Brazilian Spirit Possession and Theory of Ritual[1]

Steven Engler,
Mount Royal University and Concordia University

Beginning in Theory

In the last decades, in the words of James Laidlaw and Caroline Humphrey, "a luxuriant jungle of theories about ritual has grown up" (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, 64). This teeming crop of ritual theory seemed a useful place to start, as I tried to make sense of spirit possession rituals in Umbanda and Neo-pentecostalism. This section traces some of the steps that led to my view that beginning with general theoretical stances is problematic, and my attempt to examine these rituals in dialogue with a more tactical and pluralistic use of theoretical approaches.

As I began my attempts to analyze these possession rituals, I considered different theoretical possibilities. One possibility was to define 'ritual,' listing characteristics found in the writings of those who study it. Ritual consists of both acts and utterances. The performers form part of the audience. Ritual is

formal, patterned, ordered, standardized, structured, stylized, conventional, invariant, liturgical, rehearsed, repetitive, repeatable, sequenced, rhythmic, symbolic and meaningful. It involves a number of internal processes, including condensation, fusion, exaggeration, redundancy, repetition, anaphora, transmutation, duplication, inversion and parallelism. It takes place at certain times, in certain places, under certain circumstances, and involves certain people and objects.

A useful conceptual aid that emerges from a close analysis of the characteristics of ritual is a distinction between six elements within that broad category: (i) *script* (the prescribed listing and ordering of elements, whether written or not); (ii) *element* (the smallest building-blocks of ceremony); (iii) *ceremony* (a group of elements, with a degree of formal unity marked by its repeatability as a distinct set of elements); (iv) *ceremonial* (a group of ceremonies, marked by its repeatability as a distinct group); (v) *cult* (the full set of ceremonies and ceremonials of a tradition); and (vi) *role* (the 'part' played in a ceremony) (Snoek 2006, 9).[2]

When we look closer at the literature, however, a number of ambiguities emerge. On the one hand, ritual is often analyzed as being particular to religious contexts: Victor Turner influentially defined ritual as, "prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technical routine, having reference to belief in mystical beings and powers" (Turner 1967, 19). On the other hand, the various formal qualities of ritual just noted clearly apply to many non-religious types of social action, and the important category of 'secular ritual' would make no sense if ritual were necessarily religious (Moore and Myerhoff 1977b; Rappaport 1999; Platvoet 2006). On the one hand, ritual reflects, reiterates, or reinforces traditional structures; it expresses and delineates existing social relationships (Bateson 1958; Gluckman 1962; Rappaport 1968). On the other hand, it actively reorganizes, recreates, reshapes and revisions those social relations (Moore and Myerhoff 1977a, 5; Rao 2006). On the one hand, ritual is not encoded by participants, being prescribed, scripted, or sanctioned by tradition (Rappaport 1999, 24). On the other hand, as recent studies of ritual dynamics make clear, ritual provides great scope for the agency, even improvisation, of participants

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2. I have altered Snoek's terms (ritual, rite, ceremony, ceremonial, Rite, ritual) here to avoid the confusing distinction between rite and Rite and to preserve 'ritual' as a more general category subsuming all six elements.

(Gladigow 2006, 488–489; Kapferer 2006a). On the one hand, ritual is framed and set apart from other types of social action (Bateson 1972; Handelman 1977, 2006b; Schechner 1985). On the other hand, the extent to which this is true varies greatly; and the same holds for many other types of action, to the extent that some sociologists argue that all social action is ritualized (Goffman 1959; Collins 2004). Different theorists emphasis that ritual is structural and/or processual, invariant and/or variable, symbolically expressive and/or materially effective, etc.; the debates go on.

In the midst of this conflicting set of perspectives, defining ritual is not a promising start. On the one hand, the concept of 'ritual seems excessively limited and parochial: reflection on related terms across cultures leads to the conclusion that "'ritual' does not constitute a transcultural referential unity, and while it is clearly possible to find 'rituals' wherever one looks, the conceptual category 'ritual' (much more than 'religion') is a specific modern Western tool of self-reflection and intellectual *modus operandi*" (Stausberg 2006, 98). On the other hand, the scope of 'ritual' seems so broad that a variety of conceptual alternatives, such as 'public events' or 'cultural performances,' are proposed to delimit comparable phenomena in distinct contexts (Singer 1955, 27; Geertz 1973; McAloon 1984; Grimes 2004, 110–111; Handelman 2006a). Overall, the trend in recent theory has been to move toward more inclusive and less biased definitions of ritual, and this move to broaden 'ritual' well beyond the bounds of phenomena of specific interest to the study of religion tends to reduce the value of such definitions. Perhaps the task of definition is not a necessary prelude: as Jan Platvoet notes, "since no single definition will ever exhaust what ritual 'really' is and delimit . . . it from anything that is 'not-ritual', scholars may also research rituals without explicitly defining 'ritual'" (Platvoet 2006, 201).

I considered the possibility that the function of ritual would make for a better starting point. From the perspective of the theorist, ritual performs a wide variety of functions: e.g., *represents* or *reflects* cosmic order, social forms, or internal states; *encodes* sacred/canonical principles; *legitimizes* or *solidifies* social values; *indexes* social or individual conformity to universal norms or laws; *organizes, legitimizes, defines, reinforces* and *motivates* maintenance of social groups, distinctions, or boundaries; *alters* social status; *constructs* personal or collective identities; *guides* or *channels* cognition and emotion; *transforms* experience; *produces* catharsis; *breaks down* and *reconstitutes* conceptual totalities; *reifies* ideologies, etc. (Of course, from

insiders' perspectives, whether religious or secular, ritual performs many other functions.) However, starting here would beg the question of how we are to make sense of these various functions: individual and social, psychological and ideological, cognitive and symbolic. Emphasizing one or the other of these types of function would presuppose a prior commitment to some specific theoretical perspective.

A more basic possibility was to align myself with one of the main theoretical approaches to ritual, the basic choice lying between functionalist/structuralist and symbolic/culturalist theories. Would it make more sense to interpret ritual in terms of its relation to social structures, emphasizing its social function, or in terms of its relation to culture, emphasizing the communicative function of its symbolic dimensions (Bell 1997, 23, 61)? That is, will the analysis emphasize the two poles of ritual and social structure, or will it give culture some mediating role between these? Is the meaning of a ritual to be understood in intellectualist or semiological terms: that is, does ritual translate, into action, a worldview rooted in social or cognitive structures or does it reorganize the signs and symbols of other aspects of culture, such as cosmology or other dimensions of myth (Severi 2006)? Should we take a formalist/structuralist approach, focusing on the architecture of ritual, or a phenomenological/interpretivist approach, focusing on ritual's meaning for participants?

However, choosing among these basic theoretical alternatives does not seem a very useful place to start for two reasons. First, it puts the cart before the horse (or the auger before the Zamboni) by presupposing too much about ritual before actually getting down to cases. Second, the tendency in recent theory of ritual has been to try to move past these dichotomies in two ways: by exploring the middle ground; and by drawing on a variety of theoretical approaches and conceptual tools in order to make sense of specific cases. Michael Houseman and Carlo Severi's re-reading of the *naven* ritual, Gregory Bateson's classic ethnographic case from New Guinea (Bateson 1958), illustrates both of these tendencies: it focuses on ritual form, drawing on phenomenology and cognitive theory, but the main conclusion is neither that ritual represents or reflects social relations nor that it operates at a purely cultural level, but rather that it creates a new and independent relational context (Houseman and Severi 1998).

These three false starts suggested that definitions and theories are not the place to begin in trying to make sense of these or any other particular

cases of ritual. Starting off at too general a level leaves us unable to see the trees for the forest, the rituals for the jungle of theory. Instead, perhaps we should take our cue from recent ritual theory, which toes a different line. This sort of approach to ritual theory is described in the recent omnibus work, *Theorizing Rituals* (Kreinath, Snoek and Stausberg, 2006). To some extent, this paper can be seen as a sort of experiment in exploring this new meta-theoretical path (see Engler 2008, 26).

Five points are especially relevant here. First, the analysis of a single, or carefully circumscribed set of, ethnographic case(s) is most productive. Second, it is important to draw on a variety of theoretical resources. As the editors note in their introduction to the volume:

> any one theory will hardly suffice to account for the complexity of the phenomena. In modern scholarly practice of the study of ritual, one will therefore probably always need to refer to more than one theory. Today theoreticians of ritual(s) instead generate . . . theoretical *approaches*, which only try to explain a certain aspect of the material concerned (Kreinath, Snoek, and Stausberg 2006, xxi–xxii) (original emphasis).

Third, it is important to foreground the dynamics of ritual and the agency of participants. Fourth, in light of these points, ritual "needs to be seen in cultural context and thus as strategic" (Bell 1997; Grimes 2004, 133). Fifth, and finally, these conceptual resources do not serve as a presupposed theoretical frame nor as a set of *post hoc* interpretive lenses; the tactical choice of approaches and concepts proceeds in a dialectical relationship with the description of the case in its context. Neither ethnographic description nor theory of ritual offers some sort of basic level of reality on which to build a study. We need to be attentive to the dynamic interplay between data and theory.

Religion and Spirit Possession in Brazil

A very brief and selective overview of religion in Brazil will be helpful at this point. Portuguese Catholics colonized the region in the sixteenth century. Brazilian Catholicism continues to be shaped by very dynamic tensions between the elite views of the institutionalized church, primarily rooted in the hierarchy of the urban dioceses, and a wide range of popular beliefs and practices, primarily located in rural areas and small interior cities

and often mediated by Catholic brotherhoods. Liberation theology was of
central importance as a counter-discourse during the period of the military
dictatorship, though its influence has declined dramatically. Charismatic
Catholicism grew even more dramatically in the late twentieth century.

Brazil was a slave society until the late nineteenth century. Unlike the
United States, Brazil did not have a policy of separating slaves from similar
cultural backgrounds. This contributed to the rise of various syncretistic
Afro-Brazilian traditions[3], mixtures of Catholicism and West African
traditions, primarily Sudanese and Bantu. Candomblé is the most important
Afro-Brazilian religion. Its key rituals include initiation, divination, and
the *roda-de-santo* (saint wheel) in which initiated members dance counter-
clockwise, to intense, syncopated drumming, until they enter into a trance
state, becoming *cavalos* (horses) for the *orixás*. Condomblé is well known
outside Brazil, but few scholars, even when writing on religion in Brazil,
take note of the fact that it is just the most well-known and influential of a
range of Afro-Brazilian religions that manifest complex interrelations (and
overlaps) in terms of origins, beliefs and rituals, and which are generally
associated with distinct regions. A partial list includes the following:
Macumba in Rio de Janeiro; Canjerê in Minas Gerais; Cabula (historically)
in Espírito Santo; Candomblé de Caboclo and Jurê in Bahia; Xambá in
Alagoas, Pernambuco and Paraíba; Xangô and Jurema in Pernambuco; Toré
in Sergipe; Tambor de Mata (or Terecô) in Maranhão; Tambor de Mina in
Maranhão and Pará; Babassuê in Pará; Catimbó, Cura and Pajelança, found
from Pernambuco through Amazônia; Batuque in Rio Grande do Sul; and,
of course, Candomblé in Bahia, which later spread to Rio de Janeiro, São
Paulo and Porto Alegre, whence its formative influence in the emergence of
the quite distinct religion of Umbanda.

Kardecism, or Spiritism, arrived in Brazil in the 1860s, perhaps even
the late 1850s. It has its roots in the mid nineteenth-century French
appropriation of the American Spiritualist movement. Kardecism's beliefs
include the possibility of communication with disembodied spirits,
reincarnation, karma, the universal spiritual evolution of humankind and
a correlated hierarchy of spiritual realms, ranging from largely material to
fully spiritual, the aid of evolved spiritual guides and the hindrance of non-

3. I use the word "tradition" to point to the dynamic tension between strategies of legitimacy
and authority offered by 'authentic' and 'invented' traditions (Engler 2005a, 2005b).

evolved spirits, a plurality of inhabited worlds, a transcendent God, and Jesus Christ as an exceptionally evolved spirit. Key rituals include consultation with or reception of messages from spirits received by mediums (through oral communication or automatic writing), the "passe" (a form of blessing similar to New Age cleansing of the aura), and study sessions. Rituals of "disobsession" are held to free people from the influences of non-evolved spirits that obstruct the spiritual progress of those to whom they attach themselves. Kardecism in Brazil, reflecting its new cultural context, has diverged from Spiritualist tradition in Europe. It has become more explicitly religious, as opposed to scientific, and more explicitly racist, rejecting black and native spirits as non-evolved.

Umbanda is a Brazilian new religious movement, a mixture of Candomblé and Kardecism that emerged in the large urban centres in the 1930s. Even very solid ethnographic studies of Candomblé by non-Brazilian scholars tend to misleadingly lump Umbanda together with Afro-Brazilian traditions (Johnson 2002, 45, 52–53; Cohen 2007, 214n5). It occupies an intermediate position between Afro-Brazilian traditions and Kardecism in several senses: doctrine, degree of doctrinal elaboration, textuality and publication of texts, and, most importantly, ritual form (see Engler 2009). Like Kardicists, who are possessed by the spirits of departed people, Umbandists receive departed spirits; however, at the Afro end of the spectrum, they also are possessed by orixás. Like Kardecism, but unlike Candomblé, practitioners of Umbanda attend ceremonies in order to consult with the spirits who posses mediums.

Many of the region's indigenous cultures remain vibrant. Popular, romanticized conceptions of indigenous wisdom have had an important impact on Afro-Brazilian traditions (like Candomblé de Caboclo) and also, more importantly, on Umbanda.

Although French and Dutch Protestants played a marginal role in the early history of Brazil, the history of Protestantism in Brazil is determined by three later developments: immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the arrival and growth of Pentecostalism in the early and mid-twentieth century; and the rise and growth of Neo-pentecostalism in the late-twentieth century. Neo-pentecostalism is distinguished from Pentecostalism in three main ways: a national rather than North American origin; a prominent emphasis on the gospel of prosperity; and a strong dualism that attributes disease and misfortune to malign spirits, most

frequently identified as the orixás and spirits of Kardecism, Umbanda, and Candomblé. The latter is central to Neo-pentecostalism's "holy war" against these other Brazilian spirit possession religions.

In demographic terms, several points stand out. Brazil remains the largest Catholic country in the world, in terms of numbers of self-identified adherents. However, the number of Catholics dropped dramatically over the late twentieth century, with significant increases in the number of Protestants, especial Pentecostals and Neo-pentecostals, and in those professing "no religion." The number of adherents of non-Christian religions has grown, though not as significantly as the number of those reporting no religion. Although the Brazilian census does not distinguish between Pentecostals and Neo-pentecostals (nor between Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian traditions), the number of both these types of spirit-centred Protestantism is significantly higher than that of other large spirit possession religions, including Kardecism, Umbanda, and Candomblé. Given the prominence of multiple adherence and the crossing of religious boundaries in Brazil (as indicated by the significant number of multiple declarations), the census underreports the number of people who attend the rituals of, for example, Kardecism and Umbanda.

In discussing Brazilian religions, it is essential to take account of the specific historical and cultural context. Most importantly, Brazil continues to be influenced to a great extent by hierarchical patron-client relations and by the horizontal relations that link relatives and peers. This is, in part, because of its legacy of slave holding and the historical absence of a strong central government. This prominence of personal relations is correlated with a high degree of unpredictability, inefficiency, and, on occasion, corruption in impersonal and bureaucratic systems. As a result, Brazilian culture maintains a prominent role for the *jeitinho*, the "finding a way," that involves an appeal to personal relations in the face of the intransigence of impersonal systems.

Spirit possession is important in several Brazilian religions. The most common reason that Brazilians attend possession rituals is to seek a solution to personal problems. This is especially so with the rituals I focus on here: spirit consultations in Umbanda and exorcism in Neo-pentecostalism. In Brazilian society, beliefs that possession, by non-evolved, evil or ambivalent spirits, is a major cause of social and personal ills extends far beyond the belief or ritual system of any one religion: "the notion of a malignant spirit

. . . becomes a very powerful one when it becomes associated, as a sort of *polycentrism of evil*, with the notion of possession" (Birman 1997, 71, original emphasis). This overlap between rituals and healing and rituals of possession is especially productive ground for thinking about issues of identity and social relations in ritual.

Spirit possession is a complex phenomenon, and some words of clarification are in order. It is important both to distinguish possession from related phenomena and to note distinct types of possession:

> Possession is . . . an interpretation of a constellation of neurophysiological, experiential, and behavioural factors. It is not identical with trance . . . There are possessions . . . which do not involve trance; there are possessions that are perduring long after the initial possession . . . . Indeed, even in possession trances there is usually a sequence of phases that are often dramatically different from one another. A slight dissociation is frequently followed by what has been called a somnambulistic trance—a 'quiet' trance—that may lead to a more violent trance that ends up in cataleptic collapse, itself sometimes followed by other altered states of consciousness. . . . [I]t is important to distinguish . . . different modes of 'engagement' with the spirits: shamanism, spirit mediumship, one-time possessions classically understood, repetitive 'cultic' possessions, in which the possessed has a perduring, symbiotic relationship with the spirit or spirits, and still other modes of engagement of the spiritual healer (Crapanzano 2006, 199–200; cf. Crapanzano and Garrison 1977; Ward 1980, 151; Boddy 1994, 409–410).

Brazilian religions manifest a range of possession phenomena, including spirit mediumship (voluntary cultic possessions, including those that involve long-term relationships between a given medium and a given spirit) and involuntary possession, including both benevolent and malevolent possession, which is treated as an important cause of physical and mental illness. Some possessions leave the possessed person fully conscious where some involve unconscious trance behaviour. I focus on the contrast between voluntary spirit mediumship in Umbanda and malevolent possession in Neo-pentecostalism.

The Research Question

Two insights prompted the question that lies at the heart of this paper. I am currently engaged in a multi-year research project on syncretism and multiple-adherence among middle-class Catholics in a city in the interior

of the state of São Paulo, Brazil. This project began during my two and a half years (2005–2007) as a Visiting Research Professor in the graduate program in Ciências da Religião at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo. Because I am investigating the tendency of Brazilian Catholics to participate in the rituals of other religions, I began to attend these rituals myself.

My interest in rituals rather than texts or doctrinal statements was cemented by two observations. First, beliefs were not explicitly invoked in the rituals of Umbanda that first attracted me: there were no sermons, lectures, or readings. Second, the Catholics I talked to tended to visit non-Catholic rituals in order to receive services, without discussing or even appearing to care about the beliefs associated with those rituals. Sometimes, in fact, they were just dead wrong about basics: to the point, for example, that one Catholic informant took me to what he called "Candomblé," yet which was in fact a *terreiro* of Umbanda, albeit a form of Umbanda at the far Afro end of that religion's rich spectrum of ritual forms. If people attending rituals do not even know what religion they are participating in, this suggests that the instrumental value of ritual is more central than properly elaborated doctrine.

In the *terreiros* and *centros* of Umbanda that I have visited, you arrive early and talk to a sort of greeter who generally puts you on one list if you are a first-time visitor, on another if you are coming for a regular consultation with the spirits, and sometimes a third if you have special concerns or if this is a specific follow-up visit. In most *centros* and *terreiros*, no fees are charges for attending. First time visitors generally pass through a sort of spiritual triage: the spirit possessing a medium determines whether the visitor themselves has mediumistic abilities or whether they have any pressing health or other problems. You then sit down to wait your turn to talk to a possessed medium. The mediums, dressed in White, generally gather in a circle in a space like a stage at the front of the room and dance to the beat of drums until they are possessed. The people who are attending in order to consult with the spirits sit in rows of chairs facing that ritual space, usually separated by some sort of physical divider. They are taken forward in groups, in order of their arrival, to consult with the spirits. Often, a more specialized set of healing spirits and their mediums are in rooms or offices off the main space, and some of the attendees are led there for a second consultation after their initial one. This is generally for more

demanding healing of physical or psychological ills. Note that two very different ceremonies make up the broader ceremonial: the possession of the mediums; and consultation between mediums and clients. A third type of ceremony consists in subsidiary rituals that are assigned by spirits to clients as a sort of homework, e.g., the burning of a candle near running water.

My first impression of this layout was that it was like a Tridentine Catholic church, with the congregation seated in pews watching the ritual activity that takes place around the altar at the front.[4] Note my point of comparison: I was raised Catholic; I did my Ph.D. on early modern Christianity; I frequently teach the history of Christianity; and my primary research focus was Catholics. My first point of conceptual leverage in trying to make sense of this ritual form was a comparison with something I understood well. It is a useful comparison, drawing attention to the historical trajectories of inter-religious influences. However, a more valuable comparison lay ahead.

The first of two guiding insights came to me during my first visit to a new Umbanda *centro* in the small city in which I am doing fieldwork. The place was particularly busy, with about 200 people waiting to speak to one of eight or nine mediums. Upon arriving, my name was placed on a list and I was given a numbered ticket. There were three different coloured tickets, one for each category of client. Once the consultations began, two women in white bustled around, calling out numbers ("Red twenty to twenty-nine!") and organizing the appropriate groups into the long line that led to the main ritual space. Every five minutes or so, a man in white would come back from the main ritual space, where he and another were sorting out which client spoke with which medium, and say, "Our Father who art . . ." in a loud voice, at which point those waiting and those in the line would repeat that Christian prayer. Having arrived only a half hour before the scheduled 8 pm start, I had a lot of time on my hands. I was there for almost three hours, and only ten minutes of that consisted in my participation in the actions of the main ritual space. As I sat waiting my turn, staring at the ticket in my hand, red sixty-eight, a phrase popped into my head, *chá de cadeira*, "chair tea," a phrase that describes the unavoidable Brazilian experience of waiting in line

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4. This value of this point of comparison was brought home to me by Michel Despland, during one a conversations after a joint visit we made to an Umbanda *terreiro* in São Paulo (see (Despland 2008).

at government or doctors' offices or at the bank. I realized that I was likely to learn something important about this ritual's form if I were to compare it not to another religious ritual but to that most secular form of social action: queuing for services. In other word, this suggested the value, not of relating ritual to social structures in general terms but, of comparing the form of a specific religious ritual to the form of a specific case of ritual-like action in the related secular sphere. Given the extent to which personal relations are inseparable from bureaucratic processes in Brazil, a key question emerged: how do the possession rituals of Umbanda extend, channel, limit, or displace the agency of those who use these rituals as a source of spiritual services?

The second guiding insight occurred as I was attending an "unloading" session (*sessão do descarrego*) at the largest church in the city, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God.[5] This Neo-pentecostal service focuses on the exorcism of demonic spirits, which are held to be responsible for the problems of those who attend the ritual: financial, health, relationship, psychological and others. These demons are explicitly identified with the spirits that are believed to possess people in Candomblé, Umbanda, and, to a lesser extent, Kardecism.[6]

The interior of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God is a large hall, wider than most churches, filled with rows of pews, and with a prominent stage at the front. The name of the denomination, "*Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*," was displayed in large letters in relief on the front wall. The only other decoration consisted of tall stained glass windows on the sidewalls, bright mosaics of a cross that, curiously, looks very much like a Catholic monstrance. About 50 people attended the afternoon service, though the hall can hold twenty times that number. The service I will describe was presided over by a single male pastor who occupies the centre of the stage with a handheld microphone. A woman on stage assisted the pastor. Four others, two men and two women, assisted on the main floor during the group

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5. A YouTube search for "*sessão do descarrego*" will results in videos of this ritual. The ritual has recently been relabelled, less confrontationally, as a *troca de anjos* (change of angels), with little or no explicit references to demons or the entities of other religions.

6. This adversarial positioning in the religious marketplace is characteristic of Neo-pentecostalism, amplifying a tendency, already prominent within mainstream Pentecostalism, to turn away from identification with tradition (Barrera Rivera 2001). This is apparent in the possession rituals themselves, which, in Candomblé, involve a link to the past but which, in Pentecostalism, tends to reject tradition and the past (Rabelo 2005, 30–31).

exorcism. Before the service, the pastor sat at a table on the main floor at the side of the stage, and individual members of the congregation went up, sat and consulted with him.

Broadly, the service itself had four segments: an introductory lecture on the healing role of faith; a group exorcism; an individual exorcism of a particularly problematic case; and a concluding lecture, with a strong emphasis on the value of contributing the tithe of 10%. During the group exorcism, the congregation was asked to come to the front of the church, to the foot of the stage. (When the church is full, this is not done.) Then, with the pastor's voice mounting in intensity, we were led in an increasingly energetic set of exercises, dispelling demons each from our own heads with our hands while yelling "Out! Out! Out! (*"Sai! Sai! Sai!"*), then attacking the expelled demons, pushing them away with our hands, while yelling "Burn! Burn! Burn!" (*"Queima! Queima! Queima!"*). During this process, a dozen or more members of the crowd manifested especially energetic signs of possession, crying out, twitching, and rolling on the ground. The pastor and his assistants ministered individually to most of these people. The physical movement of the possessed were similar in many ways to those of mediums undergoing possession in Umbanda rituals, sudden twitches as if shocked, closed eyes, rolling head, sudden dramatic gestures.

The pastor selected one of the more intensely possessed people, a young woman, and she was led up on stage for the individual exorcism. First, the pastor bound the possessed woman in spiritual chains by making wrapping motions around her body, without touching her. This was marked by the phrase: "It's tied up!" (*"Tá amarrado!"*).[7] Then the pastor began to interview the demon (the leader of over 20,000 demons currently possessing the woman as it turned out). He asked a series of questions, holding out the microphone for the demon to respond after each question, in a manner very similar to that of television talk show hosts.[8] He inquired after the name of the main demon, the nature of the ills it was causing, its manner of acting, and whether it possessed the woman by its own choice or through the ritual activities of a malevolent person. The demon was identified as a spirit of

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7. On the significance of this phrase in Brazilian Neo-pentecostalism, see Campos 1999, 337; Mariano 1999, 145.
8. The dualism and exorcism techniques draw to some extent on American dominion theology (Mariano 1999, 137).

Umbanda that had possessed the woman when she made an ill-advised visit to a *terreiro* in search of spiritual advice. The demon and its associates were then expelled, the entire congregation assisting, making the same basic motions and yelling the same words that we had used to exorcise ourselves.

At that point, I realized that the similarity with Umbanda was more than superficial. The exact same spirits were possessing people in both cases. The difference lies in how these same spirits are framed by the two belief systems: for the Umbandist, they are spiritually advanced and helpful spirits; for the Neo-pentecostal, they are evil-working demons. I had noted this point in passing in the Brazilian literature on Neo-pentecostalism (Campos 1999, 345; Mariano 1999, 127; Oro 2007). The founder of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, Edir Macedo, underlines this point himself: "In many of our meetings . . . we see a dark and sombre scene, a true display of hell. If someone were to arrive at the moment in which these people are being liberated, they might even think that they are in a centre of macumba [Afro-Brazilian religion], and it really does look like it" (Macedo 2000, 108). As I joined the congregation in expelling precisely the sort of "demon" that I myself had consulted in an Umbandist ritual days before, I had a sudden insight. The important point was not the similarity between these rituals, but their differences. In the Universal Church, participants do not queue for ritual services; participants are not recruited for more central ritual roles; possession is involuntary; spirits are defined as malevolent; the primary agent, the pastor is not possessed; and very few participants have any direct ritual contact with the pastor. The diametrically opposed framing of spirits reflects not only differing doctrine, but also alternative constructions of ritual form.

In sum, my fieldwork led to two insights. First, ritual form in Umbanda can be fruitfully compared to ritual form in Brazilian secular contexts. Second, ritual form embodies similarities and differences between different Brazilian spirit possession religions, specifically Umbanda and Neo-pentecostalism. This led to a basic question that would guide the interplay with theory: how does ritual form mediate between religion and society in the case of Brazilian spirit possession religions?

Theory in Dialogue[9]

These two insights and the question that they produced offered an initial pointer in attempting to select among the panoply of theoretical resources in ritual theory. On the one hand, even initial descriptions already presuppose a certain amount of prior theorizing: for example in the concept of agency and in distinctions between form and content, ritual and social contexts. On the other hand, these initial steps (highlighting certain ritual features and providing a very preliminary sense of the phenomena with which they will be correlated) do not go very far in selecting among theoretical approaches. They privilege certain classes of approaches within ritual theory over others, but the task of choosing specific approaches remains.

In general, given my original insight regarding the potential close relation between religious and secular ritual in Brazil. This involves analyzing more that the relations between religious beliefs and religious actions. (Of course, this path was foreclosed by the choice to focus on people of one religion visiting the religions of others.) In addition, it is important to underline that clients, often the same people, seek out both Umbanda's spirit consultations and the Universal Church's "unloading sessions" in order to address the what they see as problems in their lives. As many anthropologists have noted, making sense of rituals of healing involves paying attention to cultural context: "as healing is fundamentally concerned with the reconstitution of physical, social, and spiritual order, it cannot be meaningfully examined if isolated from the wider sociocultural system" (Comaroff 1980, 639). Moreover, the intersection of possession and healing foregrounds issues of identity: "the definition of illness in the demonic mode constitutes a process that can lead to the negation of the 'normal' Self as this is socially constructed and culturally typified" (Kapferer 1979, 110).

Specifically, three factors stood out in my initial description of the phenomena of interest. First, my focus was on ritual form. This obviously led away from the many theorists that analyze ritual as communication (e.g., Leach, van Gennep, Geertz, Turner and Rappaport) and toward more recent work that emphasizes formal aspects of ritual (see Kreinath 2006; Laidlaw and Humphrey 2006; Severi 2006). Second, I was interested in how ritual

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9. This section draws in part on (Engler Forthcoming).

form mediates, in both directions, between participants and their broad social context. Third, I was interested in the issue of agency as a factor in this mediation.

A variety of approaches might be taken and prove productive. For example, the strong parallel between Brazilian rituals of possession and theatrical performances suggests the value of performance approaches to ritual (Schechner 1985; Grimes 2004; Wulf 2006, 397–402). I initially put some thought and effort into this direction. However, performance theories' prominent emphasis on symbolic communication and social function did not foreground the issues of agency and ritual form that emerged as points of interest.

Two themes in recent ritual theory seemed to offer more obvious potential value in addressing these three factors. First, some work draws attention to the ways in which ritual form acts upon the field of social relations by offering an independent relational space. Michael Houseman and Carlo Severi focus on the organizational features of ritual action, not on issues of meaning. They focus on the social context that ritual creates:

> What is really necessary is to consider the organization of ritual action itself, that is, the *form* or structure of ritualization as such. For us, the distinctive property of ritualization is to be sought in the particularly complex interactions that it brings into play . . . [I]t is the form of the *relational* field in which the protagonists are engaged which underlies the establishment of a context specific to ritual behaviour (Houseman and Severi 1998, 167).

They argue that ritual acts out special relationships, and that this is what sets it apart from non-ritualized action:

> the actions which define these relationships are undertaken in accordance with an interactive scheme that provides the ritual episode as a whole with a particular relational form. . . . To the degree that ritual performances incorporate . . . exceptional situations, they become readily recognizable as distinct from everyday interaction: they can not be fully accounted for in terms of ordinary internalities and patterns of relationship (Houseman 2006, 418–419).

Bruce Kapferer similarly focuses on "ritual as a technical practice rather than a representational formation" (Kapferer 2006b, 672). He uses the concept of 'virtuality' to characterize the social field of ritual. The virtuality of ritual creates

a self-contained imaginal space . . . a construction that enables participants to break free from the constraints or determinations of everyday life. . . . In this sense, the virtuality of ritual may be described as a form that is anti-determinant but paradoxically enables new kinds or forms of determinations to emerge. That is, it overcomes those determinations that may inhibit or prevent the capacity of human beings to act and to constitute their realities. The phantasmagoric space of ritual virtuality may be conceived as a space . . . whose dynamic not only interrupts prior determining processes but also ... [within] which participants can reimagine (and redirect or reorient themselves) in the everyday circumstances of life (Kapferer 2006b, 673–674); see also (Kapferer 2004, 47).

This emphasis on the virtuality of ritual does not make it secondary, nor does it frame the relation of virtual to 'real' as one of representation:

the virtual of ritual is a thoroughgoing reality of its own, neither a simulacrum of realities external to ritual nor an alternative reality. It bears a connection to ordinary, lived realities, as depth to surface. . . . [R]itual as a virtuality, a dynamic process in and of itself with no essential representational symbolic relation to external realities—that is, a coded symbolic formation whose interpretation or meaning is ultimately reducible to the sociopolitical and psychological world outside the ritual context (Kapferer 2004, 37, 46).

The concept of ritual virtuality "implies neither that . . . [ritual] is a model of or for reality, as in a Geertzian . . . interpretation. Nor that it is an abstract model of reality . . . Such perspectives always locate the potency of rite elsewhere" (Kapferer 2002, 118). The key idea here is that the virtuality of ritual allows it "to realize human constructive agency" (Kapferer 2004, 47).

The second pertinent theme in recent ritual theory is a more nuanced perspective on the relation between intention and action. Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw shift emphasis from 'ritual' to 'ritualization.'[10] They note that the sequences of actions that constitute ritual are learned independent of their meanings, the latter tending to be applied after the fact (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994). They argue that entering into ritual, undergoing ritualization, transforms the relation between action and intentionality: the ritualization of action . . . consists in it becoming non-intentional, stipulated, and elemental

10. Catherine Bell's emphasis on 'ritualization' does not offer as useful an account of the specific effect of ritualization, in part due to the circularity of her constructionist approach (Bell 1992, 1997; Engler 2004, 303–304; Grimes 2004, 123–125).

or archetypal" (Laidlaw and Humphrey 2006, 278). That is, rituals unhook the normal relation between intentions and actions that holds in non-ritual contexts: ritual actions are not intended in the same way that regular actions are. Rituals stipulate a sequence of actions prior to the individual ritual actor, resulting in its perceived elemental or archetypal quality.

Maurice Bloch helps to clarify this link between non-intentionality and the archetypal quality of ritualized action in a way that allows for clearer use in a broader set of cases. He agrees that intentionality is displaced when action is ritualized: "any act . . . that appears to originate fully from the actor cannot properly be called ritual" (Bloch 2005; 2006, 496). He clarifies this by noting that rituals involve extensive quotation or deference: "reliance on the authority of others to guarantee the value of what is said or done" (Bloch 2006, 497). In this light, tradition serves as a "phantasmogoric quasi-person" that guides ritual regardless of individual intentions (Bloch 2006, 504). Bloch echoes Humphrey and Laidlaw regarding the non-intentional, stipulated, and archetypal quality of ritualized action, but he is more specific regarding the cognitive mechanism involved. He also offers a more explicit bridge to discussions of one of the crucial psychological, social and ideological functions of ritual: "when one is in trouble and does not know what to do, one allows oneself to be taken over by the knowledge and the authority of others" (Bloch 2006, 506).

These two themes in ritual theory provide a vantage point from which to reflect back on the initial description of the phenomena under consideration. In terms of the first theme, the virtuality of ritual, seen more specifically in terms of its ability to create a space of relational forms distinct from everyday interaction, takes on a particular form in the case of Umbanda. On one occasion, a spirit that I consulted had possessed a person that I knew socially. In a certain sense, I knew this person, though I had not known until that moment that he was an Umbandist medium. In another sense, I had never met this person before: he talked in an altered voice, went by a different name, talked of different subjects, and showed no sign of knowing me. Whether one knows the medium or not, whether the medium is having an authentic trance experience or, hypothetically, faking the whole thing, the possession ritual creates a disjunction in the normal horizontal, peer relations that play such an important role in Brazilian society.

What remains is an idealized patron-client relationship, untouched by the personal ties and obligations that, however beneficial, inevitably

introduce elements of contingency and unpredictability into the secular rituals that Umbanda so effectively evokes. From the point of view of clients, the spirit is a patron, but one uniquely outside the normal sphere of social relations. The rich, complex, productive, reciprocal, demanding social ties that are so important in Brazilian society do not apply in the relation between client and spirit (who transcends social location) nor between client and medium (as the latter is not actively present in the social interaction). The displacement of the medium's agency, its substitution by the agency of the spirit, invokes a curious sort of transcendence: assistance from a higher power becomes available without the trappings of personal relations; the spirit is like and unlike a powerful patron in Brazilian society, able to assist those who seek favours, but outside the web of their social relations.

In terms of the second theme, displacement of intentionality is particularly sharp in the case of possession rituals. These rituals present an important qualification to Bloch's suggestion that deference is most effective when authority is seen as trailing off into the distance. The function of that distancing—paradigmatically accomplished through the evocation of tradition—is to gradually widen the gap between intention and action. With respect to the identity and actions of the medium, however, possession rituals accomplish this in one sharp disjuncture. Here the finger of deference points not into the hazy distance but directly at the mediums who sit before us, and the authority of deference is evoked because those people, quite literally, are not themselves.

Both these ritual theoretical themes offer important further insights. In addition, however, that the case of spirit possession adds something new to these theoretical perspectives: a different dimension of virtuality than that discussed by Kapferer; a type of alternate relational space quite distinct from that discussed by Houseman and Severi; a different sort of disjuncture between intention and action through ritualization than that envisioned by Humphrey and Laidlaw and one that manifests the function noted by Bloch in a distinct and more radical way. This point underlines an important limitation in ritual theory. As Michael Stausberg notes,

> the construction of theories of ritual often departs from specific rituals
> . . . as explicit (or implicit) prototypes for 'ritual' in the process of theorizing. . .
> Grounding the theory in the analysis of a specific ritual often makes the theory
> richer, but at the same time runs the risk of unduly emphasizing aspects that may

be less important or even absent in many other cases, or taking aspects that are possibly more characteristic for a certain class of rituals such as initiations or liturgies as characteristic for 'ritual' as such (Stausberg 2007, xviii).

One manner to address limitation would be to attempt to construct theories based on a broad sample of types and examples of rituals. Another, more modest in scope, is that attempted here: to bring promising theoretical approaches into dialogue with additional types of ritual, testing their value and supplementing their conceptual frame.

In light of this brief dialogue between theory and observation, the "unloading session" at the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God stands in stark contrast with the spirit consultations of Umbanda. First, and foremost, the ritual role of the spirits is altered from primary agent in Umbanda to the passive subject of the exorcism ritual presided over by the Pastor. Second, where the spiritual triage in Umbanda underlines that clients have the potential talent to be recruited as mediums, the Universal Church explicitly heads off this dimension of the agency of ritual participants: those who have previously served as mediums in other Brazilian possession religions are told to "avoid giving consultations and put yourself in your true position—someone who is starting out like a child in a new life. Be obedient to the norms of the Church, to the pastors and leaders that Jesus has placed in charge of her" (Macedo 2000, 125). Third, this undermining of the agency of clients is directly correlated with the normative reconceptualization of the spirits with whom that agency is linked. The often explicit invitation in Umbanda to join the ranks and become a medium oneself, along with the secondary rituals that clients are instructed to perform at home, link the ritual agency of participants to the hypothesized agency of the spirits. By defining the latter as malevolent, the Universal Church cuts the foundation out from under the former. Fourth, the spatial boundary between audience/participants and the main ritual area functions very differently in the two cases. In Umbanda, the boundary is at first sharp (clients wait in their seats for the possession ritual) then porous in a one-way direction (all those waiting enter the main ritual space for consultations). In the Universal Church, the boundary remains sharp throughout the ritual (those attended remain on the main floor and do not come up onto the stage), with one important exception,

a very limited two-way crossing of that boundary: the Pastor comes down onto the main floor to assist in the group exorcism, and takes a single person back for the individual exorcism.[11] These various factors suggest a basic contrast: Umbanda emphasizes the agency of ritual participants, their moving within and potentially moving up a hierarchical and transcendent patron-client relationship; the Universal Church emphasizes the agency of God, and of the Pastor as his agent. This is correlated with the fact that no fees and charged in Umbanda where a rigorous tithing is characteristic of the Universal Church.

In sum, the possession rituals of Umbanda and the Universal Church both model alternative conceptions of the hierarchical patron-client relations that are prominent in Brazilian society. Umbanda offers a purified version, in which the transcendent patronage of spirits is cut free from the competing axis of horizontal peer and family relations. The Universal Church replaces the patronage system with a more business-like frame: the clients' own role becomes entirely passive, but the fairness, incorruptibility, and efficacy of the service provider is above reproach. The rituals of Umbanda invite you into a sacred parlour, purified of worldly social relations, and with an invitation to help serve the other guests; the rituals of the Universal Church place you at a sacred counter, purified of worldly social relations, purchasing services from a particularly aggressive competitor in the market of healing rituals. The Neo-pentecostal churches claim that their product is unique: if only they recognize the true nature of the malevolent spirits that they exorcise, then only their healing rituals are efficacious. By creating a ritual space where the agency of participants is emphasized, Umbanda brings an element of "do-it-yourself" into healing rituals. By holding that only God (and his agents the Pastors) have spiritual agency, the Universal Church simultaneously undermines the claims of its rivals and justifies what are effectively exorbitant charges for its services.

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11. There are additional complications, of course. Family members or friends of the possessed individual are sometimes brought up on stage to provide additional information of the case history. Multi-pastor ceremonies can conduct multiple individual exorcisms simultaneously.

Conclusion

This paper adopted a particular meta-theoretical stance, one that has become increasingly prominent in the study of religion, in order to begin a process of analyzing two contrasting Brazilian possession rituals. Rather than starting with a definition of ritual, a focus on some set of the functions or ritual, or an overarching theory, I identified certain significant aspects of the rituals and drew upon a range of theoretical approaches that seemed promising as ways to make sense of these features. This led to a more nuanced analysis of the ritual phenomena, identifying a further set of features that warranted a closer look. This in turn leads (as explored in a separate paper) to a further engagement with more specific conceptual resources. This way of using ritual theory is particularly dynamic. The tactical use of theory clarifies cases, and clearer cases lead to a refined use of theory. Theory is not first posited then applied to cases, nor are cases analyzed in order to generate theory. Rather, there is a dynamic interplay between these two movements.

This approach fits within what an important recent work characterizes as "theorizing rituals":

> Whereas the aim of ritual theory is to articulate a particular set of hypotheses and to draw conceptual boundaries as precisely as possible, the project of theorizing rituals is an open project. It has an emergent quality. Theorizing rituals is a reflective and reflexive process. It is reflective in that it reflects upon its own procedures, trying to improve and adjust them when necessary. However, it is reflexive in that it does not claim to have a neutral, 'objective' stance, but rather points to, and perhaps even questions, its own position within scholarly discourse as such. . . . It is not located before 'the real things' happen (such as in fieldwork), nor does it occur afterwards, nor is it 'the real thing' itself (Kreinath, Snoek, and Stausberg 2006, xxii–xxiii).

The appeal to certain "paradigmatic concepts" is characteristic of this approach: "these concepts do not derive from the available market of theoretical production so much as they mark the middle ground between scholarly discourse and some apparent features of rituals" (Kreinath, Snoek, and Stausberg 2006, xxiii). Theorizing rituals is characterized by the interplay between cases, concepts and theories. That is, theories are not frameworks to be applied to cases; rather, theoretical approaches are

necessarily caught up in a dialogical "link to the 'bare' features of ritual" (Kreinath, Snoek, and Stausberg 2006, xxiv).

In the case examined here, two initial insights led to a research question. Certain theoretical approaches appeared promising for providing leverage on this specific aspect of the possession rituals. Considering the case in light of these approaches led to a clearer conceptualization of the research question. It also resulted in the clarification or supplementation of these theoretical approaches. The more nuanced analysis that results from this process then allows to us search for further theoretical approaches that suggest themselves as likely to take this process to the next level, that is, to offer further leverage on analyzing the more focused research question. This process is an open ended one, with the further back and forth between more nuanced interpretations or explanations of a case and further theoretical approaches leading to further insights. In the case at hand, the next step would be to specify more clearly the precise elements of ritual form that lead to these alternative conceptions of social relations.

With our eye to the reflexive dimension of theorizing rituals, one aspect of performance theory offers a useful analogy for the process of theorizing rituals that this paper has explored. Richard Schechner suggests that, in light of Victor Turner's theory, ritual is in many ways more like rehearsal than performance: the "ritual process is strictly analogous to the training-workshop-rehearsal process in which the 'givens' or 'ready-mades' (accepted texts, accepted ways of using the body, accepted feelings) are deconstructed, broken down into malleable bits of behavior, feeling, thought and text and then reconstructed into public performances" (see Schechner 1985, 99–105, 287–288; 1987, 23). The approach modeled in this paper is a rehearsal in this sense, taking apart the givens of ethnographic description and ritual theory in order to bring certain elements of each into a productive dialogue, and recognizing that false starts are parts of the process. Academic rituals of presentation and publication are, for the most part, polished performances. However, here where, as is generally the case with ritual, the audience participates in the same performance, it makes sense to recognize that we are all engaged in rehearsal.

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