

Popular therapists in the Recôncavo of Bahia, Brazil: agentive configurations in hybrid ontologies

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INTRODUCTION

This article investigates the popular therapies in the Recôncavo da Bahia, understood as hybrid ontologies. During the observation in the field and in the dialogue with the therapists, we realized how the gestures and postures, procedures and statements involved in devotional and religious care (prayers, blessings, offerings, possessions) extend to the environment (herbs, plants, animals, tides, bush, yards, movements of the sun and moon etc.) in a relationship of continuity. Following these connections, we consider the relevance of the pragmatic perspective to analyze the connection between therapeutic techniques and artifacts (fabrications) and vital processes (growths), in order to map some configurations in hybrid ontologies. We also consider the transformative power of ritual in the production of these ontologies.

KEYWORDS

Popular therapies, pragmatics, agency configuration, ritual

INTRODUCTION

In the knowledges and practices of popular therapists from the communities in the *Recôncavo Baiano*⁴, bodies extend themselves to things. “Herbs”⁵, plants, animals, and others related to this environment (tides, bushes, yards, movements of the stars, etc.) are related to gestures and postures, procedures and utterances involved in devotional and religious care (prayers⁶, offerings, gestures and ritual procedures).

To track these connections better, we can break them down into two levels. On the first level, one can observe continuities in the materials used in these therapeutic assemblages: the therapists who mobilize herbs, plants, animal and nature elements do not identify a partition between active principles (contained in the materiality of leaves, for example)⁷ and the set of ontologically hybrid vital processes. On the second level, we argue that there are technical actions involved in these vital processes (making teas, baths, herbal bottles, syrups⁸, smoke treatments, snakebite medicine, etc.), whose expected therapeutic effects do not contrast with the ritualistic and devotional efficiencies – expressions of faith, visions, prayers, offerings, religious possession etc., as we will see, above all, in the second part of the article. Therefore, it seems to us that the continuities between the various vital processes, which also include non-human dimensions, involve both technical and ritualistic procedures and end up giving an animic tone (an “animicity”, in Ingold’s terms) to therapies associated with popular religiosities.

In the analysis of therapeutic practices that are strongly marked by Catholic or Afro-Catholic devotion, one should obviously avoid placing them in a -disadvantageous- confrontation with the Western scientific framework, in which an objectified nature prevails in homogeneous and separate classes (Sussekind, 2018). The “theory of life”⁹ associated with popular therapies implies a *natura naturans*, that is, a nature that is neither given nor objectified according to control models that can be replicated in different contexts. For this, we will emphasize the two levels of effectiveness as presented above, based on research carried out with popular therapists from *quilombos*¹⁰ of the municipality of Cachoeira and the headquarters of the municipality of Santo Amaro¹¹. In these religiosities of the Bahian Recôncavo, therapeutic vocation is incisive and materials from herbs (leaves, husks, roots, flowers), animals (skin and feathers, poison, excrements etc.), from the environment (stones, sand, wood, bamboo, charcoal, clay, termite mound) and industrialized products (vinegar, oils, gasoline, needles, paper, fabric)¹² are mixed with collection and production procedures (in backyards and in bushes, according to days and times of the week, etc.). Devotional gestures and the evocation of Catholic saints or entities of African origin also affirm the importance of “faith”¹³ in healing. All of this happens in contexts that are intensely marked by community experiences and interpersonal participation in the making of bodies and people (Pina-Cabral e Silva, 2014).

4 | The Bahian Recôncavo is a region that is located around the All Saints Bay, also covering the portion of the territory that extends into the interior. An Afro-descendant population prevails in this region (Caroso, Tavares and Pereira, 2011).

5 | The “herbs”, or “leaves”, are a generic native designation for the different parts of plants with curative value. From now on we will use them without quotation marks.

6 | During prayers and blessings, the sign of the cross is made over the person (but also over animals or objects), prayers are enunciated and ritual elements are used (leaves, clods, as well as various other elements or artifacts). See Gomes do Nascimento and Ayala (2013).

7 | See Camargo (1985), Pinto, Amorozo and Furlan (2006) on herbal medicines in popular environments. We agree with the position of Diegues (2000) and Almeida (2008) on the importance of ethnoscientific research. However, as Oliveira (2012) observes, it is necessary to problematize the classification of native references within the scope of “ethno-scientific” approaches, whose taxonomies end up legitimizing themselves as a “silent background” for the understanding of the healing power of herbs, to the detriment of processes of hybridization.

8 | “Lambedores”

9 | The term reflects the anthropology of the last decades, characterized by research that seeks to understand non-Western theorizations of life, in which there is generally an integration between the social and the biological. Authors such as Descola (2006), Ingold (2000) and Latour (1994) were fundamental in building an anthropology capable of overcoming the nature/culture dichotomy typical of Western scientific foundations. In an article about the work *Biosocial Becomings. Integrating social and biological anthropology*, (Ingold and Pálsson, 2013), Pitrou (2015) discusses the relevance

In order to comprehend these therapies, from a heuristic point of view, it is neither easy nor opportune to understand where the herbal effect of teas or bottled drinks ends and when the symbolic efficacy begins (devotional, ritualistic, etc.). Issues like these run the risk of widening the gap between the effectiveness of biomedicine (and its true scientific criteria) and supposed predominantly symbolic dimensions of popular therapies (beliefs), in a process of reification of popular culture in the public space - the “culture” with quotation marks, as pointed out by Carneiro da Cunha (2009). Instead of “culture” (with quotation marks, as indicated by the author) we must consider the world these natives inhabit, where entanglements and continuities emerge between diverse ontologies (herbs, animals, Catholic saints, anthropomorphic energies, entities of the afro-descendent religiosities, spatialities and temporalities of the environment, etc.).

For the “animic ontogenesis”¹⁴, the world is considered to be ever-growing and is configured as the object of a certain amazement resulting from a constitutive unpredictability, with admiration for its continuous movement and implicit uncertainties (Ingold, 2015: 125). However, if on the one hand Ingold's lesson on the importance of human involvement in the movement of the environment (with its sensory and perceptual processes) should be embraced, on the other hand, an idea (in the ethical sense) of life cannot evacuate the different conceptions (in the emic sense) of the vital processes (of growth, reproduction, aging, illness, restoration of health, etc.). These are observations on Ingold's ecological anthropology that, Pitrou in recent research (2014, 2015, 2016) links to the interpretation of vital processes from *lato sensu* technical actions as they seem to be central in the various theories of life – and this goes beyond the experience of perceptual and sensory involvement in the environment.

The dialogue with Ingold's systemic (eco) theory (2013), which defends the porosity between human and non-human, organism and environment, living being and artifact¹⁵, provokes in Pitrou ethnographic concerns that lead to reiterate the importance of agentivity, in addition to the concept of animicity: being alive and open to the world in the presence of a profusion of vitalities does not exclude the “making live” by invisible agents (2016: 9). Local knowledges configure the actions of these agents in vital processes and promote a “regime of coactivity” between humans and non-humans (Pitrou, 2016: 10), notably through ritualistic skills that comprehend body techniques and actions about different elements and materials. Pitrou emphasizes how native representational systems and ritual procedures often conceive of life as a series of technical actions, in the broad sense of actions that seem to reproduce the shape and characteristics observable in living beings (2015, *passim*)¹⁶. Indeed, the importance of the technician metaphor for the understanding of vital processes in native theories “has the advantage of explaining the unknown based on practices in which humans themselves experience their power of transformation” (Pitrou, 2016: 14). This is an investigative suggestion with which Pitrou intends to emphasize ontological imbrications

of ethnographies for the understanding of the diversity of the knowledges about life and living beings — these are ethnotheories of life that, according to this author, lead to the deconstruction of the concepts of nature implicitly determined by the western perspective.

10 | Communities that are formed by descendants of enslaved people which, in Brazil, are known as *quilombos*.

11 | The data from the research on *quilombola* therapists, carried out between 2017 and 2018 and conducted by two of the authors of this article, Fátima Tavares and Francesca Bassi, among other researchers, are gathered in the “Dossier ObservaBaía” (restricted access) and are partially published in Tavares et al. (2019). The data on the therapists in Santo Amaro were obtained from a field research conducted by Francesca Bassi and Michele Macedo de Sá — also the author of this article.

12 | See the descriptive tables in Tavares et al. (2019: 148 and ss) on the materials used by therapeutic practitioners.

13 | Therapists refer to “faith” to qualify an adherence to the effectiveness of ritual and therapeutic action. The native notion diverges from the official Catholic doctrine's concept of faith, which involves, above all, the trust in an extra-worldly salvation and a creed to be professed in order to obtain such salvation (Sabbatucci, 2000). Considering these differences, we will continue using the quotation marks to signal the specificity of the native category, thus avoiding an uncritical use of the term. We will return to this question later in the text.

14 | Above all, Ingold refers to the ethnographic experience among the peoples of the Arctic circumpolar north, whose “animic ontogenesis” corresponds to being open to the world. See especially Ingold (2015).

15 | Ingold's (2013) systemic (eco) view is contrary to the assumption of predefined forms of the evolution according to criteria of replication, mutation, and transmissible characteristics. As Ingold writes, defending the idea of ontogenesis, “life forms, therefore, are neither genetically nor culturally

between artifact and living being, techniques and vital processes, according to the idea of “operative chains” (Pitrou, 2016: 17). This is also suggested by Ludovic Coupaye (2013) in the appreciation of the combination of human and non-human actions in the horticultural practices of the Abelam of Papua New Guinea, in which “growing” is presented above all as “making”.

Taking these indications from Pitrou, we will present some theoretical-methodological considerations that guided the paragraphs that are dedicated to the interpretation of ethnographic data inherent to the research conducted in the Bahian Recôncavo in the municipalities of Cachoeira and Santo Amaro. In the conclusion, we will try to resume the debate on vital processes and therapeutic fabrications, also considering the transformative relevance of ritual action.

INITIAL THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Various ethnographies point to the relevance of technical and ritual actions in understanding the complexity of life as they would help to visualize vital processes. Indeed, according to Pitrou, in ethnotheories one can perceive “ways to make the complexity of life intelligible, beyond a universal conception of *life* as movement” (Pitrou, 2015:191)¹⁷. Visualizing the complexities of vital processes based on technical processes also evokes an ontological porosity. The author highlights the research results: “[...] many ethnographies attest to the porosity of ontological boundaries between living beings and artifacts, and we are increasingly faced with phenomena such as transformation or hybridization” (2016:17). In this sense, Pitrou indicates a methodological path of pragmatic nature, in which he emphasizes large categories of actions (creation, manufacturing, domestication, production, hybridization, incorporation), as well as connections based on similarity (isomorphisms, splits, mating, etc.), among vital and technical processes (in the broad sense of “growths” and “manufacturing”). In this author’s view, these imbrications are defined as coordination of human and non-human agencies, which can be understood as “agentive configurations.” (2016: 20). Therefore, ethnotheories indicate that life is continually pragmatically constituted, based on “action-in-relationality” (Pitrou, 2015: 191)¹⁸.

Auspicing the integration of different theories on vital processes (Ingold’s phenomenological and ecological approach, but also the semiological and technological approaches), Pitrou opens up this pragmatic methodological track (2016: 20) that we consider applicable to research on popular therapies of the Recôncavo. In these popular therapies, knowledge regarding the healing properties of herbs and other materials (living and non-living), triggered by the perceptive engagement in the environment (Ingold, 2000, 2010, 2012), can be articulated with various actions: production of medicines, gestures, postures and utterances, devotional actions and religious performances (prayers, offerings, religious possessions, divinatory game, etc.). As popular

preconfigured, they emerge as properties of the dynamic self-organization of developmental systems.” (2013:8).

16 | Pitrou, referring to his ethnographic research in Mexico, writes that the data “show how the restitution of a plurality of technical actions (sowing, cutting, counting, baking, etc.) carried out by ‘The one that makes live’ allows us to know how the Mixe they represent to themselves certain mechanisms associated with life” (2016:10). In fact, according to Pitrou, not only the vital processes, but the very origin of life in many societies is thought of based on technical processes carried out by non-human demiurgical entities.

17 | Pitrou, considering the multiplicity of vital processes, decides to invert the Ingoldian proposition: “Instead of naturalizing the technical gesture, inserting it in a wider uniform movement capable of imprinting itself on all beings, artifacts and organisms, the technical processes – understood as an meeting commanded by a plurality of actions – they can be treated as a privileged object to understand the complexity of vital processes.” (2016: 17). Without going into the details of this reflection, it is worth remembering here that Pitrou questions the notion of “life” conceived in universalist terms: “what interest would there be in conducting ethnographic research if we already have a universal definition?”. The author prefers to consider “the multiplicity of theories of life, integrating the internal controversies of Western sciences on this issue into this approach.” (2016: 11).

18 | Pitrou quotes Eugenia Ramirez Goicoechea (2013).

therapies do not develop explicit systems and homogeneous classifications, avoiding the need for a philosophical or scientific systematization (Brandão, 1980), from time to time the contexts of action define the occurrences and transformations of a world in becoming.

Therefore, instead of an abstract systematization, in popular therapies we find agentive configurations that imbricate different vital domains (growths) and technical, devotional and ritual artifacts (heterogeneous fabrications). These differences in popular therapies have echoed in Amerindian ethnology for decades, producing conceptual frictions that problematize the encapsulation of intentional processes in the spirit (self) or mentality, relegating the (biological) body to the (given) nature, and enabling important decentering of the premises of the anthropology of health (Tavares, 2017). As the seminal work of Seeger et al (1979) already showed, in Amerindian philosophies the obsession is with bodily transformations (fabricated natures). The cleavages between spirit and corporeality, so fundamental in Western metaphysics, are thus turned inside out by highlighting the centrality of bodily transformations of indigenous peoples.

An alternative understanding of bodies in relation to knowledge presented by McCallum (1998) in a study of the Kaxinawá (people of the Amazon) is particularly revealing of the hybridization between growths and fabrications and the connection between external and internal dimensions. For the Kaxinawá, knowledge¹⁹ is a process that involves the organs of the body and is acquired in the interaction with the environment: there is wisdom in the skin, because it is through the skin that the person feels and understands natural phenomena such as heat, cold and rain. This wisdom is assisted by the 'soul of the body', configured as an invisible second skin or an aura (McCallum, 1998:225). The other organs (eyes, ears, genitals, etc.) also produce specific knowledge. From these quick observations, we can say that embodied knowledge includes a connection between several vital processes (the faculties of the organs, the movements of the environment, the spiritual processes). Furthermore, from the moment that knowledge of the organs is supported by medicinal herbs (McCallum, 1998:226), vital processes are inserted in a technical process, dissolving the boundaries between the living body and the artifact. Finally, knowledge ceases to be something subjective, mental or internal, as it is disseminated in the organs, while the "body that knows" (McCallum, 1998, *passim*) involves a physicality that is, in a way, subjectified. For this last question, it is worth remembering the definition proposed by Santos-Granero (2012, based on his research in Amazonian context) of a symbolic frame of fabrication that is common to living beings and artifacts, the human person being constructed according to incorporations that include the objectification of subjectivities as well as the subjectivation of artifacts²⁰.

The configurations of popular therapies in the Recôncavo neither provide for a separation between living bodies and artifacts, and the research clearly indicates the

19 | As McCallum writes, "There is no specific Kaxinawá term that can be translated as 'knowledge'. Its closest equivalent, *unaya*, can be defined as with wisdom/learning" (1998:24).

20 | As Santos-Granero writes, there are two modes of incorporation: "embodiment, which causes incorporation through the objectification of external substances and subjectivities, and ensoulment, which involves incorporation through the subjectivation of artifacts and external bodily substances" (2012: 198, apud Pitrou, 2016:20).

possibility of artifacts that act subjectively (the images of the saints have human intentionalities) and of humans that objectify themselves as ritual artifacts (the religious possessions by Afro-Brazilian entities are an example of this). According to developments and isomorphisms, specific ontological continuities are postulated. For example, during a prayer that contrasts the “big eye” (*olho grande*)²¹, the plant is passed over the patient’s body to absorb the bad energy of envy: the therapeutic action, implied in the set of words-gestures-leaf (ritual artifact), carries a process of animation and subjection of the leaf that, while absorbing the bad effects of the evil eye, hybridizes with the human vital processes (dismay, etc.) and ends up withering. Therefore, the healing process takes place according to specific and variable pragmatic conditions (observing the accuracy of words and repetitions in prayer, tone of voice, postures and gestures with the plant, etc.), which define a presence (and not mere representation) of effective assemblages and their hybridizations.

Catholic iconography itself, very important to characterize the images of the saints present in popular religiosities, has a *lato sensu* vitalist dimension. As Tavares (2015) summarizes well, the saints in traditional popular Catholicism “are people, individual beings, endowed with freedom, will, their own qualities [...] and are present on earth through their images, which are equivalent to the saint’s person itself”. For the images of saints, Todorov’s lesson (1991: 305) on various processes of symbolization, in which the metonymic agent-action relationship is more relevant than the metaphorical relationship between the image and the represented being, is a valid one. This metonymic relationship is intensively activated during (devotional and curative) ritual actions, when the agency of artifacts is enjoyed even more beyond the representational level.

In this sense, popular iconography distances itself from that of official Catholicism, similarly to the argument brought up by Neurath (2016) in his research on Mesoamerican pre-Hispanic art. The author writes about the contrast between Greek-Latin and Christian iconographies, whose attributes serve to identify the gods or saints and the tools (knives, bracers, arrows and other diverse objects that personify them, assuming ritual powers) of the Mesoamerican deities who literally act. In fact, the powerful beings are present in their own instruments, which can both threaten, attack, devour and protect human beings. (2016: 74)

Neurath cites Severi (2007) when considering how ritual contexts (in Neurath’s study these are sacrificial rituals) implement the pragmatic conditions for common instruments to become animated, ontologically hybrid artifacts that, depending on the evoked efficiencies, can or not trigger their powers and become agents. On the question of the potential animicity of artifacts, whose ontological constitution is generally hybridized and uncertain, Neurath also warns that it implies relational dimensions (between humans and non-humans) with ritual performance being the context of attribution of a specific agentivity. During the research on popular therapies, the

²¹ [See Minayo (1988) on this native category. The author presents the popular etiology explaining that children who are victims of the “evil eye” (a negative “electricity”) are recognized by different symptoms; usually fever, irritation, prostration, vomiting, dehydration, or diarrhea. In adults, the “evil eye” or “big eye”, due to envy, causes serious disturbances, weakening of health, loss of assets, unemployment, etc. Finally, the *encosto* (a disturbing spirit) implies illnesses that are difficult to be explained by medical diagnosis, such as emotional disturbances and degenerative problems (Minayo, 1988: 373). In our interlocutions, the term “evil eye” simply appeared; diseases originated by “spirits” or “bad winds” were also mentioned. In Tavares et al (2019) different prayers are presented for solving health problems, so as not to lose animal husbandry, care for the plantation, etc. In Portuguese we find different expressions for “evil eye”, such as *olhado*, *mau olhado*, *olho grande*.

agentive potential of material and immaterial artifacts was noted. Notably, in the first instance therapeutic prayers are not pronounced to exalt the characteristics of saints or divine beings (such as the praises to the saints, for example), but to call (in the sense of evoking) and activate their powers.

The therapeutic ontologies of the Recôncavo are generally visible as part of the region's popular culture. The concept of popular²² has supported several discussions about its pluralization (Rocha, 2009) and its relationship with the considered 'high' culture. The improbability of a homogeneous popular culture has been extended to the dimension of religiosity, specifically with regard to popular Catholicism (Reesink, 2013). The reflections presented here do not propose another definition of the "popular", nor an exhaustive description of the religious dimensions of popular therapies in the Recôncavo. More simply, they will be presented as theories of life that carry hybridizations between living beings and artifacts, that is, imbrications between growths and fabrications (Pitrou, 2014, 2015, 2016).

HYBRID ONTOLOGIES IN POPULAR THERAPIES

According to the different moments of a long-term research, the research on popular therapies in the Recôncavo moved around in rural and urban environments in two municipalities in the Recôncavo, differentiated by the dynamics of engagement in relation to popular culture. While there is an important community action in the rural *quilombos* of Cachoeira guided by the strengthening of ethnic references and the rescue of popular therapeutic knowledges and practices as heritage, in the headquarters of the municipality of Santo Amaro therapists act more autonomously and less engaged in identity issues²³.

Beyond these differences, however, we note that both the *quilombos* of Cachoeira and the practices of the therapists of Santo Amaro mirror hybrid ontologies. The use of plants and herbs is curative, but also apotropaic and propitiatory – *espada de São Jorge*, *a estrela de Ogum*, *arruda*, *alecrim*, *comigo-ninguém-pode*, *guiné*, *manjerição*, *pimenteira*, *cansanção*, *São Gonçálho*²⁴ and countless others are implied in ritualistic-therapeutic "fabrications". Indeed, it is not appropriate to differentiate between therapeutic efficacy and a symbolic and ritualistic one, but it is to consider the therapeutic process in its complexity, as a provider of well-being²⁵.

It is also worth noting the fact that the cure, empirically recognized and legitimized by the phytotherapeutic attributes of the leaves does not always show equivalences with the scientific classification. The difficulties of equivalence are not limited to the stabilized classifications of the species, but also affect the understanding of the active principles of the leaves, which in popular therapies enter into broad vital and ontologically hybridized processes. Consequently, such principles go beyond the

22 | Despite the problems arising from its homogenizing stigmatization, which opposes the popular to the erudite and the scientific, it is possible to rehabilitate the use of the term "popular" in the wake of the visibility, in the differences, of the ways of life.

23 | We talk about the headquarters of the municipality, which would be equivalent to the scope of the city, but it is noteworthy that the therapists from Santo Amaro we interviewed have backyards or small gardens outside the more urbanized perimeter.

24 | We will maintain the native terms for the herbs that were mentioned because of the possible inaccuracies when making translations of this type; there is no Latin equivalent for each kind, and this is exactly the point: it is not worth finding equivalents using the botanical taxonomy as "background reference".

25 | It is also noteworthy that therapists do not classify bodies (eventually targeting their organs), but speak of salutary effects that occur in "whole people" (Ingold, 2015: 117) that is, people who are body, mind, emotions etc.

punctual therapeutic action and the phytotherapeutic dimension (the one that would correspond to an ethnopharmacological survey), including multiple connections.

In a way, herbs and plants are effective in blocking or transmitting energetic principles that are pervasive in the environment: in addition to taking away the evil eye²⁶ due to the envy of others, they clean haunted places, participate in the dangerous energies that circulate in the dark, etc. (Tavares et al., 2019). In general, the vital processes of herbs and plants (they are born, grow, wither, rot) can be related to other (human and non-human) vital movements associated with protection, vitality and healing, to weakness and illness etc. by unfolding, symmetries or isomorphisms. We will see details of these agentive configurations in the next section, considering the prayers, the bodies and the handling of leaves in therapeutic *quilombolas*.

As for the imbrication between vital processes and technical actions, Pitrou (2016) ponders the frequency of cosmogonic myths in ethnotheories, in which the action of a demiurge produces living beings as a technical process (ceramics, basket-work, etc.)²⁷. As we have already indicated, according to Pitrou the interest in ways of thinking about vital processes through their homology with technical activities - configurations of actions that are exerted on materials (2016: 8) - is related to the activity of controlling the morphogeneses of vital organisms that would otherwise remain invisible and obscure. We will have the opportunity to consider some technicist metaphors of the vital processes in popular therapies, but for now we remember that, although it is not attested by a *corpus* of myths, the interlocutors generally link the origin of the effects of herbs, plants and other technical therapeutic procedures to a generic non-human agency that corresponds to the frequent expression of “faith” and is eventually combined with the manifestation of a divine gift of the therapist that is recognized as such by the community²⁸. The gift corresponds to a gift between the therapist and non-human entities (the therapist does not act by himself), indicating that the therapist's perceptual sensory growths (vision, intuition) are thought of in the aforementioned “coactive regime” (Pitrou, 2016:10), since therapists are assisted by the occasional revelations of non-human entities about specific technical procedures²⁹.

Therefore, the research together with the popular therapists suggests that the vital processes of herbs and plants (their flowering, healing principles, wilting processes, etc.) are connected with diverse and heteroclitic agencies (winds, tides, bushes, stars, entities, spirits, radiations, energies, etc.), and that fabrications are not stagnant: phytotherapeutic procedures do not constitute the technical part of a native science, which would thus be parasitized by naive beliefs and procedures (a science that can be judged as non-systematic and marked by mere empiricism). Both the ritual words, gestures and postures, as well as the techniques for handling herbs and animals (with phytotherapeutic and zootherapeutic properties), participate in the same technical-ritualistic flow³⁰. The way in which the imbrications between growths and fabrications articulate themselves with ritualistic and devotional actions will be

26 | The used term was *olhado*.

27 | Pitrou (2016) refers to his ethnographic research carried out in the peasant communities of the Mixe, Amerindian people (state of Oaxaca, Mexico).

28 | The relationship between gift and learning, however, is not one of opposition (Goldman, 2012): gift and therapeutic “initiation” occur at the same time, as it is learned from people (relatives, neighbors, elders), from non-humans, with the perception in the environment.

29 | Revelations can also happen during religious possessions, in the dream dimension, through divination, etc. An example is the case of Dona Vardé, from Kaonge *quilombo* (Cachoeira), who manufactures a famous syrup whose ingredients were revealed to her by an Afro-Brazilian entity (a *Cabocla*) in a dream.

30 | See Lemmonier (2005) on the participation of gestures and technical objects in rituals.

further developed in the section on therapists in the city of Santo Amaro; for now, we will present the imbrications in the agentive configurations inherent to the *quilombolic* therapeutic practices.

PRACTICING THERAPIES IN THE QUILOMBOS OF CACHOEIRA: AGENTIVE CONFIGURATIONS

The seventeen *quilombos*³¹ where we conducted our conversations with “therapeutic practitioners”, women and men, young and old, who do not always refer to themselves as *rezador/rezadeira*³², herbalist, therapist or another self-designation that explains the condition of specialists or health promoters, are located in the region of Iguape Bay and Valley, where the Paraguassu river widens before its mouth in the All Saints Bay. In the collected reports, descriptions of popular therapies include growths and fabrications mirrored in the making of teas, baths, smoke treatments, syrups etc., as well as in prayers, gestures, postures and various devotional objects (Tavares et al., 2019). In order to track these assemblages, it is worth bringing some examples from the research, considering how therapeutic procedures can continuously promote the effects of herbs and plants (growths), technical gestures (which include therapeutic artifacts and body techniques) and efficacies of ritual nature. On this last point, it is worth emphasizing the heterogeneity of the therapeutic action that interferes with the vital processes, being visible in ritual performances and through gestural and verbal figuration (Pitrou, 2016: 11).

The prayers, for example, can cure various problems (choking, wounds, various pains, “*miúda*”, “*vento caído*”, “*espinhela caída*”, “*ar do vento*”, “*pé desmentido*”, “evil eye” etc.)³³ and are usually accompanied by herbs, charcoal, stones, clay clods, parts and excrements of animals, honey, propolis, sugar, raw cane sugar, objects (needles, cloths, water glasses, etc.), industrialized products (wine, brandy, oils, gasoline) and gestures that configure cures in the body: the sick place is crossed with herbs or clods of clay; the glass of water is placed above the head, they interact with stones, sewing movements are carried out to configure the healed body, etc. (Tavares et al., 2019: 125, 160-161).

Therapists trust the continuity of the effectiveness of herbs and of the words and gestures of prayer. For example, *benzedeira* Iraildes³⁴ describes the cure of the “*vento caído*”³⁵, indicating procedures that do not separate what we consider to be the active principles of cotton tea from the body techniques and ritualistic language elicited by the power of the words that invoke non-human agencies: “Its (the child's) feces are like an egg. You have to pray, give cotton tea, to get better. And when you pray, you have to hold it (the child) here in the middle, you cannot hold it under its arms during the day you have been praying” (Tavares et al., 2019: 70-71). Often, during the prayer, the cure is expressed through specific technical gestures, as can be deduced from the speech of *benzedeira* Dete³⁶ from the Brejo da Guaíba *quilombo*: “I take it, fold the cloth, put the

31 | These communities are characterized by activities “at the tide and on land”, in an environment of extracting fish, seafood and fruits, combined with the production of manioc flour, palm oil, honey, and vegetables.

32 | *Rezadeira/benzedeira* is one of the modalities of healer. They use prayers and herbs among other mediators.

33 | The native terminology of diseases presents an imprecise correspondence with the diseases of biomedicine: some of them such as “*espinhela caída*” and “*ar do vento*” are serious and difficult to treat; “*pé desmentido*” can approach dislocations and sprains; “*miúda*” approaches swelling in the legs; the “evil eye”, as already mentioned, in addition to discouragement, presents a wide spectrum of consequences for children and adults.

34 | Interview conducted in the Engenho da Ponte *quilombo* on 06/15/2017.

35 | “*Vento caído* ou quebranto” causes weakness and discouragement in the child. It also refers to the “scared” child, crying and irritable.

36 | Interview conducted on 09/27/2017.

thread through the needle, I pray and sew ... by sewing, we heal ourselves and thread the needle". Dona³⁷ Dete treats the vital process of healing to the technical act of sewing in an isomorphic way, finishing the therapy with the invocation of divine powers: "I cook you broken flesh, bitten nerve, dislocated joint, injured nerve and twisted vein. Get to the place with the powers of God and the Virgin Mary... we pray. And we pray the Our Father..." (Tavares et al., 2019: 125).

Several vital processes are interconnected as we can see in Dona Dete's prayer Dona that cures headache, in which she associates the prayer to climatic factors and divine powers: "Jesus is the sun, Jesus is the serene, Jesus is the charity, taking away *dor de cabeça de pontada, dor de chuchada e de ventosidade*³⁸. Take me out of my flesh, take me out of my bones, take me out of my nerves, take me out of my vein, with the power of God and the Virgin Mary". A complex agentive configuration thus leads us to a visualization of heterogeneous elements - the sun, the serene, etc. —, which can cause headaches, and are condensed with the image of Jesus who can heal the pain. The prayers also offer the image of the exit from evil in distant, non-human, non-vital places (no light, no voice, where the sun sets, etc.): "[...] get out evil, get out of these innocent people, go to the West, where there is no cock nor chicken crowing, where there is no ox screaming and there has not been a man's son crying", as *benzedeira* Maria³⁹, from Brejo da Guaíba explains (Tavares et al., 2019: 130).

Dona Estelita's⁴⁰ prayer against evil eye also configures a complex therapeutic process that contrasts negative human agencies (occult intentionalities) through the beneficial effects of the leaves (*arruda, vassourinha de relógio, vassourinha de mofina*), which are not limited to the active principles, hybridizing ritual techniques (prayers as offerings to the saints) and various vital processes: "Mary, who put that evil eye? If it was someone fat, if it was someone thin, if it was someone ugly, if it was at work, if it was, if it were sleeping, if it was getting up. Put that evil eye in the waves of the sacred sea... then the prayer arrives, Our Father, Ave Maria, Saint Mary and offer the saint..." (ibidem: 113). In the case of prayers for skin eruptions, it is the natural growths of the waters of the hills, in addition to the pursuit of domestic animals, that enter into the visualization of the cure: "*Impingem*⁴¹, *rabicho*⁴², get out of here because the pigs walk behind you, the water of the mountain is against you... pray three times, then pray Our Father, Ave Maria, Santa Maria and offer it to the saint" (ibidem: 114).

In the described prayers, it appears that the configurations bring together actions on different materialities; evocations of non-human powers; ecological and social relationships; intentional and emotional dimensions — on this last point, it is noted that in prayers occult human intentionalities such as admiration and envy are visualized, affecting physicalities. The configurations imply both the invocation of spiritual powers of a devotional nature (the Virgin, Jesus, etc.), synchronized with the therapist's action, and the image of impersonal forces that agentively permeate the environment (the "sacred" waters of the sea cleanse and purify; the water of the mount

37 | "Dona" & "Seu" are popular terms for "Misses" & "Mister".

38 | "Specifically located headache, stabbing pain, and suffocating chest pain."

39 | Interview conducted on 09/27/2017 in the Brejo da Guaíba quilombo.

40 | Interview conducted on 03/11/2017 in the Santiago do Iguape quilombo.

41 | Interview conducted on 03/11/2017 in the Santiago do Iguape quilombo.

42 | Emotional dependence.

contrasts the impingement, etc.). According to different deployments, vital processes that are diffused in the environment can hybridize with spiritualities (we saw that Jesus is invoked as being the sun and the serene). The reproduction of technical acts and action on materials, which allow the consideration of healing processes and visualization of the body healing, indicate a general imbrication between fabrications and vital growths (bodily, environmental, spiritual).

The animosity that permeates the environment is also evident in the use of medicinal plants, usually accompanied by ritual rules (positive and negative) and devotional attitudes. A “theory of life” manifests itself in the words of the therapists, notably in relation to the herb harvesting. Reverence should be shown, at times through praying, and days and times for harvesting should be respected: the early hours of the morning are most recommended; no leaves should be collected in the middle of the day and especially at night, only in emergencies. Temporal prohibitions (avoiding crossroads of time, i.e., noon, and the hours of the night) implicitly indicate cautions against negative agencies (“winds”, “souls”) that should not synchronize with the curative leaves.

Many of the positive effects of the leave remedies are linked to ritual purity, as well as bodily techniques (cleaning, nutritional and sexual abstinence, etc.) interfere with the healing processes and contribute to its visualization. In this sense, the therapist Erasmo from Mutecho-Acutinga⁴³, remembers how his remedy against the effects of snake bites, made with roots and leaves of *tira-teima* and *vence-tudo* requires the patient's sexual abstinence, in addition to nutritional care – and the medicine itself cannot even be handled by people who have a “dirty body”, that is, who have recently had sexual relations.

As in the continuities between “blood, ritual and coexistence” pointed out by Goldman (2012), the treatment for snakebite highlights the continuities between growths and fabrications, collapsing the separations between what is given and what is done, since the relationships of proximity are also capable of acting in an agentive way and conditioning the effects (of the active principles) of the fabrication of medicine. As Renato and his mother Dona Joselita, residents of Kaimbongo⁴⁴, explain: neighbors and family members cannot interfere in the therapeutic process, looking at or asking about the situation of the person bitten by a snake (Tavares et al., 2019: 98). Interference, provoked by the curiosity or gaze of others, suggests a possible vulnerability resulting from the opening of the healing process in relation to others. It also suggests a continuity between “interiorities” (the emotional and intentional dispositions of family members or neighbors) and “exteriorities” (the patient's physicality)⁴⁵. Thus, the complexity of the medicine's effectiveness is configured, which depends on the monitoring of social relations, admitting a hybridization between vital processes and intentionalities spread throughout the community.

⁴³ | Interview conducted on 11/23/2017.

⁴⁴ | Interview conducted on 03/23/2018.

⁴⁵ | The terms “interiority” and “physicality” (or “exteriorities”) are borrowed from the vocabulary of Philippe Descola (2005). See Pitrou (2016: 8) on this point.

Finally, “faith” refers to healing as an essential vital growth, mediated by the power of leaves, words, postures and gestures, participation. The various “fabrications” (phytotherapeutic, bodily, ritualistic, etc.) support this fundamental growth that guarantees the success of the cure, as can also be inferred from the statements of Seu Erasmo:

Healing is one thing. Tea is another. The words are the cure, because it's no use, for example, if you arrive here complaining of a headache... I'll ask you if you want me to say a few religious words to see if it alleviates. If you believe in God and have faith, I can stay here talking without saying anything, but if you have faith... do you understand? What heals is faith. (Tavares et al., 2019: 135).

The power of the prayers is the power of the words in conjunction with “faith”, Seu Erasmo tells us. The prayers evoke powers, one must observe words and procedures in general. Our interlocutor explains that it is also necessary to have “faith”, indicating the imbrication between the therapist's ritual performances and the patient's emotional and intentional dispositions in relation to the effectiveness of the cure. In a way, the patient's internal movements (believing) are part of the operating chain involved in the cure, as they allow the growth of the curative powers that are mobilized by the therapist. Therefore, the understanding of “faith” as part of a complex therapeutic efficacy, capable of connecting these internal movements to external movements (therapeutic utterances and gestures, etc.), differs from a common-sense notion of faith to which we would be led if we would rush our understanding. Our interlocutors know that without “faith” there is no efficacy, as there is no inherent beneficial “growth” to the healing⁴⁶.

We can analyze the agentivity of “faith” in terms of this ontological complexity of the effectiveness of healing, that is, an “instance that is capable of favoring vital processes” or even as a notion that gives a certain coherence to the theory of local life – understood as a form of objectifying knowledges, although it has no intention to form a rigid and closed system (Pitrou, 2016: 9). Through the opening of “faith” one can elicit (Wagner, 2010) these curative effects, which are not seen as a consequence of the isolated action of the therapist (or an abstract knowledge), but of his capacity (at the same time innate and learned) to extract (vital) powers from herbs, words, artifacts, gestures, the invisible entities, etc., synchronized with the patient's internal movements, according to a joint and relational action.

We now say goodbye to the therapies of the *quilombolas*, remembering that, in the communities, knowledge of leaves is seen as an ancestral and collective heritage without profit: “When I know, everyone knows, because here one passes on to the other. There's no secret. ‘Do you have this leaf?’ When we want, we go to the houses asking for it, nobody sells leaves here”, says Toinha⁴⁷. More complex herbal artifacts (herbal bottles, syrups, etc.) can be sold, but they do not constitute a *tout court* business, as

⁴⁶ | “Faith”, however, has been decreasing, the interlocutors even regretting these changes - but this does not mean that they no longer resort to the effectiveness of care practices and, when they participate in this ontological order, they are affected by it.

⁴⁷ | Interview conducted on 03/24/2018 in the *quilombo* of Santiago do Iguape.

they refer to complex ontologically hybrid knowledges whose spiritual connotations are recognized, because therapists also act through multiple non-human agencies with which a relationship of exchange is established. This type of trade must therefore be supported by the recognition of ancestral knowledges that are incorporated by the therapists, authors of the remedies. The words of the prayers, which configure the animicity of the environment, can be considered as immaterial (ritual) artifacts that are agentive and effective, as they drive or arrest the hybridisms between different vital processes. These knowledges and artifacts have an effectiveness that must be monitored, as they are passed from generation to generation in a discrete way⁴⁸, evaluating the capacity of the novice, since it is important to deposit these powers in someone who has the endowment to assume them.

48 | The reference to ancestry brings kinship ties, relationships of mutual care, friendship and "consideration", showing the processes of co-participation in the making of people (Pina-Cabral e Silva, 2013) and in the ways of existence.

GROWTH AND FABRICATIONS IN THE THERAPISTS OF SANTO AMARO

In this second part of the article we will consider how the action of the therapists is placed in a condition of symmetry and mediation with the growths that are disseminated in the environment: they also fabricate good medicines thanks to their own sensory and perceptual growths (their gifts) that allow them to see the human and non-human agencies involved in the processes of disease and healing⁴⁹. To do this, we will present significant moments of our dialogues with three therapists from Santo Amaro⁵⁰ regarding the mediations acted out by the special powers of perception of the vital processes, generally associated with the native notions of "faith" and "gift". We will also consider how technical-ritualistic sets – devotional words and gestures, religious possessions, immaterial and material artifacts – mediate various vital processes. Each interlocutor showed a specific way of experiencing popular Catholicism and Afro-descendent elements according to their own therapeutic style.

49 | His initiation and his "gift", without opposition, in an "immanent monism", as suggested in Goldman (2012).

50 | During the fieldwork, which included semi-structured and open interviews and informal meetings, information on vital processes, technical and devotional skills was mobilized. Healing sessions were also witnessed.

"HAVING A MOUTH TO PRAY": SEU JULIO

Therapist Seu Júlio⁵¹ (nickname for Martiniano), a 70-year-old *rezador* from Santo Amaro, is recognized as an important care agent. He prays, makes smoke sticks, herbal bottles, syrups, and teas. His knowledge and practices are dedicated to men and women, as well as to animals. He began to pray after his sister became ill, who needed the care of local *rezadores* at times. It is worth emphasizing how the learning⁵² took place in an apparently immediate, spontaneous and implicitly mimetic way:

51 | Interviews conducted in November 2017.

52 | See Macedo (2013) on transmission and learning.

Because I got a guy, because my sister was sick, so I went to look for a *rezador*, he arrived there to pray and charged 50 bucks each prayer, three days, all together I had to pay 150 bucks. But I thought I had a mouth to whistle, a mouth to sing, a mouth to curse, so I had a mouth to pray. Then I started praying.

During this event, Seu Júlio felt capable to pray the utterances and therapeutic gestures emerging as a result of a process of observation and imitation of several *rezadores* in action. He describes the way to learn prayers as a process of vital growth of the sensitive body: “I started praying and that prayer no longer leaves my sense”. According to his understanding, something was revealed at the moment of necessity and stress, which, from then on, developed his own skill as *rezador*: “I saw the others pray; then, when I needed it, I started to pray. I’m going to tell you the truth, when a person is faithful to God, everything goes well for him”. As a non-practicing Catholic, Seu Júlio describes his therapeutic action as effective because he has faith in God, who is omnipresent in the environment: “If you call on God at the water’s edge, he’s right there; if you call him at the riverbank, he’s right there; if you call him at the foot of the tree, he’s right there”, he emphasizes.

Other powers and entities are also mobilized by Julio in his consultations, notably *São Roque*, who is considered the invisible doctor. Júlio does not identify with the official Catholic Church (he declares not to be a practitioner), nor with the hegemonic thinking of biomedicine, but he considers his cure, whose origin does not fall within the scope of medical procedures, appropriate for the processes of illness: “The *espinhela*, the doctor does not cure. For headache, he uses medicine, but does not cure it. The sinusitis that affects people’s heads, doctors do not cure”.

More than representing spiritual entities, Julio’s prayers call them to act together with him. As we had the opportunity to see in the previous section, the words of the prayers are iconographic and effective (Severi, 2004), as they build an image of the occurrences of powers that reverse the process of illness. The prayer definitely responds to a mental artifact, a verbalized image of therapeutic powers in action – a healing growth that is followed by the therapist. As Seu Julio indicates, the prayers must be repeated three times. In the case of the “*espinhela caída*”, for example, he usually prays by enunciating: “Christ was born, Christ died, Christ resurrected, with the power of the Virgin Mary, the *espinhela caída* raised”. Thus, effective repetition and the image of a symmetry between the death and resurrection of Christ and the patient’s illness and healing condition is proposed (the *espinhela*, like the resurrected Christ, will rise). In the case of the evil eye, he prays using herbs (*arruda*) that must be passed onto the body to absorb the negative energy: “Jesus, Joseph, Mary, with two they put you in, with three I take you out, with the power of God and of the Virgin Mary” – this indicates a numerical relationship between the dual origin of other people’s gaze (there were two people who bewitched) and a triple superhuman power (Jesus, Joseph, Mary are called to act, the three together in healing, winning from the initial pair).

Seu Júlio learned to pray with his elders (he quotes his grandmother), but the dimension of prayer as a spontaneous locutory act is also naturalized as something innate. When he faced our questions about learning how to pray, he considered it to be an internal development – “I *felt* the prayer!”, emphasized Seu Júlio at various

moments. The prayers seem to be extracted from the body to the point that Seu Júlio also points out: “I have a mouth to pray!”. Healing through prayer can, therefore, be thought of as an imbrication of vital processes – the ability to give voice to prayer – and technical-ritualistic acts (gestures and words learned in devotional environments, used plants, etc.).

Popular therapies depend on a ritualistic framework that, although minimalist, is made out of specific rules. That is, rhythms, rhymes and repetition of utterances and gestures, in addition to the aforementioned norms of purity, as the whole body must be ensured, evidenced in the recommendation of abstinence from the consumption of alcoholic beverages before the prayers. As Seu Júlio clarifies: “There are many people here, as I’m with you now, you are going to leave and I’m going to drink cachaça and then I’m going to pray? That doesn’t work”. In this case, there is also an isomorphism between several vital processes: the therapist’s own body is protected to ensure the patient’s healing process. Within this formalized framework, action is configured, establishing continuities and imbrications between growths and fabrications, that is, between various vital processes (of sick or restored bodies, of the naturalized voice of prayer, the effects of the plants, immanent spiritual powers, etc.) and technical processes (material and immaterial therapeutic artifacts that are mobilized in therapeutic-ritualistic performances).

Regarding botanical knowledge, Seu Júlio reports that he knows and cultivates many herbs: “In my garden there is *vassourinha*, *alfavaca*, *essa alfazema*, *coentro de boi*, there are a lot of leaves!”. However, medicinal plants for bottles and syrups are not listed according to a closed taxonomy; the active herbal principles and the powers of a spiritual order even overlap. Regarding the herbal bottles made from various plants, Seu Júlio argues that they are and serve both physical and spiritual problems. The “illness of the spirit” – the one that “you get anywhere, when a person does not have faith in God. Then, there is a bad spirit... This spirit is a wind” – and strokes are treated with plants from the same herbal bottle, “a holy medicine”, whose liquid must be passed onto the patient’s body. Finally, the native notion of “faith”, mentioned several times by the therapist, concerns the hybridization of herbal bottles, teas and baths with the evocation of a power that is immanent in all therapeutic agencies.

“BIRTH GIFTS”: SEU DUNGA

On Wednesdays, the almost 80-year-old Seu Dunga⁵³ from Santo Amaro conducts sessions from “spiritist lineage” (as he defines it) in his small house, incorporating several Afro-Brazilian entities: the *caboclos* Sultão das Matas and Boiadeiro; the *orixás* Iansã and Iemanjá; Padilha, “slave” of Iansã and other entities. He explains that he was born with the “gift of the vision”, which was revealed during childhood when he went to a Candomblé *terreiro*. Seu Dunga, whose therapeutic practice combines

53 | Interviews and meetings held in December 2017 and February 2018.

Catholic and Afro-Brazilian elements, says he does not make sacrifices, as he only uses flowers, candles and water as offerings. He declares that he trusts a lot in his “guides” (the *Caboclos*) who help him collecting plants, with healing practices and with God's help. Dunga is very appreciated for his ability to pray and for the herbal bottles, syrups, etc. that he makes.

The learning occurred through networks of local relationships; to develop the gift, Seu Dunga used to have strategies to learn from his elders since he was young: “In Candomblé, I learned many things... Everywhere I went I learned”. The gift of vision, prayer, and experience of using herbs come together in order to have good insights and accomplishments in the therapist's craft. Thus, he conceptualizes the “gifts” of vision and prayer: “I always asked God to give me a vision... I did things and everything worked out. I prayed and I asked God. As I asked God until today, right. And I know how to pray. I know how to pray everything. God puts my prayer”. The gift of vision is described as a natural talent, extracted from the therapist's body, as the bodily dimension connects with non-human agencies: with the very God who bestows these gifts; with Afro-Brazilian entities that reveal diagnoses during the casting of cowrie shells⁵⁴.

54 | On the casting of cowrie shells in Afro-Brazilian religions, see Beniste (1999).

Certainly, Seu Dunga learned a lot from the *Caboclos*, the owners of the forests, who usually suggest him in dreams, in altered states of consciousness, through intuition, which plants and roots to put in the herbal bottles, teas, etc. The gift of vision and prayer (as in the case of vision, prayer is “put by God”) and the revelations of the entities are articulated with “faith”, a native expression that, as we have seen, suggests the idea of an efficacy that proceeds from an immanent non-human power. The various gifts of divine origin are extracted as growths from the corporeality of the therapist – as Seu Dunga affirms, he was born with this “gift”, this capacity of vision, this intuition, this ability to pray, etc. Notably, the effectiveness of his prayer is emphasized as an internal growth: “I had prayers, but nobody cared! I learned... I don't know! It was God who put it here in my mind, I carry it from birth. I have faith in my prayer”. One can perceive that, similarly to Seu Júlio's narrative, Seu Dunga's declaration of “faith” is not intended to mobilize a theological issue, but to evoke the effectiveness of healing, a fundamental growth that strengthens the therapeutic artifact.

In the context of frequenting Candomblé environments and in the Umbanda sessions he conducts, Seu Dunga develops his sensorial-perceptual ability (his vision and mediumship). Ritualistic (divinatory) techniques reinforce this gift, especially when Seu Dunga uses the casting of cowrie shells to “spy” on the vital processes (human and non-human) that cause disturbances and illnesses. During the casting it is no longer possible to differentiate when bodily growth ends (the therapist's vision) and when the agency of the divinatory artifact begins. Seu Dunga's divinatory performance is refined. During the casting, he passes *alfazema* onto the cowrie shells, claiming that this way they gain more strength. Among flowers and candles, the images of saints (*São Cosme* and *Damião*, *Santo Antônio*, *Santa Bárbara* and *São Jorge*, among others),

of *Iemanjá* (female orixá of the salt waters) and of the caboclos *Sultão das Matas* and *Boiadeiro* are accommodated on the altar that is also used for the casting of cowrie shells. The sessions take place on Wednesdays in this room, and Seu Dunga also incorporates his guides. On these days there are also divination sessions that favor the development of the therapist's gift of vision. On the one hand, vision is a vital process of the therapist, which spontaneously grows in him through divine grant; on the other hand, the therapist acquires greater control over the diagnosis and cure, mobilizing spiritual agencies (orixás, caboclos, etc.) through the technique of divination and the ritual artifacts involved (notably the cowrie shells). The casting of cowrie shells corresponds to a complex agentive configuration, as the therapist's internal growths (vision) and the Afro-Brazilian entities act together, synchronized with the "spied" vital processes.

Seu Dunga's words detail the settings in question:

I do sessions. I call the *Boiadeiro* guide. I also work with *Dona da Água*. I call the guides and they come to me with the power of God. I call other guides... *Sultão das Matas*. I call *Cosme*... I call *Cosme*. I call *Iansã* in my body and she comes. I *feel* it... she arrives in me. She is the one who talks. It's not me.

As he explains, the woods and the places where the materials are collected are favorable for the communication with the "guides". In the woods, the *caboclo Sultão das Matas* is called and consulted about the necessary procedures for the cures: "And if someone is sick, I'll apply medicine and it'll be fine. It depends on the disease, then I go into the woods, then I get there and have a consultation with *Sultão das Matas*. He is the owner of the woods!". In addition to the important relationship between the *Caboclos* and herbal knowledge, Seu Dunga reports on the interaction between religious healing and medical practices on the territory, providing a reflection on the various care agencies during the dialogue. Thus, when talking about the "*espinhela*", Seu Dunga concludes that: "At the doctor, it doesn't go away! It only goes away in prayer! Avoid the doctor. You cannot go to the doctor. But there are psychic doctors! There are! They will say: 'Your problem is not a medical one. Your problem needs praying and I spy!'" (that is, he is able to diagnose).

The interaction with the environment seems to have played a fundamental part in the process of botanical knowledge, as Seu Dunga emphasizes: "Syrup, herbal bottle... I make them with herbs from the forest. I go into the woods to get the herbs, the roots". Herbs and plants from the territory are also cultivated in the backyard of the *rezador*, especially those that are part of daily herbal practices. The therapist's vital processes (his vision, his intuition) prove themselves in the results of his fabrications and vice versa. Efficacy depends on the possibility of acting in a *natura naturans* in which the non-human agency, allied to the therapist, is immanent and co-agent to

the technical action. If there is no nature objectified in laws and, therefore, abstract from the contingency of continuous assemblages immanent in the world, there is also no therapeutic technique separate from vital growths, considering that the therapist himself acts from his bodily growths: his gifts that he, as he emphasizes, “brings with him from birth.”

THE GUARDIAN ANGEL: DONA CÂNDIDA

Dona Cândida⁵⁵, a woman of over 85 years old, was a renowned *benzedeira* from the Santo Amaro community. Today, because of her advanced age, she does not bless anymore, but she continues to look after her own health and that of her family members with devotional practices linked, above all, to Santa Barbara. According to her, precautions must be observed in daily life to avoid disturbances brought about by negative influences or to increase well-being, activating apotropaic rituals and devotional acts.

55 | Meetings held in November and December 2017.

About her past as a *benzedeira*, she explains that she often prayed about “*vento caído*” (the aforementioned “frightened” child’s discomfort, which usually presents diarrhea and greenish feces) and evil eye. Dona Cândida makes a point of emphasizing the exchange of energies and the imbrications between different vital processes: during prayers, envy and everything that is bad “falls on the leaves!”, she ponders, indicating how the herbs go through the aforementioned animation process, hybridizing with negative anthropomorphic energies (envy). The *benzedeira* also explains that bad “winds” circulate in cemeteries and that harmful energies are present in the environment, especially at dusk and at crossroads: one should not “pick up leaves” at nightfall, nor at crossroads, where bad influences pass through. The negativities are contrasted by prayers (the *vassourinha* is used against the prayer of the evil eye, especially) and by the baths, for which various leaves are used (*alfazema*, *erva doce*, *erva cidreira*, *hortelã miúdo*, *tapete de Oxalá*, among others).

Dona Cândida’s herbal knowledge is associated with the devotional practice related to *Santa Barbara*, her “Guardian Angel”, which comprises utterances and devotional gestures, combined with the manipulation or preparation of various artifacts. *Santa Bárbara* regularly receives offerings of candles and flowers (usually *alevante* flowers), especially on Wednesdays, when Dona Cândida dresses in white in honor of the Saint and deposits the offerings at the foot of the image placed on the domestic altar. She also lives up to her “promise” by offering the *Santa Bárbara*’s *caruru* (typical Afro-Brazilian food prepared with okra) in December.

In Dona Cândida’s narrative, the agentivity of devotion stands out, especially in relation to the apotropaic effects of prayer: prayer is configured as an act that evokes luck, to be done in the morning before leaving the house, as a protection against the negative influences that circulate on the streets. Acts of a ritual nature are thus

embedded in everyday gestures: one should also leave the house right foot first while making the sign of the cross, mentalizing positivity and putting trust in the saints and the Virgin Mary. Against affliction, Dona Cândida recommends “strong” prayers, effective for the liberation of evil (she exemplifies by quoting the well-known prayer of the Rosary: “Mary was afflicted; afflicted at the foot of the cross. Afflicted I see myself, Mary. Help me, Mother of Jesus”). Prayers act as words that evoke effective powers and mobilize gifts. Thus, Dona Cândida talks about the importance of offering prayers in exchange for protection: the Our Father and Ave Maria prayers are “delivered to Christ” and to Santa Barbara to “take away everything that is bad”.

Outside the ecclesial space, domestic worship is therefore constituted as an intimate relationship with divine entities, in which prayers can act as effective ritual acts (Bassi, 2016). That is, as offerings that, in a way, oblige the saints to retribute through protection in favor of the devotee. The image of the Saint on Dona Cândida's altar is an animated artifact, with which she converses and to which she constantly dedicates her devotion. The various devotional artifacts (material and immaterial) act: the offerings and prayers activate protection and the prayers participate in the therapeutic efficacies of the vital processes, interfere with these processes and, at the same time, allow cognitive access to them.

CONCLUDING: EFFECTIVE HYBRIDIZATIONS AND PARADOXES

In the popular cures of the Recôncavo, imbrications between different vital processes (vegetable, human, non-human growth, etc.) and technical gestures (fabrication of material and immaterial artifacts) appear in a way that, when studying them, we have considered the relevance of the concept of “agentive configuration” proposed by Pitrou (2016). This concept accounts for the ethnographic diversities related to the theories of life that can be analyzed as sets of ontologically hybrid agencies, whose efficiencies belie separations between technical gestures and ritual efficacies and between different vital processes that variably mobilize humans and non-humans.

In the therapists' technical-ritualistic processes, always in the wake of Pitrou (2016), we have conceived how artifacts make the environment's animicity visible, controlling the morphogenesis and movements of vital organisms. Among these therapeutic artifacts, we have highlighted the prayers, whose healing images take place in a “fluid space”⁵⁶, where the properties of vital processes are not defined in advance, but are continuously overlapped, streamlined, braked, and can carry several occurrences. We have also considered non-human synchronizations in the healing processes – the *caboclos* can suggest new herbal ingredients; in dreams or in divination the entities may reveal a pathogenic origin, images of the saint react in favor of the well-being of the devotee who placed the offering or ‘offered’ the prayers, etc.

56 | According to an expression by Mol and Law (1994).

The ritualistic dimension of many therapies has led us along the path followed by Neurath (2016), when we consider that animicity presupposes a symbolic and ritually circumstantiated work, in order to activate or soften the efficacies spread in the environment and the agency of artifacts¹. Consequently, with regard to therapeutic action, we can conclude this work by sustaining the importance of the transformative power of rituals, which can also be seen from a pragmatic approach since, in general, there is an intrinsic difficulty in the semantic analysis of the symbolic representations implied in the rituals themselves (Houseman and Severi, 1994; Severi, 2002, 2004). Therapeutic rituals (prayers, religious healing sessions, divination, possessions, etc.) do not disprove this finding as they can be analyzed as performative acts in which different ontologies and identities are mated, condensed and hybridized, leaving meanings uncertain and counterintuitive² but communicable, since they were experienced as truths that were constructed in action. Indeed, popular cures are marked by the presence of efficacies that are immanent to the vital processes (the powers of saints, of God, the therapist's clairvoyance, etc.), mobilized according to a context of ritualistic action, whose formal framework allows for complex configurations and enunciations³.

As we have seen, unlike the logical-scientific vocation which discriminates discrete units and eventually displaces the symbolic and its polysemic ambiguities to imaginative areas that are not “really” effective (art, poetry, etc.), the therapeutic practices studied here are not afraid of paradoxes and hybridisms to communicate efficiencies about the reality. Therapeutic fabrications definitely include paradoxical and complex agentive configurations, generally determined by effective symbolic mediations (Tavares and Bassi, 2013), also favoring a “fluidity of mind” in the connection of different domains (Mithen, 2002). The fluidity of the mind implies that there are not two worlds—that of “societies” and that of “things”—but a “single environment” (Ingold, 1992, apud Mithen, 2002: 76). In this single environment, the therapists’ practices demand continuous ritualistic efforts that associate growths and artifacts, in order to promote or brake these diverse movements of ontological hybridization.

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1 See also Fortier (2014).

2 The concept of counter intuitiveness refers to Sperber's theory of symbolism (1974). Severi adopts it according to pragmatic adjustments.

3 In the case of Seu Dunga, for example, the religious trance transforms him into a “complex enunciator” (Severi, 2004: 817) who accumulates, in his own person, the identity of various entities that speak through him and make his cure effective.

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