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# **The Ontology of Possession in Bahian Candomblé<sup>1</sup>**

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Good afternoon. First, I feel I must begin reminding you we are facing right now a coup d'état in Brazil and that we are trying to resist to it. Second, my deep thanks to Diana for the invitation to be here, and also, of course, to all of you. And third, I should apologize for this non conclusive return to something I studied more than 35 years ago.

Let me start by describing a scene I witnessed in 2006. I was doing my fieldwork in Ilhéus, a city located in the Brazilian State of Bahia. The members of the *Terreiro* – or temple — *Matamba Tombenci Neto* were attending a feast of candomblé — one of the many religions of African matrix in Brazil. The *Tombenci* temple was founded in 1885 by the grand mother of the current *mãe de santo*, the “saint-mother”, Dona Hilsa Rodrigues, the priestess of the temple since 1973. Mother to fourteen children, with dozens of grandchildren and great-grandchildren, Dona Hilsa turned eighty in March 2014, having been initiated into candomblé at twelve, in 1946. She was initiated to an orisha, a divinity, known as Matamba in the Angola Bantu nation, and as Iansan or Oyá in the Ketu Yoruba nation. This is why the *terreiro*'s main festivity is devoted to Matamba, and held every January.

For reasons that I cannot get into here, during the 2006 feast tensions and conflicts occurred and this resulted in a meeting being called, so I was told, by the “owner of the house” — which did not mean Dona Hilsa, as I first understood it, but her orisha, the divinity for whom the feast was held.

Though it was meant to begin at eleven in the morning after the feast, the meeting began inside the temple well after noon. The heat was so intense that the palm oil usually kept on a pot standing on a beam under the ceiling, began to boil. The saint-mother, twelve of her sons and daughters (those who lived in Ilhéus at the time), one of her sons-in-law and four people from outside the family, including myself, were present. All of us had a long standing connection to the *terreiro* — in my case, for 23 years at that point.

The meeting started with aggressive exchanges of recriminations. Very unexpectedly, at a certain point someone asked me what I thought. I tried to minimize the conflict, saying that fights happen in every Candomblé *terreiro* all the time, and I strongly insisted that it was not worth dwelling on what had happened, as it would only lead to more conflict. Looking back, I think I just hoped to shorten a meeting in which the human and meteorological atmosphere was becoming unbearable to me.

When I naively believed, or hoped, that the meeting was coming to an end, one of the main protagonists of the dispute — who was the second in command at the temple — announced that he was “giving up his position” in the *terreiro*. One of his sisters immediately became possessed by her divinity and was taken into a separate room. On her return, we saw that she was no longer possessed by her main divinity but by an *erê*, a spirit that is much like a supernatural child, and who usually acts as a divinity's messenger. It was therefore a child divinity that gave the following message to us: “if things go on this way, something really bad is going to happen.” Upon listening these words, someone began to cry and said: “don't you people see what it is?” Others also began to cry and I realized that they were fearing the saint-mother would die. She remained serene, unlike everyone else. The mood worsened and more people begun to weep.

Soon after, the child spirit said that it was not what everyone was thinking and that they should make peace. Silence fell until, for some unknown reason, I asked to speak. I said that we had witnessed something very powerful, that it was a moment for reflection, and that we could come back later to talk about it all. After a few minutes of silence, someone suggested a prayer to end the meeting. When, I thought, the meeting was finally coming to an end, the saint-mother's divinity possessed her in the most gentle way I had ever seen. She sang in a low voice until her son, the one who had just given up his position at the Terreiro, also became possessed by his own divinity. So, we all praised them and asked for their blessing.

The son's divinity turned to his mother's divinity in order to praise her. I don't know how, but he was holding a ferule he had placed above the drums before the feast. It was meant to be a "symbol of discipline in candomblé", he had explained. Upon exchanging greetings, the son's divinity handed the ferule to his mother's divinity, but she promptly refused it; he thus knelt down, placing one hand on the floor and began to violently hit with the ferule held by his other hand. Some people ran and struggled against him until they took away the ferule from him. Before standing up however, he still very violently slapped both his hands on the floor.

At this point his mother, who was still possessed by her divinity, became possessed by her *cabocla* — an Amerindian spirit very common in Angola nation Candomblé. At the same time, her son also became possessed by one of his other spirits, who is always very playful and he announced: "enough sadness, it's time for a feast." I noticed that the cabocla spirit was also giving commands. Immediately, chairs and electric fans were removed from the room, the drums were uncovered and a caboclos' feast began, lasting the rest of the day.

Looking back, what impresses me is my difficulty to deal with what went on. Why did I think I could bring the meeting to an end just because I could not stand it? Why did I imagine it was about to end at various points? And finally, what was the source of my unease and my inability to really understand what was happening?

There is no doubt there were psychological and even physical reasons at play. The heat was unbearable but, more important, for an anthropologist who hopes to get on well with all his "natives", it is never pleasant to notice they are just like everyone else: at once similar and different, and ready to engage in the most violent disputes about issues trivial to others, including the anthropologist.

However, I believe that my unease and, above all, my incomprehension really came from what I would call the *political* nature of my own position. And I say "political" in the classical sense of the term, that is, one that presumes that situations like the one I witnessed are limited to disputes between human beings, and therefore, disagreements may be solved through dialogue and mutual understanding. That is why, at the time I believed that what was laying behind it all was actually a quarrel between the president of the *terreiro's* civil association and the president of the Cultural Group linked to the *terreiro*, as someone had suggested. That is also why I had thought that things could calm down if I called upon every one's common sense.

However, as the unfolding of events reminded me in the most direct way, a Candomblé *terreiro* is not a political space in the Greek — our — sense of the term. Meaning that it is not an exclusively human

space where supposedly rational human beings face each other. A *terreiro* is filled with other beings and other forces, and all of them come into play, even when the anthropologist does not wish it.

Now, when the Ancient Greeks defined the *polis*, they excluded women, children, slaves and aliens, as well as natural and supernatural forces and beings. I believe that something similar applies to anthropology. When tracing its field of investigation and explanation, anthropology in a way also excluded much of what constitutes the world for the peoples we meet. As one of the greatest ethnographers of all time wrote, "Witches, as the Azande conceive them, cannot exist."

My hypothesis here is that trance, or spiritual possession, constitutes an exemplary case to examine the anthropological compulsion to sort out what "exists" (that is, *our* reality) from the inexistent or illusory beings and forces that, nevertheless, are part of other people's reality. This "exemplarity" of possession is due to different factors.

Firstly, it is due to West's long and problematic relationship with ecstatic phenomena. As Weber showed, Judaism constituted itself as a religion through a process of centralization that involved combating clairvoyants, prophets and all others who dared to make direct contact with divine forces, that is, without the mediation of sacred institutions. More or less at the same time, still in the Mediterranean region, in Ancient Greece, the control of truth was passing from the hands of mystics, poets and clairvoyants to that of philosophers: sober men who had complete control over their volition, as Marcel Detienne argued in his famous analysis.

I suggest that this problematic historical relationship reveals the reasons underlying the exclusion of those who seek a direct experience of the sacred using only their own bodies as a vehicle. The Jewish case seems to demonstrate that the possibility of a relationship with sacred forces taking place outside an institutional setting threatened the development of Western religious institutions, and their monopoly of the relationships with these forces. The danger was to see the divine word directly *presented* when its legitimacy should depend on its *representation* by an institutionalized and hierarchical clerical corpus. Revelations that only occur once in a while should not be threatened by those brought through constant, repeated, variable possessions whose bearers could be virtually anyone.

The Greek case illustrates another basic antagonism between the West and ecstatic experience. Given that the possessed person is paradoxically more than one, what to do with this unity of the self so dear to Western thought? How is it possible to accept that a subject can leave his own consciousness, without perceiving it as a savage state, a malignant nature, or even the irruption of a pathological process?

Christianity brings together Jewish and Greek traditions. Clairvoyance, the splitting of the self, and possession, were all re-codified as demoniacal and came to constitute a challenge and, at the same time, an instrument for the powers of the Church. And, as we all know, it is against this background that anthropological knowledge constituted itself and its work. Because the objects of our analysis are never what "actually" exists out there, but the result of an explicit or implicit dialogue between what we think and what the people who we live with propose. Whether this inevitable diffraction is deforming or creative is always an open question.

Among the so-called “apparently irrational beliefs” with which anthropology has fed itself, trance and possession have a special place. Partly because, as Roger Bastide already warned in 1958, these are very special phenomena, in a way more complicated than other beliefs and even rituals. For possession, as Bastide wrote, “is not a ritual-imitation but rather a lived ritual-experience [*rituel-expérience vécue*] that allows us to penetrate into the world of the gods more easily.” He goes on to write that trance is a “*lived reality*,” not just a representation or imitation of myth; and that the dance, which appears to simply imitate the divinities, is a “fabulous opera,” so that “what we designate as the phenomenon of possession can be better defined as a phenomenon of personality metamorphosis.” Bastide concludes then that, in the end, “trance is actually real.”

When I first studied possession, 35 years ago, I identified no more than two anthropological explanatory models. One reduced possession to illness, by treating it either directly as a disease (generally mental illness) or giving it the status of a “pre-medical” treatment for psychophysiological disturbances. The other aimed, instead, to deal with trance by trying to see it as a direct or inverted reflection of the “broad social structure.”

Today, I believe, the situation hasn’t changed much. After all, whether we deal with possession as a performance or as a commentary, our explicit or implicit assumption that these things are not *actually* happening does not change — for we are certain that the beings who have the power to possess humans and take them into trance do not *actually* exist.

The problem is how to give up these premises and try to develop what I would call — using an old Malinowskian concept I rediscovered in my study of politics — an ethnographic theory of trance and possession. A theory that can only be elaborated when firmly based on “native” theories with their specific ontologies and epistemologies, as well as very particular notions of personhood, ritual and agency.

It is worth saying that, an ethnographic theory does not mean simply to repeat what we have already heard from our friends in a, perhaps, more sophisticated way. It does not mean we should just say “yes, the spirits possessing people are as real as the people they possess and this explains possession.” Firstly, because such a statement would still express our metaphysical and arrogant pretention of being able to sort out what exists from what does not exist. Secondly, because by trying to explain things through the actions of spirits we would make the same mistake as when we try to explain things through the influence of genes, the environment, individual impulses, cultural values, social needs, and so on. The issue is not about existence or nonexistence but about the fact that we deal with relationships, and not with substances or even with actions. Consequently, our problem is how to include the reality defined by the people with whom we live within the relationships we describe and analyze, without sneakily negating the reality of that reality.

It therefore seems to me that, slightly differently from what our panel’s first abstract suggested, the problem with religions and practices of possession is not that they are “under theorized,” perhaps it is even the opposite. My suggestion is that we are dealing with cosmopolitics here. But not just in the rather banal sense anthropologists tend to interpret Isabelle Stengers’ notion, as if it were simply enough to add some spirits to human actions to solve all our problems. I believe that the question is

cosmopolitical in the most profound sense, as Stengers phrased it when she speaks about “the unknown”; a *fundamental* unknown, in the technical sense of the term. In other and maybe enigmatic words, it seems to me that the question I will not be able to develop here is whether we are able to practice anthropology through a type of transcendental *we don't know*.

That is why I am not certain whether I could or should conclude this paper by returning to an analysis of the events I witnessed at the *Tombenci* in Ilhéus. I would therefore like to finish with another story and a slightly pretentious conclusion. The ethnographer and photographer Pierre Verger — who lived alongside African religions and religions of African matrix for 60 years, and who was initiated into some of them — regretted his inability to become possessed by the divinities, and attributed it to him being too Cartesian. I could probably say the same to explain my unease and difficulty in dealing with the events in Ilhéus, but I believe that there is something more than national or personal idiosyncrasies at work here.

It is a longstanding fact that, even without acknowledging it, we are all Cartesians and, more than that, Kantians. As Lucien Lévy-Bruhl wrote a long time ago, for us “that which is not possible cannot be real.” However, this does not mean that all humans have to be like that, or, even, that we have to be like that all the time. Moreover, it does not even mean that the conditions of possibility of reality have to be the same for everyone in all circumstances. As Lévy-Bruhl also wrote, it might be that “what experience presents as real can be unconditionally accepted as such,” so that something needs to be possible once it is real. Perhaps, we are talking here about this now famous turning from epistemology to ontology; but perhaps, and less pretentiously, it could be only something they say in Cape Verde, “everything that has a name exists.” Thank you very much.

## Notes

1. This paper was originally presented at the Latin American Studies Association in May 2016. The text was translated by Julia Sauma and revised by Luisa Elvira Belaunde.