



Vibrant: Virtual Brazilian Anthropology

ISSN: 1809-4341

Associação Brasileira de Antropologia (ABA)

Cunha, Christina Vital da
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Vibrant: Virtual Brazilian Anthropology, vol. 15, no. 1, e151401, 2018
Associação Brasileira de Antropologia (ABA)

DOI: 10.1590/1809-43412017v15n1a401

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Pentecostal cultures in urban peripheries: a socio-anthropological analysis of Pentecostalism in arts, grammars, crime and morality

*Christina Vital da Cunha*¹

¹ Universidade Federal Fluminense, Departamento de Sociologia, Niterói/RJ, Brasil

Abstract

In past decades, Catholicism in Brazil has emerged as a privileged theme in the Social Sciences literature, coming to be recognised as a key element in the formation of a “national culture”. For the less affluent residents of the city, Catholicism constituted what Sanchis (1997) called “traditional urban popular culture”. Despite the abstraction contained in the notion of a “popular culture”, Sanchis’ perspective has had wide academic repercussion. With the growing presence of Pentecostal Evangelicals in the public sphere, and the percentage of people who claimed to be “Evangelical” in the IBGE censuses since 1990, part of the social science literature began to reflect on the possible establishment of a “Pentecostal culture” in Brazil. In this article, I analyse the formation of a Pentecostal culture in urban peripheries. To this end, I consider that the increase in the number of Pentecostal churches and their devotees in these localities provoked changes in different spheres of social life. This article is based on empirical field research carried out intermittently between the years of 1996 and 2015 in the Acari shantytown (Rio de Janeiro).

Keywords: Pentecostal Culture; Peripheries; Favelas; Drug dealer; Evangelical Graffiti.

Cultura pentecostal em periferias:

uma análise socioantropológica do pentecostalismo

a partir de artes, gramáticas, crime e moral

Resumo

O catolicismo no Brasil assumiu lugar privilegiado em análises de diferentes autores das Ciências Sociais em décadas passadas como elemento chave na conformação de uma “cultura nacional”. Em meio aos segmentos citadinos menos abastados, o catolicismo compunha o que Sanchis (1997) chamou de *cultura popular urbana tradicional*. A despeito da abstração produzida pela noção de uma “cultura popular”, a perspectiva trazida por Sanchis teve grande repercussão acadêmica. Com o crescimento da presença de evangélicos pentecostais no espaço público e de seus percentuais nos censos do IBGE desde 1990, parte da bibliografia especializada passou a refletir sobre o possível estabelecimento de uma “cultura Pentecostal” no Brasil. Neste artigo, pretendo analisar a formação de uma cultura Pentecostal em periferias. Neste sentido, considero que o aumento no número de igrejas pentecostais e de seus fieis provocou mudanças em diferentes esferas da vida social nessas localidades. Este artigo tem como base empírica uma pesquisa de campo realizada de modo intermitente entre os anos 1996 e 2015 na Favela de Acari (RJ).

Palavras-chave: Cultura Pentecostal; Periferias; Favelas; Traficantes de Drogas; Grafites Evangélicos.

Pentecostal cultures in urban peripheries: a socio-anthropological analysis of Pentecostalism in arts, grammars, crime and morality¹

Christina Vital da Cunha

The meaning of the preferences of the poor and the apparent switch from Catholicism to Pentecostalism tends to represent a transit between two cultures: the traditional Afro-Brazilian-Catholic culture and a modern culture of individual choice. The New Era, for instance, represents at the same time a strong denial of an individualistic, rational e desacralizing modernity; the attempt to resume the global, spiritual, carnal and cosmic aspects of man's path to a never-attained or complete fulfilment. The Brazilian religious context, especially, but not exclusively, popular religion, is undergoing a certain spiritualistic mood that seems to be shared by various mentalities in Brazil.

(Sanchis 1997b: 29)

In past decades, Catholicism in Brazil has emerged as a privileged theme in the Social Sciences literature, coming to be recognised as a key element in the formation of a “national culture”, setting down patterns of sociability and their basic moral values (Sanchis 1986, 1994, 1997, 1997b; Oro 1988; Steil 2001; Novaes 1997; Droogers 1987 among others). According to Sanchis (1997), Catholicism was the “traditional urban popular culture” of the poorer sectors of society. He defined this cultural form by its “low moral rigour, low civic discipline, a work effort that, while often intense, is also anarchic, and, from a religious point of view, a porosity of identities which allows everyone to participate at the same time in multiple institutions” (Sanchis 1997: 124) – even if, publically at least, people tended to define themselves as ‘Catholic’. With the growing presence of Pentecostal Evangelicalism in public spaces, and the growing numbers of ‘believers’ (*crentes*) in the IBGE census since at least the 1990s, studies have begun to focus not only on the reactions of the Catholic Church to this growth, but also to the possible emergence of a “Pentecostal culture”² in Brazil. These studies stress either the incorporation of secular culture³ by the new cultural forms, or the latter's break with a pre-existing cultural order

In this article I develop the view, consonant with those I have presented elsewhere, as well as with the analyses of other scholars, that there is a significant analytical convergence between religions and cities. More specifically, I will analyse the constitution of a Pentecostal culture in urban peripheries, taking into account how an increase in the number of Pentecostal churches and their faithful led to changes

¹ I thank my dearest master and friend Luiz Antonio Machado da Silva for the attentive reading and comments on the first draft of this article.

² My approach to a “Pentecostal culture” in this article is based on the analysis of social situations, interactions that occur in a determinate time and space. Throughout the article I provide empirical data that will allow the reader to follow and check my analysis. My focus is on practice, grammars, aesthetics, and moral frameworks that are explicitly associated with an Evangelical (and mostly Pentecostal) religious universe. What has caught my attention is how the symbolism and the moral framework of Pentecostalism has diffused throughout all sectors of the social life of urban peripheries, more than their consolidation in the institutional settings of Pentecostal religious life. My study of Pentecostal culture is therefore not so much concerned with how faith is experienced by pastors and believers in the many Pentecostal churches that exist, but rather with what happens beyond the confines of Pentecostal churches, congresses and meetings. In brief, my focus is on how people activate, manipulate and operate this faith and its daily moral framework and grammar.

³ I take “secular” here not as a socially consolidated pole of the opposition between the religious and the secular (Weber 1982; Eliade 1992; Berger 2004; DaMatta 1991), but as the persistence of the religious in domains considered to be secular, where it becomes its own means of presentation and existence (Asad 1993; Taylor 2010 among others).

in different spheres of social life in these areas, including changes in sociability, economics, aesthetics, politics, landscape and in the grammar⁴ of the day-to-day interactions of their residents, whether they have direct ties to Pentecostal Evangelicalism or not.

This article is based on empirical data gathered during field research carried out intermittently between 1996 and 2015, in the Acari shantytown in the Northern region of Rio de Janeiro. The ethnography of the region provides us with “good case studies to think” the local and supralocal context.

Pentecostalism and modernity: a brief history of its emergence and expansion in Brazil

Pentecostalism is a religious movement that originated in the United States of America (Los Angeles, 1906) and arrived in Brazil through the Congregação Cristã do Brasil (Christian Congregation of Brazil, São Paulo, 1910) and the Assembleia de Deus (Assembly of God, Pará, 1911). The scholarly literature on the Pentecostal movement in Brazil typically identifies three ‘waves’, each of which corresponds to distinct theological and ritual approaches (Freston 1994)⁵. The first wave (1910 to 1950) was mostly confined to the north of Brazil. Inspired by the Biblical narrative of Acts 2 of the New Testament, its main characteristic was an emphasis on the manifestations of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, much as in primitive Christianity, including speaking in tongues and curing through intramundane asceticism, austerity and an incentive toward irreproachable conduct. A rejection of politics, television and music were also typical of this period, as was moderation in behaviour, and in what was consumed and worn. Followers emphasised knowledge of the “Word” and the teaching of the Bible in Sunday Schools. Government was congregational and decentralized. The education of pastors was continuous, much longer than it had been in former periods, and followed a sequential logic: one started out as an assistant, before becoming a deacon, a vicar, an evangelist and finally a pastor. The doctrine of the churches founded during this period was based on a pre-millenarian eschatology that expected the return of Christ and the salvation of souls. This posture required keeping a distance from “worldly” things in preparation for the return of the Lord.

The second wave began in São Paulo toward the end of the 1950s and lasted until the final years of the 1970s. The pioneer denominations for this period were the Igreja Quadrangular (Foursquare Church, originally from California) and the Igreja Pentecostal Brasil para Cristo (Pentecostal Church Brazil for Christ) and Igreja Deus é Amor (God is Love Church). These churches were organized along congregational and Episcopalian lines. Liturgy predominantly emphasized the gift of healing. During this wave, a number of evangelizing innovations were implemented, including financial investment in radio programmes and large-scale services held in sports arenas. Evangelicals gradually consolidated their presence in public spaces, and maintained the study of the Word in Sunday Schools.

The third wave started with the foundation of the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (IURD; Universal Church of the Kingdom of God), in Rio de Janeiro, in 1977. Similar denominations soon emerged, such as the Igreja Sara Nossa Terra (Heal Our Land Church), Igreja Internacional da Graça de Deus (International Church of the Grace of God), Igreja Internacional do Poder de Deus (International Church of the Power of God) and the Igreja Renascer em Cristo (Rebirth in Christ Church). All of these Churches were founded in Rio de Janeiro and spread to other regions. These denominations preach the abdication of intramundane

4 By “grammar” I mean the socioculturally established relation between the terms activated by different social actors during their engagements. My inspiration for this definition comes from the work of Veena Das (1998 ; 2007) on the grammar of gender and its associated violence. The author asks to what extent gender is activated as grammar that authorizes violence. In her view, bodies are taken to be signs and expressions of that grammar. In my view, it is not only bodies, but also the images (murals and graffiti) that are signs of Pentecostal grammar activated by residents and drug dealers in the shanty towns.

5 Although this classification remains hegemonic in the Brazilian literature on Pentecostalism, I argue that, given the wide variety of existing denominations, interactions between believers through internet social networks, and the influence that the theology of prosperity exerts on these denominations, we should always consider social behaviour in context, according to the meanings that subjects attribute to their own acts. This analytical proposal is set out in Vital da Cunha et al. (2017).

asceticism and of “the old revelation of the Cross” (Mariano 1999), according to which the earthly suffering of Christians was necessary so that they may attain paradise in the afterlife. Rituals are long, leaving little time for reflecting on Biblical verses. In contrast, there is a lot of time for music (in different styles, from choirs to Evangelical rock and pop), impassioned sermons and individual testimonials. Sunday schools cease to be important in some denominations, or disappear altogether in others. Sermons are emotive, involving effusive manifestations of the Holy Spirit. The denominations of this third wave make extensive use of media of mass communication, curing rituals and exorcisms. They seek out public life, engaging with culture, politics and the arts. They believe that life should be prosperous and happy here on earth. Ostentation is a valid expression of the grace and glory of God. Churches are Episcopalian, with a centralized administration, liturgy and doctrine⁶. Although it is beyond the aims of this article, it is important to observe that the rise of Neopentecostalism had an effect on the whole of the religious field in Brazil.

As I noted above, the arrival and diffusion of Pentecostalism in the country seemed to be a “direct challenge to traditional Brazil” (Sanchis 1997: 124). The *jeitinho brasileiro* (‘Brazilian way’), adept at bending norms and adjusting laws to customs, was said to be coming to an end, quashed by the Modernity imposed by this new Christianity (Mafra and De Paula 2002). From this angle, Pentecostalism was considered to be a cultural and ethical break with the patterns upon which Brazilian society was based, with religious traditions organized under the banner of syncretism, and with the moral flexibility characteristic of the daily interactions of Brazilian people. We still find statements to the effect that Pentecostalism is a religion that severs its ties with the past, that is exclusivist and ascetic, that dissolves social ties and cultural heritage. But we also increasingly find views that recognize a degree of underlying cultural continuity, suggesting that, in a way, Pentecostalism has itself been “Brazilianised”:

Nothing is apparently more inapposite to national identity than Pentecostalism. Reinstating a dualism between good and evil in its wake, Pentecostalism seems to divide the world in two, allowing for no middle ground. Moreover, popularizing doctrines that demand chastity and moderation, Pentecostalism appears to reverberate a modern version of North American puritanism [...]. In the same vein, through a study of the ongoing expansion of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, Pierre Sanchis (1998) suggests that ‘between the Pentecostalization of Brazilian culture and the Brazilianization of Pentecostalism’, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God is irrefutable proof that the latter has taken precedence over the former. Various other studies have restated this view: it has since become well-established that Pentecostalism’s break with national parameters was, at best, partial (Mafra and De Paula 2002:61).

Similarly, Joel Robbins (2004) attributes the success of Pentecostalism to a propensity to adapt “in its own terms”. Its global growth results as much from its many adaptations as from its modern, western and neoliberal character.

According to Sanchis (1997), prosperity – the last term in the transformation of Pentecostalism in Brazil – establishes a new way of being Christian in the country. After converting traditional Brazilian ‘pre-modernity’ into ‘modernity’, Neopentecostalism confronted the struggles of religious ‘post-modernity’ through practices of self-cultivation, self-help, the natural healing of the body, well-being and

⁶ This characterization of a historical process in *waves*, as occurs in other research areas in the social sciences, privileges a consideration of denominations. However, in more contemporary analytical terms, in what concerns the analysis of the public behaviour of Evangelicals, the denominational base ceases to be central insofar as ideas and worshipers tend to circulate between churches. There has also been a steady growth in the post-denominational movement in Brazil, the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR). The NAR results from the work of the North American theologian Peter Wagner, “whose perspective announces the transition from the denominational model to a post-denominational one, followed by ideas that, in the last decades, the Holy Spirit has re-established the ministry of the prophets and the apostles” (Oro Alves 2013: 127). On the necessity of rethinking the classification of Evangelicals in contemporary Brazil, see Vital da Cunha et al (2017).

the realization of desire, adapting and creating hierarchies as demanded by specific social situations. From these encounters a particularly creative reinvention of the Biblical tradition emerged. But it was also here that Neopentecostalism reacquainted itself with the currents of “positive confession”, Christian Science and The New Thought Movement that are at the origin of its contemporary esoteric rebirth.

The popular character of the Neopentecostal movement is one of its most striking characteristics, so much so that it has been called “a religion of the poor” (Sanchis 1997). For one, it is readily identifiable with poorer neighbourhoods, whether aesthetically or because of a certain use of the body (Mafra and De Paula 2002, Robbins 2009; Campos and Maurício Jr. 2013, among others). Once again, I quote Sanchis:

The figure of the pastor, or even of the believer, stamping ‘the street’ with the austerity of his clothing, his selective itineraries, characterizing ‘the house’ with his ascetic conduct and the visible fruits of an economic discipline of work and savings. Above all, the predominance of a clearly defined and uniquely religious identity, a wedge between the old popular tradition and modernity (Sanchis 1997: 124).

Another index of Pentecostalism’s association with the poor is the nature of its services. Starting in the 1980s, Sanchis (1997) observed a cultural adaptation of Pentecostal (or Neopentecostal) ritual “in its own terms” (Robbins 2004): “The Pentecostal service, markedly musical, emotive, made up of collectively regulated individual effervescences, found its specific albeit logical place among the ‘festivals’ that have always been a part of Brazilian popular religious customs” (Sanchis 1997: 124).

Data on evangelicals in urban peripheries

In the 1990s, Evangelicals made up a growing religious segment, expanding their presence in different spheres of Brazilian social life: in media, politics, the economy and culture. The percentage of Brazilians who declared themselves to be ‘Evangelical’ in 1980 was 6.6%, according to the IBGE census data. In 1990, this number had increased to 9% of the national population, while Catholics amounted to 83.8%. Although their ranks were increasing, and though they have been very active in public life since at least the 1970s, we knew very little about *them*, which strengthened a general feeling that they were the *other* in relation to a Catholic *us*. The anthropologist Rubem César Fernandes, with the collaboration of Regina Novaes, Otávio Velho, Clara Mafra and others, carried out research to address this feeling. They sought to understand how these Brazilians behaved, and to elucidate their habits, values, political and power strategies. The results were published in 1998 in the book *Novo Nascimento: Evangélicos em Casa, na Rua e na Política* (‘New Birth: Evangelicals at home, in the streets and in politics’). The data of the Censo Institucional Evangélico (CIN, the Evangelical Institutional Census, 1992), composed of statistical and ethnographical data, were important for the research that resulted in *Novo Nascimento*. This data had already established the relationship between Pentecostalism and urban peripheries. The table below helps us to visualise this relationship.

Table 1 – Church building per region

Region	Area	Number of temples per 10 000 inhabitants
Region 1	Southern Zone	1,33
Region 2	Northern Zone and Downtown	2,94
Region 3	West Zone	3,78
Metropolitan Region	Niterói	2,86
	Paracambi	3,02
	São Gonçalo	3,76
	São João do Meriti	4,19
	Maricá	4,30
	Nilópolis	4,44
	Itaboraí	4,71
	Nova Iguaçu	4,95
	Duque de Caxias	5,0
	Magé	5,99
	Mangaratiba	7,23
	Itaguaí	7,26

Source: Evangelical Institutional Census – 1992, ISER.

In the following decade, Evangelicals reached 15.5% of the national population, whereas Catholics had dropped to 73.8%. Using microdata from the IBGE, Jacob et al. (2004) produced religious maps of Rio de Janeiro and its greater metropolitan area, identifying the recurrence of religious identity by region. These maps show that Catholicism was predominant in the long coastal strip “that extends from the Recreio dos Bandeirantes to the City Centre, passing through Barra da Tijuca, São Conrado, Leblon, Ipanema, Copacabana, Leme, Botafogo and Flamengo. We can add the neighbourhoods of Gávea and Jardim Botânico to those contained in this strip” (Jacob et al. 2004: 136). In this region, Catholics represented almost 80% of the population. Conversely, in peripheral municipalities, Catholicism represented “less than 48% of the population. The percentage of Catholics was even lower in areas such as Nova Iguaçu, Belford Roxo and São Gonçalo, at between 41% and 30%” (Jacob et al. 2004: 136).

Analysis of microdata on the Pentecostal presence in Rio de Janeiro⁷ showed that it “was like a mirror image of the map of Catholics, since it was mostly concentrated in the peripheries” (Jacob et al. 2004: 137). The municipalities of the Baixada Fluminense, in particular Nova Iguaçu, Belford Roxo and Duque de Caxias, show high percentages of Pentecostals at 30%. According to Jacob et al. (2004), the same phenomenon is reproduced in São Gonçalo and Itaboraí. In Rio de Janeiro, the highest percentages are found in the Zona Oeste (Western Zone), where, in some areas, they amount to more than 20% of the population. Data provided by the DataFolha Institute for 2007⁸ confirm this tendency, attesting that 37% of the residents of the Baixada Fluminense declared themselves to be “Evangelical”, in contrast to 41% who claims to be “Catholic”.

⁷ It is worth noting that Pentecostals were 68% of those who self-declared as Evangelicals.

⁸ These data can be methodologically compared with those of the IBGE.

According to IBGE data, in 2010 Evangelicals totalled 22.2% of the national population. Catholics totalled 64.6%, decreasing almost 10% relative to the previous census. Despite a relevant increase in the number of Pentecostals in the middle and upper classes, IBGE data attests that the growth of Evangelicalism in Brazil that began in the 1970s is an urban⁹, and particularly a peri-urban, phenomenon, occurring mostly in the social and geographical outskirts of urban centres, as we saw above. A diverse range of ethnographies have tracked the growth of Pentecostalism in favelas and peripheries, analysing its impacts on these region (Mafrá 1998; Machado 2013; Galdeano 2014; Marques 2015; Esperança 2012; Vital da Cunha 2015 among others).

In the next section, I will focus on data gathered during fieldwork in the Acari favela to analyse more recent changes in the modalities of expression and organization of the local population, including that of drug dealers. While I have thus far been focusing on statistics and a review of the relevant literature, I will now turn to “image reading” as a methodological device, inspired by Lilia Schwarcz’s call “to scour uses of images not as illustrations, but as documents that, like other documents, construct models and conceptions” (Schwarcz 2014:393). I therefore consider that images (here, murals on favela walls) exert some type of agency, which is central to the current study. I propose that they actualise and memorialise religious sentiments, in the terms put forward by Latour (2004). Rather than expressing a rational message, images produce feelings in those who gaze upon them. As Latour stresses, the exercise of un-freezing images, that is, of accompanying their flow, is a *sine qua non* condition for understanding processes of mutual transformation (in those who emit and those who perceive images). My aim is to analyse the transformations, perceptions and strategies of the emitters in action. As we saw above, the literature has tended to emphasise the importance of the body, ritual music and, more generally, the religious experiences of Evangelicals. In contrast, I will highlight the images they produce, taking them to be fundamental symbols of a community, even if it is ultimately an imagined one. Images, in brief, will be analysed as aspects of a Pentecostal identity.¹⁰

Three decades of paintings in Acari

I have elsewhere analysed the paintings made by residents of the Acari favela, or by artists commissioned by drug dealers, during the 1990s and 2000s as a way of envisaging the social dynamic of the region, which, I argued, mirrored those occurring in other urban spaces (Vital da Cunha 2014, 2015). In the 1990s, for instance, the most common religious symbols and paintings in shared spaces in the Acari favela were St. Cosmas and Damian, St. George, St. Jerome and Our Lady of Aparecida. Zé Pilintra images were also common in altars or saint-houses made of cement and covered in tiles, found in the street corners of the favela. In many of these representations, Catholic symbols referred to their correlates in Afro-Brazilian religions, such as Umbanda or Candomblé. We would thus find Salve Doum, Xangô and Ogum next to paintings of saints¹¹.

9 For instance: IBGE data from 2000 show that 87% of those who declared themselves to be Evangelical lived in urban settings.

10 I cannot provide a review of the concept of ‘identity’ in the social sciences in the space of this article. However, I should make it clear that I do not treat ‘identity’ as if it were an emanation of “the way of being of a particular group, nor the immediate result of its material conditions” (Montero 2012). Identities are constructed discursively and rely on a process of social mediation, in which different actors and social symbols take part. Identities are thus the result of configurations (disputes and consensus) always situationally defined in space and time. Identity thus implies difference, which takes on an absolutely crucial role in social relations, inasmuch as “the difference before individuals is much more important than the similarity between them” (Simmel 2006 [1908]:46). As Poutignat & Streiff-Farnat (1998) also remind us, the concept refers to a range of possibilities for identification which betrays its analytical vitalities and possibilities, being seen by Lévi-Strauss as a “totemic illusion” (Rocha 2014).

11 Through so-called “Brazilian popular religiosity”, we often find syncretisms between Catholic saints and the entities of Umbanda or the divinities (orixás) of Candomblé. Some saints, entities or orixás were thus more commonly depicted, such as St. Cosmas and St. Damian (or Doum in the Umbanda tradition), represented by two children covered in robes and wearing brimless cylindrical hats. They are the patron saints of children, traditionally commemorated on the 27th of September when families distribute candy in homemade paper bags. It is an important sociocultural event, particularly in the Northern and

Image 1: Moment 1- Medieval Aesthetic. Image of Saint George slaying the dragon.
Unidentified author. Acari shantytown.



Photo by Marcos Alvito. 1996.

Image 2: Naïf Aesthetic. Mural in Acari shantytown – Saint Jerome/Xangô.



Photo by Marcos Alvito. 1996.

Western Zones of the city, as well as in the favelas. The rise of Evangelicals and their aversion to the worship of saints reduced the social strength of this festival in recent decades. St. George, also known as St. George the Warrior, is Ogum in Umbanda and Candomblé. He is seen to be a strong protector, lord of weapons and a victor in war. His Saint Day in the Catholic tradition is on the 23rd of April, which is a holiday in the state of Rio de Janeiro. St Jerome is Xangô in Umbanda and Candomblé, the patron saint of justice and a punisher of liars. Our Lady of Aparecida, a representation of Mary Mother of Jesus, is the patron saint of Brazil, and is venerated by many popular religious traditions. Zé Pilintra é a Umbanda entity, an important spiritual guide in ritual.

Image 3: Zé Pilintra – Umbanda entity featured in altar.



Acari shantytown. Photo by Marcos Alvito. 1996.

According to residents, drug dealers and a prestigious *mãe de santo* ('mother of saints', a Candomblé priestess) that I spoke to, local *terreiros* (Candomblé places of worship) had routine activities open to the public at the time. The most important functioning *terreiro* in 1996 hosted residents and *filhos de santo* ('children of saints', Candomblé novices) from other parts of town, who went to consult with the *mãe*¹². Local drug dealers also visited Dona Izabel's *terreiro*, consulting the shell oracle, asking the orixás for protection, presenting offerings, and helping out with the Saint Feasts. For St. George's Day and St. Cosmas and Damian's Day, in particular, there would be fireworks, festivities and, during the latter, sweets and toys were distributed to local children. Inspired by Mauss' (2003), Maggie stresses the occult aspects of magic, the fact that "it hides from the collective and the public, reserving itself for more individual and private spaces" (Maggie 1992: 21). Nonetheless, as the author also notes, magic "overflows the spatial limits of the house where rituals are carried out, mysteriously asserting itself in public spaces, concealed in *despachos*, *ebós* [types of offerings] and sorcery". (ibid: 21). In Acari, magic, the beliefs of residents and drug dealers, extrapolated the limits of the houses and the *terreiros* not in a mysterious way, but ostentatiously occupying streets with its sacred icons, songs and prayers.

The growth in the number of Evangelicals in Acari was already noticeable in the 1990s. It was evident in the creation of an Evangelical landscape of churches, banners and billboards publicizing sermons; campaigns, testimonials, worship, and celebration through music, commerce, and in the moderate clothing of women and men in contrast to the dress of non-Evangelicals, as we saw in the statements by Sanchis (1997) and Mafra and de Paula (2002) concerning the Pentecostal presence in poor areas. It was, in fact, in the end of the 1990s that the conversion to Evangelicalism of a drug dealer who was at the time the leader of the Terceiro Command (Third Command, a drug gang) gave rise to the commissioning of paintings in the favela.

¹² An affectionate way of referring to the *mãe de santos* for the Candomblé and Umbanda faithful.

It was in the early 21st century, however, that the Evangelicals came to dominate the favela. The number of Evangelical Churches in the region grew by about 50%, while the *terreiros* discontinued there public activities. Paintings of saints, music celebrities, ethnical references and football symbols gradually gave way to Biblical passages. Reading of these images (Schwarcz 2014), we can see their agencies and the meaningful combinations of text and stylistic form. Most images (text and form) refer to The Old Testament, the God of War and the God of David.

Image 4: Written religious references signed by a collective. Evangelical Universe of the Spiritual Battle. Acari Shantytown.



Photo by Christina Vital. 2008.

“It is true. Our Saint is strong. He needs no candle. Yet He has his own light. With His gaze, He soothes the largest waves in the ocean; heals all diseases; casts out all types of bad spirits; and even the spirit of death. He rose on the third day. He is the only living God. He is the Saint from Israel. Jesus Christ. By: Acari Community. Fanatic and neurotic for Jesus.”

Image 5: Biblical text – “And Moses said unto the people, Fear not: for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not”. God is Faithful. Exodus 20:20. Acari shantytown.



Photo by Christina Vital. 2008

During this time, the most wanted drug lord of the gang Terceiro Comando, born and raised in Acari, converted to the Assembly of God of the Latter Days. His arrest, widely reported by the press, was meant to contribute to the collective feeling that the safety measures put in place by Anthony Garotinho, then-governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro, were on the mend. Sometime later, with little fanfare, he was released and returned to Acari. After his conversion and return to the favela as both drug lord and Evangelical believer, a series of changes were effected in public life and local economics. The destruction of Catholic and Afro-Brazilian religious images, which had begun with the police in the mid-1990s, continued unabated, now with the blessing of the drug cartels who sponsored local artists to paint murals with Biblical texts.

Then, after Jorge Luis died, Heremias took over. He started to go more to the Evangelical side. Biblical texts. Wasn't that long ago he had a little house for St. George in the Amarelinho and they removed it not too long ago... Now it's the gangs. They started to spread Biblical passages throughout the community in the Piracambu court. Where there used to be a St. George, they wrote "Jesus is the Lord of this place", if I'm not mistaken. He also told them to put two outdoors in the main entrances to the favela, and today, wherever you go there's a huge wall where you're going to read Biblical sayings, not only here but all over the Acari complex: Acari, Vila Rica, Vila Esperança... (Interview with a resident of Acari; Acari Favela, January 2009).

Much as Anderson (2008) argues for the formation of imagined national communities, paintings in Acari simultaneously affirm and foment identities suited to the religiosity which predominates at a given time. According to Anderson, these symbols take hold in the interior of a particular logical community, wherein, despite the conflicts that are always present in the lives of any social group, the proclaimed identity and collectivity appear to be "essential, natural" precisely because they are shared. In the present case, the images, at different times and in consonance with hierarchical relations situationally established, reinforce an intrinsic relation between a collectivity and specific religious universes: first, Catholic and Afro-Brazilian; later, Pentecostal.

Tracking images-in-movement is a methodological strategy that I had not foreseen before fieldwork, but which enabled me to find analytical keys for each moment and its respective social dynamism. Thus in the 2010s, more specifically in 2013, the images in Acari were different. They were still Evangelical, but their aesthetic had changed. Paintings with passages from the Old Testament were substituted by new messages. Alongside wide usage of passages from the New Testament, one could also identify a set of words that together composed a motivational landscape made up of texts, words and colours linked to happiness, well-being, and incentives to faith, peace and love. Letters came to have a more rounded shape, leaving behind the Old English font, or other styles identified with the papyrus or parchments of ancient sacred scripts. The youthfulness of the new messages emerged from an aesthetic associated with graffiti, but also through the depiction of comic book characters.

Image 6: Evangelical graffiti – “Go ye therefore and teach all nations” Matthew. 28:19. Acari shantytown.



Photo by Christina Vital. 2013

Image 7: Evangelical Graffiti – “Kindness, Love, Union, Peace” – Acari shantytown.



Photo by Christina Vital. 2013

Image 8: Evangelical Graffiti – “And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.”

Matthew 21:22. Acari shantytown.



Photo by Christina Vital. 2013

Authorship was now attributed to the paintings: they are the work of a collective of artists (The graffiti artists of Jesus) and, in some cases, of a specific artist (André Soldado). The *hall of fame* graffiti style caught my attention. The change that the images underwent – the religious motivational message now rendered in a sweet tone, as Gilberto Freyre used to say about Christianity in Brazil – reflected both changes in techniques of Evangelization and the participation of the Evangelical youth, specially marked in urban peripheries, but increasingly present in Graffiti events throughout the city, from the Zona Sul to the Zona Oeste, as well as changes in the social dynamic of drug dealing in the region. In an interview in April of 2017, André Soldado told me that the paintings had been paid for by local drug lords. But the artistic project was conceived and offered to the drug gangs by a young believer, who attended services at the Assembleia de Deus dos Últimos Dias. The deal was that he would paint all the walls of the favela for a weekly wage which would then be distributed to the artists that worked with him. According to my interview with Soldado, both the style and the passages were selected by the young man who came up with the idea in order to produce a more “pleasant, happy” landscape.

As argued by Taussig (1999), Musil (2006) and Sansi (2005), the destruction of former images makes them strikingly visible, un-freezing and releasing them from the invisibility that had been imposed by the ostentation of their presence in the area.¹³ The religious graffiti from 2013 thus marked the emergence of new phase in the management of drug dealing in the favela. The former images, most of which were commissioned by the drug lord active at the time, expressed a phase in which the drug trade tried to identify itself with the religious narrative of a “spiritual battle” through its association with the Igreja Pentecostal Assembleia de Deus dos Últimos Dias, drawing from the political prestige of this Church among drug dealers and part of the population. Later, when he distanced himself from this Church and attempted to create his own Church in Brasília, the murals changed. By accepting the project of a believer who acted as a intermediary with the artists who painted the murals, the new drug lords signalled this new phase in relations between crime and religious leaders.

¹³ On processes of unfreezing images, see Latour (2004). For an interesting discussion on the uses of active invisibility, see Giumbelli (2010).

In 2015 the head of the drug trade in the region was a young man linked to the Afro-Brazilian Umbanda religion, but the commissioning of murals with Biblical passages continued. At the gate of the sports court (formerly known as the ‘Sand Court’) there is a large mural with references to Jesus. In the 1990’s there was a painting of Bob Marley superimposed on a marijuana leaf at the same spot. In the next decade there was a Biblical text on a parchment. In 2013 and 2015 new paintings with Christian references emerged.

Image 9: Wall to the right of the entrance to Quadra da Areia (Sand Court).



Picture by Marcos Alvito. 1996.

Image 10: Wall to the right of the entrance to Quadra de Areia.



Picture by Christina Vital. 2006.

Image 11: Graffiti on the gate and wall of Acari court: “God is the owner of this place”. On the right, the graffiti says “Jesus guards our community”.



Picture by Christina Vital. 2015.

The Sand Court is identified as a privileged (though not exclusive) space where drug dealers and their allies in Acari socialise (Alvito 2001). Football matches, card games, funk parties and gospel shows sponsored by the drug gangs were often held there. At present, other games are carried out in the multiuse court, which is draped in a new aesthetic, even though it is still known as “drug gang territory”. The current drug lord decorated the inside of the court with graffiti (commissioned from Carioca artists) that commemorates race, music and sports icons. They share space with a four-meter high painting of a rat that has been there for some time. The rat is a reference to the preferred pet of drug lords; keeping pet rats was a tradition in the 1980s and 1990s, as reported in various news articles and books (Alvito 2001; Barbosa 1997; Larangeira 2004, among others).

Picture 12: Graffiti inside Acari’s court.



Photo by Christina Vital. 2015.

Picture 13: Graffiti inside Acari's court. Alongside the Hip Hop and Reggae icons, we can read: "The opinion is yours, the reality is mine".



Photo by Christina Vital. 2015.

It is striking that the exterior of the court displays Christian symbols, conveying a youthful aesthetic and an Evangelical grammar, including references to Jesus, as Droogers (1987) proposed in his article on Brazilian 'minimal religiosity'. The author argued that Catholic hegemony in Brazil was also visible in the recurring use of the Word of God and the names of saints in public spaces. This changed with the rise of Evangelicalism, particularly in cities, after which Jesus and other terms started to be used either mockingly, in comedy shows as a stereotype of suburban "believers", or in colloquial conversations between middle and working class residents, mostly confined to the Zona Norte, the favelas and the peripheries of Rio de Janeiro and other cities. These expressions, which draw from prosperity theology and ritual events associated with Pentecostal churches include: victory, struggle, confirmation, spiritual warfare, provocation, fear of the Lord, kneel, the heat of the Holy Spirit, I can do all things through Him who strengthens me, I am more than a winner, in the name of Jesus, the Word has power, the blood of Jesus has power, the joy of the Lord is our strength, cure, anointed, blessed, blessing, feet on fire, glory, Hallelujah, Amen, you're tied up/ wrapped up with the Gospel, vases [to refer to the fragility of people], male servant, female servant, work, in honour and in glory, malignant, trembling, God will use you tremblingly, God is with you, shroud, Peace of the Lord, among many others. Images and words, articulated in order to enliven religious feelings and identities, as well as in the service of crime.

These expressions are part of the day-to-day of the residents of the favelas and the urban peripheries, whether as a sign of adherence or as critique, revealing a dynamic of domination and dispute, and of religion as a device, but also a practice, of feelings that bind. It is also a way of seeking protection and identification between residents and drug dealers, of communicating moral agreements and belongings, relations and adherences, even when these remain partial. Speculations concerning these grammatical and aesthetic usages emerge in the speech of the favela dwellers. In the moral cleansing put into effect by the "true believers", as some of the interviewees – mostly women – defined themselves, the religious affiliation of drug dealers who do not bear "true testimony" was always questioned:

...in the community there are many Candomblé saints. I can't say for sure, but I only know of one centre that is not totally active, but... there have been changes in relation to this. But that doesn't mean that there were changes in thought and in attitudes. People who were tied to Candomblé, who believed in images, stopped believing. And they turned to a more Evangelical side, let's say. It's not that everyone believes. Many go to the services, but, like, it's... they go even when they ask for protection. Just like they went to the macumba [Candomblé] centres to ask for protection, to seal their bodies, wore their spirit guides... it's changed today. Today they go to church, ask for prayers and carry the Bible in their pockets. This is something that's actually very good. Before they wore their spirit guides, their omens, and today they go to church, ask for prayers and carry those pamphlets in their pockets, carry the Bible in their pockets, those New Testament Bibles and the Book of Psalms, but they are not there in the world. Like, I don't know what security they have. I don't know if it's the same view that they had, the spirit guide protected them and the Bible will protect them as well... I don't know what their view is (Interview with a resident of the Acari favela, Acari, January of 2009).

It has become a common language, a code that communicates across social spaces, sometimes mockingly, but most of the time as evidence of a social base which, while not institutionally connected to Pentecostal churches, tends to see this religious universe as a horizon with which it must engage – whether to experiment the comfort that comes from being among peers, or to understand and challenge. The facts from my fieldwork pose a further challenge to those who hope to analyse social life in urban peripheries. I argue that it is impossible to investigate the economic and political dimensions of crime without taking into account the analysis of Pentecostal moral codes and symbolism.

The paintings inside the court and on its gate, establishing its threshold with the exterior, producing and affirming itself as an Evangelical collectivity, are emblematic of this double movement of hiding and revealing beliefs and values, of the very relationship between drug gangs and the “imagined community” of Evangelicals that surround them. While in the interior the paintings are “profane”, in the exterior they conform to how the “imagined community” identifies itself. We can think of the interior and exterior of the court as distinct moral regions¹⁴, the grammar and aesthetic of which draw the distinction: outside the relation with wider society, which expects certain behaviour and presents itself through particular symbols; inside the revelation of a self that intersects with others. Unlike notions of a violent sociability (Machado da Silva 2008), and despite the fact that guns create an inequality in all dealings between drug dealers and residents, the sale of drugs depends, to an extent, on the fear of favela dwellers and on the peaceful coexistence of all involved. Thus, although the current drug lord is not a believer, in the public spaces of the favela he sponsors Christian graffiti. Inside the court, the domain from which he cannot relinquish control, graffiti has other forms, aesthetics and textual messages.

Final considerations

The social dynamics which I have been following through intermittent fieldwork carried out between 1996 and 2015 in the Acari Favela, as well as through the analysis of three decades of images and my own understanding of the literature that has investigated the interfaces between Pentecostalism and social projects, drug dealers and former drug dealers, former criminals, militia-men, prisoners, police officers, etc., in favelas and urban peripheries (Novaes 2003; Mafra 1998; Mafra e De Paula 2002; Machado 2013; Souza 2017; Teixeira 2011, 2013; Galdeano 2014; Marques 2015; Esperança 2012 among others), allow us to reflect on

¹⁴ I use the notion of ‘moral regions’ inspired by the analyses of Goffman on social interactions and representations. The moral regions analysed here would include the “façade” and the “back”. Both are conditioned by different factors, and correspond to social situations which demand distinct positionings/behaviours from the actors. The façade favours a greater degree of public constraint, of exhibition, which demands that one behaves according to a variable number of social expectations. In the moral region of the back, subjects still interact one before the other, but in a manner that is less publicly constrained, which allows participants “to be who they are” in individual terms, but also in terms of gender roles – as the author explains by reference to the work of Simone de Beauvoir.

the anatomy of an urban culture of Pentecostalism, particularly prevalent in areas that are geographically, as well as socially, peripheral. An urban culture of the periphery within which elements of a Catholic tradition and Afro-Brazilian religions compete, and in which, more recently, Pentecostalism has made itself preponderant. This Pentecostalized mode of expression encompasses and hybridizes other, older religious references, making evident disputes over symbolic, aesthetic, grammatical, political, moral – in a word, cultural – hegemony. It does not exclude, but rather ‘updates’, both in terms of morality and ritual. It makes use of a common and pre-existing Christian infrastructure and of disseminated beliefs in spirits and supernatural entities.

Pentecostalism thereby appropriates a set of beliefs and updates them in its own terms, as Robbins (2004) would say. Pentecostals, for instance, do not deny the power of the Catholic message, but consider it mistaken in its idolatry of saints and the Virgin Mary. Similarly, they do not deny the power of the entities and orixás of Umbanda and Candomblé, but they attribute to them an exclusively malignant character. Powerful, but demoniacal, they must therefore be defeated. In urban peripheries, Pentecostal grammar and its moral values thus gradually transform into common codes that emerge from distinct forms in bodies, minds, murals.

This “Pentecostal culture” which has been growing in the peripheries and the favelas, and spreading beyond these confines, vying with the national secular culture, is, in part, a challenge to traditional Brazil, as Sanchis (1997) would have it. It is, on the one hand, disruptive; it dilutes family bonds because it severs itself from the foregoing collectivity. It is predatory, extractivist (Pierucci 2006).

And so it is. A religion of individual salvation can only establish itself, at first, extractively: it systematically extracts members of other collectivities – collectivities with which, before hearing the “good news” that triggers apostasy, they considered themselves to be structurally and inertly part and parcel. A Congregationalist religion, it “con-gregates” individuals that it “dis(a)gregates” from other grates, by secession or abduction, individuals that it recruits by uprooting, deterritorializing them from their conventional settlements, deviating them from their conventional routes, systematically disqualifying other religious systems of belief and practical life, unapologetically criticising or condemning other ways of life, other agendas of behaviour – religious or otherwise, collective or otherwise, significant or otherwise” (Pierucci 2006:112).

In contemporary public debates, Pentecostalism, and particularly those denominations associated with Neopentecostalism, is linked to violent, anti-democratic and intolerant practices. Empirical data show how the exclusionary, demonizing and intolerant practices of Pentecostalism found room for contextual concessions. It spreads because it adapts to styles (aesthetic, musical, commercial, etc.), updates meanings and rituals. Today, in favelas and urban peripheries, Pentecostal networks re-enforce family values, ties of friendship, kinship and neighbourliness. It presents itself as a fundamental way of life¹⁵ in the urban environment, struggling between forces for good and evil. It gains momentum through diffusion, gradually secularizing what it has updated in its doctrines and rituals, making these common to all. Conflicts emerge and disappear regularly, as observed in the ethnographies mentioned previously.

However, it should be noted that the exhibition of Pentecostal images in the moral region of the façade (in the wall of the Court, for example), and their absence in the moral region of the inside (the interior of the Court, for example), does not invalidate their analytical status as a common code. On the contrary, their presence in the region of the façade is not indicative of what is “true”, but of what is socially imposed, what is positively valued at different times.

¹⁵ Wirth (1979) offers a classic discussion for urban studies on the notion of “way of life”. This idea is the inspiration for important studies of urban spaces in Brazil, such as that of Magnani (2012) on the blocks and thoroughfares of cities.

By following a strand of the history involved in all of this, we can say that the basis of what Pierre Sanchis identified as a “traditional urban popular culture” in the 1990s, and which included Catholicism and Afro-Brazilian religions, has changed drastically. The basis of this culture of the urban periphery updates existing beliefs in a typically Pentecostal way, producing new sociabilities, urban circulations, social movements of the favelas and peripheries (Vital da Cunha 2015; Lânes 2017), new aesthetics, music (Novaes 1990; Sant’Ana 2017; Carvalho 2017), grammars. In contrast to what was considered an “urban popular culture”, we can say, very succinctly, that the traits of an urban culture of the periphery at present would include: (1) High valuation of entrepreneurship and of discipline as a means for success, resulting from different sources of influence, among which I would stress prosperity theology¹⁶, diffuse references to positive psychology and (consequently) the affirmation of a new relation between employment and unemployment. In this sense, as well as providing incentives for followers to start their own business, there is also a positive appraisal of cultural, artistic and sporting projects (often practiced in religious institutions), advertised as potentially instilling a “discipline for success”; (2) A sense that personal effort produces victories, which sets the groundwork for the former elements. It is worth stressing that, in a social context of vulnerability, where state services are, at best, only partially available, the sense of “relying on oneself”, on one’s “own efforts” and on more or less organic networks of kinship and coresidence, have always been basic resources for survival. Nonetheless, it is easy to discern an emphasis on individual effort, even if existing networks, when available, are engaged; (3) High valuation of the morality of the family (increasingly the nuclear family, rather than the extended family) and of well-defined gender roles; (4) From the religious point of view, a decrease in what Sanchis called a “porosity of identities, which allowed each person to engage in multiple institutional definitions at the same time” (Sanchis 1997:124); 5). Wide use of metaphors that refer to warfare (between good and evil), struggle (over souls and between antagonistic forces), tribulation (daily struggle of individuals for material and spiritual survival), all inspired in a theology of domination which stamps the doctrines and rituals of contemporary Pentecostal churches.

I propose that, among other factors¹⁷, this culture of the periphery results from the growth of Pentecostalism in these areas of the city and the combinations and exclusions that thereby result. Its spread, and the establishment of a cultural base forged in Pentecostalism, take place in the midst of conflicts, resistances, passionate affiliations and restraint. This is life pulsating; it could not be otherwise. The lifeways of institutional Evangelical Pentecostalism is therefore much more restricted than the population that is affected by its practices, and which manipulates its symbolism – indeed, updates it.

Received: February 17, 2017; Approved: July 08, 2017

¹⁶ Prosperity theology became prominent in Brazil after 1980, with denominations that emerged in this decade, although all of the Evangelical (and even the Charismatic Catholic) field has been affected by it. This theology is based on the interpretation of certain Books of the Bible, particularly The Book of Malachi. Some of its main proponents include: Essek M. Kenyon, Kenneth Hagin, Oral Roberts, T. L. Osborn. This theology claims that the domination of societies will occur through the personal empowerment of Christians. As Teixeira (2016) reminds us, prosperity is not exclusively linked to financial success, but to the harmony between the many dimensions of the life of the faithful, such as education, health, family, marriage, etc.

¹⁷ Methodologically, this is the seminal sociological orientation of Weber, in which an aspect of social life is accentuated so as to be analysed in depth. We are thus, evidently, in agreement with the multi-causal character of all social situations.

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Christina Vital da Cunha

Federal Fluminense University, Department of Sociology, Niterói/RJ, Brazil

E-mail: chrisvital10@gmail.com