

COMMENT ON *ASYMPTOTE OF THE INEFFABLE*

*José Carlos Gomes dos Anjos*¹

What would happen to Csordas' thesis from the text *Asymptote of the Ineffable* if they were submitted to the Deleuzian experimentations with the concept of altrucide? I will raise the question in detail in order to explain how I understood Csordas and the effect Deleuze's reinterpretation of Michel Tournier's experimentations about a world without the Others had on me. In the second part of my commentary, I experiment my own "ethnographic moments" about the Afro-Brazilian religion, referring to the question of otherness/altrucide, and, finally, in the third part, I draw personal conclusions out of the confrontation.

Csordas' thesis is that the human being is always (and in a way) inherently religious. There is an elementary structure of religiousness and it is related to the otherness present in "us": the otherness is constituent of the relation between the I and the corporeality itself. Thus, the elementary structure of religiousness – the otherness of corporeality – is above all intimate and in a certain way inescapable, constituent of the structure of "being-in-the-world". From this residual ontological core, Csordas opens to the multiple historical forms that religion can assume. Csordas rules out any essentialism that could go beyond the fact that otherness to us is in the first place internal and embodied.

The concept of intimate alterity grounded on the concept of otherness defined as the relation of the Self with the body itself pretty much like the relation with another one is the key point in Csordas' argumentation. I would like to explain in further detail what is in stake here when Csordas recreates a Cartesian logic, even when he seems to be playing in the best style of the embodiment turn, which is so in vogue. I do not have here the space for

¹ Professor at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul. Contact: jcdosanjos@yahoo.com.br

this kind of demonstration in a more precise way – I can only suggest that Csordas can be read as someone who convinces us that it is possible to be both Cartesian and materialist and that this is a little bit more interesting than the idealist original version.

Following Zaner – situating the self-presence and the presence to the other as if they were two different moments – is the way adopted by Csordas to limit the radicalism around the whole question. On the other hand, it would be possible to think that each and every self-presence is in itself and always the presentation of the other in the person itself, and not only a “revelation to other Selves internally perceived”. This would be a bit more radical, but it would not solve the question that both the Self and the Other are historically constituted partitions and not elementary structures of the existence.

It is evident that there is a slip point out of the Cartesianism in this corporeal turn from one Self that is always another embodied to itself. However, this line of discussion does not seem to be central in Csordas’ text. *Asymptote of the Ineffable* insists on defining the Self and “its” corporeality like two entities, when it suggests, for instance, that the “spontaneous *lift* of customary bodily performances defines our bodies as simultaneously belonging to us and estranged from us” (Csordas, 2004, p. 169-170).

The relationship conceived as of “belonging” (of the body to the subject) impoverishes the possibility of a more radical relationship in which flows of corporeality are always multiplicities of the Self that many times extend to and dissolve in the flesh of the world in such a way that it is not possible to distinguish pertinently the religious body and the rest. However, this would be only another possibility to think the relationship between the Selves and the world. Obviously, these issues are variants which would only be of any ethnographic interest provided they could be experienced by some people and poorly translated by some anthropologist who is inclined to get moved by the basic problems of others.

The argument here is that the searching for an original core for religion, an ingenious formula to settle the major issues in controllable ethnographic contexts, is harmless. *Asymptote of the Ineffable* seeks a primordial core of

historically variable responses instead of opening up to the possibility that this broad variance does not support any primordial core. There may be variation without any principle of variation when “it only happens” infinitely. But perhaps this line of flight is not interesting to maintain the Other structure, which is imposed as the Western thinking over other people studied, ineffable Others for a phallogocentric Self.

The concrete result of the search for the primordial religious structure is a kind of reductionism in which “the vivid presence of Jesus [or Mary] in imaginal performance is a culturally specific way to complete the second foundational moment, providing an ideal Other to correspond to the [moment of] self-presence”. We need to admit that this return to the origins only impoverishes what is the case: the charismatics are affirming the vivid presence of Jesus and Mary and not of an ideal Other that “corresponds” to the self-presence”. The additional part of the statement does not add to the first “vivid presence of Jesus”. The paradox here is that the ideal Other is invoked to suppress (again) the life of Jesus. In arithmetical terms, instead of two or three lives, we now have only one, the religious subject reduced to its own body as an ineffable self-presence. Jesus is lost and, depending on the angle view, the self or the body becomes ineffable.

The problem about the search for the experiential primordially is the risk of retaining the investigation from the power of thought in the judgement. After all, why should the origin of religion, the sacred, the holy be, alternatively, in the “intimate alterity of power as a bodily secretion” or in the “wholly other of abstract majesty”? For the African-Brazilian religiosity sometimes a bodily secretion is what there is on offer as power for thought; but it would not be the same problem when, for the same religious subject, other interesting, cosmic, tiny things happen to be the ones which matter; and sometimes it may be that, to the charismatic, it is really about majesties who are not necessarily abstract. In the end, what is the use of this search for a religious primordially if each and every configuration can show me a series of problems and not a single problem with many solutions?

I think that asking about the “fundamental structure of the existence” would be of little use to understand some form of religiosity. Perhaps it is important to think about “the fundamental structure of the existence”. However, the problem here is, as it is with every variant of Cartesianism, that all the answers are within the question itself.

In addition, here we could invite Deleuze (1974, p. 311-330) to summon up another conditions of happiness to the religion. What if the fundamental structure of the existence did not have either the Other (intimate or not?) neither the Self? Based on Tournier’s work, Deleuze rebuilds a modeling thought: if Robinson Crusoe ended up in the desert island he would not re-create the ideal conditions originated from the capitalism; we would be in a slow-drop process on the surface of a world without others that would dissolve both the self and the alterity. On the surface of the island:

The goat will die: “The great goat is dead.” Then Friday announces his mysterious project: the dead goat will fly and sing – it will be a flying and musical goat. [...] Friday makes use of the head and the gut and fashions from them an instrument; he places it in a dead tree in order to produce an instantaneous symphony whose sole performer must be the wind. This is how the din of the earth is in turn transported to the heavens and becomes an organized, celestial sound – pansonority – a “music that was truly of the elements”. (Deleuze, 1974, p. 311).

If these Deleuze’s pages on Tournier evoke some form of the elemental nature, this has nothing of an intimacy. The elemental is cosmic. The Self, the Other and its intimacies are part of the same additional structure, the “Others” structure. And it is this structure that the desert island destroys. There is life beyond the “Others” structure and perhaps lives in greater power. But what if living religiously means, sometimes, living without others? And what if some religions are on the verge of trying multiple possibilities of inhabiting worlds without others? What would happen to the alterity notion of corporeality?

In such cases, more than Deleuze, I would follow African-Brazilian religious. What is at stake here is not replacing Csordas for Deleuze, which would be a substantial gain, but opening ethnographic possibilities from the trail to an elementary question. In an African-Brazilian gathering in Rio Grande do Sul I could not say that a deity from that religion in the world is an ideal Other corresponding to the moment of self-presence; what is not on the scene in the phenomena that we have sociologically labeled as trance is a Self that relates with an Other. An orisha, a divine power of the African-Brazilian religion, is a bodily power and its manifestation through the spirit possession (or incorporation) is mostly the power of a double without the Other inside. The incorporation is an event that erects a double in a world without others. The orisha emanates from the body, it takes control of your body (dos Anjos, 2006).

Of course, this is just the beginning of a debate. Anyway, it seems more fruitful to me starting from the idea that there is a multitude of highly sophisticated frames of problems than trying to derive it from a primordiality, at least when it comes to the Afro-Brazilian religion. To account for the quirks, I would say that there might be some thought devices, in the Afro-Brazilian religion, which can be fruitfully related to problems of, let's say, "otherness". But these problematizations would be added as one point only in a scatter of equally important issues. Yes, otherness would be a relevant problem when an egum, the spirit of a dead man, "only" possesses the person and partially "occupies" his/her body. The religious Afro-Brazilian person would still be aware with an active power in his/her body that is an Other. The whole issue here is the huge differences between an egum and an orisha. If another structure is at stake in a manifestation of an egum, it may have already ceased to be an evocable problem with some relevance as it is the manifestation of an orisha.

As a Cape-Verdean sociologist, Csordas' final theses about the twin towers interest me as a metaphor. They draw my attention to the need of also annihilating on me the effects of the twin towers derived from the idealistic Cartesianism that lingers and from the new embodied Cartesianism

that insists. But I'm not sure whether the otherness structure governing my labor activity as a Eurocentric sociologist has not been kept intact by the simple fact of continuing to discuss about primordialities/elementarities.

Translated by Isaías da C. Rodrigues, Laura C. Schereschewsky, Maiara P. da Costa and Rafael A. S. dos Santos under the supervision and translation revision of Professor Elizamari Becker (UFRGS).

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