Religious Studies (2024), 1–17
doi:10.1017/S0034412523001129

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The mythic narratives of Candomblé Nagô and what they imply about its Supreme Being

José Eduardo Porcher

Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil
Email: jeporcher@esp.puc-rio.br

(Received 30 October 2023; revised 8 December 2023; accepted 8 December 2023)

Abstract

In this article, I explore the mythic narratives of the Yoruba-derived tradition of Candomblé Nagô to discern the attributes of its Supreme Being. I introduce Candomblé, offering an overview of its central beliefs and practices, and then present theological perspectives on the Supreme Being in African Traditional Religion as a basis for comparison with the myths I will examine. I consider the primary creation myths of Candomblé, emphasizing references to the tradition's Supreme Being and, analysing these myths, I argue that Candomblé's Supreme Being, as depicted in these narratives, amounts to a limited god. This portrayal accounts for the absence of a problem of evil within the tradition. It suggests the moral ambivalence of Candomblé's Supreme Being and other high deities, as well as the world itself. This exploration sheds light on a lesser-explored tradition and its unique approach to philosophical dilemmas, distinct from the predominantly theistic framework of most philosophy of religion, and evinces that philosophizing through immersion in myths should involve appreciating the complexities and richness inherent in these forms of life, free from the imposition of external assumptions or biases.

Keywords: Afro-Brazilian religions; Candomblé; Olorum/Olodumare; problem of evil; mythology

Introduction

Nearly a century ago, Roger Bastide (1945, 28) made a profound observation when he stated, 'Candomblé philosophy is not a barbarian philosophy, but a subtle thought that has not yet been deciphered'. Despite drawing considerable attention from anthropologists, this tradition has remained largely unexplored by philosophers of religion, even within its own place of origin. I am committed to rectifying this oversight, acknowledging that Afro-Brazilian traditions offer a promising avenue to expand the scope of the philosophy of religion. This expansion involves challenging the discipline's historically narrow and single-minded focus on rarefied forms of theism that often bear little resemblance to how religions are practised and lived. Realizing this transformation will demand tapping into frequently overlooked sources of philosophical insight.

More than two decades ago, Kevin Schilbrack (2002, 1) bemoaned the lack of attention given to the study of myths from a philosophical perspective. It was a rare endeavour at the time, even though one might assume that philosophy would be a natural domain for exploring myths. Unfortunately, this assumption has held true only in a few exceptional cases. However, in our context, we find ourselves without an alternative. Oral literature

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and ethnography serve as our primary sources, demanding our reliance on myths for the philosophical examination of Afro-Brazilian religions. As Mikel Burley (2022) points out, mythic narratives encapsulate worldviews that can genuinely be considered philosophical. Thus, the philosophy of religion stands to gain significant enrichment by according these narratives consistent and thoughtful attention.

In this article, I will delve into mythic narratives of the Yoruba-derived Nagô tradition of Candomblé to extract a set of attributes of this tradition's Supreme Being. I will introduce Candomblé, providing an overview of its central beliefs and practices. Next, I will present theological viewpoints regarding the Supreme Being of 'African Traditional Religion' – more specifically, of the traditional religion of the Yoruba people of Western Africa – which will serve as a foundation for contrasting with the myths to be examined. I will then present the primary creation myths of Candomblé, highlighting references to the tradition's Supreme Being. Lastly, I will scrutinize these myths to uncover insights into the nature of the Supreme Being and evaluate their alignment with the theological perspectives offered earlier. I will argue that Candomblé's Supreme Being, as portrayed in the mythic narratives, is a limited god. Further, I will posit that this portrayal accounts for the complete absence of a problem of evil within this tradition, and that the myths suggest the moral ambivalence of Candomblé's Supreme Being and high deities, as well as the world itself. In so doing, I aim to shed light on a lesser-explored tradition by understanding why certain philosophical dilemmas do *not* emerge within it, rather than trying to force it into the mould of classical problems formulated within the predominantly theistic framework of most philosophy of religion.

Candomblé

Between 1500 and the 1860s, upwards of 4 million enslaved Africans were forcefully brought to Brazil, a remarkable figure that accounted for nearly 40 percent of all individuals made to endure the transatlantic journey, surpassing the number sent to the United States by more than tenfold (Bergad 2007).[1] These individuals, hailing from diverse African ethnic backgrounds, became intertwined, notably in Brazil's early capitals, Salvador and Rio de Janeiro. They brought their languages, deities, rituals, cuisine, dances, and music, which blended with traditions from other enslaved groups and syncretized with the Roman Catholicism introduced by Portuguese colonizers. The intricate amalgamation gave rise to the family of traditions known as Candomblé.

Two main ethnic groups were predominantly brought to Brazil during the transatlantic slave trade. The first group, often referred to as the Western 'Sudanese', included the Yoruba (known as Nagô in Brazil), the Ewe and Fon peoples (referred to as Jêje), and the Ashanti. They originated from present-day West African nations like Nigeria, Ghana, Benin, and Togo, and primarily arrived through the port of Salvador and worked in northeastern sugar mills between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The second group, pertaining to the Bantu ethnolinguistic grouping, consisted mostly of the Angolans, Kasanje, and Mbangala from present-day Congo, Angola, and Mozambique. They primarily arrived through the port of Rio de Janeiro and worked along the Brazilian coast and in interior regions, particularly between present-day Minas Gerais and Goiás.

Slavery forced these individuals to adapt their worship traditions to a hostile and oppressive environment, ultimately forming Afro-Brazilian religions as a testament to resistance and identity formation (Engler and Brito 2016). These traditions endured through the abolition of slavery and continue to evolve. Afro-Catholic syncretism was prevalent in Candomblé, stemming from the prohibition of worshipping African deities. Because of this, to this day, many of these deities are still associated with Catholic saints

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in popular imagination. However, in recent decades, practitioners have sought to 're-Africanize' their traditions by removing the white masks imposed on their deities (Ogunnaike 2020).

The Brazilian religious landscape is diverse, featuring traditions like Babassuê, Batuque, Jarê, Macumba, Omolocô, Pajelança de Negro, Quimbanda, Tambor de Mina, Terecô, Umbanda, Xambá, and Xangô de Pernambuco. Nevertheless, Candomblé takes precedence due to its historical, cultural, and demographic significance. Candomblé comprises various 'nations', especially Queto (Nagô), Jêje, and Angola, and it developed mainly in the nineteenth century. It involves the invocation and celebration of African deities most commonly referred to as *orixás* (from the Yoruba *òrìṣà*),[2] as well as semi-divine ancestors, and powerful spirits.[3] Candomblé teaches that initiated individuals can voluntarily be possessed by, or rather 'incorporate', these divine beings in their bodies during public ceremonies, characterized by a trance that involves the loss of consciousness. Moreover, offerings and animal sacrifices are essential in paying homage to the orixás, facilitating the transmission of the sacred vital force known as *axé* (*àṣẹ*), for health and well-being. This method of worship forms the basis of several religious traditions born in the context of New World slavery, such as the Cuban tradition of Lucumí (also known as Regla de Ocho or Santería) and the traditions of Haitian Vodou and Dominican Vudú.

To speak of variegated, plural, and malleable traditions such as Candomblé always involves a significant risk of overgeneralization. Even so, we cannot avoid some measure of generalization if we are to speak about them at all. Notably, we may highlight four characteristics of these traditions that are distinctly relevant to their philosophical study. First, they are orally transmitted, and there are no universally agreed-upon textual sources. Second, they are noninstitutionalized in that no central authority controls Candomblé, and practitioners organize in autonomous worship places known as *terreiros*.[4] Third, they are ritual-focused, and there is no centrality to the profession of faith. Fourth, they are significantly embodied in their ritual ceremonies that involve dancing, singing, and drumming. Therefore, these traditions deviate from the rarified academic Christian theism that still permeates the philosophy of religion.

Candomblé Queto,[5] also known as Nagô, is a tradition primarily rooted in Yoruba culture, but it has also been influenced by other cultures, including Kardecist,[6] Catholic, and Amerindian elements. This tradition has been extensively studied by anthropologists, ethnologists, and sociologists, resulting in a wealth of ethnographic sources. In this discussion, I will focus on Nagô mythology, particularly as it is presented in classic compilations and studies by Juana Elbein dos Santos (1976/2012), Monique Augras (1983/2008), Pierre Verger (1985/2019), Reginaldo Prandi (2001), and José Beniste (2006).

Although there are no specific myths centred on the high god of Candomblé, Olorum (Ọlọ́run), also known as Olodumare (Olódùmarè),[7] this god nevertheless plays a significant role in various Yoruba and Yoruba-derived myths, particularly those related to the origins of existence and the creation of the earthly realm, the *aiê* (*àiyé*). In that pre-creation state, only the spiritual realm, referred to as *orum* (*ọ̀run*) existed. Adebanji Akintoye (2010, 48) explains that at least since the tenth century, Yoruba mythology envisioned the spiritual realm as comprising two distinct spheres: a higher and a lower one. The higher sphere is where the supreme Olorum-Olodumare resides. The Yoruba people, in general, held the belief that humans could not fathom the types of sacrifices that would appease this highest god. In contrast, the second heavenly sphere exists in close proximity to the earthly realm and serves as the abode for all other deities and ancestors, organized in a hierarchical order from the highest to the lowest.

By most accounts, the top tier includes the triad of Yoruba high deities (Gbadegesin 2013): Oxalá (whose name is a contraction of Orixanlá, from Òrìṣànlá), also known as Obatalá (Ọbàtálá); Orunmilá (Ọ̀rúnmìlà), also known as Ifá; and Exu (Èṣù). In our

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

exploration of the mythic narratives within Candomblé that revolve around Olorum-Olodumare, Oxalá-Obatalá takes centre stage as the primary protagonist. He is credited with nothing less than the creation of the earthly world, and sometimes even all the beings that inhabit it. Orunmilá-Ifá, on the other hand, is the Yoruba deity associated with divination, knowledge, and wisdom. While not at the core of Candomblé worship, he plays a significant role in numerous mythic narratives.[8] And, finally, Exu, of whom Augras (1983/2008, 91) says 'Exu is not an orixá, but the personification of the principle of transformation' and who some myths say was the first individual being created by Olorum-Olodumare.

Akintoye suggests that the top tier also includes Ogum (Ògún), the deity of war, associated with iron, along with other higher orixás. Candomblé teaches that every human is governed by orixás, whose identities are revealed through divinatory rites. Most orixás are associated with specific elements of nature believed to possess and impart the axé of that specific deity. Among the most important orixás in Candomblé worship are the female deities Oxum (Ọ̀ṣun), Iemanjá (Yemọjá), Iansã (Yánsàn), and Nanã (Nàná), associated with freshwater, the sea, the wind, and mud, respectively. Besides Ogum, some of the main male deities include Xangô (Ṣàngó), associated with quarries and thunder, and Oxóssi (Ọ̀ṣọ́ọ̀sì), linked with forests.[9]

Even if Olorum-Olodumare does inhabit the same plane of existence as the highest divinities, Akintoye maintains that Olorum-Olodumare is supreme and unfathomable.[10] This aligns with Candomblé mythology and practice: in Brazil, much like in Yorubaland, there are no shrines or sacrifices dedicated to Olorum-Olodumare (Carneiro 1948/2019, 63). In fact, one might spend a considerable amount of time in a terreiro before hearing mention of Olorum-Olodumare unless one specifically inquires into the world's creation, the origin of the orixás, or the ultimate source of axé. In that respect, the myths tell of a time when the spiritual and earthly realms were not separated. In the following narrative, prevalent especially in Nagô terreiros in Recife and Queto terreiros in Rio de Janeiro, Prandi (2001, 526–528) gives an account of the origin of key Candomblé practices such as incorporation, offering, and initiation.[11]

> In the beginning, there was no separation between
> the Orum, the Heaven of the orixás,
> and the Aiê, the Earth of humans.
> Humans and deities came and went,
> Living together and sharing lives and adventures.
> It is said that, when the Orum bordered the Aiê,
> a human being touched the Orum with dirty hands.
> The immaculate heaven of the Orixá had been defiled.
> The pristine whiteness of Obatalá was lost.
> Oxalá complained to Olorum.
> Olorum, the Lord of Heaven, the Supreme God,
> angered by the filth, waste, and carelessness of mortals,
> blew with divine wrath,
> and forever separated Heaven from Earth.
> Thus, the Orum separated from the world of humans,
> and no one could go to the Orum and return from there alive.
> The orixás also could not come to Earth with their bodies.
> Now there were the world of humans and the world of orixás, apart.
> Isolated from the human inhabitants of the Aiê,
> the deities grew sad.
> The orixás longed for their escapades among humans,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and they walked around in sadness and sulked.
They went to complain to Olodumare, who eventually consented
that the orixás could occasionally return to Earth.
However, for this to happen,
they would have to take on the material bodies of their devotees.
This was the condition set by Olodumare.
Oxum, who used to delight in coming to Earth to play with women,
sharing her beauty and vanity with them,
teaching them spells of lovable seduction and irresistible charm,
received a new task from Olorum:
to prepare mortals to receive the orixás in their bodies.
Oxum made offerings to Exu to facilitate her delicate mission.
The joy of her fellow orixá siblings and friends depended on her success.
She came to the Aiê and gathered women around her,
bathing their bodies with precious herbs,
cutting their hair, shaving their heads,
and painting their bodies.
She painted their heads with small white dots,
like the feathers of the guinea fowl.
She dressed them in beautiful fabrics and abundant bows,
adorning them with jewellery and crowns.
She adorned their *ori*,[12] their heads, with the *ecodidé* feather,
a rare and mysterious red plume from the grey parrot.
In their hands, she made them carry *abebés*,[13] swords, sceptres,
and on their wrists, dozens of golden *indés*.[14]
She covered their necks with colourful beads
and multiple strings of cowrie shells, ceramics, and corals.
On their heads, she placed a cone made of *ori* butter,[15]
fine herbs, and chewed *obi*,[16]
with all the seasonings that the orixás love.
This *oxo*[17] would attract the orixá to the initiate's *ori*,
and the orixá had no way of making a mistake in returning to the *Aiê*.
Finally, the little brides were made,[18]
they were ready, and they were *odara*.[19]
The *iaôs*[20] were the most beautiful brides
that Oxum's vanity could imagine.
They were ready for the gods.
The orixás now had their horses,[21]
they could safely return to the Aiê,
they could ride the bodies of the devotees.
Humans made offerings to the orixás,
inviting them to Earth, into the bodies of the *iaôs*.
So the orixás would come and mount their horses.
And while the men played their drums,
resonating the batás and agogôs, sounding the xequerês and adjás,[22]
while the men sang, cheered, and applauded,
inviting all initiated humans to the circle of *xirê*,[23]
the orixás danced and danced and danced.
The orixás could once again coexist with mortals.
The orixás were happy.
In the circle of those who were made, within the bodies of the *iaôs*,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> they danced and danced and danced.
> Candomblé had been created.

Equating Olorum-Olodumare, the supreme being of Candomblé, with *God* – by which most Western philosophers usually think of the God of Abrahamic religions – is far from uncontroversial. While this matter is seldom debated among scholars in countries with significant Yoruba-diasporic religious communities, such as Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, in the context of African philosophy, discussions on this topic date back to the 1960s. Indeed, in recent years, these debates have drawn upon classic arguments in the philosophy of religion (Agada and Attoe 2023). In the following section, I will briefly introduce the views of scholars working on what has been termed African Traditional Religion (ATR), specifically Yoruba religion, regarding the attributes of Olorum-Olodumare. This will provide a basis for comparing these perspectives with the conclusions drawn from the Nagô myths themselves, which will be analysed later in the article.

The 'God' of African Traditional Religion

In the past, African religious thinkers primarily focused on what Kwasi Wiredu (1998) referred to as the decolonization of African religion.[24] Scholars such as Bọlaji Idowu (1962), John Mbiti (1970), and Ọmọṣade Awolalu and Adelumo Dọpamu (1979), all possessing a Christian theological background, took it upon themselves to refute the racially biased arguments put forth by early European missionaries and anthropologists. Influential authors like the explorers Samuel Baker and Richard Burton had held a very negative view of ATR. Baker, for instance, declared that Africans 'are without a belief in a Supreme Being, neither have they any form of worship or idolatry, nor is the darkness of their minds enlightened by even a ray of superstition' (cited in Ray 1976, 2). In his turn, Burton (1864, 199) claimed that 'The Negro is still at the rude dawn of faith-fetishism, and he has barely advanced to idolatry. . . He has never grasped the idea of a personal deity'. As part of the post-colonial scholars' (very understandable) reactive attitude, running across their writings is the idea that, on the contrary, ATR is properly monotheistic. As such, Idowu and Mbiti, among others, espoused the view that the 'God' of ATR is supreme, transcendent, creator, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. In short, the view that Olorum-Olodumare is what John Bishop (1998) has called an 'omniGod'. Let's call this view 1.

In their comprehensible fervour, however, they might have overcorrected. Scholars like Otok p'Bitek (1971) and Byang Kato (1975) have argued that those who were part of the first wave of the decolonization effort did not go as far as they should have in contesting the claims made by the likes of Baker and Burton. They suggest that those African scholars' Christian beliefs and agenda might have limited their ability to accurately interpret genuine African viewpoints on the Supreme Being of ATR. John Bewaji (1998, 4) goes so far as to accuse them of smuggling 'their Christian beliefs into the religious terrain of Africa; they Hellenized and clothed the African God in borrowed garbs, as if He had always been nude'. Nevertheless, the view that Yoruba religious thought warrants understanding Olorum-Olodumare in maximal theistic terms still finds adherents in contemporary scholars such as Ebunoluwa Oduwole (2007), whom Ademola Fayemi (2012) accuses of making the same mistakes as the post-colonial scholars who, in their efforts to refute the claim that Africans lacked a coherent concept of God, allegedly integrated European categories into African religious thought. Fayemi argues that in Yoruba cosmogony, the Supreme Being is perceived as limited. Moreover, as we will discuss below, Fayemi emphasizes

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that, unlike God in the Christian tradition, Olorum-Olodumare and the other deities are not considered perfect beings who cannot be malevolent (Fayemi 2012, 11).

Relying like Bewaji and Fayemi do on a critical examination of oral mythic narrative sources of African religious thought, Olusegun Oladipo (2004) also challenges the traditional theistic interpretation of Olorum-Olodumare and defends the idea of a limited god. As he observes, Yoruba mythology repeatedly depicts a Supreme Being who fashioned the world using pre-existing materials – where 'pre-existing' can encompass notions of eternal existence, as well as antecedence to or coexistence with Olorum-Olodumare.[25] The clear inference drawn from the assertion that the Supreme Being shaped the world from materials that perpetually existed is that Olorum-Olodumare possesses certain limitations, suggesting a departure from the traditional concepts of omnipotence and transcendence. Moreover, Oladipo (2004, 360) affirms that if we view omnipotence as the possession of infinite powers, it is questionable whether Olorum-Olodumare can be genuinely seen as all-powerful. Thus, Bewaji, Fayemi, and Oladipo all argue that the mythic narratives of the Yoruba imply that Olorum-Olodumare is supreme, but not transcendent; creator, but not omnipotent, omniscient, or omnibenevolent. Let's call this view 2.

Finally, another view is presented by Segun Gbadegesin (2013) who suggests that even the toned-down conception of Olorum-Olodumare proposed by view 2 goes too far. Gbadegesin argues that Yoruba belief recognizes other divinities with supreme authority in specific domains. For instance, Orunmilá-Ifá governs destiny, while Exu presides over order and balance. As these deities have a direct impact on human well-being, Gbadegesin contends that Olorum-Olodumare's centrality should be questioned, especially taking into consideration the lack of temples, rituals, or cults dedicated to Olorum-Olodumare in most of Yorubaland. According to Gbadegesin, Olorum-Olodumare can be viewed as the 'first among equals' rather than unambiguously supreme. This perspective, let's call it view 3, places Olorum-Olodumare on the same plane as Orunmilá-Ifá, Exu, and Oxalá-Obatalá, all of whom have authority and power over the world. Below this tier are other orixás (e.g. Oxum, Ogum, and Iemanjá), followed by the ancestors on a lower spiritual plane. Finally, beneath the spiritual realm, we find the earthly world inhabited by humans and other living beings. Because the most theologically significant narratives about Olorum-Olodumare's nature are found in the myths of creation of the aiê, in the next section we will look to three different sources to evince the attributes of Candomblé's highest deity.

Mythic narratives

Elbein dos Santos (1976/2012, 59) provides us with one of the few narratives about what happened even before the generation of the orixás, the creation of the earthly world, and its definitive separation from the spiritual world. She recounts (1976/2012, 61):

> [I]n the beginning, there was nothing but air; Ọ̀lọ́run was an infinite mass of air; when it began to move slowly, to breathe, part of the air turned into a mass of water, originating the great *Órìṣà-Funfun*, *òrìṣà* of white. The air and water moved together and a part of themselves turned into mud. From this mud a bubble or mound emerged, the first matter to be given shape, a reddish and muddy rock. Ọ̀lọ́run admired this shape and blew on the mound, breathing his breath and giving it life. This form, the first endowed with individual existence, a laterite rock, was *Èṣù*, or rather, the proto-*Èṣù*, *Èṣù Yangí*.

When Olorum-Olodumare decided to create the earthly world, he called on the great orixá, the firstborn, Oxalá-Obatalá, who the narrative above calls the 'orixá of white' and the next one will call the 'Lord of the White Cloth' (a literal translation of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'Ọ̀bàtálá'). This begins what is probably the most widespread narrative of creation in Nagô mythology. There are various compilations of this myth in the ethnographic literature and, having closely examined a wealth of extant sources,[26] Prandi (2001, 503–506) does a commendable job capturing its essence:

> In a time when the world was only Olodumare's imagination,
> there was only the infinite firmament and, beneath it, the vastness of the sea.
> Olorum, the Lord of Heaven, and Olocum, the Mistress of the Oceans,
> were of the same age and shared
> the secrets of what was and would be.
> Olorum and Olocum had two children:
> Orixalá, the firstborn, also called Obatalá,
> and Odudua,[27] the youngest.
> Olorum-Olodumare entrusted Obatalá,
> the Lord of the White Cloth, with the creation of the world.
> [Olorum] bestowed powers upon him for this purpose.
> Obatalá sought the counsel of Orunmilá,
> who advised him to make offerings to succeed in the mission.
> But Obatalá did not take Orunmilá's prescriptions seriously,
> as he believed solely in his own powers.
> Odudua observed everything attentively
> and on that day, he also consulted Orunmilá.
> Orunmilá assured Odudua
> that if he made the prescribed sacrifices,
> he would become the ruler of the world that was to be created.
> The offering consisted of four hundred thousand chains,
> a chicken with five-toed feet,
> a pigeon, and a chameleon,
> along with four hundred thousand cowries.
> Odudua made the offerings.
> On the day of the creation of the world,
> Obatalá set out on a journey to the border of the beyond,
> where Exu is the guardian.
> Obatalá did not make the offerings in that place,
> as prescribed.
> Thus, a great thirst began to torment Obatalá.
> Obatalá approached a palm tree
> and touched its trunk with his long staff.
> Wine gushed abundantly from the palm tree
> and Obatalá drank from the wine until he became intoxicated.
> He became completely drunk and fell asleep on the road,
> under the shade of the palm tree.
> No one would dare to awaken Obatalá.
> Odudua watched everything.
> When he was certain that Oxalá was asleep,
> Odudua picked up the sack of creation
> that had been given to Obatalá by Olorum.
> Odudua went to Olodumare and told him what had happened.
> Olodumare saw the sack of creation in Odudua's possession
> and entrusted him with the task of creating the world.
> Then Odudua took the chameleon

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> and made it walk on that surface,
> demonstrating the firmness of the place.
> Obatalá was still asleep.
> Odudua set out for the Earth to claim it as his own.
> Then, Obatalá woke up and learned of what had transpired.
> He returned to Olodumare and recounted his story.
> Olodumare said,
> 'The world has already been created.
> You missed a great opportunity'.
> To punish him, Olodumare forbade Obatalá
> from drinking palm wine forever,
> him and all his descendants.
> But the mission was not yet complete,
> and Olodumare bestowed another gift upon Obatalá:
> the creation of all living beings that would inhabit the Earth.
> And so, Obatalá created all living beings,
> and he created man and woman.
> Obatalá moulded the human beings from clay,
> and the breath of Olodumare brought them to life.
> The world was now complete.
> And all praised Obatalá.

An alternative telling of the myth of Oxalá-Obatalá and the creation of the earthly world, also compiled by Prandi (2001, 502–503), omits the participation of Odudua. Elbein dos Santos, who is one among other scholars who characterize Odudua as female, and says that: 'The fight for the supremacy between the sexes is a constant factor in all Nagô myths' (1976/2012, 62–63). Importantly, this is a reminder that Candomblé myths are not univocal. Indeed, the alternative telling has Oxalá-Obatalá actually succeeding in singlehandedly creating the earthly world. This time, he does not ignore Orunmilá-Ifá's advice, so this alternative telling is less of a cautionary tale regarding the importance of offering and sacrifice (as well as never forgetting to appease Exu before one sets out to do something). While Prandi's version of the alternative telling does not feature Oxalá-Obatalá becoming inebriated with palm wine, the detailed version compiled by Beniste (2006) does – agreeing with other compilations of Yoruba mythology, such as Harold Courlander's (1973, 34–35). Yet, the consequence this time is not that Oxalá-Obatalá misses the opportunity to be the lord of creation, but that he mishandles a different task. As the following excerpt from Beniste's version (2006, 47–48) tells us:

> With all the elements in his power, Ọ̀bàtálá completed the task, equipping the Earth with woods, forests, rivers, and waterfalls. Soon after, he was assigned another job, that of modelling the physical image of those who were to inhabit the entire created Earth. To do this, he turned the clay over and moistened it with water from the springs, modelling, in the form determined by Olódùmarè, figures identical to human beings. Ọ̀bàtálá worked tirelessly, becoming exhausted and very thirsty. He sought to help himself with palm wine, *ẹmu.* Therefore, he went to look for liquid among the oil palm trees to alleviate his thirst. Upon extracting the liquid, he let it ferment and then drank it for a long time until he felt his body soften and everything around him spin. When he managed to stand up, he returned to work, but without his initial conditions. As a result, several models of the figures became clumsy, misshapen, with crooked legs and arms. Others had a high back, disproportionate head, and irregular height, identical to dwarfs [*sic*]. Even so, everyone was

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> placed in an appropriate position, awaiting the presence of the Supreme Being to give life to all the inanimate figures.
>
> The instruction given to Ọbàtálá, therefore, was that, when he had completed his part in the creation of Man, he would notify Olódùmarè, who would then come to give life, placing the *ẹmìí* [breath] in their bodies, thus completing the creation of the human being. From mere moulded clay figures, they transformed into beings of blood, nerves, and flesh. With life breathed into their nostrils, they began to walk and do the things necessary for their survival.
>
> When the effect of the palm wine ceased, Ọbàtálá saw that some humans he had moulded were deformed. He was sad and felt remorse. Then he said, 'I will never drink palm wine again. I will always be the protector of all humans who are defective or who were created imperfect'. Because of this promise, human beings who are lame, blind, armless, deaf, mute, and those who have no pigment in their skin, albinos, are called *Ẹni Òrìṣà*, special people under his protection.

Equipped with the above mythic narratives, which constitute the foundation of Nagô beliefs concerning Olorum-Olodumare, the creation of the earthly realm, and the dynamics between Olorum-Olodumare and the higher orixás, we are now adequately poised to evaluate the validity of the perspectives articulated by scholars of ATR in the context of the Supreme Being of Candomblé Nagô. In the next section, I will distil a fundamental set of theological attributes inferred from these mythic narratives and elucidate why they provide a framework that explains the inapplicability of the philosophical problem of evil to Candomblé.

What the myths imply

With the exception of supremeness, which is only questioned by Gbadegesin, every other quality that view 1 attributes to Olorum-Olodumare is either contradicted by the narratives or cannot be inferred from them directly. As we have seen, Elbein dos Santos's (1976/2012, 61) account of the Yoruba myth of the origin of the universe tells that Olorum-Olodumare was originally an infinite mass of air a part of which, when it began to move and breathe, turned into a mass of water that gave rise to Oxalá-Obatalá. The movement of air and water then originated mud, which turned to rock, on which Olorum-Olodumare breathed life, creating Exu. Yoruba genetic myths support at least two arguments against transcendence. First, if Olorum-Olodumare created the world using pre-existing materials, this implies that the Supreme Being has always been an integral part of the world order. Thus, Olorum-Olodumare cannot be said to exist beyond the world. Second, Yoruba mythology repeatedly tells that Olorum-Olodumare resides in the orum and not beyond it. If Olorum-Olodumare's abode is within the orum, and the orum is part of the world, then Olorum-Olodumare cannot be said to exist outside the world. Furthermore, as we have seen, the myths tell of a time characterized by constant interaction between humans in the aiê and the spiritual beings in the orum, during which humans could visit Olorum-Olodumare's abode at their convenience.[28]

The myths also do not warrant saying that Olorum-Olodumare's status as sole creator of the universe is unambiguous. Even if Olorum-Olodumare's action (or rather, movement) is responsible for the origination of the elements from which Oxalá-Obatalá, Exu, and plausibly the other orixás are engendered, Nagô mythology tells that the creation of the earthly world and the living beings that reside in it is delegated either to Oxalalá-Obatalá singlehandedly, or the task is split between Oxalá-Obatalá and Odudua. As Bewaji (1998, 8) notes, where Olorum-Olodumare did not directly cause or create,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the orixás were nevertheless instructed and supervised by the Supreme Being (although the extent and competence of such supervision is questioned by some of the mythic narratives, especially Beniste's version).

Ostensibly, to attribute the classical theist traits of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence to Olorum-Olodumare is to go beyond the descriptive exercise of attempting to construct a picture from the mythic narratives and rather to venture into a normative theological exercise unconstrained by (and perhaps unconcerned with) the myths. As first evidence of this, note that nowhere in the Yoruba narratives or the Nagô myths derived from them does one ever hear that Olorum-Olodumare is an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good being. According to the myths, Olorum-Olodumare is indeed the source of all life and the source of all power (e.g. breathing life into a laterite rock to create Exu, breathing life into human shapes to engender humans, conferring power on the orixás to be creators, managers, protectors, and messengers). Moreover, Oxalá-Obatalá, Orunmilá-Ifá, and the other orixás are either created by, or ultimately emerge from, Olorum-Olodumare. As the source of all life and the one who confers power to the orixás and delegates to them the creation and subsequent administration of the earthly world, we may infer from the myths that Olorum-Olodumare is the *most* powerful being, that is, supremely powerful, but not necessarily omnipotent.

The same goes for omniscience and omnibenevolence, of which there is no indication in the myths. In fact, the mythic narratives do not even imply that Olorum-Olodumare possesses the highest knowledge or moral goodness, let alone being perfectly or maximally knowledgeable or morally good. On the one hand, when it comes to omniscience, it is worth noting that in instances where knowledge is sought, such as at the outset of Oxalá-Obatalá's quest to create the earthly world, individuals turn to Orunmilá-Ifá, the deity of divination, rather than to Olorum-Olodumare. Interestingly, some Yoruba myths even depict Olorum-Olodumare seeking guidance from Orunmilá-Ifá (Bewaji 1998, 8; Gbadegesin 2013, 107). On the other hand, regarding omnibenevolence, the myths not only portray Olorum-Olodumare allowing evil to go unchallenged and uncorrected but also present Olorum-Olodumare as a distant and seemingly unempathetic persona. Furthermore, if the responsibility for the fact that the orixás themselves commit evil under Olorum-Olodumare's gaze can ultimately be traced back to the Supreme Being, this would imply that Olorum-Olodumare is morally ambivalent at best. This resonates with Bewaji (1998, 11), who affirms that the Supreme Being of Yoruba religion 'is conceivable as capable of both good and bad' and 'uses both for the ultimate good governance of the universe'.

In that respect, recall that in Beniste's (2006, 47–48) narrative Olorum-Olodumare delegates the creation of human beings to Oxalá-Obatalá, who then gets intoxicated on palm wine while taking a respite from his toils and proceeds to craft compromised shapes, supposedly representing every congenital disability. Instead of correcting Oxalá-Obatalá's mistakes, or urging him to try again, Olorum-Olodumare decides to breathe life into these human forms, lending support to Bewaji (1998, 8) when he states that Olorum-Olodumare 'created both the good and the bad, the well-formed and the deformed [*sic*], the rainy season and the drought' (1998, 8). As co-creators, Olorum-Olodumare and Oxalá-Obatalá would seem naturally to share the responsibility for the evil that ensues from their negligence.[29] However, while, in a poignant moment in Beniste's narrative, Oxalá-Obatalá vows to make amends for the wrongs he has committed, pledging to protect those who suffer due to his negligence, Olorum-Olodumare does and says nothing.

The theme of blame appears in a teaching story in Cuban Lucumí about Oddúa (the Caribbean Spanish rendering of Odùduwà) compiled by Natalia Aróstegui (1994, 88). While Odudua is omitted from Beniste's version of the creation myth, Aróstegui recounts

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a narrative in which Odudua is enlisted to correct an actual mistake left by the Supreme Being (called Olofi in Afro-Caribbean religions of Yoruba descent, from *ọlọ*, meaning 'owner' and *ọfin*, 'origin'[30]):

> When Olofi wanted to create the world, he descended with Obatalá (this Obatalá is the oldest of them all, Obatalá-Occuá). With enthusiasm for creation, Olofi made marvellous things (like the ceiba tree, the clouds, the rainbow, and the hummingbird), but he also faced failures and left some things unfinished. For instance, he left humans without heads. Naturally, they wandered directionless, and the world seemed like a madhouse. Annoyed, Olofi entrusted Oddúa to give them heads. Oddúa did so but left them with only one eye. It was Iba-Ibo who had to come and place their eyes where they are now and give them mouths, voices, and words. That's when humans began to be as we know them, and everything seemed fine. However, today, they threaten to disrupt all of Olofi's creation, and one doesn't know whether to blame the Father of the orishas or Oddúa, or whether to be sad or burst into laughter.

Whether Olorum-Olodumare only orders Oxalá-Obatalá (or perhaps Odudua) to create and shape human beings or takes an active role in this creation and shaping – be it breathing life into the human forms or even co-creating and co-shaping them – it seems that Olorum-Olodumare would have both the power and the opportunity to correct the mistakes alluded to in Beniste's and Aróstegui's narratives. Why then is it that the problem of evil does not naturally arise in Yoruba and Yoruba-influenced religions?[31] The fact that view 1 is contradicted by the myths makes sense of this absence when we look at the general structure of the problem as it is understood by contemporary philosophers. For instance, Michael Hickson (2013, 16) summarizes it as follows: if there is a God, then God must possess attributes X, Y, or Z; but evil shows that God cannot possess attributes X, Y, or Z; therefore, there is not a God.

Hickson's summary directs our attention to the fact that arguments from evil are specifically aimed at undermining modern proponents of perfect-being theology, the core of which is the omniGod thesis (Nagasawa 2008). The arguments usually come in two forms. The logical problem of evil is the appearance of inconsistency between the existence of God and the existence of any evil at all, such that a defence against it is thus an argument that aims to show that this appearance is misleading. On the other hand, the evidential problem of evil focuses on the inconsistency of maximal-person properties and gratuitous, horrendous evil (not just any evil). A common example that chimes with our previous discussion is that of a child born with serious congenital disorders (e.g. Spina bifida, holoprosencephaly, hypophosphatasia, etc.). Here is a paraphrase of William Rowe's (1979, 336) original formulation of the argument:

1. Gratuitous, horrendous evil sometimes occurs, which an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being could prevent without sacrificing a greater good or allowing equally terrible evil.
2. An omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being would prevent gratuitous, horrendous evil when possible, unless doing so would result in the loss of a greater good or the allowance of equally severe evil.
3. An omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly omnibenevolent being does not exist.

The argument examines the world to identify elements in our experiences that may cast doubt on the existence of an omniGod and then points to the existence of intense, seemingly unwarranted human and animal suffering as one such element. On the basis of this

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

observation, Rowe contends that the existence of an omniGod is highly improbable, providing reasonable grounds for embracing atheism, which in this case, means rejecting classical, personalist theism. However, if Olorum-Olodumare is not an omniGod, the problem of evil becomes irrelevant. Oladele Balogun (2009, 15) agrees, noting that the Yoruba perspective on Olorum-Olodumare, as a high god, makes it impossible for this Supreme Being to possess absolute attributes like all-powerfulness, all-knowingness, and all-goodness that give rise to the philosophical problem of evil. Since arguments from evil target the existence of an omniGod, the rejection of view 1 clarifies why Candomblé does not grapple with the problem of evil: Candomblé does not adhere to perfect-being theology, and Olorum-Olodumare is not an omniGod.

Finally, considering the significance of Oxalá-Obatalá, Orunmilá-Ifá, and Exu, we confront a final question: is Olorum-Olodumare truly the Supreme Being in Candomblé, or does view 3, suggesting that Olorum-Olodumare is merely first among equals, hold more merit? While the myths may portray Oxalá-Obatalá as more benevolent than Olorum-Olodumare, while emphasizing Orunmilá-Ifá's supreme knowledge, and underscoring Exu's indispensable role in all endeavours, view 3 is contradicted by the fact that Olorum-Olodumare is everywhere depicted as the origin of everything and the bestower of life and power. Thus, Olorum-Olodumare *is* the Supreme Being in Candomblé, despite occasional dependencies on Oxalá-Obatalá, Orunmilá-Ifá, and Exu. Still, a more in-depth exploration of the myths may offer a basis for further discussion, potentially leading to more debate on the choice between views 2 and 3, or even the emergence of an alternative perspective. Engaging in this speculative exploration, which honours the mythic narratives, would be a welcome instance of what Burley (2020) describes as the 'narrative turn' in the philosophy of religion and it would add to the exploration of neglected forms of religiosity that extend well beyond the typical Western philosophical concerns.

Concluding remarks

Writing in the 1940s, the eminent Brazilian anthropologist Edison Carneiro foreshadowed the African scholars who would, from the 1960s on, defend African Traditional Religion from its relegation to fetishism or, at the very least, polytheism. Carneiro (1948/2019, 14) declared with assurance that:

> We now know that in them [Afro-diasporic religions], the existence of a being was always admitted, whom the Yoruba called Olorum (a word that means Lord or Owner of Heaven) and whom the Bantu-speaking Africans called Zâmbi or Zambiampungo (which eventually became Zaniapombo in Brazil). All the qualities of the gods in universal religions, such as Christianity and Islam, are attributed to the supreme divinity, who has no altars, organized worship, and cannot be materially represented.

While this type of homogenizing judgment may be well-intentioned, the oral mythic narratives transmitted across generations by Candomblé practitioners offer a contrasting perspective. Even if we avoid taking these narratives too literally and acknowledge their multifaceted nature, they function as a linguistic instrument for articulating the values, beliefs, and commitments of religious communities – aspects that history, and perhaps even ethnographic fieldwork, may not entirely unveil. In the absence of universally agreed-upon codified texts, these narratives become invaluable resources for us to, within the realm of philosophy of religion, approach these overlooked traditions with due respect. An additional facet of our endeavour to comprehend Candomblé's portrayal of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

its Supreme Being, which is equally essential, will require a closer examination of ritual practices, aided by ethnography – a resource that philosophers of religion have, regrettably, overlooked for far too long. Ideally, philosophizing by immersing ourselves in myths and rituals should encompass an appreciation of the complexities and richness inherent in these forms of life, free from the imposition of external philosophical assumptions or biases. However, it is important to recognize that, at times, doing conceptual justice to a religious form of life will entail showing differences rather than seeking commonalities, and that is entirely acceptable.

Acknowledgements. Earlier versions of this article were presented at Waseda University (April 2023), the University of Birmingham (June 2023), the University of Brasília (September 2023), and the Logic and Religion Association (October 2023). I am grateful to audiences at these events for questions and discussion. I also thank Yujin Nagasawa and the Birmingham Centre for Philosophy of Religion for hosting me during the time I was working on this article, and Mikel Burley, Fernando Carlucci, Katie Horan, and Hasskei Majeed for valuable comments on an earlier draft.

Financial support. Thanks are due to the John Templeton Foundation for funding the project *Expanding the Philosophy of Religion by Engaging with Afro-Brazilian Traditions*, of which this special issue and the articles herein are a result.

Author biography. José Eduardo Porcher is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil. His main interests lie in explaining and understanding extraordinary beliefs and experiences, both in the context of psychopathology and religion. He is currently writing a book titled *Afro-Brazilian Religions and Philosophical Methodology* for Cambridge University Press.

Notes

1. SlaveVoyages.org, a database hosted at Rice University, gathered data on 34,948 transatlantic slave voyages from 1501 to 1867 and estimates the number of enslaved Africans brought to Brazil at 5,848,266.
2. All subsequent parenthetical additions to Brazilian Portuguese words in the vocabulary of Candomblé will refer to the Yoruba words from which they originate.
3. The deities are also referred to as *voduns* (from the Fon and Ewe languages) in Candomblé Jêje and *inquices* (from the Bantu *nkisi*) in Candomblé Angola – the two main nations of Candomblé besides Queto (Nagô).
4. The word 'terreiro' comes from the Portuguese word 'terra' (meaning 'land' or 'earth'). In this context, 'terreiro' can be translated to 'ground' or 'space'. It is a place where the ceremonies, dances, drumming, offerings, and other religious practices associated with Afro-Brazilian religions are conducted.
5. The Brazilian Portuguese rendering of the Yoruba 'Kétu' and synonymous with 'Nagô' (from 'Ànàgó'), originally referring to a subgroup of the Yoruba people mainly living in the town of Kétu (Kétou) in the Republic of Benin and south-west Yorubaland.
6. Brazilian Kardecism, a transplant of nineteenth-century French Spiritism (founded by Allan Kardec), emphasizes mediumship for communicating with spirits and highlights healing, miracles, and the veneration of leaders renowned for their spiritual evolution. Kardecists believe in soul progression through multiple incarnations, guided by disincarnated souls, with charity as a central virtue (Engler and Isaia 2016).
7. The supreme being of Candomblé is perhaps most often referred to in Brazil as Olorum (Ọlọrun, lit. 'lord of the ọrun') but also Olodumare (Olódùmarè, possibly 'owner of the source of creation'), the title most used in Yorubaland. Because the myths will use both names interchangeably, I have made the pedagogical choice to use the composite hyphenated 'Olorum-Olodumare' to avoid confusion. I will also do this when mentioning orixás who are known by more than one name and who are central to the mythic narratives of Candomblé, namely, Oxalá-Obatalá and Orunmilá-Ifá.
8. About the cult of Orunmilá-Ifá, Prandi (2001, 569) notes: 'Highly important in Cuba, where he is called Orula, he is virtually forgotten in Brazil, except in some traditional Xangôs of Pernambuco and in Africanized Candomblés, where his worship is being revived'.
9. There are, of course, other orixás who figure both in the practice and in the mythic narratives of Candomblé Nagô. Some of the more prominent ones are Ossaim (Ọsányìn), Logunedé (Lógun Ẹ̀dẹ), Obaluaiê (Ọbalúwáiyé), and Oxumarê (Ọ̀ṣùmàrè).
10. Because Olorum-Olodumare is generally considered to be genderless or beyond human gender categories, I have respected this fact by avoiding gender-specific language, even while risking verbosity.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

11. All following translations from Portuguese and Spanish-language sources in this article are my own.
12. *Ori* (*ọ̀rì*) literally means head, but by extension it can mean destiny or, more commonly, refer to one's head orixá (*orixá de cabeça*), namely, one's main protector, the one who receives the sacrifice during *bori*, the first rite of initiation in Candomblé.
13. An *abebé* is a circular-shaped fan, an attribute of Oxum when made of brass or gold, frequently featuring a mirror in its centre. It is also an attribute of Iemanjá when it is made of silver. They are used in the rituals of Candomblé, but also in other Afro-Brazilian religions such as Batuque, Omolocô, Xambá, and Xangô.
14. *Indés* are usually golden but sometimes silver rings used in the *ibás*, which are the sanctuaries (mostly referred to as settlements) of the deities of Candomblé.
15. Here, the Portuguese *ori* (*òrí*) refers not to one's head (or head orixá) but to shea butter (*Vitellaria paradoxa*).
16. Prandi (2001, 567) explains that *obi* refers to the 'Cola nut, an African fruit acclimatized in Brazil (*Cola acuminata*, *Streculiacea*), essential in Candomblé rituals; replaced in Cuba by the coconut'.
17. Prandi (2001, 569) explains that *oxo* is 'the name for the cone made from chewed *obi*, *ori*, and other elements, which is affixed to the shaven head of the initiate, indicating that they are ready to receive the orixá during trance'.
18. The Portuguese words for 'made' ('feita(s)' in the feminine, 'feito(s)' in the masculine) carry special significance since initiation is called *feitura* (lit. 'making'). Marcio Goldman (2007, 111–112) emphasizes that a person is not born as a complete entity but rather gradually constructed throughout the extended process of initiation, where the initial possession effectively shapes their identity. As Bettina Schmidt (2016, 113) sums up, 'a person is "made" during the initiation'.
19. Yoruba-derived word meaning 'good' and, by extension, 'beautiful' widely used in Bahia, particularly in Candomblé circles, made widespread by Caetano Veloso's homonymous song.
20. Yoruba-derived word meaning 'young spouse' and, by extension, *filha de santo* (lit. 'saint's daughter'), usually a female initiate of a lower rank in the initiatory journey of those who enter into possession trance.
21. In Afro-Brazilian religions, the term 'horse' (*cavalo*) symbolically denotes an initiated individual who can be possessed (or 'mounted') by a particular orixá (or other spiritual entity), facilitating communication and interaction between the spiritual and human realms.
22. Rhythmic instruments used in Afro-Brazilian rituals with the purpose of summoning the orixás or to induce possession trance. *Batá* is a type of drum commonly used in Xangô de Pernambuco; *agogô* is a double bell and one of the oldest instruments used in samba; *xerequê* is a rattle made with a gourd covered by a net of beads; and *adjá* is a small metal bell.
23. Yoruba-derived word meaning 'play', denotes a ritual in which initiates sing and dance in a circle for all the orixás.
24. The concept of God explored in this section, framed as 'African Traditional Religion', predominantly aligns with Yoruba beliefs. However, it's crucial to recognize the existence of diverse African perspectives. For example, in Akan religion, the conception of God differs significantly (Majeed 2022).
25. See, for instance, the mythic narrative by Elbein dos Santos (1976/2012, 59) cited in the next section.
26. Prandi closely follows Elbein dos Santos (1976/2012, 64–66) and Pierre Verger (1985/2019, 88–93), but also incorporates elements from narratives by Leo Frobenius (1949, 162–163), Ulli Beier (1980, 7–8), Agenor Miranda Rocha (1994, 60–63), and Arno Vogel et al. (1993, 174).
27. In Yoruba religion, Odudua (Odùdúwà) is considered one of the primary progenitors and a significant cultural figure associated with the founding of the Yoruba people and the city of Ilé-Ifẹ̀ in present-day Nigeria. About the absence of Odudua in Candomblé cult, Prandi (2001, 23) states: 'In Africa, there is a great dispute between the supporters of Obatalá and those of Odudua, but in Brazil, Odudua was less fortunate and disappeared almost completely, being confused with an aspect of Oxalá himself'.
28. Prandi (2001, 514), following Miranda Rocha (1994, 64–66), compiles a myth about the separation of the spiritual world from the earthly world that begins: 'In the beginning, there was no prohibition against moving between the Orum and the Aiê | The separation of the two worlds was the result of a transgression, | the breaking of an agreement between humans and Obatalá. | Anyone could freely pass from the Orum to the Aiê. | Anyone could go from the Aiê to the Orum without constraint'.
29. A more positive way of framing this would be to say that such negligence led to the emergence of diversity, and the ongoing presence of such diversity underscores the notion that even errors can be harnessed for good purposes – even by divine entities. This form of diversity, particularly within the realm of disability, fosters heightened empathy and forges a more profound connection between Oxalá-Obatalá and humanity. However, I doubt that such a positive reading would stand when dealing with severely crippling and painful congenital disorders (what will be referred to below as examples of gratuitous, horrendous evil).
30. Confusingly enough, in at least some contexts that title is given to Odudua, as when Verger (1985/2019, 89–93) calls Odudua 'Olofin-Odudua' in his version of the myth of the creation of the earthly world.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

31. Although much discussed by African scholars in recent times (see e.g. Agada 2023), I have found no discussion at all of anything resembling the problem of evil in connection with Afro-Brazilian (or, for that matter, Afro-Atlantic) religions.

References

Agada A (2023) God's existence and the problem of evil in African philosophy of religion. In Imafidon E, Tshivhase M and Freter B (eds), *Handbook of African Philosophy*. Cham: Springer, pp. 555–574.

Agada A and Attoe AD (2023) Shifting perspectives in African philosophy of religion. *Religious Studies* 59, 291–293.

Akintoye SA (2010) *A History of the Yoruba People*. Dakar: Amalion.

Aróstegui NB (1994) *Los orichas em Cuba*, 2nd edn. La Habana: Unión.

Augras M (1983/2008) *O duplo e a metamorfose: a identidade mítica em comunidades Nagô*. Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes.

Awolalu JỌ and Dọpamu A (1979) *West African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: Onibonoje Press.

Balogun OA (2009) The nature of evil and human wickedness in traditional African thought: further reflections on the philosophical problem of evil. *Lumina* 20, 1–20.

Bastide R (1945) *Imagens do nordeste místico em branco e preto*. Rio de Janeiro: O Cruzeiro.

Beier U (1980) *Yoruba Myths*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Beniste J (2006) *Mitos Yorubás: o outro lado do conhecimento*. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil.

Bergad L (2007) *The Comparative Histories of Slavery in Brazil, Cuba, and the United States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bewaji J (1998) Olodumare: God in Yoruba belief and the theistic problem of evil. *African Studies Quarterly* 2, 1–17.

Bishop J (1998) Can there be alternative concepts of God? *Noûs* 32, 174–188.

Burley M (2020) Narrative philosophy of religion: apologetic and pluralistic orientations. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 88, 5–21.

Burley M (2022) African religions, mythic narratives, and conceptual enrichment in the philosophy of religion. *Religious Studies* 58, 1–17.

Burton RF (1864) *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome*. London: Tinsley Brothers.

Carneiro E (1948/2019) *Candomblés da Bahia*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes.

Courlander H (1973) *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes*. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett.

Elbein dos Santos J (1976/2012) *Os Nàgô e a morte: pàde, àsèsè e o culto ègun na Bahia*. Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes.

Engler S and Brito Ê (2016) Afro-Brazilian and indigenous-influenced religions. In Schmidt BE and Engler S (eds), *Handbook of Contemporary Religions in Brazil*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 142–169.

Engler S and Isaia AC (2016) Kardecism. In Schmidt BE and Engler S (eds), *Handbook of Contemporary Religions in Brazil*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 186–203.

Fayemi AK (2012) Philosophical problem of evil: response to E. O. Oduwole. *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy* 4, 1–15.

Frobenius L (1949) *Mythologie de l'Atlantide*. Paris: Payot.

Gbadegesin S (2013) African religions. In Taliaferro C, Harrison VS and Goetz S (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Theism*. London: Routledge, pp. 102–113.

Goldman M (2007) How to learn in an Afro-Brazilian spirit possession religion: ontology and multiplicity in Candomblé. In Berliner D and Sarró R (eds), *Learning Religion: Anthropological Approaches*. New York: Berghahn Books, pp. 103–119.

Hickson M (2013) A brief history of problems of evil. In McBrayer JP and Howard-Snyder D (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 3–18.

Idowu EB (1962) *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief*. London: Longmans.

Kato BH (1975) *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*. Kisumu: Evangel.

Majeed H (2022) Evil, death, and some African conceptions of God. *Filosofia Theoretica* 11, 53–70.

Mbiti J (1970) *Concepts of God in Africa*. London: SPCK.

Miranda Rocha A (1994) *Os Candomblés antigos do Rio de Janeiro*. Rio de Janeiro: Topbooks.

Nagasawa Y (2008) A new defence of Anselmian theism. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 58, 577–596.

Oduwole EO (2007) The dialectics of *ire* (goodness) and *ibi* (evilness): an African understanding of the philosophical problem of evil. *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy* 31, 1–13.

Ogunnaike A (2020) What's really behind the mask: a reexamination of syncretism in Brazilian Candomblé. *Journal of Africana Religions* 8, 146–171.

Oladipo O (2004) Religion in African culture: some conceptual issues. In Wiredu K (ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 355–363.

p'Bitek O (1971) *African Religions in Western Scholarship*. Nairobi: Literature Bureau.

Prandi R (2001) *Mitologia dos orixás*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Ray BC (1976) *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual, and Community*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
Rowe W (1979) The problem of evil and some varieties of atheism. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, 335–341.
Schilbrack K (2002) Introduction: on the use of philosophy in the study of myths. In Schilbrack K (ed.), *Thinking Through Myths: Philosophical Perspectives*. London: Routledge, pp. 1–17.
Schmidt BE (2016) *Spirits and Trance in Brazil: An Anthropology of Religious Experience*. London: Bloomsbury.
Verger PF (1985/2019) *Lendas africanas dos orixás*. Salvador: Fundação Pierre Verger.
Vogel A, Mello MAS and Barros JFP (1993) *A Galinha d'Angola: iniciação e identidade na cultura Afro-Brasileira*. Rio de Janeiro: Pallas.
Wiredu K (1998) Toward decolonizing African philosophy and religion. *African Studies Quarterly* 1, 17–46.

Cite this article: Porcher JE (2024). The mythic narratives of Candomblé Nagô and what they imply about its Supreme Being. *Religious Studies* 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001129

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001129 Published online by Cambridge University Press