

Original article

The construction of meaning in religious healing

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Abstract

The present paper addresses the production of meaning in religious healing. Using ethnographic examples from research among Pentecostals and adepts of Afro-Brazilian religion, it poses three main questions that are held essential for the study of religious healing. The first question deals with the concept of understanding: what do we mean when we affirm that the therapeutic practices promoted by religious groups transform people's understanding of their affliction? The second develops this issue further, examining the close relation between meaning and the senses in the construction and maintenance of the identity of the healed person: what are the relations between the sensuous experiences cultivated in therapeutic contexts such as healing rituals and the attribution of new meanings for experience? The third question addresses the role of objects in the making of the intersubjective agreements that sustain the transformation of meaning: how are we to understand the participation of material objects in the therapeutic scene?

Keywords

religious healing; the construction of meaning; embodiment; sensibility

Studies produced in the scope of anthropology and sociology of the health have shown the importance of religions in the processes of interpretation and healing of afflictions in the most diversified societies and historical times. In Brazil, the situation is not different: there are various references to the therapeutic practices developed in religious groups in the country (RABELO *et al.*, 1997; MINAYO, 1994; MAUÉS, 1994; RABELO, 1994, 1993; GREENFIELD, 1992; ALVES, 1990; HALE, 1990; NGOKWEY, 1989; DROOGERS, 1989; MONTERO, 1985; NEVES, 1984; QUEIROZ, 1980; WILLIAMS, 1979; MONTEIRO, 1977) and their importance to health for a huge part of the population has not been ignored by social scientists (CANESQUI, 1994; GREENFIELD, 1992; QUEIROZ, 1980; LOYOLA, 1983; NGOKWEY, 1989). Religious treatments seldom appear next to biomedicine in the path of many ill patients. (KLEINMAN, 1981; HARREL, 1991). As with any other form of "treatment", they involve a circuit of communication in which messages are exchanged between at least two participants – the therapist and his client. Comparing

religious treatments with biomedical ones, many researchers observe that the former invest much more in communication, managing to produce an intersubjective agreement which is frequently absent from biomedical approaches (COMAROFF, 1980, 1985; TAUSSIG, 1980; KLEINMAN, 1981). This assertion is used both to explain the dissatisfaction that many patients feel in relation to the care they receive by health professionals, and to substantiate the conclusion that the success of religious therapies lies on their ability to change the way ill individuals understand and position themselves before their afflictions – in their communication capacity, we can say.

In this article I wish to address the question of the production of meaning in the contexts of religious treatment. I am using the term treatment here to include the measures and interventions developed by religious groups in the solution of the afflictions of their followers and/or clients. These measures may constitute a very restricted field of practice inside the group or be confused with other existing practices. They may be carried out by others for the patient,

or on him, or they may be performed by the latter as part of an effort to get cured. Frequently they are associated with a broader project of transformation, in which the ideal of the sound person gets mixed with that of the person saved, with a “closed (protected) body”, etc., with the broadest identity project of religion. In the current discussion, I will be giving priority not to specific events of healing, but to such events in their connection with the project of transformation subjacent to religious groups.

My purpose is not to go deeply into the contrast between religion and Medicine, in relation to the subject of therapy. And it is not to make distinctions in the field of religious therapies, based on the type of communication they cultivate. I rather intend - departing from ethnographic examples originated from the research with Pentecostal and *Candomblé* groups – to address some questions which I consider essential for the understanding of the processes of communication developed in religious treatments. More precisely, I would like to discuss three questions. The first is related to the concept of comprehension (a fundamental concept, when we consider the subject of communication). What do we mean when we affirm that the therapeutic practices promoted by religious groups change the manner by which the ill individuals understand their problem? How to understand the building of this new understanding? The second develops further the theme of understanding, exploring the link between sensitiveness and meaning in the building and maintenance of the sound person’s identity. What is the connection between the sensitive experiences lived and cultivated in therapeutic contexts with healing rituals and the building of new meanings to affliction? The third question approaches the role of the objects in the building of intersubjective agreements which define and guarantee the transformation of the meaning. How to understand the presence and participation of a set of objects that are many times much diversified in the sceneries and interaction (rituals, meetings) related to treatment? Or rather, which is the place of these objects in the meaning and production of the meaning?

Body and understanding

As I have already pointed out above, there is a certain consensus, among the authors who research the interlink between religion and therapy, that religious healing practices are practices of significance which act to transform the meaning of the affliction experienced by their clients (CSORDAS, 1983; DANFORTH, 1989; DROOGERS, 1989; GLIK, 1988; GREENFIELD, 1992; HALE, 1990; HESS, 1989; KAPFERER, 1979, 1991; KATZ, 1982; MACGUIRE, 1983;

WARREN, 1984). In this section, I would like to reflect on this idea, scrutinizing the meaning of understanding. I am going to do it departing from an example of *Candomblé*, describing a ritual which aims at re-establishing the equilibrium of the person, frequently recommended as part of a set of a broader set of therapeutic measures.

Bori is a ritual of feeding the head or *ori*, a sacred entity in *Candomblé*, worshipped as locus of the individuality. It strengthens the *ori* and, therefore, firms the head of the individual, bringing the necessary equilibrium to his health, and, if it is the case, enabling him to receive his Orisha (it, thus, precedes any process of initiation or making). It involves a sequence of offers to the kola nut, *obi*, its natural food. The ritual starts in the evening. Sitting on stools or on a mat, those who give the *bori* (or that are the target of the *ro*) have their heads washed with a good smelling infusion of fresh leaves. A sequence of dishes with grains is offered to the head, and collected into a bowl *-igbá-ori* – which each one holds on the lap. Cooked corn, blood of a sacrificed dove and slices of *obi* (kola nut) are placed on the head. The person is given a piece of *obi* to chew and the same is done by the “mother-of-saint”¹ and the member of the *terreiro* (backyard) chosen as his godmother or godfather in the *bori*. The pieces chewed are then spit in the mother-of-saint’s hand, around which a belt of white cloth is tied up. When the ritual is finished, the “borizados” lay down on the mats covered with blankets and they must spend the night and most of the subsequent day resting, being fed with food related to the *ori* – most of it being fruits. For almost a full day, they rest, and eat. During this period they receive visitors from the *terreiro*, talk a little and share with them the fruits of the *bori*. It is common that some of the “children-of-saint” receive their orishas (be possessed) when they come to visit the “borizados” (the individuals who have undergone the *bori*). These are, then, greeted by the gods. Almost when the evening falls, the mother-of-saint comes to “suspend” (finalize) the *bori*: she unties the belt of cloth which holds the food offerings to the head, collects the corn grains in a bowl and washes her “children”’s heads with water. After this, the latter take a bath and receive a set of behavior and food prescriptions which they must follow as part of their resting period.

It is worth now to ask ourselves about the movement of understanding that the *bori* sets. Is it the transmission of new contents or information?

The *bori* is not an open (public) ritual; in addition to the novices (who are offering food to their heads) only people who have already being submitted to the *bori* can be present; generally only the members of the *terreiro* are present. In spite of this restricted character, the ritual, actually, does not

introduce to the participants any new information which they do not already know from the day-to-day life in the *terreiro* or during the public ceremonies (with which even the outside clients usually are familiar). It points to the circuits of reciprocity operating in the *terreiro* through the offer of food, exposes the relationship between people and gods, as well as the hierarchy prevailing in *Candomblé*. In order to understand how the ritual involves the participants in the production of new meanings we must go beyond the notion of communication as an activity of transmission and capture of contents towards an idea of joint participation and engagement in the contexts of meaning; from a notion of understanding as an intellectual activity towards a notion of practical understanding, in which the body plays an essential role².

A brief examination of the central experiences (for the participants) of resting and eating helps us to understand this point. Rest defines the predominant framing during all the reclusion period after the performance of the *bori*: although many other things happen during this period, the action tends to be seen under the back-cloth of rest, be it as a break in this general disposition, be it as an event driving it back to it. Resting is an important part of any ritual procedure developed in *Candomblé*; it is the "natural" sequence of the activity developed in the performance. Submitted to manipulation during the ritual, the body is vulnerable: the person cannot resume his daily activities before resting, and some protective measures must be taken to ensure a smooth return to the daily routine. The passivity of rest is, in itself, a redressing of the necessary strength for the recovery of the equilibrium of the head (*ori*).

Therefore, after the night performance, the room is occupied by bodies which are either laid down or sat on the floor. There is almost no movement beyond the mats; the participants seldom stand up – and when it is necessary to do it, there is always someone to accompany the *borizados*, who must walk with caution, covered with their sheets. Lying down under the sheets, they are involved in an atmosphere of undifferentiation. The mats delimit the place of rest; in the horizontal position, they are close to the floor. Horizontality and the absence of movement invite new ways of recognizing the space, a fusion (passive) with the environment, a surrender to a set of things (among which the participant is placed, and the docility and apparent inertia that is necessary to reach). Lying or sitting on the mats, the *borizados* are disposed like children, in need of care. They have also been located according to a hierarchy – a position in which their bodies are

recognized as occupying a position below, in relation to things they learned to approach from a vertical and an in-movement perspective, made submissive to the mother-of-saint and to the other children of the house, who may sit in chairs, stand up, and move around as they wish. Bathed and fed, and subsequently placed on the floor to rest, with little possibility of movement, the body is placed in a disposition appropriate for change.

By changing the way in which the novices are situated in the room, among other people, and gods and things, the *bori* promotes new ways of sensitiveness and understanding. As a whole, the reclusion period following the *bori* and which is very important to the participants, extends many of the measures of the night performance, developing the meanings then presented, and inviting to new ways of getting adapted to them. The passive position of the body, its contact with the floor, its closing and hiding under the sheets, the alternance of resisting and feeding periods (emphasis on basic corporal shapes of orientation in relation to time and space) contribute to opening a field of experience and understanding. But the understanding produced here is less of a capture of meaning than a corporal practice: the establishment of a tuning between the body and the environment, through which the former integrates to itself a situation, responding, and getting adapted to it.

We understand something, writes Merleau-Ponty, "*as we understand a new behaviour, i.e., not through an intellectual operation of subsumption, but retaking, on our account, the way of existence that the observable signs outline before us.*" Understanding is recognizing – to be touched or affected by the latent style proposed by the things and places. As I tried to demonstrate, it is exactly this dynamics of body recognition which is at stake in the *bori*.

The preparation of the body in the *bori* positions the individual in a space of experience and sociability. In this respect it may be understood as an important part of the process through which new meanings are integrated to the body, composing dispositions and orientation modes. The Australian anthropologist Michael Jackson develops a similar argument when examining the initiation practices among the Kuranko of Sierra Leone. According to the author, these rituals constitute instances of disorganization of the daily space, in which different ways of usage of the body work as triggers for the production of new images and confrontation with distinct possibilities of organization of the social life. Here is an important key to understand the religious approaches to affliction.

Sensitiveness and Meaning

In the definition of understanding outlined above, sensitiveness and understanding do not belong to two different fields of experience – the former, a passive capture of the sensory stimulus; the latter, an active construction of meaning. The sensitive corporal experience is *per se* a significant experience. This idea has important implications for an approach to meaning in religion.

As already observed, the practices of healing developed in religions are frequently associated with a broader project of the person's transformation. The construction of meaning along the events which surround healing is also a learning process through which the ill patient/potential follower is introduced to certain ways of establishing a relationship with other individuals, with the environment, and with his own suffering.

One of the ways of addressing this learning process is to understand it as a process through which individuals are led to internalize new contents of ideas or new interpretation patterns. The construction of meaning is a cognitive process which, in the case of religion, is facilitated or launched by the extraordinary contents presented in rituals. In this kind of approach, meaning is equivalent to representation: religions modify the manner through which individuals position themselves before affliction, as it impresses on them a new stock of concepts and beliefs. Clients are potential followers who learn - acquire contents – during the course of their participation in the various events inside religious groups.

I wish to introduce here an alternative to this approach. Following closely the argument developed by INGOLD (2000) I suggest that, contrary to the position outlined above, religions manage to transform the experience of affliction as they provide to their members and / or clients contexts in which they may develop new skills and sensitiveness. An experimented practitioner, INGOLD (2000) states, does not transmit to the novice or beginner a body of knowledge: his role is rather to provide the contexts in which the latter may develop proficiency. Skills are not transmitted, but remade (or cultivated again) in the various situations in which beginners are taken (or guided) to engage with places, beings, and things which form a common work – they are always developed in contexts of active engagement.

In this perspective, we must conceive the construction of meaning in religion (and more specifically, in religious treatments) not as an introjection of contents, but as a development of skills and sensitiveness. It is a process in which sensitiveness is created, developed, and channeled towards the formation of longer lasting habits and dispositions.

Many times this transformation is the result of the practical investments through which individuals try to get adapted to new significant contexts proposed by religion and periodically dramatized in their rituals. When following the trajectory of the women from the city of Salvador, Brazil, who joined the Pentecostal Church Deus É Amor (God is Love) in the search of healing, I was able to observe an enterprise of this type: the routine and integrated exercise of postures, gestures, and thoughts destined to make them an instrument of God.

The Pentecostal follower seeks to become an instrument of God – to be utilized by God is the currently used expression in their statements and testimonies. This state of apparent passivity gives them the access to gifts – and, therefore, a set of recognized skills such as healing interpretation, revelation, etc. As already observed above it also requires an active investment to be effectively reached. It can be said that the practice of praying is the media, by excellence, through which the follower seeks to be transformed.

Praying is a skill which needs to be learned. At stake in this process is the exercise of a humble attitude and opening to the Holy, the cultivation of a disposition in the double sense of spatial (dis) position, and therefore, body, on the one hand, and emotions and mood, on the other. Whilst a body technique, praying requires the correct positioning of the body. It involves a customary and repeated set of gestures and postures. "You know a Christian by the calluses on his knees and elbows", it is usually affirmed with reference to the position of praying in the church – turning the back to the pulpit, the followers get on their knees, leaning their elbows on the bench, their arms bending and pointing above. As a disposition or an affection tonality – described as a deep joy for being in God's hands – it requires an effort to get the thought distant from the routine concerns or "worldly" concerns. This is a task not easy at all for many of the followers, consumed as they are by the daily drama of taking care of the house and children in a context which is very often of extreme poverty.

To get in position for praying is to cultivate not only the ability of getting distant from daily concerns, but also the ability of getting distant, at least temporarily, from one of the most efficient sources of control: shame. When you get on your knees to pray, it is necessary to get rid of everything which belongs to the material world, including, or mainly, the shame of surrendering to the divine power – laughing, crying, screaming, jumping.

The work through which women seek to transform themselves gives them access to a sensitive experience highly appreciated in church: receiving the Holy Ghost. Lived in the services, this experience is a development of the prayer; in the

middle of a profusion of many and different prayers proffered in an accelerated rhythm, the Holy Ghost appears as a power which gets spread, making each group a dwelling. In the description given by followers, three interlinked dimensions are emphasized: to receive the Holy Ghost is a sensation of lightness, of being lifted from the ground and fluctuate, it is the experience of a warmth which propagates from the center of the body and generates energy, a fast and almost uncontrollable movement and also a deep joy, an occasion when the spiritual joy – the deep and transcendental emotion of being visited by the Holy Power –, and the flesh pleasure – the sensation of feeling this power, invade the body.

The power that the followers experiment in the services, they try to extend to other places and people. From the daily practice of the prayer, from the habit of singing religious hymns while performing their domestic tasks and keeping the radio tuned to gospel programs, the experience of receiving the Holy Ghost outside the church and receiving some blessing is arisen. Many women tell stories of healing, produced in them or on those for whom they prayed, at home, very often while they were singing or praying, on their knees by the radio set. To the environment polluted by sin, they oppose, in this manner, not only the holy domination of the temple, but that of their own body, as a marker of place. Always somehow displaced or in friction with places where the worldly sin is firmly rooted, the feminine body is itself converted in a focus to/from a place – recipient of a power which can flow to others and transform the environment.

Taking care of herself to be used by God, the follower states she is involved in an aura of power: although she is located in a world of sin, she finds herself protected; as a matter of fact she performs an alert and continuous search of signs which confirms this state of power and protection. This hermeneutical enterprise not only multiplies the signals of the presence and of the will of God in the small events of the day-to-day life, but it also trains the attention to distinguish and interpret these signs. The field in which the Pentecostal woman acts is completely trimmed by signs of the holy power: God talks to her during the most trivial and ordinary events to which she, as a privileged interlocutor, must be always alert. Her agency is constituted by this dialogue with the other divine; it is extended in the exercise of her gifts, a known set of abilities and sensitiveness such as healing, interpretation, revelation, etc. It is interesting to notice that the first talents developed by women correspond to forms of attention and sensitiveness to the places and to the other human beings – a sense of situation, very often of imminent risk or “intuition”

of feelings such as envy or anguish (sense of situation and intuition now understood as corporal comprehension modes). The gifts are an extension of a diffuse sensitiveness which composes the *habitus* peculiar to the women of the popular layers. When legitimated in the religion as a gift, this sensitiveness not only obtains acknowledgement, but it also becomes explicitly cultivated and possibly developed.

The acquisition of gifts is part of a trajectory of development of skills legitimated and valued both inside the religious group and also outside it. In the one hand, the discovery of a gift is the self recognition as an able and sensitive interlocutor of God. It contributes, for example, to modify the general disposition of women in domestic relationships, as it introduces in these relationships a holy voice of which they are listeners and privileged recipients. On the other hand, the exercise of the talents also throws the woman into a new and amplified circuit of relationships: not only increasing her participation in the church and in religious activities which sometimes go beyond the limits of the district, but also transforming her in a reference in the neighborhood, a religious expert many times called in the houses to pray for ill persons and to expel demons. Thus, from the sensitive experiences lived and cultivated in ritual contexts, from the practices and routines of care and control of the body encouraged by religion, a new field of meaning is derived.

Body, agency, and the role of objects

The meanings produced, shared, proposed, and taught in the events which compose a religious treatment are not essentially of an intellectual nature: concepts, beliefs, or even internalized schemes of interpretation. They consist rather in the sensitiveness and skills developed through the paths of sensitive engagement in new contexts of relationship. In this section, I wish to still consider another aspect of this process of construction of meaning: the role performed in them by material things.

When we describe the events which compose a religious treatment or the series of events which lead from affliction to the assumption of a new identity in the religious group, we are readily confronted with a profusion of much diversified objects. Their presence is conspicuous both at the rituals and also in the day-to-day life of the group. Along the religious career of the follower, the objects are an important focus of a series of operations and care.

Usually, when dealing with the objects exhibited in religious environments and handled in rituals, researchers seek to unveil their meaning. Many consider that it is necessary to go

beyond the meaning attributed to them by the practitioners or followers of the group, to unveil their connection with the key concepts of religion. They propose to treat them as symbols, carriers, or material markers of cosmological, sociological, or political meaning. Under this scope, the objects are not only depository of meaning, but also they work as material intermediaries in the transmission and learning of these meanings. The role they play in religious treatments is exactly this: if these treatments aim at transmitting new meanings to their participants (to change or transform meanings) the objects are material means that facilitate the communication and construction of the intersubjective agreement which, involving the patient (and other members of the religious group), will redefine affliction.

I intend to articulate an alternative approach to the objects – and their function in religious events – using once more empirical examples. In this case, one from *Candomblé*, and another from Pentecostalism.

My first example, originated from *Candomblé*, is the sitting places of the Orishas. In this religion, each follower has an Orisha as father or mother. Such personal Orisha corresponds to a unique and individual variant of a general mythical model. (GOLDMAN, 1987). During the initiation of the follower – or “making” – his Orisha is also “made” and an individual relationship is established between the two. As part of this process, the Orisha is seated in the *terreiro*. Each sitting place is composed by a vessel or *ibá* (which can be made of glass or clay, depending on the Orisha), inside of which are objects such as cowrie shells, small tools characteristic of the relevant Orisha and, more important, a stone (*otá*), where the Orisha dwells – fixed or seated there through appropriate rituals. Together with the vessel, there is a bowl which must be kept always with water and a set of dishes for oblations. The sitting places of the Orishas of the followers of a *Candomblé* temple are kept in rooms of the *terreiro*, the rooms or houses of the saints (as the Orishas are also called), under the direct responsibility of the mother-of-saint.

When in a situation of affliction, the follower asks improvement to his Orisha. He goes to the saint bedroom, lights up a candle at the foot of the sitting place and deposits a small offering. He may also leave there a written message with his request. Laid down with reverence, he talks to the father or mother (his personal Orisha). If the problem persists, the mother-of-saint may carry out a cowrie shell divination and tells him that he needs to feed his saint. Then a private ritual will be organized, during which a certain number of animals (hens, ducks, and pigeons) is offered to the Orisha and the sitting place is poured with the blood of the sacrificed animals.

Well, what is the meaning of the sitting places in *Candomblé*? Researchers note that the sitting place is part of the building of the person in this religion. It expresses the concept of a person related or multiple, also made of sacred elements; the sitting place is a component of the person and not the person's ego, and has a material existence outside the person. Can we, therefore, state that the sitting place is a symbol?

For the followers of *Candomblé*, the relationship of the stone (*otá*) with the Orisha is equivalent to the relationship which defines the symbol, between a symbol and an idea that this object helps to represent or evoke – the *otá* does not symbolize the Orisha; it is the Orisha. But from the point of view of the social sciences it is possible – and for many, desirable – to state that if the *otá* is the Orisha (and therefore not a symbol in the point of view of the practitioners) in another level (that defined by the point of view of the observer) the *otá*-Orisha is a symbol - it represents key concepts of *Candomblé*. It is a material expression, objective – be it of abstract concepts of the religious cosmology, be it of social relationships in force at the religious environment. According to this reasoning, things are the support of a meaning which cannot be detached from them, and which exists independently and prior to them. They serve merely as intermediary means through which the meaning (religious, social or social-political) moves, but which make no difference in terms of the actual meaning.

As an alternative to this position, I suggest that the meaning of sitting places in *Candomblé* lies in the way these objects are focused for action, requiring behaviors, and establishing certain spaces of practice. Consequently, it is not independent from its materiality or from its sensitive qualifications; it is woven through them, in the relation between the bodies of the followers and their material presence, sensitive, located in the *terreiro*.

When the child-of-saint goes into the bedroom of the saint to greet his Orisha, he has already got rid of his links with the external world; he is dressed in white, and barefoot. He lies down in front of the sitting places – if his Orisha is masculine, he lies down straight, touching the floor with his forehead, and if the Orisha is feminine he turns the body, lying, from one side to the other, before touching the floor with the head. Then he talks calmly and privately with his Orisha. After a given period of time elapses, he is instructed on the care to be given to the sitting place, which must be regularly fed and washed. “I like my saints – said the leader of a small *terreiro* in Salvador – as if it were a small child of whom we take care and who is so fragile”.

The washing of the saint occurs in a ritual called *ossé*. In such an occasion, the sitting place is removed from the place where it lies, separated in two parts, each part – dishes, *ibá*, bowl, cowrie shells, tools, and *otá* – carefully washed, first with water and coconut soap, and subsequently with an infusion of fresh leaves, of a sweet and pleasant smell, which the daughter-of-saint herself has prepared, rubbing the leaves one against the other in the water. The *otá* is also greased with a sweet oil, to slide through the hands, in a gesture of intimate contact with the Orisha. After that, it is again hidden in the *ibá*, the set is put back together, and returns to its place.

The sitting places are an important focus of a series of operations. Around them, food, candles, and messages witness the care with which they are treated in the *terreiro*. The smell of the food already getting sour, or the fragrance of the infusion of leaves (*amaci*) still perceptible, or the fragrance of the perfume with which they have been washed mark the sequence of requests and exchanges between the follower and his Orisha. The luxury of some sitting places contrasts with the simplicity of others, showing internal differences in the *terreiro* and, progressively, subtle changes in this configuration. In the bedroom of the saints a story is built, invisible to outsiders, but much clear and concrete to the in-house participants. (Cf. SANSI-ROCA, 2006). The history of the relationship among the followers and their Orishas, among them and their brothers-of-saint, among all – gods and men –, and the *ialOrisha* of the house. The building of this story is intimately linked to the manner in which the sitting place mobilizes the body, requiring care (*as a small child*), “asking” certain gestures and postures, inviting action of silent contemplation. The links among the children-of-saint and their Orishas are not expressed, represented, or materialized in the sitting places: they are made and kept under this care. The relationship between the body of the followers and the sensitive qualifications of the sitting places is not secondary in the building of these links: in the *ossé*, the stone, which, with a round shape, slides through the hands of the daughter-of-saint, perfumed with *amaci* and greased with oil, is the Orisha who makes himself intimate in the tactile and olfactory care.

I proceed now to my second example. It is about a testimony given during a service of the Igreja Universal. It made reference to a hammer that had been offered at the church as part of a chain: those who adhered to the chain, depositing a certain amount of money in an envelope distributed by the church officers, were entitled to receive a wood hammer. According to the pastor’s recommendation, the hammer had to be utilized in all occasions the member needed a blessing: at work, at home, in the street. The old

man that presented himself to give his testimony was in a situation of great affliction related to a case that was going to be judged in court. He narrated the event to the church audience. On the day of the judgment he took with him the hammer acquired in the service in such a way that whenever the judge hit the table with his hammer, he also discreetly hit the chair he was occupying with his hammer. The judge hit and he did the same – according to his narrative, this was about verifying who was stronger. The result proved the victory of God; his hammer had been more efficient than the judge’s.

The resource to objects at Igreja Universal is well known: hammers, crosses, bracelets, small bottles with oil. It is part of a strategy to motivate the participation and an effective money contribution of the people attending the service – each object has a specific power or function, and it has to be acquired (purchased) so that the participants obtain benefit. It doubtless expresses the strong appeal to magic, present in neo-Pentecostal churches.

I would like to discuss a little about the role of the hammer in the scenery. In the case narrated, the church hammer starts a private battle with the judge’s hammer – the confrontation between the law of God, and the law of men and the law of God materializes in the confrontation between the hammers. In general terms, however, the gesture of hitting the hammer on the table allows the articulation of the agency of events which would tend to happen without such articulation – which would be “suffered” instead of lived in the active mode. In this sense, it is possible to say that the hammer “requires” action; it channels and extends the power of the body towards a direct interference in the context. The agency is, therefore, distributed among God, man and hammer, and it is formed by the assemblage of the three. As in the case of the sitting place, the object is not a mere intermediary of an outside meaning: the meaning is articulated in it, or in the connections it starts.

Conclusion

In this work I attempted to develop the idea that religious treatments act in the transformation of meaning, providing new interpretation scenarios for the suffering people. This assertion has been repeated by various researchers, and among their first spokesmen it was used as a criticism to the tendency of evaluating the religious practices of healing from the reference of biomedicine. But, since it defines meaning in a pure ideological or representative plan (concepts, beliefs, cognitive schemes) it eventually produces a division of fields between religion and biomedicine – the former dealing

with meanings and evaluations (the subjective life of the ill person), and the latter with illness itself, as an objective reality.

Once we abandon the concept of subjacent meaning to this type of analysis, we end up also putting into doubt the division of fields which places religion as dealing exclusively with the subjective experience of suffering. After all, the mobilization of the body, the awakening of sensitiveness, and the engagement of the feeling body with the objects in the contexts of religious practice, are part of the movement of construction of the meaning, but its effect extends beyond the acquisition of representations or interpretation scenarios. They lead, little by little, to new practical syntheses, ways (corporal) to understand the world, ourselves, and the others, and to deal with problem situations.

Notes

1. Leader of the terreiro, also referred to by the yorubá term ialOrisha. If masculine, it is father-of-saint or babalOrisha. For discussion purposes, I will use here the feminine term, mother-of-saint.

2. It is not very difficult to perceive the centrality of the body in the bori: with sensory stimulation, object of care, immerse in new contexts of practice and attention. For researchers of rituals, this is not new data – as a matter of fact this has always been noticed and incorporated to the main approaches on the subject. However, as we will see, the concept of corporal understanding which I am developing here is not founded only in an acknowledgement that people are individuals in flesh and that rituals act on their bodies.

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