

Panel 15: Faith and Spiritual Nourishment

1. Jose Carlos G. Aguiar, Leiden U [j.c.g.aguiar@hum.leidenuniv.nl]

On the Gender of Death and Bones: Popular Culture and the Identity of Santa Muerte

Since the early 2000s, images and shrines devoted to the Santa Muerte started to mushroom all across Mexico. Santa Muerte is a folk saint believed to be protector of criminals, drug traffickers, prostitutes, street vendors and single mothers. “Everybody is welcome”, say the altar keepers on the sexual and gender identities of the devotees. Transexual women and men, as much as same-sex couples have found a patron saint in Santa Muerte. In fact, the gender identity of Santa Muerte is as diffuse and fluid as that of the devotees: Santa Muerte is often presented as a protective mother, some kind of inversion of the iconic Virgen de Guadalupe, or as a sensual young woman. Yet, Santa Muerte possesses attributes and powers believed to belong to men. Although popular religion has historically included some degree of sexual/gender anomaly, Santa Muerte is, as a cultural icon, representative of a larger process. This paper demonstrates the extent the devotion to Santa Muerte challenges dominant perceptions of gender and sexual identity, and the way sexual diversity is portrayed in the popular culture of contemporary Mexico.

Jose Carlos G. Aguiar holds a Ph.D. from the University of Amsterdam, 2007. He is an anthropologist specialized in urban studies, street economies, illegality, piracy, intellectual property and borderlands. He has conducted extensive fieldwork in Latin America and China. Aguiar holds a tenured position at Leiden University, where he is director of Latin American Studies. Aguiar has been distinguished as National Researcher (level 1), Consejo Nacional para la Ciencia y Tecnología (CONACyT), Mexico. He spent research stays at the Free University of Berlin (2012, 2013), and Colegio de México (2015). He has also served as councilor for the Society for Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology, section of the American Anthropological Association. www.josecarlosaguiar.com

2. Henrique de Oliveira Lee, U Federal do Mato Grosso [holiveiralee@gmail.com]

Writings of the Self through Mystical Experience within Santo Daime

This presentation will be presenting partial results of the research project on “Writings of the self and mystical experience within Santo Daime”. This research is funded by FAPEMAT, a Brazilian state agency for research funding and technology development. Santo Daime is a Brazilian religion based on syncretic symbols of popular Christianity, Amazonian indigenous shamanism and afro Brazilian mediunic incorporation. During the Santo Daime’s cults ayahuasca (a indigenous brew made out by leafs and vime) is consumed producing intense mystical experience as it is accounted by the rituals participants. Whether in an anthropological approach or in a pharmacological frame, there are much scientific attention to all religion practice evolving the use of ayahuasca nowadays in Brazil. Despite of these main approaches to the phenomenon of ayahuasca consumption this research project points at other epistemological direction while it investigates how a mystical experience is built as a written account of oneself. In some cases there is a remarkable connection between having a mystical experience and being

compelled to give an account of oneself. In this first stage of the research we investigate published material by two authors who have written accounts on their experiences within Santo Daime's rituals. The first is the poet and ex-participant of guerrilla movement in Brazil Alex Polari. He has published the book "O guia da floresta" in 1992 as an autobiographical account of his first experience in the Santo Daime community in the middle of the Brazilian rain forest. The second is the Argentinian anthropologist and also poet Nestor Perlongher who lived in Brazil and took part in a research group on ayahuasca but the account of his mystical experience is mostly in the genre of essay in a book "Prosa plebéia". My goal for this proposal is to investigate in both texts how the mystical experience is bound to an intense process of redescription of the self which compelled these two authors to give written accounts of themselves.

Escritas do eu através da experiência mística dentro do Santo Daime

Este trabalho apresentará resultados parciais da pesquisa "Escritas do eu e experiência mística dentro do Santo Daime". Essa pesquisa é financiada pela FAPEMAT, agência do estado de Mato Grosso para financiamento de pesquisa e tecnologia. O Santo Daime é uma religião brasileira baseada no sincretismo de símbolos do cristianismo popular, xamanismo indígena amazônico e incorporações mediúnicas de religiões afro-brasileiras. Durante os cultos do Santo Daime a ayahuasca (bebida indígena feita da cocção entre um cipó e folhas) é consumida produzindo intensas experiências místicas tal como nos é relatado pelos participantes do ritual. Seja numa abordagem antropológica ou farmacológica, já existem diversas pesquisas científicas atualmente em todas as diversas religiões brasileiras que envolvem o uso da ayahuasca. A despeito dessas principais abordagens ao fenômeno do consumo da ayahuasca, este projeto aponta para uma outra direção epistemológica ao investigar como a experiência mística é construída como um relato de si escrito. Em alguns casos, há uma notável correlação entre se ter uma experiência mística e sentir-se compelido a escrever um relato de si. No primeiro estágio desta pesquisa investigamos o material publicado por dois autores que escreveram relatos sobre sua experiência nos rituais do Santo Daime. O primeiro caso é do poeta e ex-guerrilheiro Alex Polari, que publicou o livro "O guia da Floresta" em 1992 como um relato autobiográfico de suas primeiras experiências em uma comunidade do Santo Daime localizada em meio à floresta amazônica. O segundo caso é o do antropólogo argentino, e também poeta, Nestor Perlongher, que viveu no Brasil e participou de um grupo de pesquisa sobre o uso ritualístico da ayahuasca. O relato de sua experiência mística foi feita majoritariamente no gênero do ensaio em trechos do seu livro "Prosa plebeya". O objetivo deste trabalho é investigar em ambos textos como a experiência mística está ligada a um intenso processo de redescrição do eu compelindo esses autores a produzir relatos de si escritos.

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3. Zeinab McHeimech, Western U [mcheimech@gmail.com]

Talismans and Fragments of Enslaved African Muslim Women in the Americas

Between 1809 and 1835 approximately twenty slave revolts took place in Bahia, Brazil; the most substantial uprising was known as the Malê revolt of 1835, or the Muslim revolt, where as many as 500 rebels were involved (Gomez 103). Although women were involved in the rebellion, their role remains largely indiscernible in historical documents since, as historian João José Reis contends, “[w]omen were conspicuously absent from Malê rituals” (1993, 107). Despite the underrepresentation of the black female Muslim slave in the archives, her presence can still be illuminated through traces and fragments. This paper takes as its site of inquiry a few of those fragments found in runaway slave notices (compiled by Lathan A. Windley) and transcripts of the trials of Conceição da Praia, Brazil (cited in Reis’s *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*). I will focus on the complex and fraught roles of black female Muslims in the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade and in the wider Islamic community. Indeed, in the face of violence, exploitation, dispersal, and separation, enslaved African Muslim women turned to their faith to contest the risk of erasure. More specifically, I suggest that these remarkable women deployed an Islamic epistemology—evident in their dress and distribution of Islamic talismans—to retain a sense of identity and to counter a system that negated their personhood.

Gomez, Michael A. *Black crescent: the experience and legacy of African Muslims in the Americas*, Cambridge, N.Y. 2005.

Reis, João. *Slave rebellion in Brazil: the Muslim uprising of 1835 in Bahia*, Baltimore, London 1993.

Windley, Lathan (compiler). *Runaway slave advertisements: a documentary history from the 1730s to 1790, Vol. 3*, South Carolina 1983.

Talismãs e fragmentos de africanas muçulmanas escravizadas nas Américas

Entre 1809 e 1835, aproximadamente 20 revoltas de escravos ocorreram no estado da Bahia, no Brasil, sendo a mais significativa a Revolta dos Malês de 1835, na qual aproximadamente 500 rebeldes estavam envolvidos (Gomez 103). Embora as mulheres estivessem envolvidas na rebelião, seus papéis ainda permanecem amplamente indiscerníveis em documentos históricos já que, como o historiador João José Reis afirma, "mulheres eram claramente ausentes dos rituais malês" (1993, 107). Apesar da pequena representatividade das escravas negras muçulmanas nos arquivos, sua presença ainda pode ser iluminada através de traços e fragmentos. Este artigo toma como campo de investigação um pouco dos fragmentos encontrados em anúncios de escravos fugidos (compilados por Lathan A. Windley) e transcritos dos julgamentos de Conceição da Praia, no Brasil (citado em *Slave Rebellion in Brazil* de Reis). Eu focarei nos complexos e tensos papéis de negras muçulmanas nas Américas durante o comércio de escravos transatlântico e na comunidade islâmica. Certamente, diante da violência, exploração, dispersão e separação, muçulmanas escravizadas recorreram a sua fé para contestar o risco de supressão. Mais especificamente, eu sugiro que essas notáveis mulheres instalaram uma epistemologia islâmica — evidente em sua vestimenta e distribuição de talismãs islâmicos — para conservar um senso de identidade e combater um sistema que negou sua individualidade.

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Zeinab is a PhD candidate in the English department at Western University. In her dissertation, *Low Mutterings at High Tide*, she traces the figure of the Muslim slave in America and within the broader context of transatlantic passages. Her research focuses on autobiography and Arabic writings.