

## **“Entrancing and Entwining”: Sex and Gender in Afro-Brazilian Cults, an Overview**

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**Abstract:** By tracing back on the literature on Afro-Brazilian cults, this paper problematizes how gender issues have been approached in anthropological studies recently. It focuses mainly on the treatment given to women’s perspectives regarding their conflicts in the realm of the family and how they partake in the ‘supernatural’ entities of their lives. It also discusses how an objectivist anthropological perspective can hinder the recognition of religious constructs that attribute meaning to certain gender relations.

**Key Words:** possession, gender, family, trajectory, representation theories.

Two difficulties have consistently accompanied the studies on cult possessions in Brazil: one, nearly secular, concerns the relation between researchers and the very notion of possession – how is this ‘belief’ in the reality of possession, mainly as to the interaction between mediums and their saints, gods and entities to be grasped? There is a gap between the researchers of today and those who associated these cults to irrationality and primitivism, not to mention the abounding psychiatric interpretations of this strange phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> The second difficulty, more recent but not less relevant, concerns the awkwardness that ‘somewhat unconventional’ behaviors in regard to gender and to mediums’<sup>2</sup> sexuality has caused in the anthropological interpretations of these cults. Indeed, these two difficulties are intimately entwined. Certain obstacles that have hindered the theoretical understanding of possession are actually associated with researchers’ analytical difficulties before the participants’ ‘deviant’ sexual and gender behavior in cult centers throughout the country.

It is consensual in anthropology and in sociology that religious principles of interpretation of the world are powerful instruments in reality constructs. However, for cases of possession cults, there is an evident disagreement between what researchers and religious followers consider to be an integral part of the ‘real’ which is analyzed by the former. The presence of entities ‘on earth’ is ‘real’ to followers and ‘unreal’ to researchers. This slight difference as to the beings’ reality statute, absolutely central in such religious experiences, *is not exempt from* analytical consequences. Most studies between 1960 and 1980 on possession refer to mediums, to the complexity of the construct of the notion of person in possession cults, and to compensatory mechanisms

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<sup>1</sup> Raimundo de Nina Rodrigues, a Bahian physician, was the first in a vast lineage of researchers who endeavored to integrate the phenomenon of possession in the psychiatric scope (NINA RODRIGUES, 1935).

<sup>2</sup> I use the term “medium” or “filho/filha-de-santo” (“father of saint/daughter of saint”) regardless of the specificity they carry in other contexts. What matters here is to identify them as individuals that practice one or more form of possession in any of the branches acknowledged in the ‘Afro-Brazilian’ group.

that their mediunity bestows on them (especially on women), but carefully avoid considering these ‘other’ spiritual beings that so intensely occupy mediums, their clients and families as part of the targeted reality.<sup>3</sup>

The spirits and entities, so to speak, partake in the constitution of the ‘person’ but not of the ‘reality’ to be described. The described agency, in this case, is always that of the individuals even though they claim otherwise, and it unequivocally attributes agency to the supernatural beings with whom they interact.

I intend to demonstrate that we have much to gain if we adopt an analytical perspective which does not ‘de-realize’ the possession effects and products for its followers, but which, on the contrary, accepts the condition of agency which the followers attribute to their saints and entities. What power is thereby designated to them? Under what circumstances do they interfere in the mediums’ sexual, family, conjugal relations?

Underscoring mediums’ and *filhos-de-santo*’s viewpoints instead of researchers’ conceptions will enable us to make considerable strides in our understanding of the gender relations and the space granted to sexuality in these cults. This is because we will be able to see with fewer theoretical and, hopefully, theological hindrances the delicate relations that are woven when the practice of possession intertwines humans, deities and spirits into networks involving sexual desires, affective ties and gender roles with power differentials that permeate all these inter-relations.

We will therefore privilege certain academic studies that, by effectively grasping the followers’ viewpoint, have succeeded in taking seriously, with them and like them, the supernatural beings’ agency with which they develop important and varied attachments,<sup>4</sup> which may clarify followers’ accounts. One, among many others, is the case of a woman who explains what it meant to her to have had the intervention of a *pomba-gira*<sup>5</sup> in her relationship with her husband, children and lovers. The conflicting and complex dialog with the transgression of conjugal and family norms, mentioned by many mediums, depicts, as one essential component, possession as the instrument that allows these supernatural figures to intervene in their lives and in the lives of their relatives and friends.

Some recent studies feature an association between these two perspectives of the anthropological study that I am that I wish to highlight): on the one hand, the relinquishing, at least as to their centrality, of expressive and symbolic aspects of the person’s unfolding or expansion, these ‘Other spirituals’, on behalf of an analysis that underscores the followers’ interpretative perspective and the pragmatic aspects from which they stem; on the other hand, the importance given to gender and sexuality,

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<sup>3</sup> We might, at this point, refer to a Colloquium already remote in time, in which these difficulties, as well as the main ways to bypass them, were clearly consolidated. The Colloquium “*Cultes de Possession*”, presided by Roger Bastide and Jean Rouch in 1968, brought together the researchers who were most acclaimed for their studies in Africa and in Brazil. Among the researchers who at that time worked in Brazil were Roger Bastide, Joana Elbein dos Santos, Gisele Binon-Cossard and Pierre Verger. Worldwide renowned researchers Joan Lewis, Erica Bourguignon, Germaine Dieterlen and Luc de Heusch also participated.

<sup>4</sup> I refer to the studies by Stefania CAPONE, 1999; Véronique BOYER, 1993; and Kelly HAYES, 2004. In particular, the latter, which was the clearest inspiration in this study, not only presents an analysis that supplants, in the appointed perspective, the literature on Brazilian cults but also exposes a critique of functionalism which may be, ultimately, driving the whole.

<sup>5</sup> *Pomba-giras* and *exus* are terms that designate, in Afro-Brazilian cults, entities which are usually associated with often diabolic transgressions. According to specialists, the *pomba-giras* are female *exus*. The literature on these cults is vast, with frequent descriptions of these supernatural beings. See mainly Liane TRINDADE, 1982; and Marcia GOLDMAN, 1984.

considered one of the most important spheres in which these 'unreal' characters, above all *exus* and *pomba-giras*, operate.

We shall initially proceed to a brief overview of the reflections made by the pioneer investigators of possession cults as to their underlying gender, power and sexuality relations.

### **Possession and Its Effects on Gender Constitution**

As early as 1940, Ruth Landes pointed to the presence of transgressive gender relations in the possession cults she observed in Bahia.<sup>6</sup> She states that these cults displayed 'matriarchal' features while a number of them sheltered 'male homosexuals.' Her ethnographic account interlaces unusual, so to speak, gender relations with possession and power practices that did not comply with religious and moral orthodoxy recognized by researchers of these cults. Not surprisingly, Ruth Landes' work provoked reactions among scholars who, at that time, defended as genuinely 'religious' those cults resembling their own values, which included positive images of a Negro culture, of African origin, morally similar to Christianity. Arthur Ramos' incisive contestation is not difficult to understand:

In summary: Dr Ruth Landes' conclusions are charged with errors of observation, of hasty statements and of false or forged concepts concerning the Brazilian Negro's religious and magical life. It is lamentable that some of these conclusions, for example, regarding the Negro 'matriarchy' and women's control of religion in Bahia, and a ritual homosexuality among Brazilian Negros have already been ushered into the scientific community and are even being cast for publishing in technical magazines.<sup>7</sup>

Ramos' reaction highlights, as we can see, the alleged falsity of Landes' argument in relation to "women's control of religion" and the presence of a "ritual homosexuality." *Casas-de-santo* were treated by intellectuals such as Arthur Ramos, Edson Carneiro and Roger Bastide, among others, as communities that, transposed from Africa to the still rural peripheries of Brazilian cities, had preserved from their origins a social and moral harmony which had to be defended at any cost. A politically correct frame of mind, that is, an unrelenting defense of these African manifestations against the stigma of which they were the object, required identifying in these communities the same moral qualities that 'whites' and their families were entitled to. To refute Ruth Landes' arguments was, in a way, tantamount to wielding the 'opponents' same weapons in attacks which, in an inclusive society, were carried out against possession cults as a place for *curandeirismo* (healing cults) and witchcraft, at the service of ill-intentioned individuals. A normative perspective was thereby asserted in constructing these images contrary to the stigmatizing attacks of which the population of African origin was an object.

The moral scope imposed by these premises in describing Afro-Brazilian cults led their researchers to underscore the reproductive side of female identities, which, at the outset, would have them excluding or, at least, minimizing the deviant aspects appointed by Ruth Landes. The ideal of maternity and its perfect compatibility to gender relations made the women in these *terreiro* communities into quite asexual

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<sup>6</sup> Patrica BIRMAN, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> RAMOS, 1942, p. 189.

beings, dedicated to domestic chores and subordinate to the norms of family life and patriarchal hierarchy.

What Landes describes as far back as 1940 is a set of social and family relations not entirely adequate to the values of their researchers. The social and moral differences which for one reason or another drew investigators' interest would guarantee the interest of different generations of investigators throughout the past century. Powerful women and both male and female homosexuals built *familias-de-santo*, whom their supporters, the intellectual Brazilian elite, repeatedly watched with candor and romanticism, while diligently effacing the very overt marks (mostly corporeal) whereby sex, gender and power so easily entwined in their inter-relations.

It is not difficult to identify the cognitive and ideological operations carried out so as to guarantee both religious and moral purity of the cults. It would suffice to separate the wheat from the chaff, that is, those cults and centers that corresponded to the others' ideal model which, according to such applied criteria, would be false *candomblés*, practiced by quacks and individuals connected to the sub-world of contravention and crime. Indeed, the task of classifying (and purifying) to which many generations of investigators were dedicated, produced a model of orthodoxy esteemed in many *candomblé* centers.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, this normative model has never dissipated any suspicion of sexual or gender transgression even in centers that meticulously cultivated an identitarian resemblance with the dominant model in the inclusive society. The aim for tradition in certain *candomblé* centers, fostered by researchers who attended them, was often conflicting with their practice of certain gender transgressions.<sup>9</sup> Even among the less outstanding cult centers in the restricted group of traditional centers, this normative model is present and acknowledges the more or less transgressive practices. Ultimately, all of this has to do with the persistent backdrop of narrow relations among eroticism, magic and witchcraft in a number of narratives on possession in Brazil.<sup>10</sup>

How are we to understand, after all, these sexual and gender aspects, permanently associated with transgression, and forever, so to speak, disturbing researchers who venture out to the field, always quite exotic and exciting, of *terreiros* and *macumba*?<sup>11</sup> As late as the 1970's there did not seem to be any hesitation among researchers as to the immoral and pernicious character of these 'marginal' practices, always dislocated beyond the frontiers of the good *terreiros*. Afterwards, a positive recovery of these gender relations and of these 'deviant' sexual practices set in. It was not by chance that the studies in this field increased in step with the post-68 effects, above all on account of the presence and development of gender studies, mainly in reference to the statute of women and homosexuals in social life.

In 1977, Peter Fry is the first to talk of sex and homosexuals in Afro-Brazilian cults after the pioneer work of Ruth Landes. The next study was by Leni Silverstein, in 1979, who re-affirms and defends, from the feminist point of view, social and political power of the Bahian *mães-de-santo*.<sup>12</sup> After 1980 the number of studies exploring this

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. the studies of Peter FRY, 1977, 1982, and 2002; Yvonne MAGGIE, 1992; Beatriz GÓIS DANTAS, 1998, on the construction of authenticity in Afro-Brazilian cults.

<sup>9</sup> I refer here to Stefania CAPONE, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Yvonne MAGGIE, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> For an analysis of this category, cf. MAGGIE, 1992; BIRMAN 1995; and HAYES 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Leni Silverstein's paper begins by locating itself within the feminist movement: "The anthropologists who partake in the international feminist movement, which has flourished over the recent years, have endeavored to restore and re-integrate women's experiences in ethnographic registers [...]. In our attempts to analyze social phenomena regarding sex/gender, it has become necessary to struggle against a long

theme increases significantly.<sup>13</sup> I do not intend to carry out bibliographic revision of these papers, but rather to indicate some developments which contemporaneously incite special interests in this field.

## Plots and Affairs

In 1991 Jim Wafer describes a scene in which he, a researcher and anthropologist, *kissed a pomba-gira*. It is well worth reproducing his description of what happened, in the first chapter of his book entitled *The Lips of Pomba-Gira*:

"Would you like to kiss me? She said "yes" (...).Pomba-Gira said it was the first time she had ever kissed "matter". I had been keeping company with *exus* long enough to know that they do not expect their utterances to be judged by the standards of an objectivist theory of meaning. It may or may not have been the first time."<sup>14</sup>

In this account of the experience of kissing a female *exu*, Jim Wafer attributes to the *exu* an agency which, with a pinch of irony, he shows would have been denied by the "premises of objectivist representation theories." Like him, a number of *filhos-de-santo*, lovers and/or husbands of mediums have doubtlessly kissed their *pomba-giras*. Many anthropologists, in fact, have told us in their books and papers of their informers' suspicions as to the truthfulness of the trace and, as a result, of the subject with whom they engaged. But the suspicion, when expressed by the followers, does not rule out the feasibility of the event; it only questions its occurrence in that precise moment. The inter-relation between men and spirits constitutes the mediums' bread and butter and the religious centers' quotidian: "embraced *Preto-Velho*," "I was told by Caboclo what was done," "paid off Tranca-Rua an old debt..." and so forth, involving certain dramatic revelations such as, for example, when a female medium says that it was "her *exu*" who "killed her husband's lover." Much of the agency attributed to spirits sidesteps the networks of meaning depicted by anthropologists and, along with it, power and gender relations in which it intervenes vanished from this analytical field.

As Jim Wafer points out, since the *exus* do not share the same theoretical and theological concerns of social scientists, they do not, in the many encounters with their followers, foster expectations that the latter will 'de-realize' them, effacing the power of their quotidian presence and of their countless interventions in their clients' and their protégé's lives.

A number of entities, in fact, have already counseled researchers in many generations not to ignore their interventions, for the good of their studies. More recently, their advice has been underscored by researchers: Pablo Séman<sup>15</sup> draws attention to how his interviewee's grandfather participates in family reunions and helps his grandson to make important decisions for his future professional life. The fact that a grandparent will speak by means of another family member, an incorporating medium, does not alter the importance of his advice nor the acknowledgement of his agency in

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tradition of intellectual and social sexism, revealed by biased or at least superficial treatment of the woman in analytical literature" (SILVERSTEIN, 1979, p. 143).

<sup>13</sup> Márcia CONTINS and Marcio GOLDMAN, 1984; Lorand MATORY, 1988; and Patrícia BIRMAN, 1995, among others.

<sup>14</sup> WAFER, 1991, P. 3-4. I would like to thank Martijn Vanderport for having kindly suggested this citation.

<sup>15</sup> SÉMAN, 2003.

decisive moments of family life, as Séman admits. Evangelina Mazur<sup>16</sup> describes, in certain spiritist families, complicated family relations in which entities and mediums participate. A grandmother, for example, lives with her grandson and deceased husband, who incorporates by means of his grandson...

Certain questions experienced, often dramatically, often contentiously, but always in affectively important ways, by those who attend the *terreiros* are found in the accounts of Jim Wafer, who endeavored to 'enter' into and partake in relational and affective games involving his friends and informers. Who would he meet down at that square, whose gestures were they, entwining with his? Were they *Pomba-Gira*'s, trying to seduce him? Or were they the youth's, a possible lover? Or, both, alternating between the entrancing of possession and the entwining of seduction, flowing between consciousness and unconsciousness, between presence/absence of possession involving both partners?<sup>17</sup> Both the brief scene we mention as well as the cases of Mazur and Séman bring together a series of themes, dispersed amidst various academic works: the 'person' and his 'entities'; 'consciousness' and/or 'unconsciousness' in trance; 'sexual'/'conjugal'/'family' relations between individuals and spirits; the relations between researchers and spirits and their mediums; the relatively transgressive/ambiguous and dangerous nature of these relations that often twine together sex, gender and power.

Eroticism and the behaviors reported by Wafer in the Bahian homosexual environments were taken up again in recent papers that focus mainly on women, their spirits, their husbands, children and lovers. The ethnographic accounts of these relationships enable us to approach the perspectives of these people. They are far from understanding their religious practices as 'world views' or 'beliefs' in a supernatural plane – which would correspond to a universal need for transcendence, like many authors conceive the 'religious' function. Contrary to this transcendental dimension attributed to cults seen as 'beliefs,' these, as Véronique Boyer states, respond to questions that are more prosaic and more important to their followers:

If many things appear obscure or unexplainable, it is not up to men, nor is it in their interest to discuss the mysteries of faith. What matters to them is that spirits are there, all around them, and will intervene at any moment. So the main question is how to interpret their advice and their commands, how to live with them so that the course of existence of their elected will not be modified offhandedly.<sup>18</sup>

Nor do their characters obey the realistic premises that have informed the dominating analyses in this field of knowledge. That is why, as Kelly Hayes suggests,

An analysis close to the ways in which the spirits' specific narratives and practices interact with, comment on, and transform the lives of their followers at the micro political level provides us with an important contribution in this domain.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> MAZUR, on the manual printing press.

<sup>17</sup> For an interesting analysis of the states of consciousness in possession, see Daniel HALPERIN's paper, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> BOYER, 1993, p. 21.

<sup>19</sup> HAYES, 2004, p. 20.

This author suggests more clearly that the reality conceived by the researcher be integrated to the 'reality' described by the followers, involving the entities' affairs with which the person works:

In theorizing the predominance of women and other marginalized groups in these religions, the functionalist approach tended to treat possession as a form of mystification in which important psychological and social forces are re-modeled in the form of spirits, although most of the proponents of this approach acknowledge that they represent a belief in spirits in a manner not like that assumed by their participants (i.e. ancestors, deities, spirits of the deceased), but rather like large scale social forces identified by the researcher. This analytical operation converts what – to the analyst – would be relations of power or conflict (those linked to the dynamics of family, gender, class, race, capitalism, etc.) into what – again to the analyst – would be symbolic forces (spirits, ancestors, deities) to whom they speak and work in the course of the ritual.<sup>20</sup>

### **Between Mediators and Characters**

The theoretical choices of the cited authors widen the field of studies in gender relations, given that they facilitate the understanding not only of the effects that possession will generate on mediators of supernatural spheres but also on the social and political effects engendered by the presence of 'entities' in the medium's social life and circle of relations. We know from previous studies that the construction of mediunity by means of possession engenders transformations in the person and also in social roles in which he partakes. From the male point of view, possession may also alter the role of gender, promoting homosexuality in male individuals who develop this mode of contact with the supernatural, affecting their virility.<sup>21</sup> The religious activity of possession that 'forges' mediators for the supernatural sphere has its effects on the person's nature in terms of gender, 'feminizing' him in men and 'empowering' her in women. Hence, the permanent contentious dialog such people have with the social norm and the possibilities for transgression.<sup>22</sup>

A common denominator emerges in accounts reported by Jim Wafer, Kelly Hayes, Stefania Capone and Véronique Boyer:<sup>23</sup> triangular affairs involving humans and 'non-humans,' or, in other words, 'real' and 'unreal' beings in conjugal and/or erotic relationships. It is not unusual for many of these studies to entail, often with some hesitation, a discontiguity regarding the object being described: instead of the mediums and their 'real' reality, the focus becomes the mediums and their 'unreal' characters in the relationship. In fact, in privileged narratives, women speak of the conflicts between

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<sup>20</sup> HAYES, 2004, p. 289.

<sup>21</sup> LANDES, 1967; BIRMAN, 1995; LEÃO TEIXEIRA, 2000; and MATORY, 1988.

<sup>22</sup> Lorand Matory interpreted the presence of homosexuals in possession cults as na effect of this 'place' of the possessed which is occupied by filhos-de-santo, their existence as a feminine presence, or as a female role played within a conjugal relation – entity and medium – thus formed. The homosexuals' privileged position in these cults (MATORY, 1988; BIRMAN, 1995 and 1997; and LEÃO TEIXEIRA, 2000) can henceforth be more clearly understood. If it is so that the presence of homosexuals in possession cults can be facilitated, these observations do not allow us to make significant strides with regard to the role of this conjugality in the lives of those who take on this mode of connection with the 'supernatural' sphere.

<sup>23</sup> WAFER, 1991; HEYES, 2004; CAPONE, 1999; and BOYER, 1993.

themselves and their partners (husbands and lovers), between themselves and their entities (in some cases considered as their husbands) and, finally, between their entities and the women's partners (and their relatives, as well). As Stefania Capone describes,

The spirits – mainly the *pomba-giras* – thus become the pivots of a deep re-organization of the power relations within the core of the couple: the invisible ally bestows its protection and power upon its “horse” before a man who hardly has the same supernatural mediations. In order for the man to be accepted, he must then submit to the authority of his wife's protecting spirit, often establishing a true pact with the invisible being.<sup>24</sup>

In the mediums' narratives, mediums, their entities and their partners take part in contentious love affairs wherein jealousy, rivalry, vengeance, humiliation, violence and power are a part of the shared reality, guiding the behavior of those who are simultaneously their subjects as well as their victims:

In most accounts the relation between the woman and her protective spirit, *Exu* or *Pomba-Gira*, is always experienced as an alliance that allows women to face violence or men's betrayals. Therefore, it is the spirits who intervene directly, in the most dangerous moments of their “horses'” existence, in order to protect them and to punish the culprits.<sup>25</sup>

Life is not easy for these women, women from the under-privileged social classes, so point the authors. Stefania Capone describes situations wherein this ‘empowerment’ of women as a result of having entities involved in their family and conjugal relationships transforms women's roles by removing them from submissiveness:

The alliance between women and *exus* – mainly with *pomba-giras* – inverts their quotidian position of submissiveness so as to impose, through the spirits' words, their wishes on men. Supernatural authority, as opposed to male authority, thus leads to a redefinition of the roles within the conjugal relationship.<sup>26</sup>

### **Is Another Realism Possible?**

At the same time that Stefania Capone underscores the ‘triangulation’ that marks the conjugal and social relationships of *filhas-de-santo*, the dynamics implied in triangulation appears to dissolve to a certain extent when it describes the entity's extreme loyalty toward its medium.<sup>27</sup> In this dynamics, the entity's and the individual's interests seem to merge entirely. The woman's ‘defender’ is solely interested in the woman's wishes, but is unable to demonstrate this due to the submissive position within the marriage. As a result, the agency attributed by mediums to their entities disappears. Could this be an enactment wherein the multiplicity of subjects can, in fact, be reduced to only one, the true one, as definitely established by the West? Henceforth, a door to a

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<sup>24</sup> CAPONE, 1999, p. 181.

<sup>25</sup> CAPONE, 1999, p. 182.

<sup>26</sup> CAPONE, 1999, p. 182.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. HAYES's critique, 2004.



clearly more functional interpretation is opened – a door that does not only ‘de-realize’ reality as it is conceived by religious followers, but that also justifies it in essentially pragmatic terms: ‘behind’ a belief we will always find a pragmatic reason to justify its presumptions’ irrationality and unreality.

A certain reply to this questioning is provided by ethnographer Kelly Hayes. Indeed, her ethnographic work, essentially centered on an account of a medium’s life, allows us to see an even greater complexity of these triangular relations experienced by the followers and their families. In the case that she analyses, the medium attributes to a protecting entity, *Pomba-Gira*, the power to care for her, within a relationship that implies a certain balanced reciprocity. Unlike other mediums, this one does not assume that the entity is non-volitional, and that there will be no clash of interests. On the contrary, she insists that *Pomba-gira*’s volitions may even be able to differentiate and break away from her own in a conflicting manner.

The fact that women have accepted working with their entities is revealed in countless narratives as both an asset and a burden that they must manage carefully within complex family and conjugal relationships, where all sorts of difficulties overload a typically unstable quotidian. Among the difficulties posed by mediunity are those due to the fact that entities may be reluctant to accept their mediums’ determinations, triggering family conflicts that cannot be controlled by the medium.

From these women’s perspective, mediunity assumes a relative autonomy from this agency, the incorporated entity. And the narratives insist on how difficult it is for individuals to manage this autonomy in the medium’s circulation space. As Capone points out, when the field of relationships encompasses ‘unreal’ characters, it undergoes transformations. We might add that it becomes a source of configurations that engender specific problems to participants. What the entities do in order to protect their *filhos-de-santo* cannot be set off from the attributes that single them out – their moods, temperaments, tastes, moralities as well as how they relate with the medium’s family, such as spouse and children, not to mention clients. What the entities do is for the medium to necessarily take into consideration and must, like anything else in life, be carefully attended to.

To say that female mediums gain power by means of possession practices is, therefore, one part of the story. The other part, not less relevant to them, concerns the idea they have of their own limits: they cannot have everything their way because the control over these other agents in their benefit is also limited and subordinate to a logic that eschews their understanding. The entities, with their unique features, will be placed in relation to another sort of logic, that of social relations, which they often explicitly reject. Caught in the permanent crossfire within these complicated triangular relations, they realize that they lead a life of relentless burdens and overwhelming obstacles.

We might infer that the strain imposed on these women by the possession relations and about which they often complain comes from the very limits that the mediums report concerning the meager control they have of their own fate. Regardless of how strong-willed a *pomba-gira* may be as to transgressing social norms, punishing cruel husbands, empowering their protégés against their husbands’ impositions, she, *Pomba-gira*, is unable to conciliate with her own characteristics, to deny her own ‘nature’ and, much less, to operate within the social dynamics she does not altogether master. The entities will ‘open doors’ that cannot always be accessed by the person, ‘close doors’ in inconvenient situations, promise success without providing the medium with the right means to achieve it, punish their enemies often without considering that nonetheless the mediums need to have them in their lives. The medium’s lack of control of the beings for whom they mediate is a part of the complexity involved in sexual, conjugal and

family relations wherein they are inserted. *Pomba-gira*'s moody sexuality, her vengefulness, her demand for loyalty at whatever cost trigger transgressive behaviors in the medium, which she, the medium herself, may not approve. The dialog with the transgression Nazareth of domestic and family norms is, therefore, also nuanced by the conflicting dimensions that the spiritual entities instigate in the lives of their carriers.

These are the difficulties highlighted by Kelly Hayes in the ethnography she carries out of the trajectory of a *mãe-de-santo* in one of Rio de Janeiro's peripheries. In her account, Nazareth's life, burdened with betrayals, vengeance, emotional and financial breakdowns, is far from offering her all the things she might wish for, despite the combined efforts of her own with *Pomba-gira*'s. Nazareth, who we know to be delicate and friendly, is a contradictory character: her wishes and values do not always obey a homogeneous moral orientation and her choices are in step with the limits that her social status will impose. *Pomba-gira*'s role in Nazareth's life does not seem to invert gender relations, but rather to serve Nazareth in her life strategies. These seem to manifest a considerable instability as to the attachment to the dominant norms embedded in gender relations and behaviors that are, to some extent, transgressive towards these norms. The carefully preserved distance between a *pomba-gira* and her medium makes it very clear that the devious, sexually limitless identity, easily attributed to "loose women" – another name given to *pomba-giras* –, will not be confused with her own, despite the close association. Hence, in Nazareth's case, we know that, on the one hand, the spirit has protected her home and her marriage and, on the other, has helped to destroy her conjugal relations, by inducing her 'horse' to disobedience toward the family hierarchy and family roles. It was *Pomba-gira* who avenged Nazareth's husband's betrayal and it was Nazareth who sincerely suffered for her husband's miserable and dependent condition, and who was made to work much more in order to balance the domestic financial budget. Her solidarity toward her husband, who actually attempted to meet her expectations as a breadwinner, was not strong enough to make her abandon the *exu* who empowered her against the gender hierarchy to which she had to conform. By the end of the ordeal, the final toll had been a deteriorated marriage, frustrated life expectations, and a gain of autonomy within the domestic realm whose price has nevertheless been many-fold: the de-sexualization of conjugal relations, the loss in social status, a decreased family income followed by the *terreiro* closing down, and *Pomba-gira*'s reduced social power, an indirect consequence of the frequent tussling throughout their lives as a couple, marked by this 'ménage à trois.'

Nazareth's efforts, much like those of many other women described in the referred texts, does not guarantee the desired autonomy they long for so ambivalently nor the transformations they so intensely yearn to implement in their lives. They do what they are able with the instruments at hand. In acknowledging their protecting spirits' agency, they demonstrate, to a certain extent, that the reality they experience is much more complex than what our positivist imaginaries as researchers can grasp. This reality entails a dynamics of contradictory volitions to be managed within the domestic space: the entities are thus 'just one more' among the many other traditional and transgressive volitions in regard to their family's values. The result of such contentious dynamics is, finally, impossible to predict.

Being the location for an increasingly peripheral religiousness, possession cults highlight, as can be apprehended in these studies, sexual and gender identities that commute to and from an attachment to the norms embedded in sexual and dominant gender roles and their transgression, asserting, despite contentions, the hesitations and the difficulties as to the possibilities of 'other worlds.' The anthropological studies that I have attempted to underscore bear the great merit of bringing forth to the academic

discussion this 'portion' of a reality that has been kept 'invisible,' thereby contributing to 'de-realize' its strength as well as to reduce the contradictory complexity of the individuals who construct it.

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