The carnival of Salvador has been acknowledged by the Guinness Book of World Records as the largest in the world. It is a multifaceted celebration that annually attracts approximately two million participants, doubling the size of the city and functioning as the most important generator of income for the city and commerce. The city of Salvador is also known for the diversity of its culture, present in its historical buildings and most especially in the strong African heritage evident in every corner of Salvador. In fact, the city is considered the most “African” of all Brazilian cities, including the largest concentration of African descendants in the country. This African heritage has survived in a variety of forms, in the cuisine, in the religion, in the folklore, and most especially, in the carnival tradition of the city.

Even though the carnival of Salvador is celebrated as one major city event, distinct traditions were formed through its several years of development, including some of white tradition and others of African-Brazilian influence. The celebration includes the carnival of the Afoxés, the carnival of the Blocos Afros, the carnival of the trio elétrico with its recent Axé Music, and the traditional old-style carnival celebrated in the historic downtown center of the city, the carnival of the Pelourinho. Carnival celebrants have established their preferences, contributing to the grandiosity of the event.

This study is intended to describe the development of the “four carnivals” of Salvador and investigate the factors that led to the appearance of new types of celebration. It will discuss the musical developments of each carnival tradition and how they blended in more recent years for the creation of Axé music.