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CONFUSION OF FORM

Ontological confusion: Eshu and the Devil dance to *The Samba of the Black Madman*

Moises Lino e Silva*

Department of Anthropology, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, USA

What does it take to recognise “confusion” as a particular form in itself? This text explores how different types of knowledge inflect the way that some Brazilian *favela* (shantytown) dwellers experience and deal with confusion in their daily lives. I contend that religious grammars of confusion may enable the recognition and understanding of a wide variety of other (ontological) forms of confusion in the daily life of different groups living in Favela da Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro. The method used for my investigation is an ethnographic and recursive one. Part of the confusion manifested in the capacity of recognising “a confusion” derives exactly from the condition that there is no fixed or neutral epistemological position to serve as a basis from which to arbitrate with precision the existence of confusion as a form. In an attempt to better understand the way under which confusion exists in people’s everyday lives, I describe and analyse particular events that I experienced during an Afro-Brazilian (Umbanda) religious celebration and other more quotidian episodes with a different group, my Evangelical friends. What are the struggles and conflicts of power that warrant the existence of certain confusions? What confusions would normative sexual, religious and class-based orders rather avoid? The historical presence of Eshu in the Afro-Brazilian pantheon as the god of all agreements and disagreements, lord of all paths and crossroads and the master of all order and confusion has been deeply valued in Afro-Brazilian religious cosmologies – among other reasons, for the power of disruption that it offers against an oppressive social order. I suggest that part of the political dimension that informs acts of recognition of confusion as a form is revealed when we interrogate and confuse the context of order against which “a confusion” may emerge.

Keywords: Brazil; confusion; *favela*; epistemology; ontology; religion

Alleyways of confusion

A fat mouse passes over our heads, balancing precariously on one of the many wires that make part of the gigantic network of overhead cables that connects thousands of homes in the *favela* (shantytown): bringing electricity, phone service, internet connection and TV signal to many of them. Few people there would say they understand how exactly this massive bundle of networks function, considering the enormous mess of wires of different shapes, colours, sizes and utilities – all interwoven (see Figure 1). A friend of mine, an electrician without much technical training, ventures some comments about the order of what seems a total confusion to those unfamiliar with the arrangement of wires in Rocinha. He thinks, for example, that more than half of all the wires are “illegal” connections (*gatos*). The electrician adds

*Email: moises@brandeis.edu



Figure 1. A confusion of overhead cables in Favela da Rocinha. Photo credit: Levi Ricardo.

that another large part of the wires are just dead; they are too old and no longer carry any power or signal. Because dead connections are not removed from the network – and new connections emerge every day – the tangle as a whole is constantly growing. Each day, the aerial mesh prevents more and more the passage of sunlight into the narrow alleyways (*becos*) used as means of pedestrian and motorcycle circulation by thousands of people in the *favela*.

In the middle of a noisy crowd passing through one of the busiest alleyways in Favela da Rocinha, a boy of about 12 years of age started to run – pushing his way and knocking everyone in front of him. Another child, much younger, followed the first one, taking advantage of the space the taller one had created as he pushed through the crowds. Suddenly, we began to hear weird noises coming from some sort of heavy object hitting the ground repeatedly. The event drew the attention of almost everyone in the alleyway. People started to get quieter, nervously searching for clues about what was happening. My friends who were sitting on the ground all stood up and put themselves on the tip of their toes, trying not to miss anything. Samira then shouted: “Look there! A confusion there!” My eyes searched for what she had just recognised, but the whole alleyway was so busy that it did not seem to provide me with an ideal background to identify any particular confusion. With time, a gap started to emerge around a white-haired, bearded man, who carried a large black plastic bag in his left hand and a big wooden stick in his right hand. He had his clothes torn and neither of his eyes would open completely. He obviously could not see very well around him, but he kept striking the heavy stick violently against the air, in the hope that at some point he would manage to hit something, or someone. Some people began to run away from the alleyway and I was preparing to do the same. Samira then held my arm and said: “Calm down, this will be over soon! It was just these street boys messing up with the poor old man!” Knowing that the old man was visually impaired, the boys used to derive some fun from kicking him in the back, and then running away to hide from him. Very upset, the old man

responded with strikes of anger. After several of those strikes, he usually got tired and returned to the same spot where he used to spend the nights, on that same busy and shadowy alleyway.

Forms, backgrounds and grammars

This article provides a reflection on confusion as a quotidian form among residents of Favela da Rocinha, one of the largest slums of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). How do these dwellers, with whom I lived for almost two years, recognise “a confusion?” In the particular sense of a recognisable form, confusion assumes a very concrete existence: the form of certain situations, conditions, feelings and practices of everyday life. However, the act of recognising a confusion does not seem to be neutral, nor is it absolutely determined by the circumstances of life in the shantytown. That which can be seen as a shadowy confusion can also reveal much about the history, struggles and living conditions of the very place that these wires discussed above connect- and therefore help to create. What does it take to recognise and understand confusion? Accounts of anthropologists momentarily confused during fieldwork are not uncommon. However, there are moments in which the world seems to be confusing for everyone. How different people find their way around such confusion depends on many factors. In this text, I explore how different forms of knowledge infect the way that *favela* dwellers experience and deal with confusion in their daily lives. Particularly, I contend that further exploration of religious grammars of confusion may help to enable the recognition and understanding of a wide variety of (ontological) confusions in this Brazilian *favela*.

It comes as no surprise that the very act of recognising the existence of confusion under a defined form seems to be necessarily bound to particular perspectives (which provide the conditions of possibility for such act of recognition to take place). Nevertheless, I would also like to hold that context dependency is not a sufficient explanation here. I am not going to argue that it is a fixed context that allows for the determination of the existence of confusion under a particular form. Instead, I would like to consider how the act of recognising confusion as an ontological form (and that exists at a certain place and time) implies a minimal differentiation between this singular form and other forms deemed to exist as part (or as the background) to that context. The method used for my investigation is an ethnographic and recursive one, deployed to tackle a broader question: in what concrete ways particular forms of knowledge become ontological when it comes to the recognition of confusion in daily life?

I started my fieldwork easily recognising generalised confusions in Rocinha (in the chaotic traffic system, the precarious trash collection, the mesmerising density of street life, etc.), but with greater difficulties in recognising more specific and precise forms of confusion. It took me some time to acquire the necessary knowledge to determine when particular forms of confusion started to emerge in the midst of the sea of confusions of everyday life in the *favela*. In a sense, I had to learn a certain grammar of differentiation that circulates in Rocinha and that is tailored for the understanding of life in the *favela*. Nevertheless, while living in Rocinha, I also came to learn that such grammar is neither homogeneous nor bounded. To the contrary, it is as complex and fluid as a form of knowledge as the many groups of people living in Rocinha themselves are. Part of the confusion manifested in the capacity of recognising “a confusion” derives exactly from the very fact that there is

no fixed or neutral epistemological position to serve as a basis from which to arbitrate with precision the existence of confusion as a form.

In that regard, different groups with different forms of religious knowledge became an important starting point for me. It has long been recognised by anthropologists that experiences of liminality and ontological transformations are a fundamental part of religious experiences across a wide range of settings and faiths (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1967). As such, I argue that the religious domain serves as a privileged space within which ontological confusion is at the same time produced, tested and turned into other forms of knowledge. These should not be understood as exclusively religious, but readily transferable into other domains. In an attempt to better understand the way under which confusion exists in people's everyday lives, I describe and try to understand particular confusions that I experienced during a ritual of Umbanda, which took place while I lived in the *favela*. I argue that the existence of Eshu as a particular type of "god of confusions" in the cosmology of my friends who took part in Afro-Brazilian religions has extended consequences for their appreciation of confusion in their daily lives in Rocinha, especially in contrast to my Evangelical friends also living there, who believed in only one God – and not of a "trickster" type.

Eshu and Pomba-Gira dance on top of the hill

In this episode, I engage primarily with *favela* dwellers self-identified as members of a group called PAFYC,¹ who often frequented temples of Afro-Brazilian religiosity (*terreiros*) in Rocinha. Although there were complaints here and there about the shrinking number of Afro-Brazilian temples in the *favela*, I still managed to visit quite a few of them during the time that I lived there. The second group that I will engage with as I develop my argument is one constituted by Evangelicals (Pentecostals), who lived near my house in the *favela* and constantly invited me to their churches.

There were a noticeably higher number of Evangelical churches in the community than *terreiros* in 2009. It had been in the company of my Pentecostal neighbours (who were overall much older than the members of the PAFYC group) that I attended several different Evangelical services during my fieldwork in 2009 and 2010. Most of the friends with whom I attended Candomblé, Umbanda and Quimbanda rituals in Rocinha, I had met through "queer" affinities.² This marks a significant difference between the two groups. The Evangelicals were proud of following (or striving to follow) strict norms of order (mostly established by God, the Bible and the church community) that governed their lives and wider relations to the world in which they inhabited. They were very proud of being normative in that sense. To the contrary, the members of the PAFYC group were widely perceived as non-normative, not just in terms of gender and sexuality, but also in terms of their religious beliefs.³

After a momentary bewilderment, the conversation with my friends returned to the point where we had left it: the Afro-Brazilian religious celebration that would begin shortly after midnight in a house located high up on the hill, near a large water tank and in the middle of a small forest that survived the massive urbanisation of the area. My friend, Samira, was one of the most excited people about the event: "*Vai ser babado!* (It is going to be awesome!)." It had been through her that I had met most of the guys in that infamous group of friends known all over Rocinha by

the name of PAFYC. Samira was a little older than the rest of the group. She had a very sweet smile and related to the others with a maternal touch, although she took part in most of their adventures too. “Who will come to the *macumba* tonight?” – she asked from time to time with great pleasure. At each time, several hands were waved in the air with a lot of energy.

The movement was intense in the alleyway where we were sitting with Samira and others that night. As our conversation continued into late hours, the flow of people through the area never totally stopped. This was exactly one of the reasons for the PAFYC group to meet at that spot; there was always plenty of material for gossip and entertainment as people kept flowing before our eyes. A group of muscular guys had gathered near where we were sitting. My friend, Joel, tried to get their attention by laughing as loud as possible. A group of armed drug traffickers kept guarding a crossing higher up on the same alleyway, and several people gathered to smoke marijuana near them. The presence of the dealers did not seem to bother my friends. Their big machine guns seemed to be just another trivial element in that wealth of events. Further down the alleyway, an electronic games bar ran 24 h a day and was almost always crowded with teenagers. They made a lot of noise while playing their games. Different songs competed for attention in the area, coming mainly from bars nearby. Even the beauty salons on that alleyway played loud “funk” music to keep their clientele entertained.

Just before midnight, an old and very thin woman passed through the alleyway wearing a long dress of basic cut. Amendoim – a mischievous guy with chemically straightened and longish hair – looked at Samira and said: “Oh my god! That woman again!” The mentioned woman was talking to another lady nearby, who was also wearing a long dress. Based on their dress code, I assumed they belonged to Evangelical congregations. The lean lady then took a piece of paper from a small bag and delivered it to the person she was talking to. Looking backwards, she noticed our group and turned slowly towards us. She got close to Samira and wished her a good evening. Samira responded with a smile. Most people in the group simply ignored her presence. The lady handed a pamphlet to Samira, which contained messages from the Bible, and added: “You are all invited to share in worship at my church on Sunday, ok?” Samira thanked her in a very low voice. Amendoim mumbled: “Church? *Macumba* is what I want!” The Evangelical lady actually heard him and reacted by raising her eyebrows. She shook her head in disapproval and replied: “Isn’t it time for you to be in bed at home? You gotta get out of this street life, get out of this confusion! Where is your mother?” Amendoim replied straightaway: “Well, for sure you’re not my mother to give me orders!” The lady shook her head again and simply walked away. As far as I know, no PAFYC member was a street dweller; they did have families and homes in the *favela*. However, many of them were also known for being extremely rebellious and not willing to respect their parents’ wishes. Therefore, they were always out on the streets until very late at night regardless of what their parents preferred.⁴ In the PAFYC group, only Samira seemed to exert some degree of authority among different members, and Amendoim had clearly annoyed her that night. She asked him: “No respect for the old lady?” Amendoim smiled and simply replied: “I give a fuck!” And Samira slapped him hard, clearly trying not to laugh at the same time.

Samira soon after decided to break away from the group and went to her house for a quick shower before meeting everyone again about an hour later. The plan was for everyone to go uphill together, to the location where the Umbanda event would

take place. I quickly walked to my house too and drank a large glass of water. Before going uphill, I communicated to my neighbour Amelia that I was leaving to go to an Umbanda feast. A devout Catholic, Amelia was not happy with the news and told me that she was worried about me: “Beware of these things, ok?” I smiled, told her not to worry, and then left. The group had agreed to meet again at the same place where we were gathered before, but Samira was late. When she finally arrived, the group nervously split up, each of us quickly taking a motorcycle-taxi to reach the top of the hill as soon as we possibly could. After we got off the motorcycles, there was still a long walk ahead of us before we could start climbing the final steps that led to the temple. From the steps onwards, we could already listen to the sound of drums coming from the temple, a small brick house in the middle of a very thin forest.

When we got to the final stages of our journey uphill, Samira was breathing heavily and asked to take a break before we entered the place. The other members of the crew did not pay any attention to her and simply went ahead, leaving us behind and pushing the gate at the entrance in order to get into the temple. It opened without much resistance, but the crew suddenly stalled. Right behind the open gate, we could see someone dressed in a fluffy red skirt, with a lit cigarette between her lips, and holding a glass of red wine in her left hand. On the ground, in between the entrance and a few inches away from the bare feet of the smoking lady, I noticed candles burning around a rusty iron trident. “Settlement of Eshu” – told me Samira, murmuring into my ears. “How can I help you, folks?” – said the lady in red. Samira got up and walked towards her with reverence, trying to sort out the slightly awkward situation. Samira politely wished her a good evening and then said that we had come for the festivities, if that would be ok. A nerve-wracking pause followed. Moments later we heard: “More souls for the party!” – proclaimed the young lady raising her glass in toast and immediately falling down onto her knees, while emitting a deep laugh. Later on Samira remarked that this way of laughing was very typical of Pomba-Giras. She furthered her remarks by explaining to me that Pomba-Giras were the female versions of the Afro-Brazilian deity called Eshu; the master of all confusions and all orders – as she had told me many times before. We slowly walked one by one towards the centre of the compound, where a large group gathered near three drums sheltered by a very low ceiling. The gate closed again.

Inside the central house that was part of the grounds of the temple, a big circle of visitors gathered to watch the mediums perform the ritual celebration. Some of the Eshus were wearing a black cloak or suit, many were smoking cigars and almost all were drinking alcohol. Other Pomba-Giras present looked similar to the one that had greeted us by the entrance gate, but wearing a diverse range of colours. Some with more elaborate attire than others. Most people on the temple grounds kept moving to the sound of the drums, from song to song. A gentleman approached our group and offered us a bit of liquor that was overflowing in his cup. I looked to Samira and she nodded: “*Exu Caveira!* (Eshu Skull!)” One of the boys in our group started to drink from his cup. Samira laughed and told me that she was curious to see which of our friends would “*virar no santo*” (get possessed or, more literally, “turn into the deity”) first. An older lady suddenly grabbed the outer layer of her black skirt and started to rub it against Amendoim’s body. He got dizzy immediately after and quickly started to grab onto his head, trying to pull his hair up using an elastic band. Samira laughed and remarked: “This Pomba-Gira is wicked! See? She is trying to make Amendoim *virar no santo!*” Amendoim made an effort to hold on

to his hair again, but his head seemed to be getting too heavy. Samira told me excited: “He’s holding it, but let’s see for how long!” I asked if Samira would get possessed at some point too. She laughed and replied: “You should know by now that this is something that never happens to me!” The drum rhythm changed and the smell of cigarettes increased when another Pomba-Gira started talking to me: “Good evening, my boy!” Never knowing exactly how to address an embodied spirit, I replied sheepishly by quickly greeting her back and trying to turn my eyes away from hers. The Pomba-Gira smiled, spit some smoke against my face and went on to talk to Samira. A blonde woman began to tremble very close to my right-hand side and suddenly jumped up high into the stuffy air. Upon landing and opening her eyes, she apparently did not understand what was happening around her. Another girl, dressed all in white and much younger, walked towards us too. She was accompanying the blonde woman and her job was to care for the welfare of the mediums in the room. As the entities depart, they may leave behind very confused and exhausted bodies. When they arrive to possess someone, they usually make their bodies shake violently. Despite his efforts, Amendoim could not avoid the possession for long and he was soon to be seen ecstatically dancing around the room. He asked someone from the temple for a glass of wine and also wanted a skirt to wear. Then he joined the group of other Eshus and Pomba-Giras that were dancing, drinking, smoking and chatting the night away.

The strong beat of the drums combined with the dense smoke that did not find a way out of the stuffy room, the laughter of the deities, the tears of a girl who consulted herself with Eshu Seven Skulls in a more secluded corner of the house, the intense glow of the candles that illuminated images of Afro-Brazilian deities mixed with Catholic saints on an a big altar and the smell of sweat mixed with strong perfume emanating from all the heavy and extravagant attires, all these elements made me feel confused. Amendoim had just hugged me, but he no longer did so as if he were greeting a friend. “She is Pomba-Gira Ciganinha!” – Samira explained to me. Amendoim was no longer himself, he was actually Pomba-Gira Ciganinha.

Plenty of wine and *cachaça* (a Brazilian sugar cane-based spirit) were distributed at the party. The abundance impressed me. Samira told me that she was eager to talk to Pomba-Gira Dona Rosa, from whom she needed some advice. However, this particular Pomba-Gira had not arrived yet. Nobody knew for sure when and how she would come. She did come much later into the event and made a black boy named Edimilson shiver violently during her arrival. Dona Rosa came almost at the same time that the first golden rays of sunshine began to penetrate through the smoky air stuck into the house. At that moment, Samira started to tremble a bit too. An unexpected possession? Samira smiled and told me that she was just very anxious to consult with Dona Rosa.

That one Pomba-Gira ignored us for a long time, making Samira even more apprehensive. I advised her to go after Dona Rosa, but, out of respect, she said she preferred to wait for her turn to talk to the deity. When Dona Rosa finally approached us, she took Samira by the hand and led her out of the house. I got a bit apprehensive, wondering where Samira had been taken. After a while, Samira returned to my company, with a list of materials that she needed to buy in order make an offering. It should be placed at the crossroads in between the *favela* and the upper-middle-class neighbourhood called São Conrado – she told me all that with an earnest expression. Dona Rosa had given her exact instructions of what to

do in order to please Eshu and, in exchange, get whatever it was that Samira had asked for.

Experiencing and understanding ontological confusion

Was I just confused myself (because of my own poor basis for understanding that reality) or in fact defined forms of confusion were being produced for me and for others during that episode? Was it confusion in general or confusion under a specific form that we had experienced? If there was some specific confusion, against what background did it emerge? What orders do Eshu and Pomba-Gira maintain and at the same time challenge so that confusion can possibly emerge as a distinct form? What forms of confusion do they make recognisable within life in this Brazilian shantytown? What are the struggles and conflicts of power that warrant the existence of certain confusions? What confusions would normative sexual, religious and class-based orders rather avoid?

Afro-Brazilian religions historically flourished despite an oppressive background of slavery and racism in the country. It is important to question what values of order and confusion have been expected from slaves, slave descendants and their allies in Brazil. I argue that to maintain order in a power structure in which blacks were confined to the lowest levels of social existence was not something of equal interest to the slaves and to their masters. Nowadays in Rocinha, those taking part in Afro-Brazilian religions cannot be identified through a particular racial group in a simplistic manner.⁵ Nevertheless, the historical presence of Eshu in the Afro-Brazilian pantheon as the god of all agreements and disagreements, lord of all paths and crossroads, and the master of all order and confusion, seems to have been deeply valued in Afro-Brazilian religious cosmologies, among other reasons, for the power of disruption it offered towards an oppressive social order. In different parts of Africa, such as in Benin and Togo, the existence of other “trickster” divinities in many ways similar to Eshu (who is originally a figure from the Yoruba pantheon) has been highlighted and greatly discussed by authors such as Augé (1978). In a text regarding “inversion of signs,” the author describes a divinity in Togo that is celebrated for “prohibiting prohibitions” for its priestesses – therefore causing much confusion (and at the same time prosperity), challenging oppressive social structures (in particular those related to gender structures) in south-east Togo.

In Brazil, there have been many reports regarding the distaste and fear that white slave masters cultivated in response to the worshipping of Eshu (Prandi 2001). To this day in Rocinha, there exists strong prejudice and criticism against Afro-Brazilian religions and their practitioners, most of all coming from members of the Evangelical churches. I suggest that part of the political dimension that informs acts of recognition of confusion as a form is revealed when we interrogate the context of order against which “a confusion” may emerge. I speculate that great concern is generated when the power to determine which confusion may emerge in an established order is no longer in the hands of those interested in maintaining the status quo (in terms of class or gender norms, for example). It is not surprising, therefore, that the existence of Eshu as a deity capable of challenging normative structures established by a colonial history of oppression and the dominance of Christian values has led to the demonisation of Eshu in Brazil, but also in many parts of Africa (Rodrigues 1935; Souza 1986; Prandi 2001).

Beyond a generalised sense of confusion, one of the clearest forms of confusion that I experienced that night with the PAFYC group was the ontological confusion between divine and profane existences, between the presence of deities and the presence of ordinary human bodies that were part of the feast. Accustomed to an order in which the relationship between body and person tends to be more stable (and even considered irreversible),⁶ it was extremely difficult for me not to get confused when my friend Amendoim was no longer present at the party, even though his body was dancing right in front of me. More confusing still to talk to that body knowing that it was actually Pomba-Gira Ciganinha who was talking to me. The transformation of clothing between Amendoim (who was wearing a white tank top, denim shorts and light blue flip-flops) and Pomba-Gira Ciganinha (all clad in black and red, wearing a colourful bandana and dancing barefoot) certainly helped me to avoid this kind of confusion at some moments. Even though I could distinguish between Ciganinha and Amendoim at times, it was not easy to understand that the latter was no longer physically present and had been transformed into a different existence. For me, the transformation of the garments was necessary, but not always sufficient, to prevent a specific form of ontological confusion from taking place (among bodies, persons and deities).

Samira seemed a lot more certain in her judgments about who exactly was present at the temple. When Eshu Skull possessed our friend Peterson, for example, she remarked without hesitation: "Oh, Peterson is gone!" Also, she seemed to have a clearer sense of when Pomba-Gira Dona Rosa had arrived and when she had left the temple. Nevertheless, Samira seemed to recognise a specific form of confusion, which was different from mine. Because possessions rarely happened instantly, it was common for bodies to demonstrate visible signs of becoming possessed for quite a long period of time. During this transitional period, even Samira recognised some confusion as to what was the nature of the entities we were relating to. It was in this phase of "limbo" that bodies would tremble violently and the backbone, legs, arms and even fingers of the mediums would start to roll up, for example. Also, their eyes would normally close down, and their mouths would get deformed. Special attention was given to those mediums that seemed to suffer more during the process of possession. When an older lady fell on her knees right behind me that night, it was Samira who attended to her first. When other people came by to help the lady, Samira stood up and told me: "She is turning!" I asked her: "Turning into what?" To Which Samira replied: "How could we know yet? It is still coming!" Minutes later, we heard the lady laughing out loud and asking for a coat and a hat. Samira then knew it had been some Eshu who had just arrived in the temple. There was still some confusion, however, regarding the exact type of Eshu that arrived. This last piece of information, nobody would know for sure until much later into the night. Not until the entity had danced a bit, drunken some *cachaça*, and then decided that it was time to introduce himself to the visitors.

Following DaMatta (1991), it could be argued that both during Afro-Brazilian religious celebrations and during carnival celebrations in Brazil, daily gendered practices are reversed (men dress like women and vice versa), people with less schooling turn into respected experts (specialists in samba or in healing, for example), and the poor become the rich (wearing expensive clothes or drinking in abundance). Nonetheless, there are a many important differences between confusion during carnival and confusion during Afro-Brazilian rituals. For example, the cosmological existence of Eshu provides the possibility for practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions to

obtain a more radical sort of transformation of daily order, which carnival, with its Christian historical background, does not seem to afford.

For those familiar with Umbanda, and who acknowledge Eshu's transformative powers, the ritual is not simply a moment of general confusion of established social norms or violation of norms that remain valid otherwise, even if momentarily confused. In celebrations of Eshu, there is a transformation of the very existential order and of the very epistemological basis from which to judge existence. Therefore, there is also a transformation of the context against which the recognition of confusion as a defined form can even be made at all. In this sense, Amendoim was not a man dressed as a woman to attend a party and create some confusion in the gender order. If we are to take my friends seriously, it is important to understand what they are expressing: because of Eshu's power, Amendoim actually ceases to exist as a man because he ceases to exist as a human person at all. The transformation here was not one of human gender but, more radically, it was an ontological transformation, of a human being into a deity, even if a gendered (female) deity. It was exactly the existence of this new ontological reality that required the use of special clothing. Not any female clothing, though. It required the female attire of a deity. Whereas in carnival confusion takes form through people violating some established rules (including some of God's rules) in anticipation of the arrival of the period of Lent, in the Afro-Brazilian rituals confusion takes form because the gods themselves change the grammar to be used to assign the existence of order and confusion. While some people felt a more generalised sense of confusion in those circumstances (as I did), others were much more attuned to the specific form of confusion engendered by Eshu and its female version. The transformations of order brought about by these entities are different from those performed by people during carnival in Brazil. An appreciation of the profound differences in god/human relations between Afro-Brazilian religious practices and Christian religious practices is a fundamental dimension of how the grammar of confusion in Rocinha is deployed and acquires significance for daily life in the *favela*.

Many of my friends from Rocinha who attended that Umbanda ritual celebration in 2009 understand that the foundational principles of order in this world are amenable to transformation. Even if humans were not always capable of performing these deeper transformations, Eshu had such a power. Food offerings were an effective way to please the gods in the hope to convince them to engender a desired transformation that seemed out of reach for humans to achieve. At the same time, my friends were aware that Eshu is also a "trickster," who acts according to his own wishes.⁷ Therefore, the recognition of order and confusion on the part of these followers of Afro-Brazilian religious traditions oftentimes happened in a different way from mine (raised Catholic) and from that of my Evangelical friends in Rocinha.

A Devil's confusion

Evangelicals tended to resort to a different epistemological foundation in their ontological judgment of confusion. My friend Paizinha was in her forties and had two daughters. Through many of our conversations at a school where she used to teach, I realised that Paizinha often argued that the organising principles of the world were truths revealed by God through the Bible. Unlike many Catholics and practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions, most of my Evangelical friends in the *favela* simply refused to celebrate confusion under any form whatsoever. They particularly disliked

the mess during carnival celebrations in the streets of Rio de Janeiro and many spent carnival secluded with members of their church. Whereas the practices of most people during carnival were seen as sinful, the religious practices of those involved in Afro-Brazilian religions were often understood from within a different dimension; Eshu and the other gods were normally described as *being* the Devil (all of them should be recognised as one and the same entity), who used confusion as a way to get into people's lives. The transformations facilitated by Eshu were seen as so sinful that many Evangelicals ended up recognising in them a clear proof for the existence of evil. Ana Maria, a primary school teacher and a good friend of mine, used to tell me: "Eshu? That's the Devil deceiving people! He wants to pass as God! Oh, how dirty he is!" My Evangelical friends cultivated a particular grammar directed at recognising confusion under of very specific form: "devilish confusions." Among other reasons, this was done in order to avoid being tricked by the Devil themselves. Avoidance of the so-called *Laço do Diabo* (Devil's trap) was a major concern in their daily lives.

In everyday *favela* life, the epistemological basis from which to recognise confusions was diverse and opened up the possibility that different forms of confusion could be recognised at the same time. I do not want to suggest that practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions recognise only the specific forms of confusion favoured by Eshu, or that my Evangelical friends are not able to recognise forms of confusion outside the context afforded by the Bible. In fact, they argued that the Devil and his followers establish their parallel orders too. However, many Evangelicals would tend to see any order that was not the one determined by the Bible as an illegitimate order. To mark the difference of legitimacy between God's order and the order established by the Devil, God's order was preserved as the only right (and normative) order; the rest came to be recognised as confusion.

As I have been arguing, different groups in the *favela* often (but not always) resort to different grammars that allow them to recognise concrete forms of confusion. In the particular case of my ethnographic explorations, different religious knowledge play a big role in how different people in the *favela* are able to recognise different forms of confusion in domains that go beyond the religious one. Several times, Evangelical friends would ask me with curiosity about my incursions into Afro-Brazilian religious temples in Rocinha and what I expected to obtain from those experiences. Once, one of my neighbours asked me: "*Vai fazer o que naquela confusão do Diabo?* (What are you going to do in that Devil's confusion?)." Another time, I heard an old white lady in the *favela* angrily racialising Afro-Brazilian rituals (based on their historical origins) by calling them "*bagunça de preto* (black's confusion)."

There is a famous composition made by the Brazilian satirical writer Sergio Porto (1968), which is entitled: "*O Samba do Crioulo Doido* (The Samba of the Black Madman)." Written during the military dictatorship in Brazil, the lyrics of this samba was created as a veiled criticism from Porto (1968) against a law imposed by the military government that regulated the themes allowed for carnival competitions and limited them to exclusively real historical events. In his lyrics, Porto takes Brazilian historical events and combines them in an outrageously confusing fashion. While the music was said to meet the government's censorship requirements of the times, it was also absolutely devoid of chronological order, and it sounded so confusing from a conventional historical understanding that the composition's title entered the daily grammar of confusion in Brazil.

Beyond a “Devil’s confusion,” quite a few times I heard life in the *favela* being described as a “Samba of the Black Madman.” I would argue that Porto displays an admirable creative attitude in appropriating a dictatorial rule of a military government and turning it into a rule of creative composition. This attitude brilliantly represents what my friends say regarding the creative powers of Eshu. It is important to notice that what seemed to have survived in the Brazilian popular imaginary was not really the historical example of how confusion existed as a generalised form in the music of Porto. Rather, the grammar through which confusion comes to be recognised as such – which later can be applied to recognise other forms of confusion – is what I would like to call attention to and something that this essay explored through detailed ethnographic means; through the distinction between the grammars deployed by two different groups in the *favela* in their recognition of ontological confusions.

Laroye Eshu! Eshu omojubá!

Mazinho had invited me to dine with him. I arrived a bit late for our meeting but he was patient and happy. He treated my delay as a normal situation. On the dinner menu we had white rice, meat and lettuce with tomato salad. We talked about his mother’s new boyfriend. At the same time, the television was blasting out loud near our table. The phone rang and Mazinho answered it. He started talking to me and to the person at the other end of the line simultaneously. I got confused trying to understand what Mazinho was telling me. When he hung up, he continued a conversation about the neighbour’s daughter being pregnant. I had missed the exact moment when the subject had changed. That did not seem to be a problem for Mazinho and he kept talking. He cut a piece of meat and meant to take it into his mouth. I just heard the sound of his fork falling on the ground and saw no food going into his mouth. Mazinho stopped talking and stood from his chair, while seriously staring at the fork on the floor. He clapped three times in a row and revered Eshu, recognising a divine form of confusion. “*Laroyê Eshu! Eshu omojubá!*” – Mazinho shouted hailing the God in a language which, he told me later, was Yoruba, from Nigeria.

Many of my Evangelical friends understood the *favela* as a place full of confusion, violation of norms, moral deviation, and therefore far closer to hell than to heaven. Meanwhile, many of my friends practising Afro-Brazilian religions seemed to delight in specific confusions that they encountered and enacted in their daily lives. When the rules of conduct are easily susceptible to transformation, the value of the distinction between what counts as normative and non-normative practices also becomes confused. I often heard from members of the PAFYC group that living in Rocinha was good because of the movement, the funny episodes and the confusions that often took place in the *favela*. When understood as part of the workings of Eshu, daily life confusions have the power to make some people recognise a certain divine presence. With it comes an opportunity to remember that the existence of confusion varies according to grammars that coexist and interconnect, but are not homogenised because people share life within a same shantytown.

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Notes

1. P. A. F. Y. C. were the initials of the names of the original founders of this group of teenage friends. By the time I got to know the group, numbers had already grown to dozens of members who identified themselves through a range of non-normative terms to describe their gender and sexuality.
2. For a more elaborate discussion on the relationship of non-normative sexualities and Candomblé, see van de Port (2007).
3. According to results of the Brazilian national census in 2010, only 0.3% of the Brazilian population declared to belong to one of the Afro-Brazilian religious traditions.
4. See DaMatta (1985) for a more extensive discussion regarding the significance of the distinction *Casa/Rua* (House/Street) in the Brazilian context.
5. Some would argue that there are many black Evangelicals and also white practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions, for example. However, the “blackness” in question could be of a different order.
6. For a deeper discussion of the relations between body and soul, humanity and corporality (although in a very different Brazilian context), see Vilaca (2005).
7. Although some would also say he is the slave messenger of other gods.

Notes on contributor

Moises Lino e Silva is an anthropologist who specialises in freedom and its relationship to wider topics such as religion, violence, sexuality and ontology. His current research is centred on freedom as theorised and enacted by *favela* dwellers in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He recently completed a Postdoctoral Fellowship at Harvard University and currently teaches anthropology at Brandeis University. In 2013, he was selected as a World Social Science Fellow by the International Social Science Council (UNESCO).

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