Gossip and Secrecy: Women's Articulation of Domestic Conflict in Three Religions of Urban Brazil

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In this paper I discuss how women in a Brazilian working-class town choose among the Catholic Church, pentecostalism, and Afro-Brazilian umbanda when seeking religious help in coping with domestic conflict. I argue that umbanda and pentecostalism, as cults of affliction in which blame for domestic conflict may be safely articulated and projected onto spiritual Others, limit the possibilities for gossip and increase those of secrecy. They are thus more attractive to women than is the Catholic Church, which places blame for domestic conflict on human agents and, as a local cult that recruits on the basis of prior social identity rather than affliction, makes women's efforts to speak about their domestic problems vulnerable to gossip.

For the past two decades, in what some have called the most notable Catholic movement since the Reformation (Houtart, 1977), priests throughout the Third World have attempted to instill in their flocks the ideals embodied in the theology of liberation (Smith, 1973; Ferm, 1986; Hanson, 1987). This theology emphasizes the egalitarian dimension of the Gospel, interprets Christ as calling for a struggle for social justice, and announces a return to the imagined solidarity and equality of primitive Christianity by investing sovereignty in small ecclesial base communities, known as “CEBs” (Assman, 1971; Gutierrez, 1973; Boff, 1977, 1981).

Although progressive Catholic movements exist in Africa and Asia, most scholars have focused their attention on Latin America, due to the prominence of radical Catholics in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and the general visibility of Catholicism throughout the continent (Smith and Howlands, 1977; Dodson, 1979; Dussel, 1979; Lernoux, 1980; Levine, 1980; Berryman, 1984). Much of this work has concentrated on Brazil because the Brazilian National Bishops’ Conference officially supports pastoral plans shaped by the theology of liberation (Brunreau, 1974; Alves, 1979; Della Cava, 1986; Krischke and Mainwaring, 1986; Mainwaring, 1986). Not surprisingly, concerned with understanding whether CEBs have succeeded in mobilizing and raising the consciousness of Brazil’s poor, most research conceives the Catholic innovations primarily in political terms (Brunreau, 1980; Duarte, 1983; Ireland, 1983; Doimo, 1984; Pettrini, 1984; Macedo, 1986; Gaiger, 1987; Passo Castro, 1987; Nobrega, 1988).

A purely political focus tends to lose sight, however, of the fact that Catholic congregations, including CEBs, are first of all religious groups, to which people are recruited and in which they participate in order to satisfy, among other things, religious needs (Ribeiro de Oliveira, 1987). As such, CEBs are just one option within the impressively diverse religious field of urban Brazil, in which countless people who call
themselves "Catholic" seek spiritual help and solace not only from the Church, but also from pentecostalism and Afro-Brazilian umbanda, often converting and leaving the Church altogether (Ortiz, 1980; Duarte, 1983). Indeed, some writers have argued that Brazil's bishops promote CEBs precisely as a way to imitate and thus compete more effectively with the tightly-knit, emotion-centered religions of pentecostalism and umbanda, religions that have threatened Catholic dominance of the religious field since the 1950s (Della Cava, 1976; Romano, 1979; Bruneau, 1982; Paiva, 1985).

Yet reports from throughout Brazil continue to attest to the rapid growth of both pentecostalism and umbanda, and to the ongoing difficulty of recruiting and keeping people active in the Catholic Church (Gregory, 1973, 1979; CNBB, 1984; Hewitt, 1986; Mariz, 1988a). There are still far fewer Brazilian Catholics who regularly participate in non-Mass Church activities, than there are pentecostals and umbandistas (Camargo, 1973; Ribeiro, 1982; Mariz, 1988b). To begin to explain this contrast, we must see CEBs as part of the Brazilian religious arena and investigate how successfully they satisfy religious needs in comparison to other religious options both within and outside the Church.

Despite Brazil's extraordinarily diverse religious field, there has been surprisingly little effort at comparative study; instead, research has tended to concentrate on one religious group at a time (on umbanda, see Velho, 1975; Ortiz, 1978; Birman, 1980; Montero, 1985; Brown, 1986; on pentecostalism, see Willems, 1967; Souza, 1969; Hoffnungel, 1978; Page, 1984; Novaes, 1985; Rolim, 1985; on popular Catholicism, see Zaluar, 1983; Maus, 1987). At least part of the reason for the non-comparative approach is theoretical. Persuaded by Berger (1967) that the urban world has eroded religious loyalties, and by Bourdieu (1974; see Brandão, 1977) that religious specialists possess a kind of "capital," investigators have depicted the Brazilian religious arena as a "supermarket" in which people are influenced above all by each product's success in solving "immediate" problems, rather than by theological or ritual content (Duarte, 1986). Though capturing something of the process by which many people seek spiritual help in urban Brazil, the supermarket model, by depicting religious choice as essentially individual and idiosyncratic (Monteiro, 1979), reduces the urgency of comparative study. The model hence leaves unexplored the question, Why does any given religious group or specialist succeed more for some people and problems than for others? The supermarket perspective is greatly enriched by directly comparing religious groups and observing how people choose between them; only then can we explore why some religious languages and rituals are better suited than others to articulate and cope with certain kinds of problems.

In a rare comparative (though largely theoretical) essay, Fry and Howe (1975) turn to Turner's notion of "cults of affliction" (1968) to suggest that both pentecostalism and umbanda draw their clienteles through the experience of suffering. They contrast these clienteles by suggesting that pentecostalism may be favored by sufferers immersed in bureaucratic structures, and umbanda by those absorbed in patron-client relations. This hypothesis is intriguing, but difficult to test, because poor Brazilians are involved in both kinds of relations all the time. For example, did a man who stood on line in the morning to receive a welfare check from the government, and in the afternoon asked a shopkeeper for a loan, have a more "bureaucratic"- or "patron-client"-like
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The hypothesis also neglects the phenomenon of religious change: Why do so many \textit{umbandistas} become pentecostals? Do they suddenly increase their involvement in bureaucratic relations?

Despite its empirical weakness, Fry and Howe may be on the right theoretical track. By referring to cults of affliction, they remind us of Turner's distinction between these and "local cults": whereas cults of affliction recruit adherents through suffering, local cults recruit on the basis of residence and prior identity (developed by Van Binsbergen, 1981; see Werbner, 1977). This distinction is useful, as I will try to show, for analyzing the contrast between Catholicism, on the one hand, and pentecostalism and \textit{umbanda}, on the other. As it stands, however, it is too abstract. I will argue that at a more operational level, local cults may be characterized as vulnerable to gossip, while cults of affliction are spaces of social privacy. By focussing on the social group with the highest level of religious participation, married women, I will show how this contrast works in practice.

Despite their preponderance in all religions in urban Brazil, working-class womens' religious experience has received remarkable scholarly inattention. Studies of \textit{umbanda} have focused on male homosexuality (Fry, 1982; Silverstein, 1979; Birman, 1988); those of pentecostalism and Catholicism have generally dealt with the extra-domestic concerns of social mobility and industrial work relations (Rolim, 1977; Brandão, 1985). Virtually none have focused on the intersection between religious practice and the sphere of social relations in Brazil in which working-class women define themselves: the domestic realm.

During a year and a half (1987-1988) of ethnographic fieldwork in a dormitory town (that I will call "São Jorge") of eight thousand mainly working-class inhabitants, on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, I studied the processes of recruitment to and politicization through a CEB, an \textit{umbanda} center, and a pentecostal church. In particular, I investigated how informants of both sexes, various racial self-identifications, ages, and situations in the class structure articulated and coped with issues of race, age, gender and class, through these three religious options. In this article I will discuss my interviews with forty marriage-age women, exploring how they encounter the religious arena, and why this encounter is leading them to flock to pentecostalism and \textit{umbanda} rather than to CEB Catholicism. These women have spent most of their lives in domestic work, and are either living with or separated or widowed from men who work as bricklayers or carpenters in the local construction industry.

For the sake of clarity, I must distinguish here between the relatively simple act of bringing a problem to a religious specialist or group and the more complicated act of religious conversion. The first step toward conversion is almost always the act of bringing a problem, but bringing a problem does not always end in conversion. For conversion, other long-term processes are at work, only some of which I explore here.

\textbf{THE PROBLEM: THE INCREASE IN URBAN DOMESTIC CONFLICT}

The adult women of São Jorge are remarkably unanimous in representing the family's move from the \textit{roça} (countryside) of Minas Gerais to the urban periphery of
Rio de Janeiro as bringing about an increase in tension within the household. In their accounts, family tensions generally crystallize around three issues: the threat to male authority represented by urban unemployment; the heightened competition for expenditures between the male prestige sphere, on the one hand, and children’s education and the insecure urban household, on the other; and in the context of the urban arena’s proliferation of competing loci of authority, the erosion of parental control over children. Even taking into account their obvious romanticization of the past, what is striking about women’s stories is that so many of them point to an increased frequency of “fights in the house” (brigas de casa) once the family has moved to the city. I became alerted to the importance of the roça/cidade (country/city) contrastive pair when Nena, a widowed pentecostal in her early sixties, while telling me of her family’s arrival in São Jorge nearly thirty years ago, set about portraying the contrast between country and city.

In the country, there was a kind of unity, you know? Husbands worked with wives, children with parents. Now that’s gone. . . . Everything one wanted was at home. Here it’s all salary, which is very little, and everything is bought, which is very expensive. The men are always struggling with work. There isn’t that unity there used to be, the husband is always away, the wife is struggling at home, you know?

When I asked Carolina, a practicing Catholic in her mid-forties, to talk to me about the difference between how families get along in the roça and in the cidade, she explained:

In the city, there is always some fight at home. Sometimes your sons are disobedient; sometimes your daughters are disobedient. Here people mix with others. In the country your neighbors were all very distant. But here young kids mix with their friends, learning things they shouldn’t, and end up not obeying anymore.

Adilene was married in the roça of Minas Gerais to the son of a smallholder. The son brought the family to São Jorge, where he planned to work in the nearby auto factory. He lost the job after a year and was forced to work as an assistant carpenter for a subcontracting firm in which he earned less than half the factory salary and in which he had no security. He began to drink. As his wife recounted,

The salary was small, nothing was going to be left over to feed the family. He just couldn’t spend money on drink and cigarettes, because there wouldn’t be enough. So we ended up fighting. I yelled, pleaded, complained, and he didn’t like it. I was worried the children wouldn’t get to study [married pentecostal, age 56].

Another middle-aged Catholic found the move created problems with her children:

In the country my family was more united. . . . Here I would say, “Clean up the house.” “No, I’m not going to.” “Oh, yes, you are!” But she wouldn’t. So I’d get agitated and give her a smack, something I never did in the country. . . . Here they can go out with their friends, to enjoy themselves in the street, leaving their duties behind. So a lot of fights come up that never did before.

It is in the context of this intensification of domestic trouble — from women’s
points of view — that we may begin to situate the relative growth of pentecostalism and *umbanda* in urban Brazil, at the expense of Catholicism; and in particular, the growth of married Catholic women’s reliance on the prayers of, and (in many instances) conversion to, those cults. The relation between domestic issues and pentecostalism was first impressed upon me in conversations held separately with Manuel and Delia, São Jorge’s most highly respected pentecostal prayer-healers. When I asked them what they considered the most common type of problem brought to them, they answered, independently, with precisely the same phrase: “desavenças no lar” (discord in the home). Manuel expanded for me: “Problems in the house. Problems of separation, of fighting, between husband and wife, unemployment, the wife is fighting with her husband because he’s unemployed, or is with another woman, and so on.” For these prayer-healers, the vast majority of people who ask for prayer are Catholic women. Why do these women bring their domestic troubles to be prayed over by Manuel and Delia, and why do some of them take the next step and convert? Why are they not satisfied with the support of their co-religionists?

Many Catholics observe that pentecostals appear to have more faith (“*mais fé*”), which means that their prayers are stronger. The readily visible life-change of the *crentes* (pentecostals) and their dedication to prayer are signs of the strength of their faith. Many Catholics accept the *crentes*’ critique of Catholicism as lacking conviction and discipline and as being eroded from within by its cohabitation with “*macumbeiros*” (practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religion). As one Catholic man put the matter, “It seems that the Catholic Church is lazier than the *crentes*. There are fervent Catholics, but there are a lot more fervent *crentes*. So you see, sometimes Catholics think that the faith and the prayers of the *crentes* are stronger.” This contrast in fervor is well-known, and the people themselves offer it as an explanation for their preference for *crente* prayers. Still, we must ask, why do domestic issues predominate among those brought to Manuel and Delia? And why do even fervent Catholics sometimes consult these pentecostal prayer-healers? A fruitful approach to these questions is to reflect upon how the different religious groups in São Jorge articulate and deal with domestic issues.

**DOMESTIC CONFLICT AND CATHOLICISM**

In what way can a priest help resolve domestic conflict? Listen to Dona Waldinéa, at the same time a director of the *comunidade eclesial de base*, a leader of the Apostolate of Prayer (a traditional lay Catholic organization), and a highly active member of the local Catholic Church for nearly thirty years:

It doesn’t help to bring a domestic fight (*briga de casa*) to the priest. Let’s say a woman has a husband who likes another woman, so that he is betraying her; she goes to the priest: “Oh, father so-and-so, come to my house and say something to my husband,” so the priest goes and says, “You have to be faithful to your wife,” and so on. He listens to all that. But if he likes the other woman, he’s going to see her. [But why? Why doesn’t he listen and obey the priest?] Because the priest doesn’t know anything about family life. They don’t respect his opinion. Believe me, they don’t respect it.
Of course there are occasions when the priest, as a neutral figure, may help arbitrate domestic disputes, but in general he faces a tremendous obstacle in the lack of trust on the part of males. Consequently priests often seem powerless in the eyes of women to resolve domestic conflicts. Indeed, the local parish priest confirmed for me that he is rarely sought out for advice about domestic disputes.

What about the product of the post-Conciliar, and especially of the post-Medellín, progressive Church, the Bible reflection group? A generation of young priests and pastoral agents, bred on the work of such writers as Carlos Mesters (1985), conceive the Bible circle as a small, neighborhood-based group that nurtures trust and intimacy. As the priest explained,

The Bible circle creates more effective friendship ties, even more effective religious ties. To the extent that these people are meeting each other, by locale, where they live, by street, you know? So the Bible circle will strengthen people in their feeling of fraternity, of being followers of that doctrine, that faith.

It is within this supposed space of trust and friendship that progressive priests hope that neighbors will reflect upon the Bible and make a connection between faith and life (ligar fé e vida). In particular, the progressive Church hopes that participants will develop a more critical social and political consciousness. But that is not all. As the priest pointed out, “The Bible circle should try to focus on all the dimensions of life, on the dimensions of neighborhood, family, community, survival.” In practice, however, people virtually never speak about their own domestic tensions within the reflection groups. In my weekly attendance at various Bible circles in São Jorge, I never heard such talk, and I never once heard a request for a prayer related to a specific domestic conflict. On the few occasions that talk did turn to family problems, it was about other people’s (non-group members’) problems, and this gossip left many participants visibly uneasy. The most common type of talk in the circles is moral exhortation to follow Christ’s example: to be charitable, loving, faithful, committed, and so forth. Never did I (nor, to the best of my knowledge, did my informants) witness the Bible circle used to discuss and work out a personal problem using public discourse. Indeed, participants explicitly claim that the circles neither are nor should be used for this purpose: “In the groups, people don’t talk about their current problems, no they don’t. The group isn’t for that. They don’t talk about problems, but about the things they have learned from the Gospel, or of what ought to be learned from the Gospel” (group coordinator, a woman in her fifties). I asked another longstanding participant in the groups, a widowed woman, whether a woman might complain about her husband within the group. “Never! There, if you talk about that, you’re not connecting life with the Bible. Because the connection between life and the Bible doesn’t mean things about husbands and wives, about children, or the problems we have.”

Why are domestic issues taboo in the reflection groups? We may approach a partial answer by considering the fact that group participants are recruited primarily through ties of neighborhood (as inhabitants of a specific street or block) and common prior religious identity (as Catholics). The reflection groups may thus be considered “local cults” in Turner’s sense of a religious group that recruits its participants through place and prior identity, thus transferring and extending prior social roles to the religious space (Turner,
1968). As a local cult, participants in the reflection groups see other members in the same social roles they occupy outside the circle: they are, above all, neighbors, and relations between neighbors, as any anthropologist or small-town dweller knows, are fraught as much with tension as they are blessed with trust. Thus, the fear of being judged by neighbors inhibits revealing domestic tensions within the local cult. Outside the Bible circle, neighbors judge each other all the time; within the group, this tendency is reinforced by Catholic moral ideology, an ethic that emphasizes human responsibility and a direct relationship between human agency and sin. This emphasis has been deepened by post-Conciliar and post-Medellín teaching (Boff, 1977; Dodson, 1979). But, I suggest, diagnoses of domestic conflict that allocate responsibility in human terms will tend to open the floodgates of judgment, advice, and taking of sides: in short, of gossip.

Indeed, many Bible circle participants are inhibited from discussing their personal problems in the groups because they feel these are always on the edge of becoming "gossip centers" (centros de fofocas). As one women explained,

Many people don't understand that connecting life with the Bible means following Christ's example. Instead, they talk about life outside the group, the life of neighbors: so-and-so fought with his wife, he found another woman in the street, his wife got another man. . . . Domestic affairs [coisas da casa] one shouldn't tell the whole block. If you tell your story here [in the group], it's not going to stay here. It's going to spread. Everyone will know what happened.

The opinion that the groups easily become gossip centers is fairly widespread. The progressive priest reports that participants in the reflection circles throughout the parish feel there is the constant threat of gossip, a threat that is exacerbated by the progressive Church's effort to get the circles to discuss local issues.

There's a common criticism of the groups: they easily turn into gossip centers. When the reflection circle guidesheet was introduced, there was a "fact of life" in all of them, a story that tried to apply the Gospel to that story, and from that story it was hoped people would talk about how the Gospel applied to their own lives [laughs gently and with irony]. Well, the complaint arose that this was opening things up for gossip. Because the "fact of life" reminded people too much of the things that were happening in the neighborhood, among various families, and created an atmosphere of gossip, of commentary on the lives of others [parish priest, 32 years old].

There are other spaces in the Catholic Church, however, where domestic grievances might conceivably be aired. The Apostolate of Prayer is a group of some twenty older women who meet periodically to pray for afflicted members of the Catholic community. At first glance, the Apostolate has something more of the quality of a "cult of affliction," in Turner's terms, than do the Bible circles. A cult of affliction recruits participants primarily on the basis of suffering: it thus has the power to transform social roles, if only temporarily, through the common bond of affliction, the cure of which is the group's raison d'être. In such a group it is sometimes possible to escape the burdens of social roles for a time and to articulate issues that otherwise would remain shrouded in secrecy.
Upon closer inspection, however, São Jorge’s Apostolate does not have the power to create a socially safe space. The twenty prayer leaders were not recruited through suffering, but rather through co-residence, Catholic identity, friendship and kinship ties to other members, and a common aspiration to the respectability of being identified with a long-standing Catholic lay organization. Furthermore, these women are often portrayed by their neighbors as the judgmental carriers of a Catholic ethic that places blame on humans, calling them irresponsible or dishonest or mean. Thus, the same potential for gossip that exists in the reflection groups exists as well in the Apostolate.

In practice, the majority of the prayers requested from the Apostolate are for guiltless afflictions such as physical illness, rather than for domestic troubles. Ana Maria, a hearty woman in her fifties who spent her entire adult life as an active member of the Catholic Church, was a member of the Apostolate of Prayer and served as coordinator of the CEB. She had converted to a pentecostal church several months before I spoke to her.

I had a very serious problem, a family affair. I tried to talk to the priest, but they don’t understand these things. [What about the Apostolate of Prayer? Did you bring your problem to them?] Hah! Listen, son, there you can’t talk about anything. It’s just a bunch of gossipy women. They all tell everyone else.

The Apostolate is fettered with this image in São Jorge. Francisca, the coordinator of the group, told me that the women do their best to prove this prejudice unfounded, but that it often comes back to roost. On the infrequent occasions that the Apostolate receives requests for prayers related to domestic trouble (invariably these come from individuals who are intimate with at least one of the women in the Apostolate), the names of those involved are supposed to be kept secret. But this effort at reassurance was recently undermined when the Apostolate prayed for a man to return to his wife. The story leaked, and the husband’s mother publicly denounced Francisca “and her crew” (e a turma dela) for spreading the story through the town. The denunciation was particularly vehement because the husband’s mother assumed that the Apostolate had taken sides against her son. After all, she told me, how could a group of Catholics remain neutral about such an issue?

What other spaces exist? In Masses, the priest’s sermons rarely touch upon domestic issues. This is in contrast to previous priests’ concern with preaching on the subject whenever possible. Since the progressive priest arrived in the parish six years ago, pastoral work in the area has focused on encouraging reflection on large social and political issues, and deemphasizing the traditional concern with things individual and personal. In this change of emphasis, the collective confession has largely replaced private confession, but as one woman put it: “I don’t think the collective confession is valid. Most of the time people there are embarrassed to make a confession. I mean, if I say something there, everyone finds out.”

Of course, a crucial source of inner strength for many Catholic women in dealing with the pressures of the domestic realm is devotion to the Virgin Mary. As one leader of the CEB (a woman with a highly problematic marriage) confided, “When he arrives at home drunk, you know, swearing, I think of Our Lady, because didn’t she also
suffer? So there, I can suffer a little too." On the other hand, Marian devotion leaves a woman isolated, with resignation as her only comfort. For many devout Catholic women, this is enough. But in the context of competition by cults of affliction that promise a change of life and social support through adversity, Marian devotion may begin to appear a weak alternative, especially for younger women who have had little experience of it.

The ritual moments of nonliterate Catholicism, including promessas, pilgrimages, and consultations with nonliterate prayer specialists and blessers (rezadores and benzedores), among others, are well-suited to addressing the challenge of domestic conflict. Consultations with these specialists are generally secret, thus providing an opportunity for women to articulate domestic issues outside the local social net, a place to unload and receive advice without the constraints of gossip. These specialists also tend to project responsibility away from the afflicted individual and onto a variety of agencies, including God, fate, the evil eye, and "bad winds and influences." One of the few rezadores left in São Jorge told me that people seem to come to her more to talk than to be prayed over, and that the talk of women is almost invariably about coisas do lar ("home things"). Promessas, of course, provide women some measure of access to saintly power in their daily efforts to deal with their own relative powerlessness. Yet women rarely or never make promessas in relation to the behavior of husbands or children. The promessa is usually made in request for a miracle, and these can occur only if the request is absolutely pure and beyond the control of the promessa-maker. It is for this reason that promessas are generally made in search of health or cure rather than to resolve a confrontation between human wills. In paying a promessa, however, a woman may go on a pilgrimage. This not only helps re-charge her spiritual batteries, but also provides a temporary escape from the pressures of the domestic realm.

Yet the activities and rituals of nonliterate Catholicism are in decline in São Jorge, as they are in much of urban Brazil. The post-Conciliar Church has intensified its efforts to occupy ritual positions previously filled by nonliterate specialists: the progressive Church is drawing into its orbit the old specialists and is shrinking the space of those who remain. The general influence of and competition with the crentes has eroded the legitimacy of many of the practices of nonliterate Catholicism, especially those revolving around saints. And the general pressures of migration and urbanization (Zaluar, 1983) have rendered it increasingly difficult to organize many of the collective rituals of a Catholic cult rooted in agricultural rhythms and locality.

Perhaps the most effective means Catholic women have for coping with domestic conflict in religious terms is to throw themselves into church work, either with or without their husbands. There are several cases in São Jorge of couples improving their marriages through the creation of a common project and commitment to work in the Catholic Church. More generally, church work is a way for women to enjoy a small arena of freedom from marital control. Such cases, however, are far from unique to the Catholic Church and raise issues I do not have space to enter into here.

DOMESTIC CONFLICT AND PENTECOSTALISM

To return to my conversation with Manuel, the crente prayer-healer: Manuel is
a presbyter in the local pentecostal Assembly of God and performs prayer-healing in his own home rather than within the confines of the church. He has established a fine balance between the authority he draws from his charismatic cures, on the one hand, and from his position in the church, on the other. The pastor, in turn, sees himself as having kept Manuel's loyalty by naming him presbyter and thus drawing him into the church's institutional orbit. The church thereby gains the souls of people who convert because of Manuel's healing powers. Women may also choose to attend one of the weekly open-door prayer meetings held within the church, presided over by members somewhat less charismatic than Manuel.

Manuel had just told me that "discord in the home" was the commonest problem brought to him and had thus shaken my prior assumption that his specialty was rather illness and nervousness.

[But do you mean that this kind of problem is more common than illness?] Ah, much more common. You know, very often sickness is something for the doctor. In here, it's more often depression than sickness. Depression is the evil one [o máligno]; it's something that inhabits the body, but it's spiritual. The person yells, speaks evil things, swears. That is the work of the Enemy. . . . The Enemy works hard to destroy married life. The discord that arises in people's homes is the work of the Devil. He came to rob, kill, and destroy. Fights between married people are always due to the Enemy.

Manuel's account of the cause of domestic conflict helps explain why such conflicts are brought to him so often: his diagnosis, by placing primary responsibility on the Devil, undermines the critical and judgmental attitudes; it also provides a clear means for coping with the conflict by expelling the evil spirit. Manuel explained to me that when he prays for women to help them with domestic problems, he prays to expel the spirit that is causing aggressiveness both in her, and in her male companion (who usually is not present). I asked another crente, and adult male, to talk to me about Manuel's work.

[Why do you think that Catholic women go to him to be helped, rather than to the Catholic Church?] Because they already suspect that it is the Devil. The priest doesn't have that kind of aid to give. All the priest can do is give advice, to talk with them; he is not going to talk about the Devil. But Manuel, he knows that the Devil is inside that fight, and he prays. He expels the evil spirit, and the person feels better.

By going to Manuel, women get an opportunity to air their troubles in the supportive atmosphere of a cult of affliction. As Manuel explained,

The person kneels, and I ask, in front of the others, "Do you want to talk about something?" And they say, "My problem is such-and-such." Some people call me over in private, they don't want to talk here. But such people are few, because there is no necessity [for privacy]: everyone here is full of problems, so it's not necessary to hide problems from each other. I mean, no one is going to leave here criticizing anyone, because each one has her own problems.

There are numerous examples of actively practicing Catholic women bringing delicate issues not only to Manuel, but also to the weekly prayer-meetings for non-
members, rather than subject them to the harsh, critical, gossipy light of their co-
religionists. Consider the account of Josiana, a long-time leader of the CEB and a
fervent Catholic who recently converted to a pentecostal church:

I was always nervous in the house. We fought; there was always something to get me angry.
But in the Catholic Church we felt ashamed of this kind of problem. Now we know it
is the vice of the Enemy. In the Assembly of God, everyone wants to help. We began
to understand really the cause of our problems only after converting to the Assembly of
God. There, everyone supports us; in the Catholic Church, everyone just comments and
criticizes. In the Assembly of God, everyone prays together, because everyone suffers
together.

Many Catholic women come to a healer or prayer-meeting, receive the prayer
and even the blessing they seek, yet make no further commitment to the church.
For others, these prayers are a first step toward conversion and membership. In general,
women who do not become members are seeking mainly a place to articulate a domestic
problem; those who convert find in pentecostalism the long-term resolution of their
domestic difficulties. Accounting for this contrast requires careful comparative analysis
of life histories, a task I leave for a later essay. Here I wish to focus on the several
ways pentecostalism helps women to achieve long-term resolution of domestic conflict.
First, it defines in unequivocal fashion proper wifely conduct inside and outside the
home, thus eliminating uncertainty about the female role, and sacralizing female sub-
missiveness by appealing to the Pauline epistles. As a presbyter of the Assembly of
God assured me, household conflict was usually due to female pride:

When a woman doesn’t want to submit to the order of the husband, that’s the start of
a fight, right? But if the woman is a true Christian, she is going to want to obey. For the
Apostle Paul said: Women must obey their husbands. Like it or not, she has to obey,
if she wants to be a good Christian, she has to obey her husband.

It may be that in the context of male dominance and the machismo
complex, many women find greater domestic tranquillity by accepting a clearly subordinate role, rather
than flirting with the progressive Catholic Church’s call for greater equality between
the sexes. In the case of Janaina, a pentecostal for the first nine years of her married
life, the rule of submissiveness was the temporary key to domestic peace.

In my childhood and adolescence I always wanted to do what I wanted. And when I got
married, I had to start being obedient to my husband. And that was very difficult for
me. I would want to go to a neighbor’s house, and my husband wouldn’t let me. That
was very hard. For a while the Assembly of God helped me accept all that; because they
teach that that is the will of God, that the man is the head of the household.

Yet there is an important twist to the gender identity offered to women by the
Assembly of God. If on the one hand the church teaches women to submit, on the
other it provides them with new spiritual resources: the authority to speak in the name
of God, the support and collective prayers of other members, and the general strength
derived from the conviction of being one of God’s chosen. Carolina, before converting
to the Assembly, was always fighting with her husband because of his drinking; but
the more she tried to "correct" him, the more he drank.

After becoming a crente, I didn't fight anymore, because I had more strength to speak about things, without having to fight. You feel there is always someone praying for you. . . . [After conversion] I'd talk with him with authority, and he would cry. I would talk, quietly, that it wasn't right for us to waste the small salary we had on things that weren't bread, because that's Biblical . . . . Being a member of the church gave me more authority to talk like this at home.

And Nena, facing the increased disobedience of her children, found in pentecostalism the strength she needed to cope: "After becoming a crente, my children started obeying me more. [Why?] Because instead of correcting them, you know, directly, by giving them a smack, I would kneel and pray. With prayer, Jesus liberates any type of disobedience."

By converting to pentecostalism, women often hope to influence their husbands' behavior, to turn them into more reliable spouses. Carolina was explicit on this point:

I thought, on the day that I decided to be baptized, "This is a decision that I have to take, in order to have more strength to control my house, to see if I can make a little more effort to bring my husband to better things, to help him stop drinking." Because by being baptized, you feel more energy (ánimo) to request prayers, more energy to converse better at home.

Carolina was not, it turned out, successful in drawing her husband to "better things" within the Assembly of God. But she did manage to get him to moderate his drinking. Thus even non-crente husbands are subject to the influence of crente wives. Those women with crente husbands enjoy increased collective safeguards and controls over their husbands' sexual and domestic behavior. Pentecostalism rejects the machismo complex as the work of the Devil and subjects men to discipline or exclusion from the church should they indulge repeatedly in any of the elements of that complex (alcohol, cigarettes, gambling, womanizing, swearing, fighting). A crucial source of this control is the presence of the Holy Spirit within the church: this gives members gifts of prophecy and vision that are in constant vigil over the behavior of crentes. A man will think twice about partaking in a secret affair when he imagines the possibility of a prophet denouncing him during a church service. (This has indeed happened several times.) This sanction may also come in the form of dreams. One man had been flirting with the idea of seeing on the sly an old flame from outside the town. While he was considering it, he was approached by a female prayer specialist who told him she had had a dream, in which she saw him about to do something against God's will. This, of course, settled things: the man dropped the idea of a tryst at once.

Whenever it becomes known that a crente couple is fighting, the pastor calls them into his office. He reminds the woman of her Biblical duty and the husband of his. Because he speaks with the authority not only of the Word and the Holy Spirit, but also as a family man himself, these consultations are often quite effective. The effectiveness of Manuel's prayers should also be partly understood in light of the fact that he has a widespread reputation as an impeccable family man who once suffered domestic turmoil but overcame it through faith.
DOMESTIC CONFLICT AND UMBANDA

The explanation given for feeling free to articulate personal issues in a pentecostal church is remarkably similar to that of Naomi, a leader of the CEB who frequents an *umbanda* center from time to time:

There, in the center, no one gossips, no one criticizes. There everything is secret. ["Secret"?]

You see, son, everyone is there because of their problems. They aren’t going to talk about other people’s problems, because if they did, aren’t they going to have to say why they were there, too?

To the extent that an active Catholic usually visits an *umbanda* center clandestinely, the confidentiality of what one says there is virtually guaranteed.

There is a good deal of variation in the ritual practice of Brazilian mediumship religions. In particular, there is the important contrast between mediums who receive spirits who demand food or drink, and those who receive spirits who do not. One of the things these different cults have in common is that they are all well-suited to the public or private articulation of domestic issues. In one *umbanda* center I visited, one after another of the women present approached the medium and told him their tale of domestic woe, in a voice loud enough for all to hear. As a cult of affliction, this center made possible the public airing of these issues. Further, the idiom this medium used to describe how his spiritual guide (*guia*) helps people with their problems is that it “visits” each afflicted person’s home to “see what’s going on there.” The *guia* visits the homes of people even if they do not report domestic conflict as their affliction.

(I, for example, complained that the Brazilian government had denied me a visa for an additional year; the medium responded by asking me for my local address so that the *guia* could visit me at home.) The idiom of response to all affliction here is thus eminently domestic: all ills begin and end in the home.

Those mediumship practices that are directed toward spirits who eat and drink tend to focus on the private, one-on-one articulation of personal affliction, rather than encourage the public airing of one’s troubles. They also legitimate the expression of resentment and the desire for vengeance (phrased as “justice”). Here the key to the therapy is in part the secrecy guaranteed by the spirit, in part the possibility that justice according to human criteria will be done. Geraldinha identifies herself as a Catholic, but is developing her mediumship in an *umbanda* center. She recounted the story of her participation in *umbanda*:

When [my husband] Dico became unemployed, I never spoke about it in the Catholic Church. You know, in the Church many say: “He has to assume his duties.” They criticize, and I was ashamed. So I began to consult with Fidelio. I thought at first he was just a *rezador*, later I found out he dealt with orixás [spirits]. [Why didn’t you feel ashamed with Fidelio?] Because I was talking with the orixás. I couldn’t speak about these things with human beings. With people, they comment to each other; but with an orixá, the thing stays with it alone.

This last example reminds us that just as in pentecostalism there exists the contrast between frequenters and members, so in *umbanda* there are people who come
simply to consult with the spirits and those who come to develop more complicated
and permanent relationships of exchange and mediumship with them. Such relation-
ships, like pentecostal membership, may be considered from the angle of how they
help forge long-term domestic tranquillity.

The spirit medium whom I visited most often spoke a great deal about marriage
relations. She was quick to interpret spiritual unease as the presence of discord in
the home, a condition that had to be treated by identifying the dissatisfied and afflicting
spirits, and discharging one’s obligations toward them. When I expressed anxiety about
the progress of my research, she immediately insisted that I bring my wife to a ritual
in which I would pay my obligations to Ogum (my guia); for the heart of my problem,
she said, was that my spiritual guide had a different temperament than my wife’s.
She said she always encouraged couples to attend her center together, “because the
guias like marriage.” The image she used to convey the ideal relation between husband
and wife was that “the man is the roof, the woman the house.”

Geraldinha, who has been frequenting the center of Dona Zélia for about ten
years, said she had learned from her mãe de santo that “very often the pain that orixás
give is between husband and wife. It’s a punishment for not fulfilling one’s obliga-
tions.” Geraldinha and Dico attend Dona Zélia’s center together. They are both strongly
committed Catholics; indeed, Dico not only plays the metal cups at the umbanda
center, but also the tambourine at Mass. The couple became involved in the center first through
Dico’s unemployment, then through the sickness and subsequent healing of their
daughter, who became a medium. They have come to find great personal rewards
and solace in continued participation. Geraldinha told me that Dico has always been
a nervous sort, and stubborn: he is unwilling to give ground or take orders, even from
employers. Living with him has been a trial; she often suspected that she had chosen
the wrong mate. Dico has never been able to get ahead financially because, in part,
of his strongheadedness; consequently Geraldinha has had to live in circumstances
less comfortable than those to which she feels she has a right.

The diagnosis and prescription that Dona Zélia gave to Dico have, according to
Geraldinha, improved the marriage. Zélia said that Dico’s nervousness came from his
lack of obedience to his guia (one of his obligations is to avoid alcohol). Now Geraldinha
has an explanation for Dico’s behavior, that not only gives her the authority to point
out to Dico when he loses his cool that he has not paid his obligation to his guia,
but also provides her with a way of excusing herself from responsibility for Dico’s
moods, and of placing it rather on Dico or onto the spirit itself. Dona Zélia has con-
firmed Geraldinha’s suspicions by explicitly attributing her poverty to Dico’s unstable
relation with his guia. Although this diagnosis cannot by itself change things, it gives
Geraldinha the peace of knowing the truth, and defines appropriate modes of response.

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN PENTECOSTALISM AND UMBANDA

For the woman who is either merely requesting a prayer or becoming a member,
either only consulting a medium or becoming a medium herself, both pentecostalism
and mediumship religion locate the source of domestic trouble outside the Self. But
whereas the moral world of pentecostalism is absolute and dichotomized, that of
umbanda is ambiguous and multifaceted. Whereas pentecostalism embraces a vision of human weakness overcome by total submission to God, in mediumship cults humans can influence and exchange with spirits. Manuel, the prayer-healer, concisely defined his religion's difference from umbanda by saying, “God doesn't do anyone any favors”: that is, umbanda sees God as a distributor of privileges, but for pentecostalism He is a lawgiver.

While pentecostalism deals with domestic conflict by interpreting it as part of the general project of the Devil, mediumship cults attribute it to spiritual power at the service of some evil or disobedient human will: the ultimate source of such conflict is in the will of an enticing woman, a selfish or careless husband, an irascible wife. The rituals and language of umbanda are flexible enough that one can always find a culprit other than the self — indeed, umbanda’s power resides precisely in this — but the culprit is always human. Spirits are blameless: their power may be used for good or ill, at the command of those who call upon them. As one medium explained:

The guias are not evil; it is people who are evil and disobey them or tell them to do evil things. It is the guias' mission to help those on earth, even for things that seem bad to us. For even the bad thing has a good side. We cannot know it. But it may help the person to see something, maybe he will be paid back later even worse. In the end, justice is always done.

For pentecostalism evil is always beyond the ken of human power and justice; it can be overcome only by recognizing one's powerlessness and submitting to divine justice. For umbanda, evil always originates in a human Other, and hence may be dealt with by using spiritual means to achieve human justice.

This contrast partly accounts for why a woman sometimes asks for help in more than one place. It is not simply that she is somehow “hedging her bets” or “shopping around,” as the supermarket model would have it. In each place she can articulate her predicament in a slightly different way, emphasizing different aspects of the problem. In Catholicism, the emphasis is on her own guilt and resigning herself to adversity. Pentecostalism, meanwhile, proclaims the power of faith to move mountains. There she may recognize a human perpetrator of evil, but since he is a mere tool of the Devil, she may only feel pity toward him and the desire that God touch his heart to save him from damnation; there she must reject resignation and call upon God to transform the situation. In umbanda she may express anger and resentment, and impose remedies fashioned on human rather than divine justice. Catholicism nurtures perseverance; pentecostalism, “letting go” and umbanda, self-help.

Dona Marta’s husband had abandoned her, she believed, for another woman. She expressed a range of emotions. She felt, as Brazilian gender norms had taught her to feel, that she had somehow not satisfied him. Still, she was angry at him; but did not like feeling this way, for, as she said, “I don’t want to hurt him, I just want him back.” The real object of her fury was the other woman, whom she saw as the villain of the piece.

Marta took her trouble to a pentecostal prayer-healer and an umbanda medium. When I asked her why she had not sought prayer from the Apostolate of Prayer, she said, “They’ll just ask God to give me the strength to suffer this pain and sorrow. But who needs them for that? I can ask for that myself.” The Catholic petition would
be shaped by the ideal of resignation and perseverance, based on the implicit assumption of Marta's own guilt. She expected more than that for involving other people in her private affairs. In contrast, when she went to be prayed over by Manuel, the crente, he said, "Let us pray that Jesus touch his hard heart, soften him, and bring him back to you." This probably helped Marta soften both her feelings of guilt and her anger against her husband, and gave her hope that Jesus was hard at work on her problem. But she had another wrath, one she could not express to Manuel. She did not know who the woman was, but her thirst for retribution was great. It was only in an umbanda center that she could ask a spirit to find the woman and make life a burden for her.

CONCLUSION

CEB Catholicism is organized on the basis of neighborhood rather than affliction, and articulates domestic tensions in terms of the Self; hence talk about such tensions naturally spills into gossip. Mediumship cults and pentecostalism, meanwhile, both articulate domestic conflict in terms of a spiritual or human Other. I have suggested that the peculiar spiritual discourses and affliction-centeredness of both pentecostalism and mediumship cults limit the space for gossip. This is one of the deep reasons why the Catholic Church is shrinking in Brazil today while pentecostalism and umbanda continue to grow.

REFERENCES


