

# **Discerning Spirits, Defining Selves: Learning Semi-Conscious Trance in the Vale do Amanhecer**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the process of mediumistic development in the Brazilian Spiritualist Christian Order Vale do Amanhecer (Valley of the Dawn) drawing on ethnographic research in temples in Brazil and Europe. This process is described by mediums as being culturally shaped according to the purposes for which it is used. Since mediumistic practice in the Vale do Amanhecer is aimed at releasing discarnate spirits obsessing humans – that is, ‘disobsessive healing’ – these spirits need to be discerned from the medium and the spirit guides, and controlled during a semi-conscious trance. Control and discernment are skills to be learned; and emotions, feelings and bodily experience play a pivotal role in this process. In illustrating the different modes of discernment as culturally informed, the discussion addresses specific notions of the self as produced through the bodily and affective dimensions of this process, and how these embodied notions, in turn, inform therapeutic experiences.

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In this paper I address the process of mediumistic development in the Brazilian Spiritualist Christian Order Vale do Amanhecer (Valley of the Dawn) drawing upon my ethnographic research in temples in Brazil and Europe.<sup>1</sup> I will tackle questions such as: how do mediums

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based upon research that was funded by The Spalding Trust, the Read-Tuckwell Scholarship (University of Bristol) and the Royal Anthropological Institute's Sutasoma Award. The ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in Brazil in Autumn 2004, and along twenty-two months between 2009 and 2012 in the main temple of the Vale do Amanhecer in Brasilia. It also included fieldwork in temples of the Amanhecer in North-East and Southern Brazil, Portugal, the UK and Italy, which I have undertaken at different stages between 2012 and 2016.

learn their practice? How do they discern between different categories of spirits? How does mediumistic experience inform notions of the body and the self? These questions trigger a methodological shift from belief and discourses to experiences.

When addressing spiritual practices and phenomena such as spirit mediumship, trance and possession, fieldworkers have often faced a dilemma: how should we deal with local categories when they clash against our own ones? Foreign categories, which may not fit local experience and understandings, often result in reductionist and pathologising approaches. And this occurs especially when the level of discourse is approached separately from the perceptual level, thus, remaining at the level of *'belief'*, which is a territory of contested categories. I propose to shift the focus upon experience, reframing cognition within the bodily dimension of spiritual practice. Therefore, I approach the process of learning mediumship considering the cultivation of a mediumistic body as an intersubjective process of development of a specific mode of knowing, exploring how the cognitive, bodily and affective dimensions interweave.

### **The Vale do Amanhecer**

The Vale do Amanhecer was founded in 1959 by Neiva Chaves Zelaya, known in Brazil as the clairvoyant Tia Neiva (Aunt Neiva). As a thirty-three-year-old widow mother-of-four and former Catholic, Tia Neiva began to manifest spontaneous mediumistic phenomena with a revelatory character while working as a truck driver in the construction of the Capital Brasília. These phenomena included spirit guides instructing her to establish the sacred spaces, ritual healing practice and the doctrine of the Amanhecer. Moreover, these spirits manifesting as the Amerindian *cacique* Pai Seta Branca (Father White Arrow) and Mãe Yara (Mother Yara), were held to have been incarnated earlier as Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Claire respectively.

The Order spread in the last two decades, opening almost seven hundred temples across Brazil, in North and South America, and Europe. Patients are assisted free of charge, thus, temples are self-funded through occasional donations of initiated members, who live from the income of their jobs outside the Vale. The main temple near Brasília has grown from a small farm into a town of around 10 thousand inhabitants (IBGE 2010), mostly linked to the Vale. The unique and colourful geometries of the sacred spaces and ritual vestments, make the Vale one of the most visually spectacular among Brazilian religions. Open daily with a great variety of healing rituals, rather than a place for worship the temple is intended as a 'spiritual first aid' where mediums rapidly pass from one ritual to another to assist patients on the physical, material or psychological matters of their everyday life.

My interlocutors in the field used to carefully position what is intended as 'mediumship' in the Vale in relation to other Spiritualist groups. Differently from Anglo-Saxon Spiritualism, mediums in the Vale are not interested in providing evidence of an Afterlife, communication with spirits of deceased or psychic readings. Others firmly rejected the use of the category of 'possession', which in Brazil is not commonly understood everywhere in the same way, given the widespread nature of Spiritism and the influence of its conceptualisations of human and spirits relations in different practices. Mediumship is understood in the Vale as an energy that is a 'universal feature of all human beings' produced by physical bodies; and its practice, as being culturally shaped in the mediumistic

development according to the purposes for which it is used in different religions. If this energy is produced in excess, it accumulates affecting the person causing psycho-physical unbalances. Through mediumistic development one learns how to control one's mediumship and to distribute this excessive energy for the healing of others.

The spiritual treatment of patients involves 'disobsessive healing', that is, the release of causal spiritual agents understood as affecting (obsessing) the patient. For this purpose, two complementary types of mediumship are developed in the Vale: that of *apará* and of *doutrinador*, who always work in pairs in rituals. The *apará* embodies spirits through a semiconscious trance described as being similar to dream sleep. These may be spirit guides bringing guidance, protection and healing from the higher spirit worlds, such as: *pretos velhos* ('old blacks', spirits of old African slaves), *caboclos* (spirits of Amerindians), *médicos de cura* (spirits of doctors), *ciganos* (gypsies), *orixás* (deities known in Afro-Brazilian religions). Or, they may be *sofredores* (suffering spirits), *obsessores* (obsessing spirits) or *cobreadores* (creditors from a past life).

The *doutrinador*, in a conscious trance described as expanded consciousness, does not embody spirits but directs rituals and indoctrinates the suffering spirits incorporated by the *apará*, helping them to move further in the spirit world. The conscious and semi-conscious modalities of mediumship, allow mediums to be aware of different feelings and emotions during their trance states.

### **Sensing and Feeling: Mediumship and the Body-Self**

Mediums' religious biographies shared a great emphasis on the participative, ritualistic and bodily aspects of the relationship they sought with the divine. Bodily reactions to the mediumistic development accompanied mediums along the everyday life of the first stages of their development, also in form of headaches, fevers, stomach and back pains. And these, reinforced the idea of reshaping of the body, and the solar plexus in particular, in order to accommodate different forces. The development was therefore *felt* as acting simultaneously upon the different dimensions of the medium, producing a transformation, a sense of becoming.

Spiritual knowledge in the Vale, is transmitted primarily through practical experience rather than through doctrinal teachings. As an instructor explained, 'you have to *feel* spiritual knowledge: it is not a study (*estudo*), it is a state (*estado*)'. Notably, 'you have to feel' in Portuguese is '*tem que sentir*', where '*sentir*' meant both 'sensing' and 'feeling'.<sup>2</sup>

I approach mediumistic development as a process of '*enskillment*'—to use Ingold's understanding of 'learning'—which implies situating the practice through the ongoing education of perception (2000). Indeed, this practice requires mediums to both *extend* into the spirit guides and *discern* between their selves and those spirits that need to be controlled and released. And to do so, a strong sense of self should be developed.

Spirits' discernment and control are *skills* to be learned. Emotion and sensation play a pivotal role in this process. Mediums *aparás*, in trance, are instructed on how to express the energy running through their bodies through the gestural and verbal codes of the Vale,

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<sup>2</sup> Drawing upon Damasio, I refer to 'emotion' as a bodily response to a stimulus, and 'feeling' as the subjective perception of emotion (2000).

according to the culturally recognizable manifestation of each of their spirit guides. *Aparás* learn that the *preto velho* moves the arms around the body to cleanse it and snaps the fingers to disintegrate negative charges; the *caboclo* slaps the medium's chest to increase the production of energy, and the *médico* stretches the arms in front of the body to transmit healing energy to patients. They learn their spirit guides through *multi-sensory images*—that is, in accordance with Csordas (1990: 42), as resulting from the integration of different senses—in which touch, smells, visions, and the bodily feeling of the spirit's attributes, combine to form the representation of one's spirit guide. It is possible to understand these representations as embodied images, as if one may form an image of oneself from an awareness of one's body.

The spirit guides provoke in the *aparás*—and to different extend also in *doutrinadores* and patients—positive feelings of love, bliss and peace, often finding expression in laughter and tears. Also those in Italy who approached the phenomenon for the first time, holding no previous spiritual belief, and apparently not manifesting any particular bodily reaction to the external observer, still reported the most various emotions and reactions: ranging from heat-waves expanding from plexus to the throat, tingling along the limbs, pressure on the head, sense of peace or will to cry. When a drastic change in feelings and emotions is suddenly perceived, mediums understand through negative emotions that a suffering spirit is approaching to incorporate. The configurations of gestural, verbal and emotional codes, along with the content of messages, are used by *doutrinadores* to discern spirits.

In this sense, both *doutrinadores* and *aparás* develop what Halloy and Naumescu define a 'cultural expertise' in the practice of possession, that is, 'Experts need to know which are the cultural representations and expectations associated with possession and find a way ... to match them with perceptions and feelings' (2012: 166). The process of discernment is culturally informed and locally defined; similarly to Tania Luhrmann understanding of 'discernment' as 'a social process, in that there are socially taught rules through which God is identified' in the everyday life of the Evangelical Christians among whom she studied (Luhrmann 2009: 90).

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

A European woman in the early stages of development as *apará*, described her experience in these terms:

The work in the Vale is actually grounding for me, because before I set my path always meditating, being in the clouds... Here I feel that all my force and energy which is transmitted from the higher planes needs this kind of body. Here I have begun to feel that the physical manipulation is very necessary because we are on a physical plane... Everybody here feels these subtle worlds in the physical reality, even *doutrinadores* feel the energy... I always distinguished the physical reality from the beautiful soul, but here I appreciate that the dimensions are interacting with each other... Here the spirits come through your body, you can experience them in your body, you can work with them in your body but they are actually from a different dimension so everything gets

interwoven. That was the feeling I was missing: I felt as not having any borders, but now I understand that you have other dimensions inside of you as *experience* rather than knowledge... then... you see, with many new age people, you get very confused... some people who took *ayahuasca* said that they visited other dimensions and then they came back and did not know how these different dimensions could come together. Here you can probably see it more as a semi-permeable membrane, where it is very clearly defined in which space the spirit comes through... You know, it is really a matter of security... I feel that this gives me a sort of stability, and this is also what I mean by being more embodied... It is not random, making me suffer to be in this earthly plane, but it is actually something useful that can help others. That's the most grounding part of it if you have this sensitivity and you don't know where to bring this energy, and think "What shall I do with it?"

She described her spiritual experiences in the Vale as 'grounding'. Even though in the literature trance has been mostly associated with transcendence or amnesia. She recognized the ability of her self to extend out of the physical dimension in meditation, but also to immerse in the space within during trance, where different dimensions are interwoven. She also stressed that this kind of 'knowing' was grounded in experience.

The development of the skills of spirit discernment was informing her perception of having semi-permeable bodily boundaries which may be crossed by spirits, and the definition of a sense of self, as she became aware of its multidimensionality. Her words resonate with many other accounts I gathered over the years from Brazilian mediums, which grounded my argument that

In a reciprocal movement bodily experience in rituals shapes the sense of self, providing the notion of the self with attributes of extendability and multi-dimensionality. This notion in turn, informs the mediums' conceptualisation of trance, that is, the extension of the medium's spirit out of the body and the extension of the spirit's aura inside the body, which leads to the experience of the body as a platform of shared emotions and feelings' (Pierini 2016: 306).

Moreover, I suggest that the embodied knowledge engendered by this kind of learning, has informed the therapeutic process in some cases, in which mediumistic development was used as a complementary treatment, for patients with mental disorders and alcohol and drug addiction (Pierini 2016b). The instructors in charge of the special cases of addiction, observed how the percentage of relapses drastically fell after the last initiation, as a consequence of increased control and self-awareness that the medium seemingly acquires at that stage. In cases involving anxiety, panic attacks and nervous disorders, patients claimed their complete recovery through the disappearance of the symptoms during mediumistic development. The experiences reported by these mediums suggested that through the development of mediumship—along with its embodied notions and bodily skills involving discernment and control—seemed to have triggered a healing process, which was then reinforced by the shift of their social role from patients to mediators of healing (ibid.).

## Concluding Remarks

Returning to the initial question: how should we treat local categories in the light of the production of ethnographic knowledge? Anthropologist Rita Laura Segato (1992: 126) notes that what is not directly intelligible in the process of making the strange familiar, or what does not fall under a supposed correspondence between belief and society, tends to be ignored if it is not consistent with Western rationality. In doing so, anthropology flattens the world attenuating the accents of human experience that foreground a particular religious group. She proposes rather than resolving difference, to exhibit it in ethnography (1992: 133).

The idea of translation is problematic if intended as a direct transposition of one set of categories into the other—which may result in explaining away informants' assumptions, as Holbraad et al. remind us (2007: 1). The scholarly literature has repeatedly offered examples of misleading translations of spiritual phenomena into Westerner psychiatric categories. However, even psychiatry is redefining the methodological guidelines for approaching Altered States of Consciousness, such as Moreira-Almeida and Lotufo-Neto's advice to: avoid pathologising the unusual; multiply concepts of 'pathology' and 'normality'; consider the limitations of psychiatric vocabulary and classifications; and wherever possible using phenomenological description of concepts, rather than the translation of words (2003). This approach is leading psychiatrists towards discerning spiritual from pathological experiences. And I would stress that an ethnographic approach, which takes into account lived experience and modes of knowing, may assist in making this discernment possible through a particular kind of mediation.<sup>3</sup>

A first step in this direction, I have proposed, is to understand the process of mediumistic development as learning 'a mode of knowing'. What mattered to mediums was talking about their *experiences* of spirits, rather than describing their *belief*. Indeed, newcomers are not taught about the existence of spirits, they are not passed a belief. They rather come to learn how to *feel* their presence and how to discern which spirit is manifesting, that is a specific mode of knowing which urges us to shift our analytical stance from 'belief' to 'experience'.

Undermining the notion of *belief* in favour of that of *experience*, according to Goldman (2003), allows moving beyond differences in terms of belief between the categories of the researcher and those people with whom s/he studies. He proposes that that the anthropologist's main task is to produce 'ethnographic theories'. Namely, *ethnographic knowledge* should mediate between native and scientific theories (Goldman 2006:170). But how should this work practically?

I have proposed that reframing cognition within the body, along with its senses and emotions, helps understanding rituals and cosmologies as they are lived. Namely, we are not just contextualizing native propositions, but what distinguishes ethnographic knowledge is its capacity of illuminating processes of knowing. And the ethnographer may pursue this through: a) a *discerning analysis*, making explicit the ways in which local categories and

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Holbraad suggested that when native categories clash with our own assumptions, we should recognise that 'our conceptual framework' is not 'rich enough to comprehend all the others' (Holbraad 2009: 86). He invites us to produce new concepts, namely 'inventive definitions': that is 'a speech-act that inaugurates a new meaning by combining two or more previously unrelated meanings' (Holbraad 2012: 220).

theories may differ from those in use in other religious contexts and in the scholarly debate; and b) considering how local categories are articulated and lived through, as in this case, within the bodily dimension of the encounter with the sacred.

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