

## Charisma and Possession in Africa and Brazil\*

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### *Introduction*

It is becoming commonplace to refer to the global character of charismatic and fundamentalist religious movements. At its most elementary this simply means that their doctrines and their organizations tend to possess 'global reach'. But the expression 'global' in this context also refers to their propensity to borrow, imitate and project images of themselves and of others, onto themselves and others, across frontiers in time and space. The movements often exhibit a remarkable capacity to combine practices, beliefs and rituals from a wide range of sources, in ways which counteract our intuitive concept of religion as a set of institutions and beliefs rooted in tradition and resistant to change. These innumerable borrowings, and the self-images and images of others which accompany them, often seem to sit uneasily with the proclaimed beliefs of the movements in question. It is hardly the business of the social scientist to judge what is and what is not ritually or theologically acceptable to one or another religious institution, but the phenomenon, taken as a whole, does raise important questions about the definition and interpretation of cultural boundaries and also about the relationship between 'bundles' of symbolism and ritual and their nominally corresponding 'belief systems'.

Further questions are also raised about whether those 'bundles' are really bundles at all, in the light of pervasive borrowing of practices, rituals and symbols across inherited religious boundaries. This is commonly known as syncretism, but syncretism is not strictly an anthropologically respectable term, precisely because it assumes the existence of watertight coherent systems whose integrity is thought to be violated by syncretic practices. It is, therefore, an ideological term; there are no grounds for taking the fixed integrity of a religious system for granted or even for believing that religious ensembles, sub-cultures or institutions can be thought of as systems at all. However, the self-image of a religious institution or sub-culture as possessing its own integrity, or the images it produces of the other as a distinct system, are interesting and important, because religion in the modern world is evidently a marker of identity and a mechanism for the production of group/identitarian boundaries.

In this paper I propose to approach an understanding of these processes in Brazilian charismatic movements through a comparison – or, better, a juxtaposition – with the history and anthropology of Christianity in Africa. It should be explained that the usage 'charismatic' is adopted to cover a wide variety of churches and movements which have in common a belief in the gift of the spirit, which practise speaking in tongues, or glossolalia, and whose followers believe in the existence and prevalence of possession by devils. These include Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches, as well as some evangelical churches which might not describe themselves as Pentecostal. They also must now include the Charismatic Renewal movement, which is gaining a large following within Catholicism, though (so far) it has shown little interest in devils and demonic possession. The term is used in such a way as also to cover aspects of many fundamentalist churches and movements, but the word fundamentalist, which refers to a concentration on texts and their inerrancy, is narrower in scope. The word 'neo-Pentecostal' refers to the relatively recent emergence within the Pentecostal movement of more centralized, hierarchical and

‘mediatic’ churches which are different from the more chapel-based tradition associated principally with the Assemblies of God (Lehmann, 1996).

The rapprochement between Africa and Latin America is not undertaken here with the purpose of producing generalizations, but rather because of differences in approach to the study in the two places. Whilst research on Protestantism in Latin America has tended to be dominated – though not totally – by sociology, in Africa history and social anthropology have had a much stronger influence. Writing on charismatic movements in Latin America has also lacked historical depth, and even the one historian who writes at length about Latin American Protestantism (Bastian, 1994) has until recently skirted around the analysis of charismatic movements. It is striking for example, that the vast ethnographic and ethnohistorical literature on conquest and colonization in Latin America – especially Mexico and the Andean countries – has had little impact on the analysis of charismatic movements, which rarely alludes to the ethnography of popular Catholicism, or to phenomena such as the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Although there are exceptions – such as the work of Patricia Birman who has applied instruments of analysis used in her interpretation of Brazilian possession cults, to the study of neo-Pentecostalism – it is strange that in cultures renowned for the introduction of indigenous rituals or symbols into Catholic practices – and vice versa – these approximations have not been pursued.

One could speculate on the reasons for this lacuna: the strong sense among many observers of the novelty and indeed the revolutionary character of the charismatic upheaval doubtless can tempt them to think of more longstanding and established versions of popular religion as being simply irrelevant – the shock of the new leads them to wipe the old from their imagination. One might also note that the academic culture of sociology is very different from that of social anthropology, being more inclined to typology and classification and structural explanation, and less to the exploration of subjective meaning, let alone ritual and symbolism. The sociology of charismatic movements has been slow to take up the theme of health and healing, and the one brave recent attempt (Chesnut, 1997) is curiously more concerned with the efficacy of Pentecostal healing than with its symbolic construction. Likewise, the themes of evil and exorcism have been explored (in connection with Pentecostalism) only by Birman and Mariz, significantly in Brazil where possession cults form a powerful backdrop to the charismatic phenomenon (Birman, 1997; Mariz, 1997), whereas in South Africa and West Africa they have received extensive treatment from classic writers such as Sundkler (1948), and Meyer (1998). On the other hand, sociologists have also scored powerful hits: they have correctly, repeatedly and powerfully insisted on the ‘bottom-up’ character of the Pentecostal phenomenon in Latin America – its social base among the poor, even the poorest, its contestatory cultural character (Martin, 1990; Birman and Lehmann, 1999) and the multiple ambiguities of its political impact (Freston, 1993).

These observations of disciplinary cultures and blind spots lead one to ask whether the boundaries which shut them off from one another are not altogether more watertight and less permeable than the religious boundaries which form the subject of this essay, and to reiterate a doubtless hackneyed plea for combining their respective strengths and merits. Perhaps some progress could be made in this area if we cross-fertilize the sociological and anthropological accounts by showing how the

borrowings and symbolic mixing we observe in global charismatic movements relate to the evidently dissident face they turn towards cultural elites and their imaginary.

*Creative encounters: violating frontiers, appropriating symbols and becoming the other.*

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century origins of Ethiopianism and Zionism in South Africa, and the upsurge of Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America during the second half of the century especially, show the mercurial character of charismatic religion. Its growth amply demonstrates an ability to change, to adapt, to advance in the interstices of the social fabric, to take advantage of opportunities in a fast-moving, agile fashion. The recruitment of Pentecostal leadership is undertaken by promoting people from among the rank-and-file followers. The ‘class’ base can be highly varied: among the more impoverished in Brazil, the less impoverished in South Africa, while in Zimbabwe and probably in West Africa the charismatics seem – on the basis of admittedly limited evidence – to find a base among the aspirant educated middle classes and the young.

In contrast, the repertoire of ritual, of organizational techniques and of methods of communication appears relatively standard in charismatic movements across national and cultural frontiers, except in South Africa’s Zionist churches. Another standard element is the contestation of indigenous popular religion, accompanied by the presumption shared by all these movements that the spirits which inhabit the cosmologies of popular religion are real and real in their effects.

Now this contestation brings with it an invitation to the followers of indigenous religion to adopt a series of habits, routines and rhythms, and of religious rituals which originate *elsewhere*. These bring them into touch with, and eventually into membership of, a global movement, one of whose conspicuously advertised features is precisely its universal, worldwide reach. To be sure the word universal can refer to the rationalization of lives and relationships which evangelical Protestantism undoubtedly brings about. But here the emphasis is on a more concrete connotation of the word ‘universal’, namely the self-conscious appropriation of an identity which transcends the boundaries of community, race, ethnic group and nation. The standardization of liturgical procedures and communication techniques would therefore seem to be an advantage, not a disadvantage, for the churches in their expansionary drive. It is in these organizational features, rather than in ‘doctrines’ such as the ‘Health and Wealth Gospel’, that the force of the movements should be sought (Gifford, 1998: 137).

There is in this process an idea, on the part of those involved, of the power and identity of the other and a drive towards adopting the other’s way of life. However, whereas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century people would convert so as to acquire the powers (medical, economic, political) of the European missionaries (much to their consternation)<sup>1</sup> today we observe fundamental changes in the interaction between the indigenous, the rooted, the authentically traditional, and the ‘global other’. The ‘other’ grasps and transforms the indigenous, unpacking and repackaging many of its

<sup>1</sup> As will become clear later in the paper, the references to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early missionaries draw on the work of the Comaroffs, Sunkler and Hastings.

constituent elements. And although the indigenous, for their part, still seek to appropriate the other, instead of a ‘European’ other or an other embodied in colonial missionaries, doctors or officials, that other is an abstract, transcultural movement which proclaims a multi-levelled process of transformation at the personal, familial, economic and cultural levels. (The political transformation is less evident.)

Unlike more cosmopolitan multicultural movements such as Liberation Theology, the anti-apartheid movement or NGOs devoted to cultural defence and preservation, charismatic movements do not contextualize tradition. Instead they rework symbols and rituals in a piecemeal fashion to new purposes. The cosmopolitan variant regards tradition as a set of practices to be valued as markers of identity, and in doing so freezes tradition (or tries to), preserving it, as if in aspic, and with the attendant risk that it will become a spectacle. Charismatics, like Lévi-Strauss’s bricoleur, refashion local tradition without a theory of tradition or identity.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this exposition is to explore the interlocking of the permeability of ready-made cultural boundaries in a globalized cultural context, and the contestatory or dissident character of charismatic religious movements. To this end, I will pursue the juxtaposition – not, I repeat, a ‘comparison’ – of certain aspects of the African experience, both historical and contemporary, with contemporary Brazil, in order to underline how this interlocking is expressed in contemporary charismatic movements.

In Lévi-Strauss myths are transformed precisely by bricolage, a process in which ‘collections of oddments’ are reassembled and only acquire intelligibility in their overall structure, each element individually having no particular significance. Only the overall structure would tell us the meaning of these ritual practices and mythological narratives. But how do we incorporate the reflexive element described here? In interpreting transfers of practices and discourses, rhetoric and primordial narrative, across cultural boundaries account must be taken of the awareness (however well or ill-informed) among the collectivities involved of the origin of those practices. Thus the invocation of Old Testament Prophets by proto-Christian Messianic and Prophetic leaders in South Africa, say, or the proclamation of instant consumer satisfaction by Brazilian neo-Pentecostal Pastors dressed in a sober uniform of grey suits, white shirts and black ties, find a response because they and their followers are aware that these messages come from afar. In the words of Jean Comaroff this is ‘a bricolage which not only alters existing relations between signs but also integrates them with others bearing forms and forces of external origin...complexes of signs are thus disengaged from their former contexts and take on transformed meanings in their new associations’ (Comaroff, 1985: 119).

### *Background*

Although the transnational spread of evangelical and Pentecostal movements is an evident fact, the concomitant ironies and counterintuitive features continue to surprise. This is why Campbell’s account of the cross-fertilization of Black American and South African Black Protestantism, touches on a universal theme in such an

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<sup>2</sup> A recent article by Stefano Capone (1999) documents, not for the first time, such an evolution via the intellectualization of possession cults in Brazil (*umbanda*, *candomblé*) and Cuba (*santería*) in which anthropological professionals have played a prominent part.

arresting manner (Campbell, 1995). For Campbell shows how, in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Black American evangelicals, moved by a search for origins and also a yearning for liberation, brought to South African blacks a mirage depicting their own imagined future. The South Africans, held back in the Protestant/Anglican churches by restrictions on their advancement in the ministry, faced with the early steps towards apartheid, and encouraged by the emissaries of the American Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC), imagined a liberation like the emancipation of American slaves, without understanding the inequity of the post-slavery settlement. The AMEC missionaries were sympathetic to their desire to be free of white dominance in the church hierarchy, and also more tolerant of indigenous practices (such as circumcision, polygamy, and the payment of brideprice) which other missionaries condemned. The relationship with AMEC eventually soured, especially on account of disputes about money, but it paved the way for the development of African Independent Churches (AICs). These were divided between Ethiopian and Zionist. Ethiopianism tended to be more respectable, with a constituency drawn from the more socially mobile strata, while Zionism, encouraged by the example of the Illinois-based Zion Church, was more messianic charismatic and contestatory, emphasizing healing and baptism by immersion, and adopting with little if any sense of transgression, a host of indigenous rituals and procedures – of which more below.

The (American) evangelical practices and ideas penetrated different strands of the religious ferment which took hold of the South African indigenous population in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, intertwined with charismatic ideas and practices brought from Europe which were also gaining popularity among the Dutch/Afrikaans population. (Even then, as the pressures to institutionalize racial domination were growing, we observe evangelical Christianity straddling the racial divide – though to be sure straddling does not imply overcoming or even thinking about that divide, at least among the Afrikaans.) The background was a familiar one for today's observers of charismatic church expansion: massive social upheaval amidst violent economic transformation on the Rand, but also the creation of a vast, multi-ethnic population in which migrants from Eastern Europe mingled in the goldfields with migrants drawn from a variety of African ethnic backgrounds. (The same pattern can be observed at the birth of Pentecostalism in Los Angeles at about the same time.) In rural areas the Zionists established themselves under messianic leaders such as Isaiah Shembe, while in the townships around the mines African churches tried to establish a more 'respectable' identity in the image of established Anglican and Methodist traditions. But these latter, like Protestant and Catholic Churches in Brazil and elsewhere today, found themselves under persistent pressure to adopt more charismatic practices, especially healing and baptism by immersion, and to accommodate leadership sprouting from among the ranks. Hence the fissiparous pattern of church growth and hence also the difficulty of drawing a sociologically clear line between early 'Ethiopians' (alias African Independent Churches) and Zionists.

The history of these movements illustrates well the porousness of cultural frontiers in parallel with the constant process of re-creating cultural barriers. Sundkler, for example, describes the tensions experienced in urban churches led by individuals seeking to emulate Anglicanism or Methodism in separate institutions. While trying to gain a degree of recognition from patronizing, prejudiced and hostile authorities, they were also under constant pressure to adopt more charismatic practices – healing especially – and in competition with the Prophetic movements which set themselves

up in rural locations, drawing on habits of authority rooted, for example, in the Zulu Kingship system.

Within these indigenous churches, Pentecostalism was more a multiform tendency penetrating a range of churches rather than creating a church standing on its own. Thus all sorts of rituals and taboos which developed in African churches in that period – and still continue to exist and evolve kaleidoscopically today – arise from interdenominational symbiosis, Sundkler describes them as habits derived from ‘a cocktail of other church sources’ while the Comaroffs use the word ‘bricolage’. The different pathways of the Pentecostal Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) in Southern Africa show how misleading restrictive formal categories can be. Whereas in South Africa the AFM was ‘rapidly absorbed into the dominant economic and political culture’ (Maxwell, 1998b) by the mid-1930s, in Zimbabwe, its bearers acquired and maintained a dissident posture, in conflict with officially recognised tribal leaders, colonial authorities and established Anglican missions. Practitioners of exorcism, witch finding, divine healing and possession by the spirit roamed the country, causing much discomfort to the authorities. Compared with South African Zionist-charismatic movements, the Zimbabwean version developed an even less institutionalized structure during the years from about 1918 up to even 1960. Itinerant preachers and healers, moved in an out of messianic proto-rebellious movements, and while they gained large though perhaps not very stable followings, and much notoriety, they suffered from exclusion by the guardians of the political and ecclesiastical status quo. It was only with the rise of a nationalist movement that charismatic religion acquired an institutional presence. This occurred when a ruthless new leader adopted clear strategy of lining up with North American Pentecostal churches (Maxwell, 2000). The symbolic apparatus now began to distance itself from local cultures, acquiring the trappings of global Pentecostalism, while the explicit message was one of African nationhood.

Thereafter, the Zimbabwean case begins to fit a pattern familiar in other African countries (Marshall, 1991; Gifford, 1998) and Latin America. Ezekiel Guti, the all powerful leader of ZAOGA (Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa – though it has little to do with churches elsewhere bearing the Assembly of God name), used links with a succession of US-based institutions, first ‘white’ but later increasingly ‘black’, to gain credibility and money, allied himself with President Mugabe, and above all guided the church in the neo-patrimonial direction so familiar to students of African politics. He imposed centralized financial control, manipulated local church elections to place his own family and nominees in leadership positions, and acquired the familiar trappings of political power observed in Zimbabwe and neighbouring countries: the adoption of an ostentatious life style, the elevation of his wife to queenly status, the black Mercedes and so on (Maxwell, 1998b). This is highly successful and it operates a series of inversions in the imaginary projection of the identity of the church members as a collectivity reminiscent of what one observes in the Brazilian Universal Church of the Kingdom of God.

Like in Brazilian neo-Pentecostalism, the ZAOGA exalts the virtues and trappings of consumption, even of conspicuous consumption. They also have in common a highly centralized organization, and a view of political involvement as an extension and an instrument of their expansion as both a religious force and a social and cultural presence. The Brazilian version is less personalistic in the spectacular sense, but in

both cases one leader is without question undividedly in charge. The cult of personality has grown into a spectacle – even more theatrical in Africa than in the Universal Church, but similar to the Mexican Iglesia La Luz del Mundo (Light of the World) (de la Torre, 1995). In Maxwell's account there is little about healing and deliverance from the devil, so prominent in South Africa and West Africa, and in ZAOGA's precursor movements in colonial Southern Rhodesia. (Maxwell, 1999), and in Brazil.

The international involvements of ZAOGA are more concrete, more material, than those of Brazilian Pentecostal Churches. In neighbouring Zambia it would appear that President Chiluba himself (first elected in 1991 and re-elected since) has taken the position of evangelical leader, famously declaring his country a Christian nation that will seek to be governed by the righteous principles of the word of God (Gifford, 1998: 365). The Pentecostal Assemblies of God, and Zambia's most high profile evangelist, are close to him, and in the absence of a Guti-like figure, the President himself invites international evangelists to legitimate his regime.

In Brazil, it would not seem that international preachers and organizations have either as significant a political role, or as significant a role in building up (i.e. funding) church organization as in Africa. But on the other hand the promotion by charismatic churches and preachers of a glossy image of life in the United States, and of the idea that only Protestant countries achieve prosperity, is omnipresent. Indeed the leader of the Universal Church, Edir Macedo, is said by followers to 'live' in the United States – though in fact his movements are hardly known to the public at all. The symbolic dimension of this Church's global reach and international standing can be seen in kitsch-like interior design which contrasts sharply with the austerity of contemporary Catholic church architecture: neon signs, uniforms for different categories of church activists and preachers, electronic keyboards, and decorated Christmas trees. The sense of being in another world, and of being part of that other world is surely strengthened by the use of television as a vehicle of evangelization. The use of a microphone held in the same style as a television performer, the use of marketing and communication techniques drawn from business and thrust into a religious sphere (which for decades and centuries has been dominated by priestly gravitas and monotonous intonation) has to be understood as an evocation of and an invitation to share in the originating context of these practices. The church is saying to its followers that they too can join in that other world of consumption and accumulation.

Elsewhere in Latin America we find a host of examples in which religious conversion is tied up indissolubly with shifting cultural boundaries and identities. For example, Christian Gros' magisterial survey of Protestantism in rural indigenous communities (Gros, 1999) gives numerous examples from Mexico, Ecuador and Colombia of the reinvention of indigenous identities in a modern 'casing': by detaching themselves from the power structures associated with Catholic ritual and festivals, communities, or groups within communities, have been able to throw off political and economic shackles. His account of the Ecuadorian province of Chimborazo is illustrative of trends he observes also in Colombia and Mexico:

The case illustrates how religious proselytisation does not come on its own, but accompanied by a set of new strategic assets which stimulate modernisation and integration. It becomes clear that language plays a central role in missionary success: Quichua, once a mark of exclusion, now becomes a positive ethnic marker and becomes so in a renewed framework of



modernity, its usage being associated with formal education and with a remarkable will to learn. The publication of the Bible in the local Quichua dialect in 1973 was a master stroke: not only could the word be spread in the vernacular, but also the act of reading the Bible demonstrated that one could be a Quichua speaker and also be literate. Thus Protestantism allowed its followers to construct for themselves a new positive self-image, that of 'civilised' Indians freed from the alcoholism, ignorance and vice hitherto sustained by 'folk' Catholicism and the conservative elements within the Catholic Church who encouraged it. And ... this was accompanied by a new ethos aimed at individuals and at families: the convert as good father and husband, with an educated, sober and austere lifestyle (182).

We see here a process whereby elements of what we think of (mistakenly in my view) as packaged cultural complexes, can be unpackaged and repackaged. The examples adduced by Gros are noteworthy in particular for the prominent role played in all of them by apparently insensitive foreign missionaries whose only concession to local cultures in their own preaching was to translate the Bible. The missionaries in all his cases were less charismatic (or Pentecostal) than fundamentalist, which explains their translation of the Bible, for that was an article of faith for them and their mission. The cases cited in this article illustrate how although the insistence on the Biblical text and its translation provides converts with a sense that they are joining another world, the local dynamic transforms the initial narrowly religious ambitions. The activism of indigenous leaders joins a political and economic agenda to the original religious one imported by missionaries, and what seemed so out of place becomes thoroughly local.

#### *Criss-crossing, intertwined and projected cultural boundaries*

These briefly sketched examples show that we face a disjuncture when interpreting the relationship between religious transformation and cultural boundaries. Although we take it for granted that large-scale religious changes are intertwined with encounters between cultures – encounters which vary in many of their characteristics, not least the level of violence involved – we find it increasingly difficult to conceptualize the word 'culture' in this somewhat concretized sense of superimposed multiple boundaries of language, religion, race, politics and so on. So unless we disentangle our notion of cultural boundary or cultural interchange we are caught between the crudity of assuming that cultural boundaries are superimposed on innumerable others (social, economic etc.) and the absurdity of denying their existence altogether.

The point can be illustrated with reference to everyday usage. In Latin America we tend, implicitly, to think of the rise of Pentecostalism in terms of a clash of cultures in which this evangelical variant of Protestantism confronts and even defeats the region's hegemonic Catholic heritage, yet we then interpret this in terms of the ability of Pentecostal preachers and movements to communicate with the local popular culture. Can we 'have it both ways? Can we both claim to observe a majorculture clash yet at the same time recognize that it is the most locally rooted emissaries of the 'external' culture who possess the secret of its success? Already in 1990, David Martin spoke of the 'pathways' which facilitate this communication, and since then others have said similar things with different words, especially when writing about indigenous communities in the Andes and Mesoamerica. We have increasing evidence of the ways in which the imagery and symbolism of Pentecostalism engages with that of indigenous cults although there remains much to be done on this score, as we shall see, and we are well aware that the Catholic heritage is itself multifarious,

especially in the divergence between popular and erudite forms. So we have to admit that cultural divisions are not Chinese walls and that even in situations of severe conflict there is much that is shared, transferred and borrowed across boundaries – boundaries which, for all their permeability, are not any the less real.<sup>3</sup>

These reservations about cultural boundaries do not arise only from the contemporary process of globalization – the magic word that is expected to explain all and therefore has long ceased to explain anything. There is, of course, a sense – many senses – in which the process of globalization goes back right to the onset of modernity itself. But that is not the sense which is uppermost in this discussion. The sense here is one in which globalization embodies a certain concept of cultural boundaries, namely that at almost any point in time and space, they do not necessarily superimpose themselves upon one another or upon social, economic and political boundaries, but rather criss-cross, intersect and intertwine. To be sure there are cases where this might be a trivial observation, but the interesting cases are evidently those where profound cultural difference and disagreement, even hostility, co-exists with multiple borrowings and appropriations of language, ritual, daily routines and much besides. This is observed notably in healing, for example, or over the explanation of misfortune. The tortured relationship between possession cults and neo-Pentecostal churches in Brazil is an obvious example – but so is the relationship between missionaries, or Protestant and Anglican Churches and indigenous populations in Africa, and the Spanish Conquest of America itself was littered with examples of exchange and appropriation co-existing with violent suppression. Another example is the parallel development under opposing banners of Pentecostal Churches and the Charismatic Renewal which is spreading like wildfire through Catholicism worldwide, two movements which use similar ritual and symbolic procedures, profess many very similar beliefs, yet have diametrically opposed relations with the Catholic Church. Yet another, very different, example, is the reception and recounting of Bible stories – and the particular ways of handling their structure, content and rhetoric – among indigenous peoples in South Africa, as recounted by Sundkler and the Comaroffs. For example, Zionist churches established themselves only in the countryside – in opposition to the ‘polluted city’ (cf. Sodom and Gomorrah) (Sundkler, 1948: 93) – and healed the sick in pools and rivers (cf. the River Jordan where John the Baptist baptized Christ): ‘the Reserve is the Canaan [i.e. the Promised Land] with Bethesdas and Jordans, the pools and rivers where the sick are healed and Hills of Zion, the holy hilltops where prayers and sacrifices are presented to Jehovah’ (Sundkler, 1948: 93). Decades later, in the 1960s, among the Tshidi, Jean Comaroff described how, among the followers of the (Zionist) Full Witness Church, water, which had been central to Tshidi ritual prior to conversion, then was re-employed in baptism and purification, changing its association from one of fear and danger, to one of purification. The Full Witness Church also followed strict Leviticus-based dietary laws and celebrated Passover and the ‘Judaic New Year’. (The dietary laws in Leviticus, of course, have much in common with the taboos prevalent in Bantu societies.) The Zionist Bishop was respected as a healer even by non-Church members. Above all, the Zionists are described as a community obsessed with drawing dividing lines between themselves and the ‘world’ – i.e. other groups, and the sphere of the profane – most visibly in

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<sup>3</sup> It so happens that I am writing this in Israel, where the Shas movement, standard-bearer of the marginalized second generation North African and Oriental (Sephardi) immigrants, trains its cadres in the Lithuanian system of Talmudic study, and makes of this a point of principle even while proclaiming the recovery and renewal of the ‘jewel’ and ‘crown’ of the Sephardi heritage.

their elaborate dress code. Although in some ways they could be seen as rejecting the socially disruptive customs brought by colonialism – tobacco, alcohol – in other ways they ‘reformed and resituated’ imported customs – wearing shoes, using blankets – so that the Zionist came to personify ‘the distant biblical world of Victorian mission illustrations, which still line the walls of many Tshidi homes’ (Comaroff, 1985: 221).

In our accounts of these multiple exchanges we need to make sense of cultural encounters as a process in which, to quote the Comaroffs’ ‘social identities, cultural styles and ritual practices’ are transformed in a ‘highly variable, usually gradual, often implicit and demonstrably “syncretic” manner’ (1991: 250). It is, in their words again, ‘a complex dialectic of invasion and riposte, of challenge and resistance... a politics of consciousness in which the very nature of consciousness [is] itself the object of struggle’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991: 250).

The Comaroffs significantly place the word ‘syncretic’ in inverted commas. This, presumably, is either because they wish to avoid its folkloric undertones or because they do not want to imply that yet another all-encompassing, coherent system of belief and ritual is being implanted (or indeed supplanted), or finally perhaps because they wish to avoid the assumption that the two systems of belief whose clash they observe are themselves any less syncretic than any other. They do not see the converts they are describing as constrained by ‘a sense of systematic theology or universal truth’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991: 250) or even by ‘the notion that adherence to one religion excluded involvement in all others’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991: 250), and therefore they criticise those (like Horton) who would see in conversion a ‘quest for meaning’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991: 249) or even those (like Peel, in his 1968 work on the Nigerian Aladura Church) who use it in ‘its common-sense European connotation’. For the Comaroffs, in the final , converts are ‘bricoleurs of the spiritual’. If this is accurate, it flies in the face of the claims of – and many claims about – Latin American evangelical Protestantism. It is widely agreed that the latter insists on rupture with almost every expression of inherited traditions – festivals, rituals, clothes, beliefs, and more besides. Yet at the same time it is also widely observed that its rejection of possession cults is grounded in the recognition of the effectiveness (in the short term) of those cults, their cures and diagnoses.

The Comaroffs criticize the concept of conversion, because it conflates ‘changes in individual spiritual identity with cultural transformation’ and because it reifies religious belief – ‘belief’ again being placed by them in inverted commas. In this they are surely right, but none of these analytical *caveats* should allow us to forget the revolutionary dimension of the changes they so richly document, and which others like Sundkler and Campbell have also documented, which figure in their title and which so forcibly strike all observers of the charismatic upheavals throughout Latin America and Africa today.

### *Treacherous translations*

One way of resolving the paradox – of social confrontation accompanied by pervasive interchange across social frontiers – is to think of the way in which the different groups involved, through their leaders, their spokespeople, their prayers and rituals, construct their selves and ‘their’ others. They develop a certain conception and perception of each other, appropriating and expropriating stereotypical ritual and

symbolic practices, healing procedures, cosmologies, in a self-conscious manner and in a process peppered with judgments and verdicts about good and evil, and about the health and sickness of individuals, of families, even of society as a whole. The force, the power, and especially the curative power of these borrowings or appropriations is then invoked, precisely because of their origins, their provenance, and not because of the structure or logic of the procedures themselves.<sup>4</sup> Subversion consists of turning the other's arms against the other.

Examples abound. The rhetoric and narratives of the Bible are used to bolster the authority of religious leaders with apparently great success, and Biblical quotation with chapter and verse is a routine, non-rhetorical, form of legitimation. Sundkler (1948 Chapter V) described how Isaiah Shembe – leader of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century movement of devotees practising healing, elaborate purification rites and dietary taboos – made abundant use of the Old Testament prophetic books, and of their style of rhetoric. Shembe's life, like that of many similar leaders, was depicted as a succession of crises, visions, lightning, renunciation of immorality, abandonment of family as in the stories of the saints and apostles who preached the Gospel or followed Christ, culminating in the descent of the Holy Spirit and the acquisition of healing powers. Random as it might appear, the borrowing from Christianity – in this variant which today has evolved in thousands of Zionist Churches – is highly selective: it includes no mention of the Trinity, or even of Christ in this case, but it does include attempts to re-enact Bible stories – as in a tragic attempt, in imitation of Moses, to 'divide the waters' in which all save the Prophet himself were drowned. The dietary laws of the Old Testament, as both Sundkler and the Comaroffs note, struck a deep and familiar chord among peoples whose own world of healing and purification was replete with such prohibitions and injunctions, and the same, of course, can be said of (male) circumcision. When English and Scottish missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – and doubtless many other outsiders since – sought to discourage their listeners from practising circumcision, the latter had merely to respond along the lines of the chief who said 'we read [in the Bible] how God commanded Abraham' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991: 245). The same went for the many miracles of healing in the New Testament: as Hastings notes at some length in his history of the Church in Africa (Hastings, 1994: 328) David Livingstone, the most famous of all Victorian explorer/doctor/missionaries, and others, dug themselves into a deep conceptual hole on this account. When their recommendations to use elementary hygienic practices produced improvements in health, the indigenous response was simply to remark that the white man's magic works better – or at least works sometimes...which of course it did, sometimes. In these parts of Africa, healing was 'the site par excellence of mediation between the human and the divine' (Comaroff, 1997:333). Since indigenous medicine 'centred on the manipulation of material objects and essences, words and things thought capable of harnessing diffuse, invisible forces...the evangelist – who proclaimed the power of prayer, of the Word, of the Bible – would be seen as a minister of strong substances, even of dangerous magic' (Comaroff, 1997: 333). In indigenous belief medicines worked not as a body of knowledge, but because of the intrinsic qualities of the persons who administered them – qualities which might be transmitted by contact with, say, medicine books, or tools or

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<sup>4</sup> 'Not only' because the remarkable resonance which Biblical narrative – especially as recounted in the King James Version or in other now-archaic versions – has achieved in the most unexpected cultural settings must give us pause for thought before dismissing universals and archetypal narrative entirely in thinking about myth.

instruments, but not necessarily by a grasp of their content (Comaroff, 1997: 345). The stories can be very funny – as in the remark about Abraham’s circumcision quoted above or when another chief was appalled at the thought that, just as the Redeemer could make his father arise, so he could also bring back the ‘thousands’ of enemies he had slain (Comaroff, 1997: 342). It is not at all surprising that in a society where sickness in body and misfortune in life were thought of as one and the same thing and at once moral and material, the message and above all the rhetoric and imagery of the Prophets and the Gospel should find a powerful echo.

The most elaborate analysis of the intricacies of translation in these contexts is the masterly account by Birgit Meyer (1999) of the encounter between German Pietist missionaries and the West African Ewe people in the late nineteenth century. Her book is itself a potential object of curiosity since it is written in English and describes the translation of religious concepts from German to an African language, but without explaining the German to English stage of the process (which is just as well since the text is quite complicated enough already!) In chapters entitled ‘vernacularisation’ and ‘diabolisation’ she describes the missionaries’ search for words in the indigenous language which would convey their concepts of God and the devil, and the paradox whereby the missionaries found words but could only with extreme difficulty, if at all, communicate the difference between a belief in a God who demands certain standards of personal behaviour, and appeasing spirits who threaten one’s wellbeing, or between a devil who is ‘within the heart’ and the misfortune or danger which is inflicted by those same spirits or unsatisfied ancestors, or witches who bear a grudge. There were all sorts of reason why a minority of Ewe at this time turned to Christianity. It was less expensive, it was a way of identifying with the colonial power or a European way of life, but it was also an escape from evil forces – yet the converts did not seem to change their conception of evil precisely as a ‘force’, a ‘thing undergone’, rather than as a motivation or a sin/desire. In the words of one missionary in 1890:

‘Many of them are more occupied with and driven by the fear of the devil than by the anguish of conscience over their own sin... I told them that they may not attribute misery and suffering to the Devil and evil Spirits alone...the things that made them believe were also lies.’

Yet this same missionary then slips into a mode not dissimilar from that of the indigenous peoples whose motivations so frustrate him:

‘If, for instance, they said that they had to carry out sacrifices because otherwise the Devil would kill their child, this was a lie. If the child subsequently dies and they [i.e. the fetish priests in the missionary’s parlance] made them believe that the Devil had killed it, this was also a lie. *But I believe that God had taken these children away in order to convince them of the deceit of the fetish worship and to draw them to himself.*’ (Meyer, 1999:99-100) (emphasis added).

And indeed, Meyer is careful to point out that much as the Pietists insisted that theirs was a faith of the inner being, of purity of the heart, their life too was structured by an infinitude of rituals (p.76).

The missionaries nevertheless projected onto the indigenous people an underlying monotheism. Thus they looked for, and found in their spirit-beliefs an entity which they named 'High God', on the assumption that the Ewe too must have such a being in their pantheon, even though the idea was meaningless to them. In the course of explaining Christianity in terms which their interlocutors would understand, they conferred some sort of legitimacy on indigenous religion, perhaps strengthening certain aspects of it, especially those dealing with evil forces.

And so as a result of the missionaries' efforts, the Christian concept of evil was translated into Ewe as a 'thing undergone', a 'misfortune', and as an agonizing experience, (Meyer, 1999:86), English and Scottish missionaries among the Tswana in northern South Africa used the Tswana word for ancestor to denote St. Matthew's 'demons' (Comaroff, 1997: 218).

Further examples given by the Comaroffs of varieties of translation reinforce the image of a continual process of reinterpretation by one 'side' and the 'other' of each other's stories and myths, and also of continual misinterpretation of the meaning of gestures and ritual (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991: 239). Thus it is unclear whether weeping and hysteria at a Baptism ceremony were understood by the indigenous as a performance or as an expression of an inner state, which is how missionaries would have interpreted it.

These 'treacherous translations' (traduttore-traditore) tell us how sign and signified can be rearranged in borrowings across perceived cultural boundaries in ways that are not random, but rather selected and directed. But how do we insert the element of what might be called 'borrowed identities' – the idea that by borrowing ritual practices and symbols a people, a collectivity of some kind, are also identifying with the people or collectivity from whom they are borrowing – without forgetting that these practices are somehow attached to relations of power? Claims of legitimate entitlement to a certain recognition amount to claims to citizenship in a political entity, in a sphere which may seem imaginary to some but is none the less real in its effects. Take a counterintuitive example – that of British born individuals who adopt an Eastern religion: in doing so they are asserting a view about their own right to be different in a secularized society, or, more specifically, in a culture where religion is a matter of personal choice. That much is evident to the Western observer. But they are also implicitly asserting a view about what it is to be, say, a Tibetan Buddhist. They are wrenching Buddhist identity out of its former social context (in this case already violently dislocated by Chinese occupation of course) and making it into the heritage of a globalized (and individualist) humanity. Their influence, their access to the international media, will unavoidably give them power (or at least influence) over the destiny of Buddhism worldwide, and citizenship in the Buddhist community. Another example is the renewal of Sephardi Judaism in Israel, embodied in the Shas movement which is fashioning an institutionalized Sephardi culture. Shas aims at a following descended from immigrants from countries as diverse as Morocco, Tunisia, Iraq, Persia and Syria, in the name of rescuing their heritage – and has become the second largest 'party' in the country's parliament with 17 members.

In another register, the textiles and designs of Andean Indians are transformed, translated, reproduced or in some sense refined and 'versioned' on the fashion walkways of Paris and Milan. Such exhibition may feed the cause of indigenous

survival, but it also redefines and even ‘packages’ the history and identity of indigenous peoples. When these peoples then find employment knitting alpaca sweaters according to patterns produced by western designers based on, or derived from, indigenous patterns, the loop is looped.<sup>5</sup> This is not to imply that looping the loop is wrong or harmful – merely that the crossing of cultural frontiers does have consequences for power relations.

More tangibly we may observe the effects on indigenous peoples of the adoption of their cause by ‘international civil society’, NGOs, environmentalists, and defenders of the indigenous cause worldwide. In the name of survival and the environment, global civil society dispatches its emissaries to far-flung places, with their aid packages and their ready-made versions of indigenous identity arrive. There they nurture local leaders and spokesmen, who adopt inevitably modern methods of communication, learn to manage projects and money, and thus lead their followers willy-nilly into the world of globalized modernity.

These examples illustrate the irrevocability of involvement in markets and political relationships, showing that whatever the intentions of the various parties involved, the opportunities and risks offered by market and modern state, once revealed, can never be closed down. But their relevance for the present argument is slightly different. They show how cultural difference, and cultural frontiers, are a focus, or site, across which the collectivities involved appropriate the other’s practices, rituals and symbols expecting in this way to acquire some of others’ capabilities and powers. The process looks like bricolage, but it is by no means ‘just’ bricolage.

Behind the aesthetics and dramatics of representation there are, then, realities of power – conquest, colonialism, economic marginality. We are dealing not with culture contact or interchange across cultural frontiers in an abstracted sense, but rather with situations where domination – in a range of spheres, including the cultural – is at stake. In these circumstances, the cultural interchange involves the construction by the excluded, or those under threat of exclusion – as the Comaroffs’ Thlaping chiefs and healers among innumerable African examples – of a certain idea of the other and of the source of the other’s power. Indeed, if there is an element of resistance or challenge to power in these interchanges, it would be surprising if the dominated did not try to learn from the efficacy of the methods of those in power over them. In a Mexican case, Gruzinski (1989: 95) describes how in the earliest decades of the Conquest of Mexico Indian populations familiarized themselves with the stereotypes which the Spanish conquerors and clergy had made of them, confessing to all the sins and desecrations they were accused of. They apparently would even add to their sins and elaborate them in the hope of authenticating their conversion and protecting themselves, and also in the hope of gaining the upper hand in quarrels with other indigenous groups. It is more characteristic of Catholicism in Latin America than of Anglican and Nonconformist activity in Africa that the exchange may be initiated by the conqueror, the colonizer. The shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe was built on the site of a pre-existing cult to the ‘Mother of the Gods’ and in 1550 the

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<sup>5</sup> Devotees of fashion can see what I mean in the catalogue of Peruvian Connection, 3 Thames Court, Goring-on-Thames RG8 9AR, England. [www.peruvianconnection.com](http://www.peruvianconnection.com) I recall visiting a village near Oaxaca in the late 1970s where weavers were using a Dover Books English language publication about Mexican designs aimed at an American audience of amateur weavers – as a source for their own handicraft clothes or blankets destined no doubt for the tourist or export market.

Archbishop of Mexico certified various miracles performed by a new image – painted by an indigenous artist – he had had installed on the site, despite accusations from Franciscan critics that he was in effect appeasing idolatry (Brading, 1991: 122). A full blown cult had to wait another hundred years, but the underlying theme of the cult of Guadalupe has always been that of a Virgin giving help – even priority – to a humble *indio* – the ‘preferential option for the poor’ as more recent post-Conciliar (i.e. post-Vatican II) discourse would describe it. The two instances show interaction across boundaries separating not only different cultural practices but also incorporating the theme and the accompanying symbols of polarised social classes or strata.

Observers of neo-Pentecostal churches in Brazil will be very familiar with this, since in those churches the preachers state explicitly, loudly and repeatedly that, even while they demonize them as pagan and the work of the devil, they recognize the force of the possession cults and their ministers. The preachers use gestures, imprecations and other paraphernalia reminiscent of – or directly borrowed from – the cults to overcome and expel the spirits in which the cults and their practitioners believe. This is a particularly high-profile, spectacular example, and involves a measure of caricature which the cult practitioners find highly offensive, but others are more subtle. For example, one of these Churches – the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God – also borrows from popular Catholic practices in its adoption of *pedidos de oração* (prayer petitions). This practice, evidently echoes the petitions to saints left by the faithful in Catholic Churches, in the use of Holy Oil, in anointing, and a multiplicity of derivative purification rites (Birman, 1997). The adoption of a modified communion called *Santa Ceia* (a reference presumably to the Last Supper) on the first Sunday of each month is common in most Brazilian Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches. (For an explanation of these terms see Lehmann, 1996; Corten, 1999).

*Exorcising the community: health, misfortune and collective deliverance*

Both in Africa and in Latin America the interchange between indigenous religious forms and Protestantism is most spectacular (in the strong sense that it provides a spectacle) in the spheres of health and of what might be called the management of misfortune. In a process which is still little understood, ideas of salvation and of the gift of the Spirit have combined with modern technology and ideas of conversion and rationalization, and the result is a potent mix of image, ritual, symbol and not least powerful emotion.

If these twin problems of health and misfortune are without doubt central both in African religion and in the growth of charismatic movements and churches in Latin America, the literature on the subject in Latin America has been particularly weak. The lacuna can be illustrated by noting how difficult it is to decide on the status of respondents’ claims that they have been cured, or that they have changed their lives. On the one hand, this unreflexive interpretation mistakenly places all the available cures in a common framework of meaning, where any kind of thaumaturgy, modern or traditional, secular or divine, is judged by the patient or sufferer on a single criterion of curative efficacy. It does not take into account different meanings of self, of agency, of expertise and ‘gifts’, and their different cultural references. On the other hand we cannot take these claims at face value: to conclude simply that in the face of



extreme poverty, and inoperative public health care, divine healing is merely the last recourse of those who are deprived of access to modern medicine is analytically highly unsatisfactory (Chesnut, 1997). An analytical and non-judgmental approach would start out from the recognition that Latin American cultures are pervaded by a social concept of misfortune, or evil and of sickness, often expressed as possession. Even in Venezuela, where established religion is said to have very little cultural influence, the cults of Simón Bolívar and of María Lionza have a broad audience, and not only – not even especially – among the poor (Placido, 1999). In August-September 1999 banners were even paraded through the streets with images of the new hero President Hugo Chavez framed like a saint and adorned with the words *El es la luz y la salvación* ('He is our light and our salvation').

The way forward could be in forging a link between spirit possession and an idea of community bounded by kinship relations. One element in the concept of possession is the ability of a spirit to invade an entire family and by extension a community. This is well described by Patricia Birman (Birman, 1998) when she explains the case of a woman, previously a practitioner of umbanda, who converts to the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in the hope of curing her family of the plague of drugs and criminality. In the wake of her conversion the spirit – in accordance with the conception prevalent in the possession cults – proceeds to circulate among her nearest and dearest who then also follow her example and, at least nominally, switch adherence to the new creed. This circulation is a particular danger when the ritual of deliverance, or expulsion<sup>6</sup>, undertaken by a pastor of a Church such as the Universal Church, has forced the particular devil or malefic force to manifest itself. As Birman explains elsewhere (Birman, 1997) the 'trick' is to overcome a devil through faith and struggle *without* the manifestation procedure in which the devil speaks its name (or their names). The reason for this must be that manifestation in itself does not conquer the evil force, rather it is evidence of the presence of the devil. This 'evidence' places a possessed person and his or her family, even community, under a cloud of suspicion and renders them vulnerable to accusation. The pastor retains the potentially threatening authority to decide whether the power of evil is present, holding the individual in a constant condition of uncertainty and dependence. In possession cults, in contrast, harm or misfortune are countered, as in psychoanalysis, by drawing the individual into the therapeutic, role. The individual has to become a medium in order to achieve an ability to communicate directly with and detect the spirits, whereas in the church the pastor possesses the monopoly of certification of the gifts of healing and exorcism. The spirits, having manifested themselves, have to be 'tied down', and the individual has to make a continuous effort to tie them down – once is not enough. In the churches the struggle between good and evil, between the force of evil which an individual must keep tied down (under his or her feet) and the force of good, Jesus Christ, which likewise struggles with the devil within, is in the hands of the individual. Thus expulsion of devils in a Pentecostal convert requires an effort of self-control, of rationalization.

In addition, a person has responsibility to others, because of the danger that 'liberated' or 'delivered' spirits may take refuge among other close kin: the person who has

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<sup>6</sup> The Portuguese term is *libertação* - literally liberation – because the devils are being liberated from the individual (or vice versa – the ambiguity is embedded in the concept) to translate as exorcism is slightly misleading because the word refers principally to an elaborate procedure, now largely fallen into disuse, within the Catholic church.

converted can play a role in protecting other family members, as the cases quoted by Birman illustrate. If a person wasn't a member of the Church the devil could pass through him or her to other members of their family.

This is bricolage at the level of popular culture. It is conducted by individuals grasping for solutions to the difficulties arising in their daily lives – especially in controlling their husbands and children. They interpret the cures and disciplines offered by the Churches as coming from a world apart from their own, but they use metaphors, concepts and explanations of misfortune drawn from the possession cults to describe the effects of their conversion. Yet at the same time they often speak of being part of a world-wide movement, and of the prosperity of Protestant countries compared to Catholic ones, as if to emphasize that they have cut links to inherited local practices.

The discourse of the leaders and preachers of the Pentecostal, and especially neo-Pentecostal churches in Brazil, deals in a much more aggressive and polarized fashion with cures and their explanations than do the practitioners of possession. They proclaim an attack on the cherished icons of Brazilian identity and heritage – on the possession cults, and their gods, on the Catholic Church and its corruption. They sometimes invoke the United States as a haven of God-fearing peace and above all prosperity. They portray themselves as bearers of a world-wide movement of religious awakening in which the values of the nuclear family, self-enrichment, clean living, are promoted. 'Brazilian' values or emblems, in contrast, such as carnival, samba, umbanda, and candomblé, are denigrated and portrayed as allies of the vices of corruption, violence, homosexuality, unemployment and poverty.

In South Africa indigenous peoples or their leaders also absorbed the missionary message together with its narratives and symbols, and found ways to weave their own symbolic and ritual heritage into it. In Brazil, and possibly in contemporary charismatic movements more generally, the 'missionaries', who are invariably locals, not foreigners, seem themselves to go actively in search of the material from possession cults in order to set them up as the work of the devil. They may seem less naïve than the early 19<sup>th</sup> century missionaries to Africa, but they too are inventing their 'other'. There beings no longer a single dominant cultural frontier dividing locals from foreigners, Blacks from Whites, or colonized from colonizer: it passes through the midst of societies, populations and states. Yet the work of conversion continues to be formulated in a manner which radicalizes differences and indeed demonizes the other – in this case a local 'other' in the form of popular culture. In a Christian setting, it is not surprising that missionaries should paint lurid pictures of their prey: while they themselves bring enlightenment and salvation, the 'others', just as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, are branded victims of paganism or the devil, separate on innumerable superimposed counts. The globalized Pentecostal churches reach across the divide to appropriate the power of the priests and priestesses of the possession cults – like the prophets of South Africa wanting to appropriate powers of the missionaries. Of course, many of their ideas and concepts are radically opposed to those of the cults, but they are looking to take over their function of bringing cures and consolation, as well as their share of the people's money.

Beyond the individual and the immediate family are the misfortunes affecting entire communities. This may be the truly innovative element in finding a dividing line

between possession cults and charismatic religion. In addition to the repeated accounts in which individuals describe how their own conversion has spread its effects to their close kin, pastors in neo-Pentecostal churches invoke much broader social evils, from unemployment to violence, drugs, family violence, marital infidelity and corruption, in their imprecations against the forces of evil. In contrast to the mediums of umbanda or the witches of West Africa, who look to spirits operating through individuals, they also evoke forces operating in society as a whole. This, in turn, relates to the cultural dissidence present in the charismatic phenomenon.

Meyer (1998) tells of a woman convert who, after detailed conversations with her pastor, found that the reason for her infertility lay in a transgression committed two generations back in her family. Her grandfather had had recourse to a sorcerer or native priest in order to cure his wife – the convert's own grandmother – of infertility, but this 'cure' became a 'curse'. As always, for evangelicals (as for Goethe) the short-term positive benefit of magic brings longer term misfortune, and so the curse which accompanied this intervention of witchcraft had been passed on to her through the generations. In Geschiere's (1995) account of the Maka people in Cameroon, as in Sundkler's account of Isaiah Shembe at a very different point in time and space, there is a force resident in a person's stomach, which can only be removed by recourse to a counter-force, and also by elaborate rituals of purification. But whereas Sundkler, as a Protestant pastor, operates within the moral polarizations of European Protestant ways of thought, Geschiere is more circumspect. He is careful to say the people do not necessarily describe the force in the polarized terminology of good and evil, recalling that (in the people's understanding) 'there is always a risk that the basic instinct of witchcraft – that is to betray and eat your own relatives – will break through' (Geschiere, 1998: 9). As Lévi-Strauss explained decades ago, the only way to cure a maladapted or unstable personality – as opposed to a straightforward sick patient – is by conversion, as distinct from treatment. The patient must not only trust the expertise of the analyst – or the healer – but must also believe in the healer's system, in psychoanalysis as much as in magic or healing. In magic the group is assuaged and comforted by the discovery and expulsion of a demon or evil spirit. This spirit is exorcised so that thereafter the group can be assured that its integrity is preserved as a result of the removal of the extraneous destabilizing force. In psychoanalysis, he says – somewhat tendentiously perhaps – the individual is readapted to the group through the conscious acceptance of the analyst's explanation of the problem and a return to less socially disturbing behaviour (Lévi-Strauss, 1958: 201-203).

Meyer's account describes a version of 'tying down' in Pentecostal churches (*amarrar* in the Brazilian examples cited by Birman) as 'binding the Devil with a rope' – cutting the individual free from family relations, which are the channel used by the Devil to control and hold them back (1998: 338). As we have seen, this idea of family relations as the channel followed by a spirit is also found in Brazilian beliefs about possession. A very similar analysis is provided for the Cameroon by Rowlands and Warnier (1988): they describe how individuals of great power in the modern political system feel constrained to dole out largesse to less fortunate kin – especially where the kin have remained in rural areas – so as to avoid harmful accusations of witchcraft – or alternatively so as to prove that they do have supernatural powers. Once again the past is present, and as in psychoanalysis the individual has to confront that past (and its baggage of devils and bewitchment), and the Protestant ritual of

exorcism is a battleground between a person's past identity, tied up in extended and increasingly demanding family relations and a new modern individualist identity which would permit the person to break free.

In the Brazilian, Ghanaian and Cameroonian examples the central issue is a family drama, and a zero-sum game. In Brazil, it is believed that if one person converts to the new faith the evil spirit requires continued vigilance, for it may take refuge in one of her – close kin (for usually the convert is a woman). In West Africa the successful, upwardly mobile, by converting to Protestantism, are trying to detach themselves from the insistent demands of extended kin for money, lodging, food and jobs. In Brazil, furthermore, the same concepts arise – this time beyond the immediate family - in the fight against drug traffickers. The traffic is organized in mafia-like networks, and the young men involved in the *movimento* – the drugs trade – are caught in a web of obligations and threats which are not unlike those of an – admittedly poisonous – extended family. Even for a small-time player, escaping from that milieu involves appalling risks and possible death. So the ritual of deliverance from the power of devils, in the course of which the preacher heaps abomination against drugs and violence, is indeed designed to cut ties, an interpersonal gesture which is much more concrete, and risky, than imploring the help of Jesus to overcome a generalized social problem. Pentecostal conversion, then, is a collective undertaking of exorcism, involving painful ritualized ruptures with kin. The process is the same at the level of a community (which is nothing more than an extended kinship network): conversion involves a rupture with fellow members of the community and a strenuous effort to redraw community boundaries with whatever symbolic or ritual resources are available.

Conversion, we have seen, cannot be convincingly understood in terms of belief. But, if explanations in terms of belief offer an inappropriately rationalistic account, then there is a second inappropriate, but this time moralistic and even economic, version. Here conversion is explained either in terms of the virtues of a life free of alcohol, tobacco, and fornication, or in terms of the efficacy and 'low cost' of the 'divine healing' offered by Pentecostal churches. The belief-based version is merely a reproduction of the discourse of the converts and the preachers themselves, while the moralistic one ascribes to the converts an unproven naïveté and reduces a symbolic relationship to an instrumental one. The account offered above, in terms of ritual and symbolism, is an alternative to the inadequacy of these widely accepted approaches.

### *Charisma as cultural dissidence*

Although the innumerable negative reactions from a variety of elites to the neo-Pentecostal churches is clear intuitive evidence of their dissident character, the precise nature of their dissidence is not easy to define – any more than is the precise nature of the ruling culture from which they are dissenting. The dominant culture itself is heterogeneous and changing: in Brazil a standard description of the inherited dominant culture would, for example, refer to the ('traditional') clientelistic pattern of political loyalties, but also to the value attached by that same culture to a ('modern') capitalist economy and to private property. In the religious sphere, would the ruling culture of Catholicism be regarded as one of personal piety or – one of social concern or even social mobilization? In the light of the evolution of the Church from a 'social doctrine' to 'liberation theology and then the 'preferential option for the

poor' (Lehmann, 1996) some would opt for the latter. As for the dissidence of Pentecostals, is it ideological or symbolic – and if it is ideological how can we say that their loud praises both of wealth and of puritanical norms of behaviour are dissident or dissonant vis-à-vis the dominant culture.

The view taken here is that the dissidence is symbolic – but not for that any the less real than class struggle or social movements. Neo-Pentecostalism (as embodied in the Universal Church) challenges the folkloric acceptance of umbanda and candomblé<sup>7</sup> by branding them agents of the devil and campaigning vociferously and occasionally even violently against them. It challenges and inverts clientelism – whereby the political class dole out favours to their following one by one – by calling on its own following – most of whom are extremely poor – to give generously to the Church, despite the opprobrium heaped upon the preachers by the media who regard this pressure to give as an abuse of pastoral influence over the ignorant and gullible mass (Birman and Lehmann, 1999). Neo-Pentecostalism challenges accepted criteria of good taste, it invades the media market in the teeth of the opposition of vast corporations, it claims the initiative in the war against drugs and the favela-based<sup>8</sup> drugs mafia. Yet neo-Pentecostalism also has a highly conformist aspect – its political involvements exhibit all the most 'fisiológico' (i.e. opportunistic and unprincipled) features associated with the public image of Brazil's political class, and has also become involved in the business of charitable work so as to compete with NGOs. If these activities are successful it is because neo-Pentecostalism is also engaged in a campaign to transform concepts of good and evil and of misfortune within the popular culture, which is why the comparison with West Africa – where ideas about the spirit-world's effects on people's fortunes and misfortunes are so publicly aired – is highly instructive.

If Pentecostalism is to be a movement of social transformation then the healing which it offers has to be different: if it simply offers a rival way of curing individuals, then it will be confined to offering no more than another magic, eventually to be woven into an already rich folkloric tapestry. Now although there are many material reasons why Pentecostalism may or may not be such a movement, it is worth charting the changes operated by its pastors and preachers in the symbolic construction of misfortune and healing in the popular imaginary. This could be more persuasive than claims about belief (in the sense of doctrine) which are such unreliable guides to an explanation of behaviour – as was argued in the discussion of conversion earlier.

### *Magia and Mafia*

The encounter of magia with mafia – whether one of drug-traffickers or political cliques – is not surprising. Witches, like mafiosi, offer protection (Gambetta, 1993) against forces which the individual finds mysterious and fearsome. Like mafiosi they meet in secret and also like mafiosi they live in fear of one another. When they meet

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<sup>7</sup> *Umbanda* has become almost a generic term for possession cults; candomblé is the Bahia version which claims more direct descentance from African slaves,

<sup>8</sup> *Favela*, a word originally denoting a particular tree, which grew on the hills surrounding Rio de Janeiro, where the soldiers returning, victorious but bedraggled, from the Paraguayan war, set up their shacks, has for many decades been translated as 'shantytown', even though many favelas have long since been built up by their residents' own efforts, into large neighbourhoods, sometimes with 100,000 people.

neither they nor the outsider know whether they are plotting together against others or whether they are deceiving and betraying one another. The ethnographies of the Cameroon ((Rowlands and Warnier 1988; Geschiere, 1995) have cast light on the resurgence of sorcery even in a country where bureaucracy and the rule of law are claimed by the experts to be more deeply implanted than in other West African countries. These are not relics of the past buried in the hinterland. Geschiere's analysis arises at the outset from the increasing recourse by the judiciary since Independence to the services of magical experts and sorcerers (*nganga*) to help in the determination of the truth or otherwise of witchcraft accusations (Geschiere, 1998), and (less surprisingly) by politicians in search of protection ('armour') against each others' spells. The effect must surely be, in the eyes of the population, to bring the courts and politics under the sway of secretive and mysterious powers. In Geschiere's account of the management of harm, death and misfortune among the Maka people of Eastern Cameroon, individuals are possessed by – and possess – an extremely dangerous entity known as the *djambe*, thought to dwell in a person's stomach and indeed to be found there after the death of its 'host'. To control it they need to be apprenticed to a sorcerer and of course to become sorcerers themselves, otherwise they will inflict terrible harm on others even unintentionally. Like a band of mafiosi, the sorcerers meet at the dead of night and make grotesque demands of each other – such as demanding of a colleague, on pain of death, that he deliver a close kinsman or woman for consumption by the band. Individuals known as *onkong* (sing. *nkong*) are described as intermediaries who can hold the sorcerers at bay, but there is always a strong, lingering doubt – in effect a certainty – that they are themselves the sorcerers. The uninitiated – and potential victims – i.e. the population as a whole – thus live in the dreadful uncertainty of whether the *onkong* are independent, neutral intermediaries, or whether they too are in league with the sorcerers – just as in parts of Italy and in many parts of Latin America one can never know whether an emissary or intermediary – or even a judge – is independent of the criminal underworld, and just as the recourse to the *nganga* (the 'professor-healer' and advisor to the rich and famous) is undermining the independence and impartiality of the judicial system.

The power of witches, and of intermediaries like *onkong*, rests significantly on a deep, fearful ambiguity: if a person is sick and dies then it is said to be the fault of the *djambe*, but if there is recovery then the person is thought to have mastered the *djambe* within, that is to have the powers of a sorcerer, and thus to be an object of fear and suspicion. But one can never know for certain, just as one cannot know who the sorcerers are. Sorcerers too live on a knife-edge, because their powers can be turned on themselves, especially if they fail to deliver up their close kin to their colleagues (Geschiere, 1995: 63-72). On one occasion, among the Maka, when a man died some had said he had been cursed, but others said he was himself a witch and had been forced to die after refusing to continue handing over his relatives to his associates (Geschiere, 1995: 63).

### *Social capital and transparency*

The deeply ambivalent, murky and uncertain world of mafia and witchcraft stands in stark contrast to the polarized black-and-white certainties of transparent Protestant cosmology. Modern theories of democracy have insisted on the importance of transparency in institutional life and have linked the growth of transparent habits of politics and administration to the growth of social capital – of trust and communal

endeavour (Leonardi, Putman et al., 1993). In the unregulated, unpoliced and impoverished neighbourhoods of vast urban conglomerations of developing countries – and not only in developing countries, as witness Naples, the *banlieue* of Paris, Mike Davis' Los Angeles – trust, communal endeavour and transparency are either unknown or are developed in very hostile conditions. In some areas of their activity – notably their finances – the neo-Pentecostal churches – those which make most use of the rituals and symbolism drawn from the possession cults – are highly secretive and hardly diverge from the practices which prevail in their milieu. But in the domain of the imaginary, Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal movements use rituals of bringing out the hidden powers into the open, of forcing devils to reveal themselves by speaking through the mouths of those they possess – of breaking open their secrecy, mystery and clandestinity. They also use self-consciously peremptory, even unimaginative, rituals – in contrast to the elaborate self-consciously esoteric rituals of possession cults which seem to have no manifest sequence in the eyes of the uninitiated. This is why the word exorcism is not entirely appropriate to their rituals of deliverance, for it refers historically to an elaborate ritual performed by Catholic priests in certain special circumstances and in private, whereas the deliverance performed by Pentecostal preachers is conducted on an almost industrial scale, in public, and is shrouded in little mystery at all. This is a 'disenchantment' of the devil, a choreographed call for transparency.

The metaphor of transparency – now a standard shibboleth of international political parlance – turns out to have unsuspected resonances, especially when we recall the prevalence of metaphors of secrecy and mysterious dealings in contemporary political talk: the American media invented the term 'spin doctor', used in the UK to describe the public relations specialists who refurbished the image of the Labour Party in the 1990s – surely an allusion to 'witch doctor', and Geschiere has constructed a most captivating set of variations on this theme in which he detects common themes of possession, betrayal, and above all secrecy and mystery in African and American politics (Geschiere, 1998). In the current jargon of political science transparency is closely related to the notion of social capital, which refers to habits of association, of debate, of interest agglomeration, in short of an active, participatory and open society. The churches which engage in the expulsion of devils, of the evils of violence and drugs and sexual deviance, do perhaps invoke an *Image d'Epinal* of that sort, visible occasionally even in the decorations in their buildings, featuring peaceful undisturbed Alpine scenes, for example. But they also have their own mysterious workings, since all decision-making is centralized in one individual and his entourage, even in more longstanding Pentecostal churches (such as the Assemblies of God) where power tends to remain in the same hands for decades, and is often transmitted from father to son (Lehmann, 1996). The centralization is even more pronounced in neo-Pentecostal churches. The work of Chesnut (1997) is particular illustrative of these divergent tendencies, since half his book is devoted to the curative and psychologically 'uplifting' (or may be 'morale-boosting') effects of Pentecostal adherence, while the other describes in intimate detail the wheelings and dealings between the head of the Assemblies of God in the vast Amazon city of Belem and a succession of military, and later civilian, governments.

It is hardly possible to conciliate these two – among the many – faces of Pentecostalism and neo-Pentecostalism, but then it is not really necessary to do so. It is not the social scientist's task to undertake a moral defence of an institution or

movement, and the contradictions of Pentecostalism, such as those delineated in the previous paragraph, are contradictions only in the light of a particular moralistic outlook. A return to Lévi-Strauss's bricoleur might help us make sense of these apparently divergent tendencies: the churches like the bricoleur have taken a set of tools and materials from the baggage of the societies in which they find themselves, and have rearranged them to produce a message different from those elsewhere or previously transmitted by means of those same materials: hence the inversions of openness and secretiveness, and the preservation of the idea of possession. In politics too they have adopted established methods, but again they have inverted some crucial symbolic relationships, especially that between money and political allegiance: in a society where clientelism sends money 'down' in exchange for votes, very crudely speaking, their members and followers send money 'up' to their churches and give the votes along with it (Birman and Lehmann, 1999). Or so they would have us believe.

The Pentecostals reveal many sides: they use the ritual and symbolism of magic to invoke the power of Jesus against that of the devil, yet they also prescribe austere personal habits to encourage their followers to make their own contribution; they press their followers to give money, but provide no accounting of how it is spent; they denounce violence but tell their abused women to 'turn the other cheek'. They attack but do not mock the possession cults which are part of the official self-image of Brazilian culture fashioned by the intelligentsia – but they also believe deeply that the cults have a real, if ephemeral efficacy. They blaze a trail of innovation by taking a non-traditional organization into politics, but seem then to operate in accordance with the most mercenary – though not necessarily corrupt – political tactics. In short they use available instruments and symbolism in the culture of the popular sectors as they find them to explicit, public ends. They try whatever tactics or images might work, and if a trick works for them they use it endlessly. They are bricoleurs, perhaps, and like Lévi-Strauss's bricoleur, their efforts do produce a structured outcome – even if it is neither the structure laid down by the grand design of modernity nor the non-structure imagined by post-modernists!

We thus end up with two questions: a political question and a question about the nature of cultural boundaries under globalization. So far as the political question is concerned, for all the inversions and dissidences which have been evoked here, it cannot but be observed that charismatic movements rarely if ever translate their evident challenges to cultural authority into a political challenge. There is of course a vast literature on the political undercurrents of messianic and millenarian movements, but here we observe also a degree of political conformity: the *fisiologismo* of Brazil's Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches, the neo-patrimonial character of Ezequiel Guti's Zimbabwean church, and the blatant manipulations of President Chiluba in neighbouring Zambia. It may, though, be too early to entirely dismiss the prospect that charismatic movements may contribute to political transformation. Many churches are still in the hands of their founders, and if these succeed in institutionalizing their charismatic authority, which after all is a condition of the survival of their churches, then a new generation of leaders will come to the fore, and if the followers begin to reproduce through new generations as well, the pressures on Churches to extend the modernizing effort to their political activities of the churches may also grow. At the same time, the attention of the NGOs and the myriad development workers who, with mixed results, preach participation in the



development process at the grassroots level, should be drawn to churches which are growing so fast and so successfully in front of their eyes.

With respect to the cultural question, the pattern, if such it is, is no less modern than secularisation, bureaucracy and individualism. The patchwork quilt of symbolic markers, the Rubik cube of identity formation, and the enclaves it produces, can be thought of as an encounter between an immanent feature of social life – the construction, preservation and reconstruction of social boundaries – and the conception of history which modernity brings. As Jean Comaroff remarked of the Tshidi people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ‘there was no indigenous notion of formal knowledge of “myth”, “tradition”, “history” or “belief” – such ideas seldom attained the ‘level of open discourse’ (Comaroff, 1985: 125). Modernity – in the form of colonialism to begin with and later of the proliferation of overlapping arenas of conflict and competition – seems to produce at once mimesis and retrenchment. Collectivities in search of deliverance from the misfortunes which beset them, and which they perceive to be magical or spiritual in origin, though embodied in the persons of drug traffickers or untrustworthy politicians, confront these by drawing on multiple ritual and symbolic resources of the most diverse origin, in a reflection of the kaleidoscopic cross-currents brought to their consciousness by globalized culture. These they then employ to cut off the forces of evil and to draw tight boundaries, attracting to themselves the epithet ‘fundamentalist’. It is all too often assumed that fundamentalism (in its broadest and crudest acceptance) is a throwback, a symptom of anomie, yet if that was all fundamentalist movements would not be growing, as they self-evidently are. One could equally – and nowhere more than in Israel where I write these lines – see fundamentalism as a quintessentially modern mechanism whereby symbolic and material resources are marshalled through the perpetual reconstruction of group identities. The renowned Chicago ‘Fundamentalism Project’ (Appleby and Marty, 1995 and preceding volumes) started out with one view and ended up with the other. Stated differently, this is a projection across time and space of markers rendered modern because they do now carry a reference to imagined traditions and histories, and with the help of the means of communication and mobilization which modernity provides. A counter-modernity perhaps, but not for that any the less modern.

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