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SEARCHING FOR THE HIDDEN GOD: THE INTIMACY OF SOUND AND LISTENING AMONG KRISHNA DEVOTEES IN MAYAPUR

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ABSTRACT
This article looks at how the Krishna devotees in Mayapur, West Bengal, learn how to chant and listen to the sound of the holy name properly. They suggest that if one is ‘pure’ enough and knows how to listen one experiences the syneasthetic level of sound called pashyanti. At this level, one can reach beyond the duality of the ‘hidden and manifested’ worlds, the external and internal levels of sound; and one can ultimately see God face to face. This is also considered a level at which one can realise that the sound of God’s name and God himself are the same. I will focus on how the devotees learn to create this sense of intimacy with God through the sound of his holy name, and argue that listening is not merely a process connected to our auditory sense but rather a creative and engaging activity, a skill that one can develop.

KEYWORDS: Hare Krishna devotees • religion • sound • skill • intimacy

INTRODUCTION

I am a beggar on the outskirts of the marketplace of the holy name. Can anyone spare me a crumb of faith, a drop of purification, steadiness, or taste, or even a little love for Krishna? (Kancana-Valli Devi Dasi)

In her book Crying for Krishna, Genevieve Brewster (2013: 32), with the initiated name Kancana-Valli Devi Dasi, captures the nature of the long journey of learning how to hear and chant the holy names of the Lord. She refers to the struggle to involve her whole being in the process of chanting and listening in order to develop an intimate relationship with God through the sound of his holy name. It is an intimacy that devotees frequently talk about but experience less often as presumably reaching this level needs years of devotion and skill.

In this article, I will explore the connection between sound and intimacy in the international Hare Krishna community in Mayapur, West Bengal. This relationship indicates that the collective and regulated practices may hide very personal and intimate experiences. I will discuss the role that sound and skilful listening play in creating a dynamic, embodied, and intimate space where the devotees can feel bhakti, loving devotion, and a very personal relationship with God. In particular, I will explore how the devotees study the right way to hear and chant through development of certain skills and quali-
ties that relate to being a better devotee. A proper way of listening would help them
reach beyond the duality of the ‘hidden and manifested’ realms, creating a sense of
being simultaneously ‘here and there.’ Furthermore, this proper way of listening appar-
ently helps them overcome the duality of external and internal levels of the sound of the
holy name, which may ultimately lead to the realisation that the sound of God’s name
and God himself are the same.

Based on my experiences among Krishna devotees and the theoretical insights of
researchers working with sound, I argue that listening is not merely a physical process
connected to our auditory sense. It rather appears to be a perceptual and creative engage-
ment with sound through which we simultaneously perceive and design the world we
live in. Krishna devotees chant the holy names of God, which sound can change the
way they perceive the world. The article addresses, to quote Brandon LaBelle (2010:
xxvi), how “sound creates a relational geography that is most often emotional, conten-
tious, fluid, and which stimulates a form of knowledge that moves in and out of the
body” (original emphasis). Similarly, Michael Bull and Les Back (2004: 1) have referred
to the power of sound to create emotional spaces that can enable both utopian and
dystopian associations. They propose that sound allows individuals to create manage-
able, intimate and aesthetisised spaces to inhabit, but it can also become “an unwanted
and deafening roar threatening the body politic of the subject”. This approach seems
to resemble the view of the devotees that sound can be both materially contaminating
and spiritually purifying. The devotees believe that the sound of the holy name is a
transcendental vibration that penetrates and purifies the bodies and the souls of both
humans and non-humans and helps devotees to reach ultimate knowledge of God. For
the devotees, ultimate knowledge is the intimate sense of Krishna’s presence in his holy
name and the realisation that Krishna is everything and everywhere. I suggest that
this experience could also be understood as acoustemology, which, according to Ste-
ven Feld (2005: 185), is one’s sonic way of knowing and being in the world, the way of
being in which one makes sense of experiences through sound. For Krishna devotees,
the constant process of learning to hear ‘properly’ is also a process of seeking a sonic
knowledge and a sonic way of being in the world that demands a dynamic approach
towards sound and listening and involves a deep sense of creativity and engagement.

MAYAPUR, THE BIRTH PLACE OF KIRTAN

The Krishna-bhakti movement of chanting the holy names of God was introduced by
Krishna himself in the 16th century Mayapur, a little village on the banks of the Ganges
river in the state of West Bengal, in eastern India. As a golden avatar, he appeared in
the form of a saint and a devotee Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in order to experience and
spread bhakti – the deepest loving devotion of God. According to devotees, the Srimad-
Bhagavatam states that by the will of the Lord there was a lunar eclipse in the evening
when the Lord appeared as Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. It was the custom of the Hindu
public that during the eclipse one bathes in the Ganges or any other sacred river and
chants the Vedic mantras for purification. Thus, during the birth of Lord Chaitanya,
when the lunar eclipse occurred, “all India was roaring with the holy sound of Hare
Krsna, Hare Krsna, Krsna Krsna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama,
Hare Hare” (Advaita Candra Dasa et al. 2011: xv).
It is believed that this simultaneous appearance of Lord Chaitanya and the lunar eclipse indicated the particular mission of the Lord. This mission was to preach the loving devotion of God through chanting the 16 holy names of the Lord in this the age of Kali. It is suggested in the Upanisads and Puranas that among many other names of the Lord, these 16 names are particularly good for the age of Kali. According to the Bhagavad-Gita, the period of Kali will last for 432,000 years and is characterised as a time of ignorance, quarrelling, abundance of strife, vice and irreligion in which true virtue is nearly non-existent (Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada 2009 [1972]: 461). Yet the sound of the holy names is believed to free a fallen soul from material conditioning. Therefore, Lord Chaitanya founded the Krishna-bhakti movement, the movement of loving devotion of God, and initiated sankirtan (also referred as kirtan), the practice of communal singing of God’s holy names. The method of chanting the holy names of the Lord was meant for everybody, regardless their social background. According to devotees, it is stated in the scriptures that,

[T]he learned and the foolish, the rich and the poor, the Hindus and the Muslims, the Englishmen and the Indians, and the candalas [dog eaters] and the brahmanas [priestly class], can all hear the transcendental sounds and thus cleanse the dust of material association from the mirror of the heart (Advaita Candra Dasa et al. 2011: xv–xvi).

In 1965, the movement was introduced in the West by an elderly man from Calcutta, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, later known as Srila Prabhupada. At the age of 69, he travelled on the Jaladuta, a regular cargo carrier, from Calcutta to New York in order to fulfil the ancient Vedic prophesy that “[t]he holy name would be chanted in every town and village of the whole world”. Since then, the international movement has become generally known as the Hare Krishna movement, or the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). As devotees would say, the ‘holy name’ spread quickly from New York to the different parts of the world, and in the early 1970s the first ISKCON devotees, in turn, started to settle in Mayapur, the birthplace of the movement. This ordinary Indian rural area, with few temples and huge expanses of green rice fields and other agricultural land, started to grow slowly into what the devotees would see as the headquarters of the ISKCON or the ‘Kirtan Capital of the World’, which began to welcome a growing number of international devotees who came on pilgrimage or settled down in the holy place.

Today, Mayapur is a rapidly growing city that probably draws its dwellers into a different sonic world than that of the 16th century. The smoothing flow of the Ganges and the different timbres of the variety of birds are still present. However, in addition to the sounds of nature and the growing variety of traffic sounds, Mayapur also has characteristics of a noisy construction site. Fulfilling the dream of Srila Prabhupada, the devotees are building the new Temple of the Vedic Planetarium, presumably the highest Hindu temple in the world, and houses that are growing like grass after rain to welcome the newcomers. At times, the sounds of drilling and polishing and the high pitch of knocking and sawing metal becomes a disturbing cacophony, creating the holistic sensational experience that your own body is under construction. As the sound artist Salome Voegelin (2010: 47) has written, “The body of the sound has moved so close it is my body: I am the host of noise” (original emphasis). However, I was told that it was
Some devotees, however, find many of the sounds in the area rather mundane and distracting and therefore take shelter in the sound of the holy names. Following the teachings of Lord Chaitanya, the devotees who have settled in Mayapur or just come on pilgrimage keep spreading the sound of the holy names and thus revivify the sonic memory of the 16th-century sankirtan movement. They regularly dance, and sing the holy names of the Lord in the temple, on the streets, and on the roads of the nearby villages so that the transcendent sound vibration that believably emanates from the holy names would purify the hearts of all living entities in the area. The devotees chant the holy names on the boat trips and in the water of the Ganges in which the sound is believed to be thousand times more purifying. They go to the pilgrimages around the area of Mayapur where they chant the holy name along the way and listen to the stories of the pastimes of the Lord. In addition to the communal singing of the Lord’s names at sankirtan, the devotees should also dedicate at least two hours per day for *japa mala* meditation, which means at least 16 rounds of individual chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra using prayer beads. According to the scriptures, the God’s activities, called *lilas*, are eternal and thus devotees claim that actually Lord Chaitanya still walks the fields in
Mayapur and takes a bath in the Ganges. Devotees believe that those who have purified their consciousness through kirtan and *japa* can ‘uncover’ Mayapur and still perceive the presence and mercy of the Lord. This perception enables them to create a very intimate relationship with Krishna – with God who is simultaneously residing in his eternal spiritual sky as well as in Mayapur as Lord Chaitanya.

**Photo 2.** Devotees singing the holy names of God on Parikrama (pilgrimage) in Mayapur. Photo by Marje Ermel.

**THE DYNAMIC LEARNING OF LISTENING**

Even though it is believed that the devotees who have purified their souls can still perceive the presence of the Lord both in Mayapur and in his holy names, it is considered a very advanced stage of listening and perception. This refers to the possibility that through learning and practising one can actually change and develop the way one listens to the world. It also indicates that the way one perceives the world through one’s senses is socially constructed rather than naturally given. In what follows, I will explore how this process, in which one can learn to perceive the world in a new way, takes place.

Relying on Gibsonian ecological psychology, Tim Ingold (2000: 166–167) explains that there is an inexhaustible amount of information potentially available to an agent as there is no limit to what can be perceived. New things that people keep on seeing
throughout their lives in an otherwise permanent world are perceived not by constructing the same sense data according to a novel conceptual schemata but by sensitisation or the fine-tuning of the perceptual system to new kinds of information. Therefore new perceptions do not arise so much from imagining as from creative acts of discovery, in addition to which the information on which these perceptions are based is available to anyone attuned to picking it up. Ingold concludes by suggesting that the way one perceives the world through one’s senses is learnt and thus socially constructed. He explains that,

One learns to perceive in the manner appropriate to a culture, not by acquiring programmes or conceptual schemata for organizing sensory data into higher-order representations, but by ‘hands-on’ training in everyday tasks whose successful fulfilment requires a practised ability to notice and to respond fluently to salient aspects to the environment (ibid.: 167).

James J. Gibson (1979: 254) has noted that the process of learning can be seen as an “education of attention”. Therefore, Ingold (2000: 167) concludes, learning should not be viewed as a transmission of information but rather as tuning one’s perception, which continues for the whole of one’s life.

Paul Stoller (1984: 560) has given a provocative example of the experience of learning to tune one’s senses in a culturally specific way. As an anthropologist and apprentice of a Songhay sorcerer in Niger, he recalls his own failure to perceive a sick man’s spiritual double, which had been separated from the man through witchcraft. Stoller had failed to ‘hear’ the double’s return after the healer had discovered it in a pile of millet husks. He recalls his conversation with his teacher Sorko Seyni Mounmouni, who had given him his “first lesson in Songhay hearing”:

He turned toward me: “Did you hear it?”
“Hear what?” I asked dumbfounded.
“Did you feel it?”
“Feel what?” I wondered.
“Did you see it?”
“What are you talking about?” I demanded.
Sorko Seyni shook his head in disbelief. [...] He said to me: “You look, but you do not see. You touch, but you do not feel. You listen, but you do not hear. Without sight or touch,” he continued, “one can learn a great deal. But you must learn how to hear, or you will learn little about our ways.”

Theatre director and performer Phillip B. Zarrilli (2015: 121) also suggests that long-term, in-depth practice can potentially open specific sensory/experiential “worlds”. In particular, he focuses on meditation, martial arts, and acting/performance, and suggests that one can progressively unfold or elaborate a distinct complexity or “thickness of sensing” that creates the living “world” of that practice. He proposes that by paying attention to, and opening one’s awareness of, one can reach the experience of “what it is like” to inhabit/sense/live within that specific “world”. Zarrilli (2015: 122) poses the question, “How does one learn ‘to be sentient’ and ‘to open up a world,’ yielding to the resonance ‘within’ offered by that specific ‘world’?”
I would suggest that the process of chanting the holy names can also shape one’s sense of hearing in a culturally specific way. Furthermore, this process can also be viewed as a form of meditation that enables the practitioner to inhabit/sense/live within a particular world where certain kinds of sensibility become possible. Reaching this experience, I propose, demands a very steady and dynamic practice focusing primarily on the skill of listening. As when Stoller was asked to learn to be sentient and tune his hearing in a certain way, Krishna devotees told me that “there is no researching without chanting and hearing the Hare Krishna mantra”. Relying on his fieldwork experience, Stoller describes how important it had been to let the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of Niger to flow into him. He highlights what he believes to be the fundamental rule in epistemological humility – one cannot separate thought from feeling and action as they are inextricably linked (Stoller 1989: 5). Thomas J. Csordas (1994: 269) also claims that embodiment is a methodological standpoint in which bodily experience is understood as the existential ground between culture and self, and therefore considered as a valuable starting point for their analysis. In a similar manner, I realised that in order to understand the experience of chanting and listening, I had to be fully engaged in practice and take my experiences seriously.

To explore how this listening is taught, I joined a course called The Kirtan Academy, which lasted three months over the winter. During the course, devotees had a chance to learn the main musical instruments used in the kirtan such as the mridanga, harmonium, and cartals. However, the main focus was on learning the proper way of chanting and hearing the holy names. Doyal Gouranga Das, the co-founder of the Kirtan Academy, who moved to Mayapur from Germany in 2010, explained that even though it was called a Kirtan Academy, it was actually the Holy Name School. He said that it was not primarily about music or the ability to sing nicely. It was rather about understanding the holy names from different angles and becoming aware of the various qualities one should cultivate in oneself in order to be a good chanter.

Sravanam and kirtanam are considered the first and the most important processes of developing bhakti, loving devotion of God. According to Doyal Gouranga, sravanam means ‘to hear’, to receive the transcendental information through one’s ears. Kirtanam means ‘to speak, sing, describe’ the glories of the Lord. Gouranga pointed out that there are four different types of kirtan. In nama kirtan, one speaks about the name of the object of one’s kirtan. In rupa kirtan, one speaks about the form of the object of one’s kirtan. In guña kirtan, one speaks about the qualities of the object of one’s kirtan; and in lila kirtan, one speaks about the activities or the pastimes of the object of one’s kirtan. He explained further that the highest object of kirtan was God. Thus devotees sing the name of God and accordingly describe his form, his qualities, or his activities, as pastimes. “Out of four types of kirtan,” he continued, “the kirtan of the name is the most important”. He referred to the age of Kali, in which, as mentioned above, the only way to liberate the conditioned soul is to chant the holy names of the Lord.

The goal of the academy, to teach people how to chant and hear the holy names properly, seems to support the view that our senses are socially constructed and that one can fine-tune the way one perceives the world. More particularly, this view shows that listening is a skill one can learn and that the practice of listening involves much more than just the auditory sense. I remember that one of those chanting days in the Kirtan Academy showed the very dynamic nature of listening. It was the beginning
of February, an early spring day in India when the fresh mornings are still shrouded in cold and humid night fog, although the days are warm and sunny. It was the day of preparation for the ‘64 rounds day’. This was a special day in the Kirtan Academy that happens once a week when, instead of the regular 16 rounds, the devotees were encouraged to chant the mantra 64 rounds using their prayer beads. This would take approximately eight hours for an experienced chanter. The preparation day was necessary because, according to the teacher Bhakti Brhat Bhagavat Swami, it takes about 12 hours to prepare one’s consciousness for an event like this.

Bhakti Brhat Bhagavat Swami reminded the devotees of the meaning of the Hare Krishna mantra, explaining that it simply means addressing God and his energy, Hara. The mantra expresses the prayer “Oh energy of Krishna, oh Krishna, please engage me in your devotional service!” In his book The Nectarian Ocean of The Holy Name, guru Sachinandana Swami (2010 [2006]: 36) explains further that Krsna means ‘the all-attractive’; that the syllable krs can be seen as the attractive aspect of the Lord and na originates from the word ananda, ‘spiritual bliss’. Thus, he suggests that “the name of Krishna contains God’s most attractive and pleasant aspect”. He explains that Rama refers to spiritual enjoyment and Hare is the addressing form or vocative case of Hari and is also another name for Krsna, “He who grants liberation”. Yet Bhakti Brhat Bhagavat Swami suggested that devotees were often not focused or aware of the meaning and importance of chanting. He explained that such inattentive chanting was viewed as mechanical chanting and was considered one of the biggest offences towards the holy name. He explained that mechanical japa meant that devotees were doing something else along with their chanting and thus not focusing on the sound of the mantra. He had the whole list of different types of inattentive chanting which the students in groups had to act out in front of others. They were asked to make various performances of a driving japa, a newspaper japa, a sightseeing japa, a mobile phone japa, a cooking japa, a cleaning japa, a shopping japa, a ‘to do list’ japa, an Internet japa, a TV or movie japa, a Bhagavatam class japa, a kirtan japa, and the list went on. The devotees found the performances simultaneously funny and serious as many of them recognised their own mistakes in these role-plays. The performances made the ways in which one is not supposed to chant the individual japa visible. And even though the devotees are generally aware of the importance of attentiveness, the common scene in Mayapur is a devotee with his or her hand in a japa bag, murmuring the holy name, while simultaneously talking to a friend, doing laundry, checking Facebook, listening to kirtan, or shopping. This inattentiveness is considered offensive towards the holy name and one of the aims of the Kirtan Academy was to deepen the devotee’s awareness of such challenges in the process of developing one’s Krishna consciousness.

Hence, Bhakti Brhat Bhagavat Swami reminded devotees of the basics of the chanting – to focus on the sound and to hear all the 16 words and the 32 syllables of the mantra. It was important to pronounce all 32 syllables properly and loudly, simultaneously hearing them attentively. He also explained that the best chanting time was early in the morning; that we should find our own comfortable place for chanting; that we should sit properly while chanting; that we should involve both our upper and lower lips as well as the tongue while chanting; and, once again, the words “Hare Krishna” should be very distinctly pronounced and heard. He warned devotees not to be tricked by their minds during the ‘64 rounds day’. He explained how our mind would distract
our chanting by telling us to go and drink some water, to go to the wash-room, to have a rest, to ask how many rounds our friends had chanted, and many other disturbing things. He insisted: “You are not the mind! Take a vow of silence, Mauna Vrata, on the mind, do not listen to the mind! Please continue to chant, even if you are not attentive, just chant, never give up chanting.” He emphasised that we should hear the sound, not the mind, as the thinking factor of the mind and the hearing factor of the mind would not function simultaneously. “You either think or you hear,” he claimed in a nutshell.

Describing the acting and meditation training processes, Phillip Zarrilli (2015: 127–128) similarly notes that the practitioner begins to develop what is often referred to as “concentrative”, “focused attention”, or “contentless awareness of the mind”. This is the ability “to direct and sustain attention on a specific object”. Various attentive practices, as Zarrilli points out, are particularly meant for “learning to still the mind, direct one’s attention, and thereby quiet a too often naturally busy brain, “monkey-mind”, or “squirrel-like” mind that races here and there. (Ibid.: 128) For Krishna devotees, this “specific object” to focus on, as Bhakti Brhat Bhagavat Swami also reiterated, is the sound of the holy name. As Doyal Gouranga emphasised, the sound of the holy name is the “object of kirtan”. He also pointed out that the goal of any mantra was to “liberate yourself from your mind”. Similarly to Bhakti Brhat Bhagavat Swami, he explained that our mind took us either in the future or in the past. It is constantly unsated and never gets tired. Yet, if we are in the present, the mind is still. However, he admitted that this stage of stillness is not easy to reach:

If we are attentive we concentrate on the vibration, the sound of the mantra. [...] You pray for the attention because attention... it’s not a cheap thing. We pray, “Please, let me hear your name!” Then, very quickly nectar starts coming, very quickly. Without attention you can forget about the nectar, really [...] If we do it properly, just with the full respect and attention: chanting the name, hearing it; again chanting; again hearing... Don’t worry about the speed, don’t worry about time, about circumstances! When you do it, just do it! Concentrate on this! Then, this is real kirtan. And it very quickly changes us to a much much better person and ultimately to a spiritual being.

I joined the ‘64 rounds day’ in the Kirtan Academy in the late morning. The academy was actually just a nicely decorated shelter in the park not too far from the temple and next to the boys’ international school and Goshala, an ISKCON cow farm. This was a temporary place. However, even the permanent ‘holy name village’ that they were planning to build both for teaching and for the accommodation of students, would not differ significantly. As Yasomati Devi Dasi, the founder of the Kirtan Academy, told me, the place for the academy would still be eco-friendly and very simple, consisting of lots of trees and gardens and mud huts with straw roofs. When I arrived, around 15 devotees were sitting under this temporary shelter, still wrapped in the blankets that had protected them from the cold morning fog. Now the day was already hot, and the strong yet sleepy and monotonous sound of murmuring mantra felt like an irresistible lullaby sung by a cloud of honey-bees. Those who arrived early had chanted nearly half of their 64 rounds. Many devotees were struggling to stay awake, probably from the combination of the heat and lack of sleep. Even a white dog close to the shelter, which had carelessly watched the devotees chanting, finally gave up and fell asleep.
Following the devotees, I sat down in the lotus position on a light coloured carpet covering the earth under the shelter. I took out my prayer beads and started repeating the holy names. Touching the biggest wooden bead in the row of the 108 beads between my thumb and my middle finger, I chanted, “Sri-krishna-chaitanya prabhu nityananda sri-adwaita gadadhara shrivasadi-gaura-bhakta-vrinda”. As the devotees told me, it was good to chant this mantra before every round to get the Lord Chaitanya’s mercy and forgiveness for whatever offenses one may commit while chanting the Hare Krishna mantra. Then I calmly continued the round, feeling the strong wooden prayer beads gently moving one after another between my fingers. The sound of my monotonous and rather quiet chanting “Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare” merged with the sound of the devotees chanting next to me and the cacophony of the birds and construction sounds in the area. Few sounds from the outside world were enough to break my concentration and to activate my mind to observe my surroundings and ask several questions:

How many rounds have they chanted already? Did they really wake up at two o’clock in the morning, as suggested? What do they experience while chanting? Am I ever going to understand this? Do they feel ‘Krishna’s presence’? Can they really focus only on sound? Is their mind wondering around like mine?

Some devotees experienced similar difficulties, as I learned later. Premalata Devi Dasi, a devotee from the Czech Republic, shared her experience of the ‘64 rounds day’. She expressed her surprise that the warnings by the teachers about the wondering mind became a detailed reality once she started the long process of chanting. She recalled:

And it came, everything, you know... In one moment, you start to feel very tired and you really need to sleep. And then... if you say, “No, you know, let me chant few more rounds and then we go and take some rest for a short time”... okey, [now] the mind is satisfied and you can chant. Finally you realise, “I’m not tired at all!” [...] And then you become so hungry. You have to eat something, otherwise you die. You feel even dizzy. You feel such a pain in your stomach. And then, “Okey, let me chant four more rounds and then we will go and take something.” [The hunger is] immediately gone! You cheat your mind and then you realise that he [the mind] was trying to cheat [you]! [...] And then another stage is when you try to kind of investigate how many rounds your neighbour has done. And if he has done less then your mind is kind of like patting your false ego, “I’m so good, I’m so good!” And then you don’t think of Krishna, but how you are good... And if by chance your neighbour has done more, then your mind is beating you, “You are so useless, useless, useless!” Not thinking of Krishna, just thinking how you are bad... “Better give up you know. Give up, let’s go... go take some ice-cream!”

Premalata admitted that before she had developed the desire to chant 64 rounds, chanting so many rounds had been like pushing the heavy stone in front of her. But once she developed the desire the process became easier. She said:

I was kind of thinking that actually this is such a sweet... this holy name. It’s real nectar. And even if I will not make it, let me drink as much nectar as I can. And it made me like peaceful and I could continue. It was very sweet and then... [I chanted] 32 [rounds] without a problem. [...] And then you go further, you know.
If you go up to 48 [rounds], it’s like... you become tired, because we are not used to it. But you know, I’m gonna make it! And then, as Bhakti Brhat Bhagavat Swami said, “Once you do the 64, you realise that you want to chant even more. And if you are really prepared for that, prepared your mind for that and meditate upon it, then you are able to do much more.” [...] And actually, from that moment [...] when I developed the desire that I want to chant 64 [rounds], it was like... it changed the point of view. Now it’s not so heavy [...] and still I’m not there [yet], but it’s not so difficult.

Premalata’s story refers to the steady and dynamic process of learning to develop the desire and the skill to be able to chant and experience a certain state, which she describes as tasting a sweet nectar. However, this taste seems to have different qualities that one learns to discriminate in order to evaluate one’s own development in Krishna consciousness. I suggest that Zarrilli, emphasising the subtle changes in the actors’ experiences, also provides an insight into the process by which the devotee’s experience of listening to the holy names changes over time. Zarrilli seem to propose that as one continues the exercises daily, one cannot notice great changes in the intensity and amplitude. He argues, “What does alter over time is the degree, type, and quality of the ‘felt’ sense of connection; what inhabiting the exercises is ‘like’” (Zarrilli 2015: 128, original emphasis). At the beginning of the practice, there is only little “that it is like”. One needs sufficient repetition and experience to attune oneself to what is feasible within the exercises. Zarrilli proposes that “what it is like” only appears over time and changes in a similar manner how the perfumer learns to have a discriminating sense of smell, or how the expert wine taster develops the subtle skill to discriminate and “taste” the quality of the “feeling”. (Ibid.: 130)

Doyal Gouranga emphasised that the goal of kirtan was prema, the love of God, and chanting was the best and the easiest way to awaken that love in one’s heart. Similar to Zarrilli, he emphasised the necessity of long-term practice in order to gradually attune oneself to fully experience what the practice had to offer. He explained:

So, by practising the holy name you start loving the holy name. You start realising God in the holy name. And when you develop love for him you don’t want to stop chanting because that’s how you associate with him, always. So, the perfection of chanting is more chanting. And it’s a very tasty process. In the beginning it can be bitter. [...] Our great great saint and teacher Rupa Goswami writes [...] that the holy name is sweet like a sugar candy, but we feel it bitter. And the example is that when you take a sugar candy and you have jaundice, then it tastes bitter. But the ayurvedic science says that you can cure the jaundice by taking the sugar candy regularly. So, you take the sweet candy, which is by nature sweet but it tastes bitter to you. But you take the sweet candy again and again and it cuts the disease at the root. The same with the names. If you take the holy names, again and again, as much as you can, slowly slowly it will cut our diseased material condition. It’s really nectar, but we have to come to this stage. In this material condition, I have the problem, and this [the Hare Krishna mantra] is the medicine. And I have to take it deliberately. And to make it more sweet for us, we need to be very attentive.

While participating in the ‘64 rounds day’ in the Kirtan Academy, I finally managed to take the teachings of both Doyal Gouranga and Bhakti Brhat Bhagavat Swami more
seriously and tried to quiet my mind, focusing only on the sound of the mantra. Bhakti Brhat Bhagavat Swami had said, “Just chant louder so that you wouldn’t hear your mind!” However, in this process not only was the sound of the mantra present, but other sounds also became very present. With my eyes closed, I could hear various sounds from different directions hitting and penetrating my body: the rhythmical high pitch of knocking, melodious beeping, a tintinnabulating beeping from the right; a strong scrabble and rustling movement from one side to another behind me; the sound of someone flopping down and the low beat of bouncing further to the front; and a monotonous murmur on the left.

This experience reminded me of the practice of reduced listening. Michel Chion (2012: 50) explains this as a mode of listening that focuses on the characteristics of the sound itself, independent of meaning and cause. Regardless of whether it is verbal, played on an instrument, noises, or in any other form, Chion seems to claim that reduced listening takes the sound itself as an object to be observed rather than as a vehicle for something else. He would also argue that reduced listening helps us open our ears and sharpen our power of listening. He suggests that this development of a listening skill through reduced listening happens because “[t]he emotional, physical, and aesthetic value of a sound is linked not only to the causal explanation we attribute to it but also to its own qualities of timbre and texture, to its own personal vibration” (ibid.: 51). While explor-
ing the role of different senses in complementary and alternative medicine, Ruth Barcan (2011: 140) similarly suggests that sound is a tool. But it is not just a pathway to meaning that just represents or signifies. It does physical things. What it is, what it does, and also what it means cannot be completely separated.

However, the devotees were not supposed to focus on the qualities of many different sounds. They were asked to focus only on one sound – the sound of the holy name that they themselves were producing in the very moment. It did not seem an easy task in this sonic ocean in which waves with different vibration patterns were bombarding us from various directions. I continued trying with my eyes open. Now my mind started easily reflecting on what I saw. It was early spring, yet the big yellow Sal tree leaves falling in the warm wind and sunlight gave me the feeling of an Estonian ‘old women’s summer’. It is also called an ‘Indian summer’ in the Northern Hemisphere, referring to unseasonably dry and warm weather in Autumn. I also remembered the previous August when the same park was decorated with flowers and little lights for a festival where the devotees could swing the deities, sing kirtan for them, and tell stories about the pastimes of the Lord. This had been in the late summer in unbearable heat and humidity. Yet finally, I remembered to bring my mind back from these far away journeys of the places and memories. I was reminded that “it is hard to think and listen to the qualities of the sound at the same time”. I started chanting louder and finally managed to focus for a while only on the sound of the mantra. After some time, my mind became quieter and I realised that the scenes around me did not trigger my memories and thoughts anymore but were rather filled with life and a sense of presence, with no past and no future. It felt as if the same light, dry Sal tree leaf that was silently floating in the warm wind towards the dry ground was carrying in itself the whole of life and all the creative potency of the present moment. The colours around became more vivid; the contours of the trees and bushes became sharper.

I view this experience as a temporary change in perception evoked by sound and a specific way of listening. Voegelin (2010: 5) proposes that the practice of listening remains incomplete in relation to an objective totality, but it remains complete in its subjective contingency. She suggests that sound, if listened to generatively, is to produce, to be in motion. It is “an invisible act, a dynamic of production that is not interested to linger and hear its outcome. It is perpetually on the move, making time and tenses rather than following them.” (Ibid.: 14) This proposes that the world we listen to is always in the process of becoming. We can share the goals and the specific practices of listening but the experience is always subjective depending on one’s particular skills. I would propose that for devotees, in a similar vein, the experienced intimacy with Krishna in his holy name is always subjective, depending on the skills one has developed.

Bhakti Brhat Bhagavat Swami explained further that these skills did not involve only the ability of attentiveness. He clarified that the goal was to reach “the heart in chanting”, and at this stage one wanted to be private and personal; one wanted to be with Krishna. However, to be able to experience Krishna’s presence in his name demands much more dynamic learning than just focusing on the sound. As the goal is to experience Krishna’s presence as a person, one has to engage with him on a personal level. This means that, for Krishna devotees, learning to listen requires them to develop their personality on a much deeper and more existential plane.
Devotees say that the main quality one has to develop in order to acquire the skills of listening is humility. As Srila Prabhupada explains in the commentaries to the Bhagavad Gita, the beginning of knowledge is amanitva, humility. Without humility one is not capable of understanding. Therefore a devotee should be humble and know his or her subordination to God Krishna. Thus, it is believed that the process of learning begins by practising humility, and it gradually culminates in reaching the ultimate knowledge of Krishna (Bhaktivedanta VedaBase webpage). Doyal Gouranga explained that bhakti was all about pleasing the Lord and getting His mercy. He said:

If we are doing it in a most respectful, concentrated and attentive way, it shows to God how much we want his mercy. Then he opens something; then we go to another level. He is pleased; he is uplifting us. As soon as we become proud we lose our concentration, we lose our qualification.

Therefore, he added, one of the most important verses they taught in the Kirtan Academy was the verse from Lord Chaitanya himself, describing the proper state of mind for a chanter: “Be more humble than a blade of grass, more tolerant than a tree, always offering respect to others and never expecting any in return”.

Vikram Aditiyan, a young student from South India, explained that if one chanted with the right attitude and the right mood one would have the feeling of ecstasy and fulfilment. “You feel full, there is like nothing lacking within you anymore,” he said and added that during every ‘64 rounds day’ he had felt as if a caterpillar was becoming a butterfly. He felt that he was attaining a new level and was “literally coming out from the old and getting into the new”. Referring to qualities that his teacher Bhakti Brhat Bhagavat Swami had emphasised, Vikram also suggested that chanting was not a mechanical process. He referred to the words of one of their great acharyas (spiritual leaders) Bhaktivinod Dhakur, who had said that mechanically one could chant for millions of years, millions of lifetimes, but one would get nowhere because chanting was the process of connecting the heart to the Lord. Vikram explained:

Your heart has been blocked and covered by the dust of material consciousness. It has been covered by millions of lifetimes of conditioning […] So no matter how much mantra you hear, it’s not entering your heart. For the mantra to enter the heart the dust has to be removed, the heart has to be open.

Certain qualities, Vikram suggested, were necessary in order to open the heart. In addition to the importance of humility, Vikram also emphasised the significance of gratitude. He referred to Radhanath Swami, one of the highly respected ISKCON gurus, who has said: “Gratitude is the field where the seed of bhakti can grow.” Vikram explained that if one felt grateful even for the little things around, it would affect the quality of the chanting. He said, “Then... every round you do, you feel the round and you connect yourself to the holy name. You hear the name and you allow it to sink into your consciousness, into your heart.” The other quality, humility, is believed to be the true nature of the soul and, according to Vikram, the soul has to be close to its true original nature for the sound of the God’s name to flow into one’s heart. He explained that humility would align devotee’s consciousness and remove the blockages. He said that one had to align oneself in such a way that “mercy flows, everything flows, and one is in full God consciousness”.
The teachers in the Kirtan Academy as well as other senior devotees were often admired in the community because of these ‘pure qualities’. The devotees found such people as a source of inspiration and motivation to develop their own attention and desire to hear the holy names. Kay Milton (2002) suggests that actually attention itself can be viewed in terms of emotion. We may learn what to love and fear, enjoy or hate by perceiving these emotions in others. Even though the feelings of others are not directly perceivable, one can infer them by observing the way they look and behave. (Milton 2002: 68–69) I propose that perceiving the sense of gratitude and humility in other devotees seems to inspire the young chanters to dedicate themselves for more chanting and hearing the holy names. This encourages them to practice more and thus to become more skilful by attuning the sense of hearing in order to fully experience “what it is like” to inhabit the specific world of the sound of God’s names.

EXPERIENCING THE HIDDEN GOD

What is this experience, however, that the devotees are aiming to achieve through these dedicated hours of practice? What is it like to “inhabit/sense/live within that specific ‘world’” (Zarrilli 2015: 121) in which a devotee experiences an intimate relationship with the Lord? Similarly to Zarrilli, I assume that there are states of consciousness (or modes of conscious awareness) that we call ordinary and between and among these ordinary states there are transition or borderline experiences (Zarrilli 2015: 123). These different states of consciousness organise our experiences, physiology, cognition, and behaviour. While being aware of the variety of individual experiences in these practices, Zarrilli (ibid.) proposes that from a phenomenological perspective, meditation, martial arts, and acting, can all be viewed as “modes of embodied practice whose purpose is to shape socio-culturally, aesthetically, and/or historically specific forms of extra-ordinary, non-dual phenomenal consciousness that are somehow different from one’s ordinary states of consciousness and experience” (original emphasis). He emphasises that when one develops and sustains a specific discrete altered (or alternative) state of consciousness, new ways of logics and perception emerge. Furthermore, he argues (ibid.: 123), “new modes of deploying one’s sensory awareness and/or active imagination are also shaped and experienced”.

For the Krishna devotees, the new or extra-ordinary ways of perception, as indicated above, may vary in depth and perhaps in the scope of intimacy. This was vividly explained and illustrated in a conversation with Gita Nagari Das. He joined the movement in the United States in 1979 and has spent the last 12 years in different holy places in India – mainly Vrindavan, Jagannath Puri, and the last few years in Mayapur. As he said, his service to Krishna and for the community was to lead a little group of devotees singing and dancing kirtan on the main road and sometimes through the little nearby Bengali villages. When I asked him about the holy name, he explained to me that in contrast to the spiritual world, God was hiding himself in this material world; he had to hide because people in this world did not want him. However, as his spiritual master had said, God was leaving clues all over the place that he exists. But in order to discover God or bring him out of hiding, devotees chant the Hare Krishna mantra. The sound vibration of chanting would bring God out of hiding. He explained further that this
would happen because God was a reciprocatory being. “When Krishna sees that someone is attempting to approach him, then he will reveal himself to that person to show that he is there,” Gita Nagari said and admitted that this revelation was so profound, so earth shattering and so life changing that one was achieving a state of mind that was all one wanted.

His response to my question about his own chanting experience highlighted the unusual state of awareness or consciousness one can reach through sound. He explained:

You know, the thing is that [...] according to Vaishnava philosophy, it is considered [...] one should not talk about one’s ecstasies. Do you understand? So, your question is pointing at ecstasy. [...] Well, the thing is that... one doesn’t stay for 33, 34, 35 years in Hare Krishna movement unless he has some experience. Experience of God is a very private thing. But to help you out, there have been times in my Krishna consciousness, not very often, when I was chanting the Hare Krishna mantra and it was so powerfully affecting me that I couldn’t even chant it... the voice becomes choked up... tears come to the eyes, the body experiences incredible emotion, and... one becomes transported to the whole other Dham [holy place].

He added that there were some devotees who were capable of maintaining this state of God consciousness all the time. However, he claimed that for him this experience was rare, and even though he had been a devotee for 37 years, he still could not say that he had joined Krishna consciousness. He saw it as a lifelong endeavour, even the endeavour of many lifetimes, and claimed that, “You can actually say that you have ‘joined’ Krishna consciousness if you have seen God face to face. Then you have really joined Krishna consciousness.”

A somewhat similar story was told by Yasomati, the founder of the Kritan Academy, who was one of the first devotees in the ISCKON and who had moved to Mayapur from Canada. She said, “Chanting is a wonderful place to be. When you are chanting... this is the way you can really come to Krishna and call out his name. He is present in his name.” “Do you feel like you are in another place?” I asked. “Not every day. Not every day. It just sometimes feels like there is nothing else that you would rather be doing. This is it, just... just chanting,” she replied.

That the sound of chanting brings God out from hiding, enabling a devotee to experience being transported to another sacred place, and ultimately allowing a devotee to see God face to face, illustrates the power of sound to create an intimate experience of the hidden or unmanifested world. As indicated in the story of Gita Nagari Das, this ‘revelation’ through sound seems to be first and foremost a bodily experience. Peregrine Horden (2000: 6), emphasising how sound can effect the body, explains that the body’s rhythmicity is not closed. The body is open to be influenced by external sounds. Cells are dynamic and vibrating structures that can be influenced and altered by sound vibrations. Barcan also explains that music can stir emotions and bypass rationality. Its ambiguity extends to the domain of religion, where it can act as a stirrer of the flesh as well as “the agent of the sacred” (Dolar 2006: 31; cit. Barcan 2011: 131). The experiences of Gita Nagari Das and Yasomati also remind me of the reflections by a contemporary composer of religious music John Tavener, who describes his sonic experience of his own work by referring to the notion of temenos, of sacred place. Musicologist Sander van Maas (2008: 768–769) explains that this is not an indication only to his
concert spaces, but more particularly to the specific spatiality music can itself produce qua place or *temenos*. For experiencing music as a place, or as a multiplicity of places, van Maas argues that one has to be engaged, in a wholly dependent way, in the situation called music on the level of participation. Music becomes a heterotopia that, at the aural-sensible level, actualises the seemingly impossible mode of being – being simultaneously here and there, inside and outside – a mode of being of which only the gods are believed to be capable.

Stoller (1984: 559) who has studied the ‘inner’ dimension of sound in Songhay cultural experience also emphasises the intimate corporeal experience of sound. Similarly to the view of Krishna devotees, who believe that the sound vibration of the mantra penetrates and purifies one’s heart transforming a person into a higher level of consciousness, Stoller suggests that Songhay people also believe that sound can carry forces that can penetrate an object. They similarly claim that certain sounds such as magical words, praise names, and sacred musical instruments create “an auditory presence that can transform a person morally, politically, and magically” (ibid.: 563). Stoller also proposes that by penetrating the individual, sound creates a sense of participation and communication. He suggests that sound is a foundation of the flowing and dynamic world in which the outer and inner worlds interpenetrate. (Ibid.) Voegelin (2010: 12) has similarly written that sound has the ability to unsettle the idea of visual stability and involve listeners in the production of an invisible world. She also claims that listening is not a receptive mode. It is a method of exploration, a way of walking through the soundscape. She suggests that this knowing is the experience of sound as a temporal relationship. This relationship is not something that is between things but is itself the thing, is sound itself. (Ibid.: 4–5) This idea describes the agency of a listener who simultaneously perceives and designs his or her sound world, or a sonic experience. For Krishna devotees, as discussed above, there are different layers of inhabiting this specific world, and through practising and developing the skill of chanting, devotees can design their experiences accordingly.

One of the highest levels is, as Gita Nagari das referred to, “seeing God face to face”. It is the experience that the devotees constantly mention when explaining the meaning of the holy name. Seeing the face of God is a way of describing the experience that some have of the sound of God’s name and God himself being the same. Taking both the words of Voegelin and the devotees seriously, I would suggest that this is the experience in which devotees sense the presence of Krishna or the relationship with him not through the medium of sound but ‘in’ sound itself.

Srila Prabhupada explains it further as there being two kinds of expansion of the Lord: *Vishnu-tattva* and *jiva-tattva*. *Visnu-tattva* means the expansions that are considered equal to God Himself. *Jiva-tattva* means God’s expansion into living entities that are not equally powerful as God. But the expansion of *Visnu-tattva* is equally powerful, and therefore as good as God himself. Srila Prabhupada explains that this Hare Krishna mantra is the expansion, incarnation, and sound incarnation of God. He clarifies that this is not representation. He claims that God presents himself in this form of sound because humans cannot see God with their present, material eyes. But one can spiritualise these sense organs by associating with this transcendental incarnation, this sound incarnation of God. Then one will gradually become godly. He says: “So by God’s inconceivable potency, He can present before yourself in sound incarnation. That is...
His potency. That is His potency. He can do that. And therefore this name, Krsna, and the Supreme Lord Krsna, there is no difference.” (Advaita Candra Dasa et al. 2011: 5–6)

Radhika Devi Dasi, an elderly woman from the Netherlands who has lived in India for many years and whose major interests are Sanskrit texts and poetry, gave me a better insight into what this level of realisation means. What does it mean to experience how the sound of God’s name and God himself are the same, and what does it mean when devotees say that through chanting one can see God face to face? She proposed that this intimate realisation and knowledge was considered to be very high level and not so easily reachable in devotees’ experience. She explained that in Vedas there were four levels of sound. The lowest level on which we operate is called *vaikhari* – this is related to our senses, to our physical self and is mainly connected to our speech. *Madhyama* refers to thinking in one’s mind, without making a physical sound. The next two levels are *pashyanti* and *para vak*. *Para vak*, the highest level, means the highest speech and refers to God’s words in the scriptures. We were both particularly interested in the third level, *pashyanti*, which means ‘to see’. According to Aradhika, at this level one cannot distinguish the ear and the eye, meaning that if one says Krishna, Krishna is there. This means that Krishna and his name are the same. Aradhika explained that “On the level of *pashyanti* all the senses are merging into one and that level is not at the eye, or the visual level, but the level on which seeing is ‘sound’”.

The level of *pashyanti*, which enables the devotees to ‘see’ God through sound and realise that the name of God and God himself are one, is a level of synaesthetic experience at which there is a blending or overlapping of the senses. Hanna Järvinen (2006: 72) explains that the early 19th-century physiological research on misperceptions and sensory stimuli developed the understanding of synaesthesia. Even though the research made the senses into unreliable reflections of the external world, it was believed that the transcendent quality could be found through synaesthetic experiences. In his writings about Zulu dreamscapes, David Chidester (2009: 350) also suggests that even though senses are limits, they can also be seen as providing the potential for extraordinary experience. He explains that eyes can be limited, but in the experience of a shaman, for example, it is important to have the ability to ‘see’. Like metaphors, the senses enable us to transcend the limits of ordinary perception. Chidester claims that in religious discourse synaesthesia can evoke intense, extraordinary and unifying perception.
At this synesthetic level of *pasyanti*, one can reach beyond the duality of the material and non-material, the hidden and the manifested realms, or the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ levels of sound. As Radhika said, at this level, “One *knows* that Krishna and His name are non-different”. She explained:

And then we also see that everything is Krishna. Like Prabhupada... just before he left the planet he said, “there is only Krishna.” It’s not something you imagine, but it’s actually true. This is also why advanced devotees experience so many symptoms. You are chanting and all these symptoms are coming. This is not imaginary... like sweating, hair standing on the end, crying, rolling on the floors, laughing... these are all the effects of the chanting. And these are very... you can say ‘hands on’ and visible. Very visible.

A. Whitney Sanford (2002: 57) also suggests that when devotees ‘see’ Krishna, they are not having a vision based on memory or the imagination, but they are seeing something real. She claims that, “this synesthetic transformation is a portal to Krishna’s world”. This resembles what theologian Philip Sheldrake (2001: 71), who has studied the Catholic place, calls “catholicity” because in the catholic sense the divine presence cannot be imprisoned in any contracted place or series of places. He suggests, showing that the change of a person’s whole sensory experience enables a person to perceive the sacred, that the particularities of places may point beyond themselves to the mystery of God in the sacramental sensibility. He states:

A sacramental sensibility understands the divine to be accessible through the human, the universal through the particular, the transcendent through the contingent, the spiritual through the material, the ultimate through the historical. [...] [A] sacramental sensibility enables us to affirm that God’s presence is active in the space of the world, not merely within a gathered and purified Church. (Ibid.: 71)

For Krishna devotees, in a similar vein, at this intimate level that one can reach through sound, Krishna comes out from hiding and thus also the world that a devotee otherwise may perceive as material becomes Krishna. Like the concept of catholicity or sacramental sensibility, *pasyanti* is a sensory experience in which devotees perceive Krishna’s presence in particular things and places. They feel that Krishna who is believably a person, the Supreme Personality of Godhead residing in the highest spiritual planet *Goloka-Vrindavan* or in the temples in the form of a deity, is also present and “active in the space of the world”. And, as the devotees believe, through developing the proper skills of chanting and hearing the names of the Lord, one can experience this presence in one’s chanting and ultimately in one’s everyday life.

**CONCLUSION**

I have suggested, relying on the experiences of Krishna devotees, that the way one ‘listens’ to the world is not naturally given but is rather a skill that one can learn. I have explored how, through the process of skilful listening, one can reach a particular way of perceiving the world. At this level, a devotee can simultaneously experience the hidden and manifested realms and internal and external levels of sound in which Krishna and the sound of his name become inseparable.
To achieve this experience, one has to develop not only the skill to focus on sound itself, but also some of the more existential human qualities. These qualities, such as humility and gratitude, allow devotees to reach or develop a certain level of mood or consciousness that helps them sing and hear the sound of the holy name properly and develop an intimate engagement with Krishna. This has been described as a stage of fulfilment in which one has no desires or thoughts other than those connected with God. The only desire is to serve God and His devotees. This is considered the proper mood and consciousness both for leading kirtan and chanting on prayer beads. This mood is one of service in which one’s personal thoughts and desires rest in silence, or as Srila Prabhupada has said, resting in the sound of Krishna. Voegelin (2010: xv) has written that silence is not the absence of sound but the beginning of listening as communication. What becomes perceivable in the silent sound of Krishna, or perhaps simultaneously audible and visible, is also the relationship and communication between a devotee and God. This is the silence in which the sound of kirtan can emerge. As another Kirtan Academy teacher Sitala Devi Dasi suggested, “only if devotees’ sincerity is welcomed by the Lord can they do good kirtan as the Lord is the one who empowers their voice to touch the hearts of others”.

While exploring the skills the devotees were encouraged to learn for successful chanting and listening, I often felt the need to develop similar skills in order to grasp life in the field as an anthropologist. Devotees say that chanting *japa* is like a mirror, “it shows you clearly where your mind is, and thus how clean your heart is”. They emphasise that attentiveness, humility, and gratitude help to calm the mind down and open the self to hear the sound. As anthropologists, we can easily find the field site to be a mirror of our minds and hearts. The skills and qualities we have are the tools to create an intimate engagement with the people we study and the sensuous world we come to share.

I agree with Stoller (1997: 136) that the most important and complicated lesson that a sensuous scholarship is facing is that of humility. He writes, “No matter how learned we may become, no matter how deeply we have mastered a subject, the world, for the sensuous scholar, remains a wondrous place that stirs the imagination and-sparks creativity.” Thus, no matter how knowledgeable we are of the place and the people we study, life is always greater than us and constantly challenges our knowledge and experiences. Humility allows us to be flexible enough to notice what life offers and to reconsider our ways of being-in-the-world. As Sacinandana Swami (2010 [2006]: 16) has said about the holy name, “Just as an ocean offers many unexplored depths, the nectarine ocean of the holy name similarly holds greater and greater mysteries for the spiritual seeker”. Thus, joining the Krishna consciousness, as Gita Nagari Das said, and ‘becoming’ an anthropologist are both lifelong endeavours when one learns how to be a skilful listener to truly understand and reach intimacy with both the hidden and the manifested world.
SOURCES

Author’s fieldwork in Mayapur, West Bengal, India, March 2013–June 2014.

Bhakti Brhat Bhagavat Swami
Doyal Gouranga Das
Gita Nagari Das
Premalata Devi Dasi
Radhika Devi Dasi
Sitala Devi Dasi
Vikram Aditiyan
Yasomati Devi Dasi

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MAYA INTIMACY WITH THE MOUNTAINS: PILGRIMAGE, SACRIFICE AND EXISTENTIAL ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, I present two very different and yet very similar ethnographic examples of mountain-related pilgrimage and sacrifice ritual performed by the present-day highland Maya. The question I ask is why the sense of sacredness, animation and power of the mountains endures among the traditionalist as well as Pentecostal Maya in spite of the extensive transformations of the world today. In so doing, I examine the native concept of the mountain not merely as a social or cultural representation, but as an expression of everyday lived experiences and existential relationships between people and the physical and spiritual world they inhabit. Finally, I argue that the experience of interaction, communication and intimacy between the Maya and their mountain deities can be best defined as a dynamic participation in the course of the world – an existential economy of ‘working the world’.

KEYWORDS: Maya cosmology • pilgrimage ritual • cultural continuity • life-world • existential anthropology

INTRODUCTION
In current anthropology, ‘continuity thinking’ does not have such a good reputation as in earlier times. Instead of the old-fashioned theory of cultural continuity and syncretism, a language of radical change, rupture and discontinuity is required to explain the phenomenon of Christian conversion (Robbins 2007). The rejection of old indigenous customs as a prerequisite for the new faith and life is said to be particularly present in Protestantism, which is rapidly gaining ground among the native populations of Latin America. Indeed, costumbre – which literally translates as custom and which means a set of rites inherited from the ancestors that need to be performed – is rejected very resolutely by most Protestant converts. However, ethnographers of Mexico and Central America often find that new evangelical – especially Pentecostal – thoughts as well as practices still contain much of the ancient indigenous culture (Dow and Sandstrom 2001). Moreover, the costumbre as such is generally considered to be the product of a dynamic dialogue between indigenous American and imported Christian religiosity that has been developing over centuries and that is structured in a strained relation-
ship between Indians and Ladin (non-Indians) and characterised by a high degree of hybridisation (Watanabe and Fischer 2004).

Against this backdrop, my attempt to demonstrate the persistence of certain Maya visions related to powerful mountains and their masters might seem of little use. Why defend continuity again? However, in fact it is not my intention to argue for adopting the cultural continuity approach, at least not in its temporal dimension. Nor do I wish to argue for the traditional rival approach of political economy, which focuses on social difference. My contention is that Maya ritual practice, associated with specific cosmology and perceptions of mountains, should not be seen as growing solely out of cultural patterns (traditional norms, ideas and concepts) and political history (the social and ethnic structure), but also out of everyday lived experience and existential relationships between people and the physical and spiritual world they inhabit. A great theoretical divide dominates the ethnology of the Maya: a divide between primordialism (essentialism), which involves the constant search for cultural continuity and the ‘real’ Mayanness, on the one hand, and historicism (constructivism), which involves focusing on ethnic conflict and ‘made-up’ Mayanness, on the other (Watanabe 1992; Fischer 2001). I suggest that the conflict between cultural and social reductionism cannot be resolved by denying or confirming the one or the other position, but that the gap needs to be bridged by proposing a standpoint to refer not only to the cultural or social representation of the world, but also to the existential representation of the life in the world.

In this paper, I examine pilgrimage and sacrifice rituals associated with mountains, as performed by the present-day highland Maya. I draw on a total of six months of fieldwork consisting of participant observation and informal interviews, which I conducted in Maya communities in the Department of Huehuetenango, Guatemala, in 2009 and 2013. The question I will ask in relation to the two particular ethnographic examples of pilgrimage discussed here is why the sense of sacredness, animation and power of the mountains endures among the traditionalist as well as Pentecostal Maya in spite of the extensive transformations of the world today. It is the native concept of the mountain as such that, in my view, requires specific attention, not only in its cultural and social, but also in its phenomenal and existential dimension. As is well known from practice theory, the ritual is not a mere representation of the worldview; the ritual is an enactment of it (Kray 2007). Through ritual, relationships between the Maya and other peoples, saints, crosses, mountains and other beings of the world are put into practice and become real. Through ritual, an intimate relationship with these other beings is achieved, creating a basis for the knowledge and behaviour that integrate humans into (not just human) society and the (not just physical) cosmos, characterised by the existential moment of mutual dependence.

With respect to intimacy, my concern in this paper is not possession or transformation. This is not to say that such forms of intimacy between humans and non-humans are absent in Maya culture – quite the contrary: the ethnology of the Maya abounds with examples of practices in which spiritual possession or transformation into animals play a crucial role. Here, however, I wish to focus on those expressions of intimacy in which humans seek contact and negotiate with non-humans and thereby deal with fundamental existential issues of life. In such a context, intimacy is the product of continuous co-existence rather than radical change. The question of being is universal, as argued by Michael Jackson (2005: xv), and constitutes a starting-point in the attempt to
investigate human life-worlds: “[the] task is thus to explore human being-in-the-world through our ever-changing capacity to create the conditions of viable existence and co-existence in relation to the given potentialities of our environment”. The concept of ‘emotional economy’ put forward by Fenella Cannell (1999), who has described human and non-human encounters as marked by a large degree of ambiguity, tension and uncertainty, is also of high relevance in this context.

Indeed, expressive culture is a live and dynamic practice that grows out of a specific experience-based attitude to the world (Cook 2000). Thus, I regard Maya ritual as an expression of how humans work the world, which has a cyclical nature and in which, as a result, bad things can happen. It is the existential moment of being-in-the-world – a world which is not a constant given, nor something definitive nor a matter of course – that makes the shamans perform the obligations that they feel are needed in the face of a world whose harmony is constantly at risk (MacKenzie 2009). At a general level, therefore, this paper is partly a response to the calls for a phenomenological anthropology (Jackson 1996; Desjarlais and Throop 2011) and partly an echo of the current anthropological interest in the study of ontology (Scott 2013) and existential matters (Jackson 2005).

In the first part of the study, I present two brief ethnographies of Maya pilgrimage: the journey to the mountain of K’utataj, which is organised to mark the Maya New Year, and the journey to the volcano of Santa María, which is a form of Pentecostal Maya fasting and prayer service. In the second part, I propose another way of understanding the masters of the mountains, who are often thought to be of Ladino ethnicity. As in the case of the ‘diabolic’ mine owners of the Andes and the Maya ‘Judas’ Maximón, the way these beings are depicted seems to reflect the unequal power relations between Indians and Ladinos and the associated subordination and resistance. Nevertheless, I would like to emphasise that Maya mountain deities also derive their meaning from the mountains as such, that is, from their potentially existential importance in providing livelihood and fostering life. In the third part, I discuss Maya deities, saints, crosses and mountains that are perceived as autonomous living beings endowed with consciousness, volition and the ability to act. Drawing on the example of sacrifices to the mountains, I argue that, in the world of the Maya, individual interdependent beings need to meet their obligations and commitments and, in so doing, contribute to a universal existential economy. It is this existential need to pray and sacrifice for a successful continuation of the world that defies social and cultural reductionism and leads to the exploration of the practice in which humans and non-humans are active agents in the field of relationships among all beings participating in the course of the world.

MOUNTAIN PILGRIMAGES AMONG MAYA TRADITIONALISTS AND PENTECOSTALS

The importance of journeys to mountains and caves is well documented in the ethnology (for example Reina 1966; Wilson 1995; Piedrasanta Herrera 2009) as well as archaeology (for example Brady and Veni 1992; Brady and Rissolo 2006; Pugh 2009) of the Maya. Surprisingly, though, this kind of pilgrimage is not exclusive to the customs of Maya traditionalists; it can even be found in Pentecostal religious practice. Mountains
continue to be very important in contemporary Maya thought, in spite of the considerable religious and cultural changes resulting from the conversion to Protestantism in general and Pentecostalism in particular. In this section, I will provide two brief ethnographic examples of Maya mountain pilgrimage: the first concerns a pilgrimage in a traditionalist Akatek community inhabiting the isolated area of the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes; the second concerns a pilgrimage in the well-connected area of the Santa María volcano, which attracts traditionalist and revivalist Maya shamans as well as Pentecostal converts. I will then briefly discuss the nature of cultural continuity and rupture as manifested in the given context.

The pilgrimage to the mountain of K’utataj, which takes place to mark the Maya New Year, was one of the most intense and impressive fieldwork experiences during my stay in the western highlands of Guatemala. The journey starts in the settlement of Chimbán, which is the religious centre of all Akatek traditionalists inhabiting the municipalities of San Miguel Acatán and San Rafael La Independencia in the Department of Huehuetenango. In 2013, when I witnessed the ritual, the date of the advent of the Maya New Year was set at February 17 (10 Chinax in the Maya calendar). I accompanied two locals, Manuel, the rezador (prayersayer or shaman), and Félix, his ayudante (assistant), who happily consented to my participation in the pilgrimage. The pilgrimage started the day before the Maya New Year. In the morning, after the traditional all-night vigil, a sacrificial turkey was taken to a wicker cage, which Manuel loaded on to his back using a mecapal (tumpline). In the presence of other rezadores and principales (elders), we left the ordenanza house (ritual dwelling), marched past the church and then – already alone – walked out of the settlement.

At about noon, we reached the mountain of K’utataj, the goal of the first day’s journey. José, a helper, who had carried all the requisites up the slope, had already been waiting for us at a small shrine surrounded by a pine forest. The afternoon was devoted to practical matters – collecting firewood, preparing our night’s lodgings – as well as discussion and rest. It was not until midnight when we entered the shrine, dimly lit by a white candle, in order to perform the main ritual. Manuel untied the turkey and slashed its throat before the cross, so as to let its blood drip into the prepared bowl. In the meantime, Félix had prepared pom (pine resin chips), which Manuel dipped into the turkey’s blood and Félix then wrapped in green leaves that had been picked beforehand. Twelve packages were created this way; the first one was lit before the main cross, along with a little bit of pom and a small wax candle. The next package was meant for the second cross inside the shrine, and the subsequent three were to be used for the cross outside and for two small witz (mounds of stones), respectively. The remaining seven were meant for other witz to be visited on the next day. Manuel then came back for the dead turkey, took it gently in his hands, tenderly stroked its feathers and pressed its head down on to its breast. Next, he took the turkey outside, placed it on a designated spot and covered it up with stones.

In the morning, we set out on our way back to Chimbán. Along the journey, Manuel had to visit the remaining seven witz to perform the costumbre. The course of the ritual was always the same: Manuel lit candles, pom and the sacrificial package, waited until the fire flared up, and then we drank aguardiente (cane liquor) together from the bottle. Chinax, the new Year Bearer, generally thought to provide favourable conditions, started his rule. In Chimbán, the día de ora – the day of the particular Year Bearer and of
prayer – was honoured by a vigil and a special walk around sacred places, in keeping with the custom. At noon, a festive pinol (pepper sauce with chicken) was served, along with tortillas and chilli. This is the way in which the Akatek rezadores – whose job it is to pray for rain, good crops and the prosperity of the community as a whole, as well as to help individuals in need (see Siegel 1941; Deuss 2007) – ritualise the advent of the Maya New Year and the beginning of the next vegetation cycle. The ritual draws its meaning from the agricultural year. It is understood to be and experienced as an existential need: prayer and sacrifice are required for the good harvest and the successful continuation of the world.

I also encountered similar ideas of the sacredness, animation and power of the mountains on another occasion. Surprisingly, it was during a Pentecostal reunión (religious meeting). As is well known, Protestant churches – and various Pentecostal churches in particular – have spread rapidly in Mexico and Central America (Dow 2005) and have had an important impact on Maya culture as well (Annis 1987). In the traditional Maya areas in the western highlands of Guatemala, there is a popular Pentecostal religious ritual: the ayuno (fasting). Having stayed in Quetzaltenango for a few days, I intended to walk up the volcano of Santa María. During the trek, I met a K’iche’ man and his daughter from the nearby municipality of Cantel. I was told that they were attending the ayuno in order to cure the girl. In the morning, they had not eaten and had walked the long journey to pray on the volcano – they had taken on the commitment to make a sacrifice (poniendo ofrenda). On the summit of the volcano, several dozen believers gathered to wait for the beginning of the ceremony, squatting on the ground and praying. Since I had come with a member of the group, I was cordially welcomed by the Pastor and invited to participate in the meeting. The ceremony lasted for about two hours and consisted of prayers and praise to the Lord. In an emotionally charged atmosphere, people cried and implored God. Some of them – especially the women – were trembling, jerking, shouting and speaking in tongues, which was evidence that there was the intimate presence of the Spirit of the Lord.

When descending the volcano, I realised how much the traditionalist and Pentecostal ceremonies had in common. On the one hand, there are traditionalist Maya pilgrimages to mountains where the sacrifice is made in order to ensure good weather, good crops and good fortune in the year to come. On the other hand, there are Pentecostal Maya ayunos, which are perceived as sacrifices and which provide a platform to ask for whatever is needed in life, including good health and prosperity. Of course, mountains, hills and volcanoes are the pilgrimage sites where communication with the divine takes place and where problems, wishes and dreams are articulated. But although the mountains are sacred and animated for traditionalists, they should not be for Pentecostal or Protestant Christians. Unexpectedly, my new friend himself began to speak about the dueño del cerro (master of the volcano). During the journey, he told me the story of how he had once met him in the shape of a bull and showed me the place where it had occurred.

The belief in the power of mountains was documented once again when my new friends requested a favour of me. On the summit of the volcano, they asked me for a photograph; I agreed and promised to bring it to Cantel. I fulfilled the promise by visiting them in their house a few days later. After a pleasant stay there, the man presented me with a piece of paper bearing the name of his daughter and asked me for another
favour – to keep it and take it to an important mountain in Europe. Praying on the sum-
mits, I was assured, is the proper thing to do to obtain healing. The vision of powerful
mountains and their masters apparently persists among the Maya, even if they consider
themselves evangélicos. Recent anthropology of Christianity (and Protestantism in par-
ticular) has conceptualised the religious conversion as a ‘rupture’, putting emphasis on
the discontinuity between the indigenous culture and the new faith, in contrast to ear-
lier interpretations that had stressed, in one form or another, continuity and syncretism
(Robbins 2003; 2007). Protestants are said to reject old beliefs and customs to begin new
lives in a world of different logic. This is clearly at odds with the culturally syncretic
world described by most anthropologists.

How complete the break with the past is naturally depends on specific social and
individual circumstances. In some areas, anthropologists find remarkable similarity
between traditional native customs and new evangelical beliefs and, as a result, tend to
stress cultural continuity. Garret W. Cook (2001), for instance, argues that the Yukatek
have preserved several old-style values and forms of social organisation after conver-
ting to Pentecostalism. According to him, Pentecostalism is compatible with the tra-
ditional visionary, divinatory and shamanic religion of the Maya. Abigail E. Adams
(2001) has shown what might be the closestness between a Baptist woman’s trance and
Q’eqchi’ traditionalists’ receiving messages from the mountain spirits. Toomas Gross
(2009; 2012) observes that, in the indigenous Zapotec communities of Oaxaca, various
Protestant – especially Pentecostal – groups relatively easily adapt to, rather than reject,
local customs and practices. His conclusion is that the transformative role of Protestant-
ism should not be exaggerated. However, at the same time, all these ethnographers
insist that there is a clear rejection of much of traditional thought and practice, which
the Protestant Maya refused to incorporate into their worldview.

In sum, the converts have rejected many aspects of costumbre, while some of its frag-
ments – consciously and unconsciously – survive. As Matthew Engelke (2004: 106) con-
cludes, “We stand to gain from the language of breaks not because it replaces the lan-
guage of continuity but because it complements it”. In this article, my intention is not
to deny the personal accounts and understandings of religious conversion and of new
life and identity; on the contrary, I would like to take them even more seriously. The
man I talked to at the religious meeting on the summit of the volcano of Santa María
claimed to be an evangélico and, at the same time, a believer in the mountain masters.
Under the discourse of continuity, one could argue that his evangelical belief is a sort of
surface layer covering ancient Maya culture; under the discourse of discontinuity, one
could argue his attitude to be to some degree schizophrenic or that he is ignorant of the
new doctrine. Nevertheless, in so doing, one would be judging his attitude based on a
metrics completely alien to him – either our belief in an essential Maya culture, or our
belief in a pure evangelical theology. From his own point of view, however, his belief is
coherent and absolutely sensible.

The similarity between Maya traditionalist and Pentecostal pilgrimages, with moun-
tains as their common denominator, raises the following question: where does the inter-
est in and fascination with the mountains come from? To answer that question, I would
suggest that we should – instead of focusing on continuity or discontinuity of social
structures and cultural patterns that vary significantly over time – pay attention to the
thought and practice based on everyday experience and related existential concerns.
However, before presenting my attempt in this respect, I would like to discuss the most common anthropological interpretation of the mountain masters, the one which imbues them with political meaning resulting from the ethnic differences and unequal power relations.

**Lords, Devils and Judases**

One of the prominent aspects of the Maya concept of mountains is that they have an ethnicity. Various Maya ethnic groups frequently tend to regard the *ajaw* – the ‘lords’, ‘owners’ or ‘guardians’ of the mountains – as Ladinos (for example Siegel 1941: 67; Oakes 1951: 93; Watanabe 1990: 141–143). The Mam describe the mountain lords as persons with light skin and fair hair with whom famous hunters or those who yearn to gain a lot of money enter into a pact under which they have to work the plantations within the mountains (Wagley 1957 [1949]: 186). The Q’eqchi’ describe the guardians of the mountains as tall, fair and bearded beings, reminiscent of European priests or German land-owners; just as the Germans of the past, these *patrónes*, too, can eat their Indian workers (Wilson 1995: 57). The mountain lords therefore resemble Ladinos not only in their physical appearance, but also as being owners of the land and plantations on which the Indians need to work. Just as Ladinos, the owners of mountains are rich, powerful and unpredictable. They bring both good and evil: they can flood humans with game or money, while at the same time requiring hard work from, punishing or even eating them.

The idea of mountain lords is not limited to the Maya cultural area. Re-interpreting the ethnography of the ritual and folklore of Bolivian miners (Nash 1979) and drawing on Marxist doctrine, Michael Taussig (1980) considered the cosmology of the Andes as an Indian reflection of the immorality of the capitalist economy. Taussig argues the differences between pre-capitalist rural agriculture and capitalist mining industry to be personified in native deities, with Pachamama (Mother Earth, the guardian of agricultural production) representing the exchange of gifts, and Tío (Uncle, the guardian of mining production) representing the exchange of goods. Since Tío tends to be depicted as a devil, for Taussig he is the personification of the evil ascribed by the Indians to the unnatural economy based on the proletarisation of work and commodification of products. However, Michael J. Sallnow (1989) pointed out the existence of such ‘unnatural’ economy in the past and outside of mining as well. He argued that a ‘pact with the devil’ in the form of a contract between people and the owners of the mines should be understood as merely an extreme case of the culturally defined concept of blood sacrifice in the agricultural ritual. Moreover, Olivia Harris (1989) showed mining and agriculture not to be two different categories in native thinking: the minerals are in fact thought of as ‘growing’ in a way similar to potatoes or cattle and the ‘fertility’ of the mines is an integral part of the fertility of the soil. “The devils are the source both of fertility and wealth, and of sickness, misfortune, death. They are unpredictable and very powerful, a bit like wild animals, to which they are likened and whose ‘owners’ they are.” (Ibid.: 251) The sharp distinction between agriculture and mining or between the exchange of gifts and the exchange of goods, linked to a moral judgment and material-
ised in the symbolism of the ‘pact with the devil’, therefore seems to be characteristic of
the cosmology of the Marxists rather than that of the natives of the Andes.

The Maya view of the mountain guardians, too, is more complex than the ideological
shorthand would suggest. Richard Wilson (1995: 58) notes that the Q’eχchi’ ascribe both
Ladino and Indian attributes to the mountains (these do not, for instance, speak Span-
ish) and that the mere likening of the lords to landowners does not automatically imply
their sameness and identity. “Each izuultaqa’a is both a Maya and a white ‘boss’”, states
Wilson (ibid.: 53), concluding that, “The important attributes of the izuultaqa’a figure,
then, are its historical nature and its multiplicity of interwoven dualisms that encom-
pass, without resolution, representations of indigenous and nonindigenous identities”
(ibid.: 61). Comparing the saints (whose identity is seen as having more Indian traits)
and the mountains (whose identity is seen as having more Ladino traits), as perceived
by the Mam, John M. Watanabe (1992), also stressed that the distinction is not one of
essential nature (Indian/Ladino, friend/enemy, good/evil), but of a degree of proximity
and familiarity, on the one hand, and of distance and alienation, on the other. In this
respect, identity is rooted in the spatial perception of the world and has a dialectic char-
acter derived from the nature of the social relationships and the corresponding modes
of behaviour: “In this sense, saint and witiz constitute conventionalized social interlocu-
tors rather than personifications of ethnic ideals or models of absolute good and evil”
(ibid.: 77).

In this context, the discussion concerning San Simón or Maximón, the Maya saint
characterised by a Ladino look and Ladino clothes (see Mendelson 1959; 1965), pro-
vides a relevant case in point. The connection between Maximón and Judas has been
interpreted as the representation of the relationship between the Indian and the Ladino
and the cult of the saint as a form of the resistance of the oppressed against the oppres-
sor (Nash 1994). To draw on Taussig’s (1993) vocabulary, this has been seen as an exam-
ple in which fetishisation and mimetisation (imitation and copying in the form of a
figurine) of the Other attribute magic power to ethnic alterity and enable participation
in that power. On the other hand, James MacKenzie (2009: 374) has argued that San
Simón “is more than a symbol of resistance” and has compared the politicisation of the
theme by some anthropologists to similar efforts in the cultural-activist Maya spiritual-
ity. Timothy Knowlton (2012) showed San Simón to have become increasingly discon-
nected from Ladino ethnicity, not just in the perception of Indian laymen, but also in
that of Ladino spiritists. In his view, this process of indigenisation of a saint is a reflec-
tion of the progress of decolonisation: once material wealth and cultural capital are no
longer exclusively held by Ladinos, the Indian saint can really become Indian, since he
is as strong as the Maya identity. “Ironically, this same indigenization that decolonizes
indigenous spiritualities empowers Ladino spiritist practice according to the logic that
fetishizes alterity and attributes magical power to the ethnic Other” (ibid.: 243). Ethnic
identity has been reconfigured at the crossroads of two fields, the religious and the social,
neither of which can be reduced to the other.

To summarise: the similarity between the concept of ‘devilish’ mine owners in
the cosmology of the Andes and the Maya perception of Maximón as Judas or of the
‘Ladino’ lords of the mountains is significant. Given that such perceptions can be found
even in Maya areas that have never had any mining industry, the explanation for this
similarity can hardly be looked for in a resistance to the ‘evil’ mining economy. Further-
more, James E. Brady and Dominique Rissolo (2006) showed some of the pre-Columbian caves to have been dug for ritual, and not utilitarian, reasons; pilgrimages to these caves therefore seem to have been related to the religious need to enter the interior of the mountain and to their healing powers. The theory of the fetishisation of the Other, too, is not without problems: as shown by MacKenzie (2009) and Knowlton (2012), the interethnic, social and power relationships need not be the only and constitutive for the Maya saint cult.

The native perception of the mountain cannot be reduced to the categories of ethnicity or power relations, nor to a clear-cut cultural ideology. As noted by Wilson (1995: 53), the character of the tzuultaq’a is of a dual and contradictory nature: “It is both mountain and valley, male and female, spirit and matter, singular and multiple, benevolent and vengeful, indigenous and foreign, with a Q’eqchi’ name and a Spanish saint’s name, linking the heavens and earth”. The mountains are “both good and evil, nurturing and destructive” (ibid.: 60). Just as Sallnow (1989: 218) has been searching for the meaning of Andean minerals within these minerals as such, I too believe that the meaning of Maya mountain deities should be chiefly seen in the very mountains. However, in order to refine the argument, let me first discuss the ethnography of the mountains and other important beings of the contemporary Maya world.

Mountains and Sacrifices among the Traditionalist Maya

In order to understand more deeply the content of Maya thought and practice concerning the power of the mountains, in this section I turn to some aspects of the traditionalist cosmology as I learned about it in the Akatek community. I will focus in particular on the native concept of and relation to divinity. In their prayers, rezadores express their respect for God and the World in its two halves – Earth and Sky – along with its four representations in time and space, the Bearers of the World (Cargadores del Mundo) and the Bearers of the Year (Cargadores del Año). In addition, they invoke other entities such as atmospheric phenomena, natural objects, ancestors, plants, animals or saints, including various images of Christ and Mary. The saints, who inhabit churches, chapels or the dwellings of certain people, are not mere tokens or ‘symbols’ referring to spiritual beings in a different world. The saints of the church in Chimbán clearly live there: they really are the statues in the boxes along its sides. Each of them came to Chimbán one day and settled down to stay – as long as good care is taken of him. The shamans take care of the saints, decorate them on feast days, pray and sacrifice candles and copal to them.

In Maya cosmology, certain entities, which are classified as ‘material’, ‘lifeless’ or ‘unconscious’ in the European worldview, are live beings, endowed with consciousness and volition, and thus capable of autonomous action. This is true not only of saints, but also of crosses and mountains. I was informed by Maya traditionalists that an old wooden cross may not simply be thrown out or destroyed; it has to stay on the spot together with the new one, or has to have another place assigned to it. Crosses are perceived as persons: as Oliver La Farge and Douglas Byers (1931: 186) note, “These crosses see, think, hear, and also speak to those shamans who know how to put themselves in touch with them”. Crosses are ‘planted’ like plants and decorated so as to
resemble maize and trees (cf. Carlsen 1997: 60–61). Mountains, too, are not dead or passive objects, but living and active beings. They have souls and the capacity to act. The extreme importance of mountains in Maya lives is ethnographically well documented throughout the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes (see esp. Wagley 1957 [1949]; Watanabe 1990; Deuss 2007; Piedrasanta Herrera 2009).

The Maya suppose the masters of mountains to have the power to influence their lives: they are important and potent beings that need to be paid due respect (respeto) and with whom good and balanced relationships need to be fostered. Mountains are both bane and boon for the people: they bring devastating wind as well as the much needed rain, the bad luck of lost ways and good luck in hunting. Recklessness and distortion of the balance result in misfortunes and illnesses, at both the individual and collective levels (cf. López García and Metz 2002: 219; Hermesse 2011: 146–149). Failure to take care of a mountain, a cross or a saint may result in disease for the individual or bad luck for the entire community. Thus, the ritual of the advent of the Maya New Year, described in this paper, is a notable example of the ritualisation of the relationship between the shamans and the human community, on the one side, and the mountains, the World and God, on the other.

The words most commonly used by rezadores to explain why they do the things they do are costumbre and compromiso. The sacrifice on the mountain of K’utataj is a costumbre, a custom, something that simply needs to be performed and something that the ancestors did as well. To accept the office of rezador, to become responsible for performing rituals is a compromiso: a service, an obligation, a commitment. The Spanish word literally means ‘mutual promise’ and expresses the character of the Maya relationship to the divine with surprising accuracy. It represents a world in which its inhabitants, humans and deities, are analogically linked to and complement each other. Although deities are more powerful than humans, they are not substantially different: they live their lives, are endowed with conscience and volition and have their requirements and wishes. Indeed, humans might need deities to bring rain and good crops in order to be able to survive, but deities equally need humans to feed them (cf. Tedlock 1982: 77–82; Metz 2006: 125).

When rezadores perform sacrifices to crosses or mountains, they claim to be literally ‘feeding them’; in their view, crosses and mountains ‘eat’ candles and copal and ‘drink’ turkey blood (cf. Wagley 1957 [1949]: 184; Piedrasanta Herrera 2009: 72). Humans and deities support each other; they depend on each other for their survival. This mutual commitment of beings dependent on each other really amounts to a relationship of ‘compromise’: a constant dialogue and search for agreement and conformity. By offering food, the shamans fulfil the duties that humans in general have to the other beings of the world. This is the way to ensure that the world will keep on its course and prevent it from ending. In sum, pilgrimage and sacrifice are conscious expressions of the continuation of the world and the continuation as such is not a matter of course.

In Maya cosmology, the mountains have been linked to caves as sources of water and rain for a long time (Bassie-Sweet 1996). Since pre-Columbian times, the mountains have expressed the power of the Earth and acted as life-givers, originators of livelihood and maize in the rain rituals (Brady and Prufer 2004). By the same token, the entry into the cave is an advance into the interior of the mountain and a physical approximation to the cosmic powers of the Earth (Fischer 1999: 482). The mountain deities,
thus, embody the fundamental importance of the mountains as such. In fact, it is mountains that surround human communities and that create their innate environment; it is mountains that determine the weather, bringing the much needed rain as well as destructive droughts, winds and storms; and it is mountains which provide their livelihoods to people, through soil fertility or as sources of timber and game. As a result, the mountain is not just a (cultural) representation of the world; it is also a(n) (existential) representation of the life in the world.

**BEYOND SOCIAL AND CULTURAL REDUCTIONISM**

The mountain masters play an important role in Maya cosmology. However, it was the rich, powerful and unpredictable whites who lent their faces to these native deities. This obviously gives rise to a theoretical discrepancy. On the one hand, the idea of the lord of the mountain could have a social origin; it can be thought of as the result of projecting the power relations between people onto the ‘heavens’. On the other hand, the idea could also have religious roots, if it is understood as the result of a projection of spiritual relationships onto society. This is not merely a problem of materialism vs. idealism, but also a problem related to the ‘function and origin’ controversy. It is certainly true that the relationship between the Indian and the deity can be regarded as an analogy of the relationship between the Indian and the Ladino, and can be interpreted along the lines of unequal power distribution and ethnic differences. This analogy can sometimes be explained by the admiration of the richer and more powerful, or by fear of them; and sometimes by referring to the mechanism by which the subordination is affirmed, or to the instrument of resistance; or by fetishisation and imitation, or appropriation of the Other; or indeed, in many other ways.

Nevertheless, the search for the ultimate function or origin of a phenomenon is just as problematic as solving the materialism vs. idealism problem. Indeed, the answer need not be located within these oppositions but rather in the phenomenon as such, as it is, here and now; in other words, in how it lives in the people and what their experience of the world is. A phenomenological and existential approach to the life-world cannot enable rational terms like power to become “ontologically foundational to human sociality and history and [to subjugate] all other provinces of human life to them” (Jackson 2005: xxix). For the Maya, the mountains are an innate environment for human life: they are responsible for good and bad crops and life and death and, as a result, are factors of existential importance. In a very intimate fashion, they constitute the key components of the Maya life-world, which is characterised by the interaction and communication between humans and non-humans (cf. Astor-Aguilera 2010). As Jackson (2005: 186) would say, “being is not restricted to human being” since people interact with the environment and with others (for example ancestors, animals or plants); the social world, therefore, extends far beyond the world of humans. People “effectively redistribute being within the most intimate spaces of their lives, and imaginatively, practically and socially negotiate new relationships between external constraints and inner potentialities” (ibid.: 188).

Few authors have paid as much attention to Maya mountain masters as Watanabe (1992) and Wilson (1995). In a first step, both researchers focused on ethnic identity and
strived to distance themselves from the two most influential positions in this respect: from essentialism and historicism. For Watanabe (1992: 8), the problem could be summarised as follows: while the essentialists sought to interpret Maya culture as a static continuum, the historicists reduced it to an artefact of colonial dominance. Watanabe (ibid.: 12), however, situates Maya culture in the “existential relations because a focus on the conjunction of place, people, and premise enables – indeed demands – concern for what motivates individuals and groups to live in communities in the first place”. Although historicist and relational views dominate current anthropological research, Wilson (1995: 313) argues that “[they] tend to neglect indigenous agency and deny the autonomy of nativistic cultural constructions consciously developed by indigenous peoples”. Thus, he suggests adopting a synthetic approach, combining the force of cultural continuity and the influence of interethnic relationships (ibid.: 321–322). The aim of this study has, however, not so much been to attempt a Wilson-style synthesis, as it has been to try, inspired by Watanabe, to overcome the theoretical controversy by emphasising the existential relations between people and the physical as well as the spiritual world that they inhabit.

Taken to their extremes, the two positions above lead to – cultural or social – reductionism. Moreover, I think that the European assumptions underlying these positions result in ethnocentrism once we try to project them onto Maya cosmology and ritual, as they depart from their original cultural context. Social reductionism rests on the assumption that what are of primary importance and constitutive to life are the relations between people. For the Maya, however, it is not exclusively people whom they come across, socially interact and communicate with. Maya cosmology does not consider humans to be radically different from other beings of the world. Humans, of course, have their specific traits, but they are not separated from the world, nor do they differ from animals, plants or minerals by being conscious, volitional and able to act. The entire universe of the Maya, both as a whole and in its individual parts, is endowed with soul and consists of beings with varying degrees of importance and power. Mountains also have a critical impact on human lives and good and balanced relationships with them are therefore of the essence. Basically, what lurks behind European social reductionism, which is built around the dichotomies of animated/unanimated or active/passive, is anthropocentrism.

Cultural reductionism is based on the assumed existence of a spiritual entity, a transcendent and powerful culture hovering over poor individuals. Such a culture almost has the qualities of an unchanging divine idea separated from the changing world. Yet, any thinking that places a divinity in some other distant world to have it merely represented in this world by an imperfect image, icon or ‘symbol’ is foreign to the Maya. Saints, crosses and mountains inhabit the same world as humans and animals. These beings have personalities, consisting of (very often multiple) ‘physical’ and ‘spiritual’ parts. One cannot say that, for the Maya, stones are physical and objective entities, while angels are spiritual and subjective entities, and humans a combination of both: the body/spirit and object/subject dichotomies are characteristic of European rather than Maya thought. The transcendence of the spiritual and divine loses its rationale in a world where all beings have their objective and passive, as well as subjective and active components: the spirit is not something that would transcend its carnal bearer and the deity is not something that would transcend this world by its position, essence
or power. Deities are not essentially different and incomparably more powerful; they do not transcend humans due to being radically different. Fundamentally, what lurks behind European cultural reductionism is theism.\(^4\)

**THE EXISTENTIAL ECONOMY OF ‘WORKING THE WORLD’**

In this paper, I have discussed the extremely important role of the mountain deities in Maya thought and practice. Providing two ethnographic examples of Maya mountain pilgrimage, I have demonstrated a certain amount of similarity between its traditionalist and Pentecostal versions. To answer the question of the source of the mountain fascination, I have examined both the continuity/discontinuity as well as essentialism/historicism debates. Far from cultural or social reductionism, my intention here has been to present Maya mountain deities as living beings and Maya pilgrimages as lived practice. I wanted to approach Maya cosmology through a lens that does not turn people and mountains into mere puppets of cultural ideas and patterns or mere objects of social dominance and resistance, but instead, one that shows them as active agents in the field of relations between the beings of the world. On a theoretical level, the data might indicate ways in which the concepts of ‘sacred’, ‘divine’ or ‘transcendental’ can be grasped without falling into cultural or social reductionism and, consequently, ethnocentrism. I suggest that these concepts should be viewed as related to the *experiential basis of existence*, which cannot be reduced either to the ideological or the political dimension. The divine therefore needs to be situated in the sphere of the life-world and the everyday.

By stressing the phenomenal and existential aspects of thought and practice associated with the mountain and other deities, I wanted to challenge the widespread interpretation of communication with nature-based divinity as referring to (being and epiphemomenon of) ‘something else’. I suggest that this kind of communication must be seen as an actual encounter endowed with an intense experience of interaction concerning the mutual dependence between the human and non-human beings of the world. In a similar way, Cannell (1999) discusses the nature of truly emotional relationships between Bicolano healers, their patients and spirit-companions in her book *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines*. She argues that the encounters are often represented as the mutual (though not always conscious or intentional) checking of power and influence, which entails an eventualty of changing the agents involved (ibid.: 230–231). What is stressed here, however, is the large degree of ambiguity, tension and uncertainty within the interactions. The experience of such an exchange is described by terms such as ‘help’ and ‘oppression’, or ‘love’ and ‘pity’: consequently, the system under which such an exchange takes place “has to be understood as an emotional economy as much as a political economy” (ibid.: 107).

I believe that Cannell’s observations appear suitable for the Maya concept of relationship as well. But I would go even further and argue that there may also be a significant existential aspect in such an ‘exchange’ or ‘economy’. What I mean by this is that the diverse and complex emotional relationships between the agents grow out of the everyday experience related to the existential dealings between people and the physical and spiritual world they inhabit. As I hope to have shown with respect to the Maya...
life-world, the mountains can be responsible for good or bad crops, life or death, and can constitute factors of fundamental existential importance. I also hope to have demonstrated the extent to which the Maya see their being-in-the-world as delicate and fragile. For them, human beings are emplaced in a world that is not given; it is not something unchanging, definitive or self-evident. In its time dimension, the world has a cyclical character, where the end of each cycle entails the possibility of something going wrong. As noted by MacKenzie (2009: 372), the world is not heading towards a definite goal and nothing in it happens on its own: “A costumbrista worldview, I argue, while concerned with ‘order’ and harmony in the cosmos, views this as ‘work’: the practice of human (and other) subjects”. When dealing with Maya pilgrimage, sacrifice and intimacy with the mountains, we are concerned with an authentic existential economy.

As I have argued, the cultural and social function/origin distinction could be bridged by the concept of active and lived participation in the course of the world – working the world. Here, people are involved in a process of interpreting signs from diverse beings interconnected by the fabrics of mutual relationships. In this respect, Jackson (2005: xx) is certainly not wrong in describing human existence as “the struggle for being in a world where being is mutable and unstable, and where controlling and comprehending the forces that shape one’s destiny is an unremitting task”. At least for the Maya, the emplacement of people into an ever-changing unpredictable world inhabited by various beings and powers takes the form of a dynamic negotiation; then, “the struggle for being is better understood as a continual, if frequently unreflective, quest for some sense of balance between being an actor and being acted upon” (ibid.: 182). The delicate interdependence and complementarity of humans and non-humans, embedded in the fragile uncertainty concerning the continuation of the world is a form of intimacy which is best defined as the experience of participating in being. Given this state of affairs, the dynamics of the interaction and communication between the beings of the world should not be seen as a conflict between humans and the world, but rather as their co-existence.

NOTES

1 Religious change and religious pluralism are among the key characteristics of contemporary Guatemala. Today, Protestant converts represent some 50% of population in many Maya communities, with the rest divided among Catholics, Maya revivalists and Maya traditionalists (i.e. costumbristas who follow custom or the ‘old ways’). For more detailed information on Maya traditionalism, see the section “Mountains and Sacrifices among the Traditionalist Maya”.

2 Cf. Deuss (2007: 143–152) for another account of this experience.

3 Chinax is one of the four Year Bearers. The Year Bearers are considered ‘Chiefs’ of the twenty Day Lords – the named days of the Maya calendar – and it is always one of them who ushers in the Maya New Year.

4 These topics have, of course, already been discussed in anthropology, especially by authors who could be regarded as falling under the ‘anthropology of ontology’ label (cf. Scott 2013). The work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) is a prime example in this respect, as it distinguishes between a representation and a perspective, and thereby ceases to prioritise representational thinking over bodiness as a locus of ontological differentiation.
REFERENCES


ABSTRACT
This article concentrates on the material side of religious intimacy in Afro-Brazilian Umbanda through an ‘ontographic’ perspective as well as looking at materiality as evidence. It is based on an eleven-month fieldwork period among devotees, clients and individual practitioners of Umbanda in Southeast Brazilian metropolises, especially in São Paulo. In people’s experiences of spiritual work (trabalho) and spiritual development (desenvolvimento) carried out with Exús – guardians, guides and protectors who have, after their death, returned in order to work for people’s wellbeing – ritual objects (such as bodies, clothes, beverages, herbs, cigarettes, candles, songs) are seen as constitutive in knowledge production and life transformation. The central claim in this article is that diverse material and immaterial objects through which Exús interact and materialise, are neither primarily symbolic nor representative, but are re-configurative.

KEYWORDS: Umbanda • Exú • ritual objects • materiality • Afro-Brazilian religion • São Paulo

INTRODUCTION

Pomba Giras (female Exú) are beautiful women, who like to dress up, talk, laugh, drink and smoke cigarettes […] there are so many people who want to talk with them. Usually it’s about love, work, daily issues […] they become happy with the hope that Exús show to them through baths and offerings, and little by little, they find themselves. (Pai Marcelo,2 in São Paulo, 2011)

In this article I address the materiality of ritual communication between people and Exús – guardians, guides and protectors who according to the practitioners of Umbanda, once had their human life and now have returned in order to work for people’s well-being. During my fieldwork, which I carried out mainly in São Paulo, I learned that
today in Southeast Brazilian Umbanda houses, the most crowded ritual gatherings (gira)\textsuperscript{3} are those in which different Exús are interacted with, due to complicated situations surrounding health, wealth or love. These are called rituals of the left side (esquerda), in which male Exús, female (Pomba Giras), and child Exús (Exú Mirims) act, as well as some other ‘spirit entities of the right side’, known as está mais pra esquerda, i.e. capable of working in the left.\textsuperscript{4} For Umbanda practitioners (umbandista)\textsuperscript{5} the Exús are of all races, ethnic origins, social backgrounds and nationalities that have existed in Brazil throughout its history. They are known especially as people who lived on the margins of society as petty criminals, gamblers, prostitutes, and homeless children (see Prandi 2005: 81–82; Hayes 2011: 3–4), but also according to many Umbanda practitioners, as respected lawyers, politicians and doctors. Despite different social backgrounds, the common factor is that at some point during their lives, they became familiar with marginality, crime, inequality, misfortune, or betrayal. This is why they have the special ability of being able to take care of the extremely difficult problems that Brazilians face during their lifetimes.

Exú spirit entities are incorporated into human bodies to do their work. The incorporation is enabled through a process called spiritual development (desenvolvimento), which happens through the materialisation and material mediations of the Exús’ vibration in humans, and in material and immaterial objects. Through materialisation, Exús become members of the social networks formed by their human and non-human actors. While performing their spiritual work (trabalho), Exús use a wide range of ritual paraphernalia: cachaca (a distilled spirit made from sugar cane), chicken blood, capes, hats, dresses, candles, leaves, gunpowder, roses, cigarettes, etc.

In order to understand the significance of materiality in the experience of Umbanda practitioners, this article looks at the ontological modalities of materiality from an ontographic perspective. In other words, the aim is “to chart out the ontological presuppositions required to make sense of a given body of ethnographic material” (Holbraad 2011: 82). This kind of theoretical approach is based on the acknowledgement of epistemological problems faced by ethnographers working in realities/worlds in which the notion of materiality radically differs from modern Western mainstream ideas. In Thinking through Things, Amíria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell (2007) asked if things could speak for themselves, and what their voices would sound like. According to Holbraad (2011), this “pragmatological engagement with the voices of things” ena-
bles things to speak through the ethnographic association with Native voices, which is in fact a continuum for the wider anthropological concern about the emancipation of ‘the other’. However, the “things manifesto”, as Hoolbraad puts it, goes beyond subaltern radicalism (where the preoccupation is with the voices of subaltern peoples (Spivak 1988), challenging the epistemological ground through which Native voices are analysed (Holbraad 2011: 3). More closely related to my ethnographic fields, anthropologist Marcio Goldman (2011), who has carried out an extended study of the Brazilian Candomblé, showed how – because of the absence of Native voices in earlier studies – fetishism, a widely used concept to describe the position of materiality in Candomblé rituals, has repeatedly failed to explain the ontologically essential ritual dimensions, such as agency and creation. Goldman has called for an “anthropological symmetrisation” suggesting that, “we should perhaps learn from them [informants] other ways to think about this process of creation and agency in general and gain access to other ontological modalities”. According to Goldman, informants should not even be called such, but should be seen as “actors, endowed with their own reflexivity, as theoreticians with whom we should talk and from whom we can learn” (Goldman 2011: 121).

On the other hand, Webb Keane (2009: 124) has also stated, concerning the problematics of evidence related to religions, that “one basis for anthropological comparison, then, might be to start by attending to the implications of the materiality of practices and objects, rather than those immaterial things we might take them as evidence for”. Thus,

religions may not always demand beliefs, but they will always involve material forms. It is in that materiality that they are part of experience and provoke responses, that they have public lives and enter into ongoing chains of causes and consequences. (Ibid.)

Following these ideas, my study relies on the experiential level of Umbanda practitioners, studied through the different verbal, behavioural and material articulations of ritual communication with Exús. By using this approach my aim is to reach out for a wider perspective on materiality in ritual communication. Thus, earlier studies on materiality in religions (i.e. so-called fetishism) have largely been based on an anthropocentric view in which dichotomies such as human–spirit, nature–culture, subject–objects, have been central in understanding materiality as symbolic or representative signs of the ‘facts’ behind it – cultural, psychological, biological or political. The previous discussion on materiality based on ethnographic knowledge has, however, shown otherwise. Especially the works of Holbraad (2012a) on Cuban Ífá divination, Goldman (2011) and Roger Sansi (2013) on Candomblé and Halloy (2013) on Xangô rituals, have provided an understanding of Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban religious worlds in which the notion of materiality epistemologically escapes the concepts of earlier analyses, challenging them, but also offering fruitful grounds for expanding the analysis. Similarly, I will try to delve deeper into the infrequently studied world of Umbanda, and more precisely, into the realm of religiosity lived in Southeast Brazilian Umbanda houses, where the religion’s significance is primarily about spiritual work (trabalho), rather than institutionalised hierarchies and religious dogma. Through this observation my aim is to push the earlier studies’ interpretations of Umbanda as syncretic/hybrid/’a less African’6 religion towards an analysis of the materiality of religious/spiritual practices and their relatedness to knowledge production and agency.
The article is based on data collected during an eleven-month fieldwork period in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro between 2011 and 2015, where I have learned from and worked with leaders, affiliates, and clients of Umbanda houses, as well as with their family members and friends and the spirit entities of Umbanda. I have visited diverse religious locations, including worship houses, homes and shops selling religious artefacts.

In this article I look at materiality in ritual communication within the two above-mentioned contextually significant events: spiritual work and spiritual development. I will demonstrate that materialisation and material mediation in Umbandista worlds related to Exús are based on a particular spiritual–material dualism. This dualism does not, however, correspond with the commonly acknowledged epistemological dichotomies in theories of religion, such as matter–spirit, subject–object, etc., but in fact challenges the capability of these Western dichotomies to serve as ways of understanding religious experience in the Southeast Brazilian context.

In the first section I shall introduce Umbanda in the contemporary Southeast Brazilian context. Furthermore, within the following two sections I will introduce the experiential level of people I have worked with, striving to enlighten the agency, multiplicity and constitution of the body-object as well as other (non-human) ritual objects – which seem to be the two fundamental elements in the ritual practice. Later, I will return to the human–Exú relationship by pointing out some ideas about how ontologically perceived materiality is related to companionship, which in fact is the primary emphasis people give for their relationship with the Exús. I will suggest that the relation (in its material and immaterial forms) between people and Exús could perhaps be more broadly understood when looking at it from an ‘inter-species’, rather, than from a ‘transcendence’ perspective. Thus, I see that if we take the Umbanda practitioners’ ontological presuppositions seriously when treating the emerging material-semiotic forms of human–Exú relations, we could benefit from Donna Haraway’s ideas about significant otherness as a process in which both ontological beings in question (human and Exú) become and enact each other. This process, what Haraway (2003: 24) calls “the art of naturecultures” (while describing the interspecies relations and companionship between people and dogs), relies on the understanding of relation, as the smallest unit of analysis, through which the material-semiotic forms of each companion takes place. €

THE SOCIO-POLITICS OF UMBANDA IN SOUTHEAST BRAZIL

Based on socio-historical contextualisation, the very few studies that have focused on Umbanda have described it as a truly Brazilian, syncretistic and hybrid religion par excellence (Brown 1986; Negrão 1993; Jensen 1998; Ferreira da Silva 2005; Prandi 2005; Engler 2012). According to the official myth of Umbanda, in the 1920s Zélio de Morães incorporated an indigenous spirit entity Caboclo Sete Encruzilhadas in the sub-urban area of Rio de Janeiro. This reincarnated indigenous Caboclo declared himself to be the founder of a new religion called Umbanda. Historically, Umbanda’s myth of origin is related to a time when Brazil was enthusiastically searching for its national identity, emphasising the multiracial origin of its population. Umbanda was at that time celebrated as the truly Brazilian religion as it cultivated equally Catholic saints, African
Orixás,⁹ Brazilian indigenous ancestors and had strongly adapted Kardec’s spiritualism (Espirítilsmo Kardecista)¹⁰ in its ways of knowing and enacting the spiritual world (ibid.). Within the Umbanda carta magna signed by the largest Umbanda federations and several locally acknowledged Umbanda leaders on October 13, 2015 in São Paulo, Umbanda is described as a monotheistic religion, with an “afro-indigenous-euro-Brazilian” doctrine. The carta magna declares that in Umbanda the African Orixás are syncretised with Catholic saints and cultivated as spiritual guides and mentors, “God’s ministers”, who assist God’s work. It also points out that Umbanda practitioners believes in reincarnation and the incorporation i.e. the bodily manifestations/materialization of the spirits of the dead, and that these spirit entities help people in their refinement as humans and conduct them towards God. Moreover, Umbanda considers, according to carta magna, all nature to be “God’s altar”, where people can have conversations with the creator.

Even though several Umbanda authorities have come to an agreement concerning carta magna, in practice it is commonly acknowledged that more than one Umbanda exists. For instance, White Umbanda (Umbanda Branca) and Esoteric Umbanda (Umbanda Esotérica) are more closely related to Kardec’s Spiritism (of European origin), and do not accept the more African influences within their ritual practice. However, the Umbandas I have investigated during my field research in the state of São Paulo have been more identifiable with what has been locally called the African Umbanda (Umbanda Africанизada), referring to the strong influence of African-rooted religions, such as Candomblé. Lindsay Hale (2009: xv) in her comprehensive study of Umbanda in Rio de Janeiro uses the terms Afro-Brazilian and White Umbandas when talking about this division. In São Paulo the four more or less Afro-Brazilian Umbandas I have come to know during my fieldwork use atabaque drums and organise public cultivation of Exús, and two of them perform animal offerings, which are mainly absent within the public ceremonies in the white versions of Umbanda. However, similar to what Kelly Hayes (2011) discusses in her extensive work on Pomba Gira figures in Rio de Janeiro, I have observed, that the usage of concepts such as Candomblé, Umbanda, Macumba¹¹ and Espiritismo are not unified, and often Macumba and Espiritismo, for instance, are used as generic terms in reference to all Afro-Brazilian religions (Hayes 2011: 19).

Despite the differences in attitudes towards certain elements, the principal function of all Umbandas is to perform spiritual work for those who are in need. Umbanda has its devotees and clients, of which the latter group consists of a clearly larger number of people. The number of Umbanda devotees in Brazil (around 400,000), according to the Brazilian national census (IBGE 2010), is marginal considering the size of the whole Brazilian population. However, this does not indicate the number of people with different religious backgrounds who visit Umbanda worship houses temporarily in search of spiritual advice and healing and as an aid in emergencies. Thus the cultural significance of Umbanda cannot be measured through these statistics (see also Teixeira 2013). However, it is worth noting that in 2010 nearly 25 per cent of all declared Umundistas (according to the census) lived in São Paulo state, where during the past decade Umbanda had slightly increased its popularity. The other strong areas of Umbanda devotion are the states of Rio de Janeiro and Rio Grande do Sul, indicating popularity especially in the southern and southeastern areas, which are among the wealthiest in Brazil (IBGE 2010). Umbanda, in fact, is known in all parts of Brazil, although
the practice, as well as the diversity of spirit entities performing spiritual work, varies greatly in different parts of the country. Generally Umbanda is practised in specific *casas* (houses), *terreiros* (worship houses), \(^{12}\) *centros* (centres) and *tendas* (tents), as well as in private homes, cemeteries, crossroads, waterfalls and forests. The *terreiro* communities and rituals are led by leaders (*mãe-de-santo*/paí-de-santo) as well as by the spirit entities the leaders ‘carry’.

In São Paulo, there is a growing number of Umbanda activists who are very strict in demanding Umbanda’s rights as a real religion, as well as drawing a clear dogmatic line between Umbanda, Candomblé and Kardec’s spiritualism. These attitudes mirror the inferior position Umbanda has had over the past decades in comparison with other religions (see Engler 2012). One outcome of the theologisation and politicisation processes has been for instance, the above-mentioned carta magna, but also the inauguration of the first faculty of Umbanda theology, approved by the Ministry of Education in the city of São Paulo in 2003. Today, despite the recently increased religious intolerance towards Afro-Brazilian and Spiritist devotion, in the state of São Paulo there are public places for Umbanda practice, such as Ilê, a special ritual place inside a Catholic cemetery, as well as an Umbanda sanctuary (Santuario de Umbanda) where practitioners can temporarily use the space for rituals that require the immediate presence of nature elements (forests and waterfalls), or a safe place for Exús works and the dispatch (*despacho*) of broken ritual objects. Active devotees working in Umbanda federations have also organised large events in public places for commonly cultivated Orixás (such as Ogum and Iemanjá), which gather hundreds of people from many Afro-Brazilian religions in the area. In the Greater São Paulo, some Afro-Brazilian religious leaders and some politicians from the Labour Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores), have been active and gained visibility in the media and in politics over the last few years in their attempts to diminish discrimination by the more fanatical Pentecostals. Thus, during past decades there have been numerous police investigations and court hearings on cases of religious intolerance (intolerância religiosa), varying from verbal insults to physical violence (see for example da Silva 2007).

The Umbanda houses I have come to know in São Paulo are situated in socio-economically different areas, from upper middle class areas to poor sub-urban contexts. Here the ethnographic examples are drawn mainly from one Umbanda house led by Pai Marcelo in the city of Diadema.\(^{13}\) Among my interlocutors many Umbandistas, as well as religious clientele have been raised as Catholics. They often describe childhood memories of Kardec’s spiritualist centres where their mediunity was first discovered; later on they might have passed through Pentecostal churches and found their way to Umbanda, or have carried out an initiation ritual for instance in Candomblé, in which they might have established deeper relations with their Orixás. Yet, people in these Umbandas commonly define themselves as Catholic, Umbandista or Espírita (in reference to Kardec’s spiritualism, but also to Afro-Brazilian religiosity in general). This by no means signifies that the work in Catholicism, Umbanda, Candomblé or Kardec’s spiritualism is considered the same. On the contrary, the works carried out for instance in Candomblé and Umbanda are considered very different, including energies, foundations, non-human entities, practices, and so on. Thus, in all these different places the ontologically central balance between spiritual (*lado espiritual*) and material (*lado material*) sides (recognised by most Brazilians) is worked from different angles, that can,
however, serve people in different stages of life and spiritual development. In other words, it seems that different religious worlds co-exist and merge within the lives of my interlocutors. Thus, a fruitful approach would be to analyse the ontological formation of personhood (which I do in the following section). Indeed, the urban multi-ethnic cosmopolitan context, especially in São Paulo, also flavours the close intimacy of different religious/spiritual influences that people come across in their everyday lives.

Moreover, the socio-cultural inferiority of Umbanda still affects how people identify themselves in the religious field. Despite the hopes of Umbanda activists to unify and politicise Umbanda, it is still very common that ‘religion’ in Southeast Brazil is associated with Catholic and Pentecostal Churches. Thus, Umbanda as a ‘religion’ is marginal, but Afro-Brazilian forms of spirituality are nevertheless culturally very influential forms of engendered sociality and are also practised by many non-Umbandistas. Thus, what in my view is essential in terms of understanding religion and the position of Afro-Brazilian religions in a wider sense, requires attention to be paid to the services offered by different religious actors, and more precisely as stated above, to the notion of ‘person’ as well as to the logic and technology of ‘spiritual work’ (*trabalho espiritual*) in different ritual contexts.

**Luciane’s Healing in Exú Ritual Gathering**

That Saturday, you saw me, I was very ill. I was in the hospital and the doctors said they would have to operate on my spine. Before that, I had consulted a spirit entity here in this house, Seu Zé Pilintra, and he had said that I didn’t have to have an operation even if the doctors wanted it, I wouldn’t have to agree. He said he would put me back on my feet, and really, I am feeling better every day. Yesterday I had to use a walking stick and today I am walking on my own. Today I took off the orthopedic corset and I am recuperating every day […]. This Saturday we did one spiritual job [*trabalho*]. During that moment I felt I was healed, and every day I am getting better and recuperating. Like this was my real surgery […]. We gave an offering [*oferenda*] to Pomba Gira [female Exú spirit entity] and Exú. Manioc flour [*farofa*] for the woman [Pomba Gira], with honey, we gave blood… we killed an animal, a hen, and gave champagne and cigarettes. And for Exú, manioc flour, palm oil [*dendê*], a hen, *cachaça*, tobacco, and then we did the cleaning with hominy [*canjica*], popcorn, mamona leaves, and afterwards we exploded gunpowder, that is the element of purification which liberates the energies. There was Mãe Rosana’s Seu Zé Pilintra, Pai Marcelo’s Seu Ventania, and the cambônes who always help in the process […]. I really felt, and I say truly that I felt like that was my surgery, like I was healed at that moment, like I was liberated from all of the bad that was in my body and in my spirit, the bad that was prejudicing me. (Luciane, in Diadema 2011)

I happened to be around during Luciane’s healing session in a closed Umbanda *gira* (ritual gathering). The Umbanda house where the healing took place was located in a lower-middle class resident area and led by Pai Marcelo, a well-known Umbanda leader in Diadema and owner of several religious artefact shops in the area. The house was known by its dedication to Exú spirit entities, who were called to work there three
times a month. Once a month the ritual gathering was closed (gira fechada), only developing mediums could participate in order to become more familiar with their spirit entities and those of other developing mediums.

The approximately fifty-square-metre Umbanda house, painted in black ink both inside and out, was lit only by red and black candles that night. Descending the narrow staircase from the front gate, no one is able to enter without passing the spiritual alarm system, called firmeza de Exú, a ritually prepared clay pot consisting of secret elements of Exú as well as bottled cachaca by its side as an offering.

Before reaching the worship house, the energy of Exú was there again, below the earth, in a hole, where the offerings are buried and the used objects are thrown in Marcelo’s house. Luciane’s healing took place there that night.

Getting almost to the door of the Umbanda house, there is Exú again in his own house (casa de Exú). Exú Ventania’s statue is an offering and has secret ingredients that are contained in the statue, making it a materialized Exú. Inside the Umbanda house the many Exús were present as clay statues. Pai Marcelo explained that all of the mediums had their own Exú statues situated in the cafúa, a separate corner inside the Umbanda house. The statues were located in the floor close to the three walls that separated cafúa from the rest of the worship space. A black wooden throne was located in the middle of cafúa for Exú Ventania. The Exús located in cafúa – together with the spirit entities and Orixás that are located in separated congá (altar) and worked in the right-sided rituals – form the spiritual fluid (corrente espiritual) of the Umbanda house.

I was not expecting to witness Luciane’s healing ritual that night, in fact that was the first time I met her. Some days later when I returned to conduct interviews with her and some other affiliated members of Pai Marcelo’s Umbanda house, I had a chance to talk about the healing event with Luciane more specifically. I found out that a then 35-year-old white architect from São Paulo, Luciane, had recently moved to Diadema in order to be closer to the Umbanda house and her new friends from the worship house...
community. Her spiritual career had started with Orthodox Catholicism, into which she was baptised, as her parents were originally from Greece. Together with her father she had studied Kardec’s spiritualism at an early age and later on was initiated into Candomblé as Orixá Iansã’s daughter. It had been clear to Luciane’s family that her spirituality was very strong. She claimed that the first time she had heard the sound of the atabaque drums as a child, something in her had changed forever.

After this initiation into Candomblé and after years of devotion she had felt that there was something missing, her

*Photo 3. The front yard of Pai Marcelo’s Umbanda house. The hole used in Exú’s work is hidden under a wooden cover on the ground. Photo by Alexandre Riviello.*

*Photo 4. The sidewall of Casa de Exú with Exú Ventania’s ponto riscado. Photo by Alexandre Riviello.*
spirituality needed something more. She started to study Umbanda, visiting different Umbanda houses and federations. Finally, after some time she found her way to the worship house in Diadema, where we eventually met. Luciane said that now her spirituality was calm, as she had found a good place to develop it further. She specified that the reason for her attraction to this Umbanda house was its spirit entities, especially those of Mãe Pequena Rosana’s Zé Pilintra, Pai Marcelo’s Ventania and Pai Pequeno Nivaldo’s Marabô. She had been accepted as a filha (literally ‘daughter’, i.e. a developing medium) a year earlier.

On the day of Exú’s ritual gathering, the healing session was aimed at her back problems, from which she had suffered for quite a while. During her previous consultation with Zé Pilintra, he had advised her to bring specific ingredients for the healing work, as we see in the above quotation. Luciane did not hesitate to have more faith in Zé than in doctors. She had bought all the required ingredients for the healing ritual and brought them for the Exús that day.

I got to know Zé and his medium Rosana later on during my fieldwork period and learned that he was a very famous healer in Diadema. His services were widely sought, not only by Umbanda practitioners, but also by people from different religious backgrounds, even the leaders of Candomblé religion. When I returned to the field three years later I was told that the Umbanda house where Luciane’s healing took place

Photo 5. Cafúa, clay statues of different Exú spirit entities in Pai Marcelo’s Umbanda house. Photo by Alexandre Riviello.
had suffered a major conflict, in which half of the worship house’s mediums had left together with Zé and Marabô. Many people continuously looked for spiritual services from homes of these entities’ mediums. A year after the abandonment of Marcelo’s Umbanda house, Zé and Marabô started to receive clients on a roof terrace at Zé’s medium home, located in a poor district on the margins of São Paulo. More than half of the mediums left Marcelo’s house together with Zé and Marabô, and were now filhos (developing mediums) at the new house, led by Mãe Rosana and Pai Nivaldo (Marabô’s medium).

In order to consider in greater depth the material encounters in the human–Exú relationship, I will return to Luciane’s experience of her individual spirituality, which she calls the spiritual side (lado espiritual), to the actual healing event and its material and spiritual ingredients, as well as to the materialisation of Exús in the above-mentioned locations, and in human bodies. In the following sections I will look at these elements more closely and discuss the ontological modalities of body-objects particularly as well as the other material and immaterial objects (which in fact become subjects) that Exús are, and the tools which they use in their work and materialisations.

**Agency, Multiplicity and Immanence in the Body-Objects**

Like Luciane, many people in Southeast Brazilian metropolises associate themselves with different religions during their lives (see Montero 2001). This also affects the ways many of the religious institutions work in Brazil. For instance, many of Kardec’s Spiritist centres work with Umbanda spirit entities such as Preto Velho (African slave) and Caboclo (indigenous Brazilian), many Umbanda houses work with Candomblé rituals, and many Candomblé houses work with Exús from Umbanda. This is because people often think that they continue to carry with them the different spirit entities with whom they have become close, even after changing their ‘religion’ (see also Capone 2004: 178–184). Mãe Pequena, Julia’s Umbanda, which I got to know in 2011, is one of the oldest registered Umbanda houses in São Paulo. Its name, Centro Espírita Caboclo Sete Flechas, refers to Kardec’s spiritist origins and practices and yet the house is nicknamed umbandomblé (by the house’s members themselves), referring to specific Orixá rituals originating from Candomblé. The reason for the explicit ‘mixing’, Julia explained, was the simple fact that they had affiliated people in the house who asked for rituals in which they could develop their spiritual relationship – not only with their spirit entities as generally in Umbanda, but also with their Orixás, as in Candomblé, as well as to gain spiritual education through Allan Kardec’s teachings, as in Kardecist Spiritism. She together with her mãe-de-santo (Umbanda house leader) had decided to study and offer all kinds of services so that the spiritual side of their members could be fully attended to. Thus I would claim that these mixtures, instead of being random or socio-economically reducible forms of syncretism, in fact have a direct correspondence to the Afro-Brazilian ontological modalities embedded in the notion of the multiplicity and refinement of a person. By multiplicity I refer to the constitution of a person in which different ontological beings, such as spirit entities and Orixás, form and co-exist. By refinement I refer to the ritualistic process of spiritual development carried out in places
of religious practice, such as in Umbanda houses. In this section my aim is to open up these dimensions more profoundly. Thus, seeing the materiality of ritual practices through this perspective enables us to gain information about knowledge production and agency, in a never-ending (religious) process of what could be called the re-configuring of persons in Afro-Brazilian religious worlds.

This reconfiguring of the person is very much present in the events of spiritual work. One of the key elements in this work is so-called spirit possession, through which the Exús also worked in Luciane’s healing session. Zé Pilintra – the other male spirit entity who performed spiritual work – incorporated Rosana as his medium. Rosana, among many other Umbandistas, told me that during the incorporation, when a person “turns towards the saint” (virar para santo) his or her mind can be in a conscious, semi-conscious or totally unconscious state. During spiritual development, she claimed, the mind slowly shuts consciousness down and experienced mediums do not remember anything at all from the incorporation. During incorporation the spirit entities can drink, smoke, crawl, run, dance, shout, talk and laugh in ways that the mediums as conscious people could never do. However, when mediums are at an early stage of their development the incorporation is usually conscious or semi-conscious. When the medium is ready, incorporation erases the medium’s consciousness, Rosana explained.15

The question of spirit possession has been widely discussed in studies concentrating on Afro-Brazilian religions (mainly in the ‘orthodox’ forms of Candomblé). Spirit possession has been explained at first as biological, individual and pathological (especially in early texts on Candomblé authored by Nina Rodrigues 1883–1898, and published by Arthur Ramos in 1939 [Goldman 1984: 68]). Soon, by the end of the century, what Goldman calls socio-cultural models emerged, elaborated particularly by Melville Herskovits and later on by Roger Bastide who saw Candomblé as “identical to any social systems, satisfying determined social and individual necessities” (see Bastide 2001 [1958]: 39). Thus, since then the analysis of Brazilian spirit possession was seen (by many authors, such as Peter Fry (1977)), from the socio-political perspective in which the spirits were seen as nothing more than a “mask through which the socio-political mechanisms were occulted” (see also Goldman 1984: 99). In other words the emphasis was on the reduction of the spirit possession phenomenon to either empowerment of subaltern individuals or to the maintenance of the social structures surrounding them. Both of these approaches, the psycho-pathological and the socio-political, have indeed pointed to aspects valuable to understanding Afro-Brazilian religions; however, the problem for both, according to Goldman, resides in their reductionism and lack of explanation of the phenomenon itself, which he sees as a symbolic system of construction and maintenance of the personhood and its equilibrium (ibid.: 105, 191–192). I follow Goldman in his critique in my perspective on human–Exú relations, but instead of limiting it to spirit possession in human bodies, I consider that the idea could be extended to all forms of intercommunication between people and other significant beings in Afro-Brazilian socio-cosmology. Thus, as I will show, through the examination of materiality in ritual communication we will see that the so-called possession, or the dynamism of actualisations of immanent potentialities is actually a permanent existential stage in all beings.

Thinking about the concept of person in Umbanda, spirituality as well as medium potentiality are seen as essential attributes in being human, as Pai Marcelo puts it, “for
being a medium you only need to be alive”. In Umbandista autobiographies, a common feature is early childhood experience, in which a person is introduced to the spiritual side (plano espiritual). For example, it is very common that a child who cries a lot, constantly has bad dreams or otherwise behaves in an unexpected fashion is taken to a spiritual consultation in some religious place of practice (as we saw also in Luciane’s example). The reasons behind these physical or psychological problems are seen as spiritual. In order to take care of the situations people have often gone to the doctor first but then when the problem continues, have been guided, (often by doctors themselves) to a spiritual consultation. Ghosts and bad dreams are not ‘rationalised’ away as products of the imagination but are interpreted as a spiritual imbalance. Thus all the Umbandistas I have interviewed, despite their different emphases in ritual practice, share the same idea of the world in which the spiritual side is an essential part of all existence, through its material and immaterial domains.

According to Umbanda practitioners, people are never born alone. They are born with guardian angels, different spirit entities and Orixás. These non-human dimensions of human selfhood do not necessarily make people conscious of their existence. However, just as Sansi (2013: 84) observed in Candomblé, signs of these different (non-human) attributes of (a human) person can emerge during one’s life and in some cases the spirit entities need to evolve and the Orixás might need to be taken care of. Ariane, a 27-year-old actress, for instance, explained that when she moved to Rio de Janeiro she immediately started to act in a deranged way: she talked loudly and often ended up physically fighting and arguing with men in the streets after partying the whole night in the Lapa district. She felt that she could no longer control herself, and that she was constantly hovering on the edge of sanity. What she eventually became aware of was that it was actually her Maria Mulambo, who had entered “in front” (está na frente) of her appearance. This is why her actions were uncontrolled and why, in order to calm down, she needed to develop her spirituality, that is, to take care of her Mulambo and give her space to work properly.

Moreover, in Umbanda all mediums are sons or daughters of Orixás. Orixás are not, however, gods. In fact Pai Marcelo explained that the difference between God and the Orixás is that God is the origin of everything that exists, while Orixás govern the elements of nature, and yet simultaneously they are these elements. Thus Orixás are not Gods or divinities in the sense that modern Euro-American thinking would like to categorise them. They are nothing more or less than Orixás, and in my view should also be theorised as such. Consequently, the same can be said of Exús and other spirit entities and non-human beings in the Afro-Brazilian worlds.

Orixás, in a similar manner than the spirit entities, manifest themselves on earth through mediumship (mediunidade) in both human and non-human, material and immaterial things, and in that way form the natural vitality of the lived worlds of my interlocutors. According to Pai Marcelo, all things and beings are born, formed or made out of elements that originate from energies of a specific Orixá (see also Goldman 2011: 116). All things come into existence in the energetic flows (linha or literally ‘line’) of Orixás and the balance of this essential interconnection can be re-configured through materialisation and material manipulation of the specific attributes in objects, in humans and in non-human beings. Spirit entities, like people, belong to the lines of Orixás. Many Umbanda devotees and clients do not, however, bother with this type of
theorisation about the relation between Orixá and spirit entity. Both of them are simply taken for granted, as natural things – in both senses of the word. Umbanda practitioners simply feel that they know and are more intimate with their spirit entities, as they are with those whose spiritual work they are familiar with in practice. Some Umbandista practitioners, however, (like Luciane and the devotees in Julia’s umbandomblé), feel that the intimacy of both Orixás and spirit entities is significant because of the life trajectory that has for some reason revealed both of them and in that way made the intimacy of both beings more concrete.

This type of multiplicity and vitality in an individual (and other objects) is present in all situations in Afro-Brazilian religious worlds. Goldman (2011: 116) argues:

> a certain ‘vitalism’, rather than ‘animism’ is at the heart of Candomblé […] the modulations of a single force called axé (similar to other anthropologically familiar notions such as mana and orënda) make up everything in the universe according to a process of differentiation and individuation. The unity of this force guarantees that everything participates in everything else, but its modulations are such that there exist levels of participations.

Even though the concept of axé was not theorised much among my interlocutors in Umbanda, I could clearly perceive this type of ontological ‘vitalism’ related to the discussions on the spiritual-material domains in people and other things and beings. For instance, when an Umbanda practitioner enters a different space, the spiritual side, i.e. the spiritual attributes (related to spirit entities and Orixás) of selfhood react to the new situation. This can emerge as the sudden fear experienced by Iemanjá’s ‘daughters’ when going to the beach, or uncontrolled partying as in Mulambo’s case. This is also one significant reason why people associate themselves with different religions, worship houses and churches until they find a place where they will, temporarily or permanently, feel at home, i.e. get into balance with the surrounding energies, as Luciane explains. When entering the Umbanda houses the person’s vibrations are considered to either ‘match’ the house’s spiritual context (corrente espiritual) or not, depending on how their immanent qualities are received and treated. The individual process of looking for the right energetic ambience, in terms of visiting various Umbanda houses until finding the right one, is an essential feature in the autobiographies of Umbanda mediums.

Another example of this kind of reaction was shared with me by Silvia, one of the mediums who followed Zé Pilintra to his new Umbanda house. Silvia explained that sometimes during the incorporation in ritual gathering, she feels in her body that some of her Exús are trying to take over, although usually Rosa Caveira, the most evolved of her Exús, does not let the others enter. One of these other Exús Silvia carries, and loves passionately, is called Cobra. Cobra came to her in a dream a couple of years ago and according to her, stayed in her room for one week. During that time she did not know what it was. The leader in the Umbanda house where she was spiritually evolving at that time, claimed that Cobra was a bad thing, and they had tried violently to extract it from her body. However, after that, everyone present in that Umbanda session, except Silvia and her cambône (spirit entity’s human assistant in rituals), became very sick. She realised that Cobra was very angry about what had been done and was actually trying to tell her something. So she went to another Umbanda house to see what they would
make of him. There the Umbanda leader and other mediums received Cobra with the highest respect and Silvia understood, as she had already assumed, that Cobra was one of her personal Exús. Since then, Cobra has been working every now and then, or whenever Rosa allows, Silvia explained laughing. When Cobra comes, she continued, her whole body is transformed, as he comes crawling on the ground like a snake.

Even within the Afro-Brazilian religious universe in a larger sense, it is common to hear that people who were looking for spiritual advice for instance in Candomblé worship houses, were sent by the Candomblé leaders to look for Umbanda or vice versa, referring to the work that should be done according to the immanent qualities of individual energetic vibrations that are natural, albeit individually particular, in all humans.

**MATERIALISATION OF EXÚ: RITUAL OBJECTS IN KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION**

The process where an Exú becomes known is related to the ontological need of both beings involved: people and Exús. It is commonly known among Umbanda practitioners that spirit entities materialise because the person who carries it needs to evolve his or her spirituality, but also because the spirit entity itself needs to carry out charity work. Some say that the spirit entity itself is also evolving through materialisation. Exús particularly are often considered to have spiritual debts because of what they might have done during their lifetimes. On the human side the need is, as stated above, to balance their spiritual–material equilibrium aiming at refinement. Thus, working as a medium is considered dedication to help others, making people closer to the spiritual world and eventually to a sense of balance.

Not all spiritually developing Umbanda practitioners feel the need to affiliate themselves with a worship house, instead some work with spirit entities in their homes. Moreover, many people I have talked with consider their need for development as a kind of spiritual heritage that has been passed down from earlier generations. The spiritual heritage does not have to come from the same origin, but when spirituality has been developed in their family, it is often a reason for people to think they also have a need to develop it one way or another.

Despite the reason why one should get started with the process of spiritual development (instead of simply relying as a client on the work of the spirit entities), people in Umbanda affirm that the spirit entity has in several logical ways made it clear that it wants its carrier to develop. This is because the Orixás and spirit entities are already there, as Sansi (2013: 83–85) observed about Orixás in Candomblé. Thus, suddenly the immanence of different things, human and non-human, becomes active and requires the materialisation of Exú or other spirit entities.

In practice Exús materialisation is primarily a very material event. Exús like Zé Pilintra, Exú Marabô, Rosa Caveira and Cobra have all at first given signs of their existence in several ways and little by little have revealed themselves through material and immaterial objects. In the previous section I explained the ontological modalities related to body-objects, the same logic of immanent potentialities is apparent with clothes, drinks, smokes, hats, among other things that are part of who the spirit entity existentially is.
Through these objects the spirit entity’s personality and habits become recognisable. In other words, these materials are part of the objectification of the spirit entities the developing medium goes through. The spirit entities appear at first in dreams, in visions, as voices and as intuitive knowledge. They are part of their medium’s sub-conscious and during the evolvement process they become recognised as separate beings, or ontologically significant others, as I will point out further on in this article.

During my fieldwork I heard many stories about objects that people considered special. Many of these objects related to the knowledge production process, prior to the materialisation of Exús. These ‘mediator’ objects had come to them through dreams, intuition or as gifts. The objects wanted to be bought or made because the spirit entity’s imminence had connected to them, as well as to the human medium’s consciousness, to which it is ontologically linked. In other words, the spirit entity who is already there, changes from an immaterial to a material form. The agency in this process is all about immanence as well as about the relations/networks between these different ontologically connected things.

For instance, many of the Exús I became familiar with had informed their mediums what kind of clothes they wanted to wear in dreams or in person while manifesting themselves in the medium’s body. Sometimes the style of these clothes originated from the time the spirit entity lived its human life. The specific requirements about the colours, ornaments, materials and all kinds of detail varied to such an extent that in one ritual gathering I never encountered two Exús which looked exactly the same. In order to dress up their Exús, people look for esoteric shops or special dressmakers. One dressmaker who specialised in making clothes for spirit entities explained to me that people often order spirit entities’ clothes according to the wishes the spirit entity has expressed to them while taking bodily form in dreams or in voices. However, during the process of making, she suddenly receives more detailed information from the proper spirit entity and in the end the cloth can come out very differently compared to the original request. It is common, she said, that while expecting the spirit entity’s outfit to be ready for ritual use, the medium has also acquired more detailed information from the spirit entity and becomes nervous, thinking that the clothes cannot be used, as it will not please the specific preferences of the spirit entity. Usually this concern, however, is ungrounded, as the dressmaker has already been able to satisfy the spirit entity’s complete wishes without having communicated with the medium. I heard sev-
eral similar stories in relation to ritual necklaces, statutes, and other tools of spiritual work required by Exús.

Material objects also have a special role when a medium prepares him- or herself for ritual incorporation. Rosa Caveira’s medium Silvia explained that the preparation for spiritual work with the spirit entities starts one day before at the medium’s home. She prepares herself by avoiding red meat, sex, and dark clothes, because these things might interrupt one’s spirituality, as their spiritual influence is ‘strong’ (pesado). Dark clothes, for instance, not only attract the Exús in Umbanda terreiros but also all kinds of dead spirit (egun) that wander around and can harm the spiritual development of the medium. Sometimes Silvia sleeps on the floor on a bamboo mat (estera) one night before the ritual gathering and takes special herbal baths that protect her during the Exús’ incorporation. The day of the ritual gathering she always senses that the spirit entities are coming nearer. They are already with her for 24 hours like shadows, she said, but when the ritual gathering (gira) comes closer, they start to enter her more strongly.

In a way, the Umbandista perception of materialisation is very close to what Karen Barad has claimed to be a post-humanist account of performativity. Barad states that this view challenges the positioning of materiality as “either a given or a mere effect of human agency”. In her “agential realism” materiality is seen as an active factor of materialisation, seeing that “nature is neither a passive surface awaiting the mark of culture nor the end product of cultural performances”. (Barad 2007: 183) Both ontological materiality in Umbandista perception and the non-anthropocentric stance in post-humanist manifests challenge Western dualist approaches, which have emphasized the distinction of nature and culture over the last few centuries, positioning humans at the centre of the universe. Barad states that the primary units of ontology are phenomena that, according to her, are “dynamic topological re-configurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations of the world”. She argues further on that “the primary semantic units […] are material-discursive practices through which (ontic and semantic) boundaries are constituted”. The dynamism, she states, is in fact “agency – not an attribute, but an ongoing re-configuration of the world”. Thus, the “turning towards the saint” in the Umbandista world, can be seen – following Barad’s concepts – as a form of “agential intra-activity” in a world where everything is connected through spiritual and material domains. (Ibid.: 141)

THE POWER OF MATERIAL AND IMMATERIAL TOOLS IN EXÚ’S WORK

As we have seen, material objects are significant in knowledge production within the Exú’s materialisation process. Now, getting back to Luciane’s healing session performed by the two Exús, based on the same logic I will show how these ingredients of spiritual work (like cachaca, chicken blood, etc.) also work as part of transformative healing. Here (as in the previous section) I do not analyse each object separately, but look at them through their ontological category, namely as tools (ferramentas) of spiritual work.

In the beginning of my fieldwork in 2011, I visited several shops that sold ritual materials for ritual purposes in Umbanda and other Afro-Brazilian religions, as well as to individual practitioners of similar rituals. One São Paulo based stockowner who
had a wide national and international distribution of ritual objects explained that all of the objects sold in ritual shops had their special purpose. He explained that all herbs, incenses, candles, beverages, necklaces, clothes, stones, etc., sold in these shops have specific potentialities and attributes embedded in their agency and efficacy. Goldman (2011) and Arnaud Halloy (2013: 138) have observed similar phenomena in relation to materiality in Candomblé and emphasised the ontological potentialities in the immanence of certain ritual objects that are ritually ‘made’ or ‘charged’. The notion of potentiality is indeed a very accurate approach towards materiality in Afro-Brazilian rituals, in which what is at stake is not the creation of something new, but the activation of potentialities, powers and capacities that already exist – based on the same logic that we saw in relation to human-objects.

However, in Umbandista worlds, not all objects have gone through ritual charging, although they are still used by the spirit entities in Umbanda rituals. The purpose of the ritual objects to which the stockowner referred, is in fact an essential dimension that links the material and the spiritual to each other and through which the balance between these two sides can be worked. Candles, for instance, sold in ritual shops or regular supermarkets, whether they are made for ritual purposes or not, carry a capacity, potentiality and power within them, simply because of what they are. It is not only due to the candle’s flame – that is considered a point of light through which the spirits of all kinds can be attracted in Umbanda – but also, and essentially, the colours themselves. Thus a red, half-red half-black, or black candle bought by an Umbanda practitioner for Exú work (as in Luciane’s case), can be any candle from these colour options. Thus, colours themselves have attributes, potentialities, powers and capacities to attract Exús and Pomba Giras. These colours are theirs, and simultaneously they partake of these colours, or more precisely, their vibration is transmitted through and within these colours. Similarly, as I explained in the previous section about the medium using light clothes as a preparation for ritual gathering, many mediums attending Exús’ ritual gathering come dressed with red and black clothes, specifically because the colours attract Exús, and in this way the consultation or spiritual work performed by the Exús to promote wellbeing is considered even more efficient. On the other hand, the clients – people do not generally know enough about Umbanda – are sometimes advised to come in light colours so as not to attract Exú energies too strongly – meaning that they could end up incorporating Exú without any proper preparation, which would not necessarily be a pleasant experience.

Immaterial objects in ritual communication such as the smell of incense, ritual songs and drawn symbols are also considered effective because of their existential attributes. Ritual songs, for instance, are considered a very powerful way of evoking spirit entities. Such songs are learned from spirit entities and today also from CDs and the Internet. The Umbanda practitioners I met did not want to sing pontos just for fun, as that might confuse the spirit entity and even evoke dangerous situations. Drawn symbols are usually made by the spirit entities when they arrive (and are incorporated into the medium’s body). They are like a spirit entity’s signature, by which (among other things) they can be recognised. The herbs used for incense are also effective as such. The Umbanda mediums emphasised that it is always good to use fresh herbs and many people grew the herbs in their homes. However, taking into account the busy lifestyle in the metropolises, I saw that dried mixtures of ritual herbs, as well as incense, was sold in ritual
shops, on many newspaper stands and in supermarkets in urban areas and were used by Umbanda people as well as by many others. These bags and boxes carry the name of the herb or alternatively only the purpose of its use, such as “open the pathway” (abre caminho), “break the witchcraft” (quebra feitiço), etc.

As mentioned above, some Afro-American religions scholars (for instance Goldman 2011; Holbraad 2012; Halloy 2013; Sansi 2013) have written about ritually charged objects. These objects are more powerful than other objects. Their powers are often protected and controlled by restrictions. One of my interlocutors, Pai Ivan, Umbanda leader from São Paulo, for example, does not let other people touch his ritually charged objects as this might, according to him, be dangerous. Anyone can, of course, buy different things that are commonly used for and by the Exús for example. According to Ivan (and other Umbanda practitioners) this is considered very dangerous, as the Exú will respond to a ritual performed with these ingredients, although without further knowledge the outcome of this action could become very unpleasant. Even though all of the above-mentioned scholars agree that the ‘making of the saint’ (i.e. the materialisation of Orixá) in Candomblé, is a question of the saint being discovered, they also seem to agree that powerful ritual objects only work after a specific ritual preparation. The notion of ‘made’ objects (ritually made power objects like Exú statues, guia necklaces and firmezas appearing in the above description of Exú ritual gathering in Pai Marcelos Umbanda), concurs what Holbraad, Goldman and Sansi have written. However, the rest of the
objects (the given), ritually charged or not, are in my view also (spiritually) powerful, as they are considered to have been constituted by one or many qualities and thus their agency and efficacy is related to their immanence, that is, enchanted (or charged) by nature itself. These implicit or explicit potentialities of material and immaterial objects (such as cigarettes, clothes, beverages, aliments, colours, rhythms, etc.) can be activated by human and non-human beings at any time. Moreover, both of these object groups’ efficacies are based on the constitution of the ontological spiritual–material dualism in which what is at stake more precisely is the agency and modifiability of immanence.

During the process of Luciane’s healing ritual, as in any spiritual work in Umbanda, the ontological status of used objects (tools) changes. During the spiritual work they become charged by the negative energies that were taken out of the healed person. Usually Umbanda people claim that the objects used have to be taken care of by a process called dispatchment (despacho). All of the material remaining has to be taken care of in a secure manner, because if they end up in the wrong hands the negative energy that was charged in them, could be used for negative actions. Some Umbanda practitioners are very careful not to throw anything in the garbage can, not even the plastic cover wrapped around candles. Depending on each work carried out with that candle, its remains have to be dispatched properly at street corners, in bushes, buried underground, etc. Despite the different procedures people have in their home rituals, in worship houses the remains are always thrown away ritually.

**Materiality and Companionship**

Among the Umbanda practitioners I came to know during my fieldwork, the spirit entities of highly evolved mediums, like Zé Pelintra in Luciane’s healing, are experienced in a very mundane manner as members of social networks. People who have known Zé for a long time have heard him telling bits and pieces of his lifestory (while he was still in human form). Apparently Zé was a gambler and spent his time playing cards and chasing women. The mediums assume he lived in the early 19th century, as sometimes he talks about the time of slavery. It is known that a fight over a woman finally killed him, as a jealous man shot him, leaving bullets in his leg. That is why, people say, he still hobbles. After turning into a spirit entity, Zé’s special expertise has been related to health and employment issues. According to his medium Rosana, Zé works nearly every day attending people from their Umbanda as well as many Candomblé devotees, even Candomblé leaders and other people who are more Catholics and Spiritists than into Umbanda, claimed Rosana. Zé is well known in Rosana’s neighbourhood and, according to her, even some of the local Pentecostals salute him with respect when he walks in the streets outside the worship house. Despite the negative Pentecostal attitudes towards Umbanda, the local Pentecostals perhaps do not think negatively about Zé because he is very well educated and dresses in a sophisticated manner, Rosana explained.

Rosana has been working with Zé Pelintra for almost 20 years, and now talks with him directly every day. She claims that when Zé is near, she sees him in front of her without having to incorporate (to take the bodily form). At the beginning of her development the communication between them was more through the messages he had sent...
during the incorporation, but today, as he is very developed, they can communicate as people, according to Rosana. Although they are good friends, their personalities and preferences still differ quite radically. For instance, Zé loves to eat raw liver while Rosana detests it and claims that she would immediately vomit if forced to eat such a thing. Zé also loves to drink cachaça and can spend long hours talking with people as he loves attention. Rosana, on the other hand, saw herself as a reserved non-drinker. In addition to Rosana the one person who knows Zé profoundly is his cambône, Rita, who describes Zé as a friend, father and sometimes she jokes that he is even her husband. She claims to love him profoundly and admires his ability as a healer. Zé is a lovely person, she says, but when he sees that people are not sincere he immediately becomes furious.

The other famous spirit entity, Pai Nivaldo’s Exú Marabô, has broadened his friendships even to other non-human beings from other religious contexts. Thus he is well known and respected in the other Afro-Brazilian ritual house, Tambor de Mina, nearby. One spirit, Boço Claudio (an encantado incorporated in Pai Gustavo’s body) told me that he likes to visit different Umbanda and Candomblé houses in order to meet his friends, who are, for example Pai Nivaldo and his Exú Marabô, as well as many other people and spirit entities whom he has come to know during the last twenty years.

In my fieldwork I observed that companionship is also experienced through ritual objects, which, as I have shown, are some kind of mediators in these relationships (in materialisation and spiritual work) through their immanent potentialities. People express love and caring towards the objects their Exús use, cherishing the clothes, gifts, statues, pipes and other things. In Umbanda medium houses I saw separate wardrobes for the spirit entities, as well as home altars where significant spirit objects were kept.

At the experiential level it seems that Exús are like people but of different ‘species’, thus they are spirit entities that can be materially present at their firmezas and houses, yet they are like the wind, which can blow anywhere and in many places at the same time. They follow people and see everything that is happening. They can appear in front of people and make them change their ways and affect their choices. Thus we
might see Exús (among other spirit entities) as ontologically significant others. According to Haraway (2003: 24), who has written much about significant otherness and companion species, the primary ontological unit is a relation. This kind of approach in the context of human–Exú relations seems quite radical, as it forces us to take Exús and other non-human spirit entities, as well as Orixás, seriously. This approach in my view is however relevant if the aim is to understand agency within the different ontological modalities of materiality. So-called material semiotics might well offer tools for us to think further about the non-human in social interaction among Umbanda practitioners. Bruno Latour’s ideas in ANT (actor-network theory) were based on the idea of de-centralised agency, which could be defined as the “semiotics of materiality” that is “symmetrical with respect to human and non-human agency” (Law 1999: 4; Knappett and Malafouris 2008: xi). The actor is defined through its capacity to make a perceptible difference. These active entities are seen as being relationally linked with each other in webs, making a difference to each other, bringing each other into existence. In the same vein, material semiotics goes beyond linguistics, claiming that “entities give each other being, that they enact each other” (Law and Mol 2008: 58).

Moreover, Haraway has demonstrated in her inter-species analysis how people actually ‘become’ with dogs and dogs ‘become’ with people (Haraway 2003). In Umbandista worlds Exús are as real, equally loved and lived with, as for instance the human–dog relationships Haraway has studied in Western societies. Thus, ontologically the otherness of Exús is equally significant, as they are material, they are persons and they are actors, even though not in the same biological sense as humans. In fact the ontological status of Exús is simultaneously human and non-human, material and immaterial, and thus the categorisation of an Exú through such concepts as spirit or ancestor would require a radical epistemological extension. As ontological entities, Exús indeed have an effective multi-layered agency in the lives of people who share their history, routines, plans, hopes and desires with them, and most importantly the material attributes in their immanence. Thus, as Haraway has stated about being in the world in general, I would say that for people I have encountered in Umbanda houses in particular what is at stake is indeed a process of ‘becoming with’ (ibid.: 16). Thus, any kind of anthropocentric theory would inevitably fail if it maintained that a faithfulness to ‘Native’ experience would be the key point in analysing agency and materiality among mediums and clients of contemporary Southeast Brazilian Umbanda houses.

**CONCLUSION**

Both modern western Christianity and scientific materialism were built upon a denial of the spirits in things as well as – despite the latter’s tendency to associate the material with the concreteness of ‘facts’ – common understanding of materiality as ultimately defined by the socio-historical process of abstraction of the spiritual from the material (Espírito Santo and Tassi 2013: 2).

The above quotation points to the post-dualist critique that is part of the post-humanist account that questions the anthropocentric perspective of agency and materiality. This discussion has been in dialogue with ethnographic thinking about materiality in different ontological contexts. Holbraad (2012b), for instance, has proposed the establishment
of anthropological ‘objectology’ in which all things could be looked at and theorised as such, extending the borders of concepts, as well as giving birth to new ones. In this article I have tried to understand materiality in the ritual communication between people and Exús, at the same time keeping in mind the epistemological challenges embedded within the concepts (religion, spirit, ancestor, ritual object) we commonly use in order to talk about this kind of phenomenon.

The concern of the incapability of Western epistemological dualisms to explain contemporary religious worlds has been expressed by several scholars recently. More precisely, what is at stake in the discussion when talking about the agency of spirits or ritual objects, for example, is the question of evidence. Concerning the epistemological problematic of evidence in the anthropology of religion Webb Keane (2009, 112) asked if it is possible for us to “define religion in a way that takes seriously the perspective of its practitioners and can still guide research across contexts without inviting paradox?” Keane suggests an attention to religious practices “more generally, attending to their forms, pragmatics and the semiotic ideologies they presuppose” (ibid.). In line with these ideas, my observation about the material and immaterial evidence of the human–Exú relationship presented in this article has led me to the realm of Afro-Brazilian common sense in which evidence of Exús among other non-human beings, “lies not in the illusion of the really ‘real’ but in ways of being, perceiving, and knowing” (cf. Blanes and Espírito Santo 2014: 26).

In this paper’s introduction I emphasised the importance of attending to ‘the voices of things’, while thinking about the materiality through which people relate themselves to Exús (cf. Holbraad 2011). In trying to make sense of this specific human–Exú relationship, I have tried to trace the voices of different material and immaterial things that seem to form its essence. Aiming to describe and open up the ‘ontographic stories’ of people and the different material (such as candles, clothes, guia necklaces, chicken blood, etc.) and immaterial things (such as colours, songs, and ritual drawings) that have significant roles in the ritual communication, I have pointed out that, within the events of spiritual work and spiritual development, the relationship is firstly about the way a person is perceived in Umbanda worlds. The agency in an Exú’s work is worked through body-objects where a person ‘turns into a saint’, that is, lets another attribute into his or her multiple existence to govern the consciousness and actions for a certain period. The multiplicity of a person is in constant dynamic process, which can be controlled by spiritual development (desenvolvimento) in different religious institutions, for example in Umbanda houses. This process of re-configuring a person is related to the second aspect I have explored in this article, specifically the materialisation of Exús. This materialisation is enacted through a process of knowledge production in which non-human material objects become key actors through their ontological immanent potentialities. In spiritual development the Exú becomes known through the different objects that reveal its characteristics to the carrier medium and others in the same social network.

Thirdly, I have pointed out that the relationship is about transformations (healing, getting a new job, finding a new love, etc.), which ontologically are in fact re-configurations, enacted through the spiritual work Exús perform. The material object Exús use in this process enact the reconfiguration of spiritual–material balance, again, through their immanent potentialities, the “given” and the “made” (cf. Sansi 2013). This never-ending
process of re-configurations is possible through the connectedness of all things and beings that become in the world through their immanent attributes. Thus, in Umbanda worlds, the power of different ritual objects is about their nature, or perhaps more precisely, their natureculture.

Finally, the relationship between people and highly developed Exús is about social networks, thus companionship, friendship, love, trust and admiration are at stake when Umbanda people describe their relationship with Exús. If we look at the practices of this companionship, we might say that the companionship between humans and non-human Exús is very much a material one. Thus the significance of materiality in this particular companionship is not only symbolic or representative, but also, as shown above, primarily re-configurative.

Based on these observations, I see that to describe Exú as a spirit or an ancestor is not accurate. According to the experiences of people I encountered in Umbanda houses, an Exú is in many ways a material(ised) companion with whom daily life is shared. The material and mundane part of this ontological existence in fact challenges the trans-cendentalisation of Exús. Thus, the spiritual–material dualism does not refer to two distinct domains dwelled in by different groups of beings, but to the existential constitution of all things, which carry both of these dimensions within them.

Thus, in Umbanda worlds, we have seen that, particularly through the notion of Orixás, religion is largely a question of nature (rather than of culture). The essence of humanity is mainly a question of a multiplicity of non-human powers and attributes (instead of anthropocentric dichotomies). As we saw in the case of highly developed spirit entities like Zé Pilintra, the ontological position of Exú also closely resembles an inter-species relation, rather than those commonly described in religious contexts that talk of the radical alterity placed between the world and transcendence. Therefore, I suggest that by connecting the ‘ontographic’ method with Haraway’s (2003: 24) post-humanist account on ontology – as a question of how material-semiotic relations between significant others is constituted – we might get closer to a more accurate conceptualisation of the materiality of religious practices in Afro-Brazilian worlds.

NOTES

1 Among my interlocutors Exús are referred to in Portuguese with more general concepts such as entidade (‘entity’) or guia (‘guide’). Thus, acknowledging the absence of better English translations, I use spirit entity (instead of mere spirit) attempting to give more emphasis to the ontological materiality and agency of Exús.

2 All the names of people referred to in this article have been changed.

3 The Portuguese word gira in this context means ritual gatherings/cults performed in Umbanda houses. The verb girar (‘to spin around’) refers to the way mediums move their bodies in order to be possessed by or turn into the Umbanda spirit entities they ‘carry’.

4 Spirit entities ‘come from’ (vir) and ‘work’ (trabalhar) on the two sides of existence: the left (esquerdo) and right (direito). Exús are known for being specialists of the left side. Depending on the situation, the left is sometimes also worked by Zé Pilintras among other right-sided spirit entities, such as indigenous Brazilians (caboclos), ex-African slaves (pretos velhos), sailors (mariheiros), children (crianças), cowboys (boia-deiros), Bahian people (baianos) and gypsies (ciganos). The rule of who works on which side can vary from one Umbanda house to another; however, Exús themselves never work on the right side.
In Portuguese the term *umbandista* refers to a devoted practitioner of Umbanda. The different groups attending the Umbanda houses I have studied are: the leaders ‘Mother’ (*Mãe*) and/or ‘Father’ (*Pai*); the leaders’ assistants ‘Little-Mothers’ (*Mãe Pequena*) and ‘Little-Fathers’ (*Pai Pequeno*); ritual musicians (*Ôgã*); the mediums (*medium*) and the spirit entities’ assistants (*cabône*). The ritual audience (*assistência*) are the non-devoted clients attending public ceremonies in Umbanda houses. Umbandistas (as well as practitioners of Spiritism and Candomblé) are sometimes called *macunbeiros* in an ironic sense by themselves, and in a pejorative sense by outsiders. In popular language (despite its original meaning as a specific ritual drum) *macumba* means ‘spell’, ‘magic’ or ‘black magic’. The negative weight of the term depends on the context of its usage and the person who uses it.

The anthropological studies of Afro-Brazilian religions have been largely interested in the question of the African influence in Candomblé, but also in Umbanda. (For more detailed information about this discussion, see Capone 2004.)

By the term ‘body-object’ I refer to the ritual use of human bodies during the act of incorporation (‘spirit possession’) of spirit entities and *Orixás*.

Some anthropological studies – influenced by the so-called re-Africanisation of Afro-Brazilian religious and anthropological studies – posit Umbanda’s origin and formation much earlier in history than many Umbanda practitioners themselves (Engler 2012: 16–17). In reference to the centrality of ancestors in Umbanda practice, some studies claim that Umbanda is not a degenerated form of observance. Whereas Candomblé inherits ritual knowledge from the Yorubas, Umbanda in fact originates from a different cultural tradition, specifically that of the Bantu, which is considered to have had more influence in Southeast Brazil during the slavery period (ibid.: 22). In the last centuries in southeastern Brazilian cities the Afro-Brazilian religious practice was known as Macumba, (see also note 5) and thus from this point of view Umbanda has been seen as its (re)formation. Most studies on Afro-Brazilian religions have concentrated on the Northeast and have however seen Umbanda as a degenerated cult because of its explicit combinations of different religions (Capone 2004: 16).

*Orixás* are entities that originate from West African Yoruba culture. *Orixás* are often described as gods or divinities, but the contextualisation of these entities through these concepts is complicated and will be further discussed in this article.

*Kardecismo, Espiritismo, Espiritismo Kardecista* are names referring to a ‘spiritist’ doctrine captured in specific books authored by Allan Kardec, a spirit incarnated in a scientist Leon Rivaíl, who lived in 17th-century France. The ‘science of the spirits’ is widely acknowledged, respected and practiced in Brazil as well as in many other Latin American countries. It is popular especially among the middle class population and has greatly influenced the different forms of popular Catholicism and Afro-Brazilian religions, such as Umbanda. *Espiritism* the central idea relies on spirit reincarnation and spiritual development (of both spirits and people), which is achieved through different forms of charity work. According to the many adepts of *Espiritismo Kardecista*, the difference between their spiritual work compared to that carried out in Umbanda and Candomblé lies in the type of spirit involved. Thus, *Espiritismo Kardecista* usually only works with what they consider as highly developed energies/spirits, whereas Candomblé and Umbanda from their perspective deal with lower or more “primitive” energies. Thus *Exús*, for instance, are usually seen as down-to-earth energies that can easily cause harm as they have not given up their material lives. (See Capone 2004: 90–92)

*Macumba* is a term often used as an accusatory attribution to practices that are objects of fear or derision, an ascription attributed to practices deemed to be linked to witchcraft of one sort or another. At the same time, however, *Macumba* can be used as a generic term that refers to all Afro-Brazilian religions […]. (Cardoso 2014: 93)

The portuguese word *terreiro* means literally a yard, and is used in Afro-Brazilian religions in reference to the buildings and the yards around them, in which the rituals are performed for different non-human entities.
13 The Umbanda leaders are more commonly addressed as Father (Pai) and Mother (Mãe), instead of the longer versions: pai-de-santo and mãe-de-santo.

14 The interview with her, as with my other informants, was roughly divided into two parts in which the main topics were religiosity in the different phases of life trajectories, as well as the personal relationships with ritual objects that people and their spirit entities used in rituals and those they carried around or had stored in their homes (spirit entities clothes, images, stones, cups, statues, etc.). I had asked people to bring some significant objects to the interviews that were held in the Umbanda house. The task was at that point to gather information about material culture in Umbanda for the ethnographic museum (Helinä Rautavaara museum) I was then working at.

15 However, I found out that there is more than one view about this process, and some Umbanda practitioners claim that the level of consciousness during incorporation is more related to the specific kind of mediuniity each medium has, rather than the level of spiritual development.

16 Axê is a general term in Afro-Brazilian religions. It is the vital force of nature that is within all things and beings. A person can be considered to have a high or a low level of axê, as can any material object. For example, one of my interlocutors explained that the guia necklaces that are made of plastic threads (and plastic pearls) have almost no axê at all compared to those made of wool threads.

17 Afro-Brazilian religion originating from the state of Maranhão.

REFERENCES


HEALING CHAINS, RELATIONSHIPS OF POWER AND COMPETING RELIGIOUS IMAGERIES IN THE MONASTERY OF SAINTS KOSMAS AND DAMIAN IN KUKLEN (BULGARIA)

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ABSTRACT
This article offers an anthropological analysis of a conflict over the use of a set of ‘healing chains’ and other focal objects kept in the Orthodox Christian monastery of Saints Kosmas and Damian in Kuklen, Bulgaria. In a nutshell, the conflict captures the leading religious imageries propagated by the custodians of the monastery on the one hand, and the spiritual leaders of a new religious movement, so-called Deunovians, on the other. The analysis helps situate some of the significant changes currently affecting the religious culture of Orthodox Christians in Bulgaria within a broader social and cultural context.

KEYWORDS: healing chain • Orthodox Christians • Deunovians • religious imageries • Bulgaria • ekstrasensi

INTRODUCTION

They have a chain there, you may have seen it, in the big church. People place the chain against an ailing body part, the head, a leg, a body part that’s in pain, and sleep next to the chain, they have faith and conviction that the problem will go away.¹ (Parking attendant, Plovdiv, June 25, 2014)

On a warm summer day on June 30, 2013 pilgrims are filing through a narrow door leading from the narthex into the monastery church of SS Kosmas and Damian, in Kuklen.² They buy candles at a stand, and leave prayer requests for their loved ones, living and dead. They light candles in front of the icons, make the sign of the cross, and kiss the icons. Some walk inside to attend a service in the main body of the church. Most venture inside only briefly before heading back to the narthex.

An elderly woman sitting in the south-west corner of the narthex is resting her diseased feet against the links of a chain fastened to a stone. A small line of people is always waiting their turn to sit and rub the chain against their legs and arms, from the bottom

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“Could you stop all that clanging while the service is in progress?” the candle seller leans out of her stand at the opposite end of the narthex and snaps at one of the people.

A hush falls on the other people in the narthex. No clinking is heard, the people just sit silently on the stone by the chain for a few moments each. Among them is a young couple with children who are holding balloons their parents bought at a stand by the monastery wall. A woman tells her daughter to sit by the chain for a moment to calm her nerves.

The liturgy over, the pilgrims can now rub the chain against their bodies freely. They start with their arms and legs; some press the chain against other ailing body parts: neck, head or the lower back (Photo 1). Most do so unaided, although some need help. A couple of children, a boy and a girl, go through the ritual they have just learned by imitating grown-ups. The girl is sitting down and the boy is rubbing the chain against her legs (Photo 2). A small percentage of the people do the ritual half-heartedly, as if to say “This might look funny but what’s the harm? The chain might actually help.” Others perform the ritual with a focused expression, as though it was a standard healing practice that must be executed competently in order to be effective. A woman hangs the chain around her neck, literally chaining herself up. Her face has a calm, pleased expression. I strike up a conversation: apparently, she had been healed of depression several years previously, and has now brought a female friend who is likewise in need of healing.

Self-healing practices involving the chain have sparked controversy. There is an evident power struggle going on over the physical and symbolic space of
the monastery. It plays out between the chain-focused pilgrims on the one hand, and, on the other, the monastery’s current custodians, who regard the practice as being contrary to Christianity or to the spirit of Orthodoxy, and who seek to discourage it in various ways. This article will discuss the nature of that struggle by describing the religious practices and imageries of the pilgrims, their charismatic leaders, and the monastery’s current and past custodians as related to the agency and the healing powers of the monastery’s set of chains and other sacred objects. The aim is to demonstrate how former custodians of the monastery used to cooperate with believers in the healing practices, and explain the background of the current conflict, stemming from a discrepancy between the religious imageries of the two groups.

Theoretical Background

This article analyses religious imageries, by which I mean the beliefs of the pilgrims and the monastery’s custodians relating to the monastery’s power and status as expressed in a somatic or discursive manner relating to their religious environment. In my approach, beliefs are, on the one hand, the convictions and meanings that devotees attach to ritual practices and, on the other hand, the “embodied epistemology, the sensuous and material routines that produce an integrated (and culturally particular) sense of self, community and cosmos” (Morgan 2010: 8). This case study of a cult of religious objects and of belief in their agency confirms that “belief should be studied as taking place in material practices” (ibid.), and can be understood as that which “holds to a particular habit of feeling, willing, thinking and practise” (ibid.: 6). Hence, not every embodied epistemology has its verbal equivalent, and not everything that matters in a religious sense can be expressed by discursive means. Often, these things play out exclusively on the somatic, bodily level.

Accordingly, I follow Pierre Bourdieu (1977: 72) and Thomas Csordas (2002: 63) in assuming that the “socially informed body” forms the existential basis for the imageries of believers. As such, the body is the principle that generates and unites all practices or, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1996 [1945]: 429) put it, “a certain setting in relation to the world”. Our perceptions begin in the body, and divisions such as subject/objects or mind/body are secondary to the act of perception:

[…] we do not have any objects prior to perception. To the contrary, our perception ends in objects, which is to say that objects are a secondary product of reflective thinking; on the level of perception we do not have objects, we are simply in the world. (Csordas 2002: 61)

Anthropologists using this theoretical approach aim to identify and describe the mode and manner in which a phenomenon is perceived by social actors, as assimilated and expressed through the body. As Csordas (1994: 8) noted, “phenomenology is a descriptive science of existential beginning, not of already constituted cultural products”, which constitution depends on intentionality (Csordas 2002: 62). Accordingly, this epistemological perspective invites questions on the kind of social and cultural factors that determine beliefs concerning the efficacy (or otherwise) of certain activities; for instance, whether or not the ritual of rubbing or pressing a chain against a body part
will result in healing. This is because the practice expresses a certain specific somatic mode of attention or “culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include embodied presence of others” (ibid.: 7). In other words, belief is what “I know with my body” (Morgan 2010: 9).

An anthropologist looking at the practices of the pilgrims in the monastery needs to establish how social actors use their bodies for religious socialisation and, inasmuch as is possible, how they talk about such ritual practices. The task is to study the “conditions that shape feelings, senses, spaces, and performances of belief, that is the material coordinates or forms of religious practise” (ibid.: 6).

The term *multisensory religious imageries*, which I borrow from Csordas, places emphasis on the dual fact that religious socialisation involves all the senses, and that religious practices and imageries are embodied, produced and reproduced by the body: “The locus of the sacred is the body, for the body is the existential ground of culture” (Csordas 2002: 87). Accordingly, it is through the body that social actors objectivise their experience. The body reproduces cultural models and patterns even before the social actor has been able to objectivise, name or realise the same. However, this is not a spontaneous process. So-called “specialists in religious objectification” (ibid.: 65), that is to say people who enjoy trust and command respect in the community, and can therefore orchestrate, discern and classify other people’s emotions and reflections, play an important role in objectivising the models or patterns of a given habitus. This may be a matter of social roles (priest, psychologist, teacher, politician, journalist) or individual charisma (religious leaders).

The material presented here demonstrates how such specialists may influence the pilgrims’ imageries, and how this corroborates the insight proposed by John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (1991: 10) (relating to pilgrimage shrines in general):

[…] while apparently emanating an intrinsic religious significance of [their] own, [they] at the same time provide a ritual space for the expression of a diversity of perceptions and meanings with the pilgrims themselves bring to the shrine and impose upon it. As such the cult can contain within itself a plethora of religious discourses.

In described context discourses may be substituted with imageries.

The ethnographic data examined in his article was obtained through fieldwork conducted in the summers of 2013 and 2014. It comprises observations and interviews with pilgrims conducted on the feast of SS Kosmas and Damian (July 1) and on the day before (the eve of the feast), as well as interviews conducted during longer visits to Plovdiv and Kuklen in 2013 and 2014.

**CONFLICTING MULTISENSORY RELIGIOUS IMAGERIES IN THE KUKLEN MONASTERY**

My research in the Kuklen monastery identified two leading models of religious imagery and related specialists in religious objectification. The first is represented by the imagery of the monastery’s custodians, namely Bishop Nikolay (the local metropolitan bishop) and the nuns living in the monastery. The second is represented by the
Imageries of the chain-focused pilgrims orchestrated by local religious leaders: elderly women who propagate esoteric spirituality. In the case under discussion here, this is expressed through the worldview of the Deunovians.3

The division draws attention to a conflict within the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which has been present since the 1990s.4 At that point Bulgarian religious life became revitalised, complete with a wave of people returning to the fold of the Orthodox Church; on the other hand, some of the practices engaged in by the devotees were questionable in their orthodoxy. Before that period Orthodoxy was simply taken to comprise the actual religious practices of Orthodox devotees, especially since those were taking place in an adverse political climate. Since the 1990s, some of those practices have come to be increasingly regarded by some hierarchs as being contrary to the spirit of Orthodoxy, where the ideal of Orthodoxy is treated as being synonymous with the Russian Orthodox Church, or, more precisely, an image of that Church tailored to meet the requirements of ideological expediency at any given time.5 In that process, new religious movements with an esoteric background, symbolically represented by Baba Vanga (1911–1996) and Peter Deunov (1864–1944),7 appear to function as the ‘significant other’, against which the Orthodox model moulds the process of religious socialisation of the devotees. Eliminating that influence is difficult: Baba Vanga and Deunov still command considerable respect in Bulgaria, where they are regarded as an element of local colour closely linked to Orthodoxy and endowed with divine gifts.

Importantly, the centuries-old habitus of Bulgarian believers does not favour a strong connection between the people and the clergy; many of the cultural roles associated with priests have long been fulfilled by older female religious leaders (Baeva 2012: 170–171; Marinov 1994: 347). Because Greek clergy predominated in ethnically Bulgarian territories under Ottoman rule (1396–1878), clergymen were not easily accessible in the provinces, and their ties with the local population were loose. Bulgarian clergymen took charge from 1870 onwards following the establishment of an independent Bulgarian Orthodox Church, however those were few in number, and the Church Slavonic language of the liturgy was becoming increasingly incomprehensible to the faithful (Georgieva 2012: 121). Lastly, Bulgarian society after 1944 came under the institutional and ideological influence of the Soviet Union, resulting in increasing rates of atheism and suppression of religious practice through workplace discrimination and persecution. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church held an ambivalent record in that period, especially given its historical indebtedness to the Russian Orthodox Church, to which it owed its independent patriarchate. Although the cultural models embraced in the period of Todor Zhivkov’s communist government came from Russia, they were openly hostile to Orthodox Christianity. At the same time some of the Orthodox hierarchs, headed by Patriarch Maxim, collaborated with the atheist state, a fact that some social researchers today explain by historical and cultural factors such as the Byzantine tradition of the symphony of powers (cf. Ghodsee 2009).

As correctly noted by Galia Valtchinova (2007: 10):

The decades of collaboration with (and corruption by) the communist regime provoked a deep division within the Bulgarian Orthodox church; from 1992 to 1999, two synods and two patriarchs struggled for the Orthodox souls. This crisis of legitimacy paralysed the Orthodox Church throughout the 1990s, and its aftermath is still perceivable in the beginning of the new millennium.

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Lubanska: Healing Chains, Relationships of Power and Competing Religious Imageries in the Monastery of Saints Kosmas and Damian in Kuklen (Bulgaria)
Currently the Bulgarian clergy continue to face problems including enduring political divisions among Bulgarian hierarchs and even, according to popular opinion, links to organised crime. Also noticeable are certain shortcomings in the way the clergy addresses the expectations of the devotees. I repeatedly witnessed discussions between priests who were unsure if and how they should hold prayers in church settings which, though non-canonical, seemed to be important to the devotees, or whether or not to condone certain doctrinally questionable behaviour (such as positioning oneself directly under the dome of the church to benefit from the supposed special ‘energy’ present at that spot).

The controversy affecting the Kuklen monastery as described below is one of the many manifestations of a phenomenon that affects many Bulgarian monasteries and shrines, and which is also noted by researchers working in other Orthodox countries (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus).

**The Religious Imagery of the Chain-focused Pilgrims – the “Granny Religious Leaders”, the Ekstraseni and the Deunovians**

The term “religious imagery of the chain-focused pilgrims” denotes a conglomerate of beliefs and practices prevailing among ordinary believers who visit the monastery, a group that often includes members of the lower clergy (see Rock 2007: 3) and focuses on practices targeted at well-being for the “porous self” (Taylor 2007). Such people believe themselves to be permanently vulnerable to harmful powers that can, and need to be averted through protective or reparative rituals. An important role is played by somatic modes of attention aimed at contacts with physical carriers of sacred/beneficent powers. This imagery is embodied rather than expressed discursively. An item’s popularity as a focal healing object depends mainly on its record of efficacy corroborated by testimonial reports of past healings; as a result, religious hierarchs sometimes frown on the believers’ enthusiastic cult of such objects, or even on their very use. However, some members of the lower clergy share a fascination with controversial focal healing objects; for instance, the chain-focused religious imagery under discussion here is shared by the monastery’s former custodians active in 1998–2007, including Father Ivan Shtŭtov, three former monks (Fathers S., B., and X.), and “Granny A.”, a former klisarka, all of whom regarded their ministrations as a service to the community of the faithful, and did not regard themselves as superior to the chain-focused believers, whose experiences they accepted as credible testimonials of healings.

The religious sensorium of those devotees who represent the chain focused imagery is shaped through somatic, performative practice that produces in the performers a sense of psychosomatic satisfaction with their relationship with powerful healing objects. Many devotees are content merely to perform a practice in imitation of others, without seeking cosmological or doctrinal explanations of its meaning. In their case, physical contact alone with an object carrying healing powers is sufficient to produce general wellbeing in the person initiating the practice.

However, the popularity of certain objects believed to be vehicles of healing power is managed or amplified by bioenergy therapists, called *ekstraseni* in Bulgaria, in common with the other Orthodox countries. *Ekstraseni* often make recommendations to
devotees specifying which monasteries they should visit, and what practices they need to undertake in order to be healed of their ailments. They also create discursive commentary on healing objects which may or may not be internalized by the devotees.

Galina Lindquist observed a similar tendency in Russia, where *ekstrasensi* also frequently refer their clients to specific Orthodox monasteries. However, those *ekstrasensi* view themselves as forming part of, and acting as spokeswomen for, the Russian Orthodox Church. By way of contrast, Bulgarian healers often regard their methods as an alternative to those of the Church, and are convinced that their own knowledge about the psychosomatic workings of the human organism (including positive and negative energies) is more complete than that of the Orthodox clergy. As Lindquist (2006: 54) explains,

In healing practices the human body is understood [by the *ekstrasensi*] as being surrounded of some kind of bio-energy field (*biopole*) organised by ‘energo-information structures’ that works as programming mechanism and that are connected with the higher source of power through channels. These structures govern the functioning of internal organs, thus determining physical health.

In alternative spirituality this concept of energy is proposed as the causal force or mechanism of the healing processes, however it is not conceptually well-defined in conventional terms. Instead, it comprises a broad variety of spiritual experiences by treating the human body as “a compound energetic node in a holistic network of energy exchange, involved in continuous interplays and processes with all the layers of existence, from the worlds of atoms to the surrounding universe” (Mikaelsson 2013: 170).

In Orthodox countries it is the *ekstrasensi* who appear to be the chief promoters of this way of looking at the body. The Bulgarian researcher Valtchinova (2007: 19) notes:

The boom of the ES [i.e. *ekstrasensi*] as a social phenomenon coincided with the political change of 1989–90 and the early postsocialist years [...] by 1994, more than 440 ES were listed in the official register of the Bulgarian ES healers, published by their Association [...] the majority of them women (72%). It was the post-communist transition – with its socio-economic crisis, insecurity, and loss of values – that provoked both the search for alternative systems of ‘healing’ (and the reduction of anxiety, more generally speaking), and an acute hunger for prophecies.

The *ekstrasensi* promote an inclusive and eclectic spirituality tinged with quasi-scientific terminology, blending Orthodoxy with New Age movements, yoga, Zen and transpersonal psychology (Lindquist 2006: 29–30), as well as ufology, contacts with extra-terrestrial civilisations, astrology, and meditation (Panchenko 2011: 121, 123). There appears to be considerable similarity between those phenomena in Russia and Bulgaria, and the latter seems open to cultural influence from Russia concerning this type of spirituality, which forms an increasingly noticeable element of urban culture. Through the *ekstrasensi*, urban culture in its turn exerts an increasing influence on the imageries relating to monasteries and shrines, and on the pilgrims who visit them.

This phenomenon is clearly noticeable in Plovdiv, a city located seven miles from Kuklen. Plovdiv is the setting of the spiritual activity of D., a female clairvoyant, dowser and bioenergy therapist who plays a significant role in constructing the imageries of the efficacy of religious objects found in the monastery.

Lubanska: Healing Chains, Relationships of Power and Competing Religious Imageries in the Monastery of Saints Kosmas and Damian in Kuklen (Bulgaria)
used to travel to Russia during the communist period. She completed a programme at
the Institute of Non-Traditional Medicine in Moscow, where she took courses in ufology
and parapsychology. Her specialism in parapsychology was Man – Earth – Cosmos. She also proudly identified herself as the holder of a diploma from the Bol’shoy
Theatre.

I met D. at the Kuklen healing spring (ayazmo). When I approached her she acted
as though she had been expecting me, and in a subsequent conversation she explained
that her clairvoyant son had told her that on that day she would meet someone by the
healing spring who needed her. According to that respondent, children under the age
of five or six have supernatural abilities and know more about the world than adults
(as a child, her son was allegedly a clairvoyant and spoke in Sanskrit). The woman
attaches considerable importance to numerology, phrenology, feng shui, healthy eating,
healing properties of water and the existence of ‘geopathogenetic zones’ or nodal points
on the so-called Hartman network. She has practised meditation since childhood, and
has occasional prophetic dreams. She believes in reincarnation and individual karma,
which she identifies with the divine scheme of things. She claims to have learned much
of her self-knowledge from Baba Vanga (whom she once visited), a late Soviet healer
named Dzhuna, and another Bulgarian clairvoyant, Vera Kochovska. She claims that
sins committed in one life have consequences in the next. She is well known for helping
people in difficult situations. She prays for sick people in locations reputed to be places
of healing. She also obtains water with particularly potent healing properties by collect-
ing it from several different monasteries (preferably seven) and mixing while reciting
incantations over it (zarezhdane).

The former custodians of the monastery used to respect D.’s knowledge and skills,
even if, as she puts it, they tended to ‘Christianise’ her beliefs about the healing power
of some of the locations. They helped people together: D. becomes nostalgic when she
reminiscences about that period in her life. She dreams about becoming a klisarka in the
monastery of SS Kosmas and Damian so that she can help people to make ‘proper’ use of the healing agency of the chain. D. claims that SS Kosmas and Damian speak to
her directly (she hears their voices); they address her as their sister, and teach her recipes
for herbal remedies which she uses to heal people free of charge. The respondent
believes that she knows the monastery from her past incarnations; in this life she has
been visiting it since the age of four. Her grandmother, who brought her to the monas-
tery as a child, used to say, “Have some of that water, my little one, and every problem
will go away”. D. remembers how crowds of sufferers used to come to sleep inside the
church, especially on the feasts of SS Kosmas and Damian (November 1 and July 1). The
monastery matters so much to her that she persuaded a wealthy friend from Belgium
to donate a large sum for its restoration. However, she admits that her relations with
the custodians are strained; she does not visit often or come to the monastery during
major holidays, when the noise of the sellers and the crowds drowns out the voices of
the saints.

D. is an adherent of Peter Deunov, and always has some of his writings with her.
She explains Deunov’s teachings to initiates of the White Brotherhood in Plovdiv, and
serves as their spiritual guide. Deunovians are a dynamic presence in the area, and they
are particularly popular among young educated Bulgarians who treat Orthodox Chris-
tianity as a hollow tradition. The Kuklen monastery (or, to be exact, its healing spring or
ayazmo and its set of chains) are among the most important healing objects recognised by the Plovdiv adherents of that religious movement.

Echoes of Deunov’s teachings also affect older believers who practice ‘traditional’ Orthodox Christianity (what the Bulgarian anthropologist Vihra Baeva [2012] calls the old women’s religiosity, in contrast to the religious life of the priests). Such women are largely unaware that adopting these practices takes them away from institutional Orthodoxy, especially given that they regard Orthodox Christianity as a matter of religious practice rather than some kind of canonical, officially sanctioned variant. For their part the Deunovians not so much reject Orthodox Christianity as they consider their own doctrine to be at a more perfect and advanced stage: a more enlightened and inclusive doctrine offering better chances of spiritual growth and wellbeing.

Deunov’s syncretistic, esoteric system reveals strong connections with the theosophy of Helena Blavatsky, neo-pantheism, the esoteric tradition, occult historiography and biologism understood as a form of hygiene, exercise, healthy diet and a lifestyle attuned to natural rhythms, all those things being infused with a religious element (Szwat-Gyłybowa 2011: 91).

This spirituality enjoyed a degree of semi-official sanction from the Bulgarian authorities in the 1970s thanks to the then-minister of culture Lyudmila Zhivkova, daughter of Todor Zhivkov, Bulgaria’s long-term head of state and first secretary of the country’s communist party. Cut short by her premature death, Zhivkova’s public activity focused on developing an esoteric spirituality based on a synthesis of Marxism and occultism (Szwat-Gyłybowa 2006: 333–341). Baba Vanga, a clairvoyant and member of the Bulgarian Communist Party, enjoyed Zhivkova’s particular esteem as “she ‘worked to build the new socialist paradise’, to considerable personal gain. As a medium and a healer, Vanga attracted not only Bulgarians and visitors from neighbouring socialist countries, but also people from the USSR and the West” (Ciesielska 2015). Many respondents I interviewed in my fieldwork in the Rhodope Mountains in 2002–2014 proudly claimed to have personally consulted Baba Vanga for health advice (Lubanska 2015).

This combination of traditional, nominally Orthodox Christian religiosity with esoteric influences from new religious movements has a long tradition in Bulgaria, hibernating in various ideological variants including socialist and neoliberal ones.

New religious movements appear to be growing in popularity in Bulgaria; believers are attracted to various theories of spirituality relying on pseudoscientific terminology. The kind of spirituality they represent is clearly focused on energy, and largely boils down to using it to help others by offering advice and recommendations on energy sources or by reciting correct formulas over an object in order to endow it with positive energy (cf. Lindquist 2006: 29; Kormina 2010: 276). They identify certain locations (for example the Seven Rila Lakes) as emanating a power or energy, identified as “cosmic energy” or some other kind of energy related to the location’s physical characteristics (cf. Panchenko 2011; 2012; Rock 2012–2013). They argue that the positive physical and spiritual properties of certain items or natural objects stem from their physical properties; for instance, all metals (including metal crosses worn around the neck) screen off negative energy; water flowing through a crystal lattice or a hidden treasure (or containing a submerged metal cross) has healing properties, etc. Sometimes they invoke fanciful pseudo-scientific terminology with an almost empirical air (such as the Hart-
man network mentioned above). Another favoured rhetorical device consists in invoking their status as continuators of “ancient knowledge” (often rendered implausible by self-defeating anachronisms). Despite these scientific trappings their teachings require a considerable leap of faith.

Orthodox devotees, whose religiosity is often directed at achieving psychosomatic wellbeing, adapt these ideas (often in refracted form), and seek objects reputed to have healing properties, even though they are not always versed in the supposed mechanisms of their efficacy as explained by the ekstrascensi. Often the only reason for visiting the monastery is to approach such life-giving objects as miracle-working icons, relics or (in the case of the Kuklen monastery specifically), a set of healing chains.

Importantly, this need for palpable, sensory contact with the numinous has been validated and cultivated in Orthodox doctrine since the Byzantine period (Talbot 2002). With the obvious exception of the period of iconoclastic controversy, Eastern Christianity has regarded sensory contact with the sacred as being just as valid as verbal contact ever since the Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Councils (cf. Evdokimov 1964: 248; Belting 1996). Why, then, are the custodians of the monastery so troubled by the devotees’ sensory interactions with objects found in the monastery? Why are they wary not only of the touching of the set of chains in the church’s narthex, but also about the touching of the icons?

The Imagery of the Monastery’s Custodians – Metropolitan Bishop Nikolay and Igumenia Anastasiya

The second model is favoured by the monastery’s current custodians, i.e. Igumenia Anastasiya and two other nuns working in the monastery and, more importantly, by the Bishop of Plovdiv. The model involves an unambiguously purist perspective, and takes a suspicious stance with regard to the religious practices of the devotees on account of their “superstitious” (Bulgarian sueverni) ways. In this model, devotees who practice those are viewed as being merely nominal Orthodox Christians whose religious practice is “adulterated” by various un-Orthodox, “pagan” and neopagan elements coming from new religious movements.

The current custodians of the monastery believe that healing can be achieved through prayer, receiving Holy Communion, and using the water from the holy spring, but not by using the chains. To them, believing in the healing power of the chains is tantamount to idolatry, a view expressed by a female candle seller who assists the monastery staff in selling candles on the feast of SS Kosmas and Damian:

In themselves, those chains have no healing power. It’s prayer that heals. But many people have this mistaken belief that they will be healed if they touch an affected part of their body with the chain. It’s not true. It’s some kind of superstition. The chains produce no healings; prayers do, the icon of SS Kosmas and Damian does, a worshipper’s heartfelt prayer does, provided that the person is religious […] They used to bring ill people here, and they would bind them to constrain their movements, right? Then the priest would say prayers over them, give them Holy Communion, give them holy water and take them to the ayazmo where they could be bathed in water from the ayazmo. This water is quite cold but it’s never given anyone a cold. (Kuklen, June 30, 2013)
The fundamental error attributed to the devotees in this approach is that their practices are focused on materiality, meaning that religious life becomes centred on the agency of powerful objects. Members of the clergy are made apprehensive by the possibility that devotees might visit churches or monasteries not so much to seek salvation through prayer, but merely in order to utilize their interactions with powerful healing objects (which may or may not be recognised by the Orthodox Church as legitimate channels of divine grace). Like the Calvinists in the past, or like modernity in general with its West-centric tendencies, the nuns and the bishop are involved in a work of “purification”, described by Bruno Latour (1993 [1991]) as the drawing of a “clear line between humans and nonhumans, between the world of agency and that of natural determinism” (Keane 2007: 7). They seem to share the notion that “there is something scandalous or threatening about mixing of humans and things, culture and nature” since it involves moral consequences: “It is this sense of moral danger of misplaced agency that is conveyed by the derogatory accusation of fetishism” (ibid.: 23, 54).

To the custodians, another and perhaps more serious cause for concern comes from the fact that the devotees often see no need for clerical mediation in their interactions with religious objects, and frequently get their knowledge on the correct form of such interactions from the alternative specialists such as healers or ekstrasensi. It is probably this autonomy on the part of the devotees that caused the hostile reaction, triggering restrictions on those practices which take place without clerical leadership, potentially leading the devotees astray.

A number of religious books (including translations from Russian and Greek) have been published on the subject in recent years, some of them available at the Kuklen monastery. These include books such as Ivan Nikolov’s Superstition: The Sweet Poison of the Soul (no date); Yeromonah Visarion’s Peter Deunov and Vanga: Prophets and Emissaries of the Antichrist (2011) and Superstition Among Today’s Christians (2012, co-written with Yeromonah Yoan); Borislav Krachunov’s Vanga’s True Face (2009) and, in Russian, Iguemen N.’s Was Vanga an Orthodox Christian? (2008), as well as Ognyan Khristov’s Christianity, Magic and the Ekstrasensi (2011), which defines (ibid.: 21) the ekstrasensi as people who use incantations instead of praying to God, and do not worship God but rather place themselves in God’s place.

Bishop Nikolay is an example of a hierarch who is trying to stamp out this form of esoteric spirituality. On the first Sunday of Lent (March 2, 2015) he actually excommunicated all clairvoyants and ekstrasensi, including people who consult them and use their services (Novinite 2015). The bishop is trying to purge Bulgarian Orthodox Christianity of local ‘innovations’ in the spirit of Russian Orthodoxy. In practical terms, this translates into a mistrust of any religious practice cultivated in Bulgarian monasteries but not found in Russia, such as the kurbans (animal sacrifices) offered on major holidays, incubation in churches or the healing practices involving chains, as specific to the monastery in Kuklen.

Interestingly, the bishop comes from a family of communist loyalists: according to my respondents and to Internet sources (see Nikolay Plovdivski), the bishop’s father was a policeman and an antiterrorism expert in the Bulgarian secret service. Bishop Nikolay was born in Sofia, where he graduated with a master’s degree in theology before going on to study at the Moscow Theological Academy, a fact that to some extent may explain his fascination with the Russian model. He was ordained in Vratsa in 1990,
and was made a hieromonach by Patriarch Maxim in May 1993. He has since lectured at the Sofia Seminary and became an archimandrite and vicar of the metropolitan bishop of Sofia in the same year. He is remembered for his intentional slight of a papal nuncio: when the nuncio was invited to join a service celebrating the name day of Patriarch Maxim in 2002, Bishop Nikolay had the nuncio’s chair removed so that the guest had to stand during the service. As he explained on July 14 on Bulgarian television, his intention was to keep the “heretic” away from the Orthodox altar (Nikolay Plovdivski). He is also a vocal opponent of Bulgaria’s integration with the EU.

In 2007, Nikolay became the metropolitan bishop of Plovdiv, and became embroiled in a conflict with the local academic establishment. He made controversial decisions in areas such as conservation of historical monuments (he ordered old frescos at the Metropolitan Church in Plovdiv to be covered with wallpaper), education (in 2013 he founded a Theological Academy in competition with the theology faculty at the University of Plovdiv), and politics (where he holds a pro-Russian line). To Bishop Nikolay, the monastery at Kuklen is the stage for a struggle over the character of Orthodox Christian culture in Bulgaria. On July 1, 2013, the bishop censored Stoyan Atanasov during a sermon preached on the feast of SS Kosmas and Damian after Atanasov asserted in the media that the ayazmo of SS Kosmas and Damian belonged to the local county.

Igumenia Anastasiya is another key representative of this imagery. She was made an igumenia at the Kuklen monastery by Bishop Nikolay, who was her schoolmate. My respondents claim that she comes from the town of Ihtiman, and became a nun late in life. She has an adult son who is a seminary student, and who volunteers for church warden duties when he visits the monastery.

Sister Anastasiya has an imperious, self-assured air. She did an excellent job supervising the renovation project that rescued the monastery from ruin, and she is a successful spiritual leader to candidate nuns; those who fail to fulfil her expectations are quickly dismissed. Two have apparently passed the test, and have now lived in the monastery for several years. Like the igumenia, they tend to keep pilgrim’s behaviour under strict control. None of the women has a background in theology, and their policing efforts aimed at ensuring proper ritual observance are often excessive, as when they stop believers engaging in practices permitted in the Sacred Tradition (veneration of relics of saints or the icon of SS Kosmas and Damian). This leads many believers to actually question the igumenia’s Christian credentials.

At the same time, the devotees fail to realise the major difference between icons and relics as objects that make the sacred present, as opposed to sources of agency per se, a problem familiar to mediaeval iconophiles. John of Damascus, the first theologian of images, noted that “the image is a likeness that expresses the archetype in such a way that there is always a difference between the two” (Belting 1996: 145). Orthodox Christian theology clearly distinguishes between proskynesis (ikonopoklonichesto, veneration of icons) and latreia (adoration), which should only be given to the Holy Trinity. Treating icons in terms of agency amounts to idolatry and misattribution of divine agency. At the level of praxis, however, proskynesis is not always readily distinguishable from latreia, and veneration from deification. As noted by Sonja Luhrmann (2010: 59), “The icon is necessary to the worshipper because it is an index of the presence of God’s grace, but the worshipper is also enjoined to remember constantly that the source of this grace is God, not the image itself”.

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This complex tension was already worrisome to Byzantine theologians who emphasised, as Brubaker (2012: 109) puts it, that “the image was distinct from its subject and could not be confused with it”. Matter was seen as “potentially holy by virtue of the original creation and the connection maintained with God through divine energies” (Hanganu 2010: 44). But it is not holy in itself, it is a medium of God’s holiness: “At the same time it has the possibility to fulfil this potentiality by being involved in human activity performed ‘in synergy’ with God” (ibid.).

The quintessential idea of Orthodox Christianity (which venerates images and treats them as essentially connected to the archetype) can easily turn into its negation (where the archetype is either ignored in favour of the physical object, or else considered to be fully present in the icon). The Palamist doctrine, which emerged in the 14th century, argues that only divine energies are present in icons, in contrast to the divine essence, which remains transcendent and incomprehensible (Palamas 2010: 131).

Believers who realize this distinction are not guilty of idolatry. However, that is not an easy thing to verify: can this distinction be recognised from a believer’s posture or gestures? When the custodians engage in efforts to purge and correct the believers’ somatic modes of attention, are they not also attacking the deepest foundations of their religious experience? Can chains amount to indices of divine grace in common with icons or relics? To the visiting pilgrims who seek healing, can those objects be merely instances of divine grace manifesting itself in a chosen location, or is the divine grace somehow inherent to the object?

THE MONASTERY’S FOCAL OBJECTS

The Chains

As mentioned above, the focal point of the conflict at the Kuklen monastery is a set of chains. Several questions arise: Why do believers seek healing by using the chain? How do they explain and validate the chain’s healing powers? What is the opinion of specialists in cultural objectivisation? Do such specialists, or the devotees themselves, perceive this practice as stemming from Orthodox Christian tradition (church exorcisms), or does it have a different origin? And if so, what is that origin? Why did the monastery’s former custodians not object to chain-focused rituals, whereas the current ones have made several attempts to remove the chain, a decision that continues to provoke resistance from devotees? How long has the practice been cultivated?

Although accounts from believers and other sources (Shtŭtov 2004; Peev and Marchev 2014: 30) confirm that the chain was once used to hold down sufferers during exorcisms, the question why those chains were used for exorcisms in the first place remains a matter of conjecture. The monastery’s records were destroyed in a fire in 1938, so historical sources are scant. We know that there used to be more than one set of chains in the narthex but their number remains unknown. I have heard speculation that there might have been twelve, ten or five sets of chains. Father Ivan and Father S., both of whom used to work in the monastery, claim that there used to be twelve sets, but this may simply be a narrative device intended to highlight the status of the monastery as a once-famous place of healing.
Some respondents argued that the chains dated back to the Ottoman period. D. believed that the practice to be ancient, arguing that the chains had been placed in the area by the ancients, who were aware of the location’s remarkable properties.

According to Father Ivan, the chain at Kuklen is unique in the region. Father E., a priest from Plovdiv, claimed that similar chains could be found in the church of St. Constantine and St. Helen in Plovdiv (I have been unable to check this assertion). Maria Shnitter (2015: 136), a Bulgarian mediaevalist and ethnologist, adds the former monastery of St. Kirik and St. Yulita near Asenovgrad to the list. This suggests that exorcisms involving the use of chains may have once been popular in the region, but the exact age of this tradition cannot be ascertained for lack of sources.

The oldest piece of evidence that I have come across is a photograph of a boy in chains taken during an exorcism in the 1940s. The photograph appears in Part 1 of an album edited by Teodor Peev and Dimitühr Marchev (2014: 30). The boy has one arm raised in a defensive gesture, as if to shield himself from the prayer, while a priest is raising his epitragelion over the boy and reciting a prayer from an open liturgical book (Photo 3). Peev (ibid.) claims that the boy came from Topolovo near Asenovgrad; the exorcism was deemed necessary because he cried a lot after his father went to fight in the war. There is no way of establishing which prayer the priest was reciting, so it is not clear whether the priest considered the boy’s condition a case of possession.

The chain is no longer used for exorcism, which is not a popular ritual in Bulgarian churches. When asked about exorcisms, Bulgarian priests tend to change the subject to the Prayer of St Basil, which is used very rarely (if at all). None of my respondents described the people seeking healing at the monastery as suffering from possession – instead, they thought they were suffering from mental conditions triggered by illness, the evil eye or trauma. Possession was viewed as a thing of the past: they explained that they had not seen any possessed people since the introduction of psychiatric hospitals.

Some respondents argued that the monastery was in fact the earliest psychiatric clinic in the Balkans, a claim they backed with stories of the special procedures the monks used in the monastery to deal with mentally ill or possessed people; these procedures involved the use of healing water from the ayazmo, which was poured over chain-bound sufferers, and prayers recited by members of the clergy. The pilgrims agree that
the chains were once used to constrain possessed people, however this does not seem in any way to undermine their healing powers, as evident from testimonies of past healings.

Since the chain is no longer used for exorcisms on possessed or mentally ill people, believers seem to have come up with new meanings and functions. With the waning of belief in demonic possession (which the clergy were not particularly insistent on promoting), the one remaining chain has taken on a different role. No longer used to constrain sufferers during exorcisms, it has now come to function as a healing object bringing relief to a variety of ailments including pain in the arms or legs, nervous breakdowns or migraines.

Today, pilgrims often learn how to use the chain ‘on the fly’, taking cues from the more experienced people around them. Handling the chain mainly involves holding it and tracing it up the length of one’s leg, from the ankle upwards. The way in which the chain is used depends on the illness in question. One woman ran the chain along her own legs and along the back and neck of her daughter. Another woman ran it along the forehead, nose and legs of her son (preschool age). One man put the chain around his wrist. Another woman had a more comprehensive ritual, running the chain along her legs, then placing it against her hips and lower back, and finally wrapping it around her neck like a dog collar. When interviewed, she explained that the words “in the name of the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen” should be spoken during the practice.

It appears that this self-healing ritual also has a hidden purpose, which is simply to involve the body in the act of recognising the presence of a divine power in the monastery, as involving the body is the most immediate and concrete way of persuading people of the reality of divine power (Csordas 2002: 30). The chain is evidently treated in a way similar to other sacred objects, i.e. as a grace-filled and grace-giving item endowed with special powers. It is difficult to establish what the pilgrims consider to be the source of that power. Accounts of past healings, communicated orally and on online forums, appear to play a significant role, as many people bring their loved ones so they can experience similar healing. By reciting prayers when handling the chain believers establish a synergic relationship with the item similar to that between Orthodox worshippers and holy icons; in a way, they endow these items with a certain potency because only faith can produce healing. At this point one good explanation of the practice seems to be available, namely Collin McDannell’s (1995: 19) concept of divine grace as affective presence, which becomes transferred to gestures and material objects. Though far removed from Orthodox theology, this insight appears to reflect closely the feelings of some of the believers.

Those pilgrims who believe in the chain’s healing power and agency provide different explanations for its sacred nature. One woman argued that a priest who once worked in the monastery described the chain as “life-giving” (zhivotvorni); the woman attributed the healing power of the chain to the use of holy water in rituals involving the use of the chain:

People sprinkled holy water on the chain. And when they did that, he [Father S.] says, that chain has life-giving power [zhivotvorna sila], that’s what [the priest] said. And that person [a sufferer visiting the monastery] felt so good thanks to
those chains that he insisted that he was feeling no pain when he left. (Kuklen, June 27, 2014)

The liturgical term *zhivotvornost* or life-giving power, which describes various religious or ecclesiastical vessels or objects in the Orthodox tradition, notably icons, relics and springs, is perfectly attuned to the need for psychosomatic equilibrium as a result of visiting a church or shrine. And so, the priest quoted above by my respondent (whom I was able to locate in Kristova Gora), admitted in a later conversation that the chain had healing power; the priest regarded it as a vehicle or receptacle of divine grace (similar to icons, relics or sacramentalia). He explained that the chain worked by exuding physical warmth/divine grace (*blagodat*), which he supposed was transmittable through the stone to which the chain was affixed. In practical terms, this grace manifests itself in the fact that diseased body parts redden and become hot following the application of the chain. The chain becomes hot as well:

This chain has this property, it’s like an indicator. Say, you place it here, at the back of your neck; if you have a compressed nerve or sciatica the chain immediately starts to warm up, and your skin turns red at that spot. If you put the chain on your head, in the case of people with mental illnesses the chain will get warm. I don’t know how that happens exactly, but it does get warmer […], and you feel a sense of calm. It’s divine grace but I couldn’t tell you where it comes from, maybe from that stone at the bottom? Maybe it comes from the bottom up, through the stone. (Father S., June 29, 2014)

This demonstrates that the monk shares the imageries of the pilgrims who believe in the healing power of the chains, although he clearly points out that this is a matter of divine power or grace:

I don’t know if... but this chain, it simply serves as a conduit, it does not heal, it simply conducts, it’s merely a conduit. I am telling you, the chain does not heal, it’s simply a carrier. (Female respondent, Kuklen, June 29, 2014)

Not all devotees attribute the chain’s healing powers to divine grace. The pilgrims I talked to rarely used that word, mostly preferring to talk about the place’s “energy”. Even though divine grace and energy are terms which are occasionally used interchangeably in Orthodox theology, devotees tend to use that term in a sense that is more akin to New Age ideology (meaning a kind of cosmic or earthly energy), and not the power of a personal God (Lubańska 2007: 16; Rock 2012–2013: 201; Mikaelsson 2013: 169–170). By way of contrast, Orthodox clergy insist that “the grace believers perceive in holy places and things should not be mistaken with some sort of independent ‘prayer energy’ which clings to an object or place” (Rock 2012–2013: 201).

Unlike them, my respondent D. (June 30, 2014), the clairvoyant and former advisor to Father S., argues that the chains are located “at an intersection of the Hartman network”:

Parallel diameters circumscribing the whole Earth, those lines are charged with energy, They go east–west and north–south, all around the earth, right? I mean, this spot right here where the chains are is a very potent geopathogenetic zone. They [Bogomil monks] somehow sensed it, and placed the chains there.
According to my respondent, Bogomil\textsuperscript{27} monks did that in the second or third century. This chronological reference is completely ahistorical: the Bogomils were a religious movement active in the Bulgarian territories between the 10th and 15th century. D.’s reference to the Bogomil connection is anthropologically interesting in demonstrating the eclectic nature of her spirituality. In D.’s narrative, figures such as SS Kosmas and Damian, the Bogomils, Peter Deunov, and Baba Vanga all appear to be members of a single camp who, if queried, would corroborate her version of the chain and the Hartman network (para-scientific or pseudoscientific explanations being an inseparable element in this model of faith).

According to D., the chain does not give off positive energy – on the contrary, it soaks up negative energy. She rues the fact that the current igumenia is trying to remove the chain from the church, and reminisces about the “golden age” at the monastery when the custodians heeded her advice on how to use the chain for healing:

She wants to get rid of it. That’s what she wants. She wants to get rid of it because she says those are pagan rituals, complete hooey. Well, even if that’s the case, so what. To me, scientifically speaking, it’s a potent geopathogenetic zone. It’s the Hartman network, maybe you’ve heard. I mean, this is a geopathogenetic zone, meaning it soaks up disease and negative energies from people. I mean, the ancients simply knew where to place them […] People have been coming here to be healed for a long time, knowing nothing about the Hartman network. I mean, this place simply works. […] You did the right thing to approach me because I have a lot of veneration for this place, there are many waters in Bulgaria, and holy places where there are harmful zones, to me it’s like putting my hands next to a vacuum cleaner. I feel the pull of that energy, and that’s how I discover those geopathogenetic zones. This chain, when I place it on my hands, it feels like I’m about to sink into the ground. That’s how powerful it is. This is why I keep telling people, God allowing I will be a klisarka here I really love this place, I’m really close to it. (D., Female Deunovian, June 30, 2014)

According to D., the chain should not be removed on account of the unique properties of the place and of the chain itself. At the same time she emphasises that the chain needs to be used properly. There is a fixed amount of time a person should spend sitting on the stone to which the chain is fixed, depending on the type of illness being “drained off”. D. practically offers a set of precise operating instructions: for inflammations she recommends sitting for one to three minutes, depending on the person’s age and illness. She views illness as “excess energy”: the chain first drains off the bad, useless energy so that the sufferer can recover. Once the bad energy has been drained off, however, the chain begins to drain necessary good energy, meaning that excessive use may lead to extreme exhaustion, hypotension, loss of consciousness or even death. In this respect, she says, sitting by the chain is like an antibiotic treatment, which can be harmful in wrong doses. As an illustration, D. told me about people who spent too much time sitting on the stone, putting themselves or other people’s health in jeopardy. In one story a woman sat on the stone with a six-month-old baby who nearly died after being completely drained of energy. D. (interviewed on June 30, 2014), who was present at the scene, told the woman to get up immediately, and went on to resuscitate the baby: “It drains off the stuff you don’t need. That’s right, that’s why you need to take your time.
When you’re asleep in that zone, you get that kind of flow. And it drains off the energy you don’t need.”

In other words, the chains are not endowed with divine grace, but rather act as a carrier of a natural force located in this particular spot for natural reasons related to the location’s unique properties. If removed from the Hartman network, the chain would be nearly useless – though not quite, since according to the clairvoyant any metal, regardless of its location, drains energy from humans. Chains, however, do that much more effectively, and they can also carry the unique properties attributed to the Hartman network.

I mean, metals drain energy. For instance, when you get really excited you should grab something made of metal, like a home radiator or any other metal object, to release that electricity. There are other mechanisms as well. I mean, the chain is made of metal, and the place where it’s located is made of stone. (D., female Deunovian, June 30, 2014)

In contrast, a former klisarka argued that the chain carried divine grace because it had been blessed. The blessing was as it were coincidental, occurring when holy water was sprinkled over possessed people in chains, however it still managed to endow the chain with unique properties, confirmed by healings. She claimed to have heard it from Father S. who worked at the monastery. She found the igumenia’s belief that the chain was a “fetish” absolutely outrageous, and dismissed the igumenia’s opinion as being un-Christian. According to D., one might as well treat as idolatrous the crosses some people wear around their necks:

She keeps saying, “The chain is an idol, the chain is an idol”. Well, in that case a cross is an idol, if that’s the case. It was blessed with holy water, how can it be a fetish? That’s just her opinion. (Former klisarka, June 2014)

By way of contrast, the former klisarka treats the chain on a par with a cross: both have been blessed, and are therefore holy. The igumenia’s failure to realize this undermines her Christian credentials. Believers find the igumenia’s mistrust of physical objects acting as conduits or carriers of divine grace puzzling and confusing.

Father E. (July 4, 2013) from the church of St. Petka in Plovdiv argues that the only chains in the history of Christianity that could be legitimately recognised as sacramentals were the prison chains of St. Peter. However, there is no connection between the Kuklen chain and St. Peter’s chains, not even in the religious imageries of the pilgrims coming to the monastery, and none of my respondents drew this analogy (the only trace of St. Peter’s chains that I encountered in my fieldwork was a fresco in the narthex of the new church of St. Petka in Plovdiv depicting the chains). This absence of any founding gesture taking place in illo tempore to be recorded either in the Bible or in the apocrypha to furnish some sort of symbolic precedent for healing practices involving chains is perhaps the reason why the Orthodox Church cannot recognise the chain as a religious object. The archetypal Christian healer, Christ never used chains for healing, but rather made gestures of blessing, placing his hands on the sufferer’s body, using saliva or (in the apocryphon of King Abgar) impressing his image on a piece of cloth to create an image made without hands, the archetype of the icon. Accordingly, Christianity recognises as legitimate healings produced with the use of icons, relics or other objects that
remained in contact with them, and, above all, by the sacrament of anointing the sick (by analogy with Christ, who was anointed before his resurrection). Affording the same status to a chain and to an icon poses a problem: although it is difficult to explain in structural terms why an icon should be effective at producing healings but chains could not, in semiotic terms there is a profound difference between the two.

Importantly, however, the clergy makes no attempt to educate the faithful in this respect. In their declarations, representatives of the church do not see themselves as spiritual leaders, nor do they seek to establish a rapport with the faithful. Instead, they seek to manage pilgrim behaviour by gradually changing the sacred space and the rules regulating the use of its resources. In this way the believers’ bodies are effectively disciplined in a non-discursive manner by depriving the pilgrims of the space required to express favoured somatic modes of attention. It is not unreasonable to suppose that the single remaining chain may at one point be removed as well, a surmise shared by the devotees.

Based on information available online and on my conversations with the former klisarka I established that the nuns had made several attempts to remove the chain from the narthex. In 2012, a little table with liturgical coverings was placed over the chain, barring access to the object. This provoked outrage, as a group of people arrived on the scene with a hidden camera to force the igumenia to remove the table, and the confrontation escalated to threats of physical violence.

K.: The people of Kuklen hate her already. They’re no longer willing to help. They used to come and help, I used to come and help for four years, but I don’t anymore. I said, to me you’re not a Christian, I won’t be coming to help. This winter she came to me again [to ask for help], and I said, “I don’t want to help, I’m 80 years old. I can’t work. I just won’t.” There’s nothing you can do to help that kind of person.

M.L.: So, it was you who told her about the chains, and she removed the table?

K.: No, that was the people, they had an argument with her. One man came up, grabbed the table and threw it in front of her, saying: “I’m going to show you the back of my hand, I will crush you! Leave the chains alone!” And she backed down. That was two years ago [in 2012]. (K., Former klisarka, Kuklen, in June 2014)

When I visited the monastery again in 2014, rumours were circulating that the chain had been removed. People intervened again, and the chain was replaced right before the feast of SS Kosmas and Damian. However, a photograph of the bench taken a few years previously and published in Yana Gergova’s book (2015: 267–268) along with her account of the believers’ behaviour suggests that the nuns had already made efforts to interfere with the setting to influence the pilgrims’ somatic practices; they removed the little bench fastened over the stone to which the chain is fixed, formerly an integral part used by pilgrims. In 2013, pilgrims willing to use the chain had to sit directly on the stone, which hindered the practice.

Some constraints have also been imposed on the people working in the monastery in terms of public expressions of opinions or beliefs. On the igumenia’s orders I was prevented from interviewing the nuns working in the monastery or the shop assistant in the monastery bookshop. I was unable to interview the priest working at the monastery. The igumenia agreed to an interview, but declined to be recorded. The igumenia and the monastery’s chaplain appeared to be afraid to do anything that might meet with disapproval from Bishop Nikolay.
The faithful are unwilling to defer to the bishop, possibly because not many people take Holy Communion or go to confession, so most have no sense of spiritual dependence on the clergy. The impression of the faithful is that the quality of their religious life is tangibly deteriorating. In conversations and in Internet forums they voice dissatisfaction with the church hierarchy trying to keep them away from the monastery. A local complained on the Nova Televiziya channel. Excerpts of the interview later appeared in an online newspaper (Blitz 2013), which was commented by an inhabitant of Kuklen:

With Sister Anastasiya and Bishop Nikolay at the helm, they’ve simply struck out the monastery and that’s that. No one’s allowed to visit. People are forbidden to kiss the icons. They’ve taken the chains away, though they have great healing powers, and healed many people. We, the people of Kuklen, are being cordoned off. We’re not allowed to enter. We’re not allowed to sleep there [in the church].

The topic of the chains came up as well, with inhabitants of Kuklen accusing the igumenia of denying their healing powers because of the metropolitan bishop’s influence: “We collected signatures asking for her to be moved somewhere else. But she is a schoolmate of Nikolay, so that was never going to work.” (Female Deunovian, June 30, 2014)

Some took to Internet forums to criticize their bishop online (see Blitz 2013): “When he gives up his Mercedes cars and his Rolex watches I will come to believe that he is a clergyman filled with God’s grace. God forbid he should be an intermediary between me and God!”

Importantly, the devotee expressed the need to experience divine grace, but also believed that the bishop was not suited to be his/her representative. The believers want to make their own decisions about the location of that grace and healing power, mainly relying on vernacular tradition and individual somatic sensibility as they objectivise religious experience and ignore the opinions of the clergy. Confirmed by accounts of past miracles, the chain’s efficacy means that pilgrims view it as a vehicle of grace. The monastery’s custodians are generally regarded as imposing constraints on people’s ability to access the objects. The problem is not limited to the chain alone; the custodians have also objected to a miro-dripping icon (miro meaning chrism or anointing oil), or to relics, and occasionally to a believer’s somatic mode of attention during prayer.

Other Controversial Healing Objects

The problem appears to affect other aspects of somatic modes of attention. Negative experiences with the chain seem to have increased the vigilance of Igumenia Anastasiya and of other nuns working in the monastery, who view the religious practices of the faithful in the monastery as more examples of heretical imagery and try to make sure that their prayers and modes of veneration of icons and relics adhere to the Orthodox way.

As a result, the igumenia is wary of even seemingly innocuous gestures such as closing one’s eyes in prayer. A respondent claimed to have seen the igumenia reprimanding a woman who was praying with her eyes closed. I had a similar experience when I asked a nun for permission to photograph a stone plaque situated in the narthex, containing a carving of the sun and inscriptions in old Greek. The nun declined, and
forbade me to copy the plaque into my notebook by hand, arguing that I might produce a distorted image of the plaque. She made me feel unworthy of coming into the possession of that image in any way, even though the image was simply two suns facing each other, captioned with a Greek inscription. The plaque was not a conventional church decoration or an object of Orthodox cult. Paradoxically, the nun who forbade me to copy the design effectively treated the plaque as a holy object, engaging in the same kind of behaviour that she criticised in the faithful who treated the chains as sacred. On the other hand, perhaps the nun’s refusal was a simple reflex gesture. Generally wary of the problematic miraculous (and potentially idolatrous) sensitivity of the pilgrims, who tend to regard all church objects as capable of working miracles, she may have suspected me of harbouring similarly idolatrous tendencies, and simply wanted to turn my attention away. Respondents reported similar experiences. A woman complained that the faithful were no longer permitted to touch or kiss the relic of SS Kosmas and Damian (a hand kept in the monastery), even though it used to be possible to ask the monks in the monastery for a vodosvet (blessing of the water) involving the relic, which would have been placed in such a way as to practically encourage veneration. The theft of a fragment of the reliquary might have been responsible for those constraints, but the decision also seems to have been influenced by excessive veneration, as evidenced in the following comment:

K.: There used to be a little table at St. Vrachs’ where they kept a hand of St Kosmas, people would come to touch and kiss it. Then they stole the silver, and it [the hand] was placed inside a kind of box, so now you can only place your hand on top of the glass at the top. That’s the only way to take in the energy that’s being produced. The hand used to be encased in silver, and was always displayed on the table so people could kiss it.
M.L.: When was that?
K.: When I was 28. Now I’m 80. A very long time ago.
M.L.: And the hand was once accessible to the people?
K.: Yes, but then there was all this rotation, the nuns, the monks, and somebody took the silver.
M.L.: They stole the silver?
K.: Yes, and the hand was left, with three bones, three bones. That’s right, that’s all there is. But they keep it in there.
M.L.: And you can’t touch it?
K.: No, no, you can’t touch it. It’s wrapped in cotton wool (pamuk), and kept inside a box in the big church. It used to be encased in silver, and it was available to everybody. I used to come to help out for four hours at the monastery, but now that those women are here, the nuns, they simply don’t let us touch the hand, they wrapped it in there. (K., former klisarka, June 27, 2014)

Presumably, the various steps taken to prevent the faithful from accessing icons or relics are part of Igumenia Anastasiya’s repercussions against practices connected with the church chain. In an attempt to dissuade pilgrims from what she believes is a somewhat ‘fetishistic’ attitude to such objects, the igumenia takes her efforts to excess, effectively hindering pilgrim interactions with cult objects that ought to be venerated according to the Orthodox Christian canon, and paradoxically treats Orthodox relics as idols. In
official Orthodox tradition, blessed icons and relics are vehicles of divine grace, and physical contact with such objects, expressed through *proskynesis* (kissing and bowing) is an inalienable element of Orthodox cult.

Not many believers participate in the whole service, but all of those who come into the church perform the gestures of *proskynesis*. Nonetheless, the nun appears to regard aniconicity and mistrust of physical objects as being closer to Orthodox Christianity than the synesthetic contact of the faithful with objects viewed as miraculous, be it chains, icons or relics. The igumenia’s initiatives aimed at disciplining the pilgrims’ somatic modes of attention are intended to eliminate idolatrous tendencies, and to teach believers to communicate with God without the mediation of tangible objects. In her opinion, a visit to the monastery should be motivated by intentions of prayer and faith in SS Kosmas and Damian rather than by a cult of physical objects, since excessive attention to physical objects in matters of cult is essentially idolatrous. Her attitude to healing objects could thus be described as almost iconoclastic, or at least deeply suspicious, itself an attitude verging on heresy by the lights of Orthodox doctrine.

Another object kept away from the faithful is the miracle-working icon of SS Kosmas and Damian, believed to be effective in curing headaches. Father S., a former monastery custodian, told me during our conversation at Kristova Gora on June 29, 2014 that the icon had been fenced off:

Fr.S.: I mean, headaches are cured in front of the icon of SS Kosmas and Damian, inside, to the right. Now it’s fenced off, they’re saying you can’t be cured.
M.L.: Over there, by the chain?
Fr.S.: No, inside the church. You get Lord Jesus on the right hand side, and then Kosmas and Damian [describing the layout of the iconostasis]. There used to be this kind of little horn in between them. When you placed your head against that horn, I mean your forehead, your headache was gone immediately.
M.L.: You mean, in the icon, right?
Fr.S.: Yes, in the icon, but they no longer allow that. Now the place is fenced off, no entry.

Apparently, even an icon (whose cult is validated during the Feast of Orthodoxy) can be treated as an idol when a protrusion on the icon is believed to have healing properties, in which case the only way to control this physical mode of spirituality is to hide the object from believers. However, some believers interpret this as a departure from the Orthodox tradition:

K.: She actually put like a sill by the icons, so you couldn’t kiss them. Our people went there, people from our quarter, and they had a row with her. “Get that sill removed! You can’t have people not kissing [the icon]!” And she goes, “People were getting ill, they were catching infections!”
M.L.: It’s Orthodox, to kiss icons.
K.: I mean, she didn’t want anyone to kiss the icons. Even though Jesus Christ once... I don’t know if you’ve read the Bible, he wiped his face, and they took that cloth bearing an image of his face.
M.L.: An icon made without hands.
K.: Yes, they took that to the tsar, he washed, he was in a really bad state, but he had a drink of the water in which the cloth had been dipped, and he recovered, that’s
how they started drawing the face of Jesus to be kissed. But she [the igumenia], like I said, she’s not Christian. Jesus Christ once drove out such disbelievers when they weren’t admitting people. When your belief starts to wane, you end up an unbeliever. Just look at the things she’s doing, that woman has no fear of God. (K., former klisarka, June 2014)

This comment demonstrates my respondent’s familiarity with the history of the cult of icons. The apocryphal story of King Abgar’s miraculous recovery thanks to an icon “made without hands” (nerukotvorna) played a key role in the iconoclastic controversy, serving as evidence that Christ himself validated the cult of icons by miraculously creating his own likeness, copies of which circulated in Christian communities. However, despite the victory of the iconophiles, celebrated by the Feast of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, the cult of holy objects such as icons and relics continues to pose practical problems to the religious elites as the Orthodox nuns at the Kuklen monastery believe that any object perceived to be endowed with inherent agency (as opposed to transcendent agency where God’s divine grace and spiritual powers are manifested) should not be venerated (cf. Engelke 2012: 42).32

CONCLUSIONS

The conflict at the Kuklen monastery as presented in this article illustrates the fact that interpreting the intentions behind the gestures of believers is a much harder task for the priests and nuns in real life than it would appear from theological works for the elites. This is especially the case since the normative descriptions of proskynesis contained in the latter are difficult to live up to. In their policing efforts, the nuns are not motivated by theological considerations (with which they are unfamiliar), and the igumenia actually does not consider theology useful or valuable. To them, the difference between Orthodox versus idolatrous cult is an intuitive judgement call. The policy of modifying the setting in the monastery by removing, obscuring or fencing off problematic elements (the icon of SS Kosmas and Damian, the relics of the saints, the chain) is motivated by a fear that the monastery might come to be primarily associated with those objects rather than with the saints themselves. By fearing that the monastery might become a place where idolatry is propagated, they promote instead what is almost a kind of iconoclasm, for instance by hiding or obscuring some of the icons.

This fear leads to excessive attempts to discipline the believers’ somatic modes of attention, leaving them with no alternative capable of meeting their miraculous needs. The custodians’ anti-syncretic attitudes and their refusal to engage in dialogue causes deepening frustration among the pilgrims, who insist on being granted access to objects which they regard with an equal fascination, whether those are icons or relics or a set of chains. To chain-focused pilgrims, the sacred (or healing) energies, can be made present by any physical object. The current custodians of the monastery regard this approach as a scandalous subjectivisation of physical matter, which has the potential to oust God, the only proper addressee of prayers for healing, who cannot be contained by matter and must remain transcendent. The two sides view each other as interlopers who fail to realize the monastery’s unique character and usurp its space. It appears that the syncretic approach of the monks formerly acting as custodians was more compatible with
the pilgrims’ imageries; closer to the vernacular, embodied religious life, it left more room for somatic expression as the clergy and the faithful were a single community. Now the two parties are locked in a conflict over dominance, the chain serves as a litmus test showing which party has the upper hand at any given time.

Watching this process one might conclude that the iconoclastic controversy is far from over, and Bulgaria’s Orthodox Christian religious culture is in some places belatedly undergoing a local process of “purification”. At Kuklen, this process occasionally takes on a paradoxical form which undermines the foundations of Orthodoxy, in that denying the agency of icons and relics goes against the heart of the Orthodox tradition. At this point it is difficult to foresee which imagery will prevail to become associated with the monastery. At present, the embodied religious imagery of the pilgrims is primarily shaped by the elderly women (religious leaders). So far, efforts at religious socialisation launched by the bishop and the nuns appears to have failed. Indeed, the two groups seem to be isolated from, and antagonistic towards, each other.

NOTES

1 All quotations of the interviews are translated from Bulgarian.

2 The monastery of SS Kosmas and Damian, two physicians famed for healing powers also known as SS Vrachs (sveti Vrachove), is among the most popular in Bulgaria. On the feast of the patron saints, pilgrims from the area come to wash their bodies with water from a healing spring (ayazmo) dedicated to the saints, located some 300 yards from the monastery wall, worship at their relics and miracle-working icon, and seek healing using the chain.

3 Deunovians are followers of the occult teachings of Peter Deunov (1864–1944), founder of the Bulgarian White Brotherhood, see Note 6.

4 Comparative field research conducted in Ukraine by my collaborator, Magdalena Zatorska, suggests that a similar conflict is playing out in that country, where the official Church likewise is opposed to esoteric spirituality.

5 Analogous processes are taking place in Muslim communities in the Rhodopes, where young Muslim religious leaders often regard as ‘true’ a variant of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia, as opposed to the post-Ottoman form of Islam practised in Bulgaria (Lubanska 2015).

6 Vangeliya Pandeva Dimitrova, a Bulgarian clairvoyant influential with Bulgaria’s communist oligarchs.

7 Peter Deunov was an occultist and mystic from north-western Bulgaria who attended the American Seminary School in Svishtov and was further educated in America, where he studied theology at the Boston University before joining Rosicrucian circles and reading widely in American and Russian esoteric literature (cf. Szwat-Gyłybowa 2011: 89). Back in Bulgaria in 1896, Deunov published a new interpretation of the Bible propagating neo-gnosis and Slavic missionism. His missionary activity in Bulgaria involved establishing the Association for the Propagation of the Religious Spirit in the Bulgarian Nation, renamed The White Brotherhood in 1918. Members attended annual conventions and listened to Deunov’s sermons, recordings of which remain largely untranscribed. Deunov was close to the circles of power in Bulgaria. He died in 1944, the year Bulgaria became a communist regime. Deunov’s school was closed down, and his disciples faced repressions. The Brotherhood was revived after the fall of the communist regime in 1989 (Krasztev and Kerenyi 2001: 80; Szwat-Gyłybowa 2011: 90–91). Today it has many sympathizers in Bulgaria, rivalling the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Deunov is considered a heretic by the Orthodox Church, which excommunicated him in 1916 (Toncheva 2015: 214). In 2012, Deunov was “voted into second place by the Bulgarian public during a national poll to find the ‘Great-
est Bulgarians’ [...] provoking the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to declare him an antichrist” (ibid.:14).

8 Arguably, the thing that appears to trouble some members of the clergy is what Matthew Engelke (2007: 9) terms “the problem of presence”: “Simply put, the problem of presence is how a religious subject defines and claims to construct a relationship with the divine through the investment of authority and meaning in certain words, actions, and objects”.

9 Singular: an extrasens. A term derived from extra-sensory perception. It is used to refer to people who have paranormal healing abilities and strong inner energy (Rock 2012–2013: 201).

10 I only use initials to protect the anonymity of my respondents. Father Ivan Shtŭtov is an exception because he is a published author of a book on the monastery.

11 A female helper in a church.

12 More on this subject below.

13 I refer here to a type of religious life self-reported as Orthodox Christian, which in practice is a conglomerate of beliefs and practices of pre-Christian, Byzantine and Ottoman provenance, processed and reworked over the centuries in accordance with the local modus vivendi. Key elements include the cult of saints and material religious practices aimed at achieving individual and communal health and wellbeing. Crucially, this involves a relationship of reciprocity with saints who receive sacrifices (kurbans) from believers (Lubanska 2015: 107). Since the 20th century this form of religiosity has been increasingly coloured by new religious movements, which at present is felt more in the cities than in the Bulgarian provinces.

14 Vihra Baeva (2012: 170) believes that they are still a dynamic group offering a religious alternative to the priests, and often capable of introducing their recognized traditions into church life. I propose a different nomenclature for such juxtaposed models of religious life since Baeva’s “grannies” draw on new religious movements far more than would appear at first sight, and the priests are a divided group, not all of whom are opposed to the “grannies”. Some of the priests clearly share the popular religious imageries, others keep their distance and attempt to modify them “in the spirit of Orthodox Christianity”, very much an open-ended designation.

15 I find it interesting that “concepts such as agency are rarely made explicit, but rather are presupposed by the ways people act and evaluate the actions of others” (Keane 2007: 59).

16 I refer here to icons and relicts, which in official Orthodox theology are perceived as places where divine grace is made present.

17 Keane (2007: 67) is writing about Protestant missionaries, however the attitude of the bishop and the nuns towards physical objects as vehicles of agency is surprisingly similar to the Calvinism’s semiotic ideology, which “sharpened the distinction between material expression and immaterial meaning and put them in a hierarchical relations to one another, endowing the distinction with grave moral consequences. It privileged belief, associated with immaterial meaning, over practices that threatened to subordinate belief to material form.”

18 Sonja Luhrmann (2010: 70) made similar observations concerning the religious cult in the autonomous republic of Marij El in the Volga region of Russia.

19 Here I have provided the English translations of titles to make the content clearer.

20 Yana Gergova (2015: 264), another researcher working on the ritual practices in that monastery, mentions the same figure.

21 I am grateful to Petko Georgiev, archivist at the National Library in Plovdiv, for helping me locate this source.

22 The situation is different in the Western churches where exorcisms are increasingly a routine, daily practice, especially in the Pentecostal denominations. Following the Second Vatican Council the Pentecostal influence is increasingly present in Catholicism in charismatic religious movements (see for instance Csordas 2002).

23 I found this claim in a guidebook to the churches of Plovdiv, but it is not corroborated by historical sources (Doichinov 2005: 111).
24 This stands in contrast to Ukraine, where exorcisms are still practised and relatively popular. In Ukraine, exorcisms are accompanied by somatic reactions similar to those described by Csordas (2002) among the Western Christian charismatic communities (see Naumescu 2010: 165).

25 The priest was moved from the Kuklen monastery to Kristova Gora.

26 In this context we should mention the practices of pilgrims in Russia recently studied by Stella Rock, who recorded the frequent use of the word grace (blagodat) in the discourse of the pilgrims, and identified the willingness to experience grace as one of the main motivations. Similarly, Rock notes the discrepancies between the definition of grace between the Church and the pilgrims (Rock 2012–2013: 195).

27 The Bogomils were a neo-Manichaean sect named after their founder. Their doctrine was probably influenced by the Massalians and the Paulicians. They were opposed to the Orthodox Church, had a dualistic interpretation of the New Testament, and practised prayer leading to mystical ecstasy, which they considered proof of spiritual perfection and liberation from one’s inner demon, making one incapable of sinning. (cf. Szwat-Gyłybowa 2011: 40)

28 Probably for that reason Gergova (2015: 270) compares the chain in the Kuklen monastery to the chains of St. Peter held in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome.

29 Stella Rock noted analogous practices at Diveevo (private e-mail correspondence, May 1, 2013).

30 The bench is also visible in one of the photographs posted on a website devoted to the monastery (see Minovski 2007).

31 The nun does not use the term idolatry, simply referring to a cult of idols.

32 Engelke (2012: 42) writes of a similarly reserved attitude to matter in the Apostolic Church Jowane Masowe Chishanu in Zimbabwe, whose devotees try to foster “live and direct faith” understood as submission to the direct and healing influence of the Holy Spirit, and even reject the Bible as an unnecessary form of mediation of faith (associated with White colonisation and therefore suspect). Even if they use objects in their practices, they treat them as venues for the manifestations of the spiritual powers of the Holy Spirit, attributing no substantive powers to the objects themselves. One exception (to some extent) is honey used for its medicinal properties, which some members believe to possess inherent healing properties, but other than that they generally reject “the potential of religious representation through objects” (ibid.: 50), and want their faith to have an immaterial quality.

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NOTES AND REVIEWS

FUNERAL RITES FROM MOLDOVA IN A NATIONAL CONTEXT


Ion H. Ciubotaru is a well-known Romanian ethnologist who founded the Folklore Archive of Moldova and Bukovina in 1970. This institution gathered more than 300,000 documents, consisting in audio, video and written fieldwork information from almost 800 villages situated on the north-eastern side of Romania. A questionnaire of 1,175 questions, also created by Ciubotaru, was used during the investigations. The nine chapters of the book focus on all traditional aspects of life: superstitions, folk medicine, rites of passage, holidays, magic beliefs, literary folklore, childlore, traditional clothing, folk architecture and occupations.

Death customs are pursued through 102 questions that permit further inquiries. This tremendous database, collected through direct and indirect fieldwork, allowed professor Ciubotaru to study folk beliefs on dying for thirty years. Obiceiurile funebre din Moldova în context naţional (Funeral Rites from Moldova in a National Context) is the third book on this topic and it is part of a larger Romanian Academy project that uses typologies to better explain folklore. In these books, each section of a rite and all subsequent convictions are presented in their ceremonial context and order, with specific indication of the villages where the information was found. The typology is preceded by a scientific study that decodes ritual meanings and compares Romanian traditional knowledge to universal patterns, while the last part of the book comprises a text corpus of ritual literature and other artistic work related to the theme.

This book completes an investigation into rites of passage, after the publication of wedding and childbirth customs, by Ciubotaru’s colleagues Silvia Ciubotaru (2009) and Adina Hulubaş (2012). Thus, a recent perspective on these life events is provided to the reader in a coherent and integrated form. The obvious conclusion speaks about a high persistency of folk beliefs through time, in spite of social evolution. Nevertheless, Ciubotaru believes that funeral rites are more profound than other rites of passage because they connect the body with the soul and the dead with the living (p. 7). The stakes are therefore higher when it comes to funeral rites, since magic acts are not only intended to assure the well-being of the neophyte, but also to maintain social harmony. In Romanian folklore, as in the folklore of other parts of the world, it is believed that unfulfilled ceremonial gestures doom the soul to restlessness, and that the dead might come back to punish the entire community.

Ciubotaru placed Romanian Moldova (the space now divided between this country and The Republic of Moldova has a common historical and cultural unity) at the centre of a very ambitious perspective. The ethnological analyses unfold themselves vertically, with information starting from the dawn of mankind. Current practices are revealed as “late echoes of the archaic funerary complex” (p. 12). The vastness of time is equalled by the large geographical spread of death traditions; hence a second perspective covers a horizontal type of investigation. All connections start
from active rites observed in Moldova and eventually return to this space after having achieved even more meaning.

The introductory study covers 29 cultural patterns traceable in many parts of the world. Almost each archetype is discussed in connection with data pertaining to other civilisations. The same manner of investigation is found in the third section of the book, entitled “Anthropological perspectives”. Funerary practices become the top of a cultural iceberg because the author masters the technique of revealing centuries of spirituality. A general coherence on death rituals is achieved through information from ethnography, archaeology, folk literature and cult books, paintings and mythology. Hence, a network of universal imagery sustains Romanian ceremonial acts. The logical interconnection of the book is provided by the structure: themes from the introduction are traced in the typology of folk customs and in the literary corpus, while the anthropological studies convey them all. An enormous international bibliography supports Ciubotaru’s contributions. For example, ‘the road between worlds’, ‘the path to the right’, ‘following the sun and the waters’ and ‘the one way route’ are archetypes analysed in the first part of the book, but meanings receive more consistency in ethnographic data on how the dead are prepared for burial and taken to the cemetery. The same patterns appear in the literary texts from the anthology and the author even created a motif index of funerary symbols from lamentations to help the reader identify them more easily. The poetic dimension of representations of death adds a sublimated dimension to a deep and complex experience of life.

Such is the case with texts that mourn the passing of an unmarried young person. Although there is a long tradition of aesthetic interpretations made of a Romanian ballad in which death is portrayed as an empress (crâiasă) who becomes the bride for the entire world, Ciubotaru uses ethnographic documents and international information to prove that the metaphor is speaking about actual practices performed centuries ago by the Greeks, Eastern Slavs, Bantu Africans and Tatars: a bride was offered to the dead man in order to assure his peace. The conclusion that “funerary poetry doubles the rite” (p. 65) convinces the reader that folklore should be perceived in a more specific manner, with instruments that make use of mankind’s history. Unexpected information is also offered on the subject of alms given by the living for themselves, on the chromatic choice of mourning, funerary bestiary and on foretelling death and preparing the deceased. Controversies are discussed and clarified with powerful arguments that balance almost all existing information on funerary rituals. This impressive demonstration of scholarship, backed up by ethnographic facts that suggest a serene attitude towards passing away, manages to ‘tame death’ in some way. The reader gradually understands that the solitude of dying has received an essential antidote: culture. Ciubotaru’s book is filled with mythical characters and magic gestures that intend to secure the great ontological transition. If death cannot be defeated, at least it can be explained without terror.

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Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics (JEF), the journal of the University of Tartu, the Estonian National Museum and the Estonian Literary Museum, welcomes articles in the research areas of ethnology, folkloristics, museology, cultural and social anthropology. JEF is a peer-reviewed journal, issued two times per year.

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