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Shamanic Spiritual Activism: Alternative Development in the Brazilian Itamboatá Valley

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Drawing upon critiques that claim a lack of interest in spirituality in development studies, this paper aims to show how alternative ethical forms of development can be enacted when adopting shamanic spiritual worldviews. The paper draws upon ethnographic research conducted in Terra Mirim, an intentional shamanic community, located in the Itamboatá valley, Bahia, Brazil. Drawing upon contributions from Chicano scholars, this research engages with the concept of 'spiritual activism' to understand how alternative ontologies of development are shaped around the idea of interconnectedness and relational consciousness.

Key words: Development, Alternative Spiritualities, Faith-based Organisations, Spiritual Activism, Shamanism, Brazil

Introduction

The community of Terra Mirim (Brazil) emerged in 1992 with the aim of adopting the 'Shamanism of the Mother Goddess' (*Deusa Mãe*). This is based on an understanding that the healing of the planet is connected to the healing of human beings. Shamanism is an ancient tradition characterised by a belief that the spirits of nature can work "for the benefits, health and harmony of their communities and its members"[1]. Shamanic practices aim to expand individuals' consciousness via entering altered states to mediate connections between the immediate, visible or 'real world' and other forms of reality, the spiritual dimension. Various

forms of shamanism are practised around the world. They can be dated back to early prehistoric periods[2] and are framed as emergent in, and common to, indigenous cultures. Yet Terra Mirim (TM) is an atypical shamanic community because it has been intentionally created to adopt ancestral spiritual values without being an indigenous community. Favilla[3] explains this phenomenon as Neo-shamanism and interprets the reason for the resurgence and renewal of shamanic cultures as a call back towards ancestral origins to necessitate a review of the values of existing society.

The shamanism adopted by TM regards nature as the mentor and is expressed as a form of devotion to the Mother Goddess and the four elements of Water, Fire, Air and Earth. TM has a shaman[4] called Alba María who was the first visionary, one of the founders and the spiritual leader of the community. TM counts around 30 permanent and several temporary residents. It is located in the Itamboatá valley, in the Metropolitan Region of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. This area was strongly affected firstly by colonisation and, secondly, by three rapid and intense processes: industrialisation, urbanisation and deforestation. Nowadays, the rural area of the Itamboatá valley hosts 8 rural black settlements and the recently created shamanic community of TM.

This paper aims to understand how alternative spiritual communities are engaged in developmental practices by investigating TM's influence on the development of the Itamboatá valley. TM is an exceptional case study that, to be further understood, requires some conceptual clarifications. TM can be defined as an intentional community, a group of people "who have chosen to live – and usually work in some way – together" because they "have a common aim or commitment"[5]. TM is an example of a spiritual intentional community and this differs from religious communities[6]. It is useful here to differentiate between the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality'. The former is generally used to indicate *institutionalised* systems of beliefs whose values, rules and social practices are inspired by

specific sacred texts. Spirituality refers to *personal* understandings and experiences of the supernatural world but does not necessarily follow institutional practices[7]. These two concepts can overlap and for this reason I use 'alternative spirituality' to refer to those spiritual worldviews that are not linked to institutionalised religions[8].

Whilst there is some engagement on the relationship between religious organisations and development studies[9], little is known about how alternative spiritual communities shape development discourses and practices. Given the recent popularity of alternative spiritual practices, this paper makes an important and timely contribution by looking at entanglements between alternative spiritual communities and development studies through an investigation of the shamanic intentional community of TM and its relations with the Itamboatá valley. In so doing, this paper considers the work of the Chicano scholar Gloria Anzaldúa[10] and specifically the concept of 'spiritual activism'. The paper suggests that development practices embedded in shamanic ontologies can take the shape of alternative ethical projects by aiming to awaken the consciousness of human beings whilst taking care of the wellbeing of the natural environment. Significantly these ethical forms of spiritual activism envisage a break from mechanisms of dependency by supporting individual self-transformation and processes of community empowerment.

This paper draws upon ethnographic research data collected during four visits to TM between 2012 to 2017 – a total period of 8 months *in situ*. My positionality, research journey and how access to the community was granted are discussed more in depth elsewhere[11]. To summarise, the first contact with TM was made with one of its residents in 2012 while conducting research in another spiritual community in Italy. During my first visits, I assumed the role of researcher and volunteer. This means that during my time in TM, I was undertaking community work such as farming, cleaning, organising the library, supporting the administration and finance department, and any other activity required. Volunteering in

TM enabled creating a closer contact with community's residents, gaining a deeper understanding of the community's dynamics and promoting a fairer exchange —as residents were giving their time to answer my questions, I was giving my time to community activities. Thus, participatory observation was the main research method used, followed by a daily field diary that captured the community dynamics and the researcher's experience. Additionally, I conducted 25 in-depth interviews with residents, visitors and collaborators[12] and collected a significant number of internal documents, such as; project reports, financial accounts, and development project proposals.

In the last visit in 2017, I primarily conducted research outside TM interviewing local institutional actors and residents from the black communities of the valley (54 in-depth interviews) and participated in several public meetings. For this paper, I mainly draw upon data collected in 2012/2013 with TM residents, yet I integrate these research results with updated observations and notes from more recent field trips. While in early investigations the main focus was on TM community enactment[13], more recently, as part of the GLOBAL-RURAL research project[14], I explored the rural development of the Itamboatá valley and its entanglements with globalisation, crucial to understand more in-depth the context discussed here.

In the next section I discuss how development studies have recently opened to a spiritual turn, yet have been limited in considering alternative spiritual organisations. After presenting the concept of spiritual activism, the paper sets up the background to analytically explore the emergence of TM.

Development and the Spiritual Turn

In the last two decades, scholars have pointed to how the development industry and development theories have, especially before the 21st century, overlooked the role of spirituality[15]. Analysing articles published between 1982 and 1998, Ver Beek[16] demonstrates how spirituality and religion are rarely discussed, in comparison with, for instance, other categories such as gender, race, and ethnicity. He claims that such a "taboo" prevents the capturing of the influence of spirituality on development practices "result[ing] in faulty scholarship and less effective interventions"[17]. The overlooked role of religions and spirituality in development studies reflects a wider phenomenon identified as secularization that denotes the growing separation between the sacred and public spheres and the decreasing importance of religions and spiritual worldviews in a modern society[18]. Though Casanova tends to refer to European Western societies, such secular trends were also present in early development policy discourses and programs that promoted development as a universal progressive phenomenon driven by rational economic and technical solutions.

Lunn[19] provides an updated discussion that reveals a shift in development studies and a renewed interest in the role of religion and spirituality. This is the result of two main trends. First, influenced by post-development and post-colonial discourses, development has expanded beyond a narrow economic and social focus into cultural contexts[20]. Second, there has been a rise of post-secular arguments that challenge modern secular views that suggest contemporary societies have disengaged from religion and spirituality[21]. Such new engagements with religion and spirituality are reflected not only in academia but also in development institutions which "have started to realise that sustainable development can be achieved only if it incorporates cultural values and beliefs and that in many cases faith-based organisations are the most effective agencies to deliver development on the ground"[22].

Since the advent of the religious turn[23] one of the main focuses of development studies has been on civil society, and specifically those NGOs engaged in development practices that are linked to religious institutions. These are described by Clarke[24] as faith-based organisations (FBOs). The term 'faith' aims to include institutional religious organisations but also less mainstream NGOs whose actions and values are inspired by "political philosophies with strong religious elements […], modern sects […], and belief systems associated with traditional indigenous societies"[25]. In order to provide a more structured overview, Clarke classifies five types of FBOs[26] and indicates different ways in which such organisations engage in development aims and when they tend to be supported by external donors[27]. Indeed, the relationship between FBOs and international donors appears to be a new research trend on religion and development. Several studies have investigated how such organisations are embedded in and influenced by transnational networks[28]. Yet these studies tend to concentrate their attention on FBOs linked to mainstream religions such as Christianity and Islam. Clarke claims that "[o]rganisations associated with other faith traditions, [have] in contrast, received little support"[29] and, thus the "engagement remains disproportionately focussed on the mainstream Christian Churches"[30].

Thus, little is known on the interconnection between development and other FBOs that are not related to mainstream institutional religions. Bartolini *et al.*,[31] emphasise that although occulture and spiritual practices have become more popular in modern societies, understandings of alternative spiritualties and their geographies are limited. For instance Smith[32], by investigating witchcraft in three villages in Tanzania, explains how rational and irrational understanding, human and non-human agents and material and expressive components shape the development of the area and management of natural resources. More research on spiritualties is necessary to understand how alternative spiritual beliefs and worldviews influence development practices. In so doing, it is important to open the

investigation to those FBOs or spiritual communities that are not necessarily associated with mainstream, liberal and moderate institutions or international bodies. This paper thus aims to explore the interconnection between development and spiritualities by looking at a non-conventional FBO embedded in a shamanic tradition.

Spiritual Activism for a Spiritual Turn

With the turn of the new century, scholars have started paying attention to the raise of alternative spiritualities. In trying to understand if, and how, a spiritual revolution is taking place, Heelas and Woodhead[33] make a distinction between 'life-as form of the sacred' that and 'subjective-life forms of the sacred'. While the former "emphasises a transcendent source of significance and authority to which the individuals must conform"[34] and share similarities with common usage of 'religion', the latter overlaps with 'spirituality' and refers to the sacralisation and legitimation of subjective inner states such as emotions, feelings, expansion of consciousness, bodily experiences, and dreams. Though Heelas and Woodhead do not imply that alternative spiritualities are overtaking religions, they show how Western societies are increasingly undergoing through a 'subjective' cultural shift where individuals are incline to live according their own desires, needs, capabilities and well-being (subjective-life) rather than external expectations and given orders (life-as). Discussing in the context of the UK and US, they argue that whilst secularisation tends to affect life-as forms of religion, there is an increasing sacralisation of subjective-life forms of spirituality. According to Bartolini *et al.*[35], quantitative data about the rise of alternative spiritualities undervalue the importance of spiritual beliefs in ordinary life. In investigating the relationship between alternative spiritualities and their economies, they uncover how esoteric economies are entangled with ordinary culture and mainstream economy. Bartolini *et al.* move beyond the argument that spiritual beliefs are archipelagos of faith in a sea of modernity (see Wilford 2010) to state

"that religion, spirituality, superstition, magic and the like are actually the stuff out of which modernity has been built, alongside the more usual suspects of progress, reason and science"[36].

Taking into consideration the influence of alternative spiritualities in modern societies and further instigating a spiritual turn in development studies, I turn to the contributions of Gloria Anzaldúa, a U.S. third world feminist theorist[37] and Chicana lesbian activist[38]. Anzaldúa contributed in different academic fields from cultural theory to queer, feminist and postcolonial studies. Her theoretical insights address the lack of spiritual understanding rooted in academic studies, and contribute "to the contemporary shift toward a post-rationalist epistemology that acknowledges the spiritual, the imaginal, and the emotional as legitimate sources of knowledge, offering a broader, more inclusive vision of reality"[39].

Although Anzaldúa does not explicitly address the concept of development I argue that her contributions, and mainly the concept of 'spiritual activism', can be helpful to open and expand development studies to spiritual discourses and further investigate the role of the 'subject'. According to Keating, "[s]piritual activism is spirituality for social change, spirituality that posits a relational worldview and uses this holistic worldview to transform one's self and one's worlds"[40]. Spiritual activism is considered exceptional and often controversial as it combines the individual sphere of the inner spiritual world with wider social structures[41]. It is argued this kind of activism is different from conventional religious organisations as within spiritual activism the authority for social change lies with the individual (*ibid*). Empowerment does not derive from external authority but rather comes from the ability to connect with personal embodied feelings, intuitions and resources[42]. Moreover, it differs from the New Age movement as the latter tends to be focused only on personal challenges forgetting the wider scales "and thus leave the existing oppressive social

structures in place"[43]. Spiritual activism instead links the subjective spiritual experience to external oppressive systems, grounded in the assumptions that the self cannot be separated from the rest of the society; therefore, a process of personal growth and self-change offers the potential to provide impactful changes in society.

While Chicano studies tend to distinguish spiritual activism from New Age movements for their lack of interest in broader socio-material worlds, MacKian[44] challenges those arguments that remark the individualisation of the spiritual experiences of most recent spiritual practioners. In studying the re-enchantment for the spiritual of Western societies by looking at everyday spiritual practices, she argues that "being spiritually engaged is also about going *beyond* the self"[45]. By engaging in everyday spiritual practices, individuals develop a broader relational consciousness that can stimulate an infrapolitics aimed to "destabilise, subvert, trick or challenge the material world of disenchantment"[46]. Thus, taking into account MacKian's research, I am suggesting that also new spiritual movements could engage in broader changes beyond the inner self-development, and possibly, in forms of spiritual activism.

Coming back to Anzaldúa, she expands further the collective aspect of spiritual activism by discussing holistic, transformative and radical alliances made among different individuals across the world based on their commonalities. This links with Anzaldúa's concept of *El Mundo Zurdo* (the Left-Handed World) that can be described as a "visionary place where people from diverse backgrounds with diverse needs and concerns coexist and work together to bring about revolutionary changes"[47]. Such conceptualisations are not only helpful for thinking differently about spirituality, but also resonate with the idea of intentional communities. This paper foregrounds these connections between individual change and collective transformation for expanding our understandings of development studies and its

intertwinement with spirituality. It then aims to explore how such forms of spiritual activism can emerge, take place and influence development practices. In so doing, the next section introduces TM and grounds the discussion in the context of the Itamboatá valley.

Terra Mirim and the Itamboatá Valley

In the 1980s, the shaman, psychologist and natural therapist Alba María was living with her family in the *Fazenda Mirim*, a farm that occupied approximately 8.5 hectares of land in the Itamboatá valley. One day, during one of her meditations, Alba María had a vision of many people from around the world living in Mirim land[48]. While organising shamanic workshops, Alba María was sharing her vision and presenting her dream to create a space in which to awaken the consciousness of the human being, promote self-knowledge and to support a sustainable communal development whilst taking care of the wellbeing of the natural environment. During the 1990s, Alba María, with a group of people from Salvador, transformed TM from a farm into a shamanic intentional community.

Nowadays, TM has approximately 30 permanent residents, most of whom are Brazilians, predominantly from Bahia. However, there are also other temporary seasonal residents from a range of locations: since the early 2000s, there has been an increase in the number of foreign visitors (mainly Europeans) who want to experience a communal shamanic lifestyle. There are no universal membership rules and residency agreements are tailored to accommodate both individuals' and the community's needs (for instance, the desired length of stay is a variable factor which is allowed for). Given the fluidity of the arrangements through which visitors and temporary residents come to TM, it is difficult to provide a precise number of people that live in TM at any one time.

Significantly 70% of TM residents are women. The feminine shamanic approach developed by Alba María has been particularly attractive for women and they are, therefore, the ones

that lead the community. TM residents came from different cultural backgrounds and the majority are *pardo* (mixed-race Brazilians with varied racial ancestries). Similarly, residents belong to different social classes, but predominantly are from middle class backgrounds. Some of the residents have a university degree, and some also have postgraduate qualifications[49]. Residents come from a wide range of professional backgrounds and include, amongst others, those who were formerly school teachers, civil servants, accountants, psychologists, shop owners, students or unemployed prior to coming to TM.

TM residents are not originally from the Itamboatá valley, which is located in the rural area of Simões Filho Municipality, in the Metropolitan Region of Salvador. Historically the Itamboatá valley was occupied by the indigenous population Tapuia[50]; however, the colonization process, beginning in the 16th century, has had a marked impact on the history of this area. The lands of Simões Filho municipality, for example, were predominantly used for the cultivation of sugar cane to satisfy the requirement of the Portuguese Empire's demand[51], thus making "Bahia one of the major importers of African slaves during the colonial period"[52].

During this period, the Itamboatá valley saw the emergence of Quilombos communities (or Quilombolas) [53], a term used in Brazil to identify rural black settlements of escaped slaves[54]. Although slavery was abolished in 1888, former Quilombos communities were not legally recognised and therefore the Afro descendants, called libertos, were continually affected by various forms of racism, violence and segregation[55]. A century later, the word Quilombos reappeared in 1988 in the Brazilian Federal Constitution with the aim to recognise the rights for the "remaining communities of Quilombos" to own their land[56]. While there are approximately 8 "remaining" Quilombos communities[57] in the Itamboatá valley, only the communities of Pitanga de Palmares and Dandá have been officially recognised.

In the 1960s, the Itamboatá valley was affected by intense processes of industrialisation and urbanisation with the installation of the Industrial Centre of Aratú, the Petrochemical Complex of Camaçari and the Port of Aratú. These modern projects implemented by the progressive military government "came to have a strategic importance for the perpetuation of sovereign territory in the mid-20th century"[58] and thus, the Metropolitan Region of Salvador became a crucial location in which the global economic interests could be satisfied. As with any modern project, industrialisation was followed by fast urbanisation. Simões Filho became a dormitory town registering a rapid increase in population with a population of 129,964[59]. By 2000, only the 10% of Simões Filho population were living in the rural area spread over the rural communities of the Itamboatá valley[60]. The industrialisation and the regional economic strategies of the Metropolitan Region of Salvador, although generating an increase of the GDP, have not generated positive ecological, economic and social impacts for these areas[61]. Per capita household monthly income, for example, is at less than half of the minimum national wage for 43.06% of the population of Simões Filho compared to 28.7% in Salvador[62].

Furthermore, pre-existing problems of segregation, exclusion and marginalisation have been reinforced[63]. Grounding his analysis in three Quilombos communities of the nearby Bay of Aratú, Bledsoe[64] explains that the economic development programs proposed by the Brazil government have been threatening the economic subsistence, health, culture and physical spaces of the local Quilombos communities. These intense processes of anthropisation and industrialisation adversely affected the environment, contributing to the devastation of the Atlantic Forest in the Metropolitan region of Salvador. In total only 164 species of Atlantic forest flora remain, and several animal species are endangered[65]. The project of exploitation and domination of natural resources hinders the lifestyle of these communities, whose

subsistence depends on the natural environment, and, as Bledsoe argues, is an attack on their individual and collective lives. As he explains:

> Put another way, neither form of life—whether it be the figure of the individual Black person or the collective Black life of the quilombo—is recognized as a viable way of being in the world, and as such does not elicit acknowledgement from modern actors as being politically or spatially existent.[66]

This modern praxis creates circuits of violence generated by those actors driven by capitalist accumulation to implement destructive actions against natural environments, rural lifestyles and their residents and also by those subjects who are affected by such violent actions. According to the Ministries of Justice and Health[67], Simões Filho city has registered the highest murder rate in Brazil for three consecutive years. The city, called the 'Capital of Death', had an average of 146 murders per 100,000 inhabitants between 2008 and 2010, almost six times greater than the Brazilian national average (26.2 per 100,000). Bledsoe explains that "violence is a necessary tactic to be used against a system of oppression which is, itself, predicated on violence"[68]. Although the complex scenario of the Metropolitan Region of Salvador cannot be exhaustively explained in this section, the aim here is to show the context in which TM has emerged and has engaged in developmental practices.

Engaging in Spiritual Activism

From an Inner Focus to Spiritual Activism

During the early 1990s, the initial focus of TM was to strengthen the social bonds among the founding group rather than engaging in external development activities. As Begonia (founder) says '*the initial work was a communitarian work*'. It was a time for launching

proposals, organising the group and deciding what '*we wanted to be*' says Philodendron, one of the founders. Eugenia describes the intentions of the initial group as follows:

> *When we started to create this movement [TM] we did not know…, we just knew we wanted a way to live differently, each one of us searching for something. We did not know what shape it was going to take, but we knew it was not something we have already lived: in an imprisoning system, [with] a meaningless job, a racist society* (Eugenia, founder)

The urban lifestyle, the dominant capitalist system, the racial and class divisions existing in Salvador were unacceptable for some people. For instance, Jussara, after studying law, left her upper middle class neighbourhood of Salvador in search of an alternative lifestyle. As Philodendron comments:

> *We saw Terra Mirim as a place where there was the possibility of living new dreams, as a place where you can create new forms, new ways of understanding the human being, a new culture, a new reality, a new spirituality, new ways of relating... All this can happen through a process of self-knowledge, the search of your own self. So, between 1991 and 1994 was a period of very strong consolidation of the group.* (Philodendron, founder)

Development practices were not on the agenda in this initial phase. Shamanic traditions were mainly used as a means of dislocation from mainstream cultural schemes of Brazilian society and to initiate new socio-cultural-spiritual foundations for the community. Such kinds of organisation differ from other FBOs described by Clarke[69]. TM was born not with the intention to be devoted to missionary or charitable work, neither for pursuing broader political aims, but for creating *'a space dedicated to personal growth, self-discovery, self-knowledge and so on'* (Philodendron, founder). However, such 'inner focus' would not last

for long as this opposed the shamanic ideas of interconnection among humans and with nature.

While consolidating spiritually and collectively in the late 1990s, the group started to be aware of the environmental issues of the valley. Considering TM's devotion to the shamanism of the Four Elements as outlined earlier, one of the key collective practices was to take care of the Water element by cleaning the river and the lagoon in the community. These activities were part of a spiritual process of self-knowledge. In fact working with the Water element in shamanism means to engage with one's feelings, to overcome one's emotional traumas and to heal by letting these emotions flow. Thus, every Saturday after the early meditations, "*we would enter into the river to clean the river with our hands. ... taking the mud, taking out the rubbish with our own hands*" (Begonia, founder). Besides being a spiritual practice, cleaning the river was also a necessity to avoid floods in the rainy seasons. TM residents used to clean approximately 2 km of the river that ran through the community; however, after being affected by several floods and noticing that the river was not flowing, they became even more aware of the ecological problems of the valley. Then, according to Begonia (founder), "*the water inspired us to develop a project to take care of the local environment and the river*". In 2000, this inspiration became realised with the project *Aguas Puras* (Pure Waters), proposed and managed by TM and founded by the National Fund for the Environment (*Fundo Nacional do Meio Ambiente* – FNMA). The project had two aims. Firstly, it investigated the social, economic and hydro-environmental state of the Itamboatá valley and produced a report which demonstrated its condition. Secondly, it supported the re-vegetation and restoration of these degraded areas and contributed to the preservation of the remaining 7% of the Atlantic Forest. This included the planting of 30,000 native trees and the funds for cleaning the Itamboatá River (TM document 1[70]).

Addressing Bebbington's[71] concerns about the lack of knowledge of how development NGOs arise, the emergence of TM as an organisation involved in development practices should be located in the spiritual values rooted in the community culture. Shamanism is deeply embedded in a holistic and integrative worldview where binary opposition such as soul/body, humans/nature, spiritual/material and self/other are challenged[72]. According to Anzaldúa, what categorises spiritual activism from other forms of activism is the "belief in the interrelatedness of all life forms"[73] or the 'metaphysics of interconnectedness'. Strongly inspired by indigenous traditions and Eastern philosophies, it could be understood as a "fluid, cosmic spirit/energy/force that embodies itself throughout – and as – all existence"[74]. Such cosmic energy could be identified in God, in a tree, in an individual, in the waters, it does not matter because for Anzaldúa "spirit infuses all that exists – organic and inorganic – transcending the categories and concepts that govern your perception of material reality"[75].

While engaging in shamanic practices of self-knowledge, according to TM residents, the spirit of the Water showed another reality of the valley; that the river needed to be taken care of in order to flow and that neither local authorities nor private companies took any action to preserve the hydro and ecological resources of the remaining Atlantic Forest. TM residents became aware about the lack of attention that local authorities had towards the needs of rural communities of the valley. According to the ethical principle of 'Integrative Ecology' proposed by Alba María and adopted in TM, the 'healing' of the planet is directly connected with the 'healing' of the human being. It is through the reconnection between the human being with its inner/external nature(s) that spiritual activism is initiated. During a recent interview, Begonia clarifies the community shift between an inner therapeutic work toward a wider external care for the socio-environmental context saying:

> *The first 7 years, we started our shamanic formation to expand our consciousness. But then, how do you embody this consciousness that you have*

acquired in your everyday life? How can I bring this consciousness at the level of the region? This is what we have done, we worked with self-knowledge, diving into shamanism to use all this [knowledge]in a practical way.

Such relational thinking challenges social binary-oppositional frameworks. It reduces the distance between human/nature, self/other and spiritual/material and decolonises mainstream Western masculine dominant modes of thinking. Thus, spiritual practices can lead to a 'relational consciousness' where individuals become aware of their connections with other beings (earth-beings and spiritual-beings) and therefore engage in political actions in the material world[76]. Despite having grown up in an urban environment that reinforces certain modern dualistic ontologies, TM residents found in the shamanic practices alternative ontologies, new ways of being, living and acting in the world. This relational consciousness motivated TM to engage in further developmental projects.

Creating Alliances

When the project Aguas Puras was implemented, residents started to walk from the source of the river, where the black community of Convel is located, and head downstream.

In these walks, we were connecting with the communities, getting to know their people, their leaders. We walked along the whole valley […] You know the river is either a separation or unity; when we started to walk, it became a point of union with the people from the valley" (Begonia founder)

However, to create this union and to gain the trust of the Quilombos communities took more than a walk. The black communities were often very suspicious of the new neighbours.

They [Quilombos residents] started to say that we were witches, that we had dragons here, they said different stuffs… these were the myths about TM. They

said this was a place of nudity, hippies, that everyone was having sex with everyone, that we killed cobras. (Ixora, resident)

The cultural, social and ethnic differences between TM and the rest of the local communities were clearly a barrier in creating an alliance among rural residents. TM residents were mostly white or *pardos*, came mainly from the urban areas and generally had more privileges than the local inhabitants of the Quilombos communities. Ixora suggested that the relationship with the Quilombos residents started to improve with the implementation of the 'Ecological School', the main social-pedagogical project of TM. The school wanted to provide further support to the teenagers of the Quilombos communities in order to strengthen their education through complementary educational and alternative activities. One of the first realisations of TM was that as much as the Brazilian government was not taking care of the natural resources, even less attention was being paid to the socio-cultural heritage of the valley. Begonia claims "*this valley wasn't even on the map of the municipality. This area was and still is completely forgotten by public authorities*". Bledsoe stresses how the Quilombos communities were considered as non-beings, as a-spatial and a-political objects invisible to the eyes of the government[77]. Such structural and sovereign violence exercised on the black communities arguably generates circuits that can legitimise the use of further violence. One of the founders, Philodendron, describes that in the first years of TM:

the situation of the region was extremely hard. From an economic and social point of view it is a very poor region, very impoverished, with high levels of violence, marginalization, and very low political participation…at that time still lower... And we came to be invaded [from people outside], theft… So as residents, we began to realise this other reality […] and to deal with this reality.

While violence can be a mode to resist the injustices of a modern project, Bledsoe indicates other creative ways in which the Quilombos communities attempt to resist the oppressive and

exploitative capitalist system. Although attempting to persevere with their cultural and traditional practices, I argue that the Quilombo lifestyle has already been extremely hindered. For TM, the younger generations were the ones most affected by such progressive development and structural violence.

Using the methodology developed in TM called 'Integrative Ecology', the school's vision is that students understand the interrelation that exists between themselves and nature (Vernonia, former school director) in order to build a planetary consciousness, encourage a sense of citizenship and ethics, and eventually support a fair sustainable development (TM document 2[78]). Moreover, the school aimed to foster young community leaders who could fight for their rights, defend their culture, and could speak for themselves. Over the years, the school has welcomed more than 150 pupils from the rural Quilombos communities, offering classes as varied as ecology, dance, music, sports, language, maths support, visual arts, theatre, computer science and courses for discovering personal talents.

The school service was free for the families of the valley but it was mainly funded by external donations. However, the resources available were limited and the school at the site is now closed down. In 2012 the school received only 53,000 Brazilian real (approximately 14,200 British pounds) to cover the costs for the whole year. Consequently, the number of students who could join the Ecological School were limited. To address this issue, TM developed another programme in 2012 called *Brincarte* (Playing with Arts), whereby TM Ecological School could widen its impact by organising weekly learning activities in five of the official schools of the valley. In 2012, the project reached a total of 310 students of whom 213 were aged between 6 and 9 years old.

This learning support, provided over a period of 15 years, has had a positive impact on some of the youngsters of the Itamboatá valley. Tapirira, a 22-year-old girl from the Quilombos community of Dandá, started to attend the TM Ecological School when she was 10 years old:

> *Everything I learnt was thanks to the TM Ecological School. Because we [the people of Dandá community] do not go out of the village in which we live. Because it is a village far from the city, so we stay in the village all the time. When the opportunity arose to come to the Ecological School was when I began to interact more, because before I was not used to speaking.* (Tapirira, Dandá resident)

The interview with Tapirira also revealed how the relationship between TM and her community changed over these years. She explained that initially the people from Dandá were sceptical about TM, '*everyone was speaking a lot about the foundation, but we were afraid of it*'. She adds that the perceptions started to change when Alba María and other people from TM started to visit her community to speak with the people and when the Ecological School project began:

> *Now [the perception] is completely different because my community sees TM in another way and has a different point of view. Everything that my community said that was bad about TM was not true.* (Tapirira, Dandá, woman)

Despite the challenging circumstances, TM attempted to promote social change through a range of different developmental projects. Violence, scepticism and financial limitations, were some of the issues that were addressed during these years, yet a persistent commitment helped to create a more active network of individuals and institutions that are collaborating for the development and protection of the valley. It was through establishing this relationship and dialogue with the local communities that the idea for another project ('Eco-solidarity incubator of small producers in the valley of Itamboatá') was born in 2011 to address issues of food security. This project was executed in collaboration with 20 local farmers, demonstrating another level of interaction with the Quilombos communities and a less hierarchical mode of engaging in development practices.

Such a long-term approach differs from "the 'quick-fix' and target mentality of many development agencies"[79] which often do not allow for an understanding of the socio-cultural context of the local communities and can fail in producing more meaningful – slow yet effective – impacts. For instance, Ixora (resident) distances TM from other FBOs by claiming:

> *We do not indoctrinate. Evangelists, they indoctrinate, then they [the communities] need to follow a specific way. Evangelists don't arrive here asking: what is your culture, who are your ancestors and how did they live? They impose a culture. We try to understand their culture to be able to interact in the best way. This gives us a lot more work, but it's much more satisfactory because it is liberating. People liberate themselves through their own self-knowledge. Our only rule is to respect nature, this is our main rule. This differentiates us very much from other religious institutions. It's recognition, not imposition.*

The spiritual activism of TM starts from the self, by exploring ancestral memories, connecting with the Earth, and taking cognizance of the individual's roots. The aim was not to increase the number of residents in TM, nor to encourage new affiliated members. For instance, as a result of the aforementioned programmes no Quilombos residents moved to TM nor participated in Shamanic rituals. The key point I am suggesting here is that development in this alternative shamanic organisation starts as a process of self-transformation in contradistinction from the missionary will to 'save the world'. For this community, responsibility for others begins through taking responsibility for oneself. In other words by discovering, knowing and transforming (generally better identified with deconstructing or decolonising) the inner self.

Foucault, in discussing the importance of "care of the self", refers "to ancient practices which aim for self-improvement in relation to an ethical way of life"[80]. Explaining the concept of

‘political spirituality’ Foucault underlines how a process of free-ethical transformation and the will to discover a different way of governing oneself and the other are essential in challenging the Western modernity’s political rationality[81]. Gibson-Graham[82] similarly explains that “any social transformation involves as well a micro-political project of transforming the self.”

Recognising this other reality, “re(con)ceiving the other”[83] and deciding to take action is the result of a deeper inner process. Spiritual activism “is a visionary, experientially-based epistemology and ethics, a way of life and a call to action”[84]. Therefore, this spiritual call for action, this ethical responsibility starts from an inner realisation of the interconnectedness of human and non-human beings and the expressed desire that others can perceive this interconnectedness. Additionally, ‘spiritual activism’ is a radical and alternative ethical project because it breaks the mechanism of dependency by supporting individual self-transformation through processes of empowerment. TM did not transform the vulnerable situations of the Itamboatá valley, such processes cannot be the responsibility of one institution. Yet, it initiates a cultural change, a social awakening, a holistic – yet often difficult – alliance with the surrounding local residents and actors. Spiritual activism has to be a collective project of development that “starts with each individual but moves outward as we challenge and transform unjust social structures”[85].

Conclusions

Since 2000, development scholars have started exploring religious NGOs and especially how they are embedded in translational networks of support. However, the role of alternative spiritual organisations and communities has remained neglected in development discourses. In addressing this lacuna, I also address the concerns of Bebbington[86] who encourages us to look at how, why and from which social-institutional contexts development NGOs emerge.

This paper captures the emergence of TM and how, from an initial inner focus, the community opened and intersected with the surrounding communities by engaging collaboratively in ecological, social, and economic developmental projects. Yet, these findings also show how such collaborative relations were constructed over time and how they have been shaped by TM's shamanic culture.

The concept of 'spiritual activism' has helped to better capture the dynamics of a spiritual intentional community localised in a marginal area of Brazil. Drawing upon indigenous knowledge and Eastern thought, spiritual activism is a concept that refers to a holistic and integrative spirituality that aims to reduce the distance between self/other, human/non-human, spiritual/material by arguing for a radical interconnectedness[87]. The key argument is that development in such spiritual spaces starts from a process of self-knowledge, self-transformation and leads to a relational consciousness, a socio-cultural change where individuals can perceive the deeper connections with nature and other human beings.

So far development studies have embraced a cultural turn[88], some scholars mentioned also a religious turn[89], however it is just the beginning of a potential spiritual turn. By using the concept of spiritual activism, this paper has shown how development initiatives can be linked to subjective processes of self-knowing, spiritual individual journeys, and mystical experiences of consciousness expansion. To uncover the role of spirituality in shaping developmental actions it is necessary to investigate individual and collective spiritual practices to capture how mystic knowledges are produced (epistemological concerns) and which 'other' realities exist (ontological concerns). The study of spiritual practices, epistemologies and ontologies, can reveal new facets of developmental practices and can contribute to more successful development interventions.

This paper has contributed to the literature on alternative spiritualities by focusing on a Latin American context. It reinforces Bartolini *et al.*[90] argument by claiming that the modern

project enacted by the Brazilian government with intense urbanisation and industrialisation have triggered the desire for a spiritual community that could counteract to the ills of the present society. Yet, more research on the rise of alternative spiritualities in the global south could further strengthen an understanding of a possible cultural spiritual revolution in modern societies.

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[1] Mackinnon, *Shamanism and spirituality in therapeutic practice: An introduction,* 54.
[2] Eliade, *Shamanism: archaic techniques of ecstacy*.
[3] Favilla, "Cultura Xamânica e Sabedoria Ancestral as Relações de Confiança Como Valor Central."
[4] The Shaman is considered the "mentor", the "wiseman", the "person that knows" (Sampaio 2011).
[5] Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression,* 29.
[6] Clarke and Jennings, "Introduction."; Gergan, "Animating the Sacred, Sentient and Spiritual in Post-Humanist and Material Geographies."; Lunn, "The Role of Religion, Spirituality and Faith in Development: a critical theory approach."; Sargisson and Sargent, *Living in Utopia: New Zealand's Intentional Communities*.
[7] Sanderson, "The challenge of placing spirituality within geographies of development."
[8] Partridge, "Introduction."
[9] Lunn.
[10] Anzaldúa, "Now let us shift… the path of conocimiento… inner work, public acts."
[11] Regarding my positionality, it should be noted that I am not a 'local' of the context studied. For more on how I have attempted to decolonise my views from a Eurocentric perspective by engaging in embodied shamanic rituals that emphasise a more intuitive system of knowledge production, see Fois, *Enacting intentional heterotopias: Discovering alternative spaces through a relational-scalar approach in the spiritual intentional communities of Damanhur (Italy) and Terra Mirim (Brazil)*; Fois, "Understanding ethnography through a life course framework: a research journey into alternative spiritual spaces."
[12] The interviews were mainly conducted in Portuguese with the exception of five interviews conducted in English. In the first two visits, I interviewed 20 Brazilians and 5 foreigners who were temporary visiting the community.
[13] Fois, *Enacting intentional heterotopias: Discovering alternative spaces through a relational-scalar approach in the spiritual intentional communities of Damanhur (Italy) and Terra Mirim (Brazil)*.
[14] The GLOBAL-RURAL project, undertaken by Aberystwyth University and funded by European Research Council (n.339567), investigates how rural spaces are influenced by globalisation and how these ruralities shape, transform and/or resist global flows.
[15] Clarke, "Faith matters: faith-based organisations, civil society and international development."; Lunn; Ver Beek, "Spirituality: a development taboo."
[16] ---.
[17] Ibid., 36.
[18] Casanova, *Public religions in the modern world*.
[19] Lunn.
[20] Ibid.; Radcliffe and Laurie, "Culture and development: taking culture seriously in development for Andean indigenous people."
[21] Bartolini et al., "The place of spirit: Modernity and the geographies of spirituality."; Kong, "Global shifts, theoretical shifts: Changing geographies of religion."
[22] Lunn, 942.
[23] McGregor, "Geographies of religion and development: rebuilding sacred spaces in Aceh, Indonesia, after the tsunami."
[24] Clarke, "Faith matters: faith-based organisations, civil society and international development."
[25] Clarke and Jennings, "Introduction," 5.
[26] 1) Faith-based representative organisations or apex bodies; 2) Faith-based charitable or development organisations; 3) Faith-based socio-political organisations; 4) Faith-based missionary organisations; 5) Faith-based illegal or terrorist organisations (Clarke 2006).
[27] Clarke, "Faith-based organisations and international development: An overview."; ---, "Faith matters: faith-based organisations, civil society and international development."
[28] Bebbington, "NGOs and uneven development: geographies of development intervention."; McGregor; Olson, "Development, transnational religion, and the power of ideas in the High Provinces of Cusco, Peru."; Sheringham, "Creating 'Alternative Geographies': Religion, Transnationalism and Everyday Life."

[29] Clarke, "Faith matters: faith-based organisations, civil society and international development," 836.
[30] Ibid., 837.
[31] Bartolini et al.
[32] Smith, "Witchcraft, spiritual worldviews and environmental management: Rationality and assemblage."
[33] Heelas et al., *The spiritual revolution: Why religion is giving way to spirituality*.
[34] Ibid., 6.
[35] Bartolini et al., "Psychics, crystals, candles and cauldrons: Alternative spiritualities and the question of their esoteric economies," 383.
[36] ---, "The place of spirit: Modernity and the geographies of spirituality," 350.
[37] U.S. third world feminism is used by Sandoval to identify an oppositional political activity and consciousness in the US that can be differentiated from hegemonic feminism. It aims to go beyond the rational imperatives of hegemonic thought and propose a paradigmatic shift for a theoretical and methodological feminist oppositional consciousness (see Sandoval, "US third world feminism: The theory and method of oppositional consciousness in the postmodern world."Sandoval 1991).
[38] ---, "Foreword Unfinished: The Crossing of Gloria Anzaldúa."
[39] Levine, "Champion of the Spirit: Anzaldúa's Critique of Rationalist Epistemology," 172-73.
[40] Keating, ""I'm a citizen of the universe": Gloria Anzaldúa' s Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change," 54.
[41] ---, "From Bordelands and New Mestizas to Nepantlas and Nepantleras Anzaldúan Theories for Social Change."; ---, ""I'm a citizen of the universe": Gloria Anzaldúa' s Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change."
[42] Anzaldúa, "Now let us shift… the path of conocimiento… inner work, public acts."
[43] Keating, "From Bordelands and New Mestizas to Nepantlas and Nepantleras Anzaldúan Theories for Social Change," 11.
[44] MacKian, *Everyday Spirituality: Social and Spatial Worlds of Enchantment*.
[45] Ibid., 64.
[46] Ibid., 154.
[47] Keating, "Introduction," 9.
[48] The vision is a key element in shamanism; it is a way for the Shaman to channel a transcendental spiritual dimension obtained through an altered state of consciousness (Santos Jr 2000).
[49] Santos Jr., *Zelosamente Habitando a Terra: Ecovilas, Ethos e Sustentabilidade no Viver Contemporâneo. Uma contribuiçao sobre a Realidade Brasileira*.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Schwartz, "The Manumisson of Slaves in Colonial Brazil," 607.
[53] According to Almeida (2002 in Souza, 2008: 3), Brazilian legal documents dating from 1740 identified as defining features of the Quilombos community: a minimum quantity of fugitives (generally 5); geographical isolation; habitual dwelling or ranch/farm; and, self-sufficiency.
[54] Amorim and Germani, *Quilombos da Bahia: Presença Incontestável* ; Reis and Gomes, *Liberdade por um Fio: História dos Quilombos no Brasil*; Souza, *Movimento Quilombola: Reflexões sobre seus aspectos político-organizativos e identitários*.
[55] Amorim and Germani; Leite, "Os Quilombos no Brasil: Questões Conceituais e Normativas."; Reis and Gomes, *Liberdade por um Fio: História dos Quilombos no Brasil*.
[56] Souza.
[57] Starting from km 01 of the highway BA 093, these eight communities are Santa Rosa, Oiteiro, Jardim Renatao, Convel, Guaíba, Dandá, Palmares and Pitanga de Palmares (Sampaio, 2011). The intentional community of TM is between Convel and Guaíba.
[58] Bledsoe, *Defender Nosso Pedaço de Chão: Quilombola Struggles in Bahia*, 31.
[59] IBGE, *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística*.
[60] Sampaio, *Integrating the global and the local: experience of an educative community (in the metropolitan region of Salvador)*.
[61] Porto and Carvalho, *Savador na globalizaçao*; Reis, 2007 in Santos Jr.
[62] IBGE.
[63] Porto and Carvalho.
[64] Bledsoe.
[65] Santos Jr., 337.
[66] Bledsoe, 94.

[67] Waiselfisz, *Mapa da Violência 2012: Os Novos Padrões da Violência Homicida no Brasil*.
[68] Bledsoe, *Black Geographies: Racialization and Political Responses*, 131.
[69] Clarke, "Faith matters: faith-based organisations, civil society and international development."
[70] Final report of *Aguas Pura* project.
[71] Bebbington.
[72] Frost and Egri, "The Shamanic Perspective on Organizational Change and Development."
[73] Keating, ""I'm a citizen of the universe": Gloria Anzaldúa' s Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change," 60.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Anzaldúa, "Now let us shift… the path of conocimiento… inner work, public acts," 558.
[76] MacKian, *Everyday Spirituality: Social and Spatial Worlds of Enchantment*.
[77] Bledsoe, *Defender Nosso Pedaço de Chão: Quilombola Struggles in Bahia*.
[78] Proposal of the project 'Ecological School and Playing with Arts project'
[79] Briggs, "Indigenous knowledge: A false dawn for development theory and practice?," 239.
[80] Vintges, "Freedom an Spirituality," 102.
[81] Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* ; Vintges, "Freedom an Spirituality."
[82] Gibson-Graham, *A postcapitalist politics,* 120.
[83] Keating, "Shifting Perspectives: Spiritual Activism, Social Trasformation, and the Politics of Spirit," 242.
[84] Ibid.
[85] ---, "From Bordelands and New Mestizas to Nepantlas and Nepantleras Anzaldúan Theories for Social Change," 11.
[86] Bebbington.
[87] Keating, ""I'm a citizen of the universe": Gloria Anzaldúa' s Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change."
[88] Radcliffe and Laurie.
[89] McGregor.
[90] Bartolini et al., "The place of spirit: Modernity and the geographies of spirituality."