

# OMI ERÙ E PÒPÒ: AN ATTEMPT AT AN AUDIOVISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE YEMOJA FESTIVAL AT THE ILÉ ÀSÈ PALEPA MARIWO SESU TEMPLE

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ORCID  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7062-2441>

JOSÉ PEDRO DA SILVA NETO <sup>1</sup>

Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, Brasil, 05580-000 –  
ppgas@usp.br



FIGURE 1

Source: Fernanda  
Ayodele Procópio,  
2010

**Song link:** <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XfC8P-B7coKQ-PlYYS-lZaeIJMKYinuTP/view?usp=sharing>

*Omi erù e pòpò*

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## INTRODUCTION: MAY THE WATER I BRING WITH ME BE MIXED WITH THE WATER YOU HAVE<sup>2</sup>

This study aims to analyze the Yemoja festival, which has been held at the *Ilé Àse Palepa Mariwo Sesu* Candomblé temple since 1979 in honor of the community's patron deity. It is the annual event in which *Yemoja*, the great water goddess, appears publicly in the temple and performs a traditional rite in which she bears a gourd filled with water, surrounded by helpers who bear her votive food (Photo 1).

This traditional African Yoruba<sup>3</sup> territory was founded in 1977 and inaugurated in 1979 by Candomblé High Priestess (or "Mother") *Ìyá Sessu* (Clarice do Amaral Neves) and *Bàbá Jasindê* (Antônio das Neves Filho) in the southern São Paulo district of *Pedreira*.

My experience as an older initiate in this traditional territory as a fourth-generation blood relative and graduate student enables me to transit between the waters<sup>4</sup> that flow between this temple and academia. It always leads me to think that dance, music, singing, visual and aesthetic performance, food, and clothing are inseparable, i.e., they refer to the inseparability of the senses.

My proximity to the research subjects "from within" as someone who belongs to an ethnic-racial group that has been and is discriminated against and persecuted, and which suffers ceaselessly from racism (and, therefore, uses secrecy as a strategy for maintaining their relationship with the sacred) has afforded me better access to the researched phenomenon. On the one hand, this study is an attempt to do ethnography of a rite in a re-Africanized temple in which I participated as far back as when I was in my mother's womb and in which, for the past 30 years, I

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2. "May the water I bring with me mix with yours" is the translation of the song above. In our traditional Afro-Brazilian community, it is sung in different rites. While drumming and singing the *bravum*, we sprinkle water with our fingers over people, objects, and places.

3. This ethnic group is for the most part concentrated in present-day Nigeria, to a lesser extent in present-day Benin (formerly Dahomey) and to an even lesser degree in Togo and Ghana, all of which are in Black Africa. The *Yorùbá* ethnic group is subdivided into several subgroups in Brazil, such as *Kétu*, *Òyó*, *Ìjèsà*, *Ifè*, *Ifòn*, *Ègbá*, *Èfòn*, etc. These gave rise to the Orisha religion in the diaspora. "The term Yoruba applies to a language group of several million individuals. In addition to the common language, the Yoruba are united through the same culture and traditions in the city of Ilé-Ifè. It is doubtful that, before the nineteenth century, they would have called each other by the same name." (Biobaku 1973, 1). Before the term "Yorùbá" was in common usage, old books and maps between 1656 and 1730 were "unanimous" in calling these people *Ulukumy*. In 1734, the term "*Ulukumy*" disappears from maps and is replaced by *Ayo* or *Eyo* to designate those from the Òyó empire. The term "*Yoruba*" was only coined in the western world in 1826. It seems to have been attributed exclusively to the people of Òyó by the *Hausa* (Barretti Filho 1984).

4. In traditional African-American communities, the term "water" is used to define an aggregate of rites known as a "nation," "people" or "modality" or to indicate an initiative matrix or a kind of school within a tradition. For example, when asked: What are your waters? I would answer: They are *Yorùbá!* They are *Nagô!* They are from *Ìyá Sessu's* temple! I am using this term as a metaphor for the academic and religious contexts in which I participate.



have played the role of master of ceremonies, a role which enables me not only to set all aspects of the performance in motion, but also affords me the honor of leading it.

On the other hand, as an anthropologist, my “effort will be redoubled to avoid restricting my research to the relationships and stances contingent to my own life experience within the religion” (Silva 2000, 69), which means that my participant observation “from the inside” will be used as a “tool” to seek objectivity in this anthropological work without giving up detachment and astonishment. As Silva (2000) points out, being or becoming initiated is not intrinsic to carrying out fieldwork in Candomblé temples but should such a decision be taken by a researcher, they must consider, when the time comes, reflecting on the results obtained from such a condition.

Furthermore, it consists of a decision to rationalize the phenomenon through ethnography and recurrence and to define it for the humanities without analyzing the meanings behind every moment of the rite. Rather, it tries to show how it can bring together visual, sound, and performative dimensions to move and affect all those who participate in it, i.e., ethnography as a way of feeling the world, as an experience [...] shaping contents that are inexpressible in other languages, a term understood here as an articulation of signs and symbols.” (Amaral and Silva 1992/2019, 338).

The boundary between the initiate and the anthropologist can apparently only be breached by mixing these waters in an attempt to create a mixture that can undo the overlap between science and the act of doing and vice versa.

In this study, I will use the metaphor of the gourd as a container to try to “mix” these sources of knowledge. On the one hand lies my knowledge of the Afro-Brazilian tradition and, on the other, knowledge that arises from learning and debating in university anthropology, music, and audiovisual courses<sup>5</sup>. As Sylvia Caiuby Novaes (2009), the professor of one of these courses, mentioned, we must create tensions between the verbal and the visual text to question the relation between words and images or “[...] to give rise, within an anthropological analysis, to the more emotional, subjective, and sensitive aspects with which a pure ethnography cannot traditionally deal.” (Caiuby Novaes 2008/2013, 6).

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5. The article is the result of attending FLS 5298-2 — Anthropology, music, and audiovisual courses from PPGAS USP during the first semester of 2021, which was taught by professors Alice Villela (PPGAS-USP), Gibran Braga (PPGAS-USP), Mihai Andrei Leaha (PPGAS-USP), and Yuri Prado (PPGAS-USP), whom I thank for all their sharing and teaching.

The verbal here refers to more than the written or spoken text because the ritual is made up of sounds from songs and objects such as drums, cow bells, among others. Rather, just like all living things, the calabash-container also produces sounds not only from the joint flowing of verbal and visual waters but also from the shimmering bodies, instruments, and other sounds because “the ritual music of Candomblé both in public and private ceremonies goes beyond any merely aesthetic value, or even beyond the propitiation of a religious atmosphere, thus exercising its function as a constitutive element to all instances of worship.” (Amaral and Silva 1992/2019, 370). Therefore, I tried to “set” this study to music (Small 1998, 9 *apud* Vilela *et al* 2019, 18), choosing and recording songs and sounds based on the emotions they caused in me and how I wished to affect “outsiders”<sup>6</sup>. This did not happen with the simple inclusion of songs in this study but with the choice of which ones to include, how exactly they were translated, or rather, how the drum was tuned, i.e., as “[...] one of the elements through which the identities of the followers and the temples and African nations from which they come are built and express themselves.” (Amaral and Silva 1992/2019, 371).

Multifaceted songs sung to the rhythm called *sato* are similar to another one called *bata* (which has a different tempo). *Sato* is the swaying of the waters, the lullaby of a child nestled in one’s lap. The movements and sounds of the water inside the gourd are the same as those we feel and hear inside our mother’s womb. The gourd represents *Yemoja*’s (the mother whose children are fish) great maternal uterus and the waters, the amniotic fluid that envelops the child during pregnancy as well as the mother’s milk which abundantly flows from her full breasts to feed all her offspring. *Yemoja* is the great Black mother of Brazil.

This study deals with a generic description, based on observation and documentation, of a rite that has strictly adhered to the same steps for over 40 consecutive years. For this reason, I have included photographs taken by a group of people who have witnessed the rite over these years, such as Fernanda Ayodele Procópio and Andrea de Valentim, anchoring this written text in these very specific photos, rather than overlapping them.

I carefully chose the images from this rite and avoided both presenting them in a chronological order and subtitling them. They were shot on analogue film and not only act as documentation, but also capture moments loaded with emotional density that words alone will never be able to frame. My attempt with these images is “to write with them, not just about them” (Procópio 2014, 77). Fernanda Ayodele’s recurrent

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6. The songs presented here reproduce some of those sung during the analyzed public festival, though they were specially recorded in December 2021 for this study.

photographic documentation from 1999 onward (as well as her integration into the community and her commitment “from the inside”) enabled me to share photos that affect us both, in love as we are with our shared waters and the commensality of the libations.

### **IT HAS BEEN THIS WAY FOR YEARS!<sup>7</sup>**

The rituals at the *Ilé Àse Palepa Mariwo Sesu* temple started a week prior with offerings made to *Eshu*, *Ogum*, *Oshossi*, and *Yemoja*<sup>8</sup>.

The night before the public festival, we slept late because we were decorating the temple. At six in the morning, the *ògá*<sup>9</sup> arrange themselves around the sacred drums *hun*<sup>10</sup>, *pí*, and *lê* and play to *Eshu*, *Ogum*, *Oshossi*, and *Yemoja*. Fireworks are let off! It is time to wake up!

It was in the neighborhood of Pedreira, in southern São Paulo, that the temple had its first party 42 years ago. Back then, there were few houses, lots of trees, and countless empty plots of land. Few neighbors would feel uncomfortable with the sounds and noises coming from a traditional community with African Yoruba roots. Today, the neighborhood lacks empty spaces and has countless houses, markets, and bars. The fireworks and the rhythms sung by the drums are described as “very annoying” by the current neighbors of the temple, especially at six o’clock in the morning on a Saturday. Countless are the times that stones have been thrown at the windows of the temple.

Racism and its structure permeate all social relations in Brazil. At its core is the denial of the humanity of Black women, Black people, and their descendants and everything that is directly related to Black culture.

And this is how the ritual works: the followers get up and, in complete silence, take three sips of water, lower their hands to touch the earth, raise them toward the rising sun, and pray. Alone or in groups, they

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7. Ethnography based on the public festival that took place in 2009, when the temple *Ilé Àse Palepa Mariwo Sesu* celebrated 30 years of its foundation.

8. The word *Yemoja* will be written this way, respecting the spelling taught by Ìyá Sessu. Thus, it dispenses with spelling corrections since the meaning is clear and its signification even more so. Despite agreeing with Nei Lopes on the important need to drawing Yoruba words closer to “Portuguese”, I preferred to follow, for the time, my high priestess’ choice of spelling.

9. Literally = lord, chief. In Brazil, the *ògá* are men who do not go into a trance and are responsible for various functions in the community, e.g., the *ògá onílù* are instrumentalists, the *ògá asògún*, those responsible for sacrifices, etc.

10. *Hun* (hum), borrowed from *Fon*, is also the name given to the largest drum in the sacred *Candomblé Kétu* orchestra.

greet all the àjobo<sup>11</sup> and igbá<sup>12</sup> in the temple. During breakfast (coffee with milk, bread and butter, a piece of fruit), the more talkative members of the group already express their joy at being able to be there. *Ominayale*, the first initiate of the temple, has already lit the wood burning stove before breakfast and is preparing the space to cook the Orisha dishes and our lunch.

High Priestess *Sessu* finishes her breakfast and all those present in the house line up and kneel onto a straw mat to greet her and perform the *dojúbalè*<sup>13</sup>. She always says: “*Good morning*” to each person by name.

Around eight in the morning, the *Absogun*<sup>14</sup> immolates a beautiful rooster over *Eshu Yangí*'s collective shrine (àjobo) on the left side of the entrance to the temple to bring all worshippers happiness and to make sure there are no fights or disagreements during the day's festivities.

The ògá onílù of *Yemoja*, *Ofaguere*, bears castor bean leaves for the ìpàdé<sup>15</sup> and both *gonçalinho* (*casearia sylvestris*) and *pitanga* (*eugenia uniflora*) leaves are sprinkled around the temple ground during the festivity.

Some already know what to do, others do not. Priestess *Sessu* requests (more often than not) major changes to the decoration of the temple. Food is made for the Orisha shrines. Trees are decorated. They are, after all, divine.

*Olabumi* and *Wakotobi* and ìyádagàn<sup>16</sup> and ìyámorò<sup>17</sup> go to *Esu Elégbára*'s room at 10:30 a.m. where they find two clay bowls full of manioc flour, two clay bowls with yellow *acaças*<sup>18</sup>, a bottle of *cachaça*, a ceramic jar full of water, and a bowl with boiled and fried chicken that was sacrificed earlier and castor bean leaves. Armed with all these delicacies, they walk toward the center of the shed and start preparing part of the ìpàdé. Around this time the temple is still empty.

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11. These collective shrines physically and materially render specific Orishas.

12. Literally = gourd. In Brazil, they also refer to individual shrines that physically and materially represent a certain deity.

13. Literally = to prostrate oneself with one's face to the ground. In Brazil, this solemn greeting consists of the individual lying face down on top of a mat, placing their head at the feet of the priest/priestess or elder, and clapping.

14. Literally = someone who worships Ògún. In Brazil, it refers to a “rank” given to the man responsible for the immolation of animals.

15. Literally = meeting, contact. In Brazil, the rite also takes place hours before the festivity, in which the Orisha *Eshu* and his male and female ancestors are all praised and receive offerings.

16. The *ègbón* responsible for *Eshu* and the ancestors' temple.

17. The *ègbón* responsible for *Qbalúáyé* and the ancestors' temple.

18. *Acaça* is a food that all Orishas like. It is made from boiled cornmeal, wrapped in banana leaf, and folded into a triangular shape.

At exactly 11 a.m., Priestess Sessu calls all initiated followers to the temple while the uninitiated remain outside waiting. She checks the offerings, takes her àjà<sup>19</sup>, looks at the ògá, and inaugurates the ìpàdé.

The ìpàdé begins and all the songs for Eshu, as well as for male and female ancestors, are sung. Initiates then dance with joy and vigor. At a certain point, Priestess Sessu calls three people, usually Ìyádagàn, Ìyámorò, and another ègbón<sup>20</sup> to pick up the bundles wrapped in castor bean leaves and take them, two by two, to the street. Then, they take the quart of water and the bottle of *cachaça* (Brazilian rum).

Some people receive their deities in trance as the ìpàdé continues, and then three songs are sung for all Orishas, with the exception of Òsàgiyán and Òsàlúfón.

After this rite, a small meeting is held in the temple with everyone present. Priestess Sessu explains to those assembled how the public festival will take place and asks them to buy any last-minute items that are missing.

Lunch is served around 1 p.m. It includes rice, beans, salad, manioc flour, and chicken that had been sacrificed during the week, all cooked on a wooden stove. A senior member of the temple serves everyone. The ìyàwó<sup>21</sup> eat off cheaper plates made of agate, which are known as *aba-jeun*<sup>22</sup>. Another temple tradition establishes that people initiated to male Orishas eat off a deep plate, while those initiated to female Orishas eat from a shallow plate.

Each ìyàwó receives their dish full of food and proceeds first to Priestess Sessu, then to the ègbón and ògá, whereupon they ask: *A jeun*<sup>23</sup>; to which the Priestess then replies: *A jeun máan*<sup>24</sup>. Then, the assembled carry their plates to the main hall of the temple, which contains several straw mats that have been spread on the ground. Everyone has lunch there on the floor. Priestess Sessu and the others, who are older or higher in rank, have lunch at a table.

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19. Literally = bell. A ritual instrument made of one or more bells with flange, silver, gold or copper leaves.

20. Literally = older brother. In Brazil, the term refers to initiates who have completed their seven-year cycle of offerings.

21. Literally = wife. In Brazil, initiates who have completed their seven-year cycle of offerings.

22. Abaje = “the act of eating together” / un = verb in action.

23. Literally = we eat. In the day-to-day life of traditional Afro-Brazilian communities, it means “Shall we share? Is it served? Shall we eat together?”

24. Literally = we have the habit of eating. In the day-to-day life of traditional Afro-Brazilian communities, it means “Of course! Let’s share! Let’s eat together!”

When lunch is over, people file one by one with their empty plates past Priestess Sessu and the other elders say: *mo júbà*<sup>25</sup>; to which she responds: *ìbà se*<sup>26</sup>.

The kitchen is full of dishes to be done. The most conscientious wash their plates and glasses regardless of whether they are an *ìyàwó* or *ègbón*. The table is removed, the pots and glasses are put away, and the entire kitchen is tidied up.

Generally, men look for a corner to nap. The women start preparing the food to be served after the festivity as well as filling two bowls: one with sweet cornmeal and the other with green grapes.

Orisha clothes, objects, and special insignia are organized in the *òrìsà ìdílé*<sup>27</sup>. *Yemoja Sessu*'s room stores all her accessories: a large white cloth, her formal clothes made by the priest and artisan *Claudio de Osun*, as well as her "tools:" a metal staff decorated with little fish and starfish, her *adé*<sup>28</sup>, her *abèbè*<sup>29</sup>, and (her favorite object) a fish made with palm fronds, decorated with cowries and little shells, made over 20 years ago by *ògá Kiniofa* (who is no longer at the temple).

Another important piece of equipment is prepared: the *ìgbá omi*, a collective uterus made with a gourd that has been cut in half and decorated with cowries that hang from pleated raffia strands (Photo 2). In recent years, I have had the immense honor of making this for *Yemoja Sessu*.

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25. Literally = I bow down. In our community, it means, in this context, "It's great to eat together!"

26. Literally = I salute you. In our community, I mean, in this context, "thank you so much for eating together!"

27. Literally = clan, i.e., common family ancestors on the male side. In our community, it is the same as *ìdí òrìsà*, the venue that holds sacred ceremonies.

28. Literally = crown, hat.

29. Literally = fan, shaker.

**FIGURE 2**  
Source: Fernanda  
Ayodele  
Procópio, 2002.



Some hours later, everyone is showered, perfumed, happy, anxious, and waiting for Priestess *Sessu*. She saunters in from her house, which is next to the temple, and goes straight into the kitchen. She is dressed in blue and wears a necklace made of light blue stones, an old gift from Cláudio Zeiger. She orders a latte and takes her medicine.

Promptly at 5 p.m., everyone is inside the *ilé òrìsà*, the house of the Orishas. Priestess *Sessu* asks the *onílù* to start the public festivities.

The *vaninha*<sup>30</sup> is played and one by one, in a long line and by order of initiation, enter the temple dancing. A circle is quickly formed, and people dance around the center of the temple three times. Then, the drums stop.

The *ògá Absogum* prays aloud, greeting all the Orishas. Then I start the chant by saying *onílè*<sup>31</sup> *mo júbà*, to which all answer *ìbà òrìsà ìbà onílè*. Then, *onílè* is substituted by all the *òrìsà* and ancestors in the temple. During this song, everyone removes their shoes and walks toward the first door, then to the street, the center, the feet of the three drums, *Yemoja Sessu's* throne, and finally to Priestess *Sessu*. Everyone lies down in these places and, with their heads to the ground, greet and bow in reverence.

*Onílè mo júbà*

*Ìbà òrìsà, ìbà o onílè*

30. The *vaninha*<sup>30</sup>, also called *avaninha* and *hamunhya*, is a rhythm played for certain deities, as well as in the opening and ending of some rites in traditional communities of African Yoruba origin. In the latter case, it may or may not be accompanied by singing. It is a cadenced and syncopated rhythm, neither fast nor slow.

31. Literally = the owner of the land or country. For Aulo Barretti Filho (2010), it is also Oshossi, the hunter god.

To the owner of the land, I bow

I salute the Orishas, I salute the owner of the land

**Song link:** [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1POUpQjKOAXEt7zOj9X2P2mQDkK0fY\\_nE/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1POUpQjKOAXEt7zOj9X2P2mQDkK0fY_nE/view?usp=sharing)

The previous song continues, and the circle is formed. Each person greets the other in the long line opposite to them by kisses each other on the hand before taking their place. When everyone is ready, Priestess *Sessu* takes up the song, only now she asks: *iyálàse*<sup>32</sup> *mo júbà*; to which everyone replies *ìbà òrìsà, ìbà o onílè*. Priestess *Sessu* then substitutes the word *iyálàse* for all the other ranks in the temple and then substitutes those for the names of the priests and priestesses who make up the entire religious family, and finally for those of all the priests and priestesses who are visiting the temple for the festivities. Her last question is: *Yemoja mo júbà*, and after uttering it, she lowers her body, bends down to touch the ground with her forehead, and kisses the ground. All the initiated members of the temple also place their heads on the ground. The song then ends.

The *siré*<sup>33</sup> then starts, which is the third part of all public festivities in Candomblé *Kétu terreiros*. In ours, three songs are sung (in this order) to *Ògún, Òsòòsì, Òsanyìn, Lógunède, Òsun, Sàngó, Qya, Qbalúàyé, Nàná, Òsùmàrè, Yewá, Qbà, and Yemoja*. During the praise songs to *Òsanyìn*, *ègbón Olabumi* removes *gonçalinho* leaves from a large sieve and sprinkles them throughout the yard. During the praise songs for *Yemoja*, all initiates prostrate themselves and lower their heads before the High Priestess *Sessu*'s feet.

During the *siré*, representatives from other Candomblé temples arrive. On these occasions, the *run*, or largest drum, is knocked slowly like a waiting bell, after which the *iyàwó* bow and the visiting priest or priestess in front of the entourage solemnly enters the temple, places their hands on the center of the temple, and then raises a hand to the head, repeating the

32. Literally = woman/mother of power. In our community, it is the successor of the High Priestess or *Ìyálorìsà* (mother of the Orishas)

33. Generically, a day of Candomblé festival in the *Kétu* nation is divided into six major moments. The first is the *ìpàdè*, a private rite for the initiated which takes place a few hours before the feast, in which *Eshu* and male and female ancestors are praised and given offerings. The second one begins with the public feast and an opening, a prologue, in which all those present exchange greetings. The third one is the *siré*, during which praise songs present narrative passages linked to each deity, though there is still no Orisha trance. The *siré* is in fact a moment of praise, a remembrance set to music. The Yoruba word *siré* means play or party. In the fourth phase, chants are sung to propitiate the trance of certain Orishas. The fifth moment is popularly called *hun*, whereupon each deity is dressed in his or her gala clothes, sacred "jewels," and symbols. Each deity's story is then recounted in collective chants. The songs have a set beginning, middle, and end. One complements the other and they are meaningless if sung separately. In the sixth and final moment, chants are sung for that draw the public festivity to a close.

gesture to the drums and their head before greeting Priestess *Sessu*. Only after this entire sequence has been carried out does the *run* drummer accompany the rhythm of the other drums.

By the time the *siré* ends, Priestess *Sessu* is no longer in the main festival room. She is now inside *Yemoja*'s shrine room barefoot and adorned with a silver cloth, a pleated raffia turban, and a beaded necklace.

To the rhythm of the *aguerê*, Priestess *Sessu* gestures toward the door of her deity's shrine. So the priestess can enter a trance, the *ògá* sing a very special song, played only once a year at the entrance to her Orisha's house (*ilé òrìsà*)<sup>34</sup>. She dances in the middle of the temple when we suddenly hear a scream<sup>35</sup>: Priestess *Sessu* bends over and shakes her shoulders. *Yemoja* has arrived. The other initiated (*iyàwó*) also go into a trance.

It is a moment of extraordinary happiness and everyone shouts *odò iyá*<sup>36</sup>. *Yemoja Sessu*, to the sound of this song, passes through the first door, goes to the door that leads to the street, then to the center of the temple, and finally stands in front of the drums, where her greeting rings out to all who are present.

At her deity's shrine door, the *ogà Okambi* awaits, clutching her sweet corn dessert and the *ogà Absogum*, a bowl of green grapes. They greet *Yemoja*. The drums stop and a new song is sung to which everyone dances and responds (Photo 1):

*Je Je jeun*

*Ífé odara ni ayo.*

Let's share the food together,

With love, beauty, joy, and happiness.

**Song link:** <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1URNkOXJoHBiUpZ3MREuiTOthQMZ2LDDM/view?usp=sharing>

34. Restricted to the sacred universe, in general terms, the song talks about praising and invoking Black ancestry.

35. This is what we call *jinka* (*èjìkà* = shoulders), which describes the movement of bending one's torso and knees and lightly shaking one's shoulders in a trance state. It usually occurs simultaneously with the *ilá*, which is an individual cry, a greeting, the deity's sonorous representation and trademark sound. Both the *jinka* and the *ilá* are acts performed only by the Orisha that possesses the initiates in trance within the temple and in certain sacred moments.

36. Literally = mother river. It also alludes to the mother of all waters, in addition to relating *Yemoja* to the *ògún* river, her natural formative environment.

*Yemoja Sessu* sits on her throne and a line is formed in front of her. To the sound of the same song, she serves her sweet corn dessert and grapes to everyone present: first the priests, then the *ègbón*, the *iyàwó*, and finally the *abiyan*<sup>37</sup> and all outside visitors and guests.

Whether sharing food together, dancing, or singing, it is the actual divinity of the waters who offers and delivers everything to the people. Friends who have known the priestess for longer periods of time, such as Toy Francelino de Xapanã (1949-2007)<sup>38</sup> —shown in the photos below (Photos 3 and 4) —, are served by *Yemoja Sessu*, who personally places the cornmeal in his mouth, just as a mother would place her breast inside her child's mouth to feed it.



**FIGURE 3**

Source: Fernanda  
Ayodele  
Procópio, 2002

37. Literally = one with whom we are related through affinity. It is considered a pre-initiatory grade.

38. Francelino Vasconcelos Ferreira was an important traditional Afro-Brazilian religious leader. In addition to developing political and social actions in defense of Candomblé, in 1977, he founded the *Casa das Minas de Toya Jarina* temple in the municipality of São Paulo and was responsible for bringing the *Tambor de Mina* religion from Northern to Southeastern Brazil.



**FIGURE 4**

Source: Fernanda  
Ayodele  
Procópio, 2002

This is a lengthy part of the ritual, and once people have received food, they embrace the *ayaba*<sup>39</sup> one by one. When everyone has eaten, *Yemoja Sessu* rises from her throne, dances, and sings in praise:

*Yemoja a dupe,*

*Mo jùbá ni ayo.*

Yemoja thanks you,

We, cheerful and happy, ate together.

**Song link:** <https://drive.google.com/file/d/18EA02ijX9g4tjhddPo3a2HsQ4YekrG9z/view?usp=sharing>

During these dances, receptacles are taken to the *ilé òrìsà*. The drumming stops. *Yemoja* reaches for the *igbá omi*, the decorated gourd that has been filled with water and other elements.

<sup>39</sup>. Queen or the king's wife. In Brazil, the term is used to designate female deities.



**FIGURE 5**

Source: Fernanda  
Ayodele  
Procópio, 2012

The *ògá* sing three water songs, which many call the bath or rain songs, to the Orisha of the waters, the river, the sea, our body, the amniotic fluid that surrounds the child.

The Orisha dances with the gourd in both hands (Photo 5), making subtle gestures, and then stops, crouches, slowly gets up again, dances, stops, bends down, and, when everyone least expects it, throws water into the air.



**FIGURE 6**

Source: Fernanda  
Ayodele  
Procópio, 2002

The drums stop at exactly the same moment (Photo 6). The rhythm of the drums gets faster and opens another praise song. *Yemoja* dances quickly with the gourd in one hand, shaking it toward everyone in the temple as her cowries rattle on her head. It sounds like rain. The deity enters the *ilé orisà*. The drums stop.

Following this, all the other *òrìsà* who have possessed their initiates also come in. This takes place over a 15-to-20-minute period.

The temple is full of people from other places: researchers, initiates, friends. Some savory delicacies are served along with soda or coffee.

*Yemoja* gets dressed in her room. Two other Orisha are also dressed: Ogum and Oshossi. It has been this way for years. In addition to the mythical connection between these Orisha, there is an affectionate connection, Priestess *Sessu* feels a personal relationship toward these deities. Oshossi is also her Orisha and Ogum, her religious grandfather, *Bàbá Ògúnjobire's* (Justino Maia) Orisha.

In 2009, for example, initiate *Arolewin's* Oshossi and *ègbón Omokeie's* Ogum both accompanied her *Yemoja*. Previous years had fewer initiates of these Orishas in our temple. Out of great friendship, priestess *Janaina de Ogum* brought her initiates to these Orishas to *Yemoja Sessu's* great festivity.

In other public celebrations, Priestess *Sessu* also invited initiates from other temples to dance with their initiating priests, such as *Mãe Lourdes*

*T'Ogun, Mãe Janaina de Ogum, Pai Armando Akitunde Valado, Mãe Sandra Epega, Pai Cido de Oxum Eyin, Mãe Nilza Onikauí*, among others. Some researchers and initiates find this stance a little strange as they are unable to understand how a temple of such size lacks this or that Orisha to dance at a public festivity. We feel that such a stance paves way for a crucial exchange between friendly communities and a strengthening of relationships, something that is no longer so common within the Candomblé community in São Paulo.

In previous years, *Yemoja Sessu's* clothing sparked a series of negative reactions within the Candomblé community. Everyone thought it strange that a renowned priestess should dress her deity in such simple clothes, without glitter, without a classic petticoat typical of the state of Bahia, without a large and luminous crown. But this is Priestess *Sessu's* choice.

When in trance, *Yemoja* puts on a one-piece dress in various shades of blue and green, some bracelets, a simple crown, a sword, a silver mirror, and her favorite fish (Photo 7). Then, she chews African pepper and African kola nut and spreads perfume over herself. She is ready, fully dressed in her ball gown faster than anyone imagined, even though she is over 70 years old. Before leaving her sacred room, she fetches some sea salt.

The drums sound. *Yemoja*, accompanied by *Ogum* and *Oshossi*, stands at the entrance to the *ilé òrìsà*. They leave and everyone shouts: *odo iya!* At the head of this entourage, wielding an *àjà*, is priestess *Onikauí Ojubona*<sup>40</sup> who initiated Priestess *Sessu*. Everyone dances in the temple. The great mother (*ayaba*) sits back on her throne.

We first dance and sing to *Ogum* and *Oshossi* and then to *Yemoja Sessu*, covering over 40 different songs. Among these, the one I like the most was:

*Are are are ní.*

*Yeje wá se are ní*

*Yeje ko mo ija*<sup>41</sup>

Fun, fun, we are cheerful (happy).

Mother, make us joyful (happy).

Mom, don't make us fight.

40. "Creative mother." Responsible for looking after the *iyàwós* during the initiation period.

41. Pierre Fatumbi Verger translation (1999): Fun, fun, fun to be. Yeie come make fun be. Yeie do not battle.

**Song link:** <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DU25geFagxrICcNm-d6IXHrWxH87Bng9/view?usp=sharing>



**FIGURE 7**

Source: Andrea de Valentim, 2004

She asks us to sing to Shango, an Orisha that belongs to High Priest *Obadomeci*, who initiated Priestess *Sessu*.

Now it is *Òsàgiyán* and *Òsàlúfón*'s turn. All those present, initiated or not, are invited to dance. Another specific song is played and the remaining deities in the temple are led back to the *ilé òrìsà*.

Within a few minutes dinner is served, all the pots and bowls are laid out on a beautiful white tablecloth on the floor in the middle of the temple. Fish, white rice, creamed corn, roast kid, sauce, beer, cognac, soda, and water. The room is full of joy despite attendants' exhaustion.

For outsiders, the party is over; for the followers of the temple, the party only ends on Sunday night after the temple has been tidied up.

Finally, I return to the metaphor of the mixing of waters. I specifically chose a *Yemoja* ritual to posit an audiovisual ethnography in which the image dimension (of liturgical objects, dances, etc.) would be unable to be discussed without the sound dimension (prayer, rhythm, chants, musical instruments, etc.). Since *Yemoja* is associated with water, in the "currents" of this element I sought to evoke the rites that make up the *Yemoja* festival at *Ilé Àse Palepa Mariwo Sessu* in which I participate. On a methodological

level, I hoped that my experience participating in the rite (which I have done for decades), would somehow flow into the format of an academic article, making my participation instrumental to the organization of this ethnography and how I constructed it.

**Translation:**  
Roderick Steel

*Odoiya!*

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Photo 1: Fernanda Ayodele Procópio, 2010.  
Photo 2: Fernanda Ayodele Procópio, 2002.  
Photo 3 and 4: Fernanda Ayodele Procópio, 2002.  
Photo 5: Fernanda Ayodele Procópio, 2012.  
Photo 6: Fernanda Ayodele Procópio, 2002  
Photo 7: Andrea de Valentim, 2004.  
Singing and percussion: José Pedro da Silva Neto, 2022.

**KEYWORDS:**

Afro-brazilian  
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**ABSTRACT**

This study attempts to offer an audio-visual ethnography of the *Yemoja* festival held in a traditional Afro-Brazilian *Yorùbá* territory *Yorùbá* called *Ilé Àṣe Palepa Mariwo Sese* in southern São Paulo.

**José Pedro da Silva Neto** is a Master's student in Anthropology at PPGAS – FFLCH – USP. He earned a graduate degree in Social Sciences at PUC – SP. He is a member of the Center for the Study of Contemporary Religiosities and Black Cultures - CERNe at FFLCH - USP and coordinated by Prof. Vagner Gonçalves da Silva. He was initiated in the *Ilé Àṣe Pàlepà M̀̀r̀̀wò Sessu* temple – SP. Email: [inatobi@usp.br](mailto:inatobi@usp.br)

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