

# Axé: Multiple Meanings with a Sole Essence Found in the Unity of Body, Nature and Spirit

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What does the word *axé* signify? Is there a way to create one definition for the word? The term is capable of multiple meanings. How do we unite all of these unique meanings within a single conceptual framework in order to better grasp each distinct understanding of the term? Can we reach a totalizing understanding of *axé*?

Over the course of this paper, I will discuss the various meanings of the term in the hopes that this will add to our understanding of the complex relationships between religion, music, popular culture, and politics in the context of the African diaspora in the Americas. As opposed to discussing how some popular music finds its origin within Candomblé rituals, however, I go beyond such well-known histories and seek to explain how the theology of Candomblé manifests itself in ritual and popular music.

Avoiding generalizations, I believe that African religious philosophies have played a primary role in generating a way of life in Northeastern South America and the Caribbean. I use the term *axé* to explore the above-mentioned relationships because the term appears simultaneously in Candomblé theology, Afro-Brazilian religious practices, and popular music. This article represents the first attempt to explicitly place this central facet of Candomblé theology as a crucial element at the heart of Afro-Brazilian culture. To some Brazilians, the term connotes a sort of upbeat reggae-infused dance music genre, danced at a frighteningly exhausting aerobic pace, from the Northeastern region of the country. This region served as a point of entry for the nation's slaves for centuries and remains a cultural epicenter for Afro-Brazilians. The region is home of the famous *capoeira* martial art/dance, among other traditions. In this sense, *axé* may signify the commercial genre "*axé* music," often casually described by some Brazilians as "*brega*"—low-class or tacky—because it is associated with the popular classes as opposed to the intellectual elite.

To practitioners of the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé religion, however, the term embodies the deeper spiritual notion of a force of nature, a force capable of transforming reality itself and ordering human existence while integrating the practitioner into a cyclical

world system. Thus, the term *axé* can be used to mean something like “life force” or “living energy.” It has a religious significance within Candomblé, derived from the Yoruba religious traditions of Nigeria.

To these same practitioners, moreover, the term can signify a *terreiro*, a religious space where Candomblé ceremonies take place. A *terreiro* is a location for ritualized community interactions, and expression, and of integration into a connected mystical whole. A university in Bahia has attempted to map all of the *terreiros* in the city of Salvador, Brazil, including various designated as *axés* such as Axé Iroko or Axé Ajo Omi (Universidade Federal da Bahia). A perusal of the website or, better yet, a walk through the city of Salvador reveals a staggering number of places of worship, ranging from small homes in peripheral neighborhoods to well-decorated upper-class homes in the city center.

Are these seemingly distinct meanings of the same term divorced from each other, or do they share a common conceptual root? It is very easy to see that they circle around a unifying concept, but it is much harder to identify the precise spiritual understanding linking each of these usages of the word *axé*. How does the musical genre of *axé* tie into a physical space for ritual practice, the *terreiro*, and an abstract philosophical concept, a “life force”?

In this essay, I argue that each of these three meanings shares the same fundamental essence in an encompassing theological belief in a generating force activated through a ritual practice, embodied and powered by the ritual acts themselves, and directed towards communion with a spiritual world system. The religious philosophy of the Yoruba may even explain the musical structure of Northeastern Brazilian music, crafted to lead the individual into an ecstatic state. Each separate meaning speaks of the same understanding of time, nature, community, and the practitioner’s role within a mystical ordering of existence. I elaborate these connections below in more detail, beginning with music because it is one of the more internationally recognizable aspects of Brazilian culture.

### **The First Meaning of Axé: Axé Music**

According to Goli Guerreiro, author of *A trama dos tambores: a música afro-pop de Salvador*, *axé* music began as a regional sound, springing forth from samba-reggae, another Brazilian style anchored in Northeastern Brazil (133). The style unites a far stronger rhythm

section created with the use of multiple studio drummers and samplers, simple riffs, and a more repetitive refrain, a sort of incantation: “Além do encontro das sonoridades percussivas e harmônicas, os blocos de trio gravam as canções dos blocos afro, carregadas de conteúdo anti-racistas, produzindo uma espécie de samba-reggae pop/eletrônico” (Guerreiro 133). Thus, *axé* music is essentially a vehicle for a refrain accompanied by music produced via modern technology, samplers and electric keyboards, and even more percussive instrumentation than customary in Brazilian music, altering a previous style which attempted to create a fusion of samba and reggae without the presence of electronic instrumentation and with less emphasis on the refrain.

The *axé* music style became highly commercially successful, launching numerous artists, including Olodum, Daniela Mercury, and Ivete Sangalo. However, the style also encountered significant hostility from the press due to its deviation from previous musical genres focusing on crafting intricate compositions. Guerreiro explains that a sort of anti-*axé* music hysteria appeared: even Afro-Brazilian musical legend Dorival Caymmi declared that *axé* music was not Brazilian music, but simplistic choruses, easy to repeat and worthless. In addition, a member of the Olinda city council, Fernando Godim, introduced a resolution to ban *axé* music from the 1993 Carnival festivities: “A massiva veiculação do estilo chegou a ser denominada ‘invasão baiana’” (134). The opposition from Caymmi is especially shocking if one recognizes that he is a celebrated figure in Northeastern Brazilian music. City Councilman Godim’s opposition is interesting because Pernambuco is a state in Northeastern Brazil, sharing a border with the state of Bahia.

Why the fear of *axé* music? If the style is nonsensical, why should it be banned? The heavy percussion with repetitive refrains spoken amidst fervent and intense beats often contains language referring to rampant sexuality but also to festivity, Afro-Brazilian culture, and religion. Surely these forms of expression merit some recognition as stemming from an ancient tradition. *Axé* music, to elites interested in presenting a white face for Brazil abroad as well as privilege based on skin color at home, is too openly and unashamedly African to be accepted.

The song “Divindade” by the *axé* music group Olodum, named after Olodumaré, the supreme god in the Yoruba religious tradition, focuses on Olodumaré arriving at a festivity in the neighborhood of Pelourinho in the Northeastern city of Salvador, illustrating the use of Afro-Brazilian themes: “Eu sou Afro Olodum, divindade infinita

da natureza / me leva para aí, eu vou cantar com você / meu grande amor, vou me misturar com o swingue envolvente do Pelo / Sexta-feira eu vou subir ao Pelourinho” (Olodum). The song seems to indicate that Olodumaré will inject himself into the band’s rhythms and appear amidst the dancing crowd. In other words, the dance itself is a form not only of religious worship of a deity, but a manner of calling the mystical to unite with the participants. The theme of deities descending upon popular festivities is not unique to this song. The artist Leci Brandão’s song “Olodum, Força Divina” is also illustrative: “Supremo Maior da divindade da natureza, no compasso do tempo foi-se a bailar” (Brandão). These songs demonstrate that unity with a spiritual world through the act of ecstatic dancing is a major theme of *axé* music.

Discussing the group Olodum in her book *A auto-estima se constrói passo a passo*, Lucia Moysés describes them as follows: “Um dos principais objetivos do Olodum é resgatar, valorizar e preservar a cultura negra, resgate que se faz de forma marcante, por exemplo nas letras das músicas do seu bloco . . . Mas o Olodum não é apenas a banda e o bloco—sua faceta mais conhecida. Ele mantém, também, diferentes programas de ação” (64). An African arts school is maintained, where children are taught Afro-Brazilian cultural history and practice. The Olodum group is a musical *bloco* but also a social organization, intricately tied to the local cultural scene in its musical, religious and political aspects.

Even blonde Brazilian pop phenomenon Daniela Mercury, involved in *axé* music in its most commercial strain, mentions these themes. In the song “Olodum é Rei,” she sings, “O Olodum é rei / rei dessa terra sagrada / o Olodum é rei / rei dessa gente encantada” (Mercury, “Olodum é Rei”). In the song “Oyá por Nós,” she discusses Iansã, also known as Oyá, a goddess associated with wind and with being a particularly imposing and tempestuous female figure: “Oyá mulher guerreira / Oyá que é inteira / Oyá de se amar” (Mercury, “Oyá por Nós”). Of course, not all songs mention the deities. Many contain references to aspects of daily life such as dating, love, and sexuality. There is no topic that is off limits.

*Axé* music’s qualities can be summarized as repetitive refrains sung in unison and an emphasis on percussion and dancing. Themes include a focus on sexuality, Afro-Brazilian spirituality, and celebration of life, occasionally with intermingled references to the actual physical presence of a deity descending upon the crowd during a festivity. Spiritual references in the songs speak of a unity with the divine through dance as opposed to mere worship. With

this understanding of the first, musical meaning of *axé*, we proceed to the second definition of the term.

### **The Second Meaning of *Axé*: The *Terreiro***

The *terreiro* is the ritual worship space in the Candomblé religion, often a small establishment with the outward appearance of a home in a residential neighborhood. Some of these homes appear humble in origin but others appear to reflect a higher socioeconomic status.

Professor Carlos Eugênio Marcondes de Moura has described the creation of mythical parental relationships among community members, the *povo-de-santo*, inside these establishments: “[E]stes laços de parentesco assumidos subentendem direitos e deveres, e talvez sejam os responsáveis principais pela minimização de diferenças sociais e de procedência étnica porventura entre os membros de cada uma das casas-desanto” (105). Moura goes on to state that *terreiros* unite people from every race and socio-economic class; they even unite individuals of different nationalities, as the Candomblé religion has expanded to other nations (105). Perhaps what is most interesting as far as what happens in a *terreiro* or *axé* is the celebration of the body via dance rituals. These rituals would certainly seem strange to some individuals raised within the Catholic tradition, which regards the body as an object for control and negation, a shell to be cast away through ascetic practice. In the *terreiro*, on the other hand, the function of the body is quite different: “Esta valorização ainda pode ser explicada por ser o corpo humano o veículo da comunicação com os deuses, forças da natureza, que, através da possessão ritual, incorporam em seus ‘cavalos’ ou médiuns” (Moura 108). The dances and the act of possession by a deity, often a sort of dance intermingled amidst other dances, improvised by participants, represent the precise melding of body and soul through motion. The deity is present at the *terreiro* because of the ritualized movements that create not a *subjugation* to an almighty God but *union* with God through usage of the energy of the body.

The relationship of this *terreiro* meaning of *axé* and *axé* music is clear. The *terreiro* is a cultural/spiritual space where the body is united with the eternal via physical movement in the form of dance produced by percussive music. A wide variety of people appreciate *axé* music and attend *axé* concerts (as Moura observes at the *terreiros*) despite the fact that most of these people are not members of the

*povo-do-santo* and are instead interested in the genre purely for entertainment value. The structure and themes of *axé* music reflect the same ideal: the unity of body and spirit through rhythm, chants, physical activity meant to create an agitation through a celebration of life, sexuality, and the mystical.

An ecstatic existence is a holy existence. The theme of sexuality and the celebration thereof, so present in *axé* music, is not absent from the *terreiro*. Rita Amaral explains in *Xirê! O modo de crer e viver no Candomblé*: “Os modelos de relacionamento de expressão da sexualidade são introjetados durante o longo processo iniciático, que implica a convivência cotidiana com o terreiro” (78). Specific deities have specific sexual powers, orientations, and attitudes. The man possessed by Xangô is “voluntarioso, sedutor, vaidoso,” but the man possessed by Logun-Edé is romantic and well-mannered (Amaral 79). Thus, particular sexual behaviors are tied into the spiritual system, along with dance, indicating that the body-mind connection is maintained at the most intimate level.

The dance movements in *axé* music vary from separation between partners, a communal jumping with no physical contact between partners, or a courteous waltz where partners swing from side to side without any overt expression of sexuality, to more intimate dances where partners come together in sexualized movements. The same range of sexual roles reflected in the *terreiro* is reflected in dance at *axé* music concerts.

I thus conclude, at this point, that *axé* is a place where rhythm and movement can create unity with a spiritual existence. At the same time, *axé* is a musical style focusing on percussion, with refrains sung in unison. How can we connect these two meanings conceptually? The third meaning of the term, one of the central facets of the Yoruba belief system, provides the answer. Taking care not to overgeneralize, one can begin to see that, with a thorough understanding of the theological meaning of *axé*, it is possible to view seemingly disconnected phenomena within Afro-Brazilian culture—a sort of exuberance, a musicality, and a physicality often tied to theatrical rituals—as part of a legacy of an African world view.

### **The Third Meaning of *Axé*: A Force of Nature**

The third meaning of the term *axé* corresponds more closely to the Yoruba use of the term *asea*, or “life force,” which I will further expound in the following section. Dirt has *axé*. Hands have *axé*. Feet

have *axé*. Rita Amaral notes: “Os pés são considerados representantes do corpo (como entre os chineses) e devem sempre estar em contato com o chão, captando *axé* da terra” (71). Moura provides a more complete definition of this philosophical concept: “*Axé* é um conceito que pode ser definido como força invisível...*axé* é força vital, energia, a grande força inerente a todas as coisas... *axé* é a força contida em todos os elementos naturais e seres, porém que necessita de certos rituais e da palavra falada para ser detonado ou dinamizado” (116).

The same life-force concept is present in Santería, as discussed by the *santera* Marta Moreno Vega in her book *The Altar of My Soul: The Living Traditions of Santería*, wherein she repeatedly describes the process of cultivating *aché* through ritual, how she teaches her students how to cultivate *aché*, and *aché* as an element of the universe. Music allows the *Orishas* to come alive, stimulating the release of *aché*. Raul Canizares also discusses the important role of music in his *Santería cubana: el sendero de la noche*: “Según la tradición de la santería, los más expertos cantantes y tamborileros, sobre todo los tocadores de batá, mantienen el secreto de la habilidad para crear una confluencia de sonidos y ritmos que provocan lo que se ve y lo que no se ve, lo material y lo espiritual, Dios y la humanidad” (92). One can see the inseparability of music, ritualized spaces, and a force of nature agitated through dance in the Caribbean and Northeastern South America.

The ritualized space permits the release of energy but is also energy *in and of itself*; in the same way that dirt has *axé*, the actual ritual space has *axé* or spiritual energy. The music calls forth the energy, but it is generated by arms and legs, which contain *axé* and also are themselves *axé*. In this tradition, the deities appear as one of the participants of the ritual in order to unite with the other participants, making all that is associated with the ritual *axé* because it calls forth ecstatic energy. In fact, the deities are also *axé*.

Thus, the notion of *axé* as a force embodies the two other usages of the term. Music is produced by the energy of bodies and therefore is a manifestation of the *axé* force. The *terreiro* unites people within the space itself, which contains *axé* in the floor and the air. *Axé* is all-encompassing and requires agitation through ritual to regenerate. Everything used in the ritual—music, the ritual space, the arms and legs of participants—both is and creates *axé*.

Where did this all-encompassing notion come from? Why must *axé* be regenerated? To grasp this concept more firmly, we must look to the Yoruba, the forefathers of the Candomblé and Santería

religions of the Americas, for the origin of a worldview manifesting itself in so many different manners in Northeastern South America and the Caribbean. Many of the Yoruba were captured as slaves and transported to the New World, bringing their culture with them. Any analysis of the material and historical roots of this philosophical notion, at once so simple and so powerful, therefore requires a trip into the heart of Africa.

### **The Role of *Ase* in the Yoruba Tradition**

Robert Smith provides a neat summary of the Yoruba in his *Kingdoms of the Yoruba*: “They form the third largest ethnic group in Africa's most populous country, some nine million of them living in the rich forest and farmland of south-western Nigeria” (7). In Nigeria, the Yoruba engaged in farmland labor with private property held by way of family holdings. This makes the Yoruba different from nomadic groups without private property rights. Although farm property was commonly held by families, with complex social relationships and obligations to help the less fortunate, the property was not owned by one whole known as “the Yoruba.” In fact, the Yoruba were organized into distinct kingdoms, each politically separate from the other but culturally/linguistically connected: “[Each] kingdom had a recognized centre in its capital town where the leading oba resided, surrounded by his chiefs, officials and priests” (Smith 90). As in feudal Europe, positions of power were largely determined by heredity and tradesmen were organized into guilds.

The farming lifestyle of the inhabitants of this vast empire made the Yoruba highly dependent on natural phenomena. Ulli Beier's *Yoruba Poetry*, a collection of traditional Nigerian poems, illustrates the interrelation of natural phenomena, personal life, and religion in its many poems, including poems about deities, such as the god of faith Eshu walking through a groundnut farm, love, and sexuality. The gods determine the outcome of a farm's crops for a particular crop cycle, literally determining the life and/or death of those residing on a particular farm. They walk through the farms as if they were theirs because, in a spiritual sense, the farm belongs to the gods and the gods belong to the farm, and neither can exist without the other.

William Bascom describes the crucial role of farming in *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*: “The Yoruba economy is based on sedentary hoe farming, craft specialization, and trade. Hunting,



fishing, animal husbandry, and the gathering of wild foods are practiced, but the basis of the Yoruba diet consists of starchy tubers, grains and plantains grown on farms” (18). An economy based so heavily on subsistence farming naturally evolves into a society with a belief in the cyclical existence of life: “At death, the multiple souls leave the body and normally they reach heaven, remaining there until the ancestral guardian soul is reincarnated” (Bascom 71).

Each aspect of the cycle—from the humans who participate in working the fields to the plants making up the crops, to the animals which may present a danger to the crops and are intricately related to each other in a natural system, to the soil that produces the crops—contain an essential energy intricately related to a continuing co-existence. Performers in a ritual or dance exist in a world containing this essential life force because all of these elements are necessary for the continuation of the life cycle.

The Yoruba theological concept of *ase* is that of a life force which is necessary to maintain the progress of the cycle of existence, and this force must be agitated during ritual practice. *Axé* music is life force and the *terreiro* is also life force. Both are required for ecstatic existence. The Yoruba brought their theological concept of the structure of the universe to South America and the Caribbean. Margaret Thompson Drewal’s *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* provides an excellent summary of the Yoruba concept of *ase*, the source of the Brazilian concept of *axé*: “[I]t is a generative force or potential present in all things—rocks, hills, streams, mountains, plants, animals, ancestors, deities—and in utterances—prayers, songs, curses, and everyday speech . . . Ase is the power of performers to generate ritual spectacles, or rather spectacular rituals that operate as style wars” (27).

Two facets of *axé* as a theological concept should be kept in mind: first, *axé* must be agitated or the life cycle stops, and agitation requires many of the African rituals seen throughout Northeastern South America and the Caribbean, such as the ceremonies of Candomblé in Brazil, Obeah in Trinidad and Tobago, and Santería in Cuba, as well as the myriad musical styles that use instruments and rhythms originating from these ceremonies, the most celebrated musical styles from the region. Second, *axé* must be lived and felt, embodied through ecstatic living, in and out of religious ceremonies. *Axé* as a life philosophy is fundamentally embedded in Northeastern South American and Caribbean culture.

### Arriving at a Comprehensive Definition of *Axé*

We arrive, finally, at a definition of *axé* which unites the three common usages of the term in Brazil: *axé* music, the *terreiro* or ritual space for Candomblé, and the concept of life-force derived from the Yoruba *ase*. *Axé* is all aspects of existence which are connected to the divine and form a part of the life cycle, and can be agitated to form an ecstatic unity between world existence and spiritual existence. The ecstatic aspect of the Yoruba religion, simultaneously present in possession, improvisation, and dance, is a key aspect of understanding the drive toward unity.

*Axé* can thus be understood as the energy from the motion of a wheel, where the spiritual and material realms are both fundamentally united in this same eternal movement. Once we interpret *axé* in this manner, it is no longer startling that the gods would appear to dance with the mere mortals in an ecstatic ritual, or that the divine and the mundane would unite? After all, the gods are part of the same wheel, caught up in the motions of a ceaseless existence. This understanding improves our comprehension of the philosophical unity of all the separate meanings of *axé* as different manifestations of the same force, a force which impacts the religious rituals, music, and attitudes of Afro-Brazilian people.

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