Abstract

We propose that (1) two dominant, contrasting models of the self have been constructed by philosophers and social scientists, each appropriate to the two different kinds of imagined communities by which each is assumed to have been produced. We propose further that (2) each model, reified in both contemporary anthropological and folk discourse, is a modern construct. The first, an occidentalized version, describes an individuated, independent, ego-centric, competitive, autonomous Western self. The second offers an orientalized, romanticized notion of a sharing, caring, ecologically savvy, socially-connected and defined, non-Western, traditional, indigenous, self. Our data suggest the latter model is preferred by those regardless of nationality who explore new religious movements, which provide spiritualities of and for modernity. Based on their indigenous founders constructions of a homogenized Amerindian past, the religions we examine here permit their detraditionalized followers to participate in polyphonic rituals through which they transform, rename, and embody more acceptable, but thoroughly modern, selves. Finally, (3) we propose that the message the indigenous, traditional elders offer is less important to followers than who the messenger is. Data come from Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico and Uruguay.