

## From the *Xirê* to the Stage: The Embodied Knowledge of the Dance of the Orixás and its Scenic Transposition in Grupo NATA's *Sirê Obá*

Patrick Campbell  
Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

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### Abstract

This article focuses on renowned Brazilian theatre company, Grupo NATA and their award-winning performance, *Sirê Obá* (2009). The company's work is predicated upon a theatrical appropriation of the Dance of the Orixás, which is used as a basis for psychophysical training and as a guiding principle during the devising process. By drawing on Brian Massumi's notion of incorporeal materialism, I will suggest that this unique approach to theatre making is informed by the play of affect, movement and intensity underpinning African Brazilian praise performance and that, rather than a mere discursive aesthetic embellishment, the tacit epistemology of *Candomblé* is integrally embedded into the group's praxis, forming the core of their poetics.

### Introduction

The African Brazilian initiatory religion *Candomblé* is characterized by ritual praise performance praxis in which discursive knowledge is integrated with tacit, intuitive awareness and spiritual wisdom garnered through lived experience. The sacred cosmology of *Candomblé* is founded on the premise that humans can enter into contact with the *orixás*<sup>1</sup>, divinities that are either manifestations of cosmic forces associated with nature or deified ancestors who act as mediators between mankind and the supreme Godhead, Olodumare. Olodumare is the source of all *axé*, the vital power or transformative energy that is fundamentally linked to ancestry and ritual lineage. *Axé* is cultivated through the reciprocal relationship between mankind and the *orixás*, which is made possible through an

embodied religious epistemology that fuses dance, song, percussion, botany, divination and liturgical scripture, and which reflects and expresses the sacred, political, economic and social life of the religious community.

Public *Candomblé* rituals are characterized by the *xirê*, the sequence of songs and choreographed steps performed in homage to the *orixás* in order to invoke their presence. The codified movements of each *orixá* are not only gestural signifying chains encoded with spiritual meaning, but also the channel of expression used by the *orixás* when they ‘mount’<sup>2</sup> initiates during ritual incorporation. These dances contain elements of *fundamento* – the theoretical principles and secret knowledge underpinning the religion. This *fundamento* is only fully comprehensible to initiates, and revealed within the context of initiatory ritual and ceremony.

From the 1940s onwards, aspects of *Candomblé*, and the ritual dances of the *orixás* in particular, have been transposed from the sacred context of the *terreiro*, the sacred space of *Candomblé*, to the realm of secular performance, whilst over the past two decades, contemporary Brazilian theatre practitioners have increasingly incorporated semiotic elements of African Brazilian praise performance into their training processes and scenic montages.

After a brief overview of the history of African religiosity in Brazil and the transposition of the Dance of the Orixás from a public ritual practice to a secular performance form, I shall go on to focus on the specific work of award-winning Brazilian theatre company, Grupo NATA, and more precisely, on the devising and staging of their 2009 performance, *Sirê Obá*. More than a mere folkloric embellishment, the codified movement forms of the *xirê* have been employed in the group’s work both as visual signifiers of African Brazilian identity and as a basis for the development of psychophysical actor training processes and dramaturgical strategies that draw implicitly on the embodied epistemic premises underpinning African Brazilian religiosity, immersing audiences in performance fields constellated by sensation, intensity and affect.

### ***Candomblé* – A Historiographic Overview**

According to Johnson,

Candomblé is a Brazilian redaction of West African religions recreated in the radically new context of a nineteenth century Catholic slave colony. Its variations and antecedent traditions were divided into nations, loose ethnic identities often defined by the port of embarkation, which once marked linguistic and ethnic histories but were later transposed onto

religious, liturgical traditions. (Johnson, 2002: 41)

The etymological root of the term *Candomblé* itself, which was increasingly applied to the religion in Brazil from the early nineteenth century onwards, is believed to be Bantu in origin, and is derived from the word *kandombile*, which means “prayer” or “veneration” (Castro, cited in Harding, 2000: 45). Thus an essentially West African religious practice was reformed and renamed on Brazilian soil using a South Central African moniker, emphasizing the pan-African syncretism at the heart of African Brazilian religiosity.

More African slaves were brought to Brazil than any other colony in the Americas. Although there are no exact figures<sup>3</sup>, it is estimated that around four million African men, women and children were transported to Brazil as a result of the transatlantic slave trade, and that over half of these arrived in the country between 1780 and 1850 (Johnson, 2002: 61).

During this final period, a large number of Yoruba were captured and sold into slavery. On arrival in Brazil, slaves from an array of different city-states who had departed from the ports of Ouidah, Porto Novo, Badagry and Lagos were labeled as *Nagô*, a word derived from the Fon term *anago*, used generically to describe Yoruba speakers. The *Nagôs* were also accompanied during the Middle Passage by a considerable number of Ewe speaking West Africans from the Gulf of Benin, collectively known in Brazil as *Jeje* (idem). These two broad, diverse ethnic groups would intimately inform African Brazilian religiosity and the development of *Candomblé* from the eighteenth century onwards.

Brazil was the last New World colony to renounce slavery in 1888, and the slow process of emancipation in the latter half of the nineteenth century coincided with increased police oppression of African Brazilians, and the vilification of *Candomblé* by Republican authorities inculcated in Social Darwinist theories of racial health and purity. This vehement oppression shifted somewhat after the 1930 revolution and the founding of the Estado Novo by the dictator Getúlio Vargas in 1937, due to an emerging ideology of racial democracy and the strategic formation of a national culture, in which Brazil’s African heritage could perhaps be a source of pride rather than shame.

During the 1960s, the opening up of West African countries as potential trading partners also had a beneficial effect on the way in which *Candomblé* was perceived nationally. There soon followed a sweeping reform of policies towards African Brazilian religions, which slowly became, along with Carnival and football, a folkloric symbol of Brazil’s tropical, mestizo national identity.

By the end of the twentieth century, *Candomblé* had transcended ethnic and social boundaries, becoming a popular national religion, with followers from a range of different backgrounds, including increasing numbers of white middle class Brazilians with no obvious African ancestry whatsoever. What was once a cause for shame – *Candomblé's* African roots – had now, become a source of pride and legitimacy.

### **The Transition of the Dance of the Orixás to the Stage – Historical Precedents**

African Brazilian dance (*dança afro*) first emerged as an autonomous art form separate from cultural and religious manifestations in the 1940s, partly as a response to the new wave of nationalism sweeping the country during this period, and also due to shifting attitudes towards black Brazilians and African Brazilian culture in general and the development of mass media and entertainment.

A key figure in the development of the dance form was Mercedes Baptista, who had been the first black ballet dancer at the Municipal Theatre in Rio de Janeiro. Highly talented as a performer, she went on to collaborate as choreographer with renowned black Brazilian activist, director, dramaturge and politician, Abdias de Nascimento's Teatro Experimental do Negro (TEN), the first all-black, politically motivated theatre company in Brazil, based in Rio, whose wide interest in pan-African culture was wedded to a deep-seated desire to improve the lot of African Brazilians (Monteiro, 2006: 6).

In 1951, Katherine Dunham visited Rio and was introduced to members of TEN, including Baptista. During her visit, Dunham offered a scholarship to a young Brazilian dancer, and after an intense period of auditions, Baptista was chosen. She spent a year studying modern African Dance with Dunham in New York before returning to Rio and setting up her own company, o Balé Folclórico Mercedes Baptista (ibid: 8).

Whilst Dunham had focused her research mainly on African Caribbean dance forms, on arrival in Brazil, Baptista began to research and codify African Brazilian dance forms, and in particular the Dance of the Orixás. These experiments would form the foundation for the development of a secular form of African Brazilian dance, which fused the ritual choreographies of *Candomblé* with elements of American Modern Dance (ibid: 10).

Salvador, Bahia, was another important hub for African Brazilian dance. In 1962, ethnomusicologist Emilia Biancardi founded the folkloric group, Viva Bahia, which mixed different forms of African Brazilian cultural manifestations on stage, such as the Dance of the Orixás, *Maculelê*

and *capoeira*. The group toured internationally, and even staged (simulated) orixá possession as a part of their performances. Both Viva Bahia and other folkloric groups, such as Olodum, that emerged during the same period became increasingly professionalized and, by the 1970s, included trained dancers in their line-ups (Oliveira, 2008: 10).

In the 1970s, African American dancer and choreographer, Clyde Morgan, directed the Contemporary Dance Company of the Federal University of Bahia, after having carried out extensive fieldwork and research across Africa. He would also have a major impact on the burgeoning Bahian *dança afro* scene, bringing traditional African movement forms and dances to Brazil, along with a solid grounding in Modern American dance, which he passed on to a generation of young Bahian dance practitioners (Oliveira, 1992).

Biancardi and Morgan both trained another key proponent of secularized African Brazilian dance – Raimundo Bispo dos Santos, better known as Mestre King. Mestre King developed his own version of African Brazilian dance – *afro moderno* – in the mid-1970s, which fused the Dance of the Orixás with elements of modern dance, much like Baptista and Dunham before him (Ferraz, 2008: 10). He went on to train a number of key African Brazilian dance practitioners, including the late, great Mestre Augusto Omolu, who worked extensively in the 1990s and 2000s with influential European theatre director Eugenio Barba and his company, Odin Teatret, and Bahian dancer-choreographer Zebrinha, who has also played an influential role in terms of weaving elements of African Brazilian dance into contemporary theatrical practice through his work with acclaimed black theatre company, Bando de Teatro Olodum.

In their respective work collaborating with the Bando de Teatro Olodum in Bahia and Odin Teatret in Denmark, both Zebrinha and Augusto Omolu helped codify and develop the Dance of the Orixás as a specific form of psychophysical actor training and dramaturgical matrix, rather than as a purely choreographic form of dance. Thus from the 1990s onwards, elements of the Dance of the Orixás began to creep into contemporary theatrical praxis in Brazil and, more specifically, Bahia, thanks in part to the work of these practitioners, both steeped in the techniques of *dança afro* and *afro moderno*, as well as the liturgical and ritual practices of *Candomblé*. Their work and research has intrinsically influenced the aesthetic explorations of Grupo NATA, as we shall see presently.

### **Movement, Sensation, Affect**

Towards the end of his book, *Secrets, Gods and Gossip: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé* (2002), Paul Christopher Johnson, following on

from scholar Rodriguez Ibarra, argues that there has been a fundamental shift in *Candomblé*, and African Brazilian religiosity in general, over the course of the past century. He suggests that the religion has moved away from an esoteric model based on secrecy and hidden knowledge, to an exoteric, non-initiatory cultural pattern in which the ritually codified semiotic systems of African praise performances are publically accessible to all, forming part of the wider social fabric (Johnson, 2002: 156).

Whilst at first this perspective may appear to resonate with the historical overview mapped out in the previous two sections, Johnson's semiotic analysis of *Candomblé's* cumulative socio-cultural prevalence is nevertheless problematic. Whilst the religion has undoubtedly grown exponentially in popularity, and shed much of the secrecy that necessarily surrounded it in the past, it would be misleading to suggest that because of this the embodied ritual knowledge of *Candomblé* can be acquired anywhere. This would also appear to contradict Johnson's earlier description of the veiled, at times tacit epistemic premises underpinning the religion, which are known in *Candomblé* as *fundamentos*. According to Johnson:

Fundamento in the singular can refer to one's terreiro of origin, the material symbol of one's initiation (*assentamento*), or to possessing foundation in the sense of having undergone a legitimate initiation in a house deemed respectable. But in the plural, fundamentos refer to any serious knowledge about Candomblé: myths of orixás, theoretical principles of the religion, herbal combinations, song texts, or sequences of ritual performance [...] fundamentos are not to be known *about*, knowledge gained through books, but to be known *through*, learnt through practice. It is the doing, not the knowing, of secrets which is key [...]. (Ibid: 31)

It is precisely the trace of this non-discursive, experiential and embodied knowledge that would appear to constellate the performances of Grupo NATA. Whilst the company's work no doubt reflects the increasing socio-cultural prevalence and legibility of many of the major tropes of African Brazilian religiosity, the ramifications of their psychophysical training practices and dramaturgical strategies - which have developed out of a sustained dialogue with the embodied epistemic premises of *Candomblé* - cannot be reduced to this increasingly familiar definitional framework alone.

Far from merely appropriating the signifying chains of *Candomblé* wholesale, and decontextualizing public ritual practice on stage as a scenic adornment that indexically points back towards the discursive universe of African Brazilian religiosity, the company would appear to draw

more upon the *play of intensities* at the heart of *Candomblé*. Their performance, *Sirê Obá*, seems to resonate more with the religion's *underlying ontogenetic premises* than with its overt semiotic structure. In other words, Grupo NATA seem much more motivated by what Brian Massumi (2002) has termed "incorporeal materialism" – the energetic flux of the indeterminate body-in-movement, characterized by indeterminacy, sensation, intensity and affect – than by mimesis and representation alone.

### **Recursivity and Embodied Knowledge in *Candomblé***

This recursive relationship between definitional frameworks and incorporeal materialism would seem to resonate with the complex epistemic tessiture of *Candomblé*. Although framed by multifaceted, ethnically specific and ancestrally consecrated signifying chains, which manifest in ritual practice and are encoded with sacred significance, much of the religion is, in fact, articulated around silence, and sustained by an intuitive, tacit process of initiatory learning.

As Johnson himself suggests: "In *Candomblé* the art of silence is transmitted through the injunction to see but not speak" (Johnson, 2002: 28). One could add that syn-aesthetic sensation is as important as sight in *Candomblé*, and that embodied perception taking place on a pre-discursive level is as significant a source of sacred knowledge as the word.

There is thus a tension within *Candomblé* between its rigid, hierarchical nature and complex, codified ritual praxis and what this praxis leads to; an extremely personal, embodied experience of divinity, of the orixá, understood here as an ancestrally consecrated collective and individualized incorporeal materialism, an energetic intensity that reaches its apex during the performative event that is trance possession. Perhaps one of the many "secrets" of *Candomblé* is precisely this in-articulable re-encounter with pure difference, which radically, if provisionally, transforms the subject, who transcends his or her static subject position (even within the rigid social structure of *Candomblé*) as s/he folds back into the fluid indeterminacy of the virtual through the body's opening up to the unknown.

For the orixás are manifestations of the immanent potentiality in man; they emerge in the *terreiro* through indeterminacy and movement, through the divinatory throwing of cowry shells, or the codified dance steps, singing and drumming of the *xirê*, or the cyclical flux of the annual liturgical calendar. They are present in the closed calabash of each *filho-de-santo*, each initiate, who re-elaborates the mythological past in the present through his/her continuing participation in public *festas* and private

rites. Space-time in *Candomblé* is thus essentially recursive; just as its discursive structure always points back to and renews the divinized past in the present as a futurity, the affective impact of the religion's multifaceted embodied epistemic web allows the initiate to fold back into the intensities of the indeterminate real but abstract and to reconnect with a trace of the immanent transcendence tacitly revealed through initiation and fortified periodically through the ritual event.

I believe that this recursivity between the discursive and incorporeal material levels of *Candomblé* are also present as trace in the work of Grupo NATA. I shall explore this idea further in the following sections.

## **Grupo NATA**

Grupo NATA<sup>4</sup> was founded in 1998 in the city of Alagoinhas, in the countryside of Bahia State, in the North East of Brazil. Artistic Director Fernanda Júlia was born into a family steeped in the traditions of *Candomblé*. Her mother, Roselina Barbosa, is an *iyalorixá*, a *Candomblé* priestess, and Fernanda Júlia herself is an *iyaoê*, an initiate privy to the mysteries of the religion. Her siblings, Nando and Fabíola, are also members of NATA and are themselves *Candomblé* initiates. Whilst a number of the other members of the group were not followers of the religion to begin with, they have gradually immersed themselves in the universe of *Candomblé*, with some going on to become initiates of Fernanda Júlia's mother, who has also served as an advisor to the group, guiding them in their scenic appropriation of the sacred cultural material of *Candomblé* (Barbosa, 2013).

From the very beginning, the group would rehearse at Fernanda Júlia's family home, which also doubled as a *terreiro*. Thus their theatrical performances all developed in this complex locus, this fusion of family compound and sacred space, so typical of African Brazilian religiosity. And this uniquely spatial syntagmatic overlap between different semiotic and sensible universes would go on to become the foundation of the group's own distinctive theatrical aesthetic, as we shall see shortly.

In 2006, Fernanda Júlia moved to Salvador and began to study Direction at the Theatre School of the Federal University of Bahia. It was here that she discovered the work of Eugenio Barba and Jerzy Grotowski. Their research into Theatre Anthropology and Art as Vehicle would, alongside the work of black Brazilian theatre companies such as TEN, the Bando de Teatro Olodum and the Companhia dos Comuns, serve as the fertile matrix out of which NATA's professional theatrical aesthetic would emerge. This culminated in 2009, at the end of her degree, with the



debut of an award-winning performance that would prove to be a turning point in the history of the group; *Sirê Obá*.

### ***Sirê Obá* and the Activation of Ancestral Movement**

According to Fernanda Júlia:

*Sirê Obá* is the concrete result of our scenic research into the activation of ancestral movement [...] This consists of a scenic investigation that doesn't lose sight of its artistic roots, but presupposes an encounter between the actor and his/her African Brazilian ancestry, through the body, through the voice, through dance, scenic games, sonorous, visual, olfactory and gustatory stimuli. It takes place through the encounter between the actor and the four primordial elements of nature, because these four primordial elements of nature unite all the Orixás [...] Candomblé initiates know that the Orixá is part of the composition of our personality, what you would call an archetype. And it is by investigating this archetype, this primordial element of nature, and the personality of the actor in question, that I can help him or her to encounter his/her ancestry, his/her ancestral unconscious, which is deeper still. This transcends any messianic or religious drive. This doesn't have anything to do with catechism. It has to do with cultural identity. It has to do with journeying to the core of your existence. (idem)

Drawing implicitly on the universe of *Candomblé*, and based on the *orikis*, praise poems recited during rituals to evoke the orixás, this sensorial, physically charged and choreographic piece of devised theatre was based in part on the structure of the *xirê* of *Candomblé*. However, rather than directly transpose the dance steps of each orixá, Fernanda Júlia developed a unique methodological approach, encouraging her actors to create sequences of improvised movements that she could then map onto her knowledge of the ritually codified movements of the orixás, and thus detect the archetypal ancestral energy influencing the work of each actor.

Fernanda Júlia's mother used the divinatory system of *Candomblé* to determine the orixá of each actor prior to the commencement of the devising process. Aware of each actor's unique ancestral link to the divine, Fernanda Júlia was then able to guide the actors through an unconscious exploration of their orixá's *fundamento* during the creative process, as the actors improvised sequences of physical actions linked to internal impulses and encounters with the four elements in nature.

To the keen initiated eye, much of the scenic material that emerged would often reflect and embody key symbols related to the *mythemes*,

ritual gestural language and/or energetic intensity of the actor's personal orixá. These resonant actions would make their way into the final performance, and would guide the actor in an intimate exploration of his or her unique ancestry and cultural heritage.

In the final performance, all of this improvised material was woven into a concrete montage in which each of the four actors became responsible for representing the primordial element that their movements most corresponded with, and embodying the orixás connected to this element. The orixás each appeared one after the other on stage according to the sacred "grammar" of the *xirê*. However, their movements were based on the actors' own sequences of actions, rather than an exact replication of the codified steps of the Dance of the Orixás.

Thus there is a deliberate, considered play of recursivity during the performance between the definitional level of *Candomblé* – its structural, semiotic organization, which is used by Fernanda Júlia to covertly mold the improvisations of the actors – and a broader recognition by the Grupo NATA of the orixá as energetic tendency, as intensity, as an incorporeal potentiality of each body, which transcends the religious context. Hence a trace of the tacit, non-discursive experience of the indeterminate unknown, which lies at the heart of African religiosity and praise performance, haunts *Sirê Obá*, which is quite deliberately constellated around a perceptual field that is as characterized by affect and sensation as by discursive logic or linearity.

In *Sirê Obá*, scenes of great expressive beauty were fused with recitations of the *orikis* and juxtaposed with allusions to elements of popular Brazilian culture, an impassioned monologue denouncing religious intolerance and racism, and a final scene in which Fernanda Júlia's own mother took to the stage in full *iyalorixá* regalia, singing a song in honour of the Orixá Oxalá before the spectators were finally invited to come and dance in praise of the orixás on the stage. As Fernanda Júlia explains:

The end of *Sirê Obá* is my mother, the mother of Zambi and Fabíola, who are actors in the performance, the ritual mother of Thiago, who is an actor in the performance, crossing the centre of the stage as the actors bow before her, playing the *adjá*<sup>5</sup>, dressed in white, wearing a bead necklace dedicated to Oxalá, singing in praise of the Orixá *pater*, the greatest Orixá of all [...] Now that we're in the fifth year of *Sirê Obá*, wherever we go, she goes. She's an actress in the performance now. (*idem*)

Thus ancestry – a key concept in *Candomblé*, linked to ritual lineage, *axé*, the orixás and, ultimately, ancestral Africa and a sense of origin – is embodied on stage by Fernanda Júlia's own (biological and ritual)

mother. An exclusively semiotic analysis of Dona Roselina's scenic appearance would not do justice to the emotive charge and complexity of this astute directorial decision. She is not just a signifier; she is a living embodiment of all that the performance represents – matriarchal African Brazilian religiosity, cultural legitimacy and fecund creativity. Her staged iconicity reflects the recursivity of the performance as a whole, which loops backwards and forwards between culturally codified discursivity, the material impact of the performative body-in-movement, and the affect-laden *jouissance* of the multifaceted syn-aesthetic, global performance field, a secular rite established through the complicity between actors, musicians and spectators.

This liminal recursivity, this feedback and feed-forwards so characteristic of the group's work, also takes place on a concrete spatial level, in the sense that the group devised, developed and debuted *Sirê Obá* in a *terreiro* in Alagoinhas, a small, rural city with little to no theatrical tradition, and continue to tour the show in the region by performing at local *Candomblé* houses, throwing into disarray the clear-cut distinctions between theatre and African Brazilian religiosity that pervade Brazilian society. Thus, in a radical sense, Grupo NATA not only transpose elements of *Candomblé* to the theatrical stage, they also transpose the conventions of Western theatre to the *Candomblé barracão*<sup>6</sup>, literally confronting the theatre with its ritualistic roots.

The socio-political impact of this strategic choice within the local community and for the *povo do axé* – *Candomblé* initiates and followers – is considerable. In this case, the performance is an act of affirmation, a definitional act that reiterates the aesthetic beauty and the cultural validity of the religion, by imbuing it with the cultural capital of theatre, still seen by many as an elite art form. Thus, whilst in the theatre, the reception of the performance is coloured by the affect-laden impact of the trace of the ritual act, inversely, in the *terreiro*, the reception is tinged with pride and a sense of verisimilitude, as *Candomblé* spectator-initiates see an iconic representation of their religiosity which, whilst blurring the traditional semiotic structures of the *xirê*, still resonates with the intensities of embodied ritual practice and the energetic tendencies of the *orixás*.

These performances also regularly attracted a steady stream of spectators from the theatrical circuit in neighbouring Salvador who would not normally visit Alagoinhas or necessarily frequent a *terreiro*. Thus rather than merely watching a scenic adaptation of African Brazilian ritual practices from the locus of a proscenium arch theatre predicated on the Western, Eurocentric tradition of the dramatic arts, non-*Candomblé* initiates were de-territorialized and re-territorialized through their spectatorship of *Sirê Obá* into the spatial-temporal universe of the *terreiro*.

Audience members were confronted with a radically different territory, characterized by a comparatively less structured flow of affect than in the traditional theatrical venue and thus with the innate potential for a heightened sense of movement and instability between those participating actively in the performance, and those spectating from the sidelines.

Hence by translating African Brazilian praise performance into a theatrical form whilst concurrently de-territorialising traditional theatrical reception via the transportation and integration of (lay) spectators into the sacred space of the *barracão*, the work of Grupo NATA has traced out a double-articulated, transformative assemblage that blurs the socio-political and cultural boundaries between (hegemonic, Eurocentric) theatre and the historically marginalized realm of *Candomblé*.

## Conclusion

Far from a passing exploration, the activation of ancestral movement has become a major methodological approach that the group have gone on to apply in other, more recent work, such as *Ogum: Deus e Homem*, (2010) and the one-man show, *Irimalé Ayê*, featuring actor Nando Zambia, which toured Europe in 2012. The group's sensitive, innovative theatrical work is fruit of a long line of black cultural stalwarts who have perpetuated African culture on Brazilian soil and who have continued to affirm their ancestral link to the orixás through both sacred and secular praise performance. As in the case of *Candomblé*, we reduce the work of Grupo NATA if we analyse it using traditional linguistic-based cultural theoretical models alone, which do not take into consideration the important contribution that affect, sensation and movement have on this complex, hybrid form of culturally specific, ritualized danced, choreographic theatre, which is, at one and the same time, an aesthetic option, an ideological and cultural act of affirmation, and an attempt to verticalise the actor's work on his or her self, connecting him/her with an embodied sense of ancestral intensity, with the indeterminate incorporeal materialism of the African Brazilian body-in-movement.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Candomblé is one of a number of African Brazilian religious practices in Brazil. It is generally separated today into three different “nations”; *Jeje-Nagô*, *Angola* and *Caboclo*, with lineages stretching back to the Gulf of Benin and Angola and the Congo, in the first two cases, and a mixed heritage including the worship of Indigenous Brazilian spirits, in the case of *Candomblé de Caboclo*. The term *Orixá* refers to Yoruba divinities within the Nagô-Ketu tradition. In the Jeje (Ewe) tradition, these divinities are termed *Voduns*, whilst in Angolan *Candomblé*, divinized ancestral spirits called *Nkisis* are cultivated. Whilst in certain quarters, *Orixás*, *Voduns* and *Nkisis* are equated with one another and treated as synonymous, it is worth emphasizing that they all belong to different, if at times overlapping, cultural traditions on the African continent. Over the course of this article, I shall mainly refer to “*Orixás*” and employ other key terms that relate back to the epistemic framework of the Nagô-Ketu tradition, due to questions of clarity and succinctness, and the frequent employment of such terms by *Candomblé* initiates throughout Brazil as shorthand to speak of their religious practice and paradigms.

- <sup>2</sup> The term “mount” here refers to a common trope in African Brazilian praise practice used to describe the manifestation of divinity in a human body. During trance, the initiate is said to be the “horse” that is “mounted” by the Orixá as the vertical plane of ancestrally consecrated divine energy fuses with the horizontal plane of human existence during the context of ritual practice.
- <sup>3</sup> The vast majority of official documents pertaining to slavery in Brazil were destroyed by Minister Rui Barbosa in 1891 during the first regime of the Republic.
- <sup>4</sup> The acronym NATA stands for Núcleo Afro Brasileiro de Teatro de Alagoinhas (African Brazilian Theatre Group of Alagoinhas).
- <sup>5</sup> A metal bell rang in *Candomblé* to invoke the *Orixás*.
- <sup>6</sup> A space in the terreiro dedicated to public ceremonies.