

SÉRIE ANTROPOLOGIA

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**FRONTIERS AND MARGINS: THE UNTOLD
STORY OF THE AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIOUS
EXPANSION TO ARGENTINA AND URUGUAY**

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Brasília

1996

**Frontiers and Margins: The Untold Story of the
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Sometimes, it may occur that a microscopically examined sequence of events in the lives of a few individuals result in the disclosure, once again, of an often neglected characteristic of human action and discourse: its polyphonic, plurivocal nature. It is not merely the case of the Rashomon effect and the variety of versions by differently positioned actors but of the even greater complexity added by the density of voices, some in the light and some in shadows, that resound when a single informant speaks to us: all the social spaces through which her or his life alternates are involved, the whole of a life experience, amounting to her or his forecast of the intentions of the interlocutors with whom she or he happens to talk. How can such a plural account be transcribed in a single ethnography, in a linear series of statements? This is very much the case of the people about whom I wrote in this paper. A cult community that challenges ethnographers to the point that they come out, very often, with the most contradictory conclusions. Indeed, the Afro-Brazilian cults seem to be malleable enough to encompass the most confusing variety of discourses shed upon them, all embraced by data, all fitting in: they are syncretic and deny being syncretic, they are pluralistic and they are exclusive, they are political and they are a-political, they are African and they are not so African. I will speak here about a new pair of antagonistic views: this religion as conforming and not conforming to established standards in a new national milieu.

1. Paper presented at the Symposium on "Religious Syncretism and Revitalization" during the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington DC, November 1995. I thank Jose Jorge de Carvalho for the careful reading of this text and stimulating conversations on the materials. Peter Kloehn, the photographer who shared with me all the field-trips that led me to this story. Luis Carlos Santana (Santaninha), who introduced us to the enigmas of Santana do Livramento. Norton Correia, who introduced me to cult-houses in Porto Alegre which maintained important links with Argentine temples. Alejandro Frigerio and Marita Carozzi, who oriented me when I was preparing my first trip and gave me important addresses and information. Pai Julio and Pai Rubem, who became my friends and guides in the maze of the cult network in Buenos Aires. Finally, a new acknowledgement to Alejandro Frigerio, since, thanks to his criticism, I was able to go a step further in my understanding of the reality under study.

The double discourse of the Afro-Brazilian cults in Argentina: minority and nationality.

The multifaceted recent history of expansion of the Afro-Brazilian cults towards the River Plate countries started roughly during the late 50s. Today, the cults have a conspicuous presence in the Argentine and Uruguayan societies, made possible by their constant presence in the media and by the growing number of temples in the suburbia of capital cities of both countries. I will focus here on the contradictory versions on that short period of history given by its protagonists, and with the production of conflicting ethnographies based on those versions. Three universes are, therefore, superimposed in my analysis: 1) the spontaneous deeds of people who converted and brought the cult beyond the Southern Brazilian frontier, with whatever motivations they may have had; 2) the production of discourses by these very agents, pursuing simultaneously two different and, in this case, rather incompatible ends: on the one side, to keep memory alive and, on the other, to seek legitimation in the new environment of the Argentine and Uruguayan national societies - very similar among themselves, but utterly contrastive in relation to their Brazilian counterpart -; and 3) the production of ethnographies by the two anthropologists who set for themselves the task to study this process, Alejandro Frigerio and myself. I will surmount these three layers from top to bottom, that is, from the ethnographers' discourses on natives' discourses to the documented facts and, then, come back to say a word on the anthropological endeavour and its occasional flaws.

Although this paper can be said to focus on the revitalization of a culture via introduction of a set of religious symbols and the re-traditionalization of these symbols in a new historical, geographical, and political setting, it does so by specifically concentrating on a concomitant process of **legitimation** or **officialization** of a religion within new national boundaries, as well as with the **disciplining** of its elements according to the values and references for behavior in force in the new soil. Perhaps, this could be considered a specific, peculiar type of revitalization conditioned to the restriction and adequation of the adopted set of symbols to new demands for survival in a new environment.

I will depart from the two above mentioned ethnographies and the contrasting conclusions they reached to then place them in an encompassing and conciliatory perspective. Not seeking conciliation by its own sake but to show how, sometimes, we, anthropologists, fall in the trap of our informants' strategic discourses because, by looking at the tree, we cannot see the forest.

In 1993, Alejandro Frigerio published an article where, gathering from his previous writings (1989), as well as from Marita Carozzi's own findings (1991 and 1992), and also following Prandi (1991), argues against my article of 1991 "Uma Vocacao de Minoria: A Expansao dos Cultos Afro-Brasileiros na Argentina como Processo de Reethnicizacao" ("A Vocation of Minority: The Expansion of the Afro-Brazilian Cults in Argentina As a Re-Ethnicizing Process"). I had tried to understand the meaning of the introduction - or re-introduction² - of the cults in Argentina by placing informants' statements in dialogue with

2. Because, although there are not visible traits of an autochthonous Afro-Argentine population left, some kind of cult had existed in the past (Ingenieros 1957, quoted by Ratier 1977), as also existed a black and mulatto population (25% in the city of Buenos Aires in 1838, falling to less than 2% in 1887 (See Clementi 1974 y Reid Andrews 1989)

the dominant discourses that built the nation in that country. From that counterpoint emerged clearly, I believe, a dissonant voice, a voice trying to re-introduce a space for difference, some room for the experience of being minority, in a society where the national state had deployed, during the last hundred years, what can be considered the most effective homogenizing strategies in the whole of the New World (Rouquie 1984: 41). A country where the matrix for citizenship was a neutral, abstract paradigm of person, free from any traits of ethnic distinction, either Afro, Native American, Gallician or Napolitan. A species of clone created at the turn of the century in a mix of laboratory and public office run by hygienists and educators who, jointly, overrode the threats of identity chaos caused by massive immigration.

In this grey Argentine landscape, where access to citizenship was conditioned to compliance with a rigid pattern of conduct, and equality before the law meant, ideally, equality in manners, dressing, language and even accent, the voices of the informants indeed seemed to say: "we are reintroducing a lost root, we are looking outside, to Brazil, and through Brazil to Africa, to re-state a right to cultural and behavioral differentiation, to escape from totalitarian sameness". Obviously, people who were saying this (and in my article I transcribed fragments exemplifying this kind of discourse), were people who, for one reason or another, felt uncomfortable with the hegemonic pattern based on the cultural homogeneity of the population. Nevertheless, this people were poor and not so poor, white and not thoroughly white, uneducated but also educated, and would not be easy to draw a line according to any of such parameters. It is possible to suppose that no one is ever at ease with such a demanding pattern for participation in a Nation, which implies in citizens devoid of anomalies, which inoculate an horror of minority being -of course, this justified by a history where, at some stages, 70% to 80% of the population of the main centers in the country where foreigners (Germani 1971: 271).

Frigerio disagrees with this reading, and he does it rightfully. In his own words:

"My interpretation differs, thus, from that of Segato (1992: 266), who sees Afro-Brazilian religions in Argentina as 'a re-introduction of a symbolic repertoire which allows for ethnic subjectivation, for ethnic self-constitution, for self-differentiation[...] the new religious option and its associated patterns of behaviour are true indicators of a trend towards recovering ethnicity'. According my analysis, the revindication of black and indigenous elements in *the religion* occurs as part of an attempt at asserting its contribution to national history and culture. The end of the Argentine priests is not to differentiate themselves, but to incorporate *the religion* to the national culture, in a context of strong rejection of foreign "sects". The practitioners of the religion want not 'a space for alterity' (Segato 1992: 269), but the acceptance of their religious practices by Argentine society. This preoccupation prevails in temple's daily discourse and its the main motivation behind the realization of public events, radio and television programs" (1993: 114-5, my translation from Spanish).

He identified and quoted from a different discourse than the one I identified and quoted from, and it is far from my intentions here to discuss his findings, which are for sure truthful and accurately represented in his works. What I want to understand is why. Why, in such a short scope of history and geography, where I found people struggling for a place

of cultural dissension, he found people speaking of national acceptance? Why, where I found people regarding themselves as an estranged minority, he found people speaking of a new national religion and the revindication of a forgotten but afterall early foundational Argentine African root? Where I found people speaking of a Brazilian root, he found people emphatically relegating Brazil for Africa, the continent in which Argentina would have deep roots now momentarily forgotten? Where I found a globalizing trend through the introduction of a sense minority in tension with the nation, an implosive presence for its cultural constraints, he found a localizing effort, anchoring the new creed in the bedrock of nationality, almost as a new symbol of it?

Maybe our different personal idiosyncrasies led us to different teams of informants, his conservative, mine anarchist; his wealthier, mine poorer; his seeking to access a public voice, mine retreating to the domestic sanctuary of their own houses. Maybe our biographies: he, living in Buenos Aires, did lengthy and extensive field-work in this city, where he obtained valuable documentation and had privileged access to all important archives and sources of information; I, living in Brasilia, threaded the genealogies of the Argentine houses from Brazil onwards or found them in Argentina and followed them up to check them back in Brazil through Uruguay. Maybe we chose different settings to carry out our research: He gathered data from public meetings, membership of religious associations, international conferences organized by these associations, radio programs, journals and magazines of wide circulation, while I only approached individual priests, priestess and their families-of-saint, chatting informally during breaks at ritual occasions or in the intimacy of their kitchens.

Explanations of our divergences may stroll a variety of roads but probably converging at a single point, because what we found there was the tension between either two differently positioned kinds of social subjects, both in a struggle for appropriation of a same set of symbols, one to accommodate this set os symbols to the institutional set up of the nation, the other to counter it. Or, even more probably, the internal tension of these two undertakings within the same subjects, obliging them to reconcile their will of participation in a national society but nevertheless retaining for themselves their own margin of difference, their peculiar profile under the cover of legality and with the alibi of legitimacy as part of the Argentine society.

The whole idea of "secrecy", as opposed to the Catholic idea of "mystery", according to the way it was explained to me by an Uruguaian priest residing in Argentina³, and so inherent in these religions, points at this. "Mystery", as he told me, does not belong to any one and is stated by a few in priesthood, who also hold its custody. Secrecy - even in its most abstract sense of something, anything, which cannot be talked about or which has no representable referent⁴ - belongs to a few, but can, anyway, be shared, passed over through ritual and it ends by designing a network of people who are related by "knowing" or by accepting that some people "know". In this context, a secret as, for example, the "fundament of *axe*" as a source of magic power, is something that one hints at in conversation without ever truly uttering it.

3. I am quoting here Julio de Oba, of Lomas de Zamora, son-of-saints of Mother Santinha of Porto Alegre.

4. This idea of "secrecy" as the unspeakable was formulated for me by Mother Gladys de Oxum, of Villa Tesei, Moron, Great Buenos Aires.

So, a shared "secret" sets the boundary of a collectivity. Nevertheless, this collectivity can participate, as such, in a more encompassing nation. This is not remote from the idea of a loggia, with its inherent ambivalence of having its members participating in national institutions and, during certain periods, even determining the path of national history and, simultaneously, withdrawing from it, secluding itself. These two discourses, I maintain, are there. Both of them are, and one does not need to be false for the other to be true.

The student of Afro-American religions from North America to Argentina is used to the subtle gestures with which Mothers and Fathers-of-saints punctuate their conversations, meaning that all said is underpinned by a layer of secret contents and giving the impression that they are carrying simultaneously two conversations: one apparent, the other hidden; one public, the other dangerously private. Priesthood, in the Afro-American religious world, master to perfection this art of diacritic signaling so typical of the *entendus*. Everything being said echoes a stream of thought carried by another voice sounding subdued, underneath, foreshadowed by the upper utterances and loaded with presages. So, I am related this particular idea of "secrecy" to my case here because we may be before a new utterance, a re-issuing of the cultural habit of double voicing.

Finally, one is left pondering: why some people would decide to introduce a new set of religious symbols and practices, even at the risk of suffering severe social disapproval and stigmatization, to then dispose off what represented a new option, an alternative set of meanings in the new milieu by taming it and normalizing it, officializing it in the nation to the point it ceases to be an alternative, a dissension with the established mores? In other words: what would be the meaning of a new religion, if it comes to occupy exactly the same place and perform equivalent role as the older one? And I choose to leave this as an open question, because I foresee not easy answer for it and we could face new and even more serious disagreements in trying to account for it.

Digging further down, a new clue for this fertile disagreement emerges by the baffling evidence of the existence of two competing records of the story of the passage of cults towards the South.

The Double Story of Creation of the Afro-Argentine Cults and How I came to know about it.

In the relatively brief lapse of time that goes from the first appearance in the city of Buenos Aires of Afro-Brazilian religious practices of any sort, to our days, two clearly defined accounts of the sequence of events and their motivations can be recorded by anyone who goes to the right sources. As in the previous case, one was adopted by Frigerio, while I felt inclined to lend my ears to and write on the other one. However, both are evidently true, depending for whom and, most crucially, I believe, when, in which kind of situation, speaking to whom and what for.

The first story, as synthesized from Frigerio's accounts and completed by my own records, goes, roughly, this way: From the middle 60s on, people who had being fortuitously acquainted with this religions through travelling, as tourists or for work, to Brazil, and who also had some kind of thirst of a spiritual quest not allowed for within

Catholicism, experienced a bent into "Africanism" in one or other of its varieties and then embraced it, opening temples in Buenos Aires. The first temple to be opened this way and to fulfill the legal requirement for the existence as a religious cult in Argentina by registering at the Subsecretary of Cults of the Ministry of Foreign Relations was the house of Nelida of Oxum, which opened in 1966. This was followed in 1968 by the temple of Elio of Iemanja (Frigerio 1993: 95). I myself, initially following the generous lead I received from Frigerio, recorded the same story from the mouth of two of his informants, Mother Nelida de Oxum herself, and Mother Gladys de Oxum.

When I interviewed Mother Nelida in 1988, she told me that she had lived twenty one years in Brazil, travelling by most of the Brazilian states following her husband, who was an Aeronautic Engineer. She had 45 years in the religion, was initiated by mae Eva de Oxum in Porto Alegre, then passed to Father Luis of Bara, through whom she claimed affiliation to Joazinho da Gomeia in Rio de Janeiro and Menininha of Gantois. In fact, as she said, her Father Luis de Bara had initiated with Joazinho but then passed to the Bahian house of Gantois under Mae Menininha. She herself, told me, had some of her rituals performed by Joazinho da Gomeia in the 50s. What I saw at her house was a very classic *batuque* ritual, so impeccable that, for a moment, dizzy as I was - seven months pregnant and after some five hours among the public at 4 a.m. - I thought for a moment that I was in Brazil, and only woke up from a kind of "day-dreaming" to acknowledge the reality of being in Argentina when someone shouted a phrase in the heavy slung of Buenos Aires suburbs. She said she had travelled extensively, going up to what she described vaguely as "Central America", where her husband became a Babalao. Their felt mission was to bring all the knowledge of the religion to Argentina. At the moment, she worshiped only orixas in her temple, did not practice umbanda any more and strongly advocated against the presence of homosexuals in the cult. She estimated that, at that time, there were already 3.000.000 umbandistas in Argentina.

That marked, therefore, the official and well-behaved "opening" of the tradition in Buenos Aires and, since then, the cult have been known to steadily grow. Frigerio, who had direct access to the files of the Subsecretary of cult, tells that, in the early 90s, there were approximately 400 temples registered and, having that as a basis, it was possible that in fact more 1000 temple-houses were functioning in the city and suburbs (Frigerio op.cit: 96) since not all of them fulfill the requirement of registration. The subsecretary of cults had told me some years earlier, in January 1989, that the temples inscribed at his office were 250, with approximately 100 adepts each. This means that, in a few years, they almost duplicated. Despite the recent efforts to legitimize the presence of the cult in Argentina by reference to Africa (as Frigerio clearly shows in the paper I am commenting here, and also in accordance with the contemporary Brazilian trend pointed by Prandi, 1991, in his study of the terreiros of Sao Paulo), at the time of my research, four main "families of saint" or religious genealogies from Porto Alegre could be identified and traced in their expansion to the South: the "roots", as they called it, of Father Joao (Correia) of Lima; Father Luis of Bara; Father Romario (Almeida) of Oxala and Mother Estela of Iemanja. To this picture, was also added one family-of-saint of Rio de Janeiro whose founder, Father Tancredo da Silva Pinto, invented a variety of cult called *Omoloko*, which, independently from any precise links from his own cult-house, was massively adopted in Argentina for the facilities it introduced for the performance of rituals. And, finally, a family-of-saints claiming for itself ancestry with Mother Menininha of Gantois in Salvador, via one of her children-of-

Saints: Father Jeronimo de Souza of Rio de Janeiro. Affiliation to this latter is represented by Gladys of Oxum, Frigerio's main informant and with whom I also worked, following his suggestion and kind introduction.

I was interviewing this latter priestess in the search for new light that could help me to answer my own question: what was the meaning of such sudden, passionate interest vested on African culture, in a country so eminently racist and so utterly "bleached" that was often perceived as "European" by its Latin American neighbours?. So, unexpectedly, something significant occurred which again stirred up the perception of the double voicing. Double voicing which from then on unfolded into a parallel story of foundation, which I will now narrate, intertwined with the story of my own access to it.

Mother Gladys - the owner of a splendid temple whose clientele included, at that time, some members of very wealthy and traditional families in the country - was explaining to me how her religious vocation had started early, leading her to a failed attempt to become a nun. She also spoke about a bout of strange behaviour which repeated itself until she found her way to Rio and to whom was to become her Father-of-Saints. And, while saying so, she explained how limited were the options in Buenos Aires at that time. She said: "at the beginning there was Mother Nelida's house, and Elio's", and then, turning to the other people of her house who were around, she whispered, with an almost imperceptible twinkling of her eyes: "and, even earlier, there were those guys...(los *muchachos*), the three guys who came from Uruguay, you know...? Pocho, Victor, Mara.... I used to go there ..." This was not said directly to me and, at that precise moment, her countenance, her vanishing voice and her manifest unease with the matter convinced me that I had to follow it further somewhere else.

However, I had to wait. No one touched the issue again during that trip. And it was only in 1991, during my second period of field-work in Buenos Aires, that some new evidence appeared, while recording a life-history: the informant had been working at some night club at the frontier between Brazil and Uruguay, and there he had frequented the house of Mother Teta -Hipolita Ozorio de Lima is her name. He had told me before that Mother Teta was a character, a kind of live monument. And now he was telling me that she was, in fact, the main responsible for the first wave of the tradition into Uruguay and Argentina. At her *terreiro* lied an important clue to the story, because it was there that converted the first group of people who, then, became priests and opened houses in Buenos Aires and Montevideo. Apparently, these founders had also been there working in "the night". Then, I did not let it sink again.

As it seemed, the first cult-houses to offer religious services in Buenos Aires were linked to a famous brothel, "El Chalet Verde", which had existed in Santana do Livramento, on the Brazilian border with Uruguay. One of these mysterious figures was still, as I was told, living in Buenos Aires, and it took us approximately six hours one evening, meandering along remote streets that cut across the endless extensions of Buenos Aires suburbia, to find the amazing house of most notable Father Victor de Bara, leaning as it was on a forgotten railway. I was helped in this search by two local Fathers-of-saints, Julio and Nando, and in the company of photographer Peter Kloehn, who was on his turn looking for altars to shoot for his collection. We stopped at a handful of temples to ask for help. And, when we finally got there at around two thirty before dawn, it did not surprised me to find him awake. He, then, told me the following story - trivial in appearance, fertile in consequences - which I re-tell in full because I believe it is a piece of history that will be

able to account for a process of cultural diffusion that has contributed to change, at least to certain extent, the physiognomy of a society. Moreover, my responsibility increases in a case as this, where the voices of actors assumed marginal are discovered central, at the core of changes that end by affecting society as a whole.

"I went to the frontier at the age of nineteen. We went from Montevideo. We wanted to know Brazil. I went with "la Tita", "el Sergio". "Mara" came later, with the others, appeared at the Chalet Verde when I was already there. She came with a hair long to the waist, dressing as a woman, a real transvestite. That was in 56, or 57. Mara arrived

persecuted by a ranch owner. He was after her to kill her, because he had met her at the boite where she had been working, in Alegrete. There they had a "troupe" with "la Negra Enrique", "el Pocho", "la Espanola" - "la Negra Enrique" all dressed as a monkey and "Mara" dancing the "Acuarela do Brasil" turning so fast that one saw four hands instead of two!. At that time she was very naughty, very pretty. When the "ballet" fell apart, Mara stayed at Alegrete, serving drinks. She passed very well as a woman because, at that time, there were not so many transvestites as today. She worked at the saloon, as a "vamp", and a ranch owner fell in love with her and wanted to marry her and retire her from that kind of life. He became mad when another "queen" told him: -'you are in love with a *macho* ... that isn't a woman, is a *macho*". And the guy went after her to kill her. Then she fled to the frontier looking for me and escaping from the farmer. I met her at that time, and took her to the house of the "la Negra Artigas", who worked at the casino, and hid her there. She had come looking for me because she knew that there was a group of Uruguayans ... "La China, La Chita" ... -'Who are you?-', -'I am Argentine, and came fleeing. This is what is happening to me...'Two days later the farmer arrived in a big jeep asking if "Mara Malu" was there. He was searching all Livramento. Then, sometime later, she "arranged herself" with the deaf Gulmin, who was a tailor. I took her to Mother Teta.

According to the version I am following up here, and matching Mother Gladys' *sotto voce* comment that night, Mara was the first Argentine mother-of-saints to have a cult clientele in Buenos Aires. And she still had her cult-house there at the time of my research. Victor continued, then, with his own story:

I was "developing" at Mother Teta's house, due to a story very brief but very long. I had a strong mediunity and did not know what mediunity was. I did not even know what those things were. Then, I was at a party - because, at the frontier, one lived in parties, from "taco" to "taco" ("taco", he explained, was the social gathering of all the "maricas" dressed as women met and the men came to dance), and all those big occasions, which in those years were a great novelty for us - today that happens at the boites themselves, but at that time it was real hidden -, so, I was at a great party and suddenly, without knowing what I was doing, I disappeared and woke up at the cemetery. If there was a storm or was raining, I used to become "obsessed" and went to the cemetery. Among the tombs, I changed the flowers from one tomb

to the other, wandered around, and heard voices saying: -'you are mad' , louder and louder. I told to myself: -' I am maddening, this is horrible!'. Once I made a prayer to make a pact with the devil and went to encounter "him". When I was passing a bridge, I saw a big man, with a black and red cape and fiery eyes coming towards me, I was terrified and I ran away. And that was the way I arrived to "madrina" ("godmother" for "Mother-of-Saints") Teta. She made me buy the Exu of the Cemeteries, that one who is kneeling on a coffin (he refers to the image of a cult's spiritual entity), a black goat, seven bottles of "cachaca" (the Brazilian sugar cane alcoholic liquor), the Omolu (an African orixa, also called Obaluaie, that protects from skin diseases) and seven black cocks. She told me that I was "obsessed" (being molested by a bad spirit) and that I had too much mediunity. I was "obsessed" by the Exu of the Cemeteries and had to enter the "religion" (meaning the cult of the African orixas), but first I had to do something at the "Aruanda" (meaning the cult of autochthonous Brazilian Exus, lower spirits often interpreted as diabolic incarnations). So, I "made" all the "Aruanda" of Mother Teta, who at that time did not have yet the "Saints' line" (meaning the African orixas' cults). After the Aruanda I returned to the "Congal" (the parallel cult of autochthonous Brazilian spirits like Indians or "caboclos" or ex-slaves called "Pretos Velhos"). Julio Casco, Mara, Henrique, El Pocho, the whole group was present. She did the "Aruanda job" to free me from the "obsession", then I continued developing in the "line of caboclos". Only afterwards came from Porto Alegre (the capital of the Southern Brazilian State of Rio Grande do Sul) Father Joao de Bara to cross-breed the "terreiro" (the temple) with "nacao" ("nation", meaning the African cult of orixas). Mother Teta called all her Children-of-saint: -'Guys, come and bring your bed that I am passing my house to "nation" (the beds to install themselves during the long period of seclusion required for the new initiation to the orixas' cult). I bought a blue and white sofa for Father Joao (the colours of the Uruguayan and Argentine flags) but I couldn't be present because my mother was ill and I had to go. When I came back, she told me: -'Victor, I cannot do anything else for you. Everything I did it is already done. You belong directly to the line of saints (African orixas) and you have Bara in your head (meaning the orixa governing his head, his personal "patron" or "owner of the head"). You have to go directly to the hands of Father Joao de Bara in Porto Alegre. And so I did [...]. So, all that group was at the frontier, and I was the one who took all of them to the "Madrina" Teta. I was the first one, then Came Mara, and Henrique, Sergio, Tobias. That tribe of ours was formed by people who become great Fathers-of-Saints, and all went to Montevideo and here (Buenos Aires). All started by the hands of Madrinha Teta, passed by the hands of Pai Joao and, then, disperse themselves all over.

Now I understood the names Mother Gladys had dropped: Pocho, Victor, Mara....Those "guys" had acquired a face. That was truly a "missing link" of the, at times, not very intelligible passage and later installation of the cults on the other side of the Southern border. Not only because it was a crucial element, a turning point, but also because for ever after it was seen as an ignoble beginning by the diligent practitioners, striving for a place of respect in national society, as Frigerio well describes. However, we were finally on the

right track to it.

In the next trip of January, 1994, Peter Kloehn and me followed it up. The house of Mother Teta and the site of Santana do Livramento, where all had started, had to be seen. We were after some more reality for the missing link. And we found it. Mother Teta was still there, at her house, and her foster daughter and nephew Izolda confirmed everything: the eldest house in Montevideo was run by a grand-daughter-saint of Mother Teta, Amelia, who was a daughter-of saint of Mara. Mara, in fact, had left Livramento for Montevideo and, later moved to Buenos Aires. Victor, as he himself had told me, was the first to initiate, around 1956, followed closely by Pocho of Xango. Both opened their houses in Buenos Aires a few years after that. Others had gone the same path: from work in "the night" to cult life; among them was, for example, Roberto de Oxala, whom I had interviewed in his house of Montevideo in 1991. "Cata", "Cholo", "La Parda", "Tita Merelo" had also followed, and a few female prostitutes as well. Powerful, fascinating priests, all from this root.

The only difference between Izolda's and Victor's testimonies was that, according to the former, the transvestites "did not have any thing to do with the "women's house". They weren't artists", they worked in other services, cooking, cleaning. Victor, for Izolda, was a cook.

Through other people, I came to know other things, which are not accidental details but accountable to the very structure of this tradition, where, as I wrote elsewhere (Segato 1986, 1995 *a* and 1995 *b*, and seems confirmed, for example, by Jim Wafer, 1991), ontology is impregnated with androgyny and transitions. To synthesize, what happened was that booming brothels and an exuberant night life was the mark of that frontier, mostly on the Brazilian side of the border. Echoes of that splendor are still heard until nowadays, but the big noise is gone. It started to fade away in the sixties, and that was not coincidence. Santana do Livramento is the only large urban center to exist on a "fronteira seca" ("dry frontier") linking Brazil to the countries of the River Prate basin. As such, it was the only passage for all traffic of goods, up and down, until the military government started, in the 60s, the construction of the bridges who later were going to distribute that traffic (Paso de los Libres - Uruguayana, Puerto Iguazu - Foz de Iguacu). And it was exactly at that moment that the businesses of "the night" started to decline.

Livramento is indeed the proper embodiment of the margins, a place in between. A knower of the tradition would say: Exu's very kingdom. It is a most porous margin of nations, where no line, no fence, no river or mountain marks the dissolution of one country into another. The two languages, Portuguese and Spanish, are so imbricated there, that, to give an example still related to this paper, I heard my informant Izolda maintaining a continuous conversation with her Uruguayan husband, he speaking in Spanish and she answering in Portuguese, in high speed and for some twenty minutes. All genealogies are intertwined for ever back in time, and, as a remaining pimp told me, many people are "doble chapa" (hold "double identity card"). Then, also, for many years, a proper setting for other margins and transits as the transgression of gender identity: a pole of attraction for transvestites from Argentina and Uruguay who, at that time, had already perceived Brazil as a place of more flexible morality, where they could develop a vocation for, as they say, "the night".

There, flourished a splendid brothel, "El Chalet Verde", run by a woman called Ana Aramita Brun, who belonged to a family of local land-owners and politicians. All the

stories suggest that she was an extraordinary character, a "mulher-homem" ("woman-man"), and, apparently with the license of her family, changed her name to "Ema Brun", bought the house and installed the business in it. Often she herself got emotionally involved with the women working at the house, and many are the stories of her explosive, virile, character. At certain stage, she fell for the power of the *axe* of Mother Teta, and these two women established and unprecedented partnership: Ema initiated as a child-of-saint of Teta, and Teta regularly went to make offerings at Ema's Chalet Verde. A room was specially constructed to that end. There, the group of transvestites experienced the twist of fate that made their lives shift from the life of the night into the religion of batuque. After this conversion, came dispersion, followed by the opening of their own houses in Montevideo and Buenos Aires.

This unsettling, subversive clandestine story contrasts with the standard, established account that circulates openly in the cult-houses today. As the process is still new and its events recent, it is possible to reveal the disciplining tendencies in history construction, and we can hear the polyphonic tension between one face of the cult a-moral, marginal, subversive, and another official, disciplined, moralized. According to where one directs one's ears, it is possible to perceive one, or the other. As far as I am concerned, I do not have any doubts that, as I have said before, the protagonists of this story found in the religion a structure prepared to contain their own experience of transit, an apt lexicon for circulation and androgyny. The cult designed the fluid landscape that now they could take home.

The two patterns of Iconography and Double Discourse

A part of the text, which would make it too long for the presentation, will elaborate on the iconographic representations of one tendency and the other. Altars in cluster and altars in pyramid. Metonymy and synecdoche. Brazil and Argentina. Exus and Caboclos/Orixas. I will mentioned briefly this final elaboration of the idea, accompanied by Peter Kloehn's photographs as illustrations.

A final word on some flaws we usually incur in Anthropological work

The story I have told so far is one among many evidencing what is, in fact, a strong characteristic of the Afro-Brazilian religious tradition in general: the duplicity of its discourse. Saying, in this tradition - one always suspects -, is heavily impregnated by the unsaid. Telling and hiding go hand in hand. "Secrecy", in the sense defined above, resounds all over the texts, is the undertone, the permanent echo of all utterances, what underpins every dialogue. And also, what a tape recorder cannot grasp. The hints at what I have called "double voicing" are subtle, the unspeakable is, also, to a great extent, un-writable. The cues are inflection of one word, intonation of a phrase, and gestures often on the borderline of perception. We, ethnographers, are dribbled all the time. The mastering of silencing while speaking is, I believe, the great art of priesthood in this tradition. And this is what we

have witnessed in this story.⁵

That warns us, anthropologists, once again, against the wrong hermeneutic practice of reading native voices as univocal and outside their natural imbeddedness in dialogues ongoing at their own worlds, which we must understand fully, in all their implications, in order to record the complexity of voices that echo in an apparently simple utterance. This is a Bakhtinian teaching that goes

"...any product of the activity of human discourse [...]derives shape and meaning in all its most essential aspects not from the subjective experiences of the speaker but from the social situation in which the utterance appears.[...] What is characteristic for a given utterance specifically [...] is the expression of the interrelationship between the speakers and of the whole complex set of social circumstances under which the exchange of words takes place" (Bakhtin/Voloshinov 1994:41)

To ask for meaning is always to ask where, in discourse, lies desire, and this implies awareness of the multilayered projects of the speakers. All word, in the Bakhtinian sense, is double, engaged, dialogical: it says about an object, referentially, but also speaks back and forward towards an other's word, telling simultaneously of the mutual positioning of the interlocutionary subjects, how do they see each other, whom they believe they represent, as well as their projects: how would they like to be seen. In the present case: officializing, disciplining discourses in this religion indicate not something of the practices themselves or even of the national allegiances of the practitioners, but they are a presentation of self for a project of obtaining a place within the nation. These utterances are launched at the agents responsible for such acceptance, including very often the anthropologist. Parallel with this assimilationist discourse, runs another which speaks of dissolution, of margins, which is internal, a discourse of *entendues*. This plays the role of the shadow of the open word, is hidden behind it.

Applying, flexibly, another Bakhtinian concept, that of "heteroglossia" (Bakhtin, M: 1981), it is also possible to say that the characters of whom I have spoken here are heteroglotous: their life in language unfolds in two different voices, one centrifugal, engaged and launched towards others in a hierarchical society, seeking legitimacy and respect; and the other centripetal - and also, as I said, in this case, encoded in very hermetic signs -, for the circle of themselves, within the life of the margins, of the forever and by definition non assimilable by national society.

5. Let us be aware that, perhaps, this is not merely a characteristic of priesthood in the cults but a more general trait of power. I would bet that power, of any kind, including, as in this case, subversive power, for example, or, also, the power of seduction, is very strongly a factor in double voicing.

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