



Spirit Possession in Brazil

The Perception of the (Possessed) Body

Bettina E. Schmidt

Abstract. – Spirit possession is the core religious practice in most Afro-American religions. It is usually described as “mounting”; the spirit “rides” the body of the devotee as a horseman rides a horse. The description projects the image that a spirit takes control over the body of the medium and “uses” the human medium; the body of the person is passive and submissive, while the spirit is active and dominant. However, this view does not reflect the highly elaborate discourse about spirit possession in Brazil. The article is based on fieldwork among communities of Afro-Brazilian and Spiritist traditions in São Paulo, Brazil. Based on subjective narratives about bodily experience and the academic debate about body and mind, the article contributes to a wider understanding of the possession experience. [*Brazil, spirit possession, trance, candomblé, umbanda, spiritism, body concept, mediumship*]

Bettina E. Schmidt, Dr. habil., University of Wales Trinity St David; M. A. in cultural anthropology (Marburg 1989); PhD with a thesis about ethnicity and religion in Puerto Rico (Marburg 1995); habilitation with a monograph about Caribbean religions in New York City (Marburg 2001). – Her academic interests include the anthropology of religion, diaspora identity, religious experience, urban studies, medical anthropology, and gender issues. – Her main fieldworks were conducted in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, New York City, and, more recently, in São Paulo, Brazil. – She has published extensively on Caribbean and Latin American religions, identity, cultural theories and migration and is, e.g., co-editor of “Spirit Possession and Trance. New Interdisciplinary Perspectives” (London 2010). – See also References Cited.

“The whole problem is not quite the phenomenon; it is the way we look at the phenomenon”

(José Jorge de Morais Zacharias, interview on April 15, 2010).

Introduction

Concepts such as spirits, souls, gods, or demons “cut against the grain of our natural expectations about how things work in the real world” (Tremelin 2006: 87). Things are usually described as “real” when we can touch and measure them, when they have a physical quality or at least when we can repeatedly test them in a laboratory. But there is “something” in possession that escapes our understanding, as van de Port states (2005: 152). Gods, spirits, souls, religion in general, are products of cognition. While it is possible to describe the phenomenon of possession, and even to classify such experiences according to their function, etc., it seems difficult to go beyond the indigenous understanding of it (see Crapanzano 2005: 8687). Anthropologists have collected numerous accounts of local explanations from all over the world, and many have argued for the validity of these perceptions (e.g., title of a book chapter “It Is Not for Us to Judge”, in Klass 2003, derived from Lewis 2003). This attitude, however, must not be confused with antiscientific mysticism. Pyysiäinen makes an important point when he states that “whether a given explanation is valid should be judged on the basis of evidence and logical coherence of the argument, not on the basis of a religious [or anti-religious] agenda” (2008: 3). However, according to Crapanzano (2005: 8693) possession confirms “the belief in the spirits” – but that which is based only on belief is not regarded as scientific evidence. On the other side, from the believer’s point of view, religious knowledge “cannot be con-

sidered representational or theoretical”: the devotees argue that their knowledge about God or any other supernatural being “does not depend on our capacities for knowing, but on God’s own self-revelation” (Pyysiäinen 2003: 229 f.). It seems that the gap between the position of the devotees and the position of the scholars are insuperable.

This article considers the discourse about possession among mediums in Brazil, that is, the understanding of the experience among people experiencing the so-called spirit possession. The analysis will be based on subjective narratives collected via open-ended interviews in São Paulo, Brazil. Since I want to explore the indigenous, in this case Brazilian possession religions adepts’ view of the physical dimension of the possession experience, the focus of this article will be on the perception of bodily transformation. I will report, for instance, how people from different religious traditions responded when asked about their feelings during the experience; whether there is a difference depending on the approaching entity; and whether they remember physical changes. The article will also deal with the complex issue of how to include the ideas of devotees that have a possession experience inside an academic discourse without falling into non-academic, religiously motivated and unscientific explanations.

In my research, however, I did not follow the path that many anthropologists working on Afro-Brazilian religions have taken; I did not attempt to experience the incorporation myself. Although I was often told that it is impossible to describe it, and that I need to experience it, I decided to maintain my scholarly distance and remain a participant observer instead of an observing participant. Since it is very common for anthropologists studying religions to “go native” and initiate into a religious community, this decision puts me in opposition to many colleagues (see also Capone 2010). Despite my fascination for the deities that emerged during my research among adherents of Afro-Caribbean religions (Schmidt 2008), which are very similar to the deities in Afro-Brazilian religions, I could not overcome my reluctance to commit myself to the religious obligations. Consequently, my research has to rely exclusively on narratives collected from practitioners in Brazil. I can include my own experiences only as an observer who attended numerous rituals. I have no evidence to prove the accurateness of these subjective narratives about a phenomenon that is in the end ineffable.

The article is divided into two sections, one ethnographic and another analytical. I will start with a brief introduction into the ethnographic context be-

fore presenting excerpts from my interviews with narratives about the perception of the bodily dimension of possession experiences from an indigenous perspective. The second part will discuss the narratives in dialogue with the different areas of scholarly debate. The aim is to show how each of the perspectives can contribute to our understanding of the possession experience.

Trance, Possession, and Mediumship in Brazil

Ethnographic Context

In the 2010 census, 64.6 percent of Brazilians claimed to belong to the Roman Catholic Church, but with a declining tendency over the last three decades. A growing number of Brazilians belong to one of the numerous Evangelical Churches (22.2 percent in 2010 with a rising tendency). In sum, nearly 90 percent of Brazilians claim to belong to a Christian Church. The remaining 10 percent are spread between Spiritists (2 percent), adherents to an Afro-Brazilian religion (0.3 percent), agnostics or atheists (8 percent), and members of another religion, such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism.¹ These numbers, however, do not represent all practitioners of Spiritist or Afro-Brazilian religions since many people avoid being identified with an Afro-Brazilian tradition, despite the fact that the religions have been legalised. Chesnut estimates that half of all Brazilians have visited an Umbanda centre at least once, usually during a personal crisis and that 15–20 percent of Brazilians (app. 30 million) practise Umbanda or one of the other Afro-Brazilian religions regularly (2003: 106 f.). Especially Umbanda has the image of being a provider of physical and spiritual healing services, which leads to the estimation that many more Brazilians attend regularly Umbanda rituals without considering themselves to be members of the religion (Engler 2009b: 556).

Experiences with extra-sensual and extra-motoric phenomena go therefore much further than the statistics in the national census suggest and Brazilian culture and society can be characterised by an enormous openness towards so-called paranormal experiences and a willingness to speak about them (Machado 2009: 17 f.). Although this characterisation cannot be substantiated by national data, only by a small survey of students in São Paulo, it is re-

¹ The national census of 2010 can be accessed via the website of the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics): <<http://www.sidra.ibge.gov.br>> [24.08.2012].

markable that 82.7 percent of the respondents mentioned experiences with extra-sensual phenomena and 55.9 percent with extra-motoric phenomena (Machado 2009: 232).

In the centre of this article are a variety of religions grouped together under the label Spiritism and Afro-Brazilian religions. Scholars usually describe this ensemble as a continuum of religious practices, with Spiritism on one end, and the African derived traditions, such as Candomblé, on the other end. This description does not imply a hierarchy of traditions, however, or any sense of exclusivity, since there are many variations within any one tradition, as well as countless mixtures between them. As background to my study, I will give a short overview of the main traditions of the communities I visited in São Paulo, but without going into detail and without pointing towards the many variations within one tradition.²

Candomblé and the other religions derived from African traditions have developed in certain areas of Brazil (Harding 2005: 120; Prandi 2005) and can be encountered today in all major cities in Brazil. The Bahian version of Candomblé became famous, even internationally, because of the many academic and nonacademic publications that discuss it (Sansi 2007), and it is often portrayed as the most African of all Afro-Brazilian religions (Capone 2010). Gonçalves da Silva even describes Candomblé as the “reinvention of Africa in Brazil” (1994: 43).

Although the first Candomblé houses were only established during the 19th century, the tradition goes back to the time of the transatlantic slave trade, and originated in unorganised African cult groups based on the customs of enslaved Africans in Brazil. These communities became the birthplace of a tradition we subsume under the label *candomblé*. The Bahian Candomblé that became hegemonic for the tradition during the 1930s emphasises the Nagô nation (derived from the West African ethnic language group of Yoruba), while other versions are based on Jêje (derived from the Ewe-Fon), or Angola (usually regarded as Bantu). Recently scholars have tended to characterise the so-called Bantu tradition instead of the Yoruba-derived tradition as “pure” African and more powerful. At the core of the belief system of all variations is the worship of the African deities (*orixás*) who (generally speaking) can possess a human being. This possession, also called incorporation, is at the centre of the religion, and is crucial

to most rituals. If it occurs outside the community of the *terreiro* (site of a religious community), it is regarded as a sign that the person needs to become initiated and join the community. Equally important is the discovery of one’s fate, through an oracle reading by a priest (*jogo de búzios*), and the ritual sacrifices to the *orixás* (usually but not exclusively animals). The devotion to the *orixás* consists of lifelong obligations and the fulfilment of extensive rituals.

On the other side of the continuum is Spiritism, also called Kardecism. It is based on the ideas of the French schoolteacher Hyppolyte Léon Denizard Rivail (1804–1869), who published numerous books under his alias Allan Kardec, containing what he described as messages from the spirits. Shortly after their publication, his books arrived in Brazil where his teaching gained much attention. It offered those living at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century an alternative spirituality that lacked the negative connotations of the Afro-Brazilian religions. While the practice of Afro-Brazilian religions was regarded as black magic, and was legally restricted until the 1970s (Maggie 1986), Kardecism and its numerous variations under the label *espiritismo* were socially and legally tolerated.

Mediumship is the core practice. Spiritists believe that everyone has some kind of mediumship ability, although it is often undiscovered or underdeveloped. It is important to train mediums, therefore, in order to further their abilities. The term mediumship can refer to the ability to feel the presence of the spirits, to see them, or hear them, or simply to have a premonition of something that will happen or has happened. Mediumship can also refer to the practice of automatic writing, that is, the ability to write messages that are perceived as messages from the spirit world. Spirits are regarded as being in control of one’s arm or hand, or even in control of the whole body, so that this spirit can deliver a message to the world of the living. The aim is to help the living and the dead (the disembodied spirits) to develop to an evolved stage of existence. Mediums usually have to follow strict rules that call for a morally upright behaviour, a calm and polite disposition towards other people, and abstinence from alcohol and other drugs.

Umbanda occupies the spectrum between these two poles, Spiritism and Candomblé (see Engler 2009b). It includes African elements, such as the belief in the power of the *orixás* (though with a slightly different interpretation), but also has a strong Kardecist influence. Umbanda started in the 1920s and 1930s in urban Brazil, predominately among middle-class Kardecists (Gonçalves da Silva 1994:

² As my focus was on Afro-Brazilian and Spiritist traditions, my overview does not include some of the other new developments such as *Santo Daime*, which is based on the consumption of ayahuasca.

106). Despite their intention to avoid the oppression of other more visibly “African” religions, Umbanda devotees became the target of political oppression (Concone e Negrão 1985: 44), and were stigmatised as practitioners of black magic. This attitude only changed when the *umbandistas* increased the institutionalisation of their religion and became politically influential (Concone e Negrão 1985: 78). But the influence did not last long. Although some scholars still describe Umbanda as the true Brazilian religion, its political influence and membership numbers are declining.

Nonetheless, Umbanda still represents a unique religious spectrum with a wide range of variations. A central aspect is the incorporation of supernatural beings, although the type of these *guías* (spiritual guides) varies. The Umbanda cosmos embraces many types of entities, such as the *caboclos* (indigenous spirits), *pretos velhos* (spirits of old black slaves), *boiadeiros* (spirits of cowboys), *ciganos* (spirits of so-called gypsies), *marinheiros* (spirits of sailors), and *exús* (seen as a messenger or trickster spirit as well as an *orixá*) and *pomba giras*, the female counterpart of the male *exús*. The Candomblé *orixás* are also part of Umbanda cosmology though on a different position. The deities do not take possession of *umbandistas* though the mediums can sometimes become incorporated by the spirits of *orixás*. (Since the deities are supposed to have been derived from living beings, they are thought to have spirits as well.) Similar to Kardecism the aim of the incorporation is usually to help people.

Between these three cornerstones are various mixtures, e.g., *umbandomblé*, *umbanda esotérico*, and *espiritismo encruzilhada*. It is also very common to move during a lifetime through various religious traditions; sometimes they are even practised at the same time but for different purposes. Malandrino states that 42.1 percent of Umbanda priests she studied had a Kardecist background (2006: 59). Most of the *mães* and *pais de santo* (literally the mothers and fathers of a saint, a common way to refer to female and male priests) in Umbanda that I spoke with were initiated into Candomblé, and some of the Spiritists also practised Umbanda. But I also encountered people who were critical of these developments and of the subsequent inclusion of non-traditional elements. Some Candomblé priests even reject all non-African elements in their cosmology, while some Kardecists discriminate against African deities and spirits.

Subjective Narratives of Possession and Trance Experiences

Before turning to the interviews, I must address the controversial matter of terminology. The term “possession” (*possessão* in Portuguese) has gained such a negative connotation in Brazil that religious practitioners avoid it. While the rejection of the term might be connected to the discriminative attitude against Afro-Brazilian religions in general, this attitude has increased in the last decades due to increasing attacks by the Neo-Pentecostal Churches against Umbanda, Macumba, and other Afro-Brazilian traditions (Engler 2011). The confrontation focuses on animal sacrifice and spiritual agencies, which are regarded as inferior spirits (Oliva 1995: 99) who constantly disturb “the mental, physical, and spiritual order.” According to Edir Macedo, the founder of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), these spirits are responsible for the main problems in the world (Oliveria 1998: 112). It is the duty of everyone to intervene and to “liberate” the world – and oneself – from these demons. At the centre of the UCKG’s theology, therefore, is the liberation ceremony, during which evil spirits are exorcised (see also Almeida 2003). Although the gods of ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and other religions are also regarded as demons, the main attacks are directed against Afro-Brazilian religions. As an (indirect) outcome of the hostility, the term “possession” is perceived negatively by religious practitioners of all traditions. In my interviews I, therefore, switched to the term “incorporation” (*incorporação* in Portuguese), which in the Brazilian literature is commonly used for possession. However, even this term has been rejected, particularly by Kardecists, since it does not describe their understanding of the practice. One Spiritist in the south of Brazil, the founder and president of a Spiritist centre, was particularly averse to my questions about his spiritual practices and insisted, that “incorporation does not exist” (interview on May 5, 2010). His centre attracts over 2,000 patients each month and offers spiritual treatment of medical conditions, including cancer, as well as lectures about Spiritism and training for mediums. Eventually he acknowledged that his spiritual inspiration derived from instructions by his spirit guides via *psicografia* (automatic writing under the influence of a spirit) but insisted that I should not confuse it with incorporation. Each religious tradition has its own way of speaking about the interaction between human beings and spiritual agencies, whether it is *possessão*, *incorporação*, *mediunidade*, *inspiração*, or *visão divino*. In this part of the article, I will simply translate

the terms used by the interviewees. In the analytical part of the article I will apply more generic terms (e.g., possession experience) in order to highlight common aspects in the discourse. As I conducted open-ended interviews and allowed the interviewees to guide the conversation, I do not have information to the same questions from all interviewees.

Case A

Female, trained as a medium in a Kardecist centre, but does not work as a medium:

I do not remember anything about the first time, except that the sensation was a strong heat, the sensation of heat and sleep at the same time. I felt a huge weight in my back and neck, and I began to feel my heart. The heart accelerated! And it was the sensation of two hearts beating inside me. There was a kind of force in my throat, a very strong energy in the throat, and I felt like it was about to speak. But in that moment, at the first time, I was very afraid, because when it began to happen, I had doubts about whether it would be good or bad. I tried to stop it and I was left with the sensation that it would begin the communication in a trance (Interview on May 27, 2010).

This graphic description of the first experience of an approaching spiritual entity is an excerpt from an interview I took with a Brazilian woman who underwent training as a medium in a Kardecist centre, but does not practise it. She elaborately describes her recollection of the feeling when the spiritual entity approached her for the first time, a combination of “happiness mixed with fear”. She continues:

I felt the voice leaving my body, but unlike other people who do not have consciousness, I found that only a fraction of me was not conscious ... I felt that the person spoke in my head, I heard and spoke. At times, I was afraid of not speaking correctly, or that the person speaking was me. As it passed I thought ah, was it only in my imagination? ... But as time passed, I had ideas that I never had before. And this was the biggest sensation. I felt an embrace. I had no more doubts (Interview on May 27, 2010).

For her, it brought creativity into her life and a sense of security. As an artist she connects her spiritual experience with her artistic visions throughout my interview with her. She describes eloquently how her experiences enable her to make sense of the many turns that her life has taken.

Case B

Female, Umbanda priestess, but also initiated into Candomblé.

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Since she has experiences within two distinct religious traditions, Umbanda and Candomblé, I asked her whether it feels different:

It's different, the *orixá* [Candomblé] has a stronger vibration than an entity [in Umbanda]. It's a vibration; it is something that takes you, which has force. But the sense is different in Umbanda. There are various kinds of spirit, in the same way that people are also different. In my experience – have you ever had surgery? And were given an injection of a drug, an anaesthetic before the surgery? You stay well and then you do not remember anything more because the anaesthesia puts you to sleep? The state is not the same, but it is very similar (Interview on March 16, 2010).

I responded with the question, “So you can still feel something, but have no control?”, and she replied, “Yes, that's right, exactly ... and in Candomblé it is very different because you have the vibration, no control, but it is lighter.” She described the feeling of a Candomblé *orixá* as “full of energy.” “The *orixá* is a living energy that is in nature ... It gives you a new sense of wholeness ... you are full of the energy of nature. Each [*orixá*] has a specific vibration with a different meaning, which makes the interpretation very different.”

Then I asked her about the incorporation of the same *orixá* in different human bodies, and she replied:

It is the same because the energy is in nature. For instance, the *orixá* Ogun, represents iron, his energy is iron and the land where the iron comes from. Hence, Ogun is not an individual, but a very large energy. The individual part [during incorporation] is something else that you need to study hard in order to incorporate. The *ori* [intelligence/consciousness] in the head of each person has an individual connection to Ogun. Thus, a person can have an individual connection to the energy [Ogun]. So ... we could turn to the same party [both incorporating the same *orixá*] because they are two different Oguns, because even the very power of Ogun has many variations, which are the qualities (Interview March 16, 2010).

Case C

Male, Umbanda priest, but also attached to the Yoruba religion.³

When I asked about the difference between the experience in Umbanda and in the Yoruba tradition, he replied:

³ The Yoruba tradition is a recent development in Brazil, centred on religious communities founded by Nigerian immigrants.

I feel differences between the deities in Umbanda. When I incorporate some deities, I do not feel anything. And I have other deities that make me feel ecstatic, even though I did not enter them. The feeling is different from my normal waking state. But when I incorporate an *orixá* [Yoruba tradition], I usually have no control of my movements. In most deities, in the Yoruba tradition, I have no control of my movements. Often when I am conscious, I want to stop, but I cannot (Interview on April 14, 2010).

I enquired whether he would be conscious, and he replied “with some deities, but not all! Oxumarê, for instance, is one of the deities of whom I am not aware.”

What I remember is that while I was researching [for a university degree] I was not aware that the priestess was Oxumarê. Then I remember that I was outside [the religious house] with my tape recorder broken and everyone was outside. With this deity specifically I get this way. Sometimes I feel as if my arms fall asleep, or my legs, and sometimes I even feel as if I’m having a heart attack. With each *orixá* I have a different feeling. Sometimes it begins with dancing, quite violent, but I’m still conscious. Nevertheless, I can control myself, or stop dancing, and I intend to stop dancing and stand, but when I least expect it, I lose control again. In my first session, I wanted to stop dancing because my leg had been dislocated. But I could not stop and began dancing with the other leg (Interview on April 14, 2010).

And then he continued explaining his feeling in Umbanda:

In the case of Umbanda it varies from entity to entity. ... In one case, I have full awareness of what is happening. In other cases, I have full consciousness, but I cannot control the movements. There are also others where I can master the moves, but I cannot control the voice.

There are some who do not speak, but have a special way to hinder me, one entity, for instance, with drinking. The taste of alcohol leaves me unconscious because of the alcohol. However, [during the incorporation] I am aware of his attitude when he is drunk, but when he leaves, I do not have the characteristics of being drunk.

In this case, if I could check the percentage of alcohol in my blood, there would certainly be alcohol there. But I do not have the same feeling when I’m drunk. This is because I did not [remember] that I drank so badly. I have no visual distortions, [but] there is a specific entity that does that! It does not allow me to know what the entity is saying. As if he [= the spiritual entity] realizes that I’m conscious, and makes me, one way or another, unconscious! If I do not get unconscious for good, another less pleasant way is by alcohol (Interview on April 14, 2010).

Then I asked him how he feels afterwards, whether he experiences any pain or joy. He replied that:

From the deity [*orixá*], I first feel the tingling of my hands, sometimes, which is not a pleasant feeling. Soon afterwards, I initially feel much pain, not at all pleasant. And then it goes away. This is far more unpleasant. This is because I am out of breath, and feel pain in the body. After I have recovered, I feel very well.

In the case of Umbanda, it depends on the entity, but mostly, I feel good about their approach, and in the case of other entities, it is a similar feeling. Moreover, in the case of Umbanda, I can handle more manifestations than in relation to the *orixá* (Interview on April, 2010).

Then he described an event which took place while he incorporated an alcoholic entity who made him jump from a bridge just to get some alcohol (a case of “dare” challenge). “At the time, my reaction was to close my eyes and only open them again when I felt that I was on firm ground.”

Case D

Male, Candomblé priest from Salvador da Bahia, living in São Paulo.

This Candomblé priest is connected to an *orixá* and a *caboclo* (spirit of an indigenous entity), although the latter is often rejected by other Candomblé priests. When I asked him whether the incorporation of a *caboclo* is different from the incorporation of Oxum (his *orixá*), he replied:

It is different for everyone depending on who you are and who you are receiving [depending on medium and possessing agency]. The sensation is the same, the sensation of having lost contact with the world. For example, every time I go into the state, it is as if I am leaning over a building of more than twenty floors, looking down. At any given time, somebody might arrive and push me down. There is panic. It is always this way. As I am in a high place, very high, looking down, and then I turn round and see that somebody is coming in my direction and pushing me with their hands (Interview on May 21, 2010).

He confirms that this is how he feels, whether the *caboclo* or Oxum arrives.

Until today, though I am much older now, it still feels this way. Today I feel as if the earth is turning around and opens; just in front of me a big crater opens and somebody pushes me into the crater. It is terrifying! Afterwards I do not see or feel anything. Then I hear people say, “It’s White Feather [the *caboclo*] dancing”, or “Oxum was very pretty today.” I do not have any memory, I do not remember anything. And it is the same thing with the *caboclo*. It is the same thing (Interview on May 21, 2010).

He avoided answering any questions about his feelings, since he has no memory of them, but he

elaborated further on the different characters of the four entities, and the language and manner they use to convey their messages. He then concluded, “All are distinct, totally distinct from each other.”

Case E

Male, Candomblé Fon priest.

This priest represents a form of Candomblé that is often considered to be more “traditional,” since non-African entities, such as *caboclos*, are rejected. When I asked him whether there is a difference between the approach of a spirit or an *orixá*, he replied that the feeling is totally different, “the sensation is different, the weight is different, it is a completely different thing.”

As much as the person learns, the *orixá* also learns; they learn how to act, they learn the dances and the rituals. They are taught to make everything according to the tradition of the house, because each nation, each house, each place tends to keep to a specific form. Each house has its tradition, each house has its way to deal with the *orixá* and the *orixá* needs to learn how to carry them out (Interview on April 23, 2010).

As a consequence, he said, the experience of the incorporation will change during a lifetime. Seven years after the initiation, “the incorporation is much stronger, it is then complete.” I asked him whether the incorporation is always the same and he explained that:

in case of male and female *orixás*, there are similarities; each show similar [gender] aspects, but each one also has a proper personality. There is a moment in which the personality of the *orixá* is revealed, showing which *orixá* the person really is. For example, one moment you can see Ogum very calm, but he is the *orixá* of war. And then, he has enough of singing or touching, and the next moment you will see the warrior ... he becomes more agitated, but he can also become calmer, depending on the singing (Interview on April 23, 2010).

I asked him, as someone who has initiated many people, questions about the initiation process. Although he could not go into detail, since most of the rituals are secret and can only be shared with other initiated people, he was willing to explain certain aspects of the rituals that I had observed.

At the time [of initiation], the *orixá* is very strong, and as the body [of a new initiate] is not accustomed to it [= the incorporation], it loses balance ... In this moment, you can see that it [the body] trembles more than a little ... Then she [we were speaking about the initiation of a female member of his community] has to be given balance

by putting a hand here at the chest and the back so that she does not lose balance.

When a person first makes contact with the *orixá* before initiation, the body will fall to the ground and shake tremendously, very hard, because the person does not know anything about the *orixá*, does not know that the *orixá* is not yet inside or will not leave.

... This type of incorporation is a state of torpor. It loses the movement of a [normal] body. She loses the notion of everything and trembles and then falls ... The *orixá* knocks the body down to the ground to show that it has entered the person. And then one has to become initiated (Interview April 23, 2010).

Initiation for him is the transformation of a person into a sacred being, because during the initiation ceremony the person will be consecrated with the *orixá*. The priest does not describe the experience as incorporation or possession, since in his view it is not an external entity that takes over the human body; rather, the *orixá* stays with the newly initiated person and then arises from within the body (at this moment he pointed to his chest). The term “possession” would indicate that the *orixás* are limited entities that could overtake a human body. However, he insists that this is not the case. When the *orixá* takes control of the body, it is a transformation of a human body into a divine entity from within.

I have chosen these five cases as a representative sample of the dozens of interviews I took in Brazil in 2010 with members of different religious traditions. Despite the randomness of the selection, they reflect the intensity of the discourse about possession, incorporation, and trance, but also the elaborate ways to disregard intrusive questions about personal feelings and experiences. They will now be confronted with the academic discourse about possession and trance. As Bowie states, “anthropological methodology offers the possibility of personal, embodied encounters with the other – with living as well as written texts, and challenges the ethnographer to include embodied experiences as part of the theoretical and analytical matrix of interpretation” (Bowie 2002: 19).

A Fragmented Body and a Possessed Mind

Possession is at the cutting edge of the debate of the division between body and mind since it involves both the mind as well as the body. Instead of locating the possession experience in the mind, and consequently making it a psychological event (Ribeiro 1982: 156–185), I argue for a middle path, for the inclusion of the body in the analysis of religious ex-

perience. However, first I need to address the question of how to deal with the “sacred” from a culturalist perspective.

The Culturalist Perspective

In order to emphasise the academic foundation, anthropologists of religion emphasise a social scientific approach to the divine. While Rudolf Otto (1936) famously declared in “The Idea of the Holy” that no one without a religious experience would understand his argumentation and should stop reading his book, scholars today cannot accept his non-academic presumption because it would take the enterprise outside the academic framework. Following Otto would indicate that “there is no way to study ‘religious experience’ as such scientifically simply because what constitutes ‘religion’ is highly contested” (Taves 2005: 45). But does not my decision to ground my research in narratives force me to include a “sacred dimension” into my analysis? The anthropological approach requires a respect for the explanations of the practitioners, even explanations that rely on the possessing agencies for their interpretation of their experiences; hence, they embrace the divine. When we look at religion, however, as “just” another human construct that can be explained in relation to other human constructs (McCutcheon 1997: 11, see also Geertz’s [1973] definition of religion as part of the wider culture and society), the notion of a “sacred” ontological entity, from which the practitioners’ understanding of possession experience derives, has to be rejected.

For the Jungian psychotherapist José Jorge de Moraes Zacharias, whom I interviewed about his involvement in Afro-Brazilian religions, the interpretation of trance and possession experiences are culturally embedded. If a person experiences something unusual and is not given an explanation, it will cause anxiety and disorder, even mental instability. It is only when a culturally embedded explanation is delivered that the experience becomes meaningful and structured. The experience becomes part of the person:

Suppose a teenager begins to see figures and people sometimes talk to her. If she is in a very Catholic or Protestant Church, she’s crazy, she’s in trouble, because you cannot see such things. The idea that you are seeing something is regarded as a hallucination; it’s crazy and will pose a threat to your identity. As a result her identity is threatened, she feels like she’s going crazy. This threat of disintegration of identity generates anxiety. This anxiety accentuates the feeling of disorder and brings fear, and can even cause panic. The person can develop a disorder and

will be sent to hospital where he or she will be given a psychiatric drug. You can create a disruption in the brain chemistry that actually disrupts the ego.

On the other hand, and I’ve seen this happen a lot, a relative or a neighbour of the individual says, “We take her to the centre, she must be seeing spirits.” When this information is passed to the person who is living with it, she thinks, “I see spirits.” Who are these spirits? Oh, and there are spirits in the spiritual plane, and appear to some people who have a gift. “Ah, but I’m seeing it, I’m not going crazy, even though others do not see them.” The new identity is reinforced. “I am not going crazy, I see spirits.” ... After some training in the spiritual centre, the individual begins to learn the meaning of the phenomenon and becomes an active member of the group because it becomes a means of communication. Then a process of indoctrination begins, where she or he will see the spirits during the sessions, and beyond. The experience becomes structured. There is no pathology, but a set of ideas. You think in a set of beliefs and values that make sense of human experience. When we do not have that, the experience is meaningless. If it does not make sense, then something is threatening. If I see a fireball in the sky, I might say “oh, it’s an angel, God, and Yahweh,” or nowadays, “it’s a flying saucer, or an extraterrestrial.” Now, if I do not have those references, I may collapse with fear (Interview on April 15, 2010).

While I agree with his culturalist perspective (see also Klass 2003), it is important to consider the differences within one culture. The opposing interpretation of the experience from a neo-Pentecostal perspective is, of course, understandable; however, we need to look as well at the differences between Afro-Brazilian and Spiritist traditions in order to understand the complexity of the discourse.

All cases share the wider Brazilian belief in the so-called abnormal phenomena mentioned above; hence, they share the belief in the existence of spiritual entities. One crucial distinction is connected to the possessing agencies (see Keller 2002 about the importance of acknowledging the role of the possessing agency). The *orixás* are described by Candomblé, as well as by some Umbanda practitioners, as forces of nature in contrast to fixed disembodied entities. This definition is used to explain why *orixás* cannot possess a human being because it is believed to be beyond human ability to incorporate a divine entity. The priest in “Case E” sees this aspect as the ultimate distinction between Candomblé and Umbanda. In Candomblé the *orixá* does not come from the outside, but is inside the human body from the moment of the initiation. When the *orixá* leaves, something remains in the human body of the initiate.

This description resembles Goldman’s explanation of possession. The anthropologist argues that

the worlds of gods and humans converge during the possession; the adept and the *orixá* almost overlap. Hence, being possessed does not mean that a person transforms into an *orixá*, but that this individual “almost” becomes a divine entity (Goldman 2007: 112–114). Goldman argues that “becoming” is not identical with transformation, “becoming” is an active and creative process that will not (necessarily) result in a transformed entity, but will include a movement.

The spiritual entities of Umbanda, however, are considered to be individual entities, and spirits are believed to have had (in a former life) a human body. But the possession is not a simple process, as the priestess in “Case B” explains, when asked about the simultaneous incorporation of a spiritual entity within numerous human bodies. It is believed, that incorporation is a kind of dialogue and that part of the human being becomes part of the personality of the possessing entity.

This aspect is even stronger in the case of Spiritism, as indicated by the fact that mediums regularly describe how the spirits have enriched their lives. The woman in “Case A,” for instance, stressed how the experience has strengthened the creativity in her life. Spiritists regularly insist that this experience is not a possession or incorporation since the mediums take an active part when the spirits communicate their messages to the human world. Engler regards the consciousness of Kardecist mediums as the main difference between Umbanda and Kardecism (2009a: 486)

Resembling Zacharias’s explanation above, mediums in each tradition often rejected the first contact with spiritual entities. In due course, however, they learnt how to control this encounter – or, in Zacharias’s words, they learnt to structure their experience – so that it would not affect their ordinary life but help the community. After they got over the initial shock of the first approach, mediums embraced the experience freely (see Eliade 1989) about the symbolic death and rebirth of a shaman during the initiation process). This willingness is connected to their emerging role in the community since everyone highlighted the importance of helping others with their ability. From a functional perspective mediumship serves a wider community, usually the members of the religious house, and often, especially in Umbanda, a wider clientele (see Lewis 2003). The community aspect also enforces the cultural significance of possession experience in the wider Brazilian society. However, as Engler highlights, possession rituals “do not simply echo or reflect broader cultural factors: they also allow ritual participants to reimagine and rehearse dynamic con-

ceptions of an attitude to the agency of themselves and others” (2009a: 487).

The Body Perspective

Zacharias psychologises the cultural explanation of possession and locates the experience strictly in the mind, with the mind dominating the body. The *orixás* become Jungian archetypes and the experience is no longer unique. René Ribeiro, however, challenges this interpretation. Although he agrees that possession is an “ethno-psychological problem” (the title of a conference paper given in July 1955 in Salvador da Bahia, published in Ribeiro 1982: 156–185), and defines the possession of a *caboclo* in an Afro-Brazilian religious community as a dissociative personality phenomenon (158), he rejects the claim that it is merely a psychological incident (167). This attitude is also reflected in my interviews. When I asked mediums generally what they remember from the experience (mediumship, possession, or incorporation), they often declared that they did not remember anything that happened during the time of the incorporation. On the other hand, they could describe how it affected their body. One similarity, for instance, is that nearly all of them declared that they have no control over what they say or do during the episode. In all cases, the mediums describe their bodily experience of an approaching spiritual entity in a similar way – how it tickles the arm or hand; how they sense something approaching; how they can feel their body responding to the approach; and how it then takes over from one moment to another. Afterwards they usually feel a strong emotion, often they are tired and do not know why, they feel a resonance of joy or satisfaction but also sadness and a sense of loss when the possessing agency has left.

While the bodily feeling is described relatively similarly, the presence of another consciousness is perceived in different ways. In the case of Umbanda, where the spirits are described as individual entities, the consciousness of the possessing agency has a distinct individual character and the medium is aware of the approaching entity. In Spiritism, a spirit is described as an individual, who is communicating with the medium, whose consciousness remains aware of the spirit (at least in most cases). Hence, mediumship in Spiritism is a form of active interaction between two agencies, while in Umbanda the consciousness of the spiritual entity is stronger than the consciousness of the human, and the communication happens between the client (or the community) and the spirit, not between the medium and the

spirit. The mediums in both traditions have to handle more than one consciousness, the human and the spiritual one.

In Candomblé, however, the divine entity is perceived in a different way since the divinity of the *orixás* surpasses individuality. In addition, the *orixá* never totally leaves the human body after the initiation; hence the human being is transformed by the initial merger with the divine. When in further episodes the *orixá* raises within the human body to the head in order to take control, the human part of the consciousness is subdued by the divine part. The Candomblé medium does not handle two or more consciousnesses, but allows a section of it to outshine the other. Followers of Jung would perhaps like to argue that the *orixá* constitutes part of the consciousness of the medium (see Zacharias 1998 and his interpretation of the *orixás*), which justifies the resistance to label this experience as possession. The experience seems similar to the experience of Umbanda and Spiritist mediums because the human consciousness of the medium is suppressed. However, this interpretation risks overlooking the concept of the body within Candomblé thought. It is crucial to note that the Candomblé ideas go beyond the division of body and mind, as Barros and Teixeira have explained. They argue that the soul also has a material aspect and that the body has a spiritual aspect (2004: 110), since it serves as a connection to the divine. They describe the human body as a vehicle for the communication with the deities. The body can receive the *orixás*, but it is also means of personal individuality. It is impossible, therefore, to distinguish between body and mind. According to Barros and Teixeira the deities are not (only) phenomena of the mind, and the body is not (only) a material unit. Their explanation is consistent with Berkenbrock's statement that in Candomblé thought a human being consists of different elements. The body, which becomes earth again after death, consists according to Berkenbrock of *emi* (breath), which provides the body with life, *ori* (intelligence or consciousness), and something from Orum (the divine creator), which means that every person has some elements of his or her *orixás* inside the human body (1998: 285 f.). The trance provides human beings with a moment of harmony, because all fragments are temporarily unified.

The Candomblé perspective on the body as a fragmented entity shows the importance of ideas about the body for an understanding of the possession experience. Theorists on spirit possession often ignore the "centrality of the sentient body in possession" (Stoller 1994: 637) as it is expressed in indigenous opinions. However, as the narratives above

demonstrate, the possession experience is an embodied practice (Stoller 1994). The mediums feel strong emotions when encountering spiritual entities and express these experiences physically with their bodies (see also Lambek 1996: 239). This experience has encouraged the development of highly sophisticated concepts about the body, not only among Candomblé practitioners, but also among devotees of the other traditions. Csordas argues that "When the body is recognized for what it is in experiential terms, not as an object but as a subject, the mind-body distinction becomes much more uncertain" (1990: 36). He regards the body not as an object to be studied in relation to culture, but as a subject of culture. With reference to speaking in tongues in the Charismatic Christianity in North America, Csordas interprets Pentecostal glossolalia as asserting unity of body and mind, establishing a shared human world, and expressing transcendence (1990: 31). Instead of describing the experience as God inhabiting the "socially informed body," he argues that the lived body is "an irreducible principle, the existential ground of culture and the sacred" (1990: 23).

This view of the body brings the debate back to the question of how to include something or someone that cannot be studied in an empiricist way in the analysis. As the narratives above demonstrate, the mediums describe their experience in relation to spiritual entities of different qualities. Their bodies were affected by the interaction with spirits, or even transformed due to the merger with a deity. Something happened in and with their bodies during the possession experience that did not leave the body unchanged. Instead of maintaining a sharp distinction between the identities of spirit and host (e.g., Lambek 1980: 319), the body is transformed during the possession. However, this intervention cannot be measured, or scanned, or even documented, but only described. In each of the five Brazilian cases the mediums insist that the experience changes the body because – for a moment or for longer – the medium embodies the sacred perceived as the ultimate other, whether it is a spirit or a divine being.⁴

Conclusion

Gods, religions, and cultures in general are often regarded as products of cognition that create bridges

⁴ Van de Port even argues that the construction of possession as "radically other" supports the quest of Candomblé priests in Bahia for authority. Unsolicited bodily experiences, spontaneous fainting spells, visions, dreams, and other inexplicable events help "to convince people of the authenticity of their particular convictions" (2005: 164).

between the worlds we conceive and the worlds we make (Tremblin 2006: 169). Or, as Saler writes, “people do not just ‘have’ beliefs. They frequently *use* or deploy them in social interactions, in keeping with desires and interests, and there is a meaning in that use” (2001: 66, emphasis in the original). Anthropological studies of possession experience have, until recently, focused on the interpretation of these social interactions, that is, on the functional side of the experience for the society and the individual. Recently the focus shifted to cognition (see Cohen 2007). My attention, however, was on the perception of the body. Possession, trance, divine inspiration, visions, and so on, all achieve something inside the body. For a moment or longer, people lose the sense of their own self (consciousness) and experience a different self (the Altered State of Consciousness – ASC). For a moment, this “category that we call the self” is lost, overpowered by another “self” though still (perhaps subconsciously) present. However, any kind of religious experience, including spirit possession and its siblings, trance and divine inspiration, cannot be accomplished without involvement of the body because the body is “the locus of the sacred” as Csordas writes, “the existential ground of culture” (1990: 39). While the recent wave of studies focused on the brain, because of the involvement of circuits in the brain in religious experience (Pyysiäinen 2003: 124), I am not interested in brain activities but in the body as a whole, the twisting, itching, erratic movements, how the perception of body weight and even the measurements (taller-shorter) seem to change. If this may be a psychological or physiological phenomenon, I am unable to determine. What I want is to find out how it is interpreted by those to whom it happens. Obviously, something may also happen to the observer, but that would be another question. At one Umbanda ceremony, while I waited for the ceremony to begin, I noticed small stools and very short walking sticks, situated around the room. There were no children present so I had no idea for whom they were set up. The priestess of this group was a very tall woman, as were most of the other members. However, at the end of the ceremony, after I had observed (and consulted) several mediums of *preto velho* spirits, I suddenly realised that the stools no longer looked too small for the mediums and that the canes were in perfect shape for this situation. Something similar happened in a Spiritist centre, while I was interviewing a woman who had “worked” in this centre during my first visit some weeks earlier. During the interview, I realised, to my astonishment, that she was even shorter than me and definitely not taller as I had thought after my first

encounter. These are, of course, only personal impressions during emotionally charged ceremonies (and I did not measure the mediums). But the impressions confirm the mediums’ reports about their feelings and recollections of how the possession experience affected them physically.

Where does this leave me in light of a better understanding of possession experience? I am no step further in recognising whether a spirit of a doctor of medicine treats the patients in a Spiritist centre; whether an *orixá* conveys his or her pleasure about the presence of so many clients; or whether a *caboclo* criticises me for an incorrect movement. I do not understand how a woman with a disfigured foot can dance for hours without pain; why a man wakes up from his trance feeling immensely sad about the loss of his *orixá*; or why someone who has consumed an enormous amount of alcohol exhibits no effects. Nonetheless, it happened.

Pyysiäinen defines religion as “a concept that identifies the personalistic counter-intuitive representations and the related practices, institutions, etc. that are widely spread, literally believed, and actively used by a group of people in their attempts to understand, explain and control those aspects of life, and reality as a whole, that escape common sense and, more recently, scientific explanation” (2003: 227). In case of explaining possession experience it is evident that the ideas of people experiencing it indeed escape scientific explanation. Nonetheless, we should not ignore their explanations, as they are real for the devotees. It is difficult to find the right balance between explaining and experiencing religion as Taves (1999) explains. I do not want to promote a theological agenda, quite the opposite. However, I also do not want to reject the ideas of people experiencing possession “just” because they do not corroborate the current academic discourse. As Taves highlights, people experiencing acts such as possession trance do not live in isolation from the surrounding discourses. The boundary between scholars explaining experiences and people living them is increasingly blurred, in particular in Brazil. Not only are practitioners aware of the academic research conducted in Brazil, some of them pursue university study programmes in order to be able to better understand their experiences. Hence, the experience itself, as well as the theories developed about it, are embedded in the cultural context of their time and are consequently shaped by it.

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