



Embodied Encounters: Ethnographic Knowledge, Emotion and Senses in the Vale do Amanhecer's Spirit Mediumship

Emily Pierini

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

emily.pierini@gmail.com

This article examines the question of the researcher's bodily experience in the production of ethnographic knowledge, discussing fieldwork in the Brazilian Spiritualists Christian Order Vale do Amanhecer (Valley of the Dawn). Focussing on spirit mediumship, it proposes a twofold analysis discerning local categories from those widely in use in other spiritual contexts and in the scholarly debates, and considering how they are articulated and lived through. Hence, it tackles questions such as how do mediums learn their practice? How do they discern between different categories of spirits? How does mediumistic experience inform notions of the body and the self? In doing so, it shifts the focus from belief to experience, including that of the researcher, as part of the ethnographic encounter. The process of learning spirit mediumship is hereby approached considering the cultivation of a mediumistic body as an intersubjective process of development of a specific mode of knowing, exploring how the cognitive, bodily and affective dimensions interweave. This kind of analysis demands a peculiar reflexive attention to the ethnographer's re-education of perception as a way of becoming skilled in local ways of knowing and communicating, producing common grounds of interaction in the field.

Keywords: Vale do Amanhecer; spirit mediumship; learning; body; emotions; senses; ethnographic knowledge.

1. Introduction

On a full moon night back in 2004, during my first fieldwork¹ in the Spiritualist Christian Order Vale do Amanhecer (Valley of the Dawn) near Brasília, I stood by the pyramid photographing a ritual taking place in the open-air sacred space around the Lake of Yemanjá² with a medium who was guiding me across the great variety of rituals. He suddenly expressed his view on ethnography, explaining that as a receptionist of the temple he was used to accompanying visitors, journalists, reporters, and researchers, but that in some cases he said

¹ The ethnographic fieldwork upon which this article is based was conducted in Brazil in Autumn 2004, and along twenty-two months between 2009 and 2012 in the main temple of the Vale do Amanhecer in Brasília. It also included fieldwork in temples of the Amanhecer in North-East and Southern Brazil, Portugal, the UK and Italy, which I have undertaken at different stages between 2012 and 2016.

² The *orixá* of the Waters, known all across Brazil in African-derived religions.

They come here, walk around, or stay with us for a few days, listen to our explanations, and then publish things sticking upon us labels and ideas that don't belong to us. They seem not to be interested in why we do this work nor in our stories... everyone here has a story to tell. But your work is different: you are putting together this puzzle that composes the Vale do Amanhecer.

That night by the pyramid, I could certainly understand the expectation he had from my ethnographic endeavour; however, I have probably not given as much weight to those words, as I would now after twelve years of ongoing research on the Vale do Amanhecer. His concern involved a dilemma that many fieldworkers face in the field, that is how should we deal with local categories when they clash against one's own? And this dilemma is as much relevant to fieldwork practice as to ethnographic writing. Several anthropologists have repeatedly warned that the direct translations of a set of categories from one culture into another are often misleading (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]; Lienhardt 1961; Goldman 2006; Holbraad 2008, 2009; Bowie 2013). Fiona Bowie has coined the term 'cognitive empathetic engagement' to describe an approach in which the ethnographer, rather than dismissing native categories, learns to think through these local concepts as they are lived through, although maintaining a situated and critical empathy (Bowie 2013). Context-sensitive approaches understand ethnographic knowledge as a particular kind of knowledge mediating between local and scientific categories (Goldman 2006; Holbraad 2008, 2009).

In this article, I shall argue that the way in which this mediation is possible is by illuminating precisely the processes through which notions are articulated and lived through. I therefore propose a twofold analysis: firstly distinguishing, where relevant, local categories from scientific ones and secondly considering how they are articulated in terms of experience. Eventually, this kind of analysis comprises a particular reflexive attention to not only the cognitive, sensory, and emotional dimensions of learning, but especially to the ethnographer's bodily experience as a way of knowing and producing common grounds of interaction in the field; reflexive attention, in the sense that the ethnographer's experience should be addressed as a term of comparison with the particular kinds of experiences that our interlocutors categorise as spiritual.

I shall illustrate these points by discussing how, in the course of my fieldwork in the Vale do Amanhecer, I shifted my focus from discourses to experiences once body and emotions emerged as relevant to understand my interlocutors' narratives, eventually engaging my own body in the process of learning mediumship. This methodological choice provided valuable insights into how participants developing mediumship in the Vale do Amanhecer are not transmitted a belief but learn to cultivate a particular mode of knowing through their bodies. The cultivation of a mediumistic body is thus an intersubjective process of development of a specific mode of knowing grounded in the body, which informs mediums' lived experiences.

When I arrived in the field in 2004 with the intention of researching religious hybridity, not only were people rejecting my pre-constructed assumptions of hybridity, they were more interested in telling their stories, their experiences of encounter with the spirit world. I soon felt that mediums' understandings of the Vale could not be reduced to my initial conceptual framework, which would misrepresent what people were sharing in the ethnographic encounter. Besides being unethical, such a reduction would also be counterproductive for the ethnographic endeavour: the risk was to miss out the opportunity to investigate what the field was telling me, which involved important

territories of human experience. Eventually, over the years of subsequent fieldworks, I had to shift my focus upon mediumistic experience and ask: how do mediums learn their practice? How do they discern between different categories of spirits? How do mediumistic experience inform notions of the body and the self? When I discussed my ideas with a local master,³ who had followed my research since the first day I arrived in the Vale years earlier, he expressed his concern about the scholarly ways of approaching mediumship. His concern was specifically about the predominance of 'listening and seeing' over 'sensing and feeling' in the research practice:

This is what makes the difference, listening and seeing are different from feeling. So be careful in paying attention to your own bodily feelings and sensations, as this is the only way to get in touch with this phenomenon and to understand its meaning for us, even if you do not embody spirits.

Another of my long-term interlocutors led me to observe the sense of impatience and frustration I was having when in the middle of a conversation he would shut down or drastically change topic. He pointed out that in order to enter in a process of communication and to be able to conduct a conversation on spiritual matters I had to question my own ways of knowing. This kind of conversation, rather than being based on question-answer strategies, implied other processes that regulated what could be said and what should not be disclosed according to the 'energy moved by words': these processes involve intuition and somatosensory perception (particularly gut feelings). The ethnographic encounter implies not only that we learn the local language—as recommended since Malinowski—but that we should also become skilled in local ways of knowing and communicating, which may entail considering the embodied dimension of the encounter as part of the production of ethnographic knowledge.

2. Discerning Discourses: the Vale do Amanhecer

2.1 The Vale do Amanhecer

The Vale do Amanhecer (Valley of the Dawn) emerged in 1959 through Neiva Chaves Zelaya (1925–1985), known in Brazil as the clairvoyant Tia Neiva (Aunt Neiva).⁴ As a thirty-three year old widow mother-of-four and former Catholic, Tia Neiva began to

³ 'Master' (*Mestre*) is a title that male mediums receive after the second initiation, whilst female mediums are called 'nymph' (*ninfa*) even though they also belong to the 'masterhood' (*mestrado*) after that initiation. Masters and nymphs are also called Jaguars (*Jaguares*).

⁴ The Order was initially funded as União Espiritualista Seta Branca (Spiritualist Union White Arrow) in the Núcleo Bandeirante of Brasília, then the community moved to a rural area in the Serra de Ouro, near the city of Alexânia, in Goiás. In 1964 the paths of Neiva and her former helper Mãe Neném parted ways, with Neiva wanting to develop mediumship away from Kardecist practice that Mãe Neném preferred to follow. Neiva moved with the community to Taguatinga, where she also opened an orphanage, and registered legally the Order under the name Obras Sociais da Ordem Espiritualista Cristã – OSOEC (Social Works of the Spiritual Christian Order). Eventually, in November 1969 following the guidance of the spirit Pai Seta Branca (Father White Arrow) they moved and definitively settled in an old farm South of Planaltina-DF, adopting the current name Vale do Amanhecer (Valley of the Dawn), which was suggested by the spirit Mãe Yara (Mother Yara).

manifest spontaneous mediumistic phenomena with a revelatory character while working as a truck driver in the construction of the federal Capital Brasília.⁵ These phenomena immediately attracted a group of followers who began to develop their mediumship with her. What caught their attention was that these revelations came from a semi-literate woman who was held to experience astral travels to Tibet, to undertake a spiritual apprenticeship with a Tibetan monk called Master Umahã (Sassi 1999: 12). She was held to be simultaneously aware of different dimensions and times. While in trance she embodied spirit guides and provided the community with spiritual lectures and instructions to establish the sacred spaces, the ritualistic practices, and the foundations of the Doctrine of the Amanhecer. Moreover, these spirits manifesting as the Amerindian *cacique* (chief) Pai Seta Branca (Father White Arrow) and Mãe Yara (Mother Yara), were held to have been incarnated earlier as Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Claire respectively.

The Adjunto Yumatã Mestre Caldeira, who accompanied Tia Neiva in the development of the Vale do Amanhecer since 1970, told me that 'It was not as much the phenomena she was having, as it was her that was the phenomenon.' He referred to episodes in which she was embodying a spirit guide giving a message to the community while she was displacing her own spirit to be embodied by a medium in a nearby temple to give a lecture to local mediums. Tia Neiva's revelations were then systematised by her partner Mário Sassi (1921-1994), described by mediums as being 'the intellectual' of the doctrine given his background in the social sciences.

The community, originally gathered around Tia Neiva in the 1960s, spread significantly in the last two decades opening almost seven hundred temples across Brazil and beyond its borders reaching Bolivia, Trinidad Tobago, United States,⁶ Portugal, United Kingdom and Italy. In Europe the Order is rapidly spreading, with five temples in Portugal and over 2,000 mediums being initiated between 2011 and 2015. Two temples were founded in Cambridgeshire and London, attracting primarily Brazilian and Portuguese members residing in the UK, although rituals are also available to English-speaking patients. I have recently followed the foundation of a temple in Italy and the development of a group of twenty-five mediums practicing mediumship in Italian, thus for the first time in a language different from Portuguese. Many foreigners are currently traveling to the Templo Mãe (Mother Temple) in Brasília to undertake mediumistic development and to be initiated as mediums.

The social composition of the members of the temple reflects the one of the locality in which the temple is situated. The Templo Mãe near Brasília differs from the temples I have visited in the rural areas across Brazil and from those in Europe. The Templo Mãe is considered to be the root from which the Doctrine of the Amanhecer was developed; it has grown from a small farm into a town of almost 10,000 inhabitants (IBGE 2010), mostly linked to the Vale. The unique and colourful geometries of the sacred spaces and ritual uniforms make the Vale one of the most visually spectacular among Brazilian religious forms, attracting tourists and journalists from all over the

⁵ On the foundation of the Vale do Amanhecer see also N. C. Zelaya 1985; Cavalcante 2000; Reis 2008; Galinkin 2008; Marques 2009; Siqueira, Reis, Zelaya Leite, Ramassote 2010; Pierini 2013; C. L. Zelaya 2009, 2014.

⁶ For the temple in the United States, see Vásquez and Alves (2013).

world who, once in Brasília, take the chance to visit the temple and often to pass as patients in rituals. Besides Brasília's Temple being renowned, in this and other temples patients arrive by word of mouth accompanied by friends or family members, who have previously experienced passing in rituals, as proselytising is strongly discouraged for being considered an interference in people's karma and free will.

Rather than a place of worship, the Temple of the Amanhecer is intended as a 'spiritual first aid' where patients are assisted free of charge and where their donations cannot be accepted. Temples are indeed self-funded through the occasional donations of local initiated members. Since mediums cannot earn financial rewards from their spiritual practice, which is intended as a practice of charity, they live from the income of jobs outside the Vale in a variety of sectors.⁷

A great variety of rituals is performed daily and often simultaneously, which are aimed at disobsessive healing (*cura desobsessiva*), notably spirit release. Mediums maintain that by releasing spirits of deceased individuals trapped on earth after death, they help them to continue their path of evolution in the spirit world. Through spirit release they also help the incarnated attending rituals as patients, because the presence of these spirits is understood as affecting the physical, material or psychological domains of the person's life. In cases of health matters, mediums consider spiritual healing as being complementary to biomedical intervention, with the former seeking to remove the spiritual causes and the latter fixing the physical consequences, and thus advise patients to seek treatment also with a physician.

2.2 Positioning Mediumship

When discussing mediumship, my interlocutors used to carefully position what is intended as mediumship in the Vale with respect to categories used in other mediumistic religions or Spiritualist groups. As a mediums' instructor pointed out, in contrast to Spiritism and Anglo-Saxon Spiritualism, mediums in the Vale are not interested in providing evidence of an Afterlife, nor do rituals imply communication with spirits of the deceased, nor do they perform psychic readings. 'If you ask a North-American medium about mediumship, he would report on mind powers, telekinesis, psychokinesis, and so forth. It is cultural,' he said. Others firmly rejected the use of the category of 'possession'. Indeed, the category of 'possession' is not commonly used or understood everywhere in the same way in Brazil, given the widespread nature of Spiritism and the influence of its conceptualisations of relations between human and spirits in different spiritual practices. The term 'possession' is not used in the Vale given the conceptualisation that the spiritual agent does not fully enter the body and physically possess it, but it projects its vibration into the body. When the relation with spirits is interpreted negatively, it is referred to as 'obsession' (*obsessão*): the agency

⁷ In the Templo Mãe, because of the proximity to the Capital, the most common employment sectors are the Government offices, the public sector, and the National Army. Among the professionals there are lawyers, health practitioners and scholars from local universities. Because of the use of ritualistic uniforms, there are many artisans and dressmakers, some working in the uniform shops others in their private homes. Among other professions, there are farmers, builders, grocers, hairdressers and beauticians, schoolteachers and retailers. The social composition varies between middle and lower classes and professionals.

upon a person of a discarnate being in a low stage of evolution, which produces psycho-physical imbalances.⁸ The instructor also stressed that mediumship in the Vale is understood as having a bodily origin:

Mediumship is a biological factor resulting from blood circulation in all human beings. It indicates an active molecular production of blood in the body, which is transformed in energy, namely 'ectoplasm' or 'magnetic animal fluid'.⁹ It is ectoplasm that makes all human beings mediums. What leads just a part of human beings to experiencing the sensorial is an over-production of ectoplasm accumulated around the contact points of the body with the sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth senses that are the chakras, which makes the person more receptive or perceptive of the vibrations emanating from the Etheric.¹⁰

If this energy is produced in excess, he explained, it accumulates affecting the person physically, whilst when this excessive energy is distributed amongst others, it may help healing. When spirits identify in patients this energy in excess they suggest to them that they should become aware of and develop their mediumship either in the Vale or other spiritual practices, as all religions put this energy into motion. Through mediumistic development one learns to control and distribute this energy. An Italian developing his mediumship once said:

It led me to become aware that we are also spirit, which is something that we are not taught about in our culture, and that the same energy that we produce and sometime may cause us sufferance, can also help others. So we can heal ourselves while helping others.

Indeed, as the instructor explained me: 'Whilst mediumship is understood as "universal" and "biological"—meaning that a medium is far from being considered as an exceptional human being gifted with unordinary abilities—the form of the practice of mediumship is cultural'. In this sense, according to the purpose for which mediumship is used, the formal aspect of its practice is shaped by means of a specific 'mediumistic development,' that is, a structured training involving a learning process to develop mediumship.

Since the Vale puts the emphasis on disobsession (spirit release), mediumship in the Vale may be positioned more closely to the Spiritist practice (Espiritismo Kardecista) than to Afro-Brazilian trance. One may also discern a continuity with a Kardecist idea

⁸ For a discussion of the categories of mediumship, trance and possession, see Pierini (2016b).

⁹ The term 'ectoplasm' was introduced in parapsychology by the French physiologist Charles Richet (1850-1935) to designate the 'exteriorised substance' coming out from mediums' orifices in physical mediumship séances. The German physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) believed that all objects and living beings had a magnetic fluid, namely 'animal magnetism' running through their bodies and that an imbalance of this fluid was at the origin of diseases; he developed his healing method known as 'Mesmerism' aimed at re-balancing the body's magnetic fluid. Within Anglo-Saxon Mediumism ectoplasm is said to be used by spirits to produce phenomena of physical materialisation, whereas in the Vale ectoplasm is not visible.

¹⁰ For Mário Sassi's in-depth explanation of this process, see Sassi 1974.

of 'mediumistic development'. Mediumship in the Vale, however, differs from Kardecism both in the practice and in the mediumistic development for being primarily practical, experiential and highly ritualistic. As mediums of the Vale who have previously attended Kardecist development noted, the process in Kardecism was focussed mostly upon lectures and doctrinal study, with less ritualism. One medium of the Vale considered that process to be too slow in reaching the stage of practice for her need of expressing her mediumship, whereas in the Vale she was able to experience mediumship on the first day of her training.

Since the purpose of the Vale's mediumistic practice is disobsessive healing, two forms of mediumship are developed: the ones of *apará* and of *doutrinador*. Those whom the spirits advise they should develop their mediumship, and choose to do so in the Vale, undergo a test to verify which type of mediumship they are more inclined to develop. In a semi-conscious trance the *apará* incorporates suffering spirits that need to be released. These are then indoctrinated and elevated to the spirit world by the *doutrinador*, a conscious medium directing rituals. These suffering spirits are spirits who remained trapped on the earth plane after death and feed themselves with the energy of incarnated beings. They may be suffering spirits (*sofredores*), obsessing ones (*obsessores*) or creditors from a past life (*cobrades*). The *apará* may also incorporate spirits of light, that is, mentors belonging to the highest spiritual hierarchies given the level of their spiritual evolution, bringing humans guidance, protection and healing, communicating with patients on various matters related to their everyday life. They manifest in the Vale's rituals as *pretos velhos* ('old blacks', spirits of African slaves bringing wisdom), *caboclos* (spirits of Amerindians operating through the wild forces of nature), *médicos de cura* ('doctors of healing'), *ciganos* (gypsies), and *orixás* (deities known in the Afro-Brazilian context).¹¹ These spirits' manifestations are well known in Brazilian mediumistic religions, working in different modalities according to the context in which they are incorporated by mediums. In the Vale, they share the sacred space with other spirits addressed as princesses, ministries, knights, Tibetan and Hindu spirits, and extra-planetary beings originally from Capella who work together in the lineage of the Amerindian *cacique* Pai Seta Branca, and under the aegis of Jesus Christ. All spiritual beings, however, are considered 'extra-terrestrial' in the sense of inhabiting spiritual dimensions beyond the earthly one.

2.3 Positioning 'Reincarnation' and 'Millenarianism' away from the New Age Movement

Mediums in the Vale call themselves the 'Jaguars' (Jaguars), for they hold that they have been related to each other as a spirit group identified in the spirit world as 'Jaguars', which originally came from Capella¹² before beginning to incarnate on Earth. They hold to have shared incarnations in different historical periods, among the Assyrians, Persians, Hittites, Phoenicians, Dorians, the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Aztecs, Incas and Mayans, and in Colonial Brazil. According to Mario Sassi, this is particularly so for those peoples among whom the symbols of the jaguar, the Sun and the Moon spread (Sassi 1999).

¹¹ Only the *pretos velhos* communicate with patients; the other spirits work mainly in energy cleansing and disobsessive healing.

¹² The system of Capella (Alpha Aurigae).

This foundational narrative articulates different religious traits through the principle of reincarnation determining a global character of the Vale do Amanhecer, for it evokes elements and principles from Christianity, Spiritism, Amerindian and Afro-Brazilian religions, Eastern religions, Theosophy, cosmologies from ancient civilisations, Gypsy cultures and Millenarianism. In other words, reincarnation is the principle through which different religious elements, as much as individual experiences and the sense of self, appear to be articulated. Indeed, when this narrative becomes part of the collective imagery, it turns into memory, consolidating the sense of both individual and collective identity of the Jaguares, providing them with a strong sense of belonging to a spiritual ethnicity, addressed as 'the spiritual tribe of the Jaguares'. Mediums in the Vale therefore understand the purpose of their current incarnation as the redemption of their karmic debts from their past lives through the use of their mediumship to help others. Theirs is a spiritual mission of assisting incarnate and discarnate beings in a time of crisis and change, providing them with an awareness of themselves as being on a path of evolution to return to God. Through their mission they would accompany the spiritual evolution of human beings through the 'dawn (*amanhecer*) of a new era', understood as a time of transition that began in 1984 and will unfold for an undefined length of time, depending upon the moral conduct of humans.

Elsewhere, I have proposed that this kind of Millenarianism, although consistent with the global discourses of contemporary New Age, is deeply embedded in indigenous millenarian narratives (Pierini 2016c). There are striking parallels between the Vale do Amanhecer's prophecies and the Tupi-Guarani myth of the *Terra Sem Males* (Land Without Evil),¹³ particularly concerning the idea of redemption and the belief in future cataclysm, such as floods, fire, darkness and flying monsters (Schaden 1974: 163). Furthermore, the enunciator of the prophecy in the Vale is considered the spirit of an Amerindian Tupinambá, Pai Seta Branca.

Mediums in different temples of the Amanhecer in both Brazil and Europe pointed out that the idea of a new era in the Vale should not be confused with New Age movement. Rather than a New Age centre, they describe the Vale as an initiatic order of missionaries. Indeed, associating the Vale to New Age movement¹⁴—or even to 'popular New Age'¹⁵—could be problematic. Although the Vale might share many discursive connotations with contemporary New Age it cannot be understood solely through the category of New Age movement—nor through the one of Christianity, nor Spiritism, nor reduced to any of its single elements that evoke other religions, nor simply to a fashionable mix of these elements—so as to avoid misleading categorisations. Indeed, its rituals find no parallel in other religions. Moreover, it

¹³ For studies concerning the myth of the *Terra Sem Males*, see also Métraux (1927); H. Clastres (1978); Nimuendajú (1987); P. Clastres (2003); and Pompa (2004).

¹⁴ For the New Age Movement see Heelas (1996).

¹⁵ Oliveira (2009) approaches the Vale do Amanhecer through the analytical category of 'Popular New Age', understanding New Age in a context of local Brazilian religiosity of the Brazilian lower class. It should be noted, however, that the social composition of people attending temples of the Amanhecer may vary according to their geographical location and, more specifically, to their proximity to urban areas.

becomes clear that understanding the Vale as New Age is problematic when shifting the analytical focus from doctrinal discourses to mediums' experiences as initiates. Whilst the Vale attracts spiritual seekers involved in the new age movement, who may visit the temples and participate as patients in rituals, many of these have expressed their discomfort with the issues of hierarchical structure, highly ritualised practice with defined scripts, and exclusive commitment at the level of ritualistic practice when considering to be initiated. Explaining this distinction is necessary to understand the peculiarity of the Vale do Amanhecer in the context of Brazilian religiosity.

Addressing the mobility of people through religions, Reginaldo Prandi has noted that the commitment to religion is significantly reduced as changing religion is no longer perceived as a drastic change in one's personal life. The idea of 'conversion' is, thus, undermined (2000: 38). Whilst commitment in the Vale is not related to the frequency of attendance at the temple—as both the attendance or the decision to enter or leave the Order respond to the medium's free will—it is understood as responsibility towards a practice directed to patients, and the body becomes relevant to this discourse.

The instructors in the mediumistic development training explained that each religious practice works with a different energetic frequency, and through the initiatory path the body of the medium is developed to accommodate and work with a specific frequency. While mediums may visit and interact with other religious groups, they are advised that they should avoid participating actively in other kinds of ritual practices. This means that if invited, mediums may attend a mass, a wedding, and so on, but they should not participate in the performance of the ritual, as they would feel in their bodies the change of energies and forces acting in other rituals. A metaphor often used by instructors was that of electric devices plugged-in a socket with a different voltage. Thus, mixing energies by participating in different spiritual practices is not conceived as integrating new forces, it is rather perceived as damaging the device (*aparelho*), which is the medium's body. He or she would feel the impact as a form of imbalance, of bodily discomfort, which could have consequences upon their mediumistic practice in rituals, and consequently upon patients.

This precaution indirectly interrupts the dynamic of passing from one religion to another resulting in a spiritual experience exclusively immersed in the Vale. Such an interruption is similar to a process described by Luiz Eduardo Soares when assessing the place of Santo Daime¹⁶ in the context of what he called a 'New Religious Consciousness'. Whilst initially appearing to him as a manifestation of that phenomenon, through closer involvement, he came to reject the view that Daimistas were 'new agers'. He had to reconsider Santo Daime as 'establishing a point of inflation of the dynamics of the field' from which it emerged, as urging 'a proto-institutionalising or -routinising pause, a suspension of the mystical circulation' typical of the spiritual wandering, proposing a place for permanent and intense spiritual commitment (Soares 2014: 67).¹⁷ If the mobility of people through religions undermines 'commitment' (Prandi 2000), the Vale do Amanhecer re-habilitates 'commitment' as meaningful for its spiritual practice. It does so through what I have

¹⁶ Santo Daime is a Brazilian ayahuasca-based religion emerged in the 1920s in the Brazilian Amazon and then spread throughout Brazil and also Europe (See also Groisman 2009).

¹⁷ I thank Alberto Groisman for pointing out to this similarity with the dynamics in Santo Daime.

elsewhere described as a multi-layered learning process (Pierini 2016: 307), a process that cultivates a particular sensuous experience informing a specific conceptualisation of the body.

2.4 Localising Spiritual Routes

My interlocutors in the Vale who presented a past spiritual route featuring an intense religious mobility before choosing to be initiated, affirmed that the Vale helped them draw together the elements and experiences of their past spiritual routes engendering new meanings. They experienced the highly ritualised practice as a way to live the doctrine through the body in a protected setting. They also understood hierarchy and rituals with prescribed scripts as a protection from unsolicited energies, which may be better controlled by more experienced mediums holding higher ranks rather than novices. For this reason, the long queues of mediums in rituals are said to follow a hierarchical classification so that the higher classified bodies of those in front are more prepared to face the impact of stronger energies and gradually distribute them to the rest of the line. At each initiatory stage the body is prepared to support different kinds and increasing amounts of energies. Before tackling more in-depth notions of the body as articulated by mediumistic development, it should be noted how central the body was in my interlocutors' narratives of their past spiritual experiences. Such experiences were presented to me in the form of spiritual routes or therapeutic trajectories – the latter unfolding between spirituality and biomedicine in search of healing. Both featured either a continuous passage from one religion or spiritual practice to another, or the simultaneous participation in different religions, emphasising the empirical, participative, ritualistic and bodily aspects of their experiences.

Notably, those who embarked on spiritual routes to encounter the divine and eventually came to experience mediumistic practice, sought immediate and embodied forms to experience such an encounter, and tended to experience those religions that supported an idea of multiplicity of the self. In the context of their interaction with different religions, they selected those elements that were more compatible with their experiences, which have then been eclectically reinterpreted within the construction of a multi-dimensional self. Through the re-incarnational narrative of the Jaguars' past lives in different cultures and religions, these elements were re-articulated founding the possibility to be expressed and manifested simultaneously and polyphonically without being denied, releasing creativity in rituals through bodily and emotional experience. Thus, the sense of self extends beyond the single lifespan when calling upon forces from one's past incarnation, wearing ritual vestments representing those incarnations, or discussing with spirits about events from past lives with purposes of karmic release. Indeed, as Jaguars, mediums are redeeming their individual and collective karma by rescuing spirits.

It should be noted that rather than assuming the new members' past spiritual routes as contributing to a growing hybridity of the Vale's rituals, individual contribution such as the creation of new rituals or the inclusion of new elements drawn from past experiences is strongly discouraged as it is considered to undermine Tia Neiva's narrative of the spiritual origins of the doctrine. Since Tia Neiva's death, a centralised hierarchy favours a strict control over the preservation of the formal ritualistic system left by its founder. Thus, a tendency towards separation, and the creation of new small-scale groups derived from the Vale, has prevailed over the accommodation of new

elements.¹⁸ Attempts to change even the wording of rituals involved the leaders in higher positions in the hierarchy, including Tia Neiva's sons, rather than new members. Those who join the Vale are in some sense invited to participate in a ritualistic system presented as 'originated in the spirit world' that, although rigorous in its formal aspects, undergoes an ongoing renovation through a highly emotional encounter and interaction with the spirits.

One medium told me that at first glance the Vale appeared to him as a mixture of the religions of the present, but that he later understood that it is rather about fragments of past epochs in which the Jaguares lived. Since then he said he felt 'localised within the doctrine, as a form to transform one's karma from past lives, and to understand one's self and what is happening in present life'. To newcomers, the Vale do Amanhecer stands out particularly for what is perceived as a prominent hybridity, an aspect that is grounded in a local discourse developed from the mediumistic experiences, visions and revelations of the founder. Due to its global character, therefore, this discourse is able to aggregate people from different backgrounds and to articulate, within and through rituals, a great variety of contemporary spiritual experiences (Pierini 2016).

This level of ethnographic analysis discerns and situates discourses with respect to categories widely in use in the scholarly epistemology and in other religious contexts. So far, the ideas of the body and the self have gradually emerged shaping local narratives. When the level of discourse is approached separately from the perceptual level, the discussion remains at the level of 'belief', which is a territory of contested categories, often resulting in reductionist or even pathologising approaches. I therefore propose to move from discourse to experience, reframing cognition within the bodily dimension of spiritual practice. Through this shift the researcher's engagement with the field is not only cognitive and empathetic, but also bodily. Therefore, we should not only avoid bracketing out local experiences not fitting into the Westerner framework, we should include the researcher's bodily experience to convey in writing the multiple levels at which the intersubjective and embodied nature of ethnographic encounter and knowledge are constructed.

3. Sensing and Feeling: Body, Selfhood, and Learning Mediumship

The centrality of the body in mediumistic development soon became perceptible for me from the first day I entered the mediumistic development. Indeed, during my second fieldwork in 2009, I began to pay attention to how my body responded differently when passing as patient into each ritual. In the ritual of *Cura* (healing), for instance, mediums incorporating spirits of doctors (*médicos de cura*) placed their hands ten inches above my head, from which I could feel a vibration running through

¹⁸ The first of these instances happened soon after Tia Neiva's death, when Mário Sassi, her partner and one of the four leaders of the Order, together with a restricted group of mediums, began to develop a ritual manifestation of a new category of spirits anticipated by Tia Neiva but interrupted by her death. This practice encountered the strong opposition of the other leaders, which ended up in Mário Sassi's departure from the Vale in order to found the Universal Order of the Great Initiates in 1990. He ultimately returned to the Vale in 1993, shortly before dying in 1994.

the body, along my arms up to my hands. It felt as though as something was going on under the skin, within my body, digging into my flesh. When this sensation reached my hands that were placed upon my knees, it felt as if a magnet were moving intermittently between my hands. With my eyes closed, I could see vivid colours, which I attributed to the varying intensity of heat I was feeling in my body. Whilst I was paying attention to my own sensations experiencing rituals as patient, however, I realised that this position had little to tell me about mediumistic experience. Eight months later, in mid 2010, I began the development, learning semi-conscious trance, and thus re-educating my perception.

My first experience proved contradictory to my expectations concerning 'incorporation'. Some unfamiliar bodily reactions were going on *through* my body: my heartbeat increased, it felt as if a blow of wind were lifting my arms whilst my hands began to shake, and I felt an insisting pressure on my head as if it were contracting and expanding under the impulse of flashes of colours. Unexpectedly, however, I was still there, aware of the phenomenon, even though when opening my eyes I felt as if I were waking up from dream sleep. The fact that one retains a certain level of consciousness during the phenomenon means that mediums may often recall the emotions, feelings and sensations involved in mediumistic trance. I realised that by engaging my own body and discussing my experience with mediums in a comparative way, I could reach insights otherwise difficult to consider as outcomes of disembodied techniques of elicitation. It immediately became clear that bodily reactions to the development were not confined to learning the practice, as they accompanied me daily for weeks in form of headaches, which were considered by instructors as being a frequent symptom of the opening and cleansing of my head chakras. In sharing my concern with fellow participants in the development, it emerged that most of them had experienced headaches, fevers, back pains, or disturbances of the digestive system. Even developed mediums held vivid memories of these body pains, particularly related to the initiations, and considered them as a cleansing of the area around the solar plexus. The instructors explained that mediumistic development prepares the body to accommodate the forces of the initiations. Thus, these bodily reactions and pains reinforce the idea of reshaping of the body and the inscription of the solar plexus with the forces of the initiation. The development is therefore *felt* as acting simultaneously upon the different dimensions of the medium, producing a transformation, a sense of becoming.

Spiritual knowledge, in the Vale, is learned primarily through practical experience rather than through doctrinal teachings. Only after months of practice may mediums receive theoretical explanations around their practice. As an instructor explained to me—a researcher trained to ask questions and access information mentally—'you have to feel spiritual knowledge: it is not a study (*estudo*), it is a state (*estado*)'. Notably, 'you have to feel' in Portuguese is '*tem que sentir*,' where '*sentir*' means both 'sensing' and 'feeling'. Following Damasio (2000) I refer to 'emotion' as a bodily response to a stimulus, and 'feeling' as the subjective perception of emotion.

Elsewhere (Pierini 2016), I have addressed mediumistic development in the Vale as a process of 'enskillment', which implies situating the practice through the ongoing education of perception (Ingold 2000). This practice requires mediums to both extend into the spirit guides and discern between their selves and those suffering spirits whose manifestation needs to be controlled so as to be indoctrinated and then

released. In order to do so, a strong sense of self should be developed. Spirits' discernment and control are skills to be learned. Emotion and sensation play a pivotal role in this process. My approach to learning mediumship also builds upon Halloy and Naumescu's call for a consideration of 'the way contextual factors shape cognitive, perceptual and emotional processes leading to possession expertise,' that is, how 'the interrelationality of environmental conditions and mental processes' is articulated (2012: 166).

By participating in the mediumistic development lessons in the temple—both in a group and through one-to-one sessions with different instructors—I could learn how mediums in trance are instructed on the different modalities of expressing the energy running through their bodies through the gestural and verbal codes of the Vale, according to the culturally recognisable manifestation each of their spirit guides (*preto velho*, *caboclo*, and *médico de cura*). On one occasion, a *preto velho* incorporated in a medium during a ritual explained to me that as a spirit he never had an incarnation as African slave in Brazil, but in order to manifest in the physical plane he needed protect his spirit from the dense matter of this plane using clothing. This meant he had to shape his spiritual body according to a manifestation that could be culturally recognisable for the group he was to assist. In that ritual of *tronos* ('thrones') spirits in the same stage of higher evolution may manifest as *pretos velhos* drawing on the attributes of wisdom and humility associated with these spirits in their role of bringing comfort and hope to humans' suffering. The spirit guides manifesting for the first time through the *aparás* in the development needed to be instructed to come under the cultural manifestation of a *preto velho*. Thus, both bodies—the spiritual body of the spirit and the physical one of the medium—are cultivated in the learning process, in an ongoing production of a mediumistic body. Hence, in the development lessons, instructions about bodily movements are passed both to the spirit guides and the medium in trance. *Aparás* learn to maintain the posture sitting slightly bent forward while incorporating the old spirit of the *preto velho*, and to move the arms around the body to cleanse it and snap the fingers to disintegrate negative charges; the Amerindian *caboclo* spirit slaps the medium's chest to increase the production of energy; and the *médico de cura* (doctor of healing) stretches the arms in front of the body to transmit healing energy to patients.

They gradually familiarise with and discern each of their spirit guides' energy through emotions, feelings and the different intensity of vibrations in the body, and learn to switch from one manifestation to another without mixing the gestural and postural expressions attributed to each category of spirits. They learn their spirit guides through multi-sensory images—that is, resulting from the integration of different senses (Csordas 1990: 42)—in which touch, smells, visions, and the bodily feeling of the spirit's attributes combine to form the representation of one's spirit guide. It is possible to understand these representations as embodied images, as if one may form an image of oneself from an awareness of one's body.

The spirits of light provoke in the *aparás*—and to different extent also in *doutrinadores* and patients—positive feelings of love, bliss and peace, often finding expression in laughter and tears. Following mediums in development in the Vale's temples in different Brazilian and European contexts, I have noticed how even those who approached the phenomenon for the first time, holding no previous spiritual beliefs and apparently not manifesting any particular bodily reaction to the external observer,

reported to the instructors the most various emotions once disincorporating the spirit, inner reactions ranging from heat-waves expanding from plexus to the throat, tingling along the limbs, pressure on the head, sense of peace, or will to cry. When a drastic change in feelings and emotions is suddenly perceived by mediums, such as a sensation described as a power outage in electricity, and these are replaced by negative emotions, mediums understand that a suffering spirit is approaching to incorporate. Thus, *aparás* learn to close their fists and prevent as much as possible the verbal and gestural expression of the suffering spirit so that the *doutrinador* may proceed to indoctrinate the spirit. To perform the doctrine of the spirit, the *doutrinador* cleanses the aura (*limpeza*) of the suffering spirit incorporated by the *apará* by passing his or her hands around the medium's body and snapping fingers to discharge the heavy energies removed from the spirit. While the *doutrinador* does so, he or she talks to the spirit calling him 'brother' (*irmão*), making him aware of his death and of the cause of his sufferance, rage or hatred, which is the lack of love and forgiveness. Eventually, the *doutrinador* informs the spirit that the spirit guides are giving him the opportunity to be released from this plane to be healed and continue his evolution in the spirit worlds, and through an initiatic key¹⁹ they elevate the spirit. Much of the first stage of the *doutrinadores'* development is devoted to learning a set of formalised ritual keys and gestures appropriate to their functions, and to develop the skill of discerning spirits manifesting through the *aparás*. Spirits discernment for the *doutrinador* demands familiarity with the culturally recognisable configurations of gestural, postural, verbal and emotional codes in spirit manifestation, along with their sharpened intuition and attention increased by their conscious trance—described as an expanded consciousness—and often with sudden variations in thermo-perception such as feeling heat in the hands or along the body. Halloy and Naumescu address possession as a 'cultural expertise':

By 'expertise' we mean first of all the culturally relevant matching or assemblage of emotion, perception and reasoning in the process of learning a determined skill. Possession for example, requires an expertise both from the observers, who perceive it in relation to shared social values and aesthetic and normative criteria offered by that particular culture, and from the possessed person who has to make sense of her own experience ... Experts need to know which are the cultural representations and expectations associated with possession and find a way (develop the expertise) to match them with perceptions and feelings (Halloy and Naumescu 2012: 166).

In the case of spirits of light, when *aparás* begin to learn their spirit guides, gaining confidence through practice, they may release their manifestation, moving from the great conformity of gestures to highlighting specific traits of expression associated with the personality of the spirit. Even though spirits' manifestation may include a wide range of personality expression, these should still be contained. As instructors explain, a loud and uncontrolled incorporation does not define any particular status for the medium, nor the ability to incorporate 'powerful spirits', being unrelated to social or spiritual hierarchy; it rather reveals the lack of preparation of the medium.²⁰ Group

¹⁹ The 'initiatic keys' (*chaves iniciaticas*) are pre-fixed formulas composed by a precise number of words which are considered to produce spiritual processes.

²⁰ Only spirits of *caboclos* are allowed to scream as part of the cleansing they perform in rituals through their voice. However, the incorporation should still be controlled with the mediums

identity is then constructed through shared feeling—which resonates with the expression ‘mediumistic body’ (*corpo mediúnico*) used to address the community of initiates in the Order—in which emotions and senses are cultivated so as to provide a particular kind of access to and encounter with the spirit world.

Whether conscious or semi-conscious, mediumistic trance is a complex phenomenon varying not only from one medium to another, but also for the single medium from ritual to ritual. The traits briefly outlined in this paper are just a few of those that recurrently emerged among the Vale’s mediums in Brazil and Europe. The levels of consciousness are constantly varying but through practice and intersubjective exchanges mediums define what is part of the repertoire of mediumistic practice of the Vale.

In my own experience while in semi-conscious trance in the mediumistic development, on certain occasions I felt as though I was sat in a particular seat, but when opening my eyes, I realised that I had been sitting in a different place from the beginning. In reporting this sensation to other mediums in development, as well as to more experienced ones, they also reported similar sensations of displacement during trance, ‘seeing’ themselves in another seat, or observing the ritual from a side perspective. It gradually emerged that these experiences of partial displacement appeared to be more recurrent than out of body experiences. I highlight ‘partial’ because the feeling is described as being on one level somewhere else and on another still present in the body, suggesting a partial presence of proprioceptive sensations.

Master Caldeira then explained to me that the spirit of the medium is projected about one and a half metres out of the body whilst spirits project their aura within the medium’s body. This ability of the self to extend out of the body does not imply that the self would fully leave the body, as body and self are understood as being interwoven in the solar plexus of the incarnated being. In some cases, the self was described to me as moving into a distinct space within the body. To clarify this I provide an account that significantly illustrates my argument. This account belongs to Beth²¹ a European yoga teacher who was in the initial stages of mediumistic development as *apará* in the Mother Temple of Brasília. We were discussing about mediumistic experiences in the development, when I asked her where she felt her spirit guides during trance, and she described her experience as follows:

It is in that space where I am in that moment, it is like a space which is created inside of me and from there I can safely incorporate. Also in my previous [yogic] meditation I had a lot of *samadhi* experiences, when the mind is transcended and you are in a universal awareness, and in this I have a space where I have to enter to incorporate safely. There are some guards that close the door, it is like a temple really ... The work in the Vale is actually grounding for me, because before I set my path always meditating, being in the clouds ... also a shaman told me I had to accept having a body, as it was always easy for me to go in *samadhi* ... Here I feel that my all force and energy which is transmitted from the higher planes needs this kind of body. Here

remaining seated (or standing in some temples) banging their chest and moving their hands across the patient’s aura to cleanse it.

²¹ Pseudonym.

I have begun to feel that the physical manipulation is very necessary because we are on a physical plane ...

Interestingly, Beth described her spiritual experiences in the Vale as 'grounding'. Since spiritual trance has been mostly associated with transcendence, amnesia, or out of body experience one would seldom expect mediumistic experience to be 'grounding'. Mediumistic development in the Vale, however, brought about a new feeling and perception of her bodiliness:

...everybody here feels these subtle worlds in the physical reality, even *doutrinadores* feel the energies. I have always distinguished the physical reality from the beautiful soul, but here I appreciate that the dimensions are interacting with each other ... Here the spirits come through your body, you can experience them in your body, you can work with them in your body but they are actually from a different dimension so everything gets interwoven. That was the feeling I was missing, I felt as not having any borders, but now I understand that if you have other dimensions inside of you as experience rather than knowledge ... then ... you see it with many new age people, you get very confused ... some people who took *ayahuasca* said that they visited other dimensions and then they came back and did not know how these different dimensions could come together.

This new feeling has informed a new conceptualisation of her body and self. Beth described her self as being in a space created inside of her, where different dimensions are interwoven in the body in precise ritualistic moments and where spirit guides may transit to communicate with her and to perform their work with patients. The development of the skills of spirit discernment was also informing her perception of having semi-permeable bodily boundaries and the definition of a sense of self as she became aware of its multidimensionality:

Here you can probably see it [the body] more as a semi-permeable membrane where it is very clearly defined in which space the spirit comes through. Whether if you work with a shaman in the jungle, for example, how do you know what comes through? Sometime I felt as they didn't know what they were calling. So it is like a semi-permeable membrane where in certain spaces it is allowed for this energy to come through the physical space and in certain places not, so it is very clearly defined and that is actually very healthy. Because otherwise there is this thing always traveling around dimensions not knowing how and where, and that is the difference here, it is clearly a protection. With the *doutrinador*... there is a channel that is opened, and now it is allowed to come through, and then it is closed again, then it is opened again, and closed. You know, it is really a matter of security. I feel that this is the best thing for me, to feel the protection, not to just flow around, but there are times when you are physical, times when you are a medium, and whatever comes through your body is very precise. I feel that this gives me a sort of stability, and this is also what I mean by being more embodied...

Spiritual practice in the Vale is indeed precise and highly ritualistic: following formalised ritual scripts, specific symbols and colours of vestments, intended as channelling specific kind of energies through each detail, with the *doutrinador* performing the role of delimiting the boundaries where and when the spirit can manifest.

... Besides this ability that I have to be in contact with spirits, the communication with other dimensions, and that this can be helpful. It is not something random, making me suffer to be in this earthly plane, but it is actually something useful that can help others. That's the most grounding part of it if you have this sensitivity and you don't know where to bring this energy, and think 'What shall I do with it?'

At the time of this conversation Beth was in the initial stage of mediumistic development. Eventually, only later in her advanced stage of development she will receive an explanation that according to Tia Neiva the three dimensions of human being—body, soul, and spirit—are located within the body in the solar plexus enveloped by an energetic membrane, whilst the self is extended through several planes—physical, etheric, astral, and so on (N. C. Zelaya 1984: 105; Sassi 2003: 50). Therefore, as Beth also stressed, this kind of ‘knowing’ was grounded primarily in experience. She recognises the ability of her self to extend out of the physical dimension in meditation, but also to immerse in the space within during trance. She perceived her body as a ‘semi-permeable membrane’ able to be crossed by spirit energy in specific ritual times and spaces.

Similarly, an Italian *doutrinador*, recalling his past experiences of altered states of consciousness before encountering the Vale along his spiritual route, told me that with *ayahuasca* there was a somewhat episodic and provisional opening of consciousness in which he could experience other dimensions only for that moment after ingesting the tea. As *doutrinador* in the Vale he felt as if through his mediumistic practice his consciousness was continuously and gradually amplified to accommodate other dimensions in his everyday life. Their words resonate with many other accounts I gathered over the years from Brazilian mediums, which grounded my argument that ‘in a reciprocal movement bodily experience in rituals shapes the sense of self, providing the notion of the self with attributes of extendability and multi-dimensionality. This notion in turn informs the mediums’ conceptualisation of trance, that is, the extension of the medium’s spirit out of the body and the extension of the spirit’s aura inside the body, which leads to the experience of the body as a platform of shared emotions and feelings’ (Pierini 2016: 306).

4. Building Common Grounds of Interaction: Why Participation does not equal ‘Going Native’

The kind of participation in fieldwork I have discussed so far, may not always be indicated, or possible. Since ethnographic practice requires the methodological choices to be drawn from both the research focus and the specific field circumstances, a method that may seem appropriate in a specific field may not be suitable in other fields. Therefore, I do not advocate that participation is the only means through which a researcher has access to the understanding of mediumship. It was in my case, and at a certain stage of my research, the most indicated way to reach valuable understandings of the somatic elements involved in the process of learning mediumship. It allowed me to discuss with mediums the relationship between somatic aspects of mediumistic practice and notions of the self, and to understand ‘learning’ as a multi-layered process that is embodied, intuitive, performative, conceptual and inter-subjective (Pierini 2016: 307). If embodiment was a way of knowing among mediums, the dimension of the ethnographer’s bodiliness in the process of knowing the field had also to be tackled. As I have argued, this stance illuminated how the notion of an extended self was also articulated at different levels. At the level of discourse, the sense of self was understood as extending beyond a single lifespan, as the personal narrative embodied the foundational narrative. However, what preceded this level of discourse, entailed sensing and feeling in the first phase of mediumistic

development so that bodily experience grounded notions of the self with its attributes of extensibility and multidimensionality.

Among the experiential turn in ethnography, Barbara Tedlock in her discussion of participatory approaches, which predominantly focused on the aspect of ethnographic representation, critically notes that

What seems to lie behind the belief that “going native” poses a serious danger to the fieldworker is the logical construction of the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity, between scientist and native, between Self and Other, as an unbridgeable opposition. The implication is that a subject’s way of knowing is incompatible with the scientist’s way of knowing and that the domain of objectivity is the sole property of the outsider (Tedlock 1991: 71).

I propose that we need to question the assumption of ‘going native,’ understanding participation as learning ways of knowing so as to ground intersubjectivity. In fact, bodily participation does not entail ‘going native’. Firstly, the category of ‘native’ is neither bounded nor homogeneous, especially as participants in this spiritual practice come from different socio-cultural backgrounds, thus not only my experience was informed by my background, but all mediums’ experiences are. Thus, if I am not assuming that the researcher’s experience is identical to that of others it is also the case that the instructors in mediumistic development stress to newcomers that ‘each medium is a different case’. Even when bodily experience in trance is similar, anthropological insight emerges from the tension between world-views, as Desjarlais (1992) maintains from his apprenticeship with Nepali healers.

Secondly, participation can never be complete, as observation does not cease. Okely points out that ‘The fear of total participation is the fear that observation will cease. Yet there is always the need to take notes...If note taking and the relevant anthropological analysis cease, then so does the research’ (2012: 78).²² Equally, participation does not automatically entail that the researcher closes the ethnographic eye. Indeed, I found myself engaged in a continuous process of observation and interpretation even when my eyes were closed in rituals.

Furthermore, I have proposed that

This kind of participation does not imply that the ethnographer accepts beliefs at face value, because not even mediums do so when they approach the practice. It rather implies reflecting critically upon one’s bodily experience and the insights gained from it and discussing them with research participants establishing a particular kind of rapport (Favret-Saada 1990; Goldman 2003, 2005), and thus using this reflexivity as a common ground of interaction with research participants (Pierini 2016b).

This common ground of interaction moved us to a new level of reflection in which my questions gained in focus and mediums’ narratives in depth and nuances.

Certainly, what our interlocutors are willing to share is informed by what they perceive the ethnographer is prepared to understand in terms of his or her experience and

²² According to Okely ‘going native’ is a cliché ‘legacy of the colonial discourse... passed on to anthropologists seemingly to avoid alignment with indigenous people’ (2012: 78-79).

expertise. But primarily, in reflecting upon and comparing experiences, we were making the effort to finding ways to describe in words the felt immediacies of those experiences. Bodily knowledge allows moving beyond the limitations of verbal and visual modes of knowing, to shift from disembodied knowledge to the sensuous dimension of lived experience (Strathern 1996; Stoller 1997; Pink 2009; Okely 2012). Sarah Pink argues that a 'sensory ethnography,' rather than reducing experience to a visual mode of understanding—particularly in cultural contexts where other senses may be more dominant than vision—affirms the multi-sensorial and emplaced character of learning in the field (2009: 64).

This level of ethnographic knowledge gained through participation and bodily involvement, rather than losing objectivity, is valued for its reliability, as the edited collection of Goulet and Granville Miller advocated: 'In this experiential perspective, reliable ethnographic knowledge is generated through radical participation and vulnerability, not distance and detachment. How else are we to grasp a "people's point of view, *their* relation to life, to realise *their* vision of *their* world (Malinowski 1953, 25)' (2007: 11). Detachment in search of objectivity during fieldwork, Okely argues, 'is *more* likely to transform the context', as the ethnographer may be perceived as a threat or a critic. Yet, involvement through participation may allow a greater 'invisibility' in terms of transforming contexts, and particularly understood as a sign of respect (Okely 2012: 77). The classic dichotomies participation/observation and subjective/objective are indeed part of a false and misleading continuum, as one does not exclude the other (2012: 79). Similarly, Csordas maintains that 'the attempt to define a somatic mode of attention decentres analysis such that no category is privileged, and all categories are in flux between subjectivity and objectivity' (1993: 146). Furthermore, I should point out that the kind of process of knowing in the field I am proposing should not reproduce dichotomies between intellectual and bodily ways of knowing, but eventually should integrate the two.

'Ethnographic objectivity,' as Fabian argues, should be pursued through knowing, where 'knowing' stands for 'acting in company' rather than contemplating, entailing an intersubjective and processual knowledge (Fabian 2001: 29). Fabian understands the primacy of vision along with the displacement of ethnographic objectivity from the anthropological debate, as a result of a shift of interest from knowledge production to representation: 'It is no longer possible to limit oneself to the concepts and images derived from vision when discussing questions of objectivity'; the body should be rehabilitated as involved in knowledge production, in intersubjectivity, and thus in grounding ethnographic objectivity (Ibid: 30).

How should we then treat local categories in the light of the production of ethnographic knowledge? Rita Laura Segato (1992: 126) notes that what is not directly intelligible in the process of making the strange familiar or what does not fall under a supposed correspondence or 'coherence' between belief and society tends to be ignored if it is not consistent with Western rationality. In doing so, anthropology flattens the world attenuating the accents of human experience that are meaningful to and eventually foreground a particular religious group, thus, she proposes that rather than resolving difference, it be exhibited in the ethnography (1992: 133). The usefulness of Western categories to interpret local ones is under scrutiny: 'It is naive empiricism and

unfettered positivism that is intellectually and politically untenable in the emphasis of examining local beliefs within a foreign framework. And such position is frequently simply not useful.' (Miller 2007: 188).

The idea of cross-cultural translation is also problematic if intended as direct transposition of one set of categories into the other—which may result in explaining away informants' assumptions as 'imaginative interpretations' or metaphors of a pre-given reality (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007: 1). The scholarly literature has repeatedly offered examples of misleading translations of spiritual phenomena into Western psychiatric categories.²³ However, even psychiatry is redefining the methodological guidelines for approaching Altered States of Consciousness, as it calls upon psychiatrists to avoid pathologising the unusual; extend research into non-clinical populations; multiply concepts of 'pathology' and 'normality'; consider the cultural contexts and understanding of 'pathology' as well as the cultural meanings of terms; consider the limitations of psychiatric vocabulary and classifications; caution in establishing causal relations; and wherever possible using phenomenological description of concepts rather than the translation of words (Moreira-Almeida and Lotufo-Neto 2003). This approach is leading psychiatrists towards discerning spiritual from pathological experiences (Menezes Junior and Moreira-Almeida 2009).²⁴ In the light of this discussion I should stress that an ethnographic approach that takes into account lived experience along with intersubjective knowledge may assist in making this discernment possible.

5. Concluding Remarks

The field of studies of spirit mediumship and possession featured the reduction of these phenomena to symbols of social order, mentalistic patterns or pathologising explanatory categories. A closer attention to lived experience and to the processes of learning and knowing, which takes into account not only cognitive but also bodily and affective dimensions, may shed a new light upon this dimension of human experience which draws upon an embodied encounter with the spirit world.

I have shown how my interlocutors in the Vale positioned discourses about mediumship, reincarnation and millenarianism, and how notions of the body and the self were relevant to their narratives. In doing so, I moved away from a misleading

²³ Psychophysiological perspectives approached spirit possession as pathology and explained altered states of consciousness associated to spiritual phenomena in different cultures through the use of Western psychiatric definitions, such as: hypnotic states, hallucination, hysteria, schizophrenia, epilepsy, neurosis, dissociative identity disorder, and psychopathology (Oesterreich 1930; Nina Rodrigues 1935; Kroeber 1940; Devereux 1961; Bourguignon 1967; Ward 1989).

²⁴ Psychiatrists Adair de Menezes Júnior and Alexander Moreira-Almeida (2009) though a survey of 135 medical articles proposed nine criteria for a differential diagnosis between spiritual experiences and mental disorders of religious content: lack of suffering, lack of social and occupational impairments, short duration of the experience, critical attitude about the objective reality of the experience, compatibility with the patient's cultural or religious group, absence of co-morbidities, control over the experience, personal growth along the time and an attitude to help others.

assumption that the Vale do Amanhecer may be considered a New Age Movement, and I have rather argued that the development of an embodied relation with the spirit world and of a specific conceptualisation of the body re-establishes spiritual commitment within a context of intense religious mobility. Mediumistic development plays a pivotal role in this process precisely as it articulates specific notions of the body and the self through a process of enskillment (Ingold 2000), an education of perception.

Throughout the discussion I have discerned between local categories and those widely in use in other spiritual contexts and in the scholarly debates—alerting the risk of misleading translations—considering how they were articulated through the process of learning mediumship, and exploring how the cognitive, bodily and affective dimensions interweave.

Rather than using translation, anthropologists are proposing a particular kind of mediation. Martin Holbraad suggested that when native categories clash with our own assumptions, we should recognise that ‘our conceptual framework’ and categories are often inadequate to describe native concepts because they are not ‘rich enough to comprehend all the others’ (Holbraad 2009: 86). He rather proposes as part of the analytical task of the anthropologist, to rethink our own assumptions and produce new concepts that reflect native ones, namely ‘inventive definitions’ or ‘infinitions’:²⁵ ‘a speech-act that inaugurates a new meaning by combining two or more previously unrelated meanings.’ (Holbraad 2012: 220).

In this article I propose to understand spiritual knowledge in the Vale as ‘a way of knowing’, particularly when considering that what mattered to mediums was talking about their *experiences* of spirits rather than describing their *belief* in spirits. In fact, newcomers are not taught about the existence of spirits, they are not passed a belief. They rather come to learn how to *feel* the presence of spirits and how to discern which spirit is manifesting, that is a specific mode of knowing which urges us to shift our analytical stance from ‘belief’ to ‘experience’.

Undermining the notion of *belief* in favour of that of *experience*, according to Goldman (2003), allows moving beyond differences in terms of belief, between the categories of the researcher and those of the people with whom he or she studies. Both Jeanne Favret-Saada and Márcio Goldman stress the primacy of ‘being affected’ over belief, for ‘being affected’ provides another kind of access to different spheres of experience, knowledge, and dynamics of participants (Favret-Saada 1990; Goldman 2003, 2005, 2006). Goldman, in particular, considers the anthropologist’s main task that of producing ‘ethnographic theories’, namely theories produced from a local context that may render intelligible other contexts. Ethnographic knowledge should, then, mediate between native and scientific theories (Goldman 2006:170). And this mediation, we should stress, is always emplaced.

But how should this mediation work practically? I have proposed that reframing cognition within the body, along with its senses and emotions, helps understand rituals and cosmologies as they are lived through as a part of human experience. The focus

²⁵ Holbraad coined the term ‘infinition’ (inventive definitions) to designate concepts ‘under permanent ontological reconstruction’ (2008:101).

is not so much upon ideas and concepts but the way they are articulated and lived through. Rather than being taught new concepts, I have argued that new mediums, through an education of perception, learn a mode of knowing, living notions through their bodies. They are guided by instructors to experience what it *feels* like having a mediumistic body, before being passed the knowledge of how different dimensions are interwoven in their solar plexus. This specific mode of knowing shapes their lived experience and their sense of self.

To investigate this process in depth it was necessary to re-educate my own body becoming skilled in this way of knowing. And the ethnographic method provides the researcher with a particular kind of access to other ways of knowing. In this sense, the process of knowing gains centrality in the ethnographic task, over that of cross-cultural translation. Namely, we are not just translating or contextualising native propositions. What distinguishes ethnographic knowledge is illuminating the processes through which theories, notions, and categories are articulated and lived through, firstly by participants and then by the researcher.

These processes may be illuminated by the ethnographer through: a) a *discerning analysis*, making explicit the ways in which local categories and theories may differ from those in use in the scholarly debate or in other contexts; and b) considering how local categories are articulated and lived through informing lived experience—thus moving from belief to experience. The ethnographer's experience should be considered critically and reflexively within this twofold analysis. Rather than being bracketed out from the ethnography, it should be addressed both in the field and in the analysis as a term of comparison with our interlocutor's experiences, when deemed methodologically relevant to understand the variety of embodied experiences of the encounter with otherness—whether it be our interlocutors in the field, or between them and those experienced as disembodied selves.

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