

THE UNNAMED RITE. RITUAL AND PLURALISM OF VALUES

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It was with mixed feelings of joy and surprise that I accepted the editors' invitation to discuss Joel Robbins' text [Religious pluralism and pluralism of values: ritual and regulation of cultural diversity]. Surprise, because even as a scholar and researcher of rituals, my recent incursions into the field of religion *stricto sensu* have been sporadic (Cavalcanti, 2004). Joy, because ever since my research about Kardecist spiritualism (Cavalcanti, 1983), my interest on religions, a subject deeply related to symbols and rituals, is very alive. At the time of my research, the difference between Kardecist and Umbanda religious experience was constantly debated by Spiritists. When I saw the double pluralism of the text, I immediately thought it would be possible to relate it to religious syncretism, an important issue to Afro-Brazilian studies (Bastide, 1971; Ferretti, 1995) and as such appropriate to the relationship between Spiritism and Umbanda. As suggested by Pierre Sanchis (1994), this notion can surpass the diffusionist and culturalist approaches. To him, when analyzing the relation among different religious systems, one of these systems could be placed at the center, functioning as a matrix system re-semanticizing in its practices the incorporation of elements from "the other system". Syncretism and religious pluralism cover a universe of related problems.

Robbins' approach focuses on religious pluralism and, using clear and well argued points, proposes important displacements. Religious pluralism is important when taken as a pluralism of values, the analytical focus is on the relations established among different values and ritual assumes a central role in the elaboration of these relations. Paraphrasing the author, I should assert with courteous honesty that such displacements take us to exciting places. However, I should also state with honest courtesy that I can follow his arguments only to a certain point. My reading is neither so ideally harmonic as the monism of values that orients certain religious experiences, nor so inevitably tragic as the inescapable choices attributed to a pluralistic environment. In what follows, I try to formulate my arguments regarding the suggestive ideas proposed by the author.

I go back to the architecture of Robbins' argumentation. His conceptual base is the assertion of ritual as a central aspect for the expression of values in religion. Values are the "culturally defined purposes considered worthy of guiding actions" (p. 3). His ethnographic basis are two rituals performed by Papua New Guinea's Urapmin, a small group of about 400 people, all declaring themselves to be charismatic Christians. It is through them that Robbins examines the relationships established between distinct values embraced by the Urapmin: the individualism brought by the conversion to Christianity and the "relationalism" derived from the traditional morality that emphasizes the totalizing exchange. These two values would be thematized respectively in the "Spirit Disco " ritual and in the "Pig Sacrifice Sacrifice of the pig".

Robbins shares with representational and performative ritual theorists the view that, contrary to what occurs in everyday experience, ritual allows people to fully achieve singular values. DaMatta, with Kapferer and Smith, is one of the "representational" theorists who believes that rituals dramatize certain elements of a given society (values, relationships, ideologies). Rappaport, on the other hand, leads the performative theorists who emphasize the capacity of

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ritual action to highlight and bring to existence its own reference, and, thus, interfere in the orientation of conduct in general. Of these theorists, I know Da Matta's works in more detail, and he took the analysis of rituals into great account to understand the dilemmas and dynamics of Brazilian society. However, I observe that DaMatta also gives special attention to ritual symbolization mechanisms, and that his ritual theory is explicitly based on Victor Turner's ideas (1996, 2005). With Turner, we would be hard-pressed to separate "representational" from "performative" aspects, and it all goes a little bit beyond that, for rituals would also be, à la Van Gennep (1978), "transformative" (Cavalcanti, 2013). In anthropological theory, conceptual definitions of rituals abound - they represent, perform, communicate, know, meta-communicate, transform, dramatize, theatricalize. Usually, all thrive under the fruitful Durkheimian umbrella (Skoruspki, 1983) which placed ritual as an active center in the making of collective representations through the symbolic transfiguration of experience, i.e., ritual as the center of the group's symbolic production. The problem and its answers, however, are always ethnographic, for rituals can symbolize in the most varied ways, can do several different things and communicate, sometimes, several things at the same time. Their assertions can be ambivalent and, occasionally, contradictory.

Marcel Mauss (1968) already asserted simultaneity as a central problem of rituals: distinct things (or even distinct values, if that is the case) can be expressed and lived at the same time by different means and languages which are simultaneously experimented. Rituals - these aggregations of symbolical behavior as Valeri has well formulated (1994) - are always articulating, disarticulating and rearticulating disparate elements derived from social experience. My research with the samba schools' carnival revealed the simultaneous and tense existence of distinct values in the annual parade's festive ritual (Cavalcanti, 2002 and 2006). Specifically, the visual and spectacular symbolization of allegorical parade cars - that accompany the flow of the parading school - strongly contrasts with the musicality of the theme-samba [*samba enredo*] which is repeated several times during the parade. Allegorical cars allude to a linear temporality, which they systematically fragment with the opening of many different chains of meaning at the same time; while the theme-samba performance refers to a more traditional and cyclical temporality that keeps going away and coming back again. Thus, while it is possible to associate the festive parade processional form to a linear and modern time, other conceptions of time erupt and counterbalance this emphasis when we analyze it more closely. A carnival parade's successful performance depends on the constantly tense articulation between these contrasts. For this reason, I find it hard to generalize that "rituals, as separate realizations of singular values, tend, at least during their performance, to a kind of situated monism" (p. 19). Compromise solutions between disparate values are possible within the same ritual performance.

Among the Urapmin people there would be "a plurality of rituals which reflects the existent multiplicity of values (...) and which enables people to explore and deal with the relations among these values" (p. 9). Indeed, "in the contemporaneous life of the Urapmin, people frequently see themselves divided between performing the value of individualism (which, in the understanding of the Urapmin would require a certain separation from social life to avoid sin) and the performance of the value of relationalism" (p.10). The ritual polarity between the "Spirit Disco" and "Pig Sacrifice" would thus express the polarity of values which exists in this society between a Christian individualist salvationism and a traditional relationalism inserted in the net of exchanges between men and divinities. In the "Spirit Disco", after the trance of possession by the spirit, the Urapmin fall exhausted, free of sins, and ready for salvation. The equation suggested in Robbins's text between sins and traditional relationships is thought provoking, though perhaps too brief. For those like me who do not have full knowledge of the author's research, there is a question which remains unsolved: to what extent is this modern value of "individualism", associated with the "individual who deserves salvation", effectively an individualism in Louis Dumont's terms (the belief in a self which is the abstract source of

moral judgment, a key notion of modern ideology). I assert this, because in the case of Kardecist spiritism, which I researched in Rio de Janeiro, psychic rituals, and specifically one of them, the disobsession ritual, dramatically staged the notion of the Spiritist self. However, this Spiritist notion of individuality was very distant from that of the Dumontian individual. In Kardecist spiritism, a person was conceived as a "minor self" i.e., as an incarnated spirit entangled in the sphere of karma reincarnation. His incomplete free will is always tested by disincarnated spirits who are eager for human corporeality, and even by the other "minor selves" of his own past incarnations, which were erased from his memory when he incarnated again. How to distinguish between a "self" and an "other"? How to exercise free will in a cosmos full of the determinism of karma and evolution? This tension moves the whole Spiritist ritual system. And full individuality, the full achievement of free will, i.e., the transformation of a spirit into a Higher Self, would never occur during earthly life, it would be achieved only at the end of the karmic evolution cycle. It also meant the immediate dissolution of a spirit in the divine womb at the very moment of its ultimate realization. For the Urapmin, a discussion of the concept of personhood (Mauss, 2003) which exists among them would help to understand the relationship of possession by the Spirit and Salvationist individualism in the ritual of the Spirit Disco better. It seems as paradoxical as revealing the fact that the final exhaustive moment of the "Spirit Disco" is the only brief moment in which "the importance of becoming an individual who deserves salvation is fully accomplished" (p. 12). Does the accomplishment of individuality correspond to the individual's annihilation? Who will soon return to sin and therefore to existence? A fuller understanding of Urapmin's cosmology in articulation with this ritual is missing. Perhaps the tension of values within the Spirit Disco is stronger than what we are permitted to see. Could the generic Christian "individualism" value emerge fully transformed by other less obvious values, but perhaps no less active, in the ritual of the Spirit Disco? It is perhaps for this reason that the funeral ritual for his parents invented by Docsi (the most westernized Urapmin who worked in precious metal mines) failed: this ritual was in fact purely individualistic and entirely secular. It was effectively devalued, since it did not establish commitments either with modern Christian salvationism or with traditional values.

The historical process of social change experienced by the Urapmin seems to be extreme and the maintenance of the ritual "Pig Sacrifice" within the Christian community is fascinating, and brings up the topic of disease, suffering and healing which is at the core of ritual studies. And the "Spirit Women" occupy an extraordinary mediating role between the symbolic Christian scheme and the traditional one. There is also the "unnamed ritual", which is never carried out. It is only imagined by Urapmin narratives and would end the presence of the traditional spirits of nature and would guarantee the permission for unrestricted exploration of all areas of the Urapmin territory. I follow only to a certain extent the author's idea that this ritual does not thrive because it imaginably performs what is supposedly "sinful" - an uncontrolled individualism of desire and consumption that would suspend all traditional avoidances and obligations. The "unnamed ritual" does not thrive, Robbins suggests, for it would imply making real something that is, after all, "devalued" (p. 17). However, Robbins also states that the purely narrative existence of the unnamed ritual "encourages discussions among the Urapmin regarding the fantasies of individual consumption the ritual brings to the fore" (p. 17). If this is so, we must accept the ritual and performative dimension of this narrative practice that provokes a significant effect on the Urapmin's social experience. The narrative seems to perform, imaginatively, not exactly a "devaluation" of individualism, but rather a desire that corresponds to an exaggeration of a value that must always be controlled and adapted by negotiation with traditional obligations and avoidances. For the Urapmin, after all, Robbins has already suggested, it is only possible to exist in sin.

Although Robbins' article displaces the theme of religion to ritual, it is in the context of religion that a more general *continuum* of monist and pluralist ambiances applies. Within this continuum people transit struggling to

articulate their different values in a harmonic and monistic way or in a pluralist and more conflictuous, or even tragic way. This is a promising approach. However, the paper's focus is the discussion of the pluralism of values within the religious experience of one social group from the perspective of ritualization. From this point of view maybe pluralism could also be considered as an internal aspect of specific rituals.

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