

Reis, João José. Trans. H. Sabrina Gledhill. (2015) *Divining Slavery and Freedom: The Story of Domingos Sodré, an African Priest in Nineteenth-Century Brazil*, 352 pp. (ISBN 9781107439092) Paperback.

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Innovative historian, prolific scholar, and celebrated Brazilian author João José Reis is one of a new generation of slavery and emancipation historians who has successfully moved beyond the historical structuralism of previous generations of scholarship. *Divining Slavery and Freedom: The Story of Domingos Sodré, an African Priest in Nineteenth-Century Brazil* is the third and most recent monograph written by Reis on the topic of slavery and emancipation in Brazil's history. Since this work's original publication in Portuguese in 2008, this first English translation has been thoroughly updated, revised, and includes the addition of an extensive bibliography, complete with additional primary sources, appendices of Sodré's will and testament, historical timeline of events in Sodré's life and society in Bahia, letter of manumission, as well as a glossary of local and Candomblé terms. The addition of these resources allows even the amateur reader to engage this work with tools necessary for successful historical study.

Reis has dedicated this most recent work to two of his mentors, Stuart Schwartz and Katia Mattoso. Demonstrating his academic apprenticeship as a student of these two Brazilian scholars, Reis adeptly combines the contextual-biography and microhistory of Domingos Sodré within the larger sociocultural context and setting of nineteenth-century Bahia, Brazil. Sodré's life in Brazil covers most of the nineteenth-century and the significant regional and even transnational events that impacted Brazilian socio-cultural development.

In this book, Reis tells the story of Domingos Sodré, a Nigerian-born Candomblé priest who was enslaved as a young man in nineteenth-century Bahia, Brazil. African slaves like Sodré were brought in to support the booming sugar cane industry during an age of increasing agricultural production and industrialization of Brazilian cities. Sodré eventually received his letter of manumission and his freedom upon the death of his master. Later, after becoming a freedman, he became a slave owner himself and a Bahian Candomblé priest, and in 1862 was arrested on charges of witchcraft. Often

referred to as *feiticeiros* (witches or sorcerers) in archival records, these Candomblé priests and religious leaders like Sodré were often the target of blatant and systematic persecution by Bahian authorities. The religion of Candomblé was often part of the “re-Africanization” process of Afro-Brazilian slave communities seeking to adapt to Brazilian colonial culture, by formulating and reinventing their native heritage through religious and other cultural expression.

Utilizing this historical incident of Sodré’s arrest as an opening into the discussion of African religion and its place in Brazilian society, Reis analyzes the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé through the lens of a contextualized-biography of Sodré’s life. Sodré epitomizes the Afro-Brazilian religious scene and its religio-cultural resistance to slave society and its supporting structures. Although he was markedly unique, Sodré was simultaneously representative of many elite freepersons who contributed to the formation of the local Candomblé religion. Sodré worked hard for the emancipation of slaves, utilizing his religious and communal influence to do so, and even purchased the freedom of many through his collaboration with an independent manumission society. Sodré in many ways did in fact resist colonial Brazil and its practice of slavery.

Reis’ historical precision and exquisite attention to detail are abundantly clear throughout this work. Drawing on over thirty years of archival research, Reis dedicates years of thorough study to accurately telling the story of Domingos Sodré. Investigative in his approach, he synthesizes the findings of thousands of historical documents and trusts substantially in the reliability of a plethora of primary source materials. Out of these documents, the reader is introduced to an intimate depiction of this previously obscure historical character who would otherwise be lost to the fog of history. This collection of primary source material not only records the life of a particular African priest, Domingos Sodré, but offers a telling history of Candomblé in the Bahia of his time.

Sodré is a figure of paramount importance in nineteenth-century Brazilian religious history, and this book examines his extensive experience in both enslaved and free communities, as well as his religious influence in Candomblé. Sodré’s life was an amalgamation of Afro-Brazilian cultural quantities, in which he was very much a part of two worlds: African and Atlantic. Reis, through Sodré’s biography, explores the transatlantic slaveholding complex in South America, the rise and fall of systemic

slavery in the New World, and the reshaping of the Old World via colonization and slave labor. Sodré's narrative fundamentally encapsulates elements of the formation of Atlantic society, economy, and culture in nineteenth-century Brazil.

Although readers of some proclivities may find the amount of archival details of this book somewhat formidable, the product of this large archival study is a powerfully fascinating, and historically accurate representation of slavery, emancipation, and Afro-Brazilian culture in nineteenth-century Brazil. This robust excavation of archival material has illuminated the life of former slave (and later freedman) Domingos Sodré, who would otherwise be lost to the shadows of history. Consequently, the large volume of documentation surrounding Sodré makes him an exception among Afro-Brazilian slaves and freedmen. However, although Reis has successfully revealed much of Sodré's life, contemporary scholarship is left to the fog of history on many other portions of his life, and the protagonist frequently disappears as the central focus of this work.

In his book *Divining Slavery and Freedom: The Story of Domingos Sodré, an African priest in Nineteenth-Century Brazil*, Reis has formulated an enlightening biography of a significant freedman who was previously lost to the pages of history, entwining the life of Domingos Sodré into the larger narrative of slavery and emancipation within Atlantic and Afro-Brazilian history. Furthermore, scholars of religion will find this work to be a welcomed addition to the historical study of religion and religious development in South America. Postcolonial scholars will also benefit from Reis's enlightening work and study of Domingos Sodré and the colonial structures of nineteenth-century Brazil, the historical significance of the transatlantic slave trade, and the mutual resistance of those structures from Sodré and the Candomblé culture and religion in Bahia.

Although unprecedented in its scope, Reis's study does follow a multi-decade trend among Brazilian historians to analyze slavery and emancipation history through contextualized biographies such as this one. Such contextual biographies of slavery and emancipation have attracted recent and increasing academic interest. There has been keen interest within Brazilian historiography to synthesize similar contextualized biographies, not of major historical figures, but of individual men and women who would otherwise be lost to the shadows of historical anonymity. This and similar works bring a deeply personal aspect to the story of Brazilian slavery, and also the story of hope for those slaves who were successful in escaping and changing an inequitable society and social system.

This book is a perfect example of “Microhistory,” in that Reis traces the life of Domingos Sodré, an Afro-Brazilian Candomblé priest, within the greater social and cultural-historical context of colonial Brazil. Reis has beautifully incorporated the study of religion, history, and socio-cultural studies into this present volume, which is a masterpiece of Atlantic history and emancipation and slavery studies. João José Reis successfully achieves what historians often seek to attain: presenting analytic historical insight while simultaneously recounting an engaging and emotional narrative. This study and others like it allow the reader to perceive the broad movement of history from a more humane, intimate, and personal perspective. Through his dedicated, multi-disciplinary writing and scholarship, Reis has creatively combined microhistory, ethnographic and sociological study of nineteenth-century Brazil through the history of the life and person of Domingos Sodré, and the collective experience and identity of African slaves and freedmen in nineteenth-century Bahia, Brazil. This book could not be more highly recommended.