



# Journal for the Study of Religious Experience



Special Issue

## Fieldwork in Religion: Bodily Experience and Ethnographic Knowledge

edited by Emily Pierini and Alberto Groisman

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This Special Issue examines the construction of *ethnographic knowledge* in researching among participants of religious and spiritual groups through the lenses of bodily experience.

Articles discuss the methodological implications of engaging the scholarly body in the field and the ways in which to convey these experiences through ethnography, by addressing the empirical, ethical, epistemological, relational, political and analytical implications of this significant aspect of fieldwork.

Authors are particularly concerned with religious and spiritual groups whose practices imply the use of techniques, resources, plants, substances and other strategies used in religious contexts to modify the states of consciousness.

They ask specifically how does the researcher's experience in researching among these groups inform the production of ethnographic knowledge? In which way does it redefine our analytical categories, and even the way we approach the experiences of participants in these groups? Up to which extent do our interlocutors expect us to know about their experiences and practices?

Assessing critically their own experiences and their implications, they raise issues associated with contemporary debates around concepts of 'knowledge' and 'belief', 'body', 'self' and 'personhood', 'health' and 'illness' in religious contexts.

### Table of Contents

Introduction. Fieldwork in Religion: Bodily Experience and Ethnographic Knowledge  
*Emily Pierini and Alberto Groisman*..... 1

Full Participation and Ethnographic Reflexivity. An Afro-Brazilian Case Study  
*Arnaud Halloy*.....7

Embodied Encounters: Ethnographic Knowledge, Emotions and Senses in the Vale do Amanhecer's Spirit Mediumship  
*Emily Pierini*.....25

Daime Religions, Mediumship and Religious Agency: Health and the Fluency of Social Relations  
*Alberto Groisman*.....50

Studying the Body in Rastafari Rituals: Spirituality, Embodiment and Ethnographic Knowledge  
*Anna Waldstein*.....71

Spirits, Spies and Lies in Havana: Unwitting and Paranoid Entanglements between the Ethnographer and the Field  
*Diana Espirito Santo*.....87

Immersion in Experiencing the Sacred: Insights into the Ethnography of Religion  
*Stefania Palmisano*.....105

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# Journal for the Study of Religious Experience



## Introduction. Fieldwork in Religion: Bodily Experience and Ethnographic Knowledge

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The study of religious experience challenges researchers to think through the ways of approaching people's lifeworlds and innerscapes especially when dealing with other intangible worlds and selves involved in their spiritual practices. Before expecting others to be aware of, disclose and articulate their worlds, this challenge demands the development of ethnographic skills that include an awareness of the researcher's own experiences, bodies, and selves, while immersed in other people's ways of life and in the process of knowing in the field.

Knowledge and ethnography have been articulated as categories in a fundamental way to demarcate the constitution and trajectory of anthropology as a field of study. Although authors such as Tim Ingold have stated that ethnography is not synonymous of anthropology (Ingold 2006), it is undeniable that the ethnographic inspiration guides the work of anthropologists. Rather than just being a 'method' or a particular way of presenting data, it is possible to see ethnography as a *dispositive* (Foucault 1979) shaping thoroughly anthropological work from research design to the ways of narrating the 'empirical' experience. 'Empirical' as broadly understood: not only what we do while 'being there' (Geertz 1988), but also in the sense of seeking while 'being here' to evoke elements selected from a whole research experience and convert them in a text. And it is considering ethnography as a dispositive that involves not only the 'intellectual' activity of the scholar, but also the researcher as person and agent, that we proposed the organisation of a debate around the 'bodily experience,'—which could also be called 'embodied experience'—of researching in the field of religion. This consideration implies a methodological, ethical and epistemological appeal to transcend the rationalist and intellectualist notion that our 'passage' in the field is just about disembodied techniques of 'data collection.' This appeal has found a fertile ground in the discussions raised from the session 'Bodily Dimension, Experience, and Ethnographic Research' that we have organised at the 33<sup>rd</sup> Conference of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion on 'Sensing Religion' (Université

Catholique de Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium) in 2015; a discussion which was then extended to other colleagues laying the foundation for this Volume.

This Special Issue examines the construction of *ethnographic knowledge* in researching among participants of religious and spiritual groups through the lenses of bodily experience. Whilst the scholarly epistemology around issues of reflexivity, positionality, participant observation and sensory ethnography is becoming more popular in different fields, when it comes to religious and spiritual experience the question seems to enter an insidious territory challenging established categories and positions. Most likely this field is still affected by the legacy of a 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries' scholarly activism that consisted in the attempt to remove any traces of 'religious' behaviour from the scholars' activities and paradigms, resulting paradoxically in the consolidation of some dogmas, such as the criteria of 'neutrality', 'distancing' and 'objectivity.' Within this attempt to separate the 'religious' from the 'scientific', it seems that the experiences of researchers in the broadest sense, including laboratory experiments, only become legitimate if the results were presented in a depersonalised form in the writing of scientific texts. Other relevant aspects of the reflection upon and systematisation of the research activity were either suppressed or relegated to the anecdotal, such as: the relationship between the researcher and his/her collaborators, their coexistence and dialogue, and significantly, intuition and other forms of insight. However, researchers in the fields of anthropology and sociology have considered these 'other' aspects of their engagement in the field—often involving spiritual experiences and practices—as a valuable tool for field research, opening up new avenues for ethnographic insight, implying different dimensions to reflect about. Articles in this Issue discuss the methodological implications of engaging the 'scholarly body' in the field and the ways in which to convey these experiences through ethnography, by addressing the empirical, ethical, epistemological, relational, political and analytical implications of this significant aspect of fieldwork.

Earlier edited collections in the field of anthropology have tackled a variety of 'extraordinary experiences' in the field and their transformative outcome for both the researchers and their research agendas, including the attempt to treat their interlocutors' claims seriously (Young and Goulet 1994; Goulet and Granville-Miller 2007). Moreover, anthropologists such as José Jorge Carvalho (1992) and Rita Laura Segato (1993) raised the importance of thinking about the experience of the field as initiatory, and of avoiding the reification of religious experience in rationalising categories that ultimately disqualify these experiences and disregard the perspectives of those who experience them.

This Issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience* is particularly concerned with religious and spiritual groups whose practices imply the use of techniques, resources, plants, substances and other strategies used in religious contexts to modify the states of consciousness. We ask specifically how does the researcher's experience of researching among these groups inform the production of ethnographic knowledge? In which way does it redefine our analytical categories, and even the way we approach—particularly in terms of epistemological implications—the experiences of participants in these groups?

In practices in which knowledge is accessed by means of the body, ethnographers should tackle their own bodiliness in the process of knowing in the field, exploring concepts through the cultivation of cognitive and bodily skills, as Pierini notes in this Volume. The common thread unfolding across these contributions is that concepts such as ‘knowledge’ and ‘belief’, ‘body’, ‘self’ and ‘personhood’, ‘health’ and ‘illness’ arise from the felt immediacy of the field. Questioning their own experiences and their implications, authors raise issues that are associated with contemporary debates, such as putting under scrutiny the concept of belief.

The concept of ‘belief’ is undermined by an empirical and embodied knowledge. Emily Pierini considers ‘belief’ as a ‘territory of contested categories’ often leading to reductive and pathologising approaches, thus, she proposes to reframe cognition within the body shifting the analytical stance from belief to experience, understanding the practice of spirit mediumship as ‘a way of knowing’. ‘Concepts of “belief”’, argues Diana Espirito Santo, ‘crystallise notions of extra-human agency as epiphenomena of the mental processes of “believers”’ whereas knowing is the context of belief. Arnaud Halloy describes Afro-Brazilian Candomblé as ‘a religion of “experience”, a “phenomenopraxis” to some extent, constructed on an experiential expertise’.

A clear implication of these problematisations is the evocation of the notion of ‘being affected’ by lived experience. Moving along the legacy of Jeanne Favret-Saada, authors in this issue reflect upon the methodological implications of ‘being affected’ (1980, 1990). They have participated in and engaged themselves to different extent—cognitively, emotionally, or bodily—with the practices of the people with whom they were researching.

Anna Waldstein, cultivating her body among Rastafari in the UK through clothing, growing hair, meditating, and paying attention to embodiment, came to experience through heightened sensory awareness the *Ini*, namely the underlining the force that connects self and other. The intersubjective dimension of the self is therefore accessed through the researcher’s sensory experience challenging Cartesian ontologies.

Pierini, re-educated her perception in learning semi-conscious trance whilst researching on mediumistic experience in the Brazilian Vale do Amanhecer, and by sharing her experience with her interlocutors allowed for a notion of a ‘multidimensional’ and ‘extended’ self to emerge, which extends beyond the body to connect with spirits, and beyond space and time through different past lives. She argues that these notions of the body and the self grounded in experience informed conceptualisations of trance and she stresses their relevance for the mediums’ spiritual and therapeutic trajectories.

Alberto Groisman analyses his experiences of interaction with spiritual beings incorporated by mediums whilst conducting research on ayahuasca and mental health in a Daime religion in Brazil. Rather than approaching these experiences as anecdotes from the field he stresses their centrality in the participants’ lives, as well as in the relationships between researcher and spiritual entities. On one occasion he realised he had not asked the permission of the spirit of a *preta velha* Vó Nadir to display images of her incorporation in a ceremony, in a scientific event paper. Thus, he evokes his participation in these religious events as crucial to grasp the intersubjective nature of spiritual healing and therapy in Daime religions, marked by an intense relation with

spiritual beings, which calls to rethink Western concepts and approaches to mediumship and mental health.

Authors reject the idea that ethnographic participation implies 'going native', they rather assess issues of ethnographic objectivity and examine the reliability of the data gathered through their approaches, focussing upon the methodological rigor demanded in the stage of analysis and writing up. Waldstein notes that participation 'does not preclude later reflection on such experiences from an anthropological point of view.'

Halloy intends that an objectifying distance should not translate as 'cold indifference' towards one's affects or interlocutors in the field, rather it may be employed to address rigorously the ethnographic knowledge produced by the ethnographer's full participation. Reflecting upon his experiences of being possessed in the Afro-Brazilian *Xangô*, he urges the need to cultivate epistemological attitude and skills for 'empathic resonance' and 'introspective expertise' through techniques of self-observation, and identifies a three-fold strategy of reflexivity that may account for the 'scientific' nature of the paper.

Pierini questions the assumption of 'going native', especially within a religious group. She proposes an analysis discerning where relevant local categories from Western scholarly epistemologies and considering how they are produced in terms of experience; an analysis which comprises the reflexive attention to the ethnographer's bodily experience 'as a way of becoming skilled in local ways of knowing and communicating, producing common grounds of interaction in the field'.

Whilst proximity and participation may facilitate access to certain kinds of knowledge and events, it may suddenly interdict others or even determine a transformation in the relations with interlocutors. In contexts where knowledge defines social positions we may ask up to which extent do our interlocutors expect us to know about their experiences and practices?

Stefania Palmisano presents an analysis of her interrupted process of conversion into Reconstruction in Prayer, a Catholic movement in Northern Italy, occurred during her fieldwork in that community. Whilst in the process of engaging herself with practices such as meditation, yoga, dancing, and embracing their ascetic way of living and eating, she eventually got caught into the 'paradox of intimacy', whereby initial enhanced trust gained through 'participant immersion' in the field turned into restricted access to information as researcher. She reflects into the methodological, ethical and personal dilemmas she had to face as ethnographer undertaking 'participant immersion'. Nevertheless Palmisano argues in favour of her participatory approach, which on the one hand facilitated the understanding of peculiar processes that make the movement attractive for such a broad public; and on the other helped overcoming the 'observational perturbation' caused by the presence of a researcher in the group and to grasp what people actually do besides the discourses they construct around their practices.

Diana Espirito Santo while researching among Cuban Espiritistas was accused by a close interlocutor of being a spy of the Cuban Government. Analysing the suspicion and mistrust through the economy of knowing of Afro-Cuban religions, Espirito Santo tackles reflexively her proximity and eventually understands the *field* as configured

through the relationships and the processes of knowing in which the ethnographer is embedded 'emotionally, sensually, spiritually' both with tangible and intangible selves. In addressing reflexively the sudden overturning of their position in the field, both Palmisano and Spirito Santo managed to illuminate relational processes and knowledge construction both in these religious groups and in ethnography.

The contributions in this Special Issue are the result of initiatives and processes of exploration of and reflection on fieldwork experience. They imply a sense of commitment to a perspective that each elaborated work has methodological, ethical, epistemological and political implications. And that an ethnographic text should be inscribed by self-reflexivity, along with a serious and symmetric consideration of what people—who are also active participants in a 'project of knowing'—think and do. This includes the experiences and relationships that researchers establish along their empirical and analytical trajectories. In this sense, ethnography is a 'balance' or an ascertainment, a direct or indirect narrative of the events experienced with others, or of processes triggered in the intimacy of the researcher and/or with his/her interlocutors, or of their trajectories. This reflection—as some of the authors maintain—does not intend the participatory experiences discussed in this Special Issue as a prescribed condition of ethnography. In fact, as Halloy suggests, it may not be recommended in certain contexts where religious knowledge may not be entirely disclosed to non-initiated, unprepared individuals or to specific groups of population.

Our aim is to raise questions that may contribute to the contemporary debates on religious experience and the bodily and affective dimensions involved in ethnographic research. In doing so, not only will the contributions in this Special Issue impact upon the reflection on ethnographic knowledge production in different fields, but they may also call us to broadly consider the status and flow of the relationships established in our work, so that we may increasingly be able to dialogue with those 'others' in many ways who constitute the *raison d'être* of our ethnographic research: a) the 'other' selves in the field with whom we engage in a project of knowing during the experience of the ethnographic encounter; b) our own 'otherness', in the sense that the theoretical task also includes the empirical research upon our experience of becoming in the field, which as Goldman suggests—drawing upon Deleuze and Guattari (1980)—does not rest upon imitation or identification with the native point of view, but 'is a movement by which a subject leaves her own condition through a relation of affections that she can establish with another condition' (Goldman 2003: 464); c) and the 'other' scholars with whom we engage to ground our theoretical reflections. In sum, the works collected in this Special Issue contribute to reflect and debate on the process and the experience of living and thinking the various forms of relationships and frontiers we found as researchers in the contemporary world.

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## Full Participation And Ethnographic Reflexivity: An Afro-Brazilian Case Study

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In this article, I explore the conditions of ethnographic knowledge production, with a focus on 'full participation', i.e. an unrestricted affective and relational commitment on the part of the ethnographer doing fieldwork. The very notion of participation raises some questions as to the objectivity of the ethnographic endeavour, as well as to the nature of the knowledge thus produced. The main goal of this article is to show that this knowledge, under specific conditions, is not only scientifically admissible but also likely to shed a different kind of light on the reality studied ethnographically. As I will argue, this can only be achieved through the development of three forms of ethnographic reflexivity. Finally, I will stress the heuristic and epistemic added value of full participation and conclude with a discussion of the place of intuition in ethnographic work and its consequences for the training of today's and tomorrow's anthropologists.

Keywords: Full Participation, Ethnographic Reflexivity; Participant Observation; Objectivity; Afro-Brazilian

### Introduction

*Reflexivity is still about them.* –Raymond Madden (2010)<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I explore the conditions of ethnographic knowledge production, with a focus on 'full participation', i.e. an unrestricted affective and relational commitment on the part of the ethnographer doing fieldwork. The very notion of participation raises some questions as to the objectivity of the ethnographic endeavour, as well as to the nature of the knowledge thus produced. The main goal of this article is to show that this knowledge, under specific conditions, is not only scientifically admissible but also likely to shed a different kind of light on the reality studied ethnographically.

I was brought to reflect on this topic by my personal and scholarly involvement in the *candomblé Nagô* or *Xangô de Recife*, an Afro-Brazilian possession cult that I had the opportunity to study over the last fifteen years.<sup>2</sup> With thousands of followers, the Xangô is one of Recife's most influential Afro-Brazilian religions today<sup>3</sup>. As a Yoruba initiatic

<sup>1</sup> Qtd in Fasulo (2013: 259).

<sup>2</sup> *Candomblé Nagô* is the term preferred by worshippers, while *Xangô de Recife* is the popular as well as the academic name.

<sup>3</sup> As an Afro-Brazilian modality of cult (among others such as *Candomblé*, *Batuque*, *Culto Afro*, *Umbanda*, *Tambor de Mina*, etc.) the *Xangô* is, on a broader level, part of Afro-



possession cult<sup>4</sup>, each Xangô initiate is assigned at least two African deities called *orixás*, which he needs to ‘feed’ at least once a year with an animal sacrifice. Although all initiates are potential candidates, possession is neither a prerequisite nor a necessary consequence of initiation. But it is undoubtedly the most visible expression of *axé*, the vital force, often understood as ‘life itself’ connecting all beings and things that make up this ontological system (Wafer 1991; Goldman 2007).

I will not have the space here to come back to the circumstances that led me, as early as my first trip to the field in summer 2001, to become ‘phagocytised’ by the initiation process.<sup>5</sup> For the time being, it is enough to know that holding the position of a novice in the *Xangô* religious system presented to me an opportunity not to be missed, given that my thesis focused precisely on religious learning. What better social position could have I hoped for than the one thus assigned (Favret-Saada 1990)? As I began to take my first steps into the *Xangô* cult, I learned to juggle my two hats – the hat of Arnaud, son of *Ode*, the *orixá* of hunting,<sup>6</sup> and the hat of Arnaud the anthropologist who had a thesis-writing project underway, which he was very much set on completing<sup>7</sup>.

One of the early lessons of my ‘body and soul’ commitment (Wacquant 2002) to the *candomblé Nagô* initiation process was that this was not a ‘believe’ religion, an orthodoxy *stricto sensu*, but a ‘do’ religion, an orthopraxis very much bent on following the liturgical precepts, as well as a religion of ‘experience’, a ‘phenomenopraxis’ to some extent, constructed on an experiential expertise in the first and third persons –

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American religions, which are present today in America as also in various European countries - see for example Frigerio (1997); Oro (1999); Capone (2001-2002, 2005); Teisenhoffer (2015).

<sup>4</sup> *Xangô*’s origin dates back to the end of the nineteenth century. From being somewhat restrained during the first half of the twentieth century, the cult expanded rapidly throughout the city from the 1940s to the 1970s, thanks to the influence of charismatic cult leaders (de Carvalho 1987).

<sup>5</sup> I revisit the circumstances of this commitment as well as my trajectory as *Xangô* initiate and possessed in ‘Un anthropologue en transe’ (2007) and ‘Divinités incarnées’ (2015).

<sup>6</sup> *Orixá* (pronounced ‘orishas’) are Yoruba deities associated with natural elements like rivers, the sea and thunder – or with human activities like hunting and iron-working. Due to the influence of popular Catholicism, the word *santo* (‘saint’) is frequently used as a synonym of *orixá*.

<sup>7</sup> My initiatic commitment in the *Xangô* is nothing exceptional. Many if not most anthropologists of Afro-Brazilian religions since the very beginning of the nineteenth century are likely to get involved, even if minimally, in liturgical matters, if only for accessing information that only circulate among initiates of the cult. Secrecy is a historical and constitutive element of *Candomblé*’s social and political positioning (Johnson 2002). Among the founders of Afro-Brazilian studies ritually committed in one way or another, let’s mention in passing Edison Carneiro, Ruth Landes, Pierre ‘Fatumbi’ Verger, Roger Bastide or Juana Elbein dos Santos. However, very few of them, if any, decided to honour or at least to ‘confer some dignity’ (Goldman 2003: 450; 2006: 165, 171) to their own experience as a source and/or as an object of anthropological inquiry. Even Gisèle Cossard-Binon, a French anthropologist who became one of the most well-known priestesses of *Candomblé* (*mother-of-saint*) in Brazil, remained extremely discreet about her own *experience* as an initiate and possessed (*rodante*) (1970, 2007). Such attitude is easy to understand given her status as a mother-of-saint, the highest religious status in Afro-Brazilian cults. The epistemological position I defend in this paper is different. I will try to show that the kind of anthropological investigation I suggest is neither compatible with a strictly native (religious) perspective, neither with a cold and distant (scientific) analysis.

as I will later discuss in more detail.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on my journey from novice to potential initiator, but also from PhD candidate to research professor in anthropology, I will argue in favour of the scientific validity of full participation as ethnographic method – *under specific conditions*. To put it unequivocally, full participation is in no way a panacea for all ethnographic inquiries. I understand it as both a relational attitude towards oneself and the others and a useful methodological toolbox for ethnographers interested in topics such as emotions, the senses, experience or, more broadly speaking, cultural subjectivities. My purpose here is not controversial but to encourage the development of a ‘thicker’ epistemological ground in anthropology, and especially in relation to ethnographic endeavours.

I will first question the notion of ‘objectivity’ in the context of ethnography. At the heart of my argument will be a discussion on the possible ethnographic reflexivity strategies of full participation, arguing that distancing oneself from first-person ethnographic *knowledge* should not be confused with distancing oneself from the persons and affects the ethnographer is dealing with. Finally, I will stress the heuristic and epistemic added value of full participation and conclude with a discussion of the place of intuition in ethnographic work and its consequences for the training of today’s and tomorrow’s anthropologists.

## Ethnographic ‘objectivity’ revisited

Objectivity the thing was as new as objectivity the word in the mid-nineteenth century. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, men of science began to fret openly about a new kind of obstacle to knowledge: themselves. (Daston and Galison 2007: 34)

To be objective is to aspire to knowledge that bears no trace of the knower —knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgment, wishing or striving. Objectivity is blind sight, seeing without inference, interpretation, or intelligence. (Ibid.: 17)

The two quotes above – that come from a beautiful book by Daston and Galison on the history of the concept of objectivity – point unambiguously to the enemy to defeat on our way to scientific objectivity, namely the researcher’s subjectivity. This ‘objectivist’ view of our relation with the world has engendered at least two ‘objectivity’ regimes in contemporary sciences.

The first relies on falsifiability as a criterion for scientificity (Popper 1972). In this regime of objective knowledge production, a statement is said to be falsifiable if there are facts that can prove it to be false<sup>9</sup>. Which amounts to saying that in order to prove said

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<sup>8</sup> When I say that *Xangô* does not fit the definition of an orthodoxy *stricto sensu*, I do not mean that it does not possess a corpus of mythological and cosmogonic references, but rather that it lacks an interest in their transmission. In my two years of fieldwork, I have witnessed straightforward transmission of mythological episodes or cosmogonic views among *Xangô* members only on very rare occasions. Also, whatever individual followers, myself included, ‘believe’ is no matter of real concern for the other followers. In a religion such as *Xangô*, religious expertise is demonstrated through lived experience and is measured firstly by liturgical know-how and knowledge derived from lived experience.

<sup>9</sup> This is, of course, a very much simplified interpretation of Karl Popper’s definition of falsifiability. It is by no means intended as a philosophical discussion, but rather as a reminder that this is the argument that dominates in the contemporary ‘hard science’ epistemological background.

statement right it is not enough to gather facts that verify it since one could (almost) always find facts that confirm a hypothesis or a theory. On the contrary, it will be deemed false as long as there is even one fact that refutes it.<sup>10</sup> Falsifiability as a regime of objectivity, whose aim is ostensibly the production of universal knowledge, would thus require the use of rigorous experimental methods, based on the control of variables and the reproducibility of results.

It is self-evident that such methodological requirements (falsifiability, control of variables, reproducibility of results) are difficult to fulfil outside an experimental setting. And even more so in the context of *in situ* observational research such as ethnographic studies. If so, should we give up all scientific ambitions in anthropology? Could we envisage another form of objectivity anchored in an empirical approach?

Ethnographic work relies on the production of abductive inferences from particular cases and ideally leads to a plausible truth and/or the development of hypotheses about a specific reality<sup>11</sup>. To use Passeron's beautiful words, the ethnographic method is based on 'the criterion of empirically-multiplied and semantically-joined exemplifications' and its efficacy can only be measured by 'the effects of knowledge and the effects of intelligibility that it has produced' (Passeron 1991:15). The keyword here is certainly 'intelligibility', meaning that the ethnographer works as a meaning mediator to a reality difficult to grasp in the absence of intimate knowledge of it, of a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) of its protagonists, its stakes, and its socio-cultural context. *Intelligibility* and *objectivity* are therefore not synonymous.

Without claiming Popperian objectivity, two methodological attitudes or strategies have been used in anthropology for the purpose of attaining a form of, let's say, 'objective intelligibility'. The first one could be called – not without irony – the 'stealth mode' because it makes the ethnographer invisible: no longer present in his own ethnographic accounts, the ethnographer embraces "the view from nowhere" characteristic of a post-Enlightenment approach to knowledge (Lock 1993: 138), a view which is arguably pervasive in the social sciences' (Espírito Santo 2015: 205). And this is precisely the problem with this first descriptive strategy: the line separating a non-situated gaze from the illusion of an omniscient or exhaustive gaze is very fine. The alleged 'objectivity' of this strategy rests on a methodological impossibility, i.e. the 'neutralizing' of the ethnographer's subjective gaze by erasing it from the account. As Fiona Bowie rightly puts it: 'There is no unsituated knowing, no unmediated 'fly-on-the-wall' objectivity. The knower takes to him or herself an object of knowledge with all the limitations and inevitable entanglement of selfhood.' (Bowie 2013: 705)

The second and most frequently used methodological strategy today is emotional detachment, with its two distinct manifestations. One, the ethnographer creates a '*bonne distance*' (right distance) or even a '*regard éloigné*' (view from afar) in relation to the object of his inquiry. According to this methodological attitude, 'objectivity' depends on maintaining an emotional distance from the people studied by the ethnographer, with whom he is nonetheless bound to share quite a few life moments. 'Not too close but not too far either', in the words of Michel Agier (1997), aptly sums

<sup>10</sup> Even if the statement itself is debatable, it remains a philosophical landmark in the development of scientific thinking.

<sup>11</sup> An abduction or abductive inference can be defined as an inference to the best explanation resulting from an observation.

up this attitude. Second, there is another kind of emotional detachment, this time aimed not at the other but at the ethnographer himself. In other words, an objective approach requires the ethnographer to be capable of detachment or at least of keeping his own emotions at bay. This second attitude follows the 'classic' view of emotions as disruptive for human reason, hence the need to banish them from the process of objective knowledge production<sup>12</sup>.

Both versions of emotional detachment as an 'objectifying' endeavour lend themselves to criticism in several ways. Firstly, much of today's cognitive science and neuroscience research proves that empathy is the basis of social communication. According to Jackson, Meltzoff, and Decety:

Two primary components are consistent across numerous conceptualizations (of empathy): (1) an affective response to another person, which often, but not always, entails sharing that person's emotional state, and (2) a cognitive capacity to take the perspective of the other person while keeping self and other differentiated. (2005: 771).

Empathy is thus an essential capacity that enables understanding and communicating with another person. Is then keeping one's affective resonance at a distance the best strategy to 'objectively' account for the behaviour of others? Similarly, contemporary science acknowledges emotions as a constitutive component of rational thinking and of the decision-making process (Damasio 1995, 1999). Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) describe brain-damaged patients unable to use their emotions for guiding their own reasoning, or unable to learn from the emotional repercussions of their decision, or even unable to respond emotionally to reactions and solicitations of their social partners. In a word, their '*emotional thought*' was compromised because they had lost their '*emotional rudder*'. Is it then still possible for the ethnographer to claim objectivity by shutting off his own emotions?

If we take seriously – and we do – such findings on empathy and emotions, as ethnographers we are forced to admit that we should concentrate our efforts on a better understanding of our own affectivity rather than try to get rid of it. Fortunately, there is an increasingly rich and convincing literature on rehabilitating the relevance of introspection as a method of scientific inquiry (Vermersch 1994/2011, Petitmengin et al. 2013, Petitmengin 2011). Introspection can in fact count as an 'expert act' and, consequently, can be both taught and constitute a topic of rigorous scientific research (Petitmengin 2014: 196).

So what are the implications for ethnographic methods?

I can think of two pitfalls to be avoided here. First, there is methodological 'affectivism' claiming that only the researcher's subjectivism has truth value as in the case of some auto-ethnographies written particularly in the American postmodernist tradition.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The same attitude still prevails in ethology as Véronique Servais rightly reminds us: 'Much-praised neutrality and objectivity translated as emotional unresponsiveness, inhibited empathy, blocking the process that in everyday life allows us to see animals as embodied consciousness (Wieder, 1980)' (2013: 209).

<sup>13</sup> In stark contrast with the 'classic' attitude mentioned above, this methodological attitude is often built on a romantic view of emotions seen as the place of a 'uncontaminated, pure and honest' perception of reality, detached from the 'civilization's artificial rationality.' Further, the

Second, there is the persistent claim that objectivity can indeed be achieved through emotional detachment. Contemporary research on emotions bids us to better understand empathy and introspection processes and use this knowledge in our anthropological work. One way to do that, as we will see, is the ethnographer's developing a unique degree of empathic resonance and introspective expertise, which derive their ethnographic validity mostly from the ethnographer's reflexivity during and after fieldwork. What I am suggesting is a methodological alternative based on full participation and requiring from the ethnographer not so much to create an 'objectifying' distance from his hosts or his own emotions but rather from ethnographic knowledge itself, i.e. the knowledge produced and rendered by the ethnographer in the first person.

I choose to go straight to the point and begin with a description of one of my possession experiences,<sup>14</sup> because it both illustrates unequivocally what I understand by 'full participation' and serves as a case in point supporting my discussion of the specific conditions that grant ethnographic admissibility to full participation.

## Full participation and ethnographic reflexivity

### *Becoming orixá*<sup>15</sup>

*This is it, it's done! This is it, I did it! I passed the test of the Dékà<sup>16</sup>. Júnior surprised me when he called Ode, right there in the middle of the Salão!<sup>17</sup> But then Ode answered him right away! I felt a veil coming down on my consciousness, then the sudden rise of that force that I've felt before, which erases the line separating the animal from the Empress (reference to the Marseilles Tarot card<sup>18</sup>), separating the force that keeps the mouth open from the one that pours out of it. Contrary to many accounts by possessed people that I've collected myself, and the traditional established vocabulary, I did not 'switch off' (apagar). For me, it is more like being 'wrapped' in a dream-like state, having a veil over my consciousness that transforms the outer world in a sort of lucid dream in which I see myself doing things... A sort of Leirisian 'lived theatre' where Ode and I are perceived as being one by both the others*

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capacity to be affected would be the definition of being human and the source of meaning for both the individual and social life (Lutz and White 1986).

<sup>14</sup> This happened during my most recent fieldwork studying *Xangô* cult, in August 2014. For an account of my introduction to being one of the *Xangô* possessed, see Halloy (2007, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Excerpt from my field notes.

<sup>16</sup> Also known as 'confirmation', this ritual takes place at least 7 years after joining the religious cult as a *iaô*, a novice, and grants the rank of *ebômi*, or elder, as well as the legitimacy to create new initiates. The ceremony consists in presenting the initiate to the community. In most cases, it involves the possession of the candidate by his or her *orixá*.

<sup>17</sup> Júnior is my father-of-saint in the *Xangô*. The *Salão* is a large hall where public *candomblé* ceremonies take place.

<sup>18</sup> Marseilles tarot is not part of *Xangô*'s mythological background, but rather of my relation to my elder brother, who is a specialist of Marseilles tarot. The reference mentioned follows a mail I received a few weeks earlier from him. I later learnt that the female character on the Marseilles tarot card I was referring to was not the Empress but Strength (11th Major Arcana card). Since it was this archetype on which I built my description, I decided to keep it there.

*and myself. I have many visual or sound flash memories. But all of them feel like they are contained by some other body than mine, a body that pulsates from inside, a body for which feeling and acting are one, dancing is perceiving the world, feeling it, experiencing it... An imperative force, very much like a heartbeat of the whole body!*

*I am happy that this happened, that meu pai Ode (my father Ode) answered Júnior's call and I could pass with flying colours this test that had terrified me. I know I still have a lot of growing up to do in the culture of this force. Maybe one day I will switch off like many others. But until then, I know I have an orixá! And he dances through me! Ode is that part of me which led me to candomblé so that I can become a channel for him to express himself.*

*Today I think that the moment of the 'manifestation' is unique for every candidate to possession, each of us experiences it in his own way and the range of possibilities is much wider than what transpires from the discourses and what the words are able to render. My own way of experiencing it is quite special because I perceive my own lived experience through the lens of 15 years of anthropological research on possession but also of 2 years of practicing daily meditation. My experience cannot, therefore, be identical to that of the cult followers for whom the orixá is the orixá and the possession is his 'manifestation' through a person of his choice. So I cannot change who I am or what Ode is to me. When I put it like this, it sounds very stupid to me! My lived experience of candomblé and of possession is what it is, and it seems to fit perfectly what candomblé expects from its 'children' (the initiated). I am a candomblé child and son of the orixás Ode Arole, Yemanjá Ogunté and Oxum. Having looked from within, I can say it out loud: 'Eu também tenho santo'<sup>19</sup>!*

What is the epistemological value of data provided by the ethnographer's introspective account of his own experience? I will put forward two hypotheses that will sound counterintuitive to ethnographical common sense. The first is that they are not *more* trustworthy because they come from the ethnographer and therefore are allegedly closer to an 'objective' account (using the 'objectifying' strategies described earlier). An account is what it is: the translation of a subjective relation with the world. The second is that the data are not *less* trustworthy because they come from someone outside the studied culture since the lived experience of the ethnographer was 'validated' by the members of the culture, in this case the *Xangô* religious experts. In sum, while they cannot be waved off, they cannot be taken at face value either – their value for the anthropological endeavour remains ambiguous. How can one make the best of them? What are the conditions for processing introspective data as genuine ethnographic data? My answer: with the help of three forms of ethnographic reflexivity.

### *Three forms of ethnographic reflexivity*

#### **The self in the third-person**

The first form of reflexivity is the shift from the self in the first person to the self in the third person. Moving off centre, taking one's distance is not the same as the emotional detachment I described earlier. On the contrary, as Jeanne-Favret Saada has aptly

<sup>19</sup> 'Me too I have a saint!'

shown in her study of witchcraft in the Bocage, this shift requires that the ethnographer should first allow himself to be 'caught' ('prise') (1997), i.e. he is or allows himself to be affected by 'affective intensities' (Favret-Saada 1990) that he dutifully records in his field notes every day. The practice of empathic resonance and introspective thinking will provide the basis for being 'caught' a second time ('reprise') (Favret-Saada 1977), with the advantage of distance in both space and time from the field<sup>20</sup>. The distance becomes part of the research temporality, meaning that the ethnographer will be able to come back to the description of his own experience and approach it as one among many others, this time detached from the emotions that gave rise to it in the first place. In Jeanne Favret-Saada's work, field notes become the object of a retrospective auto-psychoanalysis, tracking down in her own words, lapsus and actions meaningful or significant affects<sup>21</sup>. Any such exercise might also rely on the ethnographer's developing of some 'technologies of the self' (Foucault 1994), both as the researcher who feels and understands the emotions that stir him and as the writer who puts them into words. As Daston and Galison rightly remind us: 'The mastery of scientific practices is inevitably linked to self-mastery, the assiduous cultivation of a certain kind of self.' (2007: 40).

Writing is thus critical to the process of creating distance, being involved in each of its stages. During the being 'caught' phase, writing records not only the contours of the lived experience but also makes distancing possible for the first time. During the being 'caught' again phase, these field notes become the raw material for analysing the ethnographer's own experience during fieldwork. As we will see, the description of the ethnographer's own experience will complement other field notes and provide the necessary ethnographic material for a comparative analysis. But it might also reveal avenues of research that might have been overlooked in the other categories of collected data (see *infra*).

### The self in the second person

A second form of ethnographic reflexivity is to make note of the ethnographer's experience *as perceived by his hosts*. This is what I call the self in the second person since the ethnographer learns how to get to know and interpret his own experiences through the eyes of the other, in this case the very other that he is trying to understand. My own training in possession, as I discuss in detail elsewhere (Halloy 2007, 2015),

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<sup>20</sup> In suggesting that empathic resonance and introspective thinking provide the basis for being 'caught' a second time ('reprise'), some may say I am wrongly 'psychologizing' Favret-Saada's argument. Marcio Goldman is explicit when he says: 'In the words of Favret-Saada, it is about to be affected by the same forces that affect the native, and not to put yourself in his place or to develop some kind of empathy with him.' (2003: 465, my translation). Affect, he suggests, should be understood as 'affections', not as 'an emotional or cognitive understanding of the affects of others' (Ibid.). If I can only agree with Goldman that occupying a social position is first of all being affected by the same 'forces' that affect the native, we must admit that most 'forces' are social in nature. To be affected thus means, most of the time, being affected by others. Willing it or not, empathic resonance is among the psychological tools we have for understanding and dealing with social interaction.

<sup>21</sup> I thank Emmanuel de Vienne for drawing my attention to that difference between Jeanne Favret-Saada's and the kind of introspective methods I am suggesting here. Jeanne-Favret Saada's psychoanalytical influence on her ethnographic approach is made explicit and developed in her last book 'Désorcéler' (2009).

has relied mostly on the reactions of religious experts to my own experience as I gradually found out what possession meant, bodily speaking. I will only mention here one such episode. As I was watching an *amasí* ritual involving one of the daughters of *Ode* in a *terreiro* (temple) in João Pessoa,<sup>22</sup> I felt a strong shiver in my body. Next thing I knew, one of the elderly ladies sitting next to me put her hand on mine and, in a voice suffused with tenderness but also a hint of mischief, she whispered in my ear: 'It won't be long now, it won't be long...'<sup>23</sup> referring openly to future possession. Now, as a drummer in love with the *candomblé* rhythms, I had participated in *candomblé* ceremonies for almost 20 years, and it had happened to me before to feel shivers, less intense, it's true, which I had then attributed to the musical emotion. What the lady in João Pessoa did was to point it out to me for the first time that I might get 'caught' myself by my *orixá*, something that had never occurred to me until then.<sup>24</sup>

When cultural experts – in this case, religious experts – identify the ethnographer's experience, it does not mean that they identify it with their own. At the most, they acknowledge it as a legitimate – not faked – experience of possession, shared by an entire category of individuals, namely the possessed and the candidates to possession. The 'content' or '*qualia*' of the experience is by definition idiosyncratic and cannot thus be mistaken for the *process* of the experience, which in this case consisted in a perceptual inference by a priestess seated next to me, made in a given setting (an *amasí* ritual for the same *orixá* as mine) and based on the manifestation of observable psycho-physiological effects (a strong shiver and goose bumps).

This second form of ethnographic reflexivity requires a commitment to an epistemic reciprocity between the ethnographer and his hosts, reciprocity which, in turn, requires that the ethnographer part with the scientific '*quant-à-soi*' (aloofness) typical of the all-seeing-eye attitude. As opposed to being 'caught' and being 'caught' again, the self in the second person type of ethnographic reflexivity is more contingent because it does not depend directly on the ethnographer. Its 'felicity conditions' (Austin 1970) rely both on the ethnographer's need to fill a position in the social system and on the willingness to allow himself to be touched or 'caught' by the affects that come with that position. This heuristic attitude imposes on the ethnographer a certain degree of humbleness. As Alan Bensa elegantly puts it in a quote that I love:

The field researcher who participates in the life of his hosts is less the cunning man in command, who plays pretend all the while remaining, secretly but staunchly, his scientifically aloof self, and more a rather inexperienced pawn in a game whose ramifications engulf and often exceed him (Bensa 1996: 44, our translation).

The stake for the ethnographer is not so much 'pretend play' or 'make-believe' ('*faire comme si*') (Berliner 2013) as it is to fully accept the affective implications of the place assigned to him. In other words, it is more about 'placing himself in the same dispositions' (Dupuis 2015) than claiming a 'temporary dis-identity' (Berliner 2013). Only second-person reflexivity makes it possible to acknowledge ethnographically the sharing of dispositions – and not of the sameness of experience as I have already

<sup>22</sup> *Amasí* is a ritual meant to purify the initiate's body and head by washing them with a decoction of wild plants (*folhas*), each deity having his or her own plants, in this case *Ode*, the *orixá* of hunting, who is also my main *orixá*.

<sup>23</sup> '*Não vai demorar, não vai demorar...*'

<sup>24</sup> This premonition was to be confirmed during my own initiation, which took place several months after the episode described here.



stressed – by the ethnographer and his hosts. The dispositions to be acknowledged concern the capacity to *share* an experience when and how it is expected. From this perspective, the production of anthropological knowledge arises rather from a pragmatics of action than a hermeneutics of otherness. Rather than rely on a ‘We and They’ metaphysics, so popular in the more philosophical circles of the discipline, I find it more fruitful to put back the *ethnographic encounter* at the heart of the anthropological endeavour by studying *in situ* the conditions of a mutual (mis)understanding.

### ‘Epistemic triangulation’ or the cross-checking of ethnographic data

The third kind of reflexivity, certainly more familiar to field anthropologists, is to cross-check the ethnographic data gathered in order to determine what constitutes shared traits and what constitutes the unique individual and cultural traits of the experience – or better of ‘the experiences’. The ethnographic data can come from at least three different sources: full participation, observation, and interviews with the people<sup>25</sup>. These sources can be seen as separate moments of the ethnographic endeavour or they can feed into each other. An interview can thus involve a significant amount of observation of, let’s say, the interviewee’s para- and non-verbal language. All observation is, perforce, self-observation (Clegg 2013) and, as Malinowski astutely noticed when he coined the term ‘participant observation’, it is also already a form of participation. Each of these sources of ethnographic data has its advantages and limitations. In the next section, I will come back to each of them and discuss them in the light of full participation and the three forms of ethnographic reflexivity I presented.

### *Full participation: an added value for ethnography?*

According to Jacques Galinier, the ethnographer in the field potentially has access to two different sources of discursive data. First, the one he calls ‘external exegesis’ consists in ‘all the elicited utterances, logically structured by the informants with the help of the observer’ (1990: 203, our translation). In other words, all the data obtained via interviews (structured, semi-structured, informal, elicitation) with the people. The main benefit of this approach is that it gives access to an ‘*expert*’ discourse which can be rich and complex (mythological stories, interpretations of ritual action, cosmogonic theories, symbolism, etc.). If the interviews are conducted systematically with members from all the social categories of a population (women, children, religious experts, novices, etc.),<sup>26</sup> external exegesis gives us information on the *distribution* of knowledge within the population. However, external exegesis has two possible drawbacks. If used in short-term projects, the risk is that it produces knowledge that reflects the ethnographer’s concerns rather than those of the people he studies. One way to avoid this ethnocentric bias is to start conducting interviews late in the immersive process, when the ethnographer will have had a chance to reorganise his research based on the points of interest and the knowledge gathered from the interaction with his interlocutors. Concerning my own PhD thesis, it didn’t take long for me to realise that family history played an important part in understanding the relation

<sup>25</sup> Plus photographs, videos, drawings, books, maps, etc.

<sup>26</sup> Which is obviously only possible for small populations.

between *Xangô* members and their *orixás*, which led me to include this diachronic level in the interviews I conducted during the second part of my stay.

A further contingency of external exegesis is that it can be instrumentalised by the interviewees. As already noted, the ethnographer must have his own position in a social system marked by power struggles, whether open or concealed, individual ambitions and opportunities to be seized. And all of these could generate 'a highly codified staging of identities' (Wacquant 2002: 23), leading to a stereotyped and/or idealised discourse on the reality described. Therefore, external exegesis should be recognised for what it is, namely knowledge or talk *about* a cultural content, which, more often than not, does not touch on the processual dimension of a culture 'in the making' (Barth 1992). This limitation can however be overcome by relying more systematically on internal exegesis.

'Internal exegesis' refers to 'the heterogeneous assemblage of instances of speaking, screaming, singing, playing on words, crying that are not elicited from the outside, not a response to a request for a definition, but nonetheless constitute just as many instructions indicating the proper functioning of the ritual' (Galinier 1990: 203, our translation). Galinier's definition of this discursive category does indeed concern rituals but it can be extended to the culture in general. There are many advantages to this approach. First, internal exegesis tells the ethnographer what *kind* of information is being circulated, namely what constitutes a point of interest and is worth communicating by the members of a given culture. Second, internal exegesis reveals *how* the information is spontaneously communicated, namely the degree of diversity in terms of modes of expression (speech, body postures, singing, proxemics data, etc.), registers (ironic, facetious, formal, etc.) or of emotional intensity and modalities (sadness, irritation, joy, jubilation, etc.). Finally, in response to the second drawback of external exegesis, internal exegesis provides data on the *social strategies* for the circulation of information (withholding, dissimulating, lying, etc.), while highlighting the possible contradictions or nuances in the content or form of the exegetic discourse based on the context of utterance. Its main limitation is its contingent and non-systematic character, i.e. it can prove difficult to claim to have exhausted a given topic solely based on internal exegesis.

The main advantage of internal exegesis is that it deals with situated knowledge likely to provide a whole range of information pertaining not only to the content but also to the *forms* and *contexts* of knowledge transmission, which is a prerequisite for the understanding of rationales and stakes, i.e. the basis of all cultural learning.

While essential to ethnographic observation, language practices can be supplemented by other types of data depending on the research goal: forms and modalities of non-verbal interaction, gestures and body postures, emotional expression, spatial arrangement, handling of artefacts and substances, etc. The ethnographer's possibilities for action, and consequently his leeway to complete his observation successfully, will depend directly on the social position assigned to him. So, under certain circumstances, Arnaud the ethnologist was allowed to take notes but not to film,<sup>27</sup> to record what was said but not to take photographs, etc. It also happened that

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<sup>27</sup>The situation was further complicated by the presence of my brother, who is a filmmaker, and his camera. In order to film the process of my initiation, the oracle had to be consulted

Arnaud, the son of *Ode*, was allowed to take notes on condition that he should keep them to himself: 'You're family! There's no reason why you shouldn't be taking notes... But you keep them to yourself, you don't put them in your book.'<sup>28</sup> This illustrates the relational game in which the ethnographer is inevitably caught, all the more so if he becomes integrated in groups of individuals for whom controlling the circulation of knowledge is a major social and identity issue.

And this is where I try to answer the question in the title of the section: Can we speak of an ethnographic added value in the case of full participation? The question is worth asking given the affective cost and its relational consequences to the ethnographer at the time of being 'caught', as well as the epistemological discomfort of being 'caught' a second time when he comes back to his ethnographic data. I believe that full participation does present two advantages or noteworthy functions.

On the one hand, full participation guides the gaze of the ethnographer: it teaches him where and how to look. 'Education of attention', as Tim Ingold coined it (2001), is critically important in a religious culture such as the *Xangô* where knowledge is (implicitly) 'taken' rather than (explicitly) 'given' (Halloy 2010), a learning process that Marcio Goldman nicely calls '*catar folhas*', meaning to pick up information here and there, patiently, 'with the hope that, at some point, a synthesis will be possible'<sup>29</sup> (2003: 455). This is the *heuristic function* of full participation. In my research on religious learning in the *Xangô de Recife* cult, my journey as initiated and possessed in training guided my attention towards the sensorial dimension of religious learning, and in particular to the constitutive role of liturgical activity in the development of a possession-specific emotional expertise (Halloy 2012, 2015).

On the other hand, full participation also fulfils an *epistemic function* by creating the conditions for the ethnographer's developing of dispositions and abilities to do things, to experience or to *be* in the world differently. In short, this is a first step in the direction of exercising judgment and having a cultural expertise in synch with that of the people studied by the ethnographer.

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for each stage of the initiation. The religious experts were astounded when *Ifá*, the *orixá* who speaks through the oracle, authorised the filming of the whole initiation. Unfortunately, most of the film data burnt down in a fire a few months later (*orixás* must have changed their mind...).

<sup>28</sup>Comment by Júnior, my initiator, during an *obrigação de bale*, a sacrifice for the dead, a ceremony where men and women are spatially separated. There could be two possible reasons for this constraint on the ethnographer in that case. First, the need of the high-ranking religious experts (mainly men) to maintain full control of a type of liturgical knowledge and know-how in a socio-religious system governed mainly by women (Velho 1975, Boyer 1993). The second reason could be the liturgical system itself, namely the need to prevent 'unprepared' individuals (such as women but also children and non-initiated individuals) from coming into contact with so-called 'dangerous' knowledge, which could do them harm. On the relation between 'secret' and 'danger' see Fredrik Barth's classical study (1975).

<sup>29</sup> According to Rita Laura Segato, non-verbal and emotional factors of communication with the *orixás* constitute the '*substância*' of the *Xangô* cult (1989: 7). Notwithstanding this observation by the Argentinian anthropologist in the late 1980s, very few authors since then have paid a close attention to sensory, affective and non-verbal dimensions of religious experience in Afro-Brazilian religions (for some exceptions, see for example Wafer 1991, Segato 1995, Seligman 2014, Halloy 2015).

The aim of the ethnographer who uses full participation as a methodology is not 'to go native' or to 'play pretend' to have gone native, but rather to cultivate a form of openness to the affective intensities of the other culture – an *empathic ability* – as well as a form of self-observation and paying attention to the effect they have on him – an *introspective ability*. As Joshua Clegg fittingly emphasises:

The cultivation of reflexivity around our frames of reference is not simply a matter of paying attention to culture or context; *it requires training*, something that the earliest traditions of self-observation recognised as fundamental to meaningful self-reports. (2013: 281, my emphasis)

While, as I showed earlier, full participation demands the establishing of an ethnographic reflexivity of experience, it also relies on a series of 'technologies of the self' (Foucault 1994) or 'technologies of body awareness' (Grison 2012) that the ethnographer is encouraged to learn so that he can become what Stephen Gould calls 'a more sensitive introspective instrument' (2013:125).

The epistemic function of full participation is certainly more debatable, but also the one to offer the richest epistemological perspectives, particularly as it questions the conditions of scientific knowledge production. Even if it would be a mistake to reduce the background of our experimental colleagues to the scientific culture to which they belong, we must admit that the ethnographer's position is alien and sometimes disruptive insofar as the very situation of data production is a source of constant questioning, if not challenging, of the soundness of his approach as legitimate knowledge about the world. In sum, it is precisely because the ethnographer is in direct contact with cultural diversity and the plurality of frames of reference that reflexivity must be integral part of his method.

## Final remarks

As Alessandra Fasulo rightly reminds us, the ethnographic method 'has always put the self at its centre as an instrument of knowing' (2013: 260). 'Self-ethnography' as 'autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest' (Reed-Danahai 1997: 2, cited in Fasulo (2013: 270)) is not something new in anthropology. Quite on the contrary, it is one of its trademarks. But the practice has nonetheless changed in the century that followed its first definition by Bronislaw Malinowski. In the tradition of the *Diary* of the founding-father of ethnography, of Michel Leiris' *L'Afrique fantôme* or Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques*, to quote just the most well-known examples, self-observation was generally limited to the ethnographer's diary because it revealed feelings and moods or intentions far from brilliant or even incompatible with the '*bonne distance*' required to produce 'objective' ethnographic knowledge. Self-ethnography looks very different today. It is not that ethnographers no longer suffer the unavoidable torments of ethnographic work, but self-ethnography has shifted from the first-person travel story to the introspective analysis of the ethnographer's lived experience as proven by a host of publications in the American postmodern tradition. However, the most spectacular transformation concerns less its phenomenological change of focus and more its methodological outcomes: first-person ethnography is an opportunity for the ethnographer to apply to his own experience the same descriptive and analytical

rigor that he applies to another's experience. This and the resulting reflexive attitude is what makes full participation worth experiencing.

Writing, or rather the tentative translation or rendering of an experience in writing, is an essential stage of the self-ethnographic process, well worth a separate discussion. I will limit myself here to giving just one piece of advice to the beginner ethnographers who might read these pages: do not censor yourselves when putting your experience into words! Rigor is not synonymous with cold indifference and even less with parsimony. Translating an experience often *requires* a blurring of genres (autobiographic narrative, psychological inquiry, poetry, essay, etc.) or at least an openness to words, expressions, images and metaphors as they pour fourth at the time of writing. What the ethnographer will do with them in the being 'caught' again phase is, as already shown, part and parcel of ethnographic reflexivity. The initial material, i.e. the first-person ethnography, is not analytical as such but descriptive. It has to be produced in this state of mind and only then it will add to the other sources of ethnographic data. But self-observation is not to be taken for granted. It requires a special epistemological attitude but also, as already shown, an ability for empathy and introspection that, in turn, requires cultivation and training.

As I argued earlier, the 'stealth mode' or '*bonne distance*' methodological strategies tend to distance the ethnographer from his own experience. Several choices are presented to the ethnographer willing not to get rid but instead to develop these abilities. I have mentioned earlier body awareness techniques (Grison 2012) – such as meditation, tai-chi, yoga, etc. - but doing sports and making art can also help to do the job. I would like to add to this list 'self-elicitation', a self-observation technique popular in various fields today, such as psychotherapy and 'perceptive pedagogy' (Berger et al. 2013, Berger 2014, Humpich 2015). As for elicitation interview techniques, the main goal of the technique is to access *pre-reflexive* stages of the lived experience through self-guided introspection. In other words, these techniques aim to shift – retrospectively – the focus to the *how* of the lived experience and away from its *what* (Vermersch 1994/2011, Petitmengin 2014, Petitmengin et al. 2013). Wouldn't it be possible to include these techniques in the ethnographer's methodological toolbox? Wouldn't it be beneficial to teach them in anthropology programs?

Another overlooked aspect of fieldwork is ethnographic 'intuition'. Intuition, to put it simply, might be described as a recognition process anchored in past experiences. Herbert Simon's defines it in these terms:

The situation has provided a cue; this cue has given the expert access to information stored in memory, and the information provides the answer. Intuition is nothing more and nothing less than recognition' (Simon 1992: 155).

It strikes me indeed that ethnographic intuition has received so little methodological attention when everybody knows that upon arriving in the midst of an often culturally foreign people, whose language and basic social rules he does not know, the ethnographer has no choice but to trust his intuition to make sense of the life being woven around him. He will undoubtedly face a series of misunderstandings, resulting in fluctuating meanings or emotional uncertainty, both of them likely to prompt empathy and introspection. Paraphrasing neuropsychologist Antonio Damasio (1999), this could be described as an instance of a '*social* feeling of what happens'. I believe that by thoroughly and systematically documenting the encounters that marked the

anthropologist's ethnographic journey, with its misunderstandings, talking at cross-purposes, blunders and faux pas, would provide us with rich information on what shaped the 'gaze' he uses to look at the people, but also on the development of a mostly intuitive ability to discern what occurs on each of the social, interpersonal and individual levels. As Datson and Galison remind us, 'beside the exemplary personas of the sage and the indefatigable worker, the *intuitive expert* depends on 'unconscious judgment to organise experience into patterns in the very act of perception'. (2012: 44) This *sensitive discernment* and understanding are directly involved in the ethnographer's acquiring a given 'cultural expertise' (Halloy 2015), based on dispositional inflexions and abilities specific to the culture he studies.

In this article I argue in favour of an epistemological shift from a hermeneutics of otherness perspective to a pragmatics of ethnographic encounters as the basis of anthropological knowledge and its underlying 'objectivity'. This attitude – as I defined it – cannot do without a discussion of the researcher's *ethos* – what are his expectations both professional and personal? What are his goals and the means used to meet them? Understanding human behaviour in both the social and cognitive sciences needs to rely on both third-person methods – the description of behavioural, neural, etc. *manifestations* – and first-person methods – the accompanying *subjective lived experiences*. According to this perspective, 'objectivity' cannot be the outcome of either the 'stealth mode' or of the (fake) distance created between the ethnographer and his own emotions and/or the people and practices in his field research. Moreover, they are the very source of the 'objectivity' delusion and by that they harm the very epistemological foundations of anthropology. The alternative I suggest, following the advice of Unni Wikan, is to cultivate 'a higher degree of resonance' (1992: 475) with the culture studied through full participation<sup>30</sup>. The legitimacy and interest of first-person knowledge generated by this higher degree of resonance would draw on a three-fold ethnographic reflexivity likely to shed new light on what, after all, is the object of any anthropological inquiry, namely to research and convey to a large audience what makes the sharing of experiences possible.

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<sup>30</sup> The French word 'disponibilité', as coined by surrealist André Breton (1976), might be a good substitute to the English word 'resonance'. Applied to ethnography, it describes a mental attitude characterised by a willingness of being available to others and the sensory and affective solicitations of the environment, but also by an openness of the ethnographer to 'go beyond his or her presumptions'. (Bowie 2013: 710-711).

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

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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 fieldwork<sup>1</sup> 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 Yemanjá<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> 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).<sup>4</sup> As a thirty-three year old widow mother-of-four and former Catholic, Tia Neiva began to

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<sup>3</sup> '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*).

<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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,<sup>6</sup> 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

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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

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<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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'.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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

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

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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).<sup>11</sup> 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 Capella<sup>12</sup> 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).

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

<sup>12</sup> 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),<sup>13</sup> 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 movement<sup>14</sup>—or even to 'popular New Age'<sup>15</sup>—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

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<sup>13</sup> 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).

<sup>14</sup> For the New Age Movement see Heelas (1996).

<sup>15</sup> 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 Daime<sup>16</sup> 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).<sup>17</sup> 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

<sup>16</sup> 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).

<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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

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<sup>18</sup> 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 key<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> Group

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

<sup>20</sup> 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 Beth<sup>21</sup> 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

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

<sup>21</sup> 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).<sup>22</sup> 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

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<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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).<sup>24</sup> 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

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<sup>23</sup> 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).

<sup>24</sup> 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’:<sup>25</sup> ‘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

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<sup>25</sup> 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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## **Daime Religions, Mediumship and Religious Agency: Health and the Fluency of Social Relations**

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This article presents an analysis of unconventional events experienced during fieldwork among participants in the *Centro Espírita e Obras de Caridade Príncipe Espadarte*, or the Barquinha (little boat) of Madrinha (Grandmother) Chica. Barquinha is located in the city of Rio Branco, Acre, Brazil. Barquinha participants use the sacramental psychoactive *daime*, known generically as ayahuasca. The focus of this article is to revisit and analyse - in terms of ethics, methodology and epistemology - an event in which a spiritual entity, Vó (GrandMa) Nadir, a *Preta Velha* (Old black woman), who is dedicated to help and guide young participants, intervened ritually on their difficulties and problems, creating a favourable context for social interaction and problems resolution/management. It is also based on interviews on the personal experience of the mediums who facilitate these occasions, regarding conceptions of health and spiritual help, relationships between members of the centre, and interaction with spiritual entities.

Keywords: mediumship and health; daime religions; spiritual entities; ethics, epistemology and ethnography

### **Introduction: preliminary notes**

The aim of this work is to contribute to the analysis of unconventional events experienced by researchers and which are usually discarded during the preparation of our analytical work. This analysis is based on a paper presented at an event that cannot be seen as 'conventional', the Breaking Convention 2015 (BC 2015), a 'multidisciplinary conference on psychedelic consciousness', where scholars, activists and performers gather biannually in an ecumenical assembly to discuss what has been called the 'Psychedelic Renaissance'.

My general intention is to reflect on the events experienced during my fieldwork in Brazil in which I explored the use of 'ayahuasca'<sup>1</sup> and 'mental health'<sup>2</sup>. The text is also organised in a less conventional way, keeping in mind on the one hand what was

<sup>1</sup> Ayahuasca is a Quechua word that means 'vine of the souls' and specifically identifies the plant *Banisteriopsis caapi*. The term 'ayahuasca' has been used to identify generic ritual preparations fabricated with *B. caapi* and other plants in South America.

<sup>2</sup> I put the two words between quotation marks to emphasize at this point that these expressions evoke many aspects, phenomena and implications that do not allow a conceptual definition of what they mean as generic categories. Their meaning can only be effectively drawn up in and as the empiric-social contexts where their use becomes current.

planned for the presentation of the paper at an event like the BC 2015. On that occasion, the aim was to open a discussion about the importance of a consistent approach to the relations and social life that we find particularly in Barquinha, a Daime religion. Daime religions are religious organisations which use a substance considered sacramental for their spiritual works<sup>3</sup>, which they call Daime, derived from the use of ayahuasca. This approach has the purpose to reflect on the issue of the growing *biomedicalisation* of ayahuasca, particularly regarding this field of studies, including 'alternative' circuits and networks which I think are involved in the configuration of the Breaking Convention meeting.

I start with preliminary and punctual notes which I consider important in order to structure the critical and theoretically 'clinical' perspective I am trying to develop here. By 'clinical' perspective I will refer to what has been elaborated by Márcio Goldman when he addressed the extraordinary work of Jeanne Favret-Saada (1977), which was received with 'enthusiastic misunderstanding' (Goldman 2005: 151), and that Goldman criticises for its conventional theoretical task through these words:

To do so would be to abandon once the *scientificist* paradigm in which we move, in favour of a 'clinical' method, in the medical and psychoanalytical sense. In the first option, the choices are limited: proceed inductively, generalising from the largest possible number of empirical cases, or deductively, by applying to any case of some general principles previously established (Goldman, 2005: 151).

And regarding the contribution of Favret-Saada, designs the anthropological work from the standpoint of a 'clinical' approach:

Favret-Saada, on the other hand, proceeds through observation, examination and establishment of cases whose singularity does not eliminate the fact that each can share with certain other elements and features. This implies that from the clinical eyes each case is at the same time, a single syndrome and part of common syndromes, and that each one will benefit indirectly from previous anamnesis and contribute to the future<sup>4</sup> (Goldman 2005: 151).

Therefore, I am encouraged by this idea that what the researcher examines ethnographically has a kind of 'clinical' implication. It flows by drawing up a narrative look at the experience that makes us think about its occurrence and implications for the people involved with it, including the researcher. And thus it may allow to inscribe the cases addressed in a series that will match less peculiar developments, and in being shared, allow a perspective to look at continuity and discontinuity of reasons, motivations, punctuations and generalisations, or that which constitutes what we call conventionally 'theory.'

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<sup>3</sup> 'Spiritual Work' is how Daime religions participants call events when a more intensive contact may be established with the spiritual plane. They can be organised rituals, but also personal experiences, when one may face difficulties or insights in life, regarded as coming from invisible forces.

<sup>4</sup> The author's translation.

Taking this clinical perspective as an analytical motive, I move to an ethnographic approach of the events I witnessed during my fieldwork. This movement raises issues on the embodied relationships ethnographers establish with *beings* and *becomings* during their work. I also seek to address the question raised by the proposal in this JSRE Special Issue, that elements associated with ethnography until recently were treated as anecdotal events or irrelevant to the analysis. This includes the experiences of corporeality and the unusual relationships between researchers and beings from other planes of existence, which their research partners recognise as fundamental. These forces have been treated in general by an epistemology that reifies, and even disqualifies, them as 'part' only of the 'symbolic life', or something that happens only in the mind, avoiding to recognise that this attitude is part of a Westerner informed 'possible' or 'acceptable' ontology. The theoretical perspective involved has as starting point the argument proposed by Edward Evans-Pritchard who states in his 'reminiscences' (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]) that if something like God or witchcraft makes sense to people who use it to think and act according to their consideration, then they may have a consistent ontological status. In this case, it is absolutely desirable in terms of ethnography and knowledge to regard them as existent and central to comprehend what people think and how people act.

The following notes are relevant to the reader who is particularly unfamiliar with the study of the experience of ayahuasca. Ayahuasca is the generic name by which substances made with the vine *Banisteriopsis caapi* and other plants are popularly known, and which modify states and ways of being and relating to the world. Its use emerged among indigenous and other groups in South America, but it can now be found in various regions of the planet, particularly due to the expansion of Brazilian religions. By describing the use of these substances I will introduce the subjects of mediumship and spirituality particularly addressing their epistemological implications in life and in 'scientific' approaches.

The central aim of this article is therefore to articulate the perspectives emerged from an event I recorded during fieldwork which unfolded in a relevant ethical dilemma. First, I will discuss the reflexivity and experience in the field in anthropology. Next, I will share the analytical approaches to Daime religion emerging in Brazil, and to mediumship in Barquinha. Finally, I try to address the implications and consequences of the 'embodied' experiences witnessed during the fieldwork, as challenging to and transforming of what I call 'epistemological conditionings.' These transformations somehow evoke and reveal not only the density of these epistemological conditionings in narrowing or expanding the 'native', or subject's perspective in the quest to solve their life problems, but they also influence and even weigh heavily on 'scientific' production in general, and anthropological in particular. In this sense, the ethical dilemma presented in the article discusses the conduct that researchers should assume when facing references and even embodied experiences with beings that are not evidently visible or recognisable, as in the case of spiritual entities perceived by participants in Daime religions.

### **Note 1: Reflexivity and experience**

In the 1990s, Brazilian anthropologists consolidated their concern to contribute to the debate on reflexivity in the research inspired by the notion of ethnography. This process, was discussed in detail at the symposium on the 'critical vocation' of

anthropology as a motivation for self-reflexivity organized by the University of Brasilia, which to this date constitutes one of the most successful attempts to explain the phenomenon. In this debate, the contributions in particular by Rita Laura Segato (1992) and José Jorge Carvalho (1993) were extremely important. With different approaches but in dialogue, Carvalho and Segato mainly discussed the attitude and conduct of anthropologists based on the character and content of the experiences of other participants of their research. Both of them recommended not to reify these experiences reducing them into simplistic rationalising categories. The reflection about the attitude of the researcher facing these experiences is still present in Brazilian anthropology, and the debate unfolded in empirical, ethical, methodological and epistemological points of view.

In my study I consider Carvalho's approach in that the formation of an anthropologist constitutes an initiatory event (Carvalho 1993). Carvalho refers to the correspondence that shows what happened with Bronislaw Malinowski, considered the precursor of modern ethnography compared to what happened to Madame Elena Petrovna Blavatsky, who systematised Theosophy. He suggests that in both cases the event of travel to the 'other's' worlds was built up with the purpose to know and to transform conventional forms of knowing, with the difference that in this process, Malinowski turned his experiences to a rationalist discourse, and M. Blavatsky to an initiatory method to develop spirituality.

Segato (1992) criticised the way that anthropologists 'relativise' the experiences of their 'others,' calling it a 'paradox'. From an epistemological movement of relativism 'from inside to outside,' which had presupposed new views on the human from the perspective of 'others', and thereby expand epistemological horizons, as well as question ethnocentrism, what followed was a 'relativism to inside'. In this sense, the anthropologists have relativised in fact the 'absolute' of the other's experience, converting it in rationalising and reifying categories, thus promoting in fact a sophisticated ethnocentrism, and palmed the perspective of the search for an 'internal logic' between the cosmology and the social life.

The remaining question from this debate is about what may be the ethic-epistemological role of anthropology: to amplify or to narrow the horizons of the approaching the others.

## **Note 2: Daime religions, mediumship and epistemology**

I would like to remark that the articulation between so called ritual-religious use of Daime and mediumship is an important feature of the religious groups I am calling *Daime Religions*. I mention here 'so called ritual-religious' because the use of Daime by itself certainly involves many other relevant aspects. It involves recreation, creativity, humour and pleasure even in these religious contexts. This may surprise those who think in this market like appeal that the use of ayahuasca in South America is a feature of just a sacralising and phlegmatic form of the use of the preparation. So this articulation is also related to a cosmivision in which reincarnation and karma are important features, and which relates Daime Religions to Kardecism<sup>5</sup> and to

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<sup>5</sup>Kardecism is how the writings of Spiritist systematiser Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, known by the pseudonym of Allan Kardec, and its unfoldings as a social-spiritual paradigm, have been identified in Brazilian scholarly perspectives.

Theosophy, due to an association of their founders with the so called esoteric societies and spiritist groups in Brazil<sup>6</sup>.

It can be seen as redundant or even naïve, but it is a relevant point to consider that a world composed by different planes and influenced by both corporeal and incorporeal *beings* has important implications. This point of view legitimises as existent what is considered by common sense as nonexistent because it is 'invisible' or because it is 'untouchable'. A fact which has - at the same time - practical, moral and epistemological repercussions. This serious consideration that there is more to explore beyond the visible things, actually challenges a poor and mediocre rationality, which simplistically denies the possibility of existence of what the ego is not capable or does not want to perceive, in general the things that actually are not of its taste.

In the early '70s, Gregory Bateson, in the chapter *The Cybernetics of 'Self': A Theory of Alcoholism*, included in his book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Bateson 1972) reflected and researched on this topic inspired by the idea that research and particularly ethnography was the expression of a relationship. This introduced a more symmetrical science which took into account the way research participants think about their experiences and considered them relevant theories to work with. So it was a more plural idea of science. Science in this way would not be just what a few scientists make of it.

From his work with the controversial Alcoholics Anonymous, Bateson launched the idea that their type of therapy is basically a sort of *epistemological healing*, in his words 'epistemological correction' (Bateson 1972). This implies to think about religion and therapy actually as ways of dislocating and relocating our points of view about our own experience and existence, and how this may affect, as Favret-Saada (2005) pointed out, our own perspectives and analytical choices.

The example Bateson gave was the two main principles of Anonymous Alcoholics organisation, which at that time were: 1) if you cannot cope with controlling your experience with alcohol you have to admit that the substance is dominating you; 2) that you have to agree that you are submitted to stronger forces, which are not necessarily transcendent. In a very summarised approach, according to Bateson to assume an attitude correspondent to these admissions may not mean that you are giving up, but that you are changing your own way to perceive the world where you live in, experiencing a sort of *epistemological healing*.

### **Note 3: Ayahuasca, self and epistemological *deconditioning***

My position can be understood within the current approach of those anthropologists who while critically applying the political-epistemological principle elaborated by Latour (1993) are also concerned with having symmetrical relationships with participants in their research projects, taking them seriously and considering their theories about their experiences as consistent as the so called scientific theories may be.

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<sup>6</sup>One of them was the *Círculo Esotérico de Comunhão de Pensamento*, of São Paulo, Brazil, an entity to which important daimistas, such as Raimundo Irineu Serra and Daniel Pereira de Mattos, the main founders of the most known lines of spiritual work, were associated.

In the field of the so called 'psychedelic studies' there are researchers who argue the validity or the legitimacy of the way the use of ayahuasca emerged in the form of institutionalised religious groups. An ethnographic approach may allow us to observe that each system, and even each of its local settlements or groups has its own, singular and interesting configuration to approach ayahuasca. So it is pointless to consider *a priori* the religious use of ayahuasca as 'satisfying or not satisfying', and deny *a priori* the right of any kind of use of the substance.

Inspired by Bateson's argument (1972), I would like to confront what I can call *epistemological conditioning*, or an unfolding and reverberation of a systematic and well-designed strategy to put a specific form of science in hegemony. As authors like Michel Foucault (2004) and Thomas Szasz (1961) have pointed out, the process of legitimising this form of science was consolidated by the spread of the notion of abnormality, which for Foucault (2004) was constituted by the arising of the Republican State in France, for which its political agents had recurred, or by the emerging medical and cosmological point of view which had worked systematically to disqualify religious points of view and had looked for a 'naturalisation' of those until then considered 'supernatural' phenomena. From Szasz (1961), regarding his approach to Charcot's episode in the Nineteenth Century, what was relevant was to consider this legitimisation process as part of a *circularisation* of what he called 'the myth of mental illness'. In sum, our contemporary 'field of possibilities' (Velho 2003) to think about extraordinary experiences, as mediumship may be in the academic world, is still to treat them from narrowed psychological or psychiatric points of view carrying the stigma of 'pathology'.

In other words, what it is relevant here to consider is that the convenient alliance between the Republican State, the biomedicine and conventional science—in order to establish a hegemony of the notion that extraordinary experiences may be taken analytically by its 'natural' and 'individual' character—has been a way to narrow down the possibilities of approaching these extraordinary experiences and to reify them under the umbrella of 'psychological or *paranormal*<sup>7</sup> phenomena'.

Taking this controversy as an epistemological 'black box', as Latour defined similar issues (Latour 1987), my perspective here is to reflect on the epistemological importance of the contrary, or the expansion of epistemological horizons. Whereas part of the historical role of anthropologists has been promoting a kind of *epistemological deconditioning* in academy and society, in particular confronting forms of establishing relations of power and domination between at least different points of view and corresponding social groups, in searching to appropriate symbolic and funding resources.

## The research project and the events which motivated this reflection

The research project at the basis of this paper was motivated by the expression and notion of *'pronto soccorso espiritual'*, which I heard back in 1988 while preparing a

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<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy that the category of 'paranormal' recognises some consistency in the paradigm of 'normality' as a classificatory criteria of human phenomena.



fieldtrip trip to Céu do Mapiá, the headquarters of CEFLURIS-ICEFLU<sup>8</sup>, an ayahuasca religion best known as Santo Daime. On that occasion, the expression was mentioned by a daimista who I met in Brazil, and was used to define what they were doing at the local daimista centre, '*Pronto socorro espiritual*'. The term '*pronto socorro*' (emergency room) is what health care emergency services are called in Brazil, in this case it was an emergency service for spiritual problems. I also realised that there had been a significant amount of meaning transits between public and religious services, which has been efficiently explored almost exclusively by the religious ones. Furthermore, a sort of 'side effect' of mental health policies in Brazil nowadays would be the pushing of public services users towards religious organisations, seen in Brazil as much as 'healing agencies'. This is related to what has been called in Brazil *Psychiatric Reform* entailing the idea of *deinstitutionalising* mental health care, closing confinement institutions and investing in '*Psychosocial*' ambulatory services.

My initial idea with the project was to collect data on the knowledge and experience *ayahuasca religions* participants have developed in dealing with a set of different problems they demanded to solve, which one may associate with 'mental health'. However, I was not allowed to research at all religious organizations which use daimehoasca<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, I went to investigate the knowledge Daime Religions participants have developed and incorporated to ritual-religious life in order to deal with the idea of perturbation in both personal and collective terms. I chose Florianópolis, where there are organised Daime religious groups, and Rio Branco, state of Acre, in the Brazilian Amazon, because according to official data they are on the two opposite poles of the Psychiatric Reform schedule of implantation.

During my fieldwork I was introduced to an entity from the spiritual plane, Vó (or a GrandMa) Nadir, a *Preta Velha* (Old black woman).<sup>10</sup> This entity incorporates in a medium who helps and guides young participants, and intervenes ritually in their difficulties and problems. I carried out interviews regarding personal experiences of the mediums who facilitate these occasions. They talked to me about their conceptions of health and spiritual help, their relationships with younger members of the centre, and their interaction with entities of the spiritual plane. Particularly, I try to point out that it is possible to find here, as well as in other Daime religions contexts, an articulation between knowledge on the use of Daime, mediumship and health which leads to what has been called 'healing properties' of Daime.

Although I may recognise that it may be important to know the bio-chemical effects of Daime and that, as researchers funded by the pharmaceuticals industry have argued, 'ayahuasca' may be better than other substances (such as the most known anti-depressants, for psychotherapy). I would like also to discuss and emphasise the

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<sup>8</sup>Centro de Fluente Luz Universal Raimundo Irineu Serra and Igreja do Culto Eclético da Fluente Luz Universal.

<sup>9</sup> I submitted my project to the 'Scientific Committee' of the *Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal*, which refused to give me permission to do a fieldwork among UDV participants alleging that the mention of a research project on 'mental health' would constrain its associates.

<sup>10</sup> I have kept the form of narrating this passage of the field work in different works considering that all the revisions made have kept the structure and the elements of it as the most consistent description.

articulation between ayahuasca use, mediumship and health as a relevant and fundamental way to constitute the legitimacy and fluency of/in social relations, pointing to elements that have been remarked as therapeutically relevant. My aim in sum is to discuss the 'therapeutic properties' of ayahuasca in terms of its potentialities in stimulating a management of social-religious life, framed by the implications, contents and circumstances of its use among participants of these religions. This also includes their skills on providing this management. This approach seeks to expand the horizons that restrict the therapeutic efficacy to bio-pharmacological aspects. In this sense, we can consider that the role of ethnography, as well as the 'full' experience of the researcher (see particularly Halloy, but also the other contributions in this volume) is extremely important to situate its contribution. Ethical, epistemological and methodological self-reflexivity therefore may articulate in the same analytical horizon a search for objectivity and consideration of subjectivity in the production of knowledge.

### The Barquinha of Madrinha Chica

In Rio Branco, when visiting Barquinha, one of the Daime religions, I was introduced to two mediums, Hita and Luis. I interviewed Hita and Luis in 2011 and in 2012. They were members of *Centro Espírita e Obras de Caridade Príncipe Espadarte*, or the *Barquinha* (little boat) of *Madrinha* (Godmother) *Chica*. Just to give a very initial idea, the denomination Barquinha was inspired by a tradition established in the 1940s by Daniel Pereira de Mattos, introduced to me by Barquinha participants as an extraordinary man. He was a shipbuilder, cook, musician, barber, tailor, carpenter, joiner, craftsman, poet, mason, shoemaker and baker. But more relevant here, Pereira de Mattos used to be a sailorman in his past. He went from Maranhão, a state in Northeast Brazil, to Amazonia, in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There he was initiated to Daime use.

The initiative of Daniel Pereira de Mattos, known as Master Daniel or Frei (Friar) Daniel was established in 1945, in the outskirts of the city of Rio Branco, and was gathered around the *Centro Espírita e Culto de Oração 'Casa de Jesus Fonte de Luz'* (Spiritist Center and Cult of Prayer 'House of Jesus Source of Light Source.') This center was headed, after the death of Pereira de Mattos, by Antonio Geraldo da Silva, and then by Manuel Hipólito de Araújo. It is currently led by the son of Manuel Araujo, Francisco Hipólito Araujo Neto.

The 'Mission of *Frei Daniel*' had given rise to other groups over the subsequent years; one was first created in the 1960s, probably in 1967, by Dona Maria Rosa de Almeida, known as 'Dna. Maria Baiana', and her husband Juarez Xavier Martins. This centre was named *Centro Espírita 'Luz, Amor e Caridade'* (Spiritist Center 'Light, Love and Charity'), and is located in District Amapá, in the outskirts of Rio Branco (AC). A second was founded in 1977, by Antonio Geraldo da Silva, and was named Centro Espírita Daniel Pereira de Mattos (Spiritist Center Daniel Pereira de Mattos), now led by his son Antonio Geraldo da Silva Filho. The *Centro Espírita e Obras de Caridade Príncipe Espadarte* (Spiritist Center and Charities Opera Prince Espadarte), was probably the third funded after, as the daimistas say, the passage of Daniel for the spiritual plane. It was founded in 1991 and was organised under the leadership of Francisca Campos do Nascimento, known as the Madrinha Chica, who was an important medium of the Daniel's Centro in the past. There is a fourth, less well known,

founded in 1994, by Antonio Inacio da Conceição, called *Centro Espírita Santo Inácio de Loyola* (Spiritist Center of St. Ignatius Loyola), in the neighborhood Sobral, also in Rio Branco (AC). These centres were all organised from a 'navigation' cosmology. In sum, it suggests that Daime take us to navigate the spiritual plane, a Sacred Sea.

## Mediumship in Barquinha

To present here the elements that can give a brief idea of the notions on mediumship in Barquinha is indeed impossible especially if we consider treating it with ethnographic rigour the possibilities of personal and collective experiences and correspondent exegesis. The contents that circulate among participants of the spiritual works cannot be brought together in an 'orthodox' or a static theology. Personal experiences modulate in fact the most accepted ideas. Thus, one cannot ethnographically establish parameters to an outline of the Barquinha participants' notions on mediumship. The few notions to which I will hereby refer will help understanding the association between people's thoughts and ideas and the experience of mediumship. It may be simplistic to take them generically. Instead I want to present an estrangement of conventional approaches in which one can find systematic notions forming a coherent and articulated whole, which researchers would call 'the cosmology of the group.' I resist the idea that any member of this collective perceive the world and act through and from a 'lens' of the same grade and colour. To establish this lens I think seems to extrapolate the possibilities of ethnographic studies, and also a reifying endeavour. Anyway what I can inscribe as an ethnographer is the record and the recognition that some notions may make more sense than others to the participants of the Barquinha: 1) because they correspond with what leaders / elders / veterans often say in conversations or statements during the rituals; 2) because they have read in published academic or not written works, on the Internet, exchanging on the social networks; 3) or what they have heard in side conversations that occur before and after the spiritual work, in the yard of the little church, in their homes or in places where they meet to talk about their lives. Thus, the notions related to mediumship in the Daime religions, and particularly those that researchers have heard in conversations, interviews, publications and other forms of reference, suggest that the influence of Kardecism<sup>11</sup> and African-Brazilian inspired religions, particularly Umbanda, is relevant in the whole trajectory of the social-historic constitution of these religions.

What I call here Daime religions are organisations whose trajectories are constituted of plasticity and creativity (Espírito Santo 2014) in the sense that they articulate and incorporate in their socio-cosmological, idiosyncratically, the experiences of their founders and other participants. Both Daniel Pereira de Mattos and Raimundo Irineu

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<sup>11</sup> Kardecism refers to the repercussion of the work of Allan Kardec, or how the French author Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail became best known. He is considered the 'encoder' of the Spiritism (neologism created by him). Researcher of animal magnetism and mediumship, wrote five books, here with the titles and date of original publishing: *Livro dos Espíritos*, *Princípios da Doutrina Espírita* (1857); *O Livro dos Médiuns ou Guia dos Médiuns e dos Evocadores* (1861); *O Evangelho segundo o Espiritismo* (1864); *O Céu e o Inferno ou A Justiça Divina Segundo o Espiritismo* (1865); *A Gênese, os Milagres e as Predições segundo o Espiritismo* (1868), and inspired the expressive expansion of Spiritism, or Kardecism as it is also known, in Brazil.

Serra, with whom Pereira de Mattos first took the Daime, were originally from the State of Maranhão, Brazil and most likely descendants of African slaves. In Maranhão, they also had very likely participated in African inspired religious organisations. The contact with entities of the spiritual plane were important aspects of the socio-cosmologies of these organisations.

Perhaps, thinking about the repercussion of Kardecism, we should reflect on the repercussion of the evolutionism of the nineteenth century, when it emerged, but perhaps also on the theories of Edward Tylor (1871) about the 'capabilities' of primitive man which would 'have been suppressed' by civilisation. These theories developed an approach to human being considering what he called 'spiritual evolution'. Interestingly and paradoxically in relation to classical evolutionism, on the one side Kardec articulated the trajectory of the human being on the planet to a dynamic of 'learning' and transformation that goes from 'denser' ('less light') to the 'more subtle' ('more light'). On the other side, but in the same sense, it attributed the possibility of evolution not to intergenerational features acquisition, but to the recognition of spirituality, and the training to deal with its influence, and which was enshrined in Brazil by the notion of 'spiritual development'. Therefore, the expectation of the self-recognition as someone who shared the idea that the world is influenced by visible and invisible energies, the latter of which Kardec called 'spirits', meant to apply the principle that all human beings are able to be mediums. And in addition that mediumship development is a learning process. This perspective in Brazil is configured as a central reference in the life and thought of participants of spiritual centres, African-inspired religions, Kardecist and esoteric groups, and in the Daime religions, particularly in the Barquinha of Madrinha Chica. In this sense, the Umbanda religion is also fundamental.

A consistent perspective on the ideas and concepts on mediumship between the Barquinha of Dona Francisca Gabriel participants, can be encountered in the work by Cristiane Albuquerque Costa (Costa 2008), who is a researcher and member of the group, and she elaborated what she called 'auto-ethnography'<sup>12</sup>.

Costa also points out that in Barquinha there was a statement and postulation that all human beings have the 'capacity' of mediumship, although blunted, therefore there is a need for learning and development. This unfolds the notion that spirits influence the world, by 'incorporating' or 'radiating' their energy. When a person does not develop his/her mediumship, or s/he is 'not prepared' and is 'open' or 'sensitive' and so 'would have a *capacity* (...)', this unconscious, to 'capture a range of energies of the spirit, including negative energy.' (Costa 2008: 134). In this sense the spiritual plane permanently influences the lives of people and their becomings on the condition of existence. In Barquinha, the spirits influence the earth plane, may incorporate in mediums, or irradiate as spiritual plane masters, transmitting messages and instructing.

Working out from what I learned from participants of the spiritual line of Daniel Pereira Mattos, many of these messages are received by the people and so their preparation is put to the test. This preparation is, as already mentioned, somewhat checked on a personal level by the way the person reacts to the amount of Daime that is served.

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<sup>12</sup> The category 'auto-ethnography' was then not known in Brazil.

Although the person serving Daime may evaluate spiritually the person's 'spiritual degree', the personal experience is also mediated by irradiation of the entities that are present in the events with their spiritual phalanges and as are calls for the execution of psalms and hymns by the session leader.

In sum, the *incorporation* of spiritual entities in Barquinha cannot be characterised by the notion of 'spiritual possession'. Spiritual possession involves an ethnocentric and reifying experience, to classify a 'type' of mediumship. In the Barquinha when a person is considered to be 'subjected' by a spirit, what is referred is the deleterious influence of this spirit which/who has not passed the process of spiritual development. Therefore, it may be a spirit that does not know that it is no longer on the material plane, or the spirit that is 'commissioned' by enemies. These enemies can also be 'collectors' of personal debts, or misunderstandings which involve moral consequences.

### **Vó Nadir and the spiritual work**

Hita and Luis, the mediums I mentioned, were civil servants. Hita was at that time working as emergency staff at a General Hospital in Rio Branco, and Luis, in a governmental agency for land control and economic development. I interviewed Hita and Luis, and in one of our meetings they invited me to participate in a *special spiritual work*. In this spiritual work an entity called *Vó Nadir*, a *Preta Velha*, came from the spiritual plane to help young participants of the community of Barquinha. Very briefly, Barquinha rituals are held weekly, in general on Saturdays (Costa 2008), with a special ritual feature called *Obras de Caridade* (Charity Works), when spiritual entities incorporate in developed mediums to attend people in need. They do that in a separate space, but according to Cristiane Costa (2008) there is a continuum between all the ritual spaces. People have to leave the space of the main ceremonial activities to consult the entities.

They also told me about a situation which was relevant to understanding the context in which they decided to set up that special spiritual work. Hita told me he was perceiving his daughter was not having good experiences using her mobile phone. So, he decided so to apprehend the mobile. But one day, *Vó Nadir* was incorporated in the *Obras de Caridade*, and a young member of the community, his daughter, came to consult the entity about a problem she was confronting, actually complaining about her father (Hita), the medium itself, who had confiscated her mobile phone because he thought she was experiencing situations that he did not approve. *Vó Nadir*, according to Hita, pledged to resolve the situation, but also demanded that the girl would commit not to be engaged in the problems that her father thought she was getting involved. Hita's daughter agreed, and they have not had any problems after that.

That situation triggered the idea of giving the same opportunity of *Vó Nadir's* help to other young participants, mainly those who would be confronting conflictive situations. So the idea was to open a different ritual space to help and to make the Barquinha participants' life more fluent. Thus the interesting unfolding of this experience made Hita and Luis consolidate their idea about to organise the work with *Vó Nadir*.

It is relevant to remark that this shows what I would call a *clinical* approach to perhaps conflictive situations between, here at least, young people and adults in a given relational community. In this case, the use of a mobile phone triggers a quarrel involving situations of embarrassment and even difficulties in the relationship. These are the situations that we can say cause disruption and conflict and which often turn out into serious trouble.

In this event I remark that from my point of view, Vó Nadir incorporates *with* Hita. This means that following the Barquinha participants theo(lo)r(g)y, I think it is inconsistent with commonly held belief that says there is a control of the medium body by the entity. In fact, Hita relationship with Vó Nadir is in certain way negotiated and he may accept her presence in his body. So it is a sort of acquaintanceship, and not 'possession'.

### Vó Nadir in Earth

The presence of Vó Nadir in the Earth is generally facilitated by a ritualised event. The one I approach here occurred at Mutum<sup>13</sup>, an area in the rural outskirts of the city of Rio Branco. It was early evening. About twenty young people were there besides me, Hita and Luis. I wondered how they arranged to have twenty young people (from probably 15 years old to early 20s) there, on a Friday evening in a remote and not very comfortable place to take Daime, which has a bitter and most of the time unpleasant taste, and which can make you vomit or other undesirable effects. I was also wondering why these young people went there to confront their own concerns about things they do or did, just to be attended by an entity who may help to solve problems, but who can also tell them off.

We arranged the place, people put on white clothes, and afterwards, we waited. We drank Daime and sat down though a few of the participants lay down in the hammocks they brought. I positioned myself where I thought it would be better to follow the proceedings, taking as criteria the regularity of Daime works which is configured by a sort of *concentricity*<sup>14</sup>. Hita started to concentrate himself in a remote place and we started to pray. Then, following this moment, a voice that reminded me of a grandmother was heard, sounding strange yet tuneful. Vó Nadir had just incorporated.

In this moment, and having no plans to do it, as I was just there to have an idea of the Vó Nadir spiritual work, an imperative message which I think the origin may be attributed to the spiritual plane, stimulated me to film the events. I remembered that I had a photographic camera which was also able to film. It was not exactly prepared and I then experienced an ethical dilemma. I always may ask permission for image taking and use well in advance, making it very clear the terms of use and disclosure.

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<sup>13</sup> I keep here the original version of the narrative of this paper, because at that time I was still awaiting a response from Brazil to my request for the entity's permission. However, I realised I would have to go personally to request the permission of Vó Nadir. In 2015, I returned to Rio Branco. The events and implications of this period of fieldwork are explored in a paper presented at Breaking Convention 2015, *The permission of Vó Nadir: Daime religions and the consistency of relationships* (to be published).

<sup>14</sup> The concentricity of ritual space is a common feature among the Daime religions. A central table is always an important liturgical reference.

Also, I had not checked the camera's memory space and battery life. But the 'message' was too strong to be ignored. And thinking that it was a justified exception I called one of the organisers and asked if I could film. He signalled immediately and simply with a gestural 'yes'. Starting to hear an ancient voice chanting, I switched on the camera. Vó Nadir arrived singing her *ponto*, or a chant which identifies herself and tells a little bit about who she is.

*Eu venho de Aruanda nestas matas trabalhar  
Eu venho de Aruanda nestas matas trabalhar  
Só se vê a quebradeira, é fogo no canaviá  
Só se vê a quebradeira, é fogo no canaviá  
Chegou a Preta Guerreira eu chego prá trabalhar  
Eu sou a Preta Guerreira que cheguei prá trabalhar*

*Preta Velha Vó Nadir, quando eu boto é prá lascá  
Só se vê a quebradeira, é fogo no canaviá  
Só se vê a quebradeira, é fogo no canaviá  
Eu chamo a todos os pretos para vir me ajudar  
Eu chamo a todas pretas para vir me ajudar*

*Eu chamo todos caboclos para vir me ajudar  
Eu chamo todos os encantos para vir me ajudar  
Eu chamo todas crianças para vir me ajudar  
Chamo as benditas almas para vir me ajudar*

*Meu pai Oxóssi Guerreiro vós venha me ajudar  
Meu pai Oxóssi Guerreiro vós venha me ajudar  
Só se vê a quebradeira, é fogo no canaviá  
Só se vê a quebradeira, é fogo no canaviá<sup>15</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> I come from Aruanda to work in these forests  
I come from Aruanda to work in these forests  
Only see the crash, the fire is at the canaviá  
Only see the crash, the fire is at the canaviá  
Came the Black Woman Warrior I am here to work  
I am the Black Woman Warrior I am here to work

Black Granny Nadir, when I put it is for chipping  
Only see the crash, the fire is at the canaviá  
Only see the crash, the fire is at the canaviá  
I call all blacks (black grandads) to come help me  
I call all blacks (black grandads) to come help me

I call all *caboclos* (indian spirits) to come help me  
I call all the enchants (\*\*\*) to come help me  
I call all children to come help me  
Call the blessed souls to come help me

My father Oxóssi Warrior you come help me  
My father Oxóssi Warrior you come help me  
Only see the crash, the fire is canaviá  
Only see the crash, the fire is canaviá

Now, Hita-Vó Nadir wore a skirt, and then put a stole around her neck. She continued singing and chirping choreographically, in a rhythmic dance like movement in the yard.

Vó Nadir was on the earth. I have to tell that I filmed her arrival, but cannot show the film at the Breaking Convention 2015, because even having the permission from Hita and Luis, two months before the conference, when preparing the paper presentation, I realised that to be consistent about the anthropology I practice I needed also Vó Nadir's permission to show the film. And it has not arrived yet. And I thought I had to return to Rio Branco for it as the entity cannot call me or email me. So, imagine a six foot tall man, wearing a skirt and speaking as a grandma. Then they put a stole around her neck. Now it is only Vó Nadir we can recognise as present. She continued singing and dancing. Soon, she challenged aloud yet individually some participants, mentioning things about their lives in an enigmatic way to those who did not know them, but in a direct and really affective way for those who already knew that she was referring to the recurrence of their 'faults'.

Vó Nadir particularly mentioned events in which the person was neglecting relationships with those closest, as well as their faults to 'get' that they were neglecting, particularly those which she raised in the last session. She continued challenging participants, citing things so puzzling to those who did not know them but in a direct and clear way to each participant and always with 'affection' and familiarity. The entity referred publicly to each particular individual suggesting that she knew each personally and followed what they did.

Afterwards, Vó Nadir started an individualised care. Vó Nadir attended a young man asking questions and also giving passes with her ritual stole, which are called by Daniel Pereira de Mattos line participants a 'sword'. In this case, her proceedings were generally in silence, eventually with short dialogues and controlled gestures. She passed her stole-sword around each person's body, as if pulling off something she was perceiving and which needed to be pulled off. She acts as a cleanser, disposing what may need to be disposed. She also asks sharply how things had been going since their last conversation.

My impression was that another spiritual entity, perhaps of a 'visual anthropology ethnographer' had taken place in my body. I who never had used filming in my fieldwork before, could keep filming almost in a continued movement for almost one hour.

By the end of Vó Nadir's incorporation, and immediately after the entity had 'risen' to the spiritual plane, the battery of the camera was run down.

### **Vó Nadir's Spiritual Work: about the 'don'ts' in relationships**

About the setting up of those spiritual works, I can say that Hita and Luis have shared the same theory, on why that work was relevant.



Hita said:

*Tem (...) um povo assim que tava muito, assim, com essa coisa do mundo ou metido com algum espirituquinho aí, alguma coisa, que andaram beliscando algumas coisas aí, então a gente, preocupado com isso (fazendo os paliativos, as preces, as interseções) aí caridade dos pedidos (...) justamente esse cidadão que recebe essa Preta Velha, e ela veio pra acolher os filhos, né, acolher como mãe mesmo, com todo o amor, com todo o carinho, quebrar aquela coisa do não, não pode isso, não pode aquilo. Quer dizer assim, abriu um momento, um espaço pra que eles se sintam úteis, valorizados, confortados dentro do trabalho e estarem no trabalho. Toma o Daime se querem, na hora que querem tomar, quantas vezes querem, desde que acompanhados por ela; quer tomar mais um pouquinho, vamos tomar, ela dá o tanto certo, tira o tanto, como está, tá cansado? quer dizer, ela (a Preta Velha) tá ciente de tudo o que tá passando; rede armada, ela atende e faz aquela parte do trabalho, viu que ele tá um pouco já desgastado, ela vai lá, e bota pra ele. É um trabalho bem (...) esse trabalho de desobsessão<sup>16</sup> (...); a coisa de tratar bem o psicológico, aquela da crítica (...) que muitas vezes nós cometemos determinados desatinos, tipo assim, que os nossos filhos podem ter ficado machucado com alguma coisa, traumatizado, quer dizer, ela trata tudo isso. Ela trata os traumas, os desprezos do fulano, a indiferença nossa mesmo de não saber lidar. Quer dizer, o momento de mim mesmo dentro desse trabalho, quer dizer, nós temos sete sexta-feira.*

Hita said, and here I do a rustic but approximated translation:

There are (...) people (...) too influenced, well, by the 'things' of the 'world', and who become stuck or influenced by a *espirituquinho* (pejorative - 'very little spirit') there... something that walked tweaking a few things (...), so we, became worried about it (...), and feeling that charity<sup>17</sup> was requested (...) So this *Preta Velha*, (...) she came to welcome the children, embrace as a mother, with all the love, with love, breaking that 'cannot be' thing, or 'this cannot be', 'that can also not'. I mean, well, (she) opened a moment, a space for them to feel useful, valued, comforted inside the spiritual work. They can take Daime if they want, when they want to take, how often they want, provided they are accompanied by her... (She may conduct...) want to take a little bit more? to take as much as they want. Are you tired?... I mean, she (Vó Nadir) will be always aware of everything, you're going through; You have only to install the hammock, she also assists oneself and makes that part of the work. She saw that someone is a little worn now, she goes there, and gives a little bit more Daime. It's a job (...) a work for a disobsession (...), the right thing to treating the psychological, that criticism (...) that we often commit some blunders, like with our children, who may have been hurt by something we did, traumatized, I mean, it is all about it. She treats trauma, the contempts, our indifference in not even know how to deal. And also, I mean, the moment of myself into this work we have for seven Fridays.

And Luis added:

*...E essa confiança também é o que permite a esse adolescentes, a esse jovens, a abertura pra que eles possam conhecer, cada vez melhor, as entidades da casa. Isso é um ponto muito bacana (...) São da casa. Ainda são jovens.*

<sup>16</sup> The category 'desobsessão' (disobsession) is widely used by spiritist groups in Brazil. It evokes a procedure to undo a situation of 'obsessão' (obsession), in which a spirit force influences negatively the flow of life of a person.

<sup>17</sup> The category charity here may refer to particular approach to Christian charity. In Daime religions it is a cosmic obligation to assist people in need of spiritual help.

And that confidence is also what allows these adolescents an openness, so they can know, even better, the entities of the house. This is very nice (...) They are from the house (referring to Barquinha). And are still young...

Hita also said

*depois desse trabalho com essa entidade eu comecei a ver determinadas faltas nossas, falta de atenção, falta de cuidado, de amor, de carinho, de zelo com as nossas famílias(...). Talvez esse questionamento abriu margem pra ação desse espírito benfeitor que se apresentou de uma maneira ó: 'Vai conhecer essa preta velha'. (...) esses dois encontros de duas pedras preciosas, (...).*

...after this work with this entity, I started seeing our faults, our lack of attention, our lack of care, of love, of tenderness, of care with our families (...). Perhaps this questioning opened margin for action this benefactor spirit, who presented herself in a way: 'Look, you will meet this old black woman.' (...) These are meetings of two precious stones (...).

He refers to having realised that they were not doing well, and the idea of having Vó Nadir helping in a more settled and frequent way. It is also important to note here that the contents of Luiz and Hita's accounts communicate an interesting process of interaction which may be that between the contingency of the participation of a medium in the social-political-spiritual daily life of a religious organisation, and that has to be with the incorporation of *pretos velhos e pretas velhas* (black old (wo)men)<sup>18</sup>, and an ability to deal let's say social-ritually with personal social problems.

That is the 'social place' where the relationships with the spiritual entities is central, dynamic and ultimately establishes conditions for the quality and the dynamic fluency of social-political-spiritual life. And within expectations which would not be necessarily established by the religious hierarchy, or by centralised leadership, but by a circumstantial and located intervention. Moreover, it is interesting to note that at no point in their accounts remains that the initiative of setting up these 'works' was at stake determined or assigned by the initiative of spiritual forces, explanation which could be expected from an institutionalising initiative. The process of formation of this ritual space is presented as a combined set of fittings and articulations, that eventually consolidate it, and that can be assigned either to an intervention, even if somewhat diffuse and 'misexpressed' by the entity, as to the application of the creativity of the mediums, which indeed were those who put the work with Vó Nadir into operation.

In fact, I think this articulation between ritual and social life as a way to deal with daily problems does not constitute a huge novelty for researchers who work with spiritual healing and mediumship. However, what it is very interesting is, first of all, to perceive how a ritual ceremony is set up by the combination of demanding and related circumstances, and also by a consistent articulation between self-consciousness/self-criticism and the most intimate relationship with a spiritual entity, which is to 'incorporate' her in different dimensions of life. Here I am considering that 'incorporate' an entity of the spiritual plane is not just a ritualistic event, but a full attitude toward the spiritual world, in which one assumes that the messages and guidance received from

<sup>18</sup> Which may be perhaps its most significant distinction in relation with other ayahuasca organisations, particularly those related to the tradition of Daniel Pereira de Matos. See Costa (2008).

the consultation relationship with the entity may reverberate in one's life. In other words, there is a whole continuity between ritual life and social/personal life.

## A few brief concluding notes

### 1. Science and Mediumship

It is relevant to consider first, that the use of Daime and other similar substances in Brazil, particularly the so-called religious ones, has great potential to attract people, especially those who are looking for experiences that suggest will be a 'benefit' to their health and lives. It may be also relevant in this attraction the expectation that joining a religious group would eventually lead to the expansion and fluency of social relationships, and to the access to new social networks. In general, in a cultural context in which religion is not generally rejected, and where it is actually stimulated, it is not difficult to imagine that the role ayahuasca religions in the Brazilian religious landscape will increase significantly.

Second, even among those who may consider themselves opened to different points of view about the world, there may be many who think mediumship is just a psychological problem of dissociation, or a theatrical strategy for religious conviction. This skepticism with mediumship comes probably from the 19th Century, (...) when leading physicians, for example in the US (Alvarado & Zingrone 2012), engaged to elaborating criteria to perceive the limits between normality and abnormality in human behaviour. And mediumship, or 'mediomania', as it was inconsistently called, was considered a 'pathology' to be treated, as many others peculiarities of human behaviour were, and still are, considered diseases.

One of the main arguments was that strong emotional experiences could cause a disruption on a supposed existent mental equilibrium, producing dissociation, exaltation and the emergence of different personalities (Alvarado & Zingrone 2012). So people were not entirely ill, but induced to have different, 'disruptive' or 'dissociative' behaviours in situations in which emotional exaltation was provoked. Furthermore, these rustic, but considered 'scientific' views on mediumship phenomena were unfolded to become more explanatory sophistications, as for example when spirit possession was regarded as a resource for empowerment, particularly for women in 'lower' social positions. Regarding openness, even the acceptance that not all comes from our 'brain-mental' experience, it does not take into account the emic or native point of view, and still looks to translate these phenomena into supposed scientific idioms. This reflection on science leads me to think about the relationships between medicine and science and further about the relationship between medicine, health and mediumship. Whilst the focus here is not primarily the discussion of the debate on mediumship, I should point out that there is a great gap in the research on psychoactive and psychedelic substances with a lack of an appropriate epistemology. One which at least would consider seriously the research that refuses any intrinsic harmfulness. In this sense, I think mediumship deserves the same epistemological consistence. Indeed, the negative term referring to a diagnosis

of dissociation and consequently to schizophrenia, became popular to classify the mediumistic experience. Therefore, once related to dissociation, mediumship was characterized as problematic, pathological and associated to a sort of perturbation. However, to sum up my position, here I tried to show that even if one regards mediumship as dissociation, the kind of dissociation promoted is actually a structuring one. Thus, supposing that there is a dissociation, this dissociation is actually structuring social life, as it provides a plausible and efficient framework for the fluency of social and cosmic relations at least among Barquinha participants.

## 2. The daimista notion of person

The notion of what is a person, or what is a human being, which I gathered from my encounters with daimistas, offers a peculiar perspective about people considered 'disturbed' that affects the cosmoideology of what might be called generically as Brazilian Spiritism. What I may call Brazilian Spiritism would be characterised by various religious segments which call themselves *espíritas* (spiritists), and in an analogous way to the theory Allan Kardec established on the existence, presence and influence of spiritual beings on human beings and vice versa. This is a cosmoideology that understands the existence of the human beings as intensively related to a world, or plane of existence, 'visible' with a world, or 'invisible' plane, from where other forces influence human life. In this sense, some of the people regarded as having mental disorders are considered to be in fact more susceptible to the influences of the spiritual world. This leads us to think about indigenous groups which consider people with more unusual behaviour candidates to be shamans. This approach, on the one hand, is recognised as relevant in an intense exchange system, and, on the other hand, in the same direction, it may imply that the experiments that daimistas usually do in parallel with their regular religious services, for example using different techniques in order to modify the relationships with the world, would amplify their capacity to be receptive to the relationship with the 'invisible'. To accept this perspective and to live according to it constitutes a huge epistemological change which impacts significantly their daily life.

### Final Note

I think that it is possible to evince from the work of Hita, Luis and Vó Nadir, as well as in other Daime religions contexts, first of all, an articulation between knowledge on the use of Daime, mediumship and health, which leads to what I think are the most relevant 'healing properties' of Daime. This articulation is a way to constitute legitimacy and fluency on social relations, pointing to elements which have been remarked as therapeutically relevant, and so thinking about Daime's 'therapeutic' properties not from a simplistic and industrial-pharmacological point of view - a perspective which has grown in recent years - but actually from a complex and creatively crafted management of social-religious life, framed by the implications, contents, accumulated knowledge and circumstances of ayahuasca/Daime use. What I tried to show here is that the spiritual healing in Daime Religions has been seen in a 'psy' reifying view as related to 'individual problems' solving, and too conditioned by

the Western perspective influenced by psychiatric and psycho-analytic points of view, which have been able just to approach the individual, letting social and cosmic relationships as secondary for problems solving strategies.

I want also to remark that I am not attacking abstractly science as a form to approach the use of Daime, ayahuasca or other psychoactives or even anything in the world, but trying to argue that a perspective which considers pharmacological, or laboratorial based studies on psychoactive substances as being the only valid ones is very problematic. It is not just a naïve and perhaps hypocritical way to deal with the politics of the scientific experience, and with research agendas, but also an incentive for pharmaceutical industry and commerce enterprise to take action and to dominate the existence and circulation of these substances. I hope we can find a way to approach and engage with the knowledge of Daime religious participants and other groups and people who use ayahuasca in a symmetrical, respectful and consistent epistemological way.

This approach is very relevant when exploring the potentialities of ritual-religious life regarding the help they can provide to the involved community. I had the opportunity to accompany Vó Nadir's dislocation among the participants and, as I noted earlier, she answered to the problems of a couple, the health of a young man and how all participants were doing in their lives with a few short sentences.

Vó Nadir did question the attendees about aspects of their personal lives - of those who she attended for the first time, or what happened to those already seen since their last meeting. She instructed them to do further work, as to make *oferendas* (offers) to the spiritual entities who can help them in their needs, or to take further treatment with herbs and other plants she would tell them how to prepare.

Moreover, from the point of view of mediumship, Vó Nadir religious or spiritual agency demonstrates a structuring way to build more consistent social and cosmic relationships, through her interactional intervention, whose 'effects' I could already observe afterwards, when returning to city centre of Rio Branco with the participants. They remembered carefully what she said and did, even her jokes and telling offs, consolidating their relationship towards sharing its contents. In this way, and taking the pejorative category of 'dissociation' which characterises most of the so-called scientific approaches to mediumship, I would say that if there is any dissociation it serves to improve attention and to structure social, emotional, and cosmic relationality.

From a point of view which may combine the notions of spiritual healing and therapy, the process as a whole reflects what many authors have said about the relational nature that involves the so-called spiritual healing. It fits particularly to those religious groups that have a cosmoideology which comes from a self-attributed African inspiration, and which claim that human life is in constant and intense relationship with spiritual entities.

Still, the events organised to meet Vó Nadir in Barquinha also contrast dramatically with the mental health policies which have been developed by the Brazilian State in particular, but I can imagine in many other countries. In front of the conflicts and tensions brought by patients to the system of mental health attention, intervention is almost exclusively done based on the managing/mediation of medication, in general commercially valued bio-chemical agents.

So yes, Daime/ayahuasca can be a pharmaceutical tool. But to reduce its impact just to psycho-neurologic effects in fact reifies the incredibly rich and interesting repercussion of its use by the Barquinha participants relegating it exclusively to a pharmaceutical or even to a psychotherapeutic point of view. In sum, as it has become an increasing trend, it may be regarded as an inconsistent, epistemologically speaking, problematic reification. I would like also to remember that the articulation I presented here between different aspects of a relational helping, is a way to constitute legitimacy and fluency in/of social relations, and bring us to think about ayahuasca's 'therapeutic' properties as also a result of a complex and creatively crafted management of social-religious life.

Last but not least, I conclude this contribution to a Special Issue dedicated to approach bodily experience and ethnographic knowledge by taking into consideration primarily a sense of body conditioned by the Cartesian mind-body fragmentation. In this discussion I have not mentioned experiences of tingling in the limbs, nausea, tachycardia, sensation of external entities presences that seems to come from other dimensions of the cosmos. All these perceptions can be felt when doing research in empirical situations as that found in the field research that inspired this text. However, these 'bodily' ways of knowing the lived experiences and the lives of others include here another 'bodily experience.' That is, how the formulation of ethical and methodological attitudes is effectively a body processing. These experiences inform us of our 'productivist' inconsistencies even before we have to listen to other colleagues' warnings about involvement in the fieldwork experience. In short, I am proposing the construction of an embodied epistemology which draws upon and stimulates our attention also to our existential discomforts, as fundamentally relevant to establish the consistency of our 'scientific' contribution.

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## Journal for the Study of Religious Experience



### Studying the Body in Rastafari Rituals: Spirituality, Embodiment and Ethnographic Knowledge

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Rastafari spirituality is a nonsecular science that considers how various energies and powers influence socio-ecological systems. Rastafari people follow a number of spiritual prescriptions related to the body, including smoking, meditating, growing matted hair, eating an Afrocentric vegan diet and drumming/chanting. However, a person does not have to follow all of these practices to be Rastafari, rather they are means to achieve specific spiritual objectives. While anthropology is generally a secular discipline, by participating in various rituals, the body becomes an ethnographic tool that can lead to an awareness of how spiritual and material worlds interconnect. While I have collected data through conventional ethnographic methods, the most important insights have come through my own personal, bodily engagement in many Rastafari practices. Anthropological work on the 'spiritual body' provides a theoretical framework for making sense of experiences of embodied intersubjectivity that arise out of participation in various bodily rituals.

Keywords: spiritual body; ethnography; intersubjectivity; meditation; nonsecular anthropology

#### 1. Introduction

Tucked away in a secluded corner of Cannizaro Park, Wimbledon, UK is a weathered bust of His Imperial Majesty, Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, who lived in exile in England from 1936-40. Although he and his family resided at Fairfield House in Bath, the Emperor was said to be fond of Cannizaro Park, which he visited during a short stay in Wimbledon. Apparently the Emperor made such a positive impression on Wimbledon society that an amateur sculptress was inspired to carve the bust. On 23 July 2012 the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Ras Tafari Makonnen Woldemikael (who inspired the birth of the Rastafari movement when he was crowned Emperor Haile Selassie I in 1930) there was a *groundation* celebration sponsored, planned and hosted by two nascent organisations: the Rastafari Council of Britain and the Rastafari Global Council. In addition to celebrating the birth of His Imperial Majesty and bringing together the diverse Rastafari community of London, the intention of the ceremony was to stake a spiritual claim on the grounds where the bust now rests, as a sacred space for Rastafari gatherings. I was invited to attend the celebration by the leaders of the two host organisations. I had even been involved in planning discussions for the event, including an unresolved debate about what the exact definition of a *groundation* is and how it differs from and/or encompasses other types of Rastafari ceremonies. Nevertheless, when I arrived at Cannizaro Park on that warm, sunny afternoon to help



set things up for the ceremony I felt a shyness, with which I had become familiar at the two Rastafari events that I attended at Fairfield House in the preceding months.

In those early days of my work with Rastafari, there were several reasons why I generally felt unsure of how to dress, what to say, how to act or what was expected of me (and how I might balance meeting certain expectations with my anthropological responsibilities). Rastafari gatherings in the UK bring together people from British, Jamaican, Trinidadian, Ghanaian, Ethiopian and many other backgrounds with which I (an American by birth) have varying degrees of cultural (un)familiarity and I was struggling with everything from greeting strangers appropriately to balancing multiple cultures of dining etiquette. Moreover, although 'white' individuals are generally tolerated, if not welcomed into it, Rastafari is a 'black' supremacy movement. While I have never found myself to be the only fair skinned person at a public Rastafari gathering, 'white' people stand out and may be put on the spot at any time. I also had a private, phenomenological crisis as I was faced with the realisation that I could not simultaneously sing, dance and shake a rattle (the standard musical role for women at the Rastafari ceremonies I have participated in), something I remember being able to do easily when I was younger.

MacPhee (2003) defines the spiritual body as a life force or mindful presence in the body. An emphasis on heightened sensory awareness differentiates the spiritual body from the individual body, the social body and the body politic (cf. Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). This paper is about ways of studying the embodiment of Rastafari spirituality and the bodily techniques that I have engaged in as an ethnographer, which on the occasion of the Cannizaro Park *groundation* helped me to be a spiritual body, ultimately able to overcome social anxieties and other mundane imperfections. This paper is also about the body in more private spiritual practices, particularly meditation, which make it possible to experience heightened states of consciousness, including intersubjectivity with the higher Self, and with other living selves. I argue that when spiritual practices are included in participant observation and combined with a focus on bodily experience the production of ethnographic knowledge is enhanced. I begin with a brief discussion of bodily participation in the production of ethnographic knowledge and its place in a nonsecular anthropology of religious/spiritual experience. I then present ethnographic descriptions of collective and private rituals, focusing on how they contribute to the (re)fabrication of the Rastafari body/self. Anthropological work on the (spiritual) body provides a theoretical framework for making sense of experiences of embodied intersubjectivity that challenge the distinctions between mind/body, spirit/matter, etc. and also makes for a more critically and corporeally engaged anthropology. I conclude that in Rastafari, embodying the divine is achieved through heightened states of consciousness, which are elicited by a variety of means that contribute to the production of ethnographic knowledge about spiritual power.

## 2. Embodying Ethnography

Cannell (2005) argues that anthropology was founded as a secular discipline that made an intellectual break with theology. For the most part, it is still generally a secular intellectual endeavour, in which valid knowledge is grounded in a rationality guided by reason (Kapferer 2001). This places anthropology at odds with the sincere embrace of spirituality as real (Bowie 2013; Perman 2010), as spiritual phenomena are explained away as social, political, cognitive and/or historical constructs. Positions of

secular neutrality can also prevent us from fully appreciating the inner experiences and motivations of the people we study (see Bowie 2003). Thus, anthropology often has to be anti-secular to overcome such blinding prejudices (Kapferer 2001). Moreover, secularism is not the same as atheism (i.e. denial of the existence of divinity), but rather the separation of divinity from the workings of ecology and society (Pina-Cabral 2001) and many anthropologists have their own spiritual beliefs and experiences in and out of the field. This has created a tension in anthropology between concealing religious experience as good secular scientists and revealing it as good reflective researchers (Stewart 2001). For example, in describing how she was transformed by ethnographic fieldwork with Amazonian (and other) shamans Glass-Coffin (2010: 212) writes 'when I begin to accept that outcomes of my actions and intentions toward normally unseen forces and powers have consequences in the material worlds, I have probably, at least for most of my colleagues in anthropology, "crossed over."'

Nevertheless, there appears to be a growing interest in new methodologies (e.g. cognitive empathetic engagement) for a nonsecular anthropology in which knowledge is an intersubjective creative engagement between selves (see Bowie 2013; Fountain 2013; Roberts 2016). Retsikas (2008) argues that the primary research vehicle for ethnographic understanding is the anthropologist's embodied, sensing and situated self. I began learning about Rastafari as a secular anthropologist, but using/acknowledging the body as an ethnographic tool led to experiences that opened my awareness to the interconnections between spiritual and material worlds. Holmes (2013) eloquently describes how his bodily experiences lent valuable insight into social suffering and power hierarchies in the lives of indigenous Mexican migrant workers in the United States. I have found that paying attention to the 'field notes offered by the body' (Holmes 2013: 57) is also of immense value in the study of spiritual power in the material world. However, before describing how they are valuable ethnographically, I must address a few methodological points.

My 'white,' female, American body has shaped my ethnographic knowledge of Rastafari, a (primarily) Jamaican 'black' power movement in the UK. As a body with 'white' skin, I can only ever have a partial view of the life experiences of the majority of Rastafari people. Moreover, Rastafari is extremely diverse and while some 'black' people are more than happy to share their lives with 'white' people (or even to do away with the labels black and white altogether), others find it difficult to relate to them and may even express wishes to exclude them from the movement. Working closely with two Jamaican men (first the founder of the Rastafari Global Council and later my partner/research assistant) has led to a bias toward male perspectives in the ethnographic knowledge I have produced. This has as much to do with skin colour as it does with gender dynamics. Of the relatively small number of women who have actively participated in my research activities over the years, the majority also has 'white' skin. A few of these women and several personal experiences have suggested to me that many 'black' Rastafari women (especially those raised in the UK) mistrust ostensibly single 'white' women, who are perceived to be competing for the affections of 'black' men. They may especially dislike 'white' women in 'mixed-race' relationships. In contrast, I have found that 'black' men are generally more ready to accept that I am actually an anthropologist who is interested in Rastafari and are less concerned with who my partner may or may not be. At the same time, I am a woman and for that reason alone there are certain things that men won't or can't talk to me about.

In my work with Rastafari I have participated in countless *reasonings* (ritual discussions), as well as more formal interviews. The main difference between *reasonings* and conventional semi-structured interviews is that the former are co-constructed equally among all participants, rather than led by the researcher. As such, *reasoning* can generate ethnographic data that is participant-led to complement responses to the questions posed by the researcher, giving rise to new insights. *Reasoning* is further distinguished from focus group discussions by the rituals that accompany it. For example, while *reasoning*, many people hold their hands in a specific configuration that is meant to focus the mind. Smoking *herbs* (cannabis) is also a frequent accompaniment to *reasoning* (which often deals with controversial topics), because it helps many people to stay calm and not take things personally. Many of the *reasonings* I have participated in have taken place during ceremonies and other public gatherings, but some have been more intimate in nature. While *reasonings* have been a significant part of my ethnographic work more broadly, this paper is more focused on other rituals (and other forms of participant observation) that involve bodily engagement. In particular, I return to the Cannizaro Park *groundation* and expand on the body's role in various aspects of such collective ceremonies. I then take a more introspective turn and explore meditation and ecstatic trance, as well as their potential as ethnographic methods. Both ethnographic reflections can be made sense of within the theoretical construct of the spiritual body.

### 3. Collective Rituals and the Rastafari Spiritual Body

In Rastafari, there are collective rituals that combine drumming, chanting (i.e. singing) and dancing, which can put participants in altered states of consciousness, with or without smoking *herbs*. A month or so prior to the Cannizaro Park *groundation*, when I met with the leaders of the two host organisations we discussed whether they should have a *groundation* or a *binghi*, or indeed whether a *binghi* was a part of a *groundation* (or vice versa). Ceremonies of the Nyahbinghi Order of Rastafari, usually referred to as *binghis*, increase the health and spiritual power of the participants so that African repatriation (and other aims of the movement) may be realised. In London *binghis* are organised by the Nyahbinghi Council to celebrate important holy days. They take place in a large room with an altar in the middle. On the altar (a table covered with white cloths, flowers and the Ethiopian flag) are pictures of Haile Selassie I and copies of various Rastafari holy books. Drums are arranged in a semi-circle around the altar in the far end of the room and chairs are set up along the wall near the entrance. While the men drum, women of the Nyahbinghi Order dance and sing around the side of the altar and use shakers and trumpets. *Binghis* are open to anyone with 'clean hands and pure heart' who wishes to pay respect to Haile Selassie I, so there is also a large crowd of men and women from all corners of Rastafari who dance and sing. While less intense than Jamaican *binghis*, which can go on for weeks, London ceremonies last until well after dawn, with dancing, singing and drumming punctuated by *reasonings*, sermons, naps in the chairs and breaks in the kitchen or around the fire outside the building.

In contrast, *groundations* seem to have something to do with making a connection to a specific place, as well as generating energy/spiritual power to fuel various *works* (projects). Because I reached the Cannizaro Park *groundation* early, I had time to relax in the sun and walk barefoot in the lush, inviting green grass before the crowd arrived,

which seemed to prove helpful in dampening my usual fieldwork (and performance) anxieties. I was hungry when I arrived at the park (after skipping lunch) but was distracted from eating the snack I had brought by the leader of the Rastafari Council of Britain who was growing more and more anxious about the late arrival of his colleagues from the Rastafari Global Council. Apparently, they were late because there was a delay with a cake they had specially commissioned for the event. He asked me to ring them (as they had stopped answering his many calls) and tell them to give up on the cake and “just bring the drums and the (dread)locks.” My call was answered and I was assured that the cake was in hand and they were on the way. They arrived just as the ceremony was beginning with the cake, as well as drums, candles, incense, Ethiopian flags and a *chalice* (water-pipe), which is used to smoke *herbs*. The *groundation* opened with prayers, chanting and drumming. The hosts looked stunning dressed all in white; the leader of the Rastafari Council of Britain, with his crewcut, in matching white suit and wingtips and the head of the Rastafari Global Council in a white dashiki and turban. To my relief he was also barefoot, as I had become very conscious that everyone else in the gathering crowd had kept their shoes on.

In Rastafari the way the body is groomed and clothed can help (or hinder) the fulfillment of various spiritual (not to mention social) objectives. Wearing matted hair, commonly known as ‘dreadlocks’ or *locks*, is as emblematic of Rastafari as smoking *herbs*. For many people who wear the hairstyle it is related to the Nazarite vow to let the hair grow naturally, without trimming or shaving it. However, not all Rastafari people wear *locks* and not all people who wear dreadlocks are Rastafari. Many Rastafari people who wear *locks* experience them as a conduit of spiritual energy that is captured during meditation. The head is considered to be the most important part of the body as it is the closest to the heavens, the seat of the intellect and contains a critical mass of the body’s sensory organs. In meditation, cosmic energy is said to come through the head to heal and energise the rest of the body. Hair channels this energy and the more hair the wider the antennae for capturing and holding it.

Covering the hair protects it from undesirable energies and pollution from the environment (not to mention lice), but at *binghis*, it is important for men, especially drummers to uncover their ‘spiritual antennae.’ This can cause tension when men of the Boboshanti Order, who always wear turbans in public, wish to pay their respects to His Imperial Majesty at a *binghi*. In London this issue was resolved by an agreement that Boboshanti men can keep their turbans on while attending a *binghi*, as long as they are also wearing their traditional robes (an expression of modesty and humbleness). Other Rastafari men may wear robes or dashikis on special occasions and cover their hair with a turban, but tams (large knit hats) are also popular (at least in the older generations), along with military fashions. I have seen several different dress styles among Rastafari women in the UK. The Ethiopian style is white robes, with turbans covered by a separate scarf that hangs down the sides of the head. Some women dress in West African style gowns with matching head wraps. Others dress in more European styles. But for Nyahbinghi, Boboshanti and many other Rastafari women skirts are worn long and the shoulders and hair are covered, at least in public.

In many respects, following Nyahbinghi dress code (which I do whenever I attend a Rastafari event) is not a huge deviation from my normal way of dressing. I decided many years ago to let my body hair grow because shaving it was destroying my skin, so my wardrobe is full of ankle length skirts and tops that cover my shoulders and

underarms. Moreover, while I generally keep the long hair on my head combed, I do wear it covered in public (albeit by a hat, rather than a turban) when I don't have time to comb it out (or when I'm attending a Rastafari event). I am well aware of the difference in attention that I receive (and the self-confidence that I feel) when I wear my hair down and when I wear it covered (or pulled back in a bun or plait), mainly from men, but also from women. While I have always felt my most self-confident when my hair is down and typically wear it that way on important public occasions in my professional life, I have found that keeping my hair pulled back, if not covered is helpful in maintaining a sense of humility and focus on work.

The colours of headwear and clothing may also be ritualised in Rastafari. Boboshanti are meant to wear a specific colour of turban each day of the week. These colours include the emblematic red, gold and green (worn on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday respectively), as well as 'planetary' colours (purple on Wednesday, blue on Thursday) that are said to align with astrological forces. The black worn on Friday contrasts with the Saturday Sabbath white. There are also colours associated with the 10 faculties of divine human consciousness (*Neteru*), which are fundamental to the Pan-African 'Ausarian' religious system that is growing in popularity within some sections of the Rastafari movement. The Ausar-Auset Society was founded in Harlem, New York by Dr. Ra Un Nefer Amen in 1973 to provide Afrocentric spiritual teachings to the African diaspora. Similar to Rastafari, the teachings of Ra Un Nefer Amen are influenced by Asian (particularly Yoga and Traditional Chinese Medicine), as well as African (especially Ancient Egyptian/Kemetic), spiritual practices. Each day of the week corresponds with a different *Neter* that in turn is associated with a distinct colour or colour combination. The body may be clothed in these colours to enhance its ability to manifest the corresponding divine qualities.

One aspect of my wardrobe that has changed over the years is the colour palette, largely as the result of a habit that I developed of wearing the colours associated with the various *Neteru* on different days of the week. If nothing else, this manner of dressing is an excellent way of remembering to pay attention to the various faculties of consciousness and their associated attributes (i.e. leadership, nurturance, justice, intellect, balance, intuition, joy and inner peace) every day of the week. However, this is not to say that I didn't struggle with my clothing when I started attending Rastafari gatherings. The first time I went to Fairfield House I made the mistake of wearing a long white cardigan (cum robe) over a black skirt. Although black is the planetary colour associated with Saturday (the day of the week on which the event took place) and many Rastafari, especially Boboshanti, wear white on the (Saturday) Sabbath, I found out too late that the combination apparently could also be taken as white symbolically dominating over black. At the Cannizaro Park *groundation* I wore a gold and green dress with my red hat. I was happy that I also chanced wearing the white cardigan again, as this time it sent the appropriate message, harmonising me with the colour schemes of the hosts' and the crowd's attire.

Food is also an important component of Rastafari events and eating/drinking are important spiritual practices for many Rastafari people. Feeding the body an Afrocentric vegan diet is linked to a strong ecological ethic within Rastafari, which includes being a steward to the earth by protecting it and keeping it clean, productive and free from the chemical fertilisers and herbicides that oppress both land and people (Dickerson 2004). In Jamaica, Rastafari farmers developed a system of agricultural

production and consumption known as *ital*, which involves a commitment to cultivating and using agricultural products in their natural states (Edmonds 1998). *Ital* agricultural techniques are similar to those of organic and biodynamic farming. The term *ital* is derived from 'vital' and implies purity as well as naturalness. *Ital* foods (i.e. vegetables, fruits, grains, legumes and nuts) and (herbal) medicines are prepared only with ingredients that are vital to proper bodily function. Thus, simple raw foods are an important component of an *ital* diet and cooked food should be unadulterated by salt. In many respects, the *ital* way of eating was developed intuitively, following logic such as avoiding food from under the ground when seeking spiritual upliftment (Morgan 2013). Although there are regional variations *ital* cuisine is generally comprised of West Indian and African recipes, with some innovations inspired by European vegan cooking.

Eating *ital* re-grounds the body within the physical and social environment (Dickerson 2004). It is also a way to keep the body purified, along with intermittent fasting, drinking pure spring water and consuming roots tonics and other herbal remedies. Jamaican roots tonics are deep decoctions of *Smilax sp.* and a variety of other roots, barks, and leaves that may be sweetened with sugar/molasses and/or fermented (Mitchell 2011; van Andel et al. 2012). They have a history of use as general strengtheners and purgatives but are now often marketed as aphrodisiacs to boost male sexual potency (van Andel et al. 2012). Many Rastafari roots tonics are different from the commercially marketed aphrodisiacs, as they come in a variety of formulas for men, women and even children. They are taken to purge the blood (and sometimes the gut or womb) of impurities and to make the body strong. Keeping the body clean and pure through these various consumptive practices is linked to healing powers and immortality, in the sense that some *italists* claim that they can remember past lives on Earth.

Although I have yet to keep up an *ital* diet for long enough to remember any previous incarnations on Earth, I do still remember a distinct lightness in my body that resulted from a long afternoon in the sunshine combined with my inadvertent fast on the day of the Cannizaro Park *groundation*. The feeling was not altogether unpleasant but it did exacerbate my musical and kinaesthetic challenges. It was the cake, which had caused so much anxiety earlier, that helped me to transcend them. Just before making a speech about the life and works of Haile Selassie I, the head of the Rastafari Council of Britain cut the cake, which was a beautiful masterpiece, expertly decorated with an image of His Imperial Majesty in fondant icing. He invited me to be the first to taste the cake, which we were informed was completely *ital*. The cake tasted even better than it looked and I happily invited the rest of the participants to partake of some. As I ate the cake while listening to the speech, I felt a change in my energy (and my blood sugar level) and for the rest of the ceremony found it easier to keep in time with the drums and to dance and shake the rattle at the same time. By the time the head of the Rastafari Global Council opened the floor to any participants who wished to share a 'word-sound,' I was feeling so energised and extroverted that I spoke publicly at a Rastafari event for the first time, albeit only a few words of thanks. In the cloud of smoke that perfumed the air on that summer evening in Cannizaro Park, confident in my appearance, after fasting, dancing barefoot on a sacred site and eating pure, natural food, I was a spiritual body.

#### 4. The Body in Private Ritual

Away from the public, ceremonial context, I also learned to be a spiritual body through practicing some of the rituals that are popular in Rastafari. Just as Amazonian peoples are focused on a predator/prey dialectic, there is a Pan-African preoccupation with master/slave polemics. One of the main spiritual aims of many branches of Rastafari is becoming master of the self, rather than master (or slave) of an other. Reflecting East African and Hindu roots of the movement, this is achieved through a variety of rituals for embodying the 'higher Self' that precedes the earthly body and lives on after its death. As the head of the Rastafari Global Council explains, although the body is just an 'Earth suit,' it is the higher Self's most important creation because it is a vehicle for action. He shares an African ontological perspective in which there is no distinction between matter and spirit. As he describes, all matter and energy in the universe are made of spirit and the body is spirit in its densest form. Therefore, the body can be used to make things happen in the spiritual realm, while happenings in the spiritual world are manifested in the body and its earthly environment.

In my ethnographic work, the bodily practice that has most increased my consciousness of spiritual power is meditation. My first year of learning about Rastafari consisted primarily of working with the head of the Rastafari Global Council who gave me initial instruction in Rastafari theology, history and culture. One of the many things we *reasoned* about regularly, were various types of meditative and trance states and I was encouraged to practice the meditative state in which the mind is completely still and quiet. I have been an intermittent yoga student since I was a teenager but at that point had never been able to still my mind for more than a few seconds and was generally reluctant to sit and meditate for very long. In fact, it was the sitting position that made my attempts at Rastafari meditation much more successful. Rather than sitting crossed-legged on the floor, I was encouraged to sit in the 'throne' position, on the edge of a chair, as befits a divine King or Queen. I found this position to be infinitely more comfortable and could stay in it for much longer periods of time. Eventually, I figured out how to keep my mind still by focusing on the sensation of energy running freely through my body (or perhaps I figured out how to sense the energy running through my body by keeping my mind still). At one point, I experienced a sensation that I recognised from my yoga teacher's descriptions of opening the heart *chakra*. I am now able to open this *chakra* at will and can send energy back out from it. These new abilities certainly allow me to ease my body when it is tense or in pain, though I have yet to determine whether my attempts at directing healing energy toward others have had any appreciable effect.

I was also instructed in the 'Ausarian' meditations, which involve visualisations and chanting Kemetic words of power (*hekau*), which can be done with or without recordings of guided meditations by Ra Un Nefer Amen. There are different *hekau* that correlate with the *Neteru* that govern the days of the week and chanting them can help invoke their corresponding divine qualities. Visualisations involve connection with the higher Self to learn one's destiny and plan for a successful life path. It is also possible to connect and communicate with the higher Self through ecstatic trance. As described in Congo-Nyah et al. (2013: 271) ecstatic trance 'is the highly receptive midpoint between sleep and wakefulness; between the subjective/ objective, conscious/unconscious, material/etheric, higher/lower self, etc. In ecstatic trance we can bridge the gap between the "two worlds" and communicate with/from the higher

Self and The Source.' It is during ecstatic trance that the mind can be (re)programmed with visualisations of desired life outcomes.

Smoking *herbs* is the most iconic method of achieving ecstatic trance in Rastafari and is also used as an aid in other types of meditation (see Congo-Nyah et al. 2013), which is why the plant is considered to be sacred. However, smoking is also considered to be a 'professional' activity that requires knowledge and experience (Waldstein n.d.). It can take years of heavy smoking to reach the highest states of Rastafari consciousness (including ecstatic trance), which means that smokers' bodies must be able to accommodate large amounts of smoke (and all of the chemical messengers that infuse it), which involves the fabrication of a new sort of 'self-body.' In Morobe Province, Papua New Guinea, habitual cannabis smokers are viewed as transforming their bodies into 'drug bodies' that are easy going, confident and social. That is, cannabis is ascribed an ability to transform bodies that other drugs don't have (Halvaksz 2006). African Caribbean peoples (especially smokers) tend to dichotomise cannabis and other drugs and in Rastafari, *herbs* is not recognised as a drug at all, but rather an agricultural product. Nevertheless *herbs* appears to have an ability to help transform/re-make the bodies of Rastafari smokers so that they can communicate with the higher Self. This ability offers smokers insights and esoteric knowledge as they learn to interpret and follow their intuition. Devisch (2012) defines divination as a form of intuitive and acute bodily sensory perceptiveness. It would seem that smoking *herbs* is helpful to many people as they learn to predict the future or know what others are thinking, based on bodily intuitions in ecstatic trance.

Ecstatic trance can also be achieved through sex (Congo-Nyah et al. 2013). While this necessitates partnership and intimate contact with another person, in Rastafari sex is still a private matter between man, woman and *Jah* (the Creator). However, this is not to say that the subjects of fertility and reproduction are never discussed. Moreover social media provides just enough anonymity that from time to time there are postings about sex on various Rastafari Facebook groups, raising issues that might be more difficult to broach face to face. In the material that I have seen (e.g. Nyahbinghi sexual code of conduct) there is an affinity with both Tantric and Biblical directives. For example, some of it is reminiscent of the Evangelical sex manuals described by DeRogatis (2009), which suggest that the main point of sex is unification with God, while enjoyment and even reproduction are secondary. There is some recognition in Rastafari that sex is important for more than conceiving children alone. With practice and care, the procreative energy of sex can be channelled into making ideas and aspirations (as well as children) become manifest. Thus, even the infertile or those beyond reproductive age can benefit from sex because it can lead to ecstatic trance and other divine experiences. Nevertheless, in Rastafari, conceiving, developing and raising children are important social obligations and are also necessary to reach the highest levels of spiritual consciousness. This is why homosexuality is seen to prohibit people from reaching their fullest spiritual potential and helps explain Rastafari's reputation for homophobia.

It is personally challenging and somewhat risky to write about the experience of ecstatic trance because the ways it is generally entered in Rastafari are taboo. The private nature of sex in Rastafari is compatible with both my relatively puritan upbringing and natural introversion. Moreover, in the current climate of British cannabis prohibition personal smoking habits are also best left private. Nevertheless,



there have been times when I have reached that state, one way or another, and have found it to be helpful in sensing connections between myself and the rest of creation and in applying the power of positive thinking to make things happen in the world. This connection between the self and the cosmos is a core feature of Watts' (1968) description of psychedelic/religious experience. With practice, it is possible to focus this unification on the embodied self and other specific embodied selves (e.g. between ethnographer and research participants). When it is possible to experience the self as other in ecstatic trance and similar meditative states it becomes easier to interpret both what is and is not said in interviews and *reasonings*. For example, I have had to make inferences about sexual relations and spirituality in Rastafari based on *reasonings* about homosexuality, as people are more willing to weigh in on this contentious topic, rather than discuss their own private sexual lives.

My ability to make such inferences was increased by my expanding sense of mindful embodiment that came from meditation. As Okely (2008) describes, anthropological encounters are more than periods of fieldwork alone, especially when this work takes place within the geographic context in which the anthropologist is normally resident. In such situations anthropology is 'infused with years of ideological representations, flotsam and fragments which are carried as internal baggage. These like the disjointed poems in the surrealist's imagination, may come to fruition and make sense years and dreams and events later' (Okely 2008: 67). I have found that meditation can allow such 'internal baggage' to resurface and is also a powerful and efficient way of making sense of it. As discussed in the next section, the intersubjectivity or shared consciousness that can be reached with other selves in meditation is related to the dissolution of mind/body dualism.

## 5. The Self, Other Selves and Ethnographic Knowledge

MacPhee (2003) argues that symbolic analysis is limited because it is predicated on an assumption of connections between a discrete mind and body, which obscures the link between healing and spirituality in anthropology. Likewise, studies of spirit mediumship have historically pathologised the phenomenon because they were grounded on a Western notion of a bounded self (Pierini 2016). Perhaps the greatest impediment to understanding religious sentiments and spiritual logics is the inability or reluctance of the researcher to break free of the Cartesian distinctions between mind/body, self/other, matter/spirit and natural/supernatural. Moreover, the Cartesian division between subject and object tends to place the body in the same ontological category as the objects of physical science (Jackson 2012). While anthropologists may recognise the significance of embodiment in the people they study, they may ignore or downplay their own bodies in the course of their research. However, embodiment as a technique of ethnographic research subjectifies and intersubjectifies the body, with phenomenological, theoretical and theological implications. More specifically, an ethnographer's ability to experience monism between self and other, not to mention other aspects of spirituality, depends largely on rituals of the body and other technologies of the self. Glass-Coffin (2010) argues that sometimes it is necessary to suspend participant observation and fully embrace new states of consciousness for transformational insights to occur. But rather than destroy objectivity this immersion facilitates bodily knowledge (Bowie 2013), which can be reflected upon later from a more secular anthropological perspective. Ultimately, our ability as ethnographers to

make different cultural/social/spiritual perspectives mutually intelligible lies in our ability to pass back and forth between dualistic, monistic and other ontologies.

Breaking down mind-body dualism is not to deny the experience of non-embodied states of consciousness, but rather to reconfigure the continuum of body, mind, consciousness and self. Phenomenologies of multiple modes of experience do not necessarily replicate the mind-body dualism that underlies both biomedical (and other scientific) theories and Western religious philosophies (see Halliburton 2002). The Rastafari concept of a higher Self that precedes and lives beyond the earthly body does not imply a dichotomy between mind/self and body. Mind, body, self, other, matter and spirit are unified in earthly existence, which is reflected in language. One of the most distinctive features of Rastafari speech is use of the pronoun *InI* (derived from I and I) in place of I, me, we and us, which reminds the speaker of the shared source from which all life comes (Congo-Nyah et al. 2013). That is, an emphasis on the unity of self and other is codified in Rastafari language. Access to experiences of such unification between the self and others can also be gained through attention to embodiment. As Jackson (2012: 70) writes:

to recognize the embodied character of our being-in-the-world is to discover a common ground where self and other are one, for by using one's body in the same way as others in the same environment, one finds oneself informed by an understanding that... remains grounded in a field of practical activity and thereby remains consonant with the experience of those among whom one has lived.

By using my body in a Rastafari way during meditation (e.g. sitting in the throne position, chanting *hekau*) I was able to achieve the effect Jackson describes, even in the privacy of my own home.

Theories of the body in medical anthropology are particularly helpful in reconfiguring dualist perspectives on the world and are also useful for understanding the place of embodiment in the production of ethnographic knowledge. In an attempt to transcend mind-body dualism with a 'mindful body' Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) draw on multiple alternatives, from various religious philosophies. For example, wholes may be conceived as harmonious, in which everything from the cosmos to individual organs is understood as a single unit. Or there is holistic (balanced) complementarity, in which the cosmos is understood as a state of dynamic equilibrium, oscillating between two poles (e.g. yin/yang). For Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987), the mindful body is an overlap of the individual body (the embodied self, existing apart from other individual bodies), the social body (the body as symbolic of nature, society and culture) and the body politic (regulation, surveillance and control of bodies), which represent three separate units of analysis and three different theoretical approaches (phenomenology, structuralism/symbolism, poststructuralism). My exploration of the spiritual body within the ethnographic context of Rastafari, builds on these earlier conceptions, in the era of the ontological turn and post-humanism. By learning techniques for cultivating spiritual bodies in different cultural contexts, ethnographers can gain experiences that breakdown dualities between matter and spirit, offering new insights on the anthropological distinction between knowledge and belief, as well as the relationship between higher and embodied selves.

The spiritual body is similar to the mindful body concept proposed by Scheper-Hughes and Lock, but has a greater focus on the senses. As MacPhee (2003) describes,

Saharan housewives become spiritual bodies by learning to sense and connect pleasant sensations from the heart that radiate throughout the rest of the body. This definition of the spiritual body echoes Fernandez' (1990) description of the progression from sordid to spiritual body in Bwiti rituals by freeing blockages in flows of vital life processes. MacPhee (2003) explains that Islamic practices such as daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan and giving alms to the poor are thought to contribute towards religious merit and salvation. In Rastafari, similar practices are a means to achieve specific spiritual (and ultimately political) objectives, namely immortality (through reincarnation), intuition and the manifestation of divine will on Earth. Thus, one of the most interesting questions that has arisen from my work with Rastafari in the UK is whether Rastafari spiritual bodies can really do things that other bodies cannot do (e.g. divine and give oracles, remember past lives).

Answering this question requires looking at embodied spiritual experiences as knowledge, rather than belief. Anthropology has a relatively long history of contrasting scientific knowledge with religious belief, although more recently some of the problems inherent in defining religion in terms of belief (and beliefs through the category supernatural) have been acknowledged (see Keane 2008). Nevertheless, while spirit belief may be taken seriously, knowledge claims are still generally rejected (Hufford 2010). But what happens when we look at spiritual experiences, rather than beliefs? As McIntosh (2006) describes, Kenyans of European descent know they aren't supposed to accept African metaphysics as real, but many have had experiences that challenge this ideology. In a similar manner, people from North America and Europe who apprentice with Peruvian shamans, may eventually come to accept the existence of sorcery (Fotiou 2010) based on experiences that make it difficult to deny. Hufford distinguishes between visionary and interpretive spiritual experiences. The former involve the direct perception of the unseen order of the world (as manifest in apparitions, the performance of spirit mediums and/or omens) while the latter are primarily affective and don't involve the perception of spirits. Visionary experiences may be construed as normal in cultures that endorse and teach them, but are generally considered pathological in Western/industrialised societies, in which interpretive experiences are consistent with the modern view of religion as a matter of feeling and intuition rather than empirical knowledge. But using the senses to transform spirit into bodily experience makes it possible to observe and describe spiritual phenomena.

Assuming that empirical observation does not necessarily equate with visual observation, sensory experiences of all sorts can bear ethnographic data. Learning to sense and control embodied energies (e.g. opening the heart *chakra*) and to connect with the higher Self through meditation leads to intersubjective connections with other living selves. This intersubjectivity challenges the dualistic ontologies of anthropology and other sciences, but nevertheless provides empirical insights and can be described ethnographically. Zivkovic (2014) explains that Tibetan Buddhists know the body as interdependent with all other phenomena. She argues that intersubjective embodiment can enable an understanding of the body that crosses between human and extrahuman (e.g. spiritual) worlds in order to control the universe as a particular extension of subjectivity. In both Buddhism and Rastafari this is achieved through meditative insights, facilitated by other bodily rituals. Kohn (2013) defines selves as living, growing thoughts. But living selves are embodied thoughts that experience the world around them with a variety of sensory mechanisms that can be illuminated or obscured depending on socio-ecological context. Ethnographers may have bodies

that appear very different from those of the people they study, but the spiritual body—the body with heightened sensitivity and divine consciousness—can be cultivated by anyone and provides a bridge between self and other that transcends political, biological and ontological divides to produce particularly rich ethnographic knowledge.

## 6. Conclusion

Rastafari spirituality is less of a religion than a nonsecular science that considers how various energies and powers influence socio-ecological systems. The world we live in is made up of both material and spiritual components (which is not to say there is no afterworld), meaning that these energies and powers are treated as natural rather than supernatural forces. While anthropology is generally a secular discipline, by participating in various rituals, the body becomes an ethnographic tool that can lead to an awareness of how spiritual and material worlds interconnect. The embodiment of Rastafari spirituality involves consciousness of the higher Self, as well as the relationship between phenomena in the spiritual and earthly realms. Collective rituals that combine drumming, dancing and singing, such as *binghis* and *foundations*, as well as clothing and feeding the body in specific ways, facilitate the embodiment of divinity. The matted *locks* worn by many Rastafari people are considered to be spiritual antennae and covering the hair protects it from absorbing negative energies and other forms of pollution. The ways the rest of the body is covered can further help or hinder the embodiment of divine qualities. Eating is also a spiritual practice in Rastafari and consuming an Afro-centric vegan diet is a way to keep the spiritual body purified, along with periodic fasting, drinking clean spring water and taking roots tonics and other herbal remedies.

Meditation and ecstatic trance (facilitated by smoking *herbs* and/or sex) are also important in the (re)fabrication of Rastafari bodies/selves. In Rastafari, smoking *herbs* is a ritual activity that transforms the bodies of smokers so that they can connect with the higher Self, while sex can also lead to higher states of consciousness and increase (pro)creative power. In my work with Rastafari, my (ethnographic) knowledge of many spiritual practices has been informed by my own embodied experiences, as well as those of my interlocutors. Meditation in particular involves awareness of various bodily sensations and develops the ability to sense connections between the self and other living selves. It produces ethnographic knowledge that is experiential as well as affective. My position as a 'white' American female has shaped the ethnographic knowledge of Rastafari that I have been able to produce because it influences the type of people willing to engage with me. However, by engaging in rituals that embody spirituality, such as meditation I have learned to make inferences and interpret what both is and is not said. This is because meditation breaks down mind/body dualism, allowing experiences of intersubjectivity.

Exclusive commitment to Cartesian dualism can be an impediment to ethnographic research because ethnographers need to be able to move back and forth between dualistic and monistic ontologies. Breaking down mind-body dualism (at least temporarily) allows the ethnographer to experience intersubjectivity with other living selves (human and otherwise). Anthropological theories of the body, especially the concepts of the mindful body and the spiritual body offer some guidance for the ethnographer who wishes to use embodiment as a tool for breaking down dualities and experiencing intersubjectivity with others. The spiritual body is a heightened

sensory awareness and mindful presence in the body. It is cultivated through bodily rituals to achieve spiritual objectives, which raises the question of whether spiritual bodies can do things other bodies cannot do. Historically, scientific knowledge has been contrasted with religious belief, but experiences that embody spirit make it possible to learn and describe spiritual knowledge. In cultivating a spiritual body, ethnographers learn intersubjectivity with other living selves through heightened sensory experiences. This contributes to the production of ethnographic knowledge about spiritual power that challenges Cartesian ontologies.

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## Journal for the Study of Religious Experience



### **Spirits, Spies and Lies in Havana: Unwitting and Paranoid Entanglements Between Ethnographer and Field**

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In this article I argue that caution, suspicion and even paranoia are natural outcomes, as well as processes generative, of the behaviour of knowledge and of knowing in the Cuban religious cosmos, and beyond it. “Knowers”, here, may be variably absent, invisible, or immanent in the social plane, which implies necessary, if temporary, vacuums of knowledge and of certainty. I start with an anecdote from my fieldwork in Havana, Cuba, among spirit mediums, of being accused by one of my interlocutors of being a spy for the Cuban government. I then reason that this paranoid “intrusion” into my self-definition was less a case of what went wrong but of what went *right*. Spirits of the dead are master instigators of both relations and fracturing suspicion between people, and the economy of Afro-Cuban religious knowledge is one with many absences and invisibilities, generating pervasive doubt and spiritual insecurity. In order to come to grips with this distressing accusation I had to reflexively reconstitute my own forms of extreme proximity with practitioners and their *muertos* (spirits), the ontological uncertainties that were implied by this proximity, and the role of non-living entities in the equations of everyday life, including mine.

Keywords: Afro-Cuban religion; spirits; witchcraft; paranoia and suspicion; fieldwork

#### **1. Introduction**

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in Havana between August of 2005 to November of 2015. The bulk of my work was done with spirit mediums of varying Afro-Cuban religious inspirations in mostly informal ways. Throughout their history Afro-Cuban religions have developed mainly in underground settings, in people’s homes, away from the public eye, although there are exceptions. I followed these networks of independent-minded practitioners from one house to the next, observing and participating in their conversations, rites, and ceremonies. This means I developed a clear empathy for my interlocutors – their spirits, and spaces of praxis – with whom I shared frank dialogue born from an intersection of their cosmos with mine. In a sense I build here on Edith Turner’s desire to acknowledge the existence of spirit entities in my analytics (cf. for eg. Turner 2016). However, the main argument in this paper is that researchers do not need to experience the empathy that I clearly did to be the recipients of all manner of effects in their fields, which are themselves products of constant interactions and relations in the field. This is particularly so in Cuba where spiritual actants are often invisible, generating all manner of paranoia in their wake.



One of the most personally alarming and perplexing moments of my fieldwork in Cuba came in the shape of an accusation of my being a spy, about a year after I had ended the bulk of my fieldwork in late 2006. It was a warm day in early January, and I had spent it with one of my close friends and interlocutors – Elias, an Afro-Cuban architect in his early forties, who was also an experienced spirit medium whom I had met on my initial fieldwork foray. On this particular day, we had had a beer, strolled through the Old City, and Elias had taken me to see an art exhibition and to listen to salsa. As was the norm between us, we had talked about the dead, reincarnation, spiritual evolution, and the work his Spiritist society does on a weekly basis and which I had followed closely during the first few months of my fieldwork. Suddenly, the mood takes a right turn and Elias withdraws from the conversation. He began to simply watch me, while we walked down the Malecón: I had an increasingly uneasy feeling. Then he turned to me and told me he had something he wanted to “clarify” with me. I asked him what he wanted to know, and he responded that during the year that I had been away, many “suspicious” things had happened to him. For one, he’d been feeling observed, a feeling confirmed once by a passing comment of one his friends, an “insider” of sorts in the government, who had warned him that the government (Cuban State Security, was the implication here) did have “information” on him and was indeed keeping an eye.

“But why would you pose any threat to Government”, I asked naively? “Who would want to watch you?”

“You tell me”, he answered. “What do you know about this?” His eyes fixed upon me intently, as if he had just caught me lying. I was speechless.

“Are you suggesting that I’m some sort of *spy*?” I asked unbelievably (and, most incredibly, in my mind, for *Fidel Castro*?).

According to Elias, there was no one else but me that knew the things that he was told “they” knew about him. Still, he waited for me to confess. I did not. Suddenly, despite myself, my utter incredulity turned to outright anger. Elias was piecing apart our friendship in front of my eyes in what seemed then like a baseless and unjust form of Cuban paranoia. Genuinely irritated with his frank lack of vision, I retorted soberly that he could not be as good a medium as he thought he was – after all, had his guiding spirits been so enlightened, surely they would have known I had nothing to do with this. Or perhaps his own spirits had “planted” the paranoid sensations he was articulating, for one or another reason. I walked away at that moment and effectively, our relationship ended there. There had been nothing more to say. He had accused me, and I had accused him too.

To be fair, my history with Elias had never been as transparent or free of controversy as I would have liked to believe. Elias was not the paranoid or obsessive sort – he was an educated, conscientious man who had preached an emotionally balanced and religious fanaticism-free approach to life. However, when I think about it, there had been a power game in these accusations that escaped me then, while making me feel highly uncomfortable. Elias was, in this sense, *claiming* me for himself, and expressing it implicitly through an explicit and confrontational accusation. These power dynamics were all too familiar in Cuba, especially to women. His explosive paranoia, in this case, was clearly not only the means of calling my attention, but eventually, of breaking his

affective tie with me. Nevertheless, certain events had undeniably led up to that point, although among was not, needless to say, any covert espionage on my part. Understanding Elias's accusation required of me no more ontological imagination that I had been capable of during my initial fifteen-month fieldwork period in Havana among Cuban mediums and their *muertos* – the omnipresent protective spirits that give certain individuals their vision into the workings of the supramundane. Indeed, I suspected that the dead had been intimately involved in the generation of Elias's growing disquiet in relation to my identity and intentions.

While there may be a series of tangential factors that contributed to his suspicion – that in Havana I lived with two rather unorthodox Cubans (one being a charismatic and self-proclaimed anti-Castrite, and the other a well-known figure in the city's growing New Age movement and experienced practitioner of Santería, Cuba's best known religion of African inspiration); that I often (rather unwisely, I admit) talked politics; and that I consistently resisted the possessiveness of any of the highly-organised Spiritist groups that I observed, including his – I believe that the catalyst can be traced to a single ritual moment, preceded as it was by a sequence of events. Very briefly, and in order to illustrate, there had come a point in our friendship where Elias had expressed a romantic interest in me. I had refused him the first time, but he had insisted a second time, despite my denial of his advances, claiming that his spirits were alerting him to the fact that I was *afraid of*, not *adverse to*, a relationship with him. It was obvious to him that my need "not to complicate things" did not remit to matters of the heart but something else I wasn't telling him. At a spirit mediumship ceremony that we had both attended once, Elias took advantage of the moment and confirmed his intuition with one of the *muertos* incorporating a medium at that time. The spirit – a wise, old African slave – told Elias that indeed I was hiding something, since I had feelings for him too. After this episode, Elias's attitude increasingly reflected his understanding of me as concealing of my true self: if, before my departure, he had become seductive and intensely charming in what appeared to be a last bid for me to reveal myself, after my departure, this would turn into a deepening commitment to the idea that I had been fake, or worse, manipulative (for some end neither him nor I were ever clear about) at the expense of his feelings and mine. I never returned to confront the African spirit to ask him what, in turn, he knew about me (that perhaps I did not), or why he misled Elias. But the point was that embroiled in the net of impressions, suspicions, gossips and denials were agencies that transcended Elias's and mine but that were nevertheless as consequent or more. The spirits had been direct instigators in the demise of our friendship (regrettably, at least to me).

"Do misunderstanding and understanding relate to each other like error and truth?" asks Johannes Fabian (2001: 31). While committing mistakes is clearly a very real scenario, he suggests, such as in translation errors, Fabian also says that we should not forget the fact that the process of knowing "signals a notion of understanding as a praxis of constant transformation, rather than as the accumulation of understandings and the elimination of misunderstandings" (ibid: 49). In line with this idea, my feeling is the above anecdote suggests not misunderstanding or failed communication, but in fact the opposite – knowledge flow. If, as Fabian argues, context works dialectically, that is, it is constituted via individual practices and intersubjective histories, and is *not* something that pre-exists such interactions, or which functions as some sort of self-explanatory backdrop to be cited as the cause of something else (ibid: 51), then we must understand under what terms suspicion and paranoia, such as that manifest

above, is *also* an understanding. That is, we should be asking not what went *wrong*, but what went *right*. While my reaction to Elias's accusation was temperamental at the time (he hadn't been a good medium, I had retorted!), on closer inspection I would be foolish to attribute the event to him alone; nor would I be wise in locating it exclusively in the specifics of a political climate which makes otherwise sane people paranoid. Less still as a consequence of a religious "belief system" which creates a "delusional" trust in metaphysical sources of information, such as the African spirit. Rather, one single event may have not one cause but many; may be the outcome of not one voice but many, entangled, causally, and cosmologically. Including my own, in this case.

My argument in this paper is that caution, suspicion and even paranoia are natural outcomes, as well as processes generative, of the behaviour of knowledge and of knowing in the Cuban religious cosmos, and certainly beyond it, as the next section aims to show. As a colleague of mine once remarked, given the pervasive logic of concealment and mistrust in Cuba, we should be asking what the possibilities are for the opposite to be true, if indeed it can be. I take my embeddedness in the circulation of this knowledge and knowing here as evident. As Fabian says: "Ethnography is biography is historiography" (ibid: 51). For Fabian, knowledge is a dialectical concept, and the problem of ethnography is not an ontological one, of knowing what knowledge is, but a communicational one (ibid: 52). However, as I shall also argue, in Cuba how knowledge is communicated (or not) is exactly relevant to what it *is*, particularly amongst religious communities. And this is also an ontological problem. Knowledge is not necessarily propositional (Espirito Santo 2015b) but substantial, sensual even; it has weight, and can effect physiological changes. In the same way that context does not pre-exist experience, we cannot divorce the suspicion "event" from the myriad agencies from which it emerged. We are not just talking about the generation, transaction, transmission, authorisation or manipulation of knowledge by experts or other social actors, classical topics for the anthropology and sociology of knowledge (cf. Barth 1987, 1990; Keesing 1987; Simpson 1997). We are referring to a distribution of information, and of "knowers", that may be variably absent, invisible, or immanent in the social plane. This distribution in itself arguably already implies necessary, if temporary, vacuums of knowledge and of certainty, sometimes leading to moments of what De Boeck (2009) has called "spiritual insecurity". In my view, this remits less to questions of belief than to the structure of these knowledge systems themselves, into which the world of spirits and deities is weaved, and to knowledge as a "thing" itself, with effects beyond the epistemological. Cubans effect constant forms of negotiation and sacrificial diplomacy with their *muertos*, where these entities are volatile, temperamental and conflict-ridden. Elucidating sources of paranoia in this context requires of us more than a look at the socio-political Cuban context, then. It requires an understanding of the disruptive as well as constructive effects of cosmology, including from the point of view of the ethnographer and their own experience. In writing myself reflexively into this article, I will also explain the effects of these structures on my own phenomenological experiences and decisions in the field.

## 2. Political witching and paranoia

I began with a personal story, but one that is refractive (not reflective) of at least two major facts of life in Cuba, facts that relate intimately to each other, historically and pragmatically. First, the continued existence of a strong ethic of vigilance and self-

ensorship that is pervasive and engrained in the texture of social life and its performance, and indeed, part of its logic; and second, the intense complicity of religious cosmology in the unfolding of the 'social drama' (à-la-Turner) of everyday life, particularly, the extent to which spiritual intervention and mediation determines the modes and possibilities of relating, or lack thereof. In this section, I deal with the first point. In the next section I will attempt to understand the indissociability of Cuba's social and spiritual forms in terms of the economy of knowledge that characterises religious exchanges; an economy whose life and effectiveness is at once generated by information and its absence, and in which the ethnographer enjoys no independent existence.

Kenneth Routon has demonstrated how closely aligned discourses of witchcraft are with the all-purveying eyes of the State, especially in the post-Soviet economic milieu (2010: 7):

The economic crisis had not only inflamed morally suspect activities such as hustling, prostitution, stealing, and other petty crimes, it had also fuelled what many believed to be an unprecedented rise in predatory forms of *brujería* (magic and sorcery)...(But) As the promise of socialist modernity waned, which effectively diminished the state's moral authority and its hold over the public imaginary, these religions and their magic offered a wealth of imagery upon which to base new visions of power and authority.

As an inseparable component of this religious repertoire, Routon argues, *brujería* belongs as much to the ritual arena as it does to political discourses that register the circulation of power and chronicle misfortunes and afflictions of the everyday kind (ibid: 8). Indeed, in their book on witchcraft and rumour, and rumour as a kind of witchcraft, Stewart and Strathern have noted that "in times of crisis, the citizens of a state are often urged to be "on the alert" more than usual"; "actions otherwise considered innocent may be viewed with suspicion" (2004: 30).

From the point of view of the Cuban Revolution, or at least of its official stance, the political, economic and socially corrosive threat originating from the "outside" is imminent and ongoing, the public projection of which can be found in the many and varied imaginative posters throughout Havana that warn Cubans of the dangers of the enemy, so close to home, ready to pounce at the slightest whiff of weakness. From an outsider's point of view, this discourse of immanent threat and the consequent call for collective alertness is arguably embedded in the very definition and legitimation of the Revolution itself as a "process" subject to constant self-sacrifice (Holbraad 2013), ever-perfecting but forgivably imperfect due to just such external pressures. Indeed, while crisis – at all levels – is experienced in a very real sense by the common man and woman in the myriad difficulties he or she faces in the resolution of basic needs, such as food, there is a sense in which invisible forms of crisis management perpetually accompany the more palpable ones. Suspicion is, in Cuba, arguably a way of living, rather than a state of mind, just as the Revolution is a process and not an end-point. Most Cubans have been born into this state of permanent alertness. "A revolution does not, by definition, stand still", writes Antoni Kapcia, "neither, therefore does the need for self-definition" (2000: 208). Historically, this need for self-definition was to manifest not just in the will to expand or export the Revolution, such as through Cuban military or medical missions abroad, but also in the need to root out from within those that represented what the revolution was not. In practice, there was and continues to be little room for dissidence, ideological or otherwise. State-controlled

media project the Party's hardline discourses with little tolerance for political grey areas or intellectual subtleties, and subversives are sidelined or purged at government level (or invited to leave the country, in the best of cases).

At local levels, an effective "horizontalised" political system also required that the people become their own watchdogs, guardians of their own morality. This had repercussions. For example, institutions such as the CDR's (Committees for Defense of the Revolution), neighbourhood-level organisations designed to co-ordinate community-support work, but more importantly, to act as constant local checks for anti-social behaviour ('in each neighbourhood, Revolution!' is their slogan), have traditionally become hubs of overly-keen Party informants, where rumour and gossip have a central place in the generation of potentially damaging information. The *doble moral* (double morality) of deceiving appearances was born under such conditions, or at least that is what Cubans say; an individual's official "face" often hid a more socially performative and critical one, one not voiced in public. It has become normal for Cubans to "take care" (*cuidarse*) of their image in public, and for private life and opinion to be "guarded" from the eyes of potential fervent Communists or of the jealous.

For religious communities this guardedness was even more imperative, at least until the early 1990s, when Fidel Castro promised a more tolerant attitude towards religious manifestations of various sorts, which had been sorely missing before. Until that point, religious leaders and adepts of all forms of credence were routinely discriminated and subjected to restrictions and abuse, professionally and socially. While the 1976 Cuban Constitution in principle guaranteed an individual's freedom of expression, including religious and sexual, reality was a different matter. Practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions such as Santería, Palo Monte and even Spiritism<sup>1</sup>, would routinely perform their ceremonies and initiations in secrecy, or face hefty fines, harassment and even jail. Johan Wedel cites several authors who complain that many practitioners and believers were accused of antirevolutionary sentiment and activity, and their meetings subject to restrictions or banned (2004: 33). Guardedness, under such conditions, brought in the best of circumstances cohesion, mutuality, and solidarity between religious folk, as well as frustration. Ritual experts shared their resources and aided one another's godchildren. Some of these forms of cooperation and trust would see subsequent erosion.

It is important to note here the extent to which the collapse of the Soviet economy in the 1990s, and its tremendous impact on Cuban lives (the years that followed it became known ominously as the Special Period in Times of Peace, or *período especial*), intensified pre-existing structures of paranoia, generating with it a multiplicity of other forms of suspicion in its wake. Afro-Cuban religion, in particular, newly tolerated by the regime, would flourish in the sea of fear and insecurity that washed over the nation. As Cuba plunged into what would be the most difficult and scarcity-ridden years of the Revolution, Cubans counted more than ever on their patron saints, their *orichas* (Afro-Cuban deities worshipped in Santería) and their dead (accessed through spirit communication cults of Spiritism and Palo Monte). Spirits and experts

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<sup>1</sup> Santería is Cuba's most popular religion of African inspiration, associated with slaves of the West African Slave Coast (Nigeria, Benin, Togo); it worships deities called *orichas* in elaborate ceremonies. Palo Monte is known informally as Cuba's most potent form of witchcraft, associated with Bantu-speaking slaves. Spiritism, as it is practiced in Cuba, is a creolised form of Anglo-European spiritualism (cf. Espirito Santo, 2015).

both found their niche in this crisis, passing on messages from concerned otherworldly beings that urged the living to acquire potent ritual protections and initiations, and to watch themselves from those who could easily stab them in the back. As Afro-Cuban religion became increasingly perceived and cultivated in the public sphere as a cultural commodity or tradition, rather than a burden of an irrational past (Ayorinde 2003), Santeria's *iyawós* (novices) reappeared in the outdoor markets to complete their ceremonies; *babalawos* (divination priests) and *santeros* publically wore their religious *collares* (necklaces) around their necks and wrists; spirit mediums replaced their glasses of water on their altars without fear of the control induced by sanitation inspectors, and some even consulted on dusty street corners with their cards and their gypsy spirits. But for many, however, the consequences of religious freedom took a wrong turn.

The Special Period generated forms of competition and individualism fuelled by desperation, compounded by Cuba's opening to tourism and the exclusive economy it quickly created, where only a few could obtain hard currency (cf. Rosendahl 1997, Eckstein 2003). Access to dollars, and to foreigners, would become a socially divisive and often racially determined question, with white communities benefiting ahead of black; racial and social tensions would ignite. Cuba would turn into a society separated by two currencies and the social, moral and ideal worlds that these would generate: the dollar on the one hand (or Cuban Convertible Peso, after 2004) and the goods it could buy, and the national Cuban peso, on the other, and the life it *couldn't* buy. But this foreigner influx also led to what many religious believers describe as the "commercialisation" of Afro-Cuban religion (Argyriadis 2008), the selling of its soul. From the mid-1990s, accusations of religious exploitation and profiteering became widespread, and indeed, this inter-religious suspicion would constitute an important part of boundary making discourses between experts to this day. The spiritual seeker navigating amongst Afro-Cuban religious houses must now distinguish carefully between the serious and the charlatan, the real and the fake, and clean and the possibly deadly religious specialist. The crisis provoked an underlying and entrenched paranoia of witchcraft and evildoers, as well as a search for solutions that still strongly reverberates. Knowing that "not everyone I meet has good intentions" was practically the first thing I learnt when I arrived in Havana, and explained to a certain extent, some of the possessiveness I experienced with groups and individuals who saw themselves as my protectors. There is a sense in which some of these groups attempted to "encompass" me within their folds, to control the output of my work, on the one hand; and on the other, to protect the reputations of their practicing community among an increasingly competitive and hostile religious environment.

Devotees and clients of Afro-Cuban religious practices in Havana must now arguably deal with an embedded sense of uncertainty in relation to the viability of experts, opening up questions of legitimate spirituality, as well as morality. Leonel, friend and long-term religious expert tells me:

... [from the Special Period onwards] they began to emerge, the opportunists and the charlatans, and they're still there. But you're also finding that humble person who works hard, who does things from his heart, and who is not just after money. He still has to charge you, because he needs to live, but he charges you reasonably so that anyone who needs his help can reach it. But, yes, the opportunist exists. That person who doesn't practice his religion with faith or in any clean way, but who uses it to [achieve his aims], even religious leaders sometimes. It's a kind of power, that's the

problem. This power can mean contact with foreigners, travel, or having access to someone outside who can even help them financially. You'll see many groups in Havana like that.

But in my telling of Elias's and my story above, I wished to call attention the idea that among religious communities, both causes and actions have a distributed, non-local dimension. In particular, one in which a host of beings may be implied as "knowers", and in which power relations are not simply a function of human activities but of the wider nets of relations in which these are performed. This means that action itself is distributed, as Latour has suggested, or rather, "dislocated" (2005: 46), belonging not to single minds or bodies but to collectivities of agencies, and the actor, not the source of action but the "moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it" (ibid). This brings us to my second point, which is that an understanding of the generation of a suspicious environment requires more than an analysis of the sociological antecedents and dimensions of religious competition: it requires an appreciation of the role of non-human entities in the equations of the everyday.

While I consider myself lucky to have avoided any truly destructive bouts of suspicion during my stay in Havana, in reality, I was the object of much suspicion, often unbeknownst to me. I lived illicitly in a building where people asked who I was all the time, mostly in a friendly manner, but sometimes, by the government workers who routinely came into our apartment to count refrigerators and televisions or to fumigate when there were epidemics of disease. Later I discovered that official attention was invariably deflected from me by a "nice" middle-aged housewife living in the apartment on the floor below me. As I was to discover, this housewife had held quite an important post at government level (according to local gossip she had been chief of state security), and, perhaps because she had taken a liking to me, she protected me. But during the first month or so of my stay I was also observed by a more unorthodox presence in the house: a spirit. For weeks I battled with my imagination to make sense of the feeling that someone or something was literally prodding me, touching me gently but sternly on my shoulders and arms, as a curious child might do to a stranger in her house. I had been quite startled by this. On one or two occasions, in an empty house, I also heard what sounded to me like a whistle, directed at me, and on other occasions, my name being called out. It may have come as some comfort to me that my flatmate didn't think I was going mad: in his interpretation the "prodder" was one of his own spirits, namely, the most important guardian of the house, who was testing my limits as a newcomer. Apparently I had not been the first to feel the brunt of his suspicion. But as I soon understood this situation had a flipside: I discovered that I also had spirits who were suspicious of others, as on one occasion where one of my own spirits drifted over to the house of a medium I was to meet the following day, in the middle of the night, and woke her up. According to her, the spirit had wanted to ensure that she was a good person for me to hang out with. She was. As an *extension* of my person, so to speak, this spirit was tentacular in its geographical and sensorial dimensions, touching the medium – literally – and waking her from her slumber.

In Cuba, religious ancestors, deceased kin, as well as spirits, saints and deities with whom the person of "faith" may establish and develop bonds of varying types, all participate in the outcomes of mundane life, they are hardly ever independent of it. In dreams spirits communicate winning lottery numbers and other prognoses (Maitland Dean 1993), in visions they reveal the identity of envious neighbours or troublesome family members, in possession they pass on advice on whom to be wary of in order to

advance professionally, on how to clean oneself of the witchcraft of ex-lovers, on how to attract potential ones, or on what kinds of offerings to perform to appease a deceased affine or god. And in silence, they fuel incessant speculation on all of the above. Indeed, as most practitioners will tell you, Afro-Cuban religion deals mostly with the here and now, the intricacies of material life, not the after-life: it “resolves”, which, as Katherine Hagedorn says, “implies relying on an informal network of people, both living and deceased, from all parts of one’s life” (2001: 205). It is in the vulnerable and sometimes precarious nature of these relationships that Cubans become aware of their own fragility with respect to the cosmos they engage with and activate through their ritual actions. This would be a fragility I would experience too.

### 3. The dark side of (un) knowing

In a recent article where he takes a better look at the concept of ignorance, as opposed to knowledge, Roy Dilley argues that, contrary to much anthropological literature, which treats “the issue of knowing as a relatively unproblematic accumulation of what is it is that people claim to know”, knowledge and ignorance are mutually constituting, and “not simply in terms of an opposition by means of which one is seen as the negation of the other” (2010: 176). For Dilley, “if knowledge is transmitted, communicated, disseminated, or exchanged through social relations, it is given form and process by the potentiality of ignorance, of not-knowing, either as an absence in and of itself, or as a willed intentional stance towards the world” (ibid: 177). What Dilley suggests to me here is that knowing and not-knowing exert necessary pulls on each other so that one justifies and shapes the other’s existence somehow. The question is to know exactly how, in each ethnographic case.

These observations are relevant because, in my view, the contemporary practice, and particularly consumption of, Afro-Cuban religions are in part propelled by an underlying desire to create knowledge relations, as well as emotional and physical bonds, between the different realms of existence, including the spirits of the dead and deities (or divinities), knowledge relations which are not always successful, or at least smooth. While not all such entities are regarded as illuminated or transcendent, they are generally thought to have access to information unavailable to their human counterparts, and to be able to transmit it, either through oracular consultation or spirit mediation practices. Indeed, one of the characteristic features of Havana’s Afro-Cuban religious environments is that it is a potentially infinite resource for knowledge: of past, present and future circumstances. And as I have argued elsewhere (Espirito Santo 2011), this knowledge is generally experienced, particularly in spirit mediumship practices, as emergent and spatiotemporally distributed, rather than as a cumulative construction whose origin is exclusive. This means that we are not dealing with a kind of knowledge that would have as its negation its absence, ignorance; or that would have as its antithesis falsity; but perhaps with one that would have as the driving force for its generation the desire for completion, for *more*. To establish knowledge relations with spirits, either through consecration, consultation via mediums, or intuitively, is to participate of, and in this way create a flow of knowing that is also tied to understandings of the self, a self under a perpetual process of self-improvement, evolution, fulfilment of its true path, or whatever other image might be used in this sphere. The creation of knowledge relations, therefore, is not necessarily an anxiety-free trajectory, but rather, balances the security of spiritual connection and knowledge, with the disruptive effects of variable need and necessary incompleteness.



Let's take the three most popular religious practices of "African" inspiration as an example of such a state of affairs. In Santería (Bolívar 1990, Brown 2003, Lachatañaré 2001), a tradition associated with slaves of West African – and especially Yoruba – descent, each person is thought to have both a *camino* (path), ascertained through divination, and a "guardian angel" deity – an *oricha* or *santo*. After full initiation, the *signo* (divination sign) that determines this path is accompanied by a series of sayings and myths, generating prescriptive advice on how to live, eat, and generally behave. But everyone knows the road is full of obstacles and difficulties, and not just on the human end. It is quite common, for example, for two or more *orichas* to fight over a neophyte's "head" (the head is where the person's soul is thought to be and is where the *oricha* is "seated" during the initiation). Being initiated to one and not the other could be potentially deadly, or result in madness. Furthermore, punishment and retribution for disobedience are very real possibilities. In Spiritism, on the other hand, a Euro-American spiritualist doctrine introduced in Cuba in the mid-nineteenth century but mostly integrated into the Afro-Cuban religious dynamic (Espírito Santo 2015a), it is quite common for a protective spirit to be jealous of the material attention given to another spirit, and purposefully wreak havoc in the life of those it protects.

But for Spiritism, the universe is also replete with undesirable, lowly, lost souls who attach themselves to people, unwittingly or otherwise. While the set of spirit protectors (called a *cordón espiritual*) functions as a kind of spiritual immune system, the dangers of inadvertently picking up stray dark spirits, or being sent them through witchcraft, are great. Preoccupations with whether or not someone is carrying a *muerto oscuro*, a "dark" destructive spirit, or a *espíritu obsesor* (obsessing spirit), are usually determinate of whether or not the causes of their misfortune are spiritual in nature or not. The medium's task is to forge such relations explicitly. But these are not the only dangers: Spiritism recognises the existence of needy ancestors and the recently deceased, whose lack of "light" and reticence to accept death may be responsible for family crises or other tragic events; *espíritus burlones* (joking or trickster spirits), entities who pretend to be other than what they are, disguising themselves to the medium's eye; as well as those whose association to more material forms of religion, such as Palo Monte (described below), make them almost impossible to identify clearly and extinguish. Suspicion in Spiritism, is almost ipso facto: Spiritism functions as a means to indicate not just appropriate forms of material homage and acknowledgement for spirits, but to identify the involvement of other modes of ritual engagement (and perpetrators, spirits and persons) in the cause of a designated problem.

The experience of spiritual and material power, and its corollaries and opposites – sustenance, protection, but also insecurity, vulnerability, paranoia, and self-destruction, can be felt in full force among communities of Palo Monte, a set of religious practices widely diffused in Cuba, and associated with Bantu-speaking slaves from the Congo basin (see for e.g. Cabrera 1986, Ochoa 2010, Palmié 2006). Its central work instrument is the *Nganga*, a cauldron in which a magical micro-cosmos is created and moved, with the help of a primary "slave" spirit, to whom animal blood and other substances are fed. Indeed, Palo Monte is in itself generative of an economy of suspicion, independently of the other forms of worship, but it also presents the Afro-Cuban religious environment with possibilities for effective religious control, possibilities which manifest among other ways, ideologically, via the myriad forms of

witchcraft stories that circulate among adepts and practitioners more generally. These stories create climates of suspicion and mistrust, fuelled by common religious prejudice or conversely, religious know-how, as well as respect. Palo's moral ambiguity in popular conceptualisations derives in part from a stereotyped understanding of the intensity of the power it produces and manipulates, such that both extreme good and excessive evil are potentials, and further, on potentially equal moral and ontological footing. In Havana, the Palero is the "resolver" of the toughest kinds of problems. In Palo, the cosmos is replete with associations and identifications between people and things, people and people, and people and spirits, which facilitate and fluidify magical operations, both constructive and destructive. One Palero, José, for instance, told me the following:

An important factor is someone's guardian spirit, of course, the spirits that surround that person [by which he means the *cordón espiritual*]. But there are jobs that can be done to dominate that guardian spirit, to contain those protections. So that via that domination, work can be done against you. A name, a single name is sufficient. Or a photo, with no name. Hair. But you don't even need a name, a photo, or any hair at all. There's a ceremony that we can do that collects the person's trace [*rastro*, namely, by collecting the soil or dust on which he or she stepped on].

Religious *Habaneros* co-exist with various forms of paranoia, among which is the fear of being the targets of avaricious Paleros or ritual enemies via Palo. The silence in these cases, in relation to the religious economy (and distribution) of knowledge, may be deadening, and even deadly. Palo entities are expert eluders of spirit mediums' perceptual apparatuses; even the *cordón espiritual* will not alert it's protected of impending danger until witchcraft has already taken place. Palo's spirits dwell in the spaces between events, in the absence of knowledge, exemplifying to the extreme the dangers of such gaps, of such forms of invisibility.

I think I may have encountered at least two spirits during my fieldwork in Havana. The first was in a narrow corridor of the ground floor of a building where I stood, outside an apartment, waiting for a typically garish, colourful birthday cake to be delivered by the baker inside for a friend's birthday party. As I stood, leaning against the wall, out of the corner of my eye I saw a man enter the building and come down the dark corridor, then attempt to brush past me. I apologised, stepped out of the way – *perdón*, I had said – then instinctively and immediately looked down the corridor in the opposite direction to see where the gentleman had gone, only to not find him there at all. The second incident was perhaps not as innocuous as this one, as it was explained by some of my interlocutors in terms of witchcraft on *me*.

I had been walking through a crowded commercial street towards a ritual ceremony I was to attend as a guest. A masculine voice called my name twice, loud, through the crowd, and I turned to watch a stranger walk slowly and deliberately towards me. He was a tall, middle-aged and light-skinned black man with piercing, transparent green eyes, and patchy hair, and I had never seen him before. By the time he reached me I had a nagging feeling that I should flee. He said, provocatively, intensely (in Spanish): "every time I see you I fall more in love with you", and stared. Once I felt the hairs on my arms standing on their head, I turned and fled without uttering a word. I made two pit stops that day. The first was a *fiesta de santo*, a party that Cuban practitioners of Santería religion throw to celebrate their tutelary spirits' (*orichas*) birthdays, or more specifically, the day they were initiated to one of them. During the party I chatted with

Luis, a clairvoyant medium and Afro-Cuban religious expert that I was acquainted with, and told him about my experience earlier.

“He had light-coloured eyes and not much hair, right?” Luis said, tuning in, before I could provide him with the full description. “That’s not a person you saw”, he continued, to my surprise. “That’s a spirit. Probably one of Havana’s wandering ghosts. You must have run up against him in your previous trips here, and he recognised you and was playing around. Nothing to worry about”, he assured me. “The city is full of them”. I left feeling puzzled but unflustered. My second pit stop produced an explanation of a different, more worrying order, and eventually, an exorcism. I was set to visit an experienced religious couple, Eduardo and Olga, close friends with whom I had worked regularly during my doctoral research on spirit mediumship practices. They were about to organise an upcoming violin and drum homage ceremony for Gypsy spirits, one that I had paid for and was due to participate in soon. As I sat down with them to go over some of the details of the event, Olga remarked curiously that she had seen “someone” come in through the door with me.

“He’s sitting right behind you, there on the sofa, and he’s murmuring, chuckling, trying not to be seen”, she said, intrigued, her brows furrowed as she looked over my shoulder. I looked back, too. Both her and her husband then proceeded to describe the mystery fellow that had claimed his love for me. “Mulatto man, with patchy or unhealthy hair. And eyes as clear as a cat’s”, Eduardo said. But as they looked closer, through mechanisms unavailable then to my perception (even though they had clearly been working before, that same day), they saw more. “This is bad”, said Olga ominously. “This thing pretends to come with you, to be one of *your* spirits, but it’s not. It’s diabolical. Very strange”, she mused; “it’s like I can see inside it, to the skull and bones, as if the skin could just fall off”. Eduardo confirmed this by saying that he had the impression that this spirit’s appearance, its physiognomy, could just disintegrate, as if it were a mere mask. The spirit, he concluded, or its “look”, was a disguise for what was really inside. It’s not a spirit at all, they finally said - it’s a composite of elements brought together by the work of witchcraft, and animated enough so that it walked and talked like a human spirit. This mind-boggling explanation of alternative spirithood was coupled with a reading of who the culprit was – to my horror, someone I knew well – and the observation that it’s message – that he was in love with me – was the sender’s, not the spirit’s. Fortunately, Eduardo was an experienced Palero, which meant he was well equipped to deal with the offending “spirit”, and the following day he was swearing me under the protection of his magical recipient (the *Nganga*) in front of a handful of his godchildren. I was cleansed with plants, animal blood, and incisions were cut on the skin of my hand to ensure I would be “under the wing” of the religious house’s main *muertos* from now.

Among other things, this witchcraft incident had the curious effect of spurring in me an ethnographic and theoretical fascination with the “substance” and “composition” of spirits, and how people understood “deadness”, rather than merely “aliveness”. I was to work on this theme in subsequent fieldwork forays. But it had also instilled in me a disquieting feeling of bodily and spiritual vulnerability in relation to my own position in the religious sphere. After all, if one of my own *friends* had exercised his power over my own emotional and physiological existence – assuming the spirit was “designed” to interfere in my will towards him and to eventually fall in love with the sender – how could I ensure my physical safety from the myriad sorcerers that I had contact with

during my work and who might not wish me well? I became increasingly paranoid myself. I quickly found myself listening to the counsel of my own spirits, through the mediums I visited, being careful to whom I gave my surname to (surnames are traces used for witchcraft), and learning the signs associated with the presence of undesirable dark entities (headaches, for instance), or Palo's deadly *muertos oscuros*. I too, like my interlocutors, feared spiritual and ritual persecution. After this bout of witchcraft I was once more a victim of it, knowledge of which reconfigured existing relationships to informants, friends, and strangers. Not surprisingly, I was to receive some minor health-inducing Santería initiations from Eduardo on a subsequent trip (the so-called *guerrero orichas*, the "warriors") – initiations he maintained would "tie me down to earth" rather than see me become the victim of something which would release me from it – and became tied (*presa*) to undergoing full-blown initiation at some later, unspecified date.

The point of all these personal observations is simply to note that at no time during my learning of this new conceptual religious language could I simply treat it as a "language", devoid of operative causes and effects, for I was very much a part of these causes and effects in the environments through which I routinely traversed. In Cuban religious circles there is little room for genuine scepticism (scepticism makes you easy prey to the evil of others). At no time was I ever asked whether I "believed", except by unbelievers, who are normally Marxist or foreign. To fail to have been affected by these agencies to which these languages referred, and on which they operated, would have been to fail to grasp the most basic insight of this environment: that information – and more importantly, communication, or *lack thereof* – makes the world go around, whether it comes from the living or the dead. Information, in this sense, is not something contained in minds, and transmitted. Information creates sensory and emotive-scapes that quite escape any propositional understanding of their content but instead evoke particular moods and inclinations. Witchcraft is certainly one of the most pervasive of such encompassing sensory-scapes.

There has been much written on the "modernity of witchcraft", especially in African contexts (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, Geschiere 1997). As Bonhomme recently argues, "Discourses about witchcraft are shaped by globalised imaginaries and spread through modern means of communication", thriving in sectors of society such as politics and the economy (2012: 210). But Bonhomme also crucially highlights the need to examine what he calls the "microsociological" aspects of witchcraft, which he does through an analysis of the spread of rumours in West and Central Africa – rumours such as penis snatching through mundane encounters with strangers, and mobile phone numbers that kill the receivers of their calls. Bonhomme's argument is that in order to come to grips with how witchcraft works, we need to do something other than simply focus on globalisation and other facets of abstract modernity. His interest lies in how "the wide-ranging dynamics of modernity translate into the basic substance of everyday interaction on a smaller scale" (ibid). For example, he connects penis-snatching rumours to the phenomena of urban anonymity, tracing them to marketplaces where there is much interaction and contact between strangers and where friendly gestures are treated suspiciously, putting "urban sociality to the test" (ibid: 215). According to Bonhomme, it is the abstract figure of the "unknown" or the "stranger" that causes witchcraft accusations or rumours in this context, be they other ethnicities or foreigners (ibid: 216). Witchcraft, then, represents the "dark side of anonymity" (ibid: 225). While in Cuba the sorcerer is also generally "anonymous" (until

revealed, for instance, by other sorcerers like Eduardo), evil is not just a question of morality, but ontology (Silva 2015) – it is pervasive and all-consuming.

In different ways, the religious practices that I briefly described at the beginning of this section encapsulate well the notion not just that most knowledge is knowledge-under-construction, even when it comes from higher sources - and thus, that there is always a potentially obscure dimension of information - but that even those higher sources may be conflict-ridden, temperamental, and volatile. The constant negotiation and sacrificial diplomacy required between ritual expert or medium and their entities, in order to sustain balanced and productive relationships, alerts us to the often-tenuous nature of trust here. These are not separate aspects of religious experience, in my view. Understanding the nature of knowledge and mistrust as aspects of one another brings us closer to one of the main themes of this paper – the “spirits” of suspicion.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

In this article I have tried to theorise paranoia, mistrust, and to some extent, conflict, not as destructive or negative phenomena necessarily, but as reflective and generative of a certain ethos in Cuba, one in which knowledge is not simply something propositional but absent, in certain cases, occulted in others. Experience and participation in these extended religious systems is not a matter of belief, but effect, so to speak, where the ethnographer is not exempt from bearing the brunt of phenomena such as witchcraft, for instance, or from becoming embroiled in situations that are beyond her control proper, but remit to broader cosmologies.

One of the harsh lessons of the field may be that anthropology is not about “truth” at all – in the sense of faithfully *representing* something that exists in the world – but about relationships: the anthropologist’s own assumptions to those of the culture she studies; her understandings of Otherness to her personal experiences of it; her expectations to those of her so-called “informants”; and so on and so forth. None of this is controversial. As Kirsten Hastrup (1995: 51) has stated: “If reflexivity is part of ethnography, this means that the anthropologist becomes her own informant”; I would add that her presence in the field inevitably alters it, and it is only through the reverberations of these constant alterations, materially, socially, and emotionally, that she arguably attains any degree of connectivity and thus, empathy. That we are necessarily “implied” in the fabric of our “fields” inasmuch as we live and work and *know* in them is, I think, a given. Favret-Saada (1980) demonstrated this rather poignantly in her study of witchcraft and words in France. If the ethnographer chooses to engage in her natives’ discourse, to ask questions, to utter words, then she too will be “caught”, her fate tied and untied by the kinds of positions she produces at any given moment, and the statements about herself that these invariably engender. Indeed, in a more recent paper, Favret-Saada ventures to say that “confronted with an incomprehensible cycle of unfortunate events, anybody – whatever his culture – may adhere to the ideas of Bocage witchcraft” (2012: 48). But the more interesting question Favret-Saada raises seems to be raising is how exactly we define our “field”, particularly when we write anthropologies of the “unseen”, “unheard”, or the otherwise intangible and its effect on the unfolding of our research (cf. Blanes and Espirito Santo 2014).

Postmodernism's call for reflexivity seems to have little to say about how we personally deal with what Stephan Palmié has called "disqualified forms of interpretation" (2002:20), regimes of knowledge such as dreams, rumours, visions, spirit communications, as well as our own "paranormal" experiences, which are usually taboo in the academic world. This silence is directly related to the first problem, it seems: namely, one of determining who counts as "actor" in this field - inasmuch as this is defined by the power to direct and produce change - as well as *what* counts as legitimate "anthropological" experience from our standpoint. And this also bears quite significantly, I would add here, on our over-reliance, as anthropologists, on concepts of "belief", which necessarily crystallise notions of extra-human agency as epiphenomena of the mental processes of "believers". One of the problematic assumptions in the anthropology of religion, argues Catherine Bell, "is the ease with which we grant belief a prior existence in order to cast it as the a priori shaper and instigator of action" (2002: 107). But "while belief may well work this way some of the time, we have no evidence that this happens most of the time" (ibid). Indeed, what cases of suspicion and paranoia in spirit-driven environments show us is exactly the opposite: belief is secondary to effect, to event, to knowledge. And knowing does not occur within a context of belief; it *is the context*.

A couple of observations are pertinent here, specifically, regarding what can be reasonably understood as the "field" in *fieldwork*, and its constitutive entities. On the question of what the "field" is, Barak Kalir says the following:

We seldom give serious practical and theoretical recognition to the role of the field. While anthropologists regularly account for all sorts of constraints in the field, these are often simply treated as static circumstances, rarely integrated in a dynamic way into the conceptualisation of our own position and actions. (2006:237)

Instead, Kalir follows Bourdieu's definition of a "field" as a "configuration of collective relations between positions" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:97, ibid), relations determined by certain rules. While I do not find Bourdieu's concern (and Kalir's for that matter) with the structured/structuring facts of the field relevant to my material – such as existing sets of rules, structures of power or the habituses of others, all of which impinge upon our possible responses, and so on – I take Kalir's point that we are often faced with power relations that escape our immediate control and even perception, and which we are forced to acknowledge nevertheless, sooner or later. However, while fieldwork methods are designed in principle to help the anthropologist experience the "field" from the point of view of local ontologies, and to deal reflexively with alterity as a natural component of our personal encounters, there tends to be a bias towards understandings of power as that wielded exclusively by people. But, as Eduardo Kohn argues, in relation to dreaming dogs, significance "is not the exclusive province of humans" (2007:5); it can inhere among "non-human selves", be these animals, natural forces, or invisible beings. The first observation here, then, is that in order to understand difference in fundamentally social ways, *relationally*, we must, as the anthropologist Viveiros de Castro says (2003), be willing to see *all* relations as social, including those that would ordinarily escape the anthropologist's own demarcated ontological frames, i.e. living people. Working the "field", as it were, is to also to accept and work with a fundamental ontological exposure, one that is processual and relational, not fixed in cosmological givens.

Nils Bubandt (2009) has suggested the usefulness of treating spirits as “informants” proper, as “methodologically” (if not quite “ontologically”) real beings. It makes sense, he says, to “treat spirits anthropologically as informants because that is how people in Ternate [Indonesia] treat them” (2009: 295). Describing a possession ceremony which resulted in heated political discussions between multiple spirits, including those of sultans and pre-Islamic leaders, many of which through the body of a single medium – Ibu Lan – Bubandt states that the spirits, each one, “in their own right were historical persons that could be treated as informants”. For him, “the idea of treating these spirits as informants is only counterintuitive because the category of ‘informant’ remains linked to conventional, philosophical idea(l)s about the bounded self. This vestige of individualism that continues to inform the concept of the informant is odd” (2009: 296), he comments. What he calls the “one-body-one-person-one-mind model” of the self, which obviously has dividends for the category of informant, is just inadequate to his data, and also to mine. Like Bubandt in Indonesia, in Cuba I encountered a lot more “selves” than there were bodies to account for them in any given room. I take from this my second observation for this conclusion: that while it is necessary and desirable to take spirits as “methodologically real” actors in the fields we work, we are in the end not looking for a suspension-of-disbelief, which at some later time will be unsuspended to give way to the way things really *are* (unbeknownst to the natives themselves). As Marcio Goldman argues in an article which begins with a description of one of his own mystical experiences, where he hears some drumming attributed by his Candomblé friends to the dead in the distance – it matters very little whether the phenomenon in question is true or not, what matters was that he was *affected*, in the manner proposed by Favret-Saada. I translate and quote: “Maybe our task is more modest”, Goldman argues, “to develop ethnographic theories capable of returning what we study to its dailyness” (or mundaneness);

...to reinsert whatever it is that we study into life and to carefully avoid the kinds of literalisations and over interpretations that are, at the end of the day, the weapons of the powers that-be; and finally, to at least try to glimpse at that which, in life, and in often silent ways, escapes this same dailyness or mundaneness. (2007:171).

Any concern with the ethics of fieldwork in suspicion-laden environments (and even more so, *religious* environments) should, I think, begin with these premises, so that we are able to look at the field as the *totality* of (knowledge and other) relationships in which we are actually implied, emotionally, sensually, spiritually.

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## Immersion in Experiencing the Sacred: Insights into the Ethnography of Religion

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This article was inspired by an analysis of my interrupted conversion to Reconstructors in Prayer – a new Catholic movement – which took place during ethnographic research. My own experience of conversion, followed by my distancing, thus became ethnographic material to be studied and recounted. I shall narrate the ‘natural history’ of my meeting with the group and my interrupted conversion, touching upon the dilemmas and contingencies of my fieldwork; rather than dwell upon my autoethnographic methodology or my research findings, I shall discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the participant immersion ethnographical technique in studying religious phenomena. Thus I have a double aim. On the one hand, I shall show that the bodily engagement implied in autoethnography furnishes the researcher with a privileged perspective from which to examine religious experiences, especially when they become extraordinary experiences resulting from initiatic knowledge. On the other hand, I shall point out the risks, dilemmas and costs to a researcher of ethnography based on participant immersion. These reflexions will lead me to the conclusion that the researcher’s total immersion is not compulsory for the ethnography of religion, but is particularly useful in cases where the experiential component is central because spiritual knowledge-acquisition is mediated by the experience of the body. I shall then argue that the reflexive dimension of ethnographic accounts is welcome if, and only if, it enriches and problematises cognitive effort cultivating research.

Keywords: Autoethnography, participant immersion, extraordinary experiences, ethnography of religion, initiatic knowledge

### 1. From ethnography to autoethnography in the sociology of religion

This article was inspired by an analysis of my interrupted conversion to a new Catholic movement, which took place during ethnographic research. My own experience of conversion, followed by my distancing, thus became ethnographic material to be studied and recounted. I shall narrate the ‘natural history’ of my meeting with the group and my interrupted conversion, touching upon the dilemmas and contingencies of my fieldwork. I shall not dwell upon my autoethnographic methodology or my research findings<sup>1</sup>: rather shall I talk about the advantages and disadvantages of the participant immersion ethnographic technique in studying religious phenomena. Thus I have a double aim. On the one hand, I shall show that the bodily engagement implied in autoethnography furnishes the researcher with a privileged perspective from which to examine religious experiences, especially when they become extraordinary experiences resulting from initiatic knowledge. On the other hand, I shall point out the risks, dilemmas and costs to a researcher of ethnography based on participant

<sup>1</sup> In this context, see Palmisano (2009).

immersion. These reflexions will lead me to the conclusion that the researcher's total immersion is not compulsory for the ethnography of religion, but is particularly useful in cases – such as the one described focussing on practice – where the experiential component is central because spiritual knowledge-acquisition is mediated by the experience of the body. I shall then argue that the reflexive dimension of ethnographic accounts is welcome if, and only if, it enriches and problematises cognitive effort cultivating research.

Autoethnography appears as a natural progression from already-ingrained elements in the ethnographic tradition. The history of ethnography reveals that ethnographers have always attempted to define their relationship with the subjects they portray. Their field notes have always included personal accounts of, and subjective reactions to, their fieldwork. In the past, however, these accounts rarely found their way into officially published ethnography (Van Maanen 1988; Coffey 1999). In the 1970s there was a change in emphasis from participant observation to the observation of participation, in the light of which more ethnographers focussed on their personal experiences of participation in their fieldwork. By the 1980s, more and more ethnographers were doubting the objectivity standard and allowing themselves to appear in their fieldwork accounts (Tedlock 1991). Contemporary tendencies in both postmodern and feminist theories add to the narrative and autobiographical exploration of field experience.

Although autoethnography has not yet become widespread in the sociology of religion, it is one of the most important novelties in this discipline, traditionally reluctant to cross the border and make the researcher the object of the research (Spickard and Landres 2002). Above all, it has stimulated the enthusiasm of sociologists interested in multi-sensorial approaches which go beyond the observation-participation mix, encouraging – as Pink (2009: 63) states – learning which is embodied, situated, sensorial and empathetic. Autoethnography may develop in this vein as a specific research method where the religious phenomenon is understood through the researcher's immersion in the field, and his/her body and experience of the study group. Some scholars (Goulet 1994; Liberman 2001; Palmer 2001a; Zablocki 2001) state that when researchers are willing to join in their hosts' religious and spiritual practices, they gain a deeper understanding of the culture being studied, above all when this involvement sees them opening up to unusual experiences. However, whatever form it takes, this involvement entails a cost to the researcher, often in terms of an identity struggle. Autoethnography transforms the researcher into the object which s/he studies: comprehension of the meaning attributed by the members of the culture being examined to their everyday actions evolves through identification by means of empathy where the barriers between public and private life are demolished. In the case of ethnography of religion, there can be very marked *displacement* because the researcher is often dealing with religious groups who mediate with the spiritual world, so while participating in their practices one may find oneself having extraordinary experiences. Palmer (2001) observes that experiencing altered states of consciousness or supernatural phenomena jeopardises the objectivity of the researcher and his or her analytical frame, but it is part of the path towards the truth of what the group wishes to communicate. On the other hand, Goulet pointed out, as early as in 1994, that in the process of anthropological fieldwork it is useful for the ethnographer to undergo the extraordinary experiences which natives do and to incorporate such experiences in ethnographic accounts because s/he can listen to other people's responses to the

account of waking dreams and visions experienced while living among them. Kimball (1972: 191) had previously claimed that, although 'there is no known device that measures the degree of penetration into an alien culture', one may assume that the deeper the participation in the new culture, the more one would expect changes at a 'psychic level in the patterns of cognitive and emotional response and in the unconscious manifestations through dreams and visions'.

As will become clear in the following sections, the above points have encouraged me to adopt participant immersion in my research into Reconstructors in Prayer (RIPs).

## **2. Entrapped in intimacy: How my interrupted conversion became a source of ethnographic knowledge**

My first meeting with RIPs took place in 2003, when I began a yoga course at their centre in Turin<sup>2</sup>. During the final yoga class, the teacher invited us to attend a course in deep meditation. It began to dawn on me that this place was more than just a gym. A course in vegetarian cooking gave me the opportunity to improve my understanding. Everything became clearer: this was not a proper health club, it was a community. The courses were located on the ground floor of a small block of flats, on the first floor of which lived the RIP. Fascinated by them, I decided to conduct an ethnographic survey. I started collecting information on their identity and I discovered that behind their ideals of healthy living there resided a religious community.

Carrying out the research was not easy. The community had to learn to accept and manage the presence of an intruder who was a 'professional stranger' (Agar, 1980). A proposal by its leader, Father Cappelletto S.J., was decisive: he engaged me as his 'biographer' and tasked me with recording the history which the community has been expecting for a long time. I was allowed to conduct interviews and move freely around the forty houses they have in Italy<sup>3</sup>. Cappelletto wanted to inform only the community members about my role as a researcher. The others, he told me, might be distressed, and this would jeopardise their full integration into the movement. Therefore, as far as the others were concerned, I was simply Cappelletto's biographer. During my research

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<sup>2</sup> The group was founded in Italy in 1980 by a Jesuit named Vittorio Cappelletto after he had spent a period in India at the school of Anandamurti, a master of Tantric Yoga. This experience affected him so profoundly that he was induced to import the teachings received from the Indian guru into Christianity. In 1993 the RIP were approved by the Catholic Church. Many sacerdotal vocations have arisen within the group. Their ministry in the parishes alternates with their work at the centres which the movement had established Italy (40 houses). The internal hierarchy of the group is structured on three levels: the priests (22) and the 'community members' (150) constitute the higher levels; 'volunteers' (around 300) form the middle level; and 'sympathisers' (around 1500) the lowest level. Although the RIP describe themselves as a Catholic group, and although their membership of the Church has been confirmed by canonical recognition, they are distinguished by the syncretism of their doctrinal and liturgical structure, which has induced some members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy to doubt their Catholic identity (Palmisano 2015). The RIPs' religious beliefs exhibit a close intertwining between the Tantric-Yoga teachings that Cappelletto received from Anandamurti and the Christian tradition.

<sup>3</sup> Fieldwork was focussed on Piedmont, North-West Italy.

I wondered continuously whether the 'biographer' appellation masked his desire to enrol me among his followers. His laconic use of language, his sibylline statements and the rhetorical questions with which he invariably concluded our conversations led me to suspect that I too was being subjected to the 'becoming aware' pedagogy used by the group to attract converts.

Furthermore, although my position as biographer made the interviewees more willing to talk openly, I was soon assailed by the doubt that the pact I had entered into would compel me to betray the scientific aims of ethnography. I found myself having to manage the problem of 'historical intervention' signalled by Palmer (2001), who advises ethnographers not to let themselves be manipulated by the New Religious Movement of which they are guests, not even in exchange for guaranteed access to the field. I was considering how I could release myself from the pact when the meditation course began. I learned to dance the *kirtam*, to chant the *mantra* in Sanskrit, and to meditate. I also participated in Cappelletto's Sunday Masses and the community's monthly retreats. For a couple of weeks I visited several of the houses belonging to the RIP in the countryside of Piedmont, where I adapted to the requisite lifestyle: cold showers, vegetarian food and fasting; no TV, smoking or alcohol; and, above all no, mattresses for sleeping. Everybody welcomed me with warmth and enthusiasm, and all were willing to be interviewed. Their opinions conveyed a 'holy' image of Cappelletto: a living saint, endowed with thaumaturgical powers and the purveyor of visions and prophecies; everybody accepted that it was his mission to reconquer souls for Catholicism.

I, however, had the impression of being confronted by a syncretic version of Catholicism. As Leatham observes (2001), one of the most crucial tasks of a researcher in the field is negotiating his or her personal identity within the community being studied. In my experience the difficulties derived not from religious distance but from proximity. I had to overcome all the resistance raised by my Catholic upbringing against dancing the *kirtam*, chanting the name of Christ in Sanskrit, and seeking communication with angels. However, the discomfort passed rapidly. Liberman (2001) states that researchers who study other cultures should be open to intellectual and personal transformation. Chancellor (2001) is of the same opinion when he observes that those who conduct research in an NRM should be willing to undertake a personal journey filled with intellectual, political, moral, and spiritual dimensions shaping one's personal history as well as the movement about which one writes.

Perhaps because of the liberating message of reflexive ethnography (Bromley and Carter, 2001), or perhaps because of my spiritual curiosity, the *bricolage* between *tantra*, yoga and Christianity suddenly no longer troubled me. Instead I was intrigued. I no longer took part in the rites of the RIP by emulation but experienced the promised effects (gift). Carried away with enthusiasm for this new experience, I found myself a voluntary accomplice in a process of enrolment among Cappelletto's disciples. I spent most of my time with them and, when I could not, I sought to ensure that my daily lifestyle complied with the discipline of the community. Identifying with RIP members, practising meditation and living by ascetic rules gave me direct experience not only of their daily lives, but also a foretaste of the extraordinary experiences described by the interviewees (I experienced sensations of light and sounds, but not clairvoyancy, hypnosis or telepathy, which I nonetheless heard accounts of). Above all I committed myself to protecting the community. I was troubled by the 'dilemma of

contextualisation' (Palmer 2001) when giving an adequate description of their life and culture without exposing them to external judgement. On the personal level I was being converted, while on the working level I was struggling with the problem of 'going native' (Goulet 1994; Palmer 2001; Bromley and Carter 2001; Buckser and Glazier 2003). I was becoming my own research object: what is the explanation of conversion to this group? What role do extraordinary experiences – a gift of meditation passionately desired by all practicants – play in encouraging total commitment to serving the RIPs' mission?

While I was still plagued with these questions, Cappelletto, without any explanation, deprived me of my role of biographer. This act, performed in front of his closest collaborators, hurt me deeply. Reading between the lines I had the intuition that what I had written was not as congratulatory as had been expected. I also wondered whether that act was the result of Cappelletto's recognition of his failure to enrol me in the group. We did not have time to discuss it. I thought I noticed that he was profoundly disappointed: he had entrusted me with the role of biographer, compatible with my profession, with the intention that it would provide a launching-pad for my conversion; but in return, I turned out to be lukewarm. Soon afterwards I found out that they had contacted an Italian publisher and that the task of writing the history of the RIPs had been entrusted to a member of the community. I felt hurt because that gesture took place during the deep crisis which I was undergoing as a researcher, following the dream of concluding the research in order to take the step for which I was 'really' there – to convert. On the other hand, many of Cappelletto's collaborators confessed to me that they had received messages from heaven revealing that my arrival had been providential: rather than my research leading me to them, it was the Holy Spirit bringing me 'home' again.

This was a turning point, not only for my research, but also in my life. My relationship with the 'guardians' was no longer the same. Except for a few members, those who had been my 'favourite informants' started to refuse to co-operate. The pact of trust no longer existed. My conversion had impeded my investigating fundamental issues for fear that I might cause embarrassment among my informants. Consequently, the information that I had managed to gather was incomplete. I was confronted with the 'paradox of intimacy': a high degree of trust achieved early in an investigation may curtail a researcher's freedom to seek and enquire. How could I continue my research? I was disappointed by Cappelletto's act, but this gradually gave way to relief at being freed from my tasks as biographer. The initial inspiration which had induced me to become complicit in enrolment among the sympathisers of the movement began to subside.

At this point, I had to find new interlocutors from whom to obtain information. I consequently tried to approach the sympathisers, but although they were clearly willing to help me, I was unable to gain any new information from them. This situation continued until one day I received a telephone call. A woman with a hoarse voice asked me to meet her. She told me that she had left the RIP a couple of years previously and wanted to help me, as she had been told about my research by a mutual acquaintance. This was the first of twelve interviews that I conducted with former RIPs. The classic methodological problems posed by working with ex-members as informants were present from the outset (Bromley 1998; Zablocki 2001). There were considerable differences between accounts of the movement furnished by hostile

former members and by committed ones. While the RIPs extolled the saintliness of Cappelletto, the former RIPs emphasised his authoritarianism, his inclination to spiritualism and his disputes with the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Although their stories were centred on the 'captivity narrative' (Bromley 1998b) typical of apostates (Carter Lewis 1998), they were a valuable source of information for study of the esotericism of the RIPs, their 'dark side' as the apostates call it, and their relationship with Anandamurti the founder of the Ānanda Mārga, an NRM which appeared in Italy in the 1960s.

It was from the first informant that I learned of the relationship between Cappelletto and Anandamurti. Many of the practices taught by Cappelletto, the woman told me, had been inspired by the doctrine of the Ānanda Mārga. She also told me that, like the Ānanda Mārga, the RIP were custodians of arcane knowledge. I cast my mind back to the first interviews, and I remembered that Cappelletto had told me about the meeting with Anandamurti. However, he had side-stepped my request for further details by claiming that it had been a marginal event.

I decided to visit an Ānanda Mārga community. I discovered that there was only one in Italy, near Verona. According to an agreement made by telephone, I would meet only four of the ten *acharya* (teachers who furnish rules on practice) who lived in the community, because many of them were abroad during the summer. However, when I arrived, there was only one person to meet me. Fearful that I would lose this last contact as well, I presented myself as a rather undisciplined member of Cappelletto's group. It was perhaps for that reason that the *acharya* gave me his opinion on the Jesuit's work. He told me that Cappelletto, after becoming Anandamurti's disciple, had re-crossed religious borders in order not to be condemned by the Roman Catholic Church. Eventually, in reply to my questions, he revealed that the Ānanda Mārga were the custodians of an arcane doctrine that was only accessible to initiates. In the shop at the Ānanda Mārga centre, I bought *Sixteen Points: Our Fundamental Duty* (Anandamurti 1960), a book containing the essence of Anandamurti's message. Reading this text was illuminating: not only had Cappelletto drawn his inspiration from Anandamurti's 'doctrine of sixteen points'; he had also become an 'interpreter' of an innovative translation process which imported into Catholicism practices, rituals and languages peculiar to Tantric Yoga. The whole Ānanda Mārga system is found among the RIPs, the difference being that *mantra*, *mudra* and *kirtam* are accommodated in order to be dedicated to Christ.

The second informant told me about the esoteric nature of the group and about Cappelletto's supernatural powers. She had joined the group when she was nearly eighteen years old, and a few years later, encouraged by him, had married a male member of the movement. 'To Father Cappelletto', the woman told me, 'you must give utmost obedience. There are some oaths which seal certain promises'. She told me about her initiation, but did not want to disclose the contents of the secret ceremony. She said that she was frightened about what might happen when Cappelletto read my mind and 'saw' our meeting. She was convinced that the Jesuit had the power of clairvoyance, one of the *siddhis* that had been transmitted to him in the initiation received from Anandamurti. She recounted episodes when he had guessed her thoughts during their group meditation, but also during her confessions, which took place once a month and which she never missed.

The interviews with former members, which did not interrupt my visits to the community, helped me to see the RIPs in a new light. When I mentioned my meetings with the former RIP who was the only community member still talking to me, he seemed neither surprised nor angry; nor did he ask me to whom I had spoken, or what they had said, and I certainly did not volunteer to tell him. Tired of being ignored by Cappelletto and all the others, I asked him for an appointment to talk about my article, determined to tell him about everything I intended to write. He did not try to stop me; he asked me if he could read the article as soon as it was finished. Six months later I gave him a draft of the article. He was dissatisfied and proposed several radical changes which I accepted only in part. I accepted all his corrections of dates and events, but did not change my interpretation of the group as a syncretistic spiritual itinerary within Italian Catholicism. Strangely enough, he never asked me to leave. I suspected that, for some reason linked with his personal truth-seeking, my representation of the group caused him to doubt, soliciting him to reflect upon the critical consequences of the syncretistic establishment which he had set up. Then I thought that his removal of my role as biographer needed to be re-interpreted not as a demotion but as a reluctant act of liberation, facilitating my return to my 'real' home, viz. my research: in other words, enabling me to supply a sociological account which would be useful for reflecting on the destiny of the RIPs at a delicate moment of their existence, when their founder was on the point of leaving the scene. After almost two years from the start of the research, it was I who decided that the moment had come to abandon the field, for I had not received any new information for a long time. Taking my leave was not painless. I promised myself that I would come back soon to dance, sing and walk around their farms, a promise which I did not keep.

Some months after that, I read in a newspaper that the RIPs were in the news because of accusations of paedophilia against one of the group's priests. A year later Cappelletto died suddenly<sup>4</sup>. All this prompted me to rethink my research experience. Methodologically what had happened stimulated me to reconsider the value of reflexivity in fieldwork, especially the epistemological role of ethnographers' misunderstandings, usually generated by their negotiating strategies for the acceptance of their presence in the field. This reflection also evoked the 'theatricality' of the field: how ethnographers incorporate the distancing/proximity dialectics in their attitudes and relationships, in the form of a specifically-elaborated professional 'character', one of the most difficult challenges facing scholars who choose participant immersion. I shall focus on this question in the next section.

### **3. In favour of participant immersion, being aware of the risks**

The above narration of my autobiographical experience of RIP enrolment and distancing, also illuminates their most important sociological traits. In this Section I shall claim that I would not have been able to discover or explore many of these traits

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<sup>4</sup> Although there were some defections after Cappelletto's death, the community survived and is still active today, led by a priest from the movement nominated by Cappelletto himself as a kind of spiritual testament. The successor has opted for a bureaucratic leadership style characterised by the aim of laying aside the esoteric aura associated with the founder's charisma in favour of an 'essentialisation' of the RIPs' doctrine, thus allowing improved relationships with ecclesiastical authorities in the dioceses where the RIPs have their houses and hold their meditation courses (Palmisano 2015).



if I had not carried out participant immersion ethnography. Although broad agreement with RIP practices facilitated my conversion, I am still in favour of this ethnographic approach when studying religious phenomena where embodied spiritual experience occupies a central space.

The RIPs aim to entice back the 'lost sheep' to the Catholic Church by reawakening their desire for a relationship with the transcendent. This mission has been declared in their charter: 'To commit itself, through study and research, to finding the best means to bring back to the faith those who have abandoned it, or non-believers, and to re-educate them in the sacramental life'. What is missing in the charter is that this journey is accomplished through meditation and that it is not presented as leading to an encounter with the personal God of Christianity, but rather to an impersonal and fusional god evoked in the form of 'cosmic energy'. Only through my fieldwork did I understand that the subsequent steps towards discovery (or rediscovery) of the Christian God and the figure of Christ are part of a gradual process of 'disclosure' which begins if/when the spiritual aspirants are ready. This aim explains why the RIPs address a public that is vast and heterogeneous from a spiritual point of view. Among those whom I met at the meditation course there were atheists and agnostics; seekers of spirituality attracted by Oriental culture and esotericism; non-practising Catholics, and active Catholics dissatisfied with parish life. Informal interviews reveal that all feel they were received with great enthusiasm on their arrival. In the affiliation process they are guided by an experienced member of the opposite sex whose role it is to foster their involvement by eliciting curiosity about the spiritual journey they are about to undertake and its results. Through my experience I realised that once they join the meditation group, new members are encouraged to observe the diet/lifestyle and spiritual discipline of the community – taught by Cappelletto – and participate in its activities. These are the necessary conditions for achieving results in meditation, namely arriving at a particular psychophysical state of deep relaxation during which the person meditating enters into communion with the spirit world (angels, saints, the deceased and natural energy), helping him or her to experience direct contact with God. Not infrequently, it seems that meditators experience particular sensations, like lights, sounds, a sense of wellbeing or tremors. In the 'spiritual direction', the priests explain that these extraordinary experiences are signs of spiritual growth. Except in this private meeting with the priest, it is not allowed to speak to anybody about such experiences. Thus, how can the researcher get closer to them?

Since RIP spiritual itineraries are characterised by the centrality of personal experience and the body, if I had restricted myself to interviewing group members or only observing their rituals without participating, I would not have fully understood the meanings which they attribute to those paths. Participant immersion turned out to be the most valid heuristic practice for my research aims. However, I cannot deny that the choice of this role of observer was painful, raising various ethical and methodological dilemmas: it meant acting like a 'novice', taking part in the meditation course and rituals in RIP homes, experiencing ascetic discipline at first hand, and interiorising their views of the world, their values, their discourse and specific symbols – exactly the same process of socialisation and learning which those who decide to join the group must undergo. Above all, such deep involvement meant an 'experience curve' (Piasere 2002) in my existence, implying not only 'living with them' but also 'living like them', wishing to become one of them. My conversion was the key of my autoethnography: my body became my diary and my recorder, my emotions

preservers of memory. I superseded all the limits which ethnography handbooks impose on the researcher so that s/he does not lose objectivity or scientific rigour, i.e. 'in order to avoid the danger of going native'. And I paid the price of these 'methodological mistakes', trapped first of all in the 'intimacy paradox' described in the previous section: the conversion path inhibited not so much my critical gaze upon the group as my ability to ask questions which could, in extreme cases, embarrass the interlocutor. And when the disciple's afflatus had run its course rediscovering my identity as a mere researcher, I found myself with little information at hand and, even more important, few informants.

Although I am aware of the dangers and critical consequences which 'unorthodox ethnography' may lead to, I shall argue here in favour of ethnographic approaches implying sharing in the practices of the subjects being examined. I am not claiming that this sharing is always compulsory because, even in one's choice of ethnographic method, submission to the research object – the precedence of the object over the method – is still the rule. It is rather my intention to suggest that – only for the study of religious phenomena connected with embodied experiential practices – participant immersion has a revealing function which other sociological approaches may lack. Specifically, my fieldwork aims to contribute to the validation of sensory ethnography (Pink 2009) and to affirm the importance of the bodily experience of the fieldworker as a research process and source of knowledge (Okely 2007: 66, as cited in Pierini 2016: 66). In studying RIPs, the *ex-post* reasons inducing me to prefer participant immersion ethnography as a means of research, compared with other sociological approaches, may be summed up as follows:

1. The RIPs are obliged to speak exclusively with their spiritual guides, and nobody else either inside or outside the group, about their meditation practices and the effects which, in their opinion, it could produce in terms of extra-sensory experience (sounds, lights, colours, encounters with spiritual beings). Such wisdom, part of esoteric knowledge, is accessible only to initiates and therefore subject to secrecy, the reason why they cannot be discussed in an interview;
2. Even if the RIPs could speak freely about these experiences, an interview would not be the most suitable means of investigating them because: a. spiritual experience contains a strongly subjective, individual and intimate component, for which reason interviewees might not wish to talk about them; b. meditative practice as a vehicle of spiritual experience hinges on perception of energy through the body. During meditation the RIPs, guided by their leader, train themselves to perfect their perception ('let's learn to extend our antennae') in an effort to reach the highest levels of awareness. Thus, an interview is not suitable for investigating these aspects because it is not capable of expressing in words those 'embodied notions' (Pierini 2016) which are difficult to translate into language;
3. But even if an interview is not suitable, nor is observation sufficient. Sight is not the most useful sense for exploring the RIPs' spiritual experiences – which take place in silence, in immobility and with eyes closed. Sharing these practices rather helps the researcher to learn to 'feel' exactly as the RIPs do by training themselves to perfect their perception. In this way the researcher's bodily experience may become consciousness-producing material: not only because s/he may undergo extraordinary experiences but also because one may ask one's hosts for their personal opinion of

those experiences (Goulet 1994; Palmer 2001). Indeed, such shared experiences may become the entry-point to study beliefs, values and cosmogony. On the other hand, the more refined the researcher's sensorial awareness becomes, the more interlocutors are willing to reveal new elements to him/her. What they are prepared to say will depend partly on how much they think the researcher is able to grasp and understand (Pierini 2016). In other words, being reflexive about one's experience can constitute a common ground for interaction with research participants (ibid). In my case study, this discovery allowed me to show that among the RIPs themselves, many are critical of the beliefs implicit in spiritual experiences of meditation;

4. Participant immersion is also solidly supported by the 'observer paradox' (Devereux 1967): the very presence of the researcher may induce members to modify their behaviour. Observation in itself may have a damaging effect on the context being examined, provoking a remarkable degree of observational perturbation: one can imagine how much impact the presence of the researcher – equipped with notebook, taking notes during a meditation session, even the rustling of pages and a pen scratching on paper in an environment of *summum silentium* – may have. Rather, although it may appear paradoxical, it is the full participation of the researcher in his/her hosts' lives, his/her immersion in the field, which reduces the degree of perturbation deriving from his/her 'being there'. The reason this happens is that, as the ethnographer passes gradually from observation of, to participation in, the object of study, his/her 'third world' (Fabietti 1999) becomes evanescent in the sense that his/her presence in the field is 'naturalised' over time partly due to his/her greater capacity to stay and act in that environment. If this on one hand allows hosts to 'forget' the researcher, on the other it allows the latter to activate – sometimes totally inadvertently – the 'fluctuating attention' or 'receptive distraction' (Devereux 1967) which allow him/her to learn and understand (without any necessity for direct intervention of awareness but simply being in the context and in some way 'absorbing' it) – a process which Olivier de Sardan (1995) defines as 'impregnation'.

These reflections demonstrate that the choice of the observer role, of the ethnographer's degree of involvement and/or the group's sharing in the experience, are not exclusively methodological questions, but epistemological because they deal with how knowledge of the phenomenon being studied is constructed.

#### 4. Conclusion

The autoethnography of my interrupted conversion to the RIPs was an existentially important and professionally revealing research experience which has helped me to clarify the 'ethnographic posture' which I intend to adopt in future fieldwork. Having carried out this research, with the described modalities, has convinced me of the validity of the technique of participant immersion in the study of religious phenomena dealing with spiritual experiences based on the body and on subjectivity, especially in groups with an initiatic structure connected with esoteric knowledge. But I am not claiming that this is the only option possible or the most valid for every ethnographic research object. Moreover, having made myself, my body and my personal experience the object of ethnography has stimulated some epistemological reflections tending towards the rationalisation of ethnographic reflexivity. Given my past of going native, this may seem contradictory but, maybe because of this very experience, I sustain that an ethnographer should aim at a kind of impartiality, recognising that this is a utopia

or a limiting idea rather than an out-and-out scientific criterion. Even though the ethnographer feels strong attraction towards, or repulsion against, 'his' social actors, I believe that the best way to do them justice is the most objective possible description of the practices in which they are involved. I am not contradicting what I have already said, but rather affirming that participant immersion is a more valid technique when it allows gathering more data than the others do about a given social phenomenon – data which the researcher may elaborate in order to interpret that phenomenon. In other words, the reflexive dimension should enrich and problematise the cognitive process because what counts in the end is what the ethnographer says about a given social phenomenon, not his/her subjectivity. This is especially true because ethnography, in the light of its very militant methodological role, adopts a revelatory function which other sociological approaches find it more difficult to realise: being interested in practices, in what the social actors 'do', it is often able to show how things 'really' are, apart from the discourses which the actors or society create around themselves. I end with a *caveat* about the ethnographer's reflexivity: reflexive and introspective accounts are not always better than those where reflexivity is hidden. While some research benefits from its author's reflexivity, becoming thereby heuristically valid and convincing, other, openly introspective, research – where the author does little else but navel-gazing – is therefore destined for oblivion.

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