

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

Comment [bs1]: Note the way in which the review is headed by a full reference to the book: author, title, place of publication, publisher, date, number of pages, price and ISBN

It is an excellent monograph about Afro-Brazilian religious traditions, in particular Umbanda and Candomblé. The aim of the study is to demonstrate that the concept of a “pure” African tradition in Brazil does not exist despite many attempts to establish one particular version of Candomblé, Nagô (Yoruba) as the ‘ideal’ Afro-Brazilian tradition. The book was originally published more than a decade ago in French (1999) and half a decade ago in Brazilian (2004). Finally, this important contribution to Afro-American studies is now also available in English. The field of Afro-American studies is a multi-lingual field; however, the academic discourse across the range of Afro-America studies is unfortunately often affected by the lack of language skills of academics. Though scholars working about Brazil have known of Capone’s research for a decade, it is now also available for scholars of other areas of Afro-America. This is a crucial point because Capone’s study is more than a research monograph about the Afro-Brazilian religions. Her work also contributes to the theoretical discourse around ‘invention of tradition’ and the concept of ‘Africa’ in the Americas.

Comment [bs2]: The first paragraph introduces the book by making brief reference to the field and by declaring immediately what the reviewer thought about it. You do not need to do this but you need to think about how to introduce the review

Capone did most of her field work in Rio de Janeiro though not exclusively as she also included in her research framework religious houses in other Brazilian cities such as Bahia. Her research bridges therefore also geographically the separation between different houses and traditions.

Comment [bs3]: The second paragraph refers to the basic argument of the book

The book circulates around the ambivalent figure of Exu. Capone describes him as the central god in Candomblé because he enables the communication between humans and gods. However, he is also present in other Afro-Brazilian traditions as Capone points out which places him at a perfect position as mediator between the different religious traditions in Brazil. And in this process the African Exu becomes Brazilian (p. 11).

Comment [bs4]: The third paragraph makes more detailed reference to how the argument is constructed. This concentrates on analytical description rather than evaluation

The book is divided in three parts. The first part introduces the main Afro-Brazilian traditions as well as the central figure in this research, Exu with his female counterpart (in Umbanda) Pombagira. It gives important insight into the dynamics of the main Afro-Brazilian traditions that will be a welcome source of information for future students in this field.

Comment [bs5]: The next paragraphs then raise evaluative and critical issues with the book’s content and argument.

In the second part Capone then focuses on ritual activities. She describes successfully the “fluidity” in the day-to-day activities of the Afro-Brazilian religions that prevents the construction of any “pure” forms which is anyway more an ideal model than reality (p. 95). Capone highlights in particular the gap between the ideal orthodox model and its necessary adaptation in ritual practice (p. 126). An interesting aspect is, for instance, the transmigration of mediums from one tradition to the other. A consequence of the move of an Umbanda medium (and her/his spirits) to Candomblé is the Africanization of these spirits. The Umbanda Exu and Pombagira are metamorphosed, as Capone outlines, into the

slaves of African divinities. Even Pombagira, the female counterpart of Exu in Umbanda who had (originally) no African equivalent, gets re-africanized as Iyamí Oxorongá, the African witch (p. 141). Her extracts from her fieldwork in the religious houses, the quotations from her interviews with the participants and the photos of ceremonies in this section of the book make the book a fascinating ethnographical monograph.

The third part of the book then looks at the semantic shift in the figure of Exu and how it is linked to the adaptation strategies developed by the practitioners. At this point Capone discusses the impact researchers have had on Afro-Brazilian religions and in particular the “paradigm of pure African religion” (p. 174). She refers, for instance, to the research carried out in Bahia, the city many consider to be the ‘purest’ African place in Brazil.

Anthropologists such as Roger Bastide and Pierre Verger and their students have created with their research the image of a pure African tradition in Nagô Candomblé, especially in three traditional houses that became synonymous with Bahian tradition and culture (p. 199). By subscribing to one tradition, “anthropologists legitimize these traditions and perpetuate them” (p. 262). The result is that these three houses became the keeper of African tradition. Today, the debate about the place of the “true” tradition is at the heart of the re-Africanization movement in Brazil as Capone points out. While religion becomes the main expression of negritude, religious leaders are transformed into the new leaders of the political struggle of the Afro-Brazilian population. However, Afro-Brazilian religions, as Capone rightly elaborates, tend to ignore this dogmatic shift (p. 251).

In sum, it is a superb research and presents an important discourse in Afro-American Studies. Unfortunately the author was not able to update her study (apart from her own list of publication in the bibliography). Hence, she overlooks some interesting new contributions to the debate of Africa in Brazil. However, my last (and only negative) comment is directed at the publisher: change the translator! The language, in particular the structure of some sentences, follows (at least in the first part of the book) French rules instead of English and it takes a while to get used to it.

855 words

Comment [bs6]: The final paragraph makes some general evaluative comments. These can be positive but they do not need to be so. It is important to support whatever evaluative conclusion you reach.

Comment [bs7]: You must include a word count. You should not exceed 1500 words and write no less than 1450.