to the members of the Prison Alley *terreiro*. These relationships were renewed and reaffirmed in countless communal ceremonies where the family united in the service of the Orixás. Together they cured the sick, afflicted the unjust, and came together in worship. Webs of mutual obligation united them. Brasília's individuality and her personhood were expressed in and created through her unique position in the temple's complex hierarchies.

However, upon her demise, her personhood, her individuality, and her multiple connections to the members of her blood and ritual families could become dangerous, even deadly to her survivors. In the *axexé*, the members of Maria's temple united to sever them. Brasília was dead but not gone. Her

continued proximity was a constant danger. They ameliorated this danger with money.

The ritual rendering of coins to the dead monetizes what were once reciprocal, familial relationships. The coins of the *axexé* sever kinship ties created through blood sacrifice. Relatives are not paid; they are given gifts. Payments rendered terminate obligations and destroy interpersonal relations. Gifts, as we have long known, create obligations and sustain interpersonal relations. Money is the universal equivalent and as such it is anonymous and impersonal. The dancers in the *axexé* rub coins over their bodies and toss them into Egum's calabash. They purge themselves of their personal relationship to the deceased. They pay her off. She was once Brasília, beloved sister, daughter, and mother. She is now Egum, a generalized, anonymous force to be called upon in *ebós*.

As one relationship is severed, others are reaffirmed. Brasília is dead. What made her Brasília must be destroyed. But the Prison Alley *terreiro* lives on. The relationships and the obligations that unite its living members must be maintained in the face of crisis. This is accomplished through a very different ritual transaction of money: the distribution of *dinheiro do chão*, or money on the floor. The floor itself is crucial. It is the dwelling place of the gods of the temple, the Orixás who anchor the system of ritual kinship that unites its human members. *Dinheiro do chão* is placed on the floor in homage to them. Money changes hands, but not directly. It is not a payment for services rendered among humans. It is a payment to the gods themselves in recognition for all they provide to their devotees. Only afterwards can it be gratefully collected by its humble final recipient.

The way she receives the money recognizes and reaffirms her place in the temple hierarchy. She prostrates herself and begs the blessing of the priestess who gives it to her. This ritual of submission underscores her devotion to the family of which she is a member. The money she picks up from the floor is a token, a gratuity, a gift and one that carries plenty of obligations.

The rendering of coins for the dead and money on the floor are two moments in an unending cycle of transformations of value between human and divine realms. Reciprocal ritual kinship is underwritten by commercial transactions of ritual services, between priestesses and clients, and between devotees and the gods they serve. One uses the anonymous power of money to sever family ties. The other uses money's pure potential to reproduce ritual hierarchies and families. Preta transformed the coins from Brasília's *axexé* into a case of beer. I am sure Brasília would have approved. The underlying logic is preserved. We took

our blessings with our cups, prostrate on the floor as she sat huge and haughty on a stool. The relative positions of the members of the ritual hierarchy were reaffirmed and the ties that unite us were celebrated with beery effervescence.

Notes

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¹ These are the deities that would take over Brasília's body in Candomblé Ceremonies. The Eré, Flor do Dia or Flower of the Morning is the spirit of a baby. Caboclo Oxossi is a West African Orixá reincarnated as a Caboclo or Brazilian Indian. Yansan and Yemanjá are Brasília's tutelary Orixás.

² *Irmãos de Santo* are those initiated to the same Candomblé ritual family.

³ Ketu is a nation "*nação*" or ritual variant of Candomblé that arrived in Cachoeira in the 1930s.

⁴ An Egum is a spirit of a deceased person in Candomblé parlance. The plural is Eguns.

⁵ The *Real* (pl. *reais*) is the unit of Brazilian currency. On 25 February 2005 it was worth .38 USD.

⁶ *Cachaça* is a liquor distilled from sugarcane. *Conhaque* is another cane liquor mixed with grape brandy and other flavorings to imitate cognac.

⁷ The *contraegum* (also called a *mocã*) is braided from raffia-palm fiber, dipped in a mixture of herbs and blood (called *abô*), and tied tightly around the biceps, hips, and/or ankles to provide protection from Eguns.

⁸ I do not try to replicate modern Yoruba orthography in my transcriptions of songs in Candomblé's liturgical language called *Iorubá*, nor do I provide translations. The people who sang these songs are not familiar with modern Yoruba orthography and are not able to provide word-by-word translations of their songs. This song pays homage to Exú in preparation for the ceremony for Egum.

⁹ A *limpeza* is a ritual cleaning to remove the influences of Exús and Eguns from the body of an afflicted person. Offerings to the spirits are passed over the arms, legs, trunk, and head of the client.

¹⁰ I use the male personal pronoun for Egum because Egum takes the masculine article in Portuguese. Eguns in general are referred to as masculine but specific female ancestors, when referred to by name, take feminine articles and pronouns.

¹¹ *Trabalho* means work, in this case a ritual service calling on Exú.

¹² *Ekedis* are the female counterparts of *ogans*. They are initiated officiants in Candomblé ceremonies who do not become possessed by the gods.

¹³ I use holocaust in its original sense of a sacrifice that entails the complete destruction of its victim.

¹⁴ *Axé* means a lot of different things. Here it refers to the life force of an animal contained in its blood and internal organs used to replenish the shrines of the Orixás.

¹⁵ *Peregún*, also called *nativos*, (*Dracaena fragrans*, English: corn plant) is nailed to the walls of Candomblé temples to ward off Eguns (cf. Voeks 125).

¹⁶ Santo here can refer equally to the saints of the Catholic pantheon and to the Orixás.

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