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**THE MYSTICISM OF MARGINAL
SPIRITS**

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*Yo, más cuerda en la fortuna mía,
Tengo en entrambas manos ambos ojos
Y solamente lo que toco veo.*
Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

This is the highest honor that I have yet received in my academic life: to have this opportunity to speak about spirituality in this chapel still flooded, after exactly 300 years, with the spirit of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, “la peor (y mayor) de todas” – “the worst (and greatest) of all.”¹

In mosaic form I intend to offer a panoramic view of certain aspects of the intense religious life that one observes in Brazil and in practically all other Latin American countries. My reflections are part of a wider effort of a group of Brazilian scholars, the majority of whom are anthropologists, but who are however, in constant dialogue with theologians, sociologists, and religious historians seeking to develop a conceptual framework, one that begins with a dialogue formed of ideas proposed by thinkers from other continents for a better understanding of the rich and complex universe of religious phenomena. Here I have chosen to put lesser emphasis on the Christian universe, simply because its spiritual fulfillments are already sufficiently known to the intellectual public such as those present at this World Congress. In this light, I hold that if there is creativity in Brazilian religious activity, it is above all manifested in the syncretic and popular spheres, in exactly those places where the dominant pattern is given neither by official Catholicism nor by Protestant sects.

In *The Banquet of the Sorcerers* (1987) Carlos Rodrigues Brandão formulated one such thorough sociological framework for interpreting religious affliction and the various types of organized religious agents that provided an answer to this necessity. From the issues of mental disorder, relationship with the deceased, personal and collective vows, divinations, and pilgrimages, among others, the Brazilian religious community finds at its disposal a vast religious universe that includes the official Catholic church; centers of Kardecism or spiritualism; traditional Catholic fraternities; temples for *umbanda*, *candomblé* and other forms of Afro-Brazilian religious practices²;

religious movements from Japanese origin; numerous Protestant sects and churches; New Age movements, etc. There is a clear articulation between practically all these religious institutions that operate simultaneously according to a structural relationship – of, on the one hand, cooperation, and on the other, open conflict.

¹This text was originally written in Spanish as one of the four keynote addresses delivered at the XVIIth International Congress of the History of Religions, in Mexico City, in August, 1995. I thank Jesse Samba Wheeler for the careful revision, with suggestions, of the present English version. I also thank the help received from Sérgio Ferretti, Lélia Rodrigues and Rita Segato.

²For a basic information on *umbanda*, see Brown (1994); for *candomblé*, see Bastide (1980).

Something that stands out, practically all over Latin America, is the idea that we are facing a plural religious world. However, this idea of plurality as something recent is actually misleading, for from the religious point of view Brazil has been a diverse country since the beginning of the twentieth century. What is more recent is the discursive production of that plurality. In my view, the real novelty in this national religious landscape is the ever increasing expansion of Protestant sects, especially in the last thirty years, and which has certainly provoked a rupture in the self-image of Brazil as a mono-religious country.³

I have emphasized the issue of spirituality in the first place because I am interested in understanding the strictly religious side of experience and, if possible, the individual side of participation in Brazilian popular religious groups. One should always bear in mind that all religious movements we call popular are, in fact, much more dependent upon the individual spiritual participation of their practitioners than the hierarchical movements and institutions we call "great religions". To clarify thus: for me, religion refers to any articulated systems of beliefs, ritual practices, and explanations of the world, that can be expressed, in those more ethnocentric cases, in dogma; or, in the most open and flexible cases, following the dynamics of collective representations. On the other hand, I conceive of spirituality as the way in which a given individual internalizes, absorbs, develops, in a manner which is always idiosyncratic, the particular path or model of union (or of re-connecting, if we want to remember the origin of the term religion, from the Latin *re-ligare*) proposed by the religious movement to which he belongs. Thus, spirituality implies a dimension of cultivated subjectivity, of religious experience that may even transcend the norm or the formal expectation of the community of followers. In a way similar to the art world, spirituality is always something carried out under the sign of uniqueness, or singularity. And it is precisely of this dimension of the singularity of spiritual experience, seen simultaneously with the sociological, ideological, aesthetic, and political dimensions of religious movements that I would like to make sense.⁴

I insist on this point because there is a kind of division of labor partially established in academic studies of religion that needs to be overcome: scholars who study the spirituality of the so-called "world religions," or "great religions" tend to concentrate themselves on the biographies and the concrete experiences of the leaders, masters, saints, or mystics representative of the traditions studied. On the other hand, those researchers who focus on the religions of the so-called primitives, or of popular religion, or of the predominantly oral religious traditions (generally anthropologists or sociologists), often distance themselves from individual achievements and tend to concentrate on problems of collective memory, myth, or ritual; by doing so, they almost invariably stress the role of the collective in the dynamics of the religious movement they analyze. However, it would be quite difficult for these movements to expand if they did not provide a space for individual experience beyond the communitary participation.

Putting it in other terms, it could be argued that this division of labor certainly has its consequences, for the greatest prestige was always granted to religious traditions that were capable to receive, on the part of their authors, a personalized treatment. Anonymous treatises rarely reach the degree of fame and influence achieved by the writings of well-known authors. This way, spiritual traditions placed marginally within the official history of religions are twice undermined: firstly, because they are interpreted mostly as the result of social experiences and collective representations; secondly, because they continue to rely basically on oral circuits of communication for their expansion and reproduction. Moreover, not all researchers of oral traditions are interested

³ Bearing in mind these transformations and continuities, I have tried to formulate a general synthesis of the Brazilian religious plurality (Carvalho 1992, 1994a and 1999).

⁴I have proposed a theory of styles of spirituality somewhere else (Carvalho 1994b).

or capable of producing mystic-literary corpi. Most of them choose concentrate themselves in offering their interpretations, but of materials which were collected with the ethnographic aim of understanding them and not with an interest of proposing, signalling or even generating what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls eminent texts⁵. The strategy of ethnographers turns out to be exactly the opposite of the one used by most scholars of the so-called world religions, for their main activity ends up being the promotion of the textuality generated by the leader and mystics of their historical currents: they are all the time producing editions, commentaries, comparisons, exegeses, analyses, etc.

To simplify the argument, one already has then an expectation of how to assess the spiritual content of a religious movement based on the nature of the texts that are produced about them. If they are not individual texts, they are at least collective; if they are not written, they will at least be structured oral texts, as, for example, the corpus of *Ifa* oracle amongst the Yorubas, or cosmogonic myths, recited in ritual contexts, such as the ways of Muu of the Kuna, etc.⁶ And if there are no linguistic texts, there should be at least images, rich in allusions and formal content. What is really difficult to admit, in this universal repertoire of historically established spiritualities, is the existence of religious traditions that are not manifested through these conventional ways of expression whose parameters of excellence were developed after the studies of the "religions of the book." This leads me to my main subject of inquiry: we have a theory of spirituality that does not recognize or that does not know how to recognize the individual experience of a vast number of religious movements, many of which are dominant in Brazil and in other countries of Latin America.

When we situate this discussion exclusively within the field of theory, we find that the majority of the analytical models of apprehending the spiritual world are taken from the largely Western canon of interpretations of the world spirituality. Here a number of first class studies can be found, such as those of Henry Corbin on Sohrawardi, Ibn Arabi and Avicena; Izutsu's comparison between the paths of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu and that of Ibn Arabi; Rudolf Otto's classic comparative study on Shankara and Meister Eckhart; Gershom Scholem's studies of Jewish mysticism; Louis Massignon's monumental study on Al-Hallaj; Suzuki's essays on the Zen Buddhism and its connections with Meister Eckhart's teachings; Mario Satz's study on the influence of Sufism in the sixteenth-century Spanish mystics; and recent works, such as Michael Sells's outstanding proposal of how to read the great mystics of various traditions, languages, places and epochs.⁷ On the other hand, when one approaches the study of popular, indigenous, Afro-American, and even New Age religious movements, one almost always ends up discussing the collective production of meaning, group ideology, ethnic identity, therapeutic function, social integration or rejection of the social order. As a consequence of the way academic disciplines dedicated to the study of religion have been articulated and differentiated since the nineteenth century, popular religious movements do not seem to attract the same abstract questions that scholars address when they study literate spirituality. It is easy for anthropologists to accuse comparativists and phenomenologists of ethnocentrism; it is easy for the latter to view the ethnologists as people unprepared to penetrate the subtleties of the language of the "great" religious teachers and traditions. Putting it as a theoretical problem, how are we going to unify the studies of the "great religions" with anthropological and sociological studies of religions, without one having

⁵See Gadamer (1986).

⁶For information on the mythic-literary corpus of Ifa see Bascom (1969) and Abimbola (1976); for further readings on the corpus of the Kuna see Holmer & Wassen (1947) and Sherzer (1990).

⁷See Corbin (1958,1976 and 1979); Izutsu (1983); Otto (1932); Scholem (1991); Massignon (1975); Suzuki (1949, 1950, 1953 and 1957); Satz (1991).

to borrow or to lend its prestige to the other? This is the general theoretical issue that underlies the following interpretation of popular religions in Brazil.

II. Religious Diversity in Brazil

In a brief synthesis, it could be said that Brazil is a great laboratory of creative and intense religious movements. Here the practices range from the most remote Catholic traditions, such as brotherhoods of flagellants, however forbidden by the Vatican; a number of variants of Afro-Brazilian traditions, present all over the country; New Age communities; new forms of Japanese religions; Islam, which is expanding rapidly in the state of São Paulo; Spiritualism, or Kardecism; a vast profile of esoteric movements, some of which began in the nineteenth century; the unique mystical panorama of the capital, Brasília, where I live, which offers a wide variety of Third Millennium religiosity; and, above all, the extraordinary expansion in the last three decades of Pentecostal Churches, a phenomenon which is causing a dramatic change in the traditionally syncretistic character of the Brazilian religious universe. However, as I have already argued, more than Catholic (or now simply Christian), Brazil is, in a broader sense, a spiritualist country.

According to a survey carried out in 1992 by the Institute for the Study of Religion (ISER) of Rio de Janeiro, 64% of the Brazilian Catholics believe in reincarnation and relate, to some extent, to the Afro-derived religious world, or to the Kardecist and other types of Spiritualism.⁸ Even the most dynamic segment of the Pentecostal movement - specifically, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God - has chosen to exercise a direct confrontation with the Afro-Brazilian religious tradition by practicing, in their rituals, exorcisms of supernatural beings worshipped in cults of an African origin. Thus, by using symbols of negation, they also participate in the dominant spiritualist space. In other writings I have called this complex field of religious groups living in close contact and constantly influencing one another a “quarrel of the spirits.”⁹

Since the middle of the nineteenth-century, two movements of quite distinct cultural and social origins have been simultaneously growing and influencing each other, challenging the image of Brazil as a predominantly Catholic country: Alan Kardec's Spiritualism, imported from France at the time of its creation in the 1860s; and *candomblé*, being a restructuring of the African model of religiosity within the hostile environment of slavery.¹⁰ *Candomblé*'s main focus is possession by the gods; Spiritualism's main goal is the development of mediumship, understood as the incorporation and consequential communication with disembodied beings. *Espiritismo* is a literate tradition, stemming out of the scientificist and evolutionistic context of the nineteenth-century, and, as such, a tradition already born within a rationalist framework. As well as in France, spiritualism arose in Brazil within the stratum of the white population. On the other hand, *candomblé* emerged on the opposite pole, that is, out of the African myth of oral tradition reconstructed by the slaves and their descendents on American ground. Recent historical investigations have recurrently demonstrated the early cross-fertilization between these two forms of religiosity. It is probable that spiritualism was organized in Brazil, simultaneously with its doctrinal development in France, by assimilating

⁸See Carneiro & Soares (1992).

⁹See Carvalho (1992 and 1999). For this expression, “quarrel of the spirits”, I have drawn inspiration from the title of the essay by Desiderius Erasmus, *Querella Pacis* (The Complaint of Peace) and also from the structure of his Colloquies, such as the delightful “The Religious Feast”, where many characters and their shadows exchange perspectives on Christian doctrine (see Erasmus 1989).

¹⁰For an ethnography of *candomblé*, see Bastide (1958).

the style of orthodox Afro-Brazilian religions, which were already structured in cities like Salvador, Rio de Janeiro and São Luís as early as the first half of the nineteenth-century.

Ubiratan Machado quotes a poem called “Naive Brasília” (Brasília Ingênua), published in the journal *Bahia Ilustrada* (1867:23), in which someone makes fun of the spiritualist doctrine, at that time already established in the state of Bahia. In the two final strophes of the poem a daughter warns her father not to believe in what he observed in a spiritualist seance: “Papa, forget about all that confusion\if you don't want to go wrong\ ... \don't believe in that hoax\ this is nothing else\ but a memorable *candomblé*\ prepared for the white men of this land.”¹¹ This short poem is quite a revelation, because within it one can capture the kernel of Brazilian syncretistic religiosity. The girl's father is obviously a member of the elite (or at least aspires to be so) and as such supposes that he should not be associated with religious practices that pertain to the descendants of African slaves; however, everything suggests that such a familiarity had already existed for him. Granted that we can see how spiritualism also functions as an intelligent social alibi: one engages in popular trance, but announces publicly that it is in fact Alan Kardec's literate and “scientific” doctrine. The daughter, interested that her father be always associated with the European status in Brazil, warns him that that type of spiritualism is actually nothing but a *candomblé* ceremony for the whites. The color white signifies not so much a racial feature, but rather a metaphor for social status; that is to say, a kind of possession polished enough not to confront openly the Catholic Church.

Here a third religious current that has also been restructured in an underground manner should be included: the indigenous shamanistic traditions, incorporated by the mestizo populations. These fusions resulted in the syncretistic cults called *jurema* and *catimbó* in the Northeast and *pajelança* and *cura* in the North.¹² The format of these cults is also similar to other Afro-Brazilian syncretistic models that will be discussed later on: the *pajé* or “master” is possessed by a series of entities, all of them related to some cosmic realm and in charge of the cure for illnesses and mental disturbances.

From a sociological and ideological point of view, we already have excellent works that answer questions of a structural, functional and political type regarding spiritualism and Afro-Brazilian cults. However, these movements are only able to grow if they provide the possibility for a spiritual experience that is transmitted by the leaders and absorbed by the neophytes. And what sort of experience is that? Is it possible to understand such an experience as an outsider, in order to place it in the universal catalogue of spiritual experiences? In other words, I would like to include some forms of religiosity currently practiced in Brazil within the field of comparative mysticism. I seek to do so because there is an absence of references to Afro-Brazilian religions in recent encyclopaedias and readers on world-scale religions.¹³ This absence is especially regrettable if we consider the richness, creativity and intensity of these mystical practices that have been developed for centuries in this part of the world.

¹¹“Papai saia da embrulhada\Se não quiser ficar mal\...\Não creia nessa armadilha,\Que outra coisa não é,\Que dos brancos desta terra\Memorável *candomblé*.” (Machado 1983:101).

¹²For basic information on *jurema*, see Carvalho (1990a); for *catimbó*, see Cascudo (1951); and for *pajelança* and *cura* see Mundicarmo Ferretti (1993 and 1994).

¹³ See, for example, the monumental *World Scripture: A comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts*, published in 1995, which only included, apart from the established prestige of the “great religions”, “African traditional religions”, Maori traditional religion and the religion of the North American Indians. Inexplicably, neither the religions of the South American Indians nor the Afro-Brazilian religions are referred to within this grand world portrait. The same can be said of the anthology edited by Beverluis (1995), where Afro-Brazilian religions are also absent.

1. Spiritualism: mediumship and psychography

The experience offered by spiritualism allows for an expressive form that is more easily adaptable to scholars' proposed questions of what are known as great religions, due to the fact that the mediumistic experience is rendered in speech and in writing. Moreover, it is treated as a process of non-personalized verbalization, which works almost as another form of the famous experience of transverberation of St Teresa of Avila, though not through the angel's flaming arrow, but through the word of the spirit.¹⁴ While the angel's fire spreads through Teresa's body, the words of the spirit pass through the medium's mouth or pen and are thus spread throughout the community.

The spiritual fulfilment of the medium seems to be measured first by the fidelity of its mediation – that is to say, to be able to filter it in the most perfect way possible to its personal channel that permits a passage into incorporation – and, above all, for the evolutionary stage of the spirit that incorporates. Psychographic mediums produce constantly a vast literature, expressed in several literary genres – novels; historical, philosophical, and moral texts; poems; biographies; as well as commentaries and reflections on the spiritualist doctrines. Undoubtedly spiritualism is not confined to the spiritualistic literature; there are also painters, plastic artists, musicians; and finally it is the practice of charity and of love for one's neighbor, parameters of spirituality that allows spiritualism to be presented socially as an entirely compatible spiritualistic movement with Catholicism.

One event which illustrates the importance of spiritualism to Brazil took place in the 1970s on the occasion of the first satellite transmission of Brazilian television. Instead of transmitting the message of a Catholic priest - given the traditional self image of the country as the greatest Catholic nation of the world - the television filmed Francisco Cândido Xavier, the most popular Brazilian spiritualist leader writing, through the act of psychography, a message of peace, progress and hope sent from the beyond to the whole nation. That remarkable event, which was meant to be a celebration of Brazil's symbolic inclusion into modernity, can also be understood as the fulfilment of the initial promise of spiritualism, which defined itself, since the nineteenth century, to be the scientific doctrine of the spirits, capable of joining science and religion together. Thus, a spirit living in outer space sent a message to all via a medium; and the TV broadcast it to the whole nation via electromagnetic waves. Given the all-pervasive belief in spiritualism in Brazil, many people who saw the broadcast may have drawn an analogy between Francisco Xavier's power as a medium for extra-physical messages and the technicians's powers as men of science, capable of controlling the satellite as a source for physical communication of messages. In this way Francisco Xavier could publicly reclaim the relevancy of the title of one of his more famous books: "Brazil, Heart of the World, Homeland of the Gospel."

Common amongst Brazilian social scientists is a certain aesthetic-ideological rejection of spiritualist psychographic literature, because it describes distant planetary universes which, surprisingly, are run as a kind of utopic society of civil servants, all practicing the good and accumulating a kind of merit called a bonus, similar to the way terrestrial officials accumulate bonuses and points in their professional career on their path to retirement. Such an interpretation is valid, obviously, but it does not exhaust in any way the creativity of the Brazilian spiritualist literary fiction.

¹⁴ The word transverberation has been associated almost exclusively with St Teresa's mystical experience told in Chapter 29 of her autobiography (Teresa 1957:210). The OED defines it thus: "a striking through... The room in which Teresa received her mystical transverberation - the piercing of her heart by a fiery dart" (1979:3385)

The greatest figure in Brazilian spiritualism is, as we have already indicated above, Francisco Xavier. He has been psychographing for almost seventy years and has published more than 300 books, mostly novels. However, some of his texts are substantial contributions to the doctrine and cosmology of Western spiritualism. One could say that Francisco Xavier embodies the Christian ideal of a compassionate life, one entirely devoted to comforting the heart-stricken through his mediumistic powers¹⁵. If we assess him as a religious writer, his work is evidently uneven, although he does have moments of great subtlety and of a certain spiritual poetic reverie. Here is one phrase dictated to him by André Luiz, one of the spirits that he has psychographed, indicating the path to the great realization of sanctity: "The saint's ecstasy was, one day, a mere impulse, like the cut diamond – a celestial drop chosen to reflect the divine clarity – he lived in the alluvium, ignored in a brute state among common stones"¹⁶ (Xavier 1973:158).

Here the implicit conception of sanctity is clearly Christian, although the idea of reflection of divine clarity points to the role of the mediator, as a mirror or a surface plane crossed by divine light; and that makes him close to the Kardecist goal of spiritual development as the capacity to transmit the divine essence. From the point of view of this religious conception, deeply disseminated among the Brazilian population, Catholicism is understood as a special form of spiritualism.

I am convinced that Francisco Xavier deserves much more attention on the part of scholars of other continents who research spiritualism. For example, texts such as *No Mundo Maior (In the Larger World)* and *Evolução em Dois Mundos (Evolution in Two Worlds)*, with their rich description of planetary homelands and with precise descriptions of how the universe was formed, are equivalent of classics such as *Heaven and Hell* and *The New Jerusalem* by Emmanuel Swedenborg, or *The Book of Spirits*, by Alan Kardec. Moreover, one could perfectly think of a compatible dialogue between Francisco Xavier and Teilhard de Chardin on the evolution of man as a spiritual being. It would also be worthwhile, for those who study North American Channeling (such as, for instance, the group that produces the books of the spirit Michael), to read Xavier.¹⁷ As I see it, it is not a lack of quality in his work which has prevented him so far from attaining more scholarly interest outside Brazil, but rather the way international prestige is currently constructed through legitimizing academic circuits.

Moving now to an assessment of popular Catholicism, special attention should be given to various appearances of the Virgin Mary in many parts of Brazil, many of them described by followers through the language of possession. In many cases, such as in *umbanda*, the model of Afro-Brazilian religion most open to incorporate new entities to its pantheon all the time, the Virgin is treated as just another entity of this vast supernatural pantheon. A special and creative case of appearance is the one happening in the town of Piedade dos Gerais, in the state of Minas Gerais.¹⁸ In the beginning of that phenomenon, the Virgin would write ethereal words in the sky, that vanished immediately after the visionary girl read them. Some time later, both the seer and the Mother of God devised an elegant system of lip synchronization among themselves: the Virgin would move her lips silently and the girl would vocalize what the divine Lady was indicating, thus uttering the words of the Virgin. The young visionary continues to be merely a messenger that

¹⁵For a current biography of Francisco Xavier, see Souto Maior (1995).

¹⁶ See Xavier, *No Mundo Maior* (1973:158); transl. mine.

¹⁷ On channeling as a new spiritualist model, see Riordan (1992), and the directory of channelers prepared by Robin Westen (1998).

¹⁸ See Almeida (1994)

speaks for, but is not possessed by Mary. However, the visual synchrony seems to work like a semiotic transposition of other synchronic arrangements used in Afro-Brazilian possession cults, which demand more somatic activity. A whole community has been formed out of these appearances with synchronous messages. Equally extraordinary, and to some degree similar to the world “of the spirits,” is the capacity of the young woman who sees the Virgin and delivers her messages to reproduce the phenomenon daily: without routine, yet repetitive.

Another tradition of the mystic type that continues to grow in importance is that of the diversified cult forms based on the ingestion of the *yagé* plant, better known in the Brazil as *ayahuasca*. They demonstrate very well this aggregating, syncretistic and fusionist character of the Brazilian religious pattern. While on the Hispanic side of the Amazon – be it Peru, Ecuador or Colombia – shamanism structured around *ayahuasca* has remained until recently confined to the indigenous populations and their own cosmologies, it was reorganized into a mestizo kind of cult as soon as it crossed from Bolivia into the state of Acre on the Brazilian frontier. One of the first of these cults is the well-known *Santo Daime*, founded in the 1920s by Master Raimundo Irineu Serra, from the state of Maranhão. In his youth Raimundo was a practitioner of the *mina* cult, which is a fusion of the original vodun religions from Benin with *pajelança*, a form of worship of nature spirits (a kind of mestizo shamanism) that have the capacity to cure. So, the *mina* of Maranhão was already a coalition of African religious traditions with those of Brazilian natives with Catholicism. When later Irineu Serra created the Sacred Daime, he developed a second synthesis of that first synthesis with the Andean-Amazonian tradition of the *ayahuasca* cult. In this way, even the shamanic complex of *ayahuasca* was incorporated in Brazil under the sign of syncretism, though in this case through a double fusion: simultaneously compatible with the African-American-Brazilian language of spirit possession, and also with Christianity.¹⁹

From the point of view of reconciling distinct religious practices, another unique case is that of the priest Miguel Fernandes of the Brazilian Apostolic Catholic Church, who lives in a suburb of Brasília. After performing the Mass, Fernandes becomes possessed by a spirit of a friar named Fabiano, and then he cures his parishioners' physical and mental illnesses. Here we are no longer dealing with syncretism understood as a fusion or amalgam of beliefs or religious practices of distinct traditions brought into contact. This is rather a creative or two-fold symbolic arrangement: from the priest's point of view, this syncretism may be called biographical, closer perhaps to a case of multiple consciousness, or of an internal plurality of the subject. According to him, what the Bible calls charisma, is identical to what is called mediumship in Spiritualism. Thus, he translates himself for two different religious publics, the Catholics and the Spiritualists. From the point of view of official Christian Theology this arrangement is understood as incommensurable. From the point of view of the parishioners, however, they simply experience peaceful and complementary intimacy between two religious universes divided by different principles and corresponding to very different spiritual necessities.²⁰

¹⁹ For information on *Santo Daime* see Alverga (1984), MacRae (1992) and Froes (1986); on the *ayahuasca* cult in the Andean area see Luna & Amaringo (1991).

²⁰ On this mixture of Catholicism with spiritualism see Dioclécio Luz (1989).

2. *Xangô, candomblé* and other traditional African-American-Brazilian cults: radical apophasis and the displacement of oneself²¹.

While Spiritualism concentrates itself on textualizing the specific experience that it offers, traditional Afro-Brazilian religions present us with some truly radical challenges, namely: the silence regarding the internal world; the suspension of all dimensions of textual writing; and strict control over oral expression. In spite of the vast literature extant on *candomblé*, *xangô*, and *tambor de mina*, their unique style of spirituality has not been discussed.²² Firstly, they form a complex and intense religious movement that has already expanded into other countries, like Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Venezuela, the United States, Portugal and Morocco. The various styles of *orisha* cults in the New World, whether from Brazil or from Cuba, have experienced an expansion of immense magnitude resembling, in style and geographical width, that of Buddhism 2000 years ago. The starting point of this formidable expansion has not been the glorious historic kingdoms of West Africa, such as those of Oyo, Dahomey, Asante, etc, but the dramatic experience of slavery. Less than two centuries after their reintegration, Afro-Brazilian religious practices can already be found on five continents, and their expansion is not credited with any economic base or politics nor with any significant support of it in written form; its strategy is based strictly on conversion, or on conviction.

It is common to find analyses of world religions that speak of *umbanda*, *macumba*, *candomblé*, etc, as types of possession cults. However, the spiritual trajectory of a *candomblé* practitioner is qualitatively different from that of an adept of *umbanda*, or of *jurema*. Moreover, I believe it is also quite different from the spirituality of a Yoruba or of an Ewe person who worships his/her divinities on the West Coast of Africa. To begin with, the internal world of the Brazilian adept is full of expressions formulated in an exclusively sacred language, unknown to him and very distant from the Portuguese that is spoken daily.²³ The fundamental experience of the religiosity of *xangô* is trance induced by the *orishas*, gods that represent the forces of nature. There is constant demand for a great performance in terms of dance, body posture, facial expression, etc. The *orisha* hardly speaks and even has difficulty in communicating to the audience through gestures. The person depends greatly on the ritual community during the occasions that she receives the divinities. No one is able to break free from the trance state; the possessed one is taken to the sacred room and awakened under close supervision of her colleagues. Many times she remains asleep or resting for a while, and there is a feeling of shame or avoidance, a sense of being uncomfortable in the moment of returning to ordinary consciousness, when she will once again share the festival with her fellow worshippers. Furthermore, one has to learn how to administer this trance state with proficiency, and control the impulse of getting into trance, so as not to banalize one's own *orishas*. A fully initiated son a saint, with years of familiarity with the *xangô* world, will not receive his *orishas* more than a half dozen times per year; and people of greater status receive them in general no more than three

²¹I am using the expression as a translation of the Portuguese “saída de si”. I chose displacement, instead of departure, exit, dislocation, or deposition, to mean that control of oneself has been transferred to a supernatural being wilfully, and as a result of a ritual practice. For a detailed analysis of the complex composition of the self in *xangô* religion, see Segato (1995).

²²For basic information on *xangô*, see Carvalho (1990b); for *tambor de mina*, see Sérgio Ferretti (1985).

²³ I have been able to edit and translate a corpus of sacred songs in Yoruba of the *xangô* cults of Recife and could confirm the nearly absolute lack of knowledge of the literal sense of the content of those songs in Yoruba language on the part of the current generation of adepts (Carvalho 1993).

times per year. Initiates learn the social art of creating in the community an anticipation as regards the gods who control their heads.²⁴

The most radical and demanding case of this trance state is probably that of the orthodox *tambor de mina* temples of São Luís, in Maranhão. In order to be accepted as a neophyte in one of the centuries-old temple houses (the one called House of the Minas), one must attend a public party in honor of the voduns and, from the audience, fall into trance in the presence of everyone. One will then be taken to an isolated room and it will be subjected to a true test of recognition (naturally of the semiological type) in order to know if the supernatural entity received is in fact one of those worshipped in the House. This absorption, without rehearsal or practice, of a somatic image as complex yet precise as a vodun is, demands enormous mental and performative command, even more difficult if we consider that each person faces this challenge entirely alone. This aspect of traditional Afro-Brazilian religiosity, which is quite obvious for those who live it from the inside, has surprisingly not been discussed so far in the literature. Perhaps researchers have been more interested in studying the concept of person, or the cult's representation of the world and the individual, or the polytheistic structure of the pantheon, or the social and political allegories of the divine personalities, etc. Unfortunately, they have not dealt with the complexities of how synaesthesia becomes necessary in order to carry out with beauty, elegance, and control of the scene, the always unique and unrepeatable spectacle of possession by *orishas* and *voduns*.²⁵

We are dealing with a style of spirituality that can only be revealed during its climax, that is, in the exceptional and premeditated moment of total surrender. After that moment the adept should repress entirely any compulsion to speak about her experience. Higher priests and priestesses never conveyed any important detail of their subjective life through written form; neither do they vocalize it for the benefit of a fixed or privileged witness. The greatness of a *pai de santo*, or a *mãe de santo* is measured, on one hand, by his\her gifts of intuition, capacity for leadership, self-control and surrender to the community's needs; and, on the other hand, by both his\her aesthetic skills and those of the *orishas*: the way s\he dances during possession; the way s\he dresses and his\her body expression; the messages and divinations s\he is able to give. In short, his\her greatness or, to use a native term, "majesty."

Public possession is, in fact, the summit of that extremely demanding and punitive religious road. After the trance one is forbidden to make commentaries with anyone. It is a completely private experience that is not to be admitted to or divulged. Not only is it prohibited to mention that one entered into trance, but neither can one hear any comments on one's performance. During trance, the divinity that possesses the adept's body gives advice and solutions for those who request his\her help. Furthermore, the divinity can even leave messages for herself through the artifice of referring to herself in the third person. However, that mediator-interlocutor of the divinity almost always changes, allowing the diffusion, throughout the whole community, of the memory of its *orishas*. This way, not only is the individual biography fragmented, but that of the *orisha* also. Here biographies are collectively constructed, even if full of censored materials; the biography of the *orisha* is narrated, partly by the person that receives her in trance, and partly by fellow members. The two histories of the spirit remain therefore severed. Nobody has the whole truth, neither about her own ecstasy nor about that of her fellow members; possession continues to be at the same time a reality and a mystery. If hermeneutics reminds us that to understand always means to affirm a partial vision, in the world of *xangô* such a statement seems part of the common sense.

²⁴ For an interpretation of *xangô*'s archetypal psychology and the different possession patterns of the *orishas*, see Segato (1995).

²⁵ An exception is the discussion of the "psychic soma" proposed by Segato (1995).

Maybe the amount of slander, intrigue, and interpersonal tensions so common among fellow members provides an outlet for the need to externalize images of the other, denied by the taboo of the trance itself, about which only a third person can speak with some other member. To speak, good or bad, of the *orishas* that descend upon fellow cult members (who are called brothers of saint and sisters of saint) is a way of dominating the phantasm of the silence of their own experiences, which are the most important personally and at the same time the least negotiable socially.

Put in terms of the mysticism of the so-called “great religions”, while the literate apophysis possesses its own dynamism capable of generating displacements of signifiers that respond to sensory stimuli, visions, and internal processes that only come to life when externalized in a written text, in the case of spirit possession the dynamism consists of growing deeper in silence about the experience itself – emotional, somatic, psychic, and spiritual. The tension of accumulated silence is resolved in a new ecstasy by the adept, until a complete maturity is reached in this life “in and out of the mind,” to borrow an expression taken from Ruth Padel’s essay on the tragic Greek self (Padel 1992). Once it is conquered, this profound control over one’s internal unfolding is passed on to the young adepts, normally without uttering a single word. Once again the renouncement of speech is one of the pillars of orthodox Afro-Brazilian devotion.

Although this tradition counts on a gallery of men and women considered to have achieved a high degree of spirituality, there are no written records of their spiritual life. Various biographies of *pais* and *mães de santos* exist, but they are always disappointing, in this sense, because they never discuss this hidden dialogue²⁶, this gnosis grown through their personal relationships with their *orishas*; there is a systematic refusal of verbalizing that type of hierophany. If we allow ourselves a momentary digression, this Afro-Brazilian refusal to openly affirm that which is experimented, may remind us of the fascinating biography, written by Jonathan Spence, of Kang-Hsi, who was emperor of China for sixty years in the 17th century. Spence tells us how difficult it was to arrive at the concrete man, with his unique personal world, because Kang-Hsi was always hidden behind the protocol and the stereotyped language of the court.²⁷ Even if it sounds heterodox, this comparison underlines that aristocratic attitude so characteristic of the religion of the *orishas* in Brazil. This refusal to give one’s word to outsiders is also political: no Theology, or Theological Anthropology, capable of expropriating the devotion of members of traditional Afro-Brazilian cults, has been possible up to now.

What is really surprising is the capacity to resist, year after year, in spite of the intensity and rigor of this religious way, talking about that experience. One’s relationship with the “owner of one’s head” is truly dramatic and passionate, and it is the source of many headaches, both literal and symbolic. The philosophical problems of this relationship, when projected into an individual conscience, are certainly vast and deep. What is the truth of such a phenomenon? Even the practitioners themselves may not be able to explain it very well; or perhaps the question itself may be a false one. The *orisha*, absolute being, a force of nature, that knows it all and can make it all, the one who descended into my head and became my *orisha*... can I make sense of it? Maria das Dores da Silva, a prestigious *mãe de santo* of the religious community of the *xangô* of Recife, a daughter of the *orisha Shango*²⁸, told me more than once that often she had the impression that the *orisha*

²⁶For this notion of hidden dialogue, and for dialogism in general, I took the conceptual framework of Mikhail Bakhtin and adapted it to the case of trance religions (see Bakhtin 1981 and 1984)/

²⁷ See Spence (1974).

²⁸To avoid confusion, I have kept the local Brazilian spelling *xangô* to refer to the religious cult; and Shango, to refer to the god of thunder, since this is the current spelling in English.

was with her all time – all day and every day, and not only during the ritual moment of possession, which occurs very few times during the year. I have heard something similar from her and from other adepts in regards to their *caboclos*, or “earth spirits”, that will be mentioned below. This intimate relationship with the divinities is a characteristic of this type of spirituality that has been developing parallel to Christianity. The play between having everything under control and at the same not being able to possess rational control over one’s acts; between being centered into oneself and being always outside oneself; between dominating the *orisha* through her desire and being dominated by her through possession: there lies the intense spirituality of traditional Afro-Brazilian religions. The issue here is not to formulate a general theory of religious trance, but rather of pointing out the difficulty of recovering, for an academic discipline that is fundamentally comparative, the signs of spiritual fulfillment offered by Afro-Brazilian cults.

We are faced here with a classic dilemma of mysticism, recently discussed by Michael Sells in his book *The Mystical Languages of Unsayings*: the problem of apophatic language.²⁹ What is so striking, if we use Sell’s model, is that the Afro-Brazilian spiritual tradition is based on the radical apophasis. Instead of the Tomist solution, or of the textually creative apophasys, which was developed, for instance, by Plotinus, Meister Eckhart, Chuang Tzu, Ibn Arabi, among others, the *xangô* people chose the concentrated weight of absolute silence. In spite of the silence, the intensity is obviously there, and it can be observed in the majesty of the body behavior and in the capacity of self-control on the part of leaders, precisely that attribute that allows them to pass on their *ashe*.³⁰ There is no dialogue possible, nor a third person that can act as guarantor, through language, of the truth of one’s experience. This resistance to make one’s psychic life socially semiotic (as Mikhail Bakhtin would have it³¹), is a strong characteristic of this spiritual path, and one that has, until recently, been poorly understood by specialists. The truth, or the quality of one’s possession, is ostensive, to use Wittgensteinian terminology (it “shows itself”); and its rhetoric is entirely performative. We tend to interpret spirituality precisely on the basis of autobiographical documents, of confessions of tribulations and progresses of the soul in search of its liberation. It is the model of the seeker, which is present in the writings of St Augustine, Plotinus, Jacob Böhme, St Theresa of Jesus, St John of the Cross, St Thérèse of Lisieux, and Thomas Merton. It is here where lies the difficulty of the comparison attempted by Roger Bastide in his essay “The interior castle of the black man”, between the stages or mansions crossed over by the soul in the *Interior Castle* of St Theresa of Avila and the various dimensions of trance in *candomblé* religion³² (Bastide 1976). The hermeneutic model generated by this refusal of speech is extremely complex. First, it is not a kind of “Rashomon effect,” constructed with several versions of a well-known fact³³; neither is it the model of the Kwakiutl shaman Quesalid, analyzed by Lévi-Strauss, according to which during a

²⁹ See Sells (1994).

³⁰ *Ashe*, a term similar to *mana*, refers to the force or magical power that emanates from the deities or that can be activated by means of ritual invocations.

³¹ For a development of these Bakhtinian notions of the third in a dialogue, and of psychic life as semiotic, see the thorough essay by Gary Morson & Caryl Emerson (1990).

³² See Bastide (1976). His pioneering inquiry into Afro-Brazilian mystical experience is only consistent with his intellectual career: two decades before visiting Brazil for the first time Bastide had already published a book on the mystical life (Bastide 1934).

³³ Here I am referring to the short story by Akutagawa, *Rashomon*, which was also made into a precious film with the same title directed by Akira Kurosawa.

certain moment in his career Quesalid was not able to know whether in fact he did have or did not have the power to cure³⁴. I cannot affirm that someone who enters into trance with an *orisha* does not know what is happening to him\her; perhaps s\he does know, if not everything (this we do not know about ourselves even when awake), at least something basic. But the experience of possession (that is to say, even this specific knowledge) would be destroyed if it was externalized. A steady complicity, a strong pact of silence, from the inside to the outside, is necessary. Ultimately, even if one knows what is happening and how it is happening, the energy accumulated from the constant effort to remain silent is liberated only during the experience of another trance and helps one to reproduce the experience in an equally intense way.

It is highly probable that this spiritual structure of the apophatic silence has been conditioned by the repressive and violent experience of slavery and the conditions - not much better - of the post-abolition period. Anyway, we must not look at this spiritual style merely from the perspective of what it does not show: it has been conditioned by a historical context, in the same measure that all other styles of spirituality have also been and are still being pressured and conditioned by their own political, ethnic, racial, or religious contexts. In other words, the decision to remain silent has generated (or reinforced) a specific spiritual technique, much in the same way that the decision of worshippers of the *ayahuasca* cults, to voice every detail of their internal visions has also generated another unique style of spirituality. So deeply engrained in Brazilian society is this Afro-Brazilian spiritual structure that it has remained practically unchanged for generations since the 19th century. A hundred years ago most of the leaders of Afro-Brazilian cults were illiterate, whereas nowadays many of them have managed to attain a secondary school education. Moreover, many priests are now writing books on their religious traditions, sometimes with assistance. Nonetheless, this new access to writing for some leaders does not seem to have affected the style of spirituality developed by the present generation of adepts.

Negative Theology derived from the apophatic discourse is a kind of refusal to speak which is creative: it builds traces, frontiers, thresholds. It delimits the external side of the unspoken, and this unspoken is precisely the spiritual goal of the subject, whose desire is to merge or fuse with it. The very presence of this unspoken ends up being confirmed: since it cannot be affirmed, it is confirmed by the text that denies it. By denying it, it brings it into existence. But this unspoken already existed, logically, before it was denied; were it not so, the whole effort would simply be meaningless.³⁵ On the other hand, the refusal to describe one's relationship with the *orisha* differs from the literate apophasis in at least one important aspect. In classic apophasis, the mystic proposed, with his\her text, a dialogue with a reader that would be able to understand the apophatic character of his\her speech; or, as Michael Sells puts it, someone who was capable of following the mystic in his\her path of "de-ontologizing" the world and reality. That is, of undoing the set of reifications and substantializations which guide everyday consciousness. However paradoxical this discourse may seem, the reader tends to follow this "rational" necessity of transcending rational language in order to emphasize, performatively, yet in words, the ineffable.

In the case of the religion of *orishas* and *voduns*, which is a type of spiritual path dedicated basically to the displacement of oneself, whatever little the adept reveals of his\her own trance, s\he reveals it to someone else who also enters into trance. In other words, they cannot establish an inter-subjective agreement on a rational basis among themselves because all of them - s\he who is now expressing his\her experience and those fellow members who receive it and pass it on -, according to the conventions that shape this practice, are partially and fundamentally alienated from what

³⁴ See the classic essay on shamanism by Lévi-Strauss (1963).

³⁵ This is the approach of dissemination that Derrida explores in his creative discussion of Negative Theology (see Derrida 1989 & 1993).

happens to them when they receive an *orisha*. Maybe the classical apophasis (which is ultimately the apophatic discourse originally formulated by Plotinus and Dionysius the Areopagite), used as an analytical category by Michael Sells, is an apophasis of the Apollonian type, or a variation of the *jñana* yoga, the intellectual side of mystical experience according to the classical Vedanta typology³⁶. The apophasis of half-silence among the half-silenced is the apophasis of the displacement of oneself, of the avoidance of any rational systematization, even if it is about what one knows that cannot be said. It could possibly be an apophasis of a *bhakti* or Dionysiac type³⁷. Plotinus writes for a reader that will supposedly understand his language; and he is ready to say all that formal language allows him to say. Through this way of writing, Plotinus says everything to say nothing. A mature adept of *candomblé* does not put him\herself in a position to try to say all that the language would allow him\her; perhaps so that his\her experience will never be expropriated from him\her. Whatever s\he expresses, with little or nothing to say, is the complicity of the community of those who get possessed.

3. *Macumba, jurema, quimbanda: the mystic lyricism without frontiers.*

While the model of worship of *shango*, *candomblé* and *tambor de mina* is centered on the worship of African divinities, the model I call syncretistic concentrates on the worship of divinities whose history is linked to the Brazilian side of the Atlantic coast. Mingled with the shamanic and indigenous traditions in general, these cults are devoted to the entities which represent, allegorically, the historical experience of the peoples who lived in Brazil before, during and after the Portuguese colonization; from thousands of years ago to recent times. The main groups of deities are: a) “caboclos”, entities that symbolize the spirits of the Indians that lived in the country’s forests as well as all those who live in Brazil –: blacks, whites, mestizos and, obviously, Indians; b) “Pretos Velhos” (Old Black People) that symbolize the blacks, both those who were slaves and those that lived in the country in the condition of ex-slaves or of post-slaves. Like the *caboclos*, they also represent any Brazilian, including the whites, who also get possessed by their Pretos Velhos; and finally; c) “Mestres and “Mestras”, that symbolize those men and women of great supernatural power who lived in the interior of the country during its colonial, imperial and republican history and who practiced the typical shamanic rituals performed by the Indians, especially those related with to the cult of the *jurema*, a plant which is prepared as a drink capable of inducing trance and visionary states. The *Mestres* would be mythically mestizos, not unlike the image of Don Juan, the main character in the books by Carlos Castañeda.

The biggest contrast, however, with the African model, is that the songs for *orishas* and *voduns* are sung in African languages that are basically unknown by the adepts of *xangô*, *candomblé* and *tambor de min.*, whereas the repertoires of the syncretistic cults *jurema*, *pajelança*, *candomblé de caboclo*³⁸ and *umbanda* are sung entirely in Portuguese. This implies a considerable change in the construction and expression of the religious experience provided by the cult. However, when one sings in an unknown language, all the historical world which surrounds us, the

³⁶For a discussion of *jñana* yoga, see the classic book by Vivekananda (1970a).

³⁷For the way of *bhakti* see also Vivekananda (1970b).

³⁸For information on *candomblé de caboclo*, see Santos (1995).

entire horizon of Dasein³⁹ becomes excluded from the symbolism now generated. On the other hand, when one sings in Portuguese, the effect of the religious experience in one's consciousness is traceable, because there is an unavoidable contiguity, as well as a semiotic contamination, between the religious expression and that of ordinary non-religious experiences. There is a necessary displacement of signifiers from the domain of the profane to that of the sacred – and not only of the sacred as collective representation, but also of the horizon of the person. Readers familiar with the essay by Michel de Certeau on Baroque mysticism, above all on the sixteenth century Spanish saints, will understand how the regime of language changed precisely at the moment when the so-called mystics performed the originary semantic displacement of the terms they chose to use to describe their experiences.⁴⁰ In the case of the popular trance religions in Brazil, we can see exactly the moment when poetic metaphors, built on a lyrical tone, begin to be used in the construction of a doctrinal, although still open, corpus dedicated to this African-Indian-Christian spirituality. Here I will provide a few examples of those sacred texts to illustrate the originality and intensity of this spiritual model that may be referred to as typically marginal.⁴¹

1. Song for Caboclo Tupinambá

Três pedras, três pedras
 Três pedras dentro dessa aldeia
 uma maior, outra menor
 a mais pequena é que nos alumia
 (Three stones, three stones
 three stones inside this village
 one bigger, another smaller
 the smallest of them is the one that gives us light).

This song has circulated throughout Brazil since at least 1941, when it was recorded in Salvador, Bahia, by Frances and Melville Herskovits. As with the *caboclo*, the *aldeia* or “Indian village,” is a polysemous term. Firstly, it is the actual place where the Indians live; secondly it is the mythical place where the supernatural entities called *caboclos* reside; thirdly, it is also the sacred space where the cult takes place. Apart from the lyricism of the images, the text alludes to a mystical dimension of understanding the cosmos and the individual soul. There is initially an allusion of the triad, which by itself opens a vast field of comparative symbology: from the Christian triad to the “great triad” of René Guénon. The village, a confined space, may refer both to

³⁹I use this Heideggerian expression here rather loosely, only to insist on the role of language in framing (as well as generating) one's own religious experience. A general background of this subject can be found in Gadamer (1993 and 1994).

⁴⁰ It is worth quoting a bit of de Certeau: “These manners of speaking, whether they fit foreign terms into a canonic language or quietly introduce the terminology of a legitimate science into a new form of speech, are translative processes. They are metaphorical activities (the metaphor is a *translatio*). They effect displacements; they attract words and change them. The logical interplay that was carried out within one stable linguistic system is now replaced by “transformations” from one system to another and by innovative uses or reuses of words in every field” (1992:119).

⁴¹ In another article I attempted to provide a comprehensive reading of this mystic-literary corpus in the Portuguese language (see Carvalho 1997).

an external sacred center as well as to an internal center, to a space one constructs while experiences possession and develops a dialogic and existential relationship with one's entities. It also reminds us of the image of the castle in a famous Sermon of Meister Eckhart's.⁴² According to Ilse M. De Brugger, this castle, understood as an "inexpugnable redoubt of the soul", may also be termed "little village". The light that shines from the smallest of the stones suggests the power of the smallest over the biggest, a theme which is common to many mystical traditions, including Alchemy. Let us think, for example, of the remora or *echeneis*, the small fish that halts the ship in the middle of the ocean. Here we can also recollect an alchemical proverb: *multum in parvo* – abundance in little.⁴³ Furthermore, this minimal stone that shines can be equivalent to the philosopher's stone of the alchemists and to the Fünkelein, or internal light, the uncontaminated center of the soul formulated by Meister Eckhart. The stone that shines is the title of the main treatise of the Flemish mystic Jan van Ruysbroek (*Van den blinkenden Steen*), who interprets the white stone of San Juan's Apocalypse as a small stone that shines. She can also be associated with the *Étoile Internelle* (the eternal star) analyzed by L. Charbonneau-Lassay (1940).

From the Hindu tradition, the small stone can be understood as the *Hiranya gharba*, the golden embryo or golden womb, image of the divine body located within the innermost part of the heart. Another possible analogy would be with the *Bindu*, divine point, seed of consciousness and ipseity, one of the basic symbols of the traditional Tantric Buddhism. Here, the reader may ask how can I justify such a radical departure from the Afro-Brazilian cultural horizon to which that sacred song belongs. I shall respond very briefly to this perfectly reasonable concern. Firstly, we should be reminded that the present song text and the following ones are not entirely alien to the Christian mythopoetical horizon. Three stones inside this village: syncretic as *umbanda* is as a religion, we can guess that the Christian trinity is also implanted inside the gongá (shrine for the gods of *umbanda*). Put another way, adepts of *umbanda* and *candomblé de caboclo* participate in the Christian imaginary through popular Catholicism, and also as someone who experiences trance by supernatural entities. In this and in the next song, it is the *caboclo* who expresses his condition of transcendence.

2. Song for Caboclo Pedra Preta (Black Stone)

Pedrinha miudinha de Aruanda ê
 Lajeiro tão grande
 tão grande (longe) de Aruanda ê
 (Little stone minimum of Aruanda eh
 Huge stone so big
 so big (far) from Aruanda

Here, two types of mythical spaces are united: the paradise of the Indians (*caboclos*) is described with the name of a place in Africa (Aruanda, or Luanda), which is associated in Brazil to one of the ports of departure of slaves coming from the regions of Bantu language: São Paulo de Luanda. We can follow the symbolism constructed in the previous song and consider that when the word "far" is changed into "large", the image of the *multum in parvo*, that is, of the power of the smallest, becomes even more clear. While the big rock which stands out in the landscape becomes distant from the mythical kingdom of Aruanda, the smallest stone becomes the big stone that can

⁴²See Eckhart (1977).

⁴³ I offered a systematic presentation of this alchemical symbolism in my edition of the *Mutus Liber* (see Carvalho 1995).

support me (the rock of Psalm 18). Surely the stone is something hidden, of a dimension analogous to that of the “smallest” stone we talked about earlier. Moreover, we should not forget the name of the *caboclo* to whom the song is dedicated: Black Stone.

This pebble\boulder of Aruanda is clearly an *imago mundi*, equivalent, for example, to another stone very dear to specialists of Greek culture: the *omphalos*, the oracle stone of Apollo in Delphos. This symbolic association can also grow to include other well known centers of the world: mount Meru of the Hindu tradition; Montsalvat of the medieval legend of the Holy Grail; mount Qaf of classical Persian mythology; and also the Beth-el, or house of God, the stone that Jacob put his head on to sleep and dream of the stairway where the angels ascended and descended. The small stone that recurs can also be assimilated to the stone of the Grail itself, the *lapis exillis* that appears in the *Parzival* of Wolfram von Eschenbach⁴⁴.

3. Song for a Water Spirit

A rã preta é dourada
 a rã preta é dourada
 mas eu moro é no balseiro
 do olho d'água
 (The black frog is golden
 the black frog is golden
 but I live in the *balseiro* [fluctuating island]
 of the spring)

This is a song I recorded in 1977 in a ritual of *cura* in a *mina* temple house of São Luís, Maranhão state. According to a priest, this song talks about the spirit of a frog, worshipped in the *pajelança* of São Luís. *Olho D'água* (eye of the water) is literally one of the names for a spring, a source of pure water. Apart from that, it is also the name of a beach on the island of São Luís, believed to be one of the places where the *encantados* (enchanted ones, usually nature spirits) can be seen by worshippers in *pajelança* or *cura* rituals.⁴⁵ It is, therefore, generic and metaphorical at the same time as it is literal. *Balseiro* is a word which describes a curious Amazonian geographical phenomenon: it refers to a fluctuating island formed by old pieces of vines which intermingle and break free from the banks of the rivers or creeks. Sometimes the *balseiro* reaches the sea, as is the case in this song. The water stays underneath the floating structure of branches and vines, and it is there below where the frog lives. The *balseiro* is thus a liminal element, an island which moves, connected with a spring of sweet water which reaches the sea (salt water). In that beach called Olho D'Água there used to be a channel to capture the clean water coming from the spring. The priest explained to me that there is a kind of black frog that shines with golden reflections when the rays of the sun pour over her at sunset. The description is therefore, in a certain plane, exact, precise. The question posed by the analyst, as s\he recognizes the poetic character of the text and decides to inquire about its sacred dimension is: Why did the author decide to highlight such a particular scene and transform it into an element of worship? Probably because s\he identifies an analogy with a spiritual experience and tried to express it with that scene, while others expressed their experiences with analogies extracted from other scenes. It is quite obvious that the author of this song did not

⁴⁴Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, Chap. 9 (1980:239).

⁴⁵ Mudicarmo Ferretti enlists the Olho D'Água beach as one of the visible places where the *encantados* live and can be seen (Mudicarmo Ferretti 1993:170).

read alchemical or other kinds of mystical treatises; but a transmission of these general symbols through the Christian tradition may have existed⁴⁶.

The first verse expresses an idea of a challenging complexity, built on an antithesis that obeys a perfect symbolic structure, if compared with Alchemy or esoteric symbolism. The black frog (as being inferior) is the same golden frog (the superior); but I live in a fluctuating island - a river island, which sometimes can reach the bay, as is the case of this one in Olho D'Água, which contains crystalline water. Put in alchemical terminology, the black frog is the *opus nigrum*, the imperfect and degraded material, that is subjected to putrefaction (probable allusion to the *balseiro*, where the dead vines and branches are concentrated); and the golden frog is the *rubedo*, or *iosis*, the work in red, or gold, which is the gold that resulted at the end of the alchemical process. Thus, the *prima materia*, brute and dense (the black frog), is the same *lapis philosophorum*, final realization of the *opus*, the work of transmutation (the golden frog). In the Emblem V of the classic alchemical book *Atalanta Fugiens*, by Michael Meier, of 1612, the black frog is taken to the woman's breast so that she can extract, through an operation symbolically analogous to what is described here, the pure white milk.

An analytical mind could have separated the two processes here described and mentioned two animals: the black frog lives in the *balseiro*; the golden frog lives in the spring. By using a paradox, however, the author overlapped these predictable oppositions and proposed an integration that brings to mind the Taoist figure of the *pa-kwa*, in which the white color mingles with the black and vice-versa: black mingled with golden, sweet water mingled with salt water are seen from the point of view of an object of synthesis: the *balseiro* carrying a frog. Synthesis is also implicit in this idea of the Olho D'Água, simultaneously sweet and salt water.

4. Song for Caboclo Cirilo

A mata virgem relampeou
 Cidade do Juremá
 Caboclo Cirilo abaixou no reino
 Saravou seus filhos
 Encruzou gongá
 (A lightning struck the virgin forest
 Village of Juremá
 Caboclo Cirilo came down in the kingdom
 Greeted his children
 and drew a cross in the temple)

This beautiful *umbanda* song was sung by a popular painter and fisherman, Antonio de Gastão, from Cabo Frio, in the state of Rio de Janeiro.⁴⁷ The text is paradigmatic of the model of building a symbolic enclosure, typical of syncretic cults (such as *jurema* and *macumba*): the “state”, an individual equivalent of the castle of the soul of medieval mysticism as I mentioned above. A relationship of synchronicity is here described: the *caboclo* comes down in the temple, appears physically to everyone by entering the body of an adept; at the same time he “comes down” into a human being by taking possession, albeit partially, of his consciousness, and in this sense one can conceive of his head as the virgin forest, as a city, a kingdom, or as the *gongá* (the temple).

⁴⁶I have discussed the epistemological and theoretical issues behind these comparisons in another essay (Carvalho 1997).

⁴⁷Text extracted from the book on the life and works of Antonio de Gastão (1989).

Thus, the text expresses the passage from the celestial to the terrestrial domain: *Caboclo Cirilo* departed from the distant place where he was and, by descending, inseminated the once profane space of the *terreiro*, making it co-extensive with that of the virgin forest; or rather, with the city of Juremá, the enchanted Kingdom of the *caboclos*, now transformed into a *gongá*, a temple, a shrine, a sacred space in the earth.

From the musical point of view, this melody is perfectly iconic. The first two verses rest on the tonic and the third of the major scale on which the song is constructed, on a low tessitura. At the beginning of the third verse there is a modulation to the subdominant and after the word *abaixou* (came down), which has the highest note of all, the melody begins falling or “coming down” by continuous grades, reproducing iconically the process which the text describes: *Caboclo Cirilo* comes down from the high, from the sub-lunar space, from the Kingdom of the *juremá*, arrives at the human level, of his children’s, and finally descends to the level of the earth, of the *gongá*. This jump from one plane to another is experienced as commotion, a trembling, a revolution in the apparent disposition of things. Seen from the point of view of individual consciousness, the sudden presence of the divinity for everyone, in the temple, is equivalent to a possession, to a trance.

The World of *Macumba* and *Quimbanda*

However, not all these song texts are so evidently sublime. Let us examine the spiritual complexities of the following text by Preto Velho:

5. Song for Preto Velho

Meu pilão tem duas bocas
trabalha pelos dois lados
na hora do aperreio
valei-me pilão deitado.
(My mortar has two poles
it works by the two sides
in the hours of trouble
help me, resting mortar)

I recorded this song in 1976 in the *umbanda* temple of Mário Miranda, in Casa Amarela, Recife. This quite extraordinary text condenses several levels of experience into a metaphoric language which capitalizes, to the extreme on the power of ambiguity. To start with, it should be remembered that symbolically there are two kinds of mortars: the large, or normal sized mortar, used for domestic tasks, capable of evoking the kitchen of the house of the slave (and also of the post-slave) master, where the Old Black Man and the Old Black Woman performed, historically and mythically, their domestic tasks. Apart from that, there is also a small manual mortar or artifact used exclusively in the Afro-Brazilian ritual context for grinding herbs and other elements which are used in the preparation of several types of baths, offerings and magic potions. In its capacity as a sacred song, the text evokes as much dualism as it demonstrates the ambivalence of the divine power: the little mortar can work for the good (i.e., for supernatural protection) as well as for the bad (harming an enemy). However, since the song concludes with the image of the laid down mortar, it can indicate the return to the unity and to a state of stability and equilibrium, as if the subject would be saying: out of necessity I present myself ambiguously, but I am fundamentally whole.

This song is still paradigmatic of some aspects of Brazilian social psychology. Its powerful language is transferred from the supernatural realm to the world of social and racial relationships of

discrimination: the poetic subject is ready to face what may come to him\her, regardless of whether it is something good and peaceful, or if it is an invitation to open conflict, in case he\she feels threatened, pressured, discriminated against or with the back against the wall. Moreover, this text also reflects a fundamental aspect of the Afro-Brazilian spirituality: the integration of good and evil. The being that is constructed with this worldview is not exclusively good in the Christian sense of the term; and from the point of view of the pedagogy of the soul, the ambiguity is even more extreme, because it implies taking distance from the contrasting tendencies of the individual psyche. It also favors a warring and dynamic attitude of the soul, quite the opposite of the practice of *dejamiento* (letting go) of a Miguel de Molinos, or from the *Gelassenheit* (detachment) of a Meister Eckhart.⁴⁸

There is also a sexual allusion in this text that points to a way of living that is open both to heterosexuality and to homosexuality. If the poetic subject is pressured to position himself\herself in the world of sexual identities, (s)he chooses a strategic distancing, a neutrality, an impartiality which leaves, however, no space for omission: in the moment of excitement (the "shivering" - *aperreio* - that can also be heard (or misheard)⁴⁹ as the "shivering" - *arrepio* - in sexual urgency), s(he) is able to function either passively or actively.

Finally, I would like to present something of the tradition that has been most criticized and censored in the literature on Afro-Brazilian cults. Some of the following images may be, for some, surprising or even shocking. They are two songs dedicated to *Pomba Gira*, a powerful entity associated to the "heavier" or evil side of *jurema*, *macumba* and *umbanda* cults. *Pomba Gira* is the female counterpart of *Eshu*, the famous trickster god, similar to Hermes and to Loki, in their role as guardian and messenger of the gods. An adulterous woman, prostitute, archetype of sexual love without barriers, owner of the cemetery, she commands infernal entities and is at the same time the great protector and the great avenger. The following texts are absent from all the anthologies of *umbanda* songs that I could find. Here is one that I recorded in Recife:

6. Song for Pomba Gira

Deixei meu marido no aeroporto
e fui com outro
(I left my husband at the airport
and went away with someone else)

The sociological landscape of this text seems clear. As far as I know, this is one of the few religious traditions that still expresses spiritual contents through explicit or "immoral" sexual images. Beyond this more obvious level of reading, we may imagine that the airport transmits an idea of modernity, something that can still be treated as a novelty and is satirized here by those who live in the squalid neighborhoods of Recife. As far as it was sung by women of the periphery, it could be saying that: to leave the husband in the airport and depart with another, doesn't concern me, but the women whose husbands take airplane trips. If we identify the subject of the song with *Pomba Gira* herself, she is telling us that she does not merely circulate in the lower classes of society, but also amongst higher class members. In sum, according to the moral optics with which the dominant society is represented - the Western and Christians - *Pomba Gira* affirms that the world of the rich is also a depraved world.

⁴⁸I have offered a model of analysis of the role of violence and chaos in Afro-Brazilian religiosity in another essay (Carvalho 1994c).

⁴⁹ For a theory of mishearing in songs see my essay (Carvalho 2000).

Beyond these more explicit moral and sexual dimensions, there are still others, if we accept that it is a sacred text. Let us think of a law that is not only psychological or social, but also cosmic. First, it is necessary to define what is the husband. The husband is the convention, the norm - to go with another is to surpass the common law. The husband plunged in a flow (the airport) and she plunged in another (she went on a trip with another person). Or it could also be exactly the opposite: she left the husband, who is, on another, totally different level - a level which is superimposed on the social - The Husband. To be liberated from the husband can mean to be liberated from oppression, from control. All of the possible abandonments are condensed there, like in a crystal that shines according to the light that illuminates it. The first and greatest of all abandonments is suffered by the one who flies: he left. When I say: I left my husband, it can also be that I was left and I had to go with another.

This is a perfect example of the change in discursive regime to speak of the sacred in circumstances of preference for marginal forms of cult. Pomba Gira is a goddess with a mundane biography: she was the wife of seven Eshus, a woman of the street; that is why her language draws analogies taken from the mundane plane.

7. Song for Pomba Gira

Essa puta é minha e ninguém toma
quem quiser puta gostosa
vai buscar na zona

(This whore is mine and nobody takes her from me
whoever wants a lovely whore
go to the brothel and get her)

This sacred text is one of those rare examples of sacralization of non-conjugal sex, of a utopia of carnal pleasure. Today, in almost all spiritual traditions (obviously, I am not referring to the past) sex has been degraded and relegated exclusively to the obscure parts of the profane world. However, in a world where there is no repression, as in the world of this divinity, the "savory prostitute" is something positive, desirable, and without any notion of sin or shame. In the first place, the text emphasizes the great sexual power of the goddess, known to be the woman of seven men, and that will find resonance in a desire for identification on the part of those individuals who are possessed by *Pomba Gira*. One of the main messages of this text is that it invites us to meditate on the symbolism of the brothel. A term which turns out to be clearly polysemous in this context, it seems to alert us to the existence, beyond the social brothel, of a psychic brothel and even of a spiritual brothel. One of its perplexities is that, as a principle, the prostitute is someone who belongs to everyone; why does the subject intend to become her exclusive owner? There are numerous prostitutes in the brothel; he who knows how to search will end up finding his savory prostitute there. So, besides celebrating Pomba Gira, and highlighting her capacity of seduction, the text can also shed light on the necessity for individuation, i.e. for the encounter with one's personal desire. Although the poetic subject is, from the literal point of view, masculine, the place of identification with the situation of encounter proposed by the text can also be occupied by a woman in search of equivalent pleasure, even if her desire is not symmetrical to that of a man's.

As long as the man has not developed the capacity of tuning himself to achieve individuation, we can say the prostitute belongs to all; from the moment that self-awareness has been attained, she is then owned by him alone. This way, the prostitute assumes the symbolic function of the archetype, that is to say, of the general principle of identification. In other words, she becomes a mirror of the self. And then the brothel can be transformed into a kind of "realm of

the mothers” of *Faust II* by Goethe, a place where all archetypes live in a potential state.⁵⁰ It is also a place of plurality, of transit, of the illusion caused by seduction; place of abandonment, of servitude. The text seems positive because the author seems to say that he found his Pomba Gira in the brothel and in that sense the key word of the text is "search". Nobody finds his savoury prostitute free; neither can one request her from others. Whoever can say: “that prostitute is mine and nobody will take her from me”, has finally found himself, at some profound level of his being. In other words, besides the social brothel, there is also the psychic brothel and finally the spiritual brothel. In the brothel are found all the prostitutes, that is, all the Pomba Giras: you have to go there and look for yours (prostitute, that is, Pomba Gira). The poetical subject addresses Pomba Gira and calls her “my whore”. This is an expression of worship to the deity, similar to saying, “my goddess”: I identify myself with Pomba Gira and do not desist from this identification, even if it means social degradation.

These are new sacred metaphors, generated by an extremely alive and intense spiritual tradition. They are mystical texts produced in the urban contemporary atmosphere of large cities filled with peripheral areas and shanty towns. In spite of this wealth of images and new metaphors of the spiritual world, the Afro-Brazilian religious tradition continues to be, unfortunately, neither well-known nor valorized. Here is how Robert Torrence, in his book, *The Spiritual Quest*, assesses Brazilian *umbanda*: "What is missing from spirit possession in *Umbanda*, for all its spinning mediums and batteries of gods, for its elaborate spiritism and ostentatious spirituality, is precisely its spirit: the continual possibility of a never wholly predictable alteration of the given human condition through the overpowering intrusion of the divine" (Torrence 1994:116).

One of the possible explanation for Torrence's pessimist conclusion is that he had to rely exclusively on texts published in English and, more specifically, on authors who were not at all interested in or at least prepared to read, the inherent spirituality of *umbanda* songs, like some of those I have discussed. Lesser known authors like Serge Bramly (1977), Pedro McGregor (1966), Esther Pressel (1977), and even authors that carry more weight, such as Roger Bastide (1980), Diana Brown (1994), and Ruth and Seth Leacock (1975), have reproduced a certain Weberian stereotype, according to which syncretistic cults, such as *macumba* and *umbanda*, would represent the routinization of trance experience, as opposed to *candomblé* or *xangô*, which would still be able to transmit charisma.

All these Afro-Brazilian traditions use histories, biographies, songs in lyrical mood, and they avoid systematically any direct confrontation with the canonical religion, that is, with Christianity, the religion of the book. To maintain illiteracy; to always stay near oral tradition; to choose to follow a pattern of acephalous organization; to be politically fragmented: here is a reflexive way of preserving an alternative world of religious experiences. All the practitioners of the various marginal religions we have discussed know the great power of Christian religions and are conscious that they could not compete with them on their own terrain, that is to say, if they attempted to offer the same things they offer. If we allow ourselves a small digression, this Brazilian process may, in fact, help us to understand, from another angle, that which Michel de Certeau defined as the “mystical Marranism” of the Christian Baroque spirituality.⁵¹

Although I have used the expression “marginal spirits” throughout this essay, I must clarify that by marginal I do not mean being inferior, or incomplete, but simply less socially exposed and less powerful. Moreover, there is a specific cognitive lucidity which comes precisely from looking at the world from its margins, where often many possibilities lie hidden or repressed. Maybe one day, after these religions are better known and respected, we may not call them marginal anymore, but simply

⁵⁰ On the Mothers in *Faust*, see the remarkable study of Janz (1969).

⁵¹ See Certeau (1992)

Brazilian, or Afro-American, or New World religions. To conclude, my intention has been focused on trying to understand the complex social, racial, and ideological predicaments faced by adepts of these movements; to accept the eminently mystic character present in their texts and histories; and to inscribe them in the universal movement of spiritual traditions of humanity, to which I am convinced they belong.

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