Assessing Ritual Experience in Contemporary Spiritualities

The Practice of 'Sharing' in a New Age Variant of Umbanda

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ABSTRACT: Seeking to attain balance and well-being through what practitioners call 'spiritual development', the ritual practice in Paris of Umbanda—an Afro-Brazilian religion—is emblematic of the orientation that characterizes contemporary spirituality. In this context, regular public mediumistic rituals are aimed at transforming participants into beings open to the teachings of 'spiritual entities', which they embody for their own and others' benefit. In this process, specialists and participants are explicitly and systematically invited to 'take stock' or 'share', that is, to revisit the rituals they perform. This article argues that 'sharing', which may also be found in other forms of contemporary spirituality, is not only an exegetical exercise that participants must regularly submit to in order to assess how these rituals affect them. It may also be understood as a ritual device that the efficacy and reproduction of such practices depend upon.

In contemporary Pagan and New Age rituals aimed at self-enhancement and personal development, verbal exchanges generally referred to by the emic term 'sharing' often follow the ritual endeavors. The experts who conduct these rituals (whether individual healing rituals or communal celebrations) usually invite their followers to 'share' by expressing their thoughts and feelings and reflecting on their experience in a given ceremony. These verbal interactions between participants in the rituals are apparently intended to assess what happened during a given ritual and how the people involved in it perceived its effects, which they often describe as being transformative. However regular it may be in many forms of contemporary spiritual practices (e.g., Fedele 2014; Houseman et al. 2016; Lindquist 1997; Luhrmann 1989; Sutcliffe 2003), this reflexive practice is not necessarily formalized or explicitly presented as a ritual sequence in itself. While it may imply prescribed elements—such as sitting in a circle and/or passing around an object, for example, a 'talking stick' inspired by North American indigenous traditions—in some cases it presents itself as a more or less spontaneous discussion about ritual experience. Its indeterminate yet recurrent nature nonetheless suggests that in this context it may be as important to speak about

one's ritual experiences as it is to conduct them. As assessments of ritual action, such utterances clearly imply a reflexive stance or a form of 'derived reflexivity' (Rozenberg 2011)—that is, a subsequent appraisal of ritual action triggered by the ritual itself. However, it is not self-evident how they relate to ritual action, and this relation has not been fully explored. Is 'sharing' to be understood as exterior to the ritual, as an integral part of the ritual, or as a ritual itself? What are the formal characteristics and the mechanisms at work during these specific episodes?

In this article, I aim to address this kind of discursive practice on the basis of ethnographical observations carried out mainly in the Temple Guaracy of Paris, an Umbanda shrine house with transnational dimensions in which New Age tenets and Afro-Brazilian mediumistic practices are creatively combined.[1] By analyzing the interactional patterns that 'sharing' implies in this case, I wish to shed a better light on this speech event and to demonstrate that it appears, in fact, as an institutionalized form of evaluation of ritual performance, or as a form of ritual reflexivity, that is as crucial to the efficacy of ceremonial endeavors as the ritual action itself. In an attempt to account for the form and role of 'sharing' and reflexive attitudes in contemporary rituals aimed at self-enhancement, I will focus on the verbal interactions that follow mediumistic consultations in the Temple Guaracy.

Drawing on my fieldwork and the concept of 'ritual refraction' coined by Houseman (2007, 2010), based on his analysis of forms of ritualization in contemporary spiritual practices, I will argue that in this context reflexivity is concomitant with the co-construction of ritual experience by means of a complex interplay of mutually exclusive perspectives. These perspectives include one's own as well as those of the non-human agencies summoned (spiritual entities, gods and goddesses, Amerindian shamans, Druids, 'energies', the 'inner child', etc.) and of fellow participants. In doing so, I adopt a formalist and structuralist-inspired perspective that, in spite of its possible limitations, will allow shedding light on the morphological characteristics of the practice of 'sharing' and the reflexive attitude it involves. At the same time, I articulate it with a more 'dynamic' approach by also raising the issue of the role of speech and language in this case.

Indeed, some specialists of contemporary spiritual practices aimed at self-enhancement highlight a more or less constant vocabulary used by practitioners that testifies to their self-reflexivity (see Chen 2014), while others posit a *lingua franca* of 'self religiosity' (Heelas 1993) or point to the pervasiveness of exegesis in this religious universe (Hanegraaff 1998). Little is known, however, about the use of language in practice. In this respect, the discursive practice of 'sharing', which denotes the process of acquiring a pre-eminently reflexive attitude in ritual and its perception in terms of personal transformation, seems crucial. While the example discussed here would not alone suffice to determine whether 'sharing' pertains to ritual proper in contemporary spiritual practices or if it assumes a similar form in all of them, I will thus attempt to show, first, that it may be considered as something more than an epiphenomenon of ritual with formal characteristics and an efficacy of its own and, second, that it is related to the reflexive stance participants adopt as a result of the rituals they undertake in the Temple (and perhaps elsewhere as well).

Umbanda, New Age, and Reflexivity

The Temple Guaracy of Paris is a branch of an international Umbanda shrine house located in São Paulo and other Brazilian cities that also has offshoots in Portugal, Switzerland, Belgium, the United States, and Canada. The Temple's expansion is closely related to its leader's project of collecting and systematizing his spiritual entities' teachings. This is obviously reminiscent

of Umbanda's prominent figures' efforts to codify their religious tenets in order to make them more respectable, notably by putting them into writing (see Brown 1985). However, this codification does not so much aspire to legitimize or reform Umbanda; rather, it is a creative reinterpretation of Afro-Brazilian religions in general and their remodeling into a new synthesis that presents many of the characteristics of Neo-Pagan and New Age thinking—hence my decision to designate it as a 'New Age version' of Umbanda (Teisenhoffer 2013).[2]

Founded over 20 years ago by a French psychotherapist, the Paris Temple attracts persons who turn away from institutionalized religions and engage in different practices. People who might sympathize with the Temple Guaracy's tenets and rituals, in any of its settings, are often not familiar with Umbanda or the Afro-Brazilian religious universe in general. They may instead be familiar with different techniques of self-betterment—for example, reiki, meditation, yoga, westernized ayahuasca rituals, and transpersonal psychotherapy—which they take up as a means of pursuing what they call 'spiritual development'. The Temple Guaracy's members consist of about thirty well-educated French persons between 20 and 60 years old who had generally had a Catholic upbringing,[3] as well as sympathizers, be they Brazilian, French, or North American. They define themselves as 'seekers' (*buscadores*/*chercheurs spirituels*)—a common auto-denomination among people engaged in a process of self-discovery made up by other, more or less exotic practices appropriated in accordance with Western values in typically New Age ways (see, e.g., Heelas 1996; Sutcliffe 2003). Hence, by engaging in the practice of Umbanda in the Temple Guaracy, they do not so much become affiliated with an Afro-Brazilian tradition per se, but rather pursue what they call their 'spiritual quest'. As a result, some of them also develop their own methods of self-enhancement based on their experience in the Temple Guaracy and other ritual techniques they acquire in the course of their 'spiritual development'.[4]

Accordingly, the conception of Umbanda mediumship advocated in this shrine house differs considerably from that documented in the sociological and anthropological literature on Afro-Brazilian religions and more widespread forms of this practice. The most obvious differences between the two reside in what they consider to be the etiology of misfortune and the representation of the spiritual entities summoned in the course of rituals. If in more common versions of Umbanda affliction generally supposes the intervention of malevolent humans or spirits (Birman 1980; Maggie Velho 2001; Negrão 1996), in the Temple Guaracy it is explicitly attributed to an individual's lack of interior balance and negative emotions such as fear, anger, or despair provoked by an inadequacy between the individual and his or her surroundings. As in other Umbanda shrine houses, however, in the Temple Guaracy, 'spiritual entities' (*entités spirituelles*) manifest as Amerindians and old African slaves, among others,[5] which yield their wisdom in the course of individual consultations and collectively delivered messages. Historically, the spiritual entities that form the pantheon of Umbanda represent marginal social categories, challenge established social roles, and are associated with the idea of danger (Brumana and Martinez 1991; Maggie Velho 2001): in the most extended variants of Umbanda recorded in expert literature, they are held to be the spirits of deceased persons who need to 'evolve spiritually'. It is for this reason that they 'work' with humans, that is, they orient and help their clients to solve problems in everyday life as a means of redeeming the flaws that may hinder their evolution toward higher spiritual realms (Ortiz 1979). In this context, the relationship that binds spirits and humans is one that implies reciprocity: humans and entities mutually serve each other (Birman 1980).

However, the spiritual entities one can meet in the Temple Guaracy can hardly be considered as needing any services from humans. On the contrary, they are selfless emissaries of pure spirituality. Even though they 'manifest' themselves as easily recognizable spiritual entities of Umbanda, it is not rare that the Temple's mediums, French and Brazilian, have visions about their entities as being Tibetan monks or North American shamans or other figures praised above all for their

heightened spiritual skills in comparison to Western urban dwellers.[6] In this context, most spiritual entities tend to be anonymous and stripped of the historical and cultural markers that would allow characterizing them as being 'typically Brazilian'. In this case, spiritual entities and mediums rather act as guides or facilitators on the path of personal development, revealing the participants' latent capacities and qualities that may help them overcome general negative dispositions. It is precisely this orientation, which deeply connects this practice to the universe of the New Age, that makes the Temple's tenets and rituals appealing to individuals outside of Brazil as well as to Brazilians who do not feel particularly attracted to more 'classical' forms of Afro-Brazilian religions.

In the Paris group, as in the Temple's other settings, including in Brazil,[7] mediums hold that spiritual entities reveal what they refer to as one's 'spiritual dimension' (*dimension spirituelle*), often referred to as 'interior light' (*lumière intérieure*). This is a part of oneself deemed wiser, healthier, and more balanced than what may be called, in opposition to the 'spiritual dimension' or a 'spiritual self', the 'ordinary self', which is necessarily limited by social expectations. This conception of the self, a core idea in New Age thinking, posits that individuals have a 'real identity', an 'inner' or 'higher self' endowed with "increased insight, spirituality, love, balance and health" (Hanegraaff 1998: 211). As in other contemporary spiritual practices, the Temple's mediums and sympathizers thus seek to awaken individuals' 'spiritual consciousness', to bring out what Galina Lindquist (2005: 166) termed the "New Age self," a "true core beneath the masks of social roles." With the lack of proper care (i.e., any given spiritual practice, such as the one made available in the Temple Guaracy), this 'inner self' is considered prone to external pressures, entailing anxiety, illness, crisis, and disharmony in everyday life. The spiritual entities summoned in the course of the Temple's rituals strive precisely to reveal the participants' 'inner light' or 'spiritual dimension', thereby enhancing the way they perceive themselves and others and shielding them from negative dispositions.

Mediumistic practice engages participants in what is called 'spiritual work', that is, ritual procedures that may prompt them to discover their own and others' 'inner light', spiritual propensity, and spiritual guides. This process is supervised by the spiritual entities that senior mediums 'incorporate' or embody and that deliver messages and prescribe propitiatory rituals in order to encourage laypersons to discover their own spiritual guides and to experiment with their mediumistic abilities. In practice, all participants in the ritual are thus treated as potential mediums. In this context, becoming and acting as an individual endowed with spiritual qualities therefore involves becoming a medium and, above all, acquiring the skill of recognizing other participants' spiritual qualities through the mediation of their spiritual entities. While this implies a prominently reflexive stance in the unwinding of ritual action itself, it also depends largely on participants' ability to assess and comment on the perceptions they have of themselves and of others.

To understand the shift in perception and self-understanding that such New Age practices afford their participants, a fruitful line of analysis is the mechanism of 'ritual refraction', which Houseman (2007, 2010) identifies as a distinctive feature of these new forms of ritualization, which also characterize Neo-Paganism. According to this model, these forms can be characterized as self-consciously innovative and creative as well as designed to be reflexive. New Age and Neo-Pagan ritual endeavors can be qualified as "identity-refracting" rituals (Houseman 2011: 265) inasmuch as their efficacy relies on the simultaneous experience of mutually exclusive intentional and affective states. By ritually invoking spiritually evolved Others (in the case of the Temple, Buddhist monks, Amerindian shamans, Brazilian farmers, African healers, innocent children, etc.), participants in such ceremonies are led to identify figures to which they confer a particular sensibility and a power of beneficence and, at the same time, to recognize their own private dispositions in light of such an encounter. Refracted between self and Other(s), participants in the ritual are caught up in an emotional reverberation between their personal perceptions and those that they assign to the Other(s) whom they seek to emulate. In turn, this dynamic triggers an

"extraordinary, multiple, and enhanced identity" (Houseman 2010: 65). In the production of this sense of self, two complementary processes act together. On the one hand, Houseman identifies a 'vertical refraction', an emotional reverberation between the participants' personal perceptions and those they assign to the non-humans they summon. On the other hand, at the same time they are caught up in a 'horizontal refraction', remaining attentive to their co-participants who are also refracted between different identities (ibid.). If 'vertical refraction' is verifiable in the internal dynamics of a given ceremony, 'horizontal refraction' seems more elusive in the unwinding of ritual action, at least in the case of the Temple Guaracy. Considering ritual refraction from the point of view of the reflexive attitudes it produces, its 'horizontal' aspect seems essential. Indeed, in the case at hand, the observation of the ways that 'sharing' relates to the ritual it is intended to comment on suggests that this is the main locus of this dynamic. It seems that in the mediumistic practice of the Temple Guaracy, it is in the course of 'sharing' that the experience of transformation, which its practitioners purport to experience, becomes effective.

Meeting a Spiritual Entity

The Temple's ritual activities revolve around the summoning of participants' spiritual entities to the sound of drumming and chanting. Exemplary mediumistic interactions occur typically in the frame of weekly public ceremonies called *gira*. These are aimed at consultations between senior mediums' spiritual entities and laypersons who ask for guidance and comfort, as well as at the mediumistic training of those who join the Temple. Although there is no pre-established order for the operations that make up an entity's 'spiritual work', the consultation usually involves the following recurring elements: a 'message', that is, a teaching the entity may wish to pass on to the client; dancing and/or kinetic manipulations; and the prescription of a specific ritual for the client. Individual consultations mobilize four agents: a senior medium that 'incorporates' his or her entity; the entity itself; an assistant (*cambono*) who is also a medium, although at a lower hierarchical level; and a layperson. The practice of 'incorporation', that is, the embodiment of a spiritual entity, implies that it is not the senior medium who leads the consultation but the spiritual entity. The representation of these non-human beings and the relationship that participants establish with them in this framework reflect the dynamics of 'vertical refraction' in New Age and Neo-Pagan rituals.

Displaying most often a loving and supporting attitude, spiritual entities deliver more or less lengthy enigmatic and metaphorical messages that compare their clients to, and even identify them with, natural elements and spiritual entities. They may, for example, say to their clients: "you are the daughter/son of Fire/Earth/Water/Air"; "you have a lot of power in your hands"; "you are like a rock, and inside this rock there is a beautiful crystal"; "the look in your eyes is enough for your *cabocla* [female Amerindian spirit] to work"; "you have the heart of a *cabocla*." In the course of the consultation, the entities thus act as if they are endowed with a special vision that allows them to see and sense the heart of heart of persons, their 'vibrations', 'energies', or 'spiritual dimension'.[8] The entities' messages can be proffered to newcomers as well as to regular visitors and experienced mediums. On occasion, they may also question their clients' patterns of thinking when they notice a certain tension, establishing that "the head is not balanced with the heart" and enjoining their clients to "think with [their] heart." The advice of spiritual entities and the rituals they prescribe are therefore intended to rectify this imbalance, enabling their clients to submit to spiritual experiences and to embrace the entities' point of view.

In general, the entities' utterances, which may be more or less elaborate and/or elliptical, describe the clients as being better than how they perceive themselves through the prism of their

ordinary awareness. In turn, the entities' messages and actions are all intended to encourage their clients to comply with this special vision and to explore the qualities that the entities see in them. Eventually, clients are led to discover that they, too, have their own spiritual entities that they can bring forth through the practice of 'incorporation', that is, through their embodiment. Indeed, entities' messages and ritual actions suggest convolutedly yet unfailingly that their clients are not only potential mediums but also spiritual entities in their essence. Accordingly, to embody their own spiritual entities is the most emblematic way that participants can relate to them and thereby demonstrate their spiritual propensity. To meet a senior medium's spiritual entity implies that one will eventually meet one's own spiritual guide(s). Thus, any interaction between participants in the ritual supposes an explicit or implicit presence of their spiritual guides and essence. This recursive mirroring relational pattern is not, however, evident from the perspective of individual participants during their immediate experience of a given consultation.

Experiencing 'Spiritual Work'

Although the messages and actions that compose the entities' 'spiritual work' reveal a series of recurring and straightforward elements, participants cannot immediately grasp the experience of the consultation. Spiritual entities tend to phrase their advice in an elliptic manner. Also, they often speak Portuguese and/or use terms of African origin to refer to ritual ingredients and the deities (or *orixás*) that compose the pantheon of different varieties of Afro-Brazilian religions. Their vocabulary is thus necessarily enigmatic for the layperson unfamiliar with the Temple's language. Yet even when the participants become more acquainted with the group's terminology, they may still find the entities' messages and gestures puzzling. Technical terms that the entities may use, such as 'polarity', 'energy', and 'light', for example, are related to the Temple's cosmology, which nourishes the entities' teachings and which is believed to provide the explanation for all natural, social, biological, and psychological phenomena. However, cosmological narrations and ritual speech do not convey propositional knowledge here, as they do in many contexts (Bloch 1974; Boyer 1990). The perception of the Temple's tenets and hence of the entities' 'spiritual work' can therefore be only approximate and partial.

Experienced mediums often say that the entities' words and actions are not aimed at one's intellect (*le mental*), but at a 'subtle dimension'. This comment on the entities' 'spiritual work' refers to the fact that elements may get lost in translation from the entities' purely spiritual language to a natural one; yet somewhere in the client, there is a place where it will necessarily make sense. In other words, 'spiritual work' supposes a complex listener whose perception is not limited to his or her ordinary, 'logical' consciousness, but which consists of a spiritual consciousness as well. It is thus immediately posited that participants—both laypersons and mediums—have an alternate, non-ordinary self that the consultation is intended to bring forth, although the process of summoning this non-ordinary self necessarily raises doubt, incertitude, and ambiguity. Indeed, the Temple's leadership strongly recommends that practitioners take an interest in cosmological and ritualistic matters and do their best to become well-versed mediums. At the same time, despite participants' attempts to evolve into knowledgeable mediums, it is inevitable that they will confront elements of mediumistic practice that they are unable to explain.

The imperative opacity characteristic of the Temple's spiritual entities is perhaps most conspicuous in the kinetic manipulations they impose on their clients. Entities often enjoin them to 'let go' (*lâcher prise*) and dance freely to the music. During this exercise, the entity may encourage them by pounding on the floor or by shrieking in more or less intense and/or loud fashion. Clients dance until the entity holds their clothing, their wrists, or their temples—all gestures

indicating that they must stand still. In senior mediums' words, the purpose of this dance is either 'to connect to' (*se connecter*) or 'to approach' one's entity (*approximation*).

This kinetic interaction occurs systematically in such a way that the client is unable to foresee what will happen next and to know what the entity expects. The person is deprived of ordinary sensorial references, such as sight, as well as the body's steady vertical position. One must lean entirely on the kinetic signs the entity conveys. This situation, which may be described as "distracted tactility" (Taussig 1993: 58), unsettles the client's senses and usual markers. The inexperience or lack of bearings that would enable the participant to make sense and to take control of the situation implies that he or she must thus rely on fellow participants' feedback in order to ascertain the presence of the entities they embody in the course of the ceremony. Yet even as they more or less progressively get used to 'letting go', participants rely on 'sharing' their experience of 'incorporation'. They may therefore recount experiences such as "my arm moved on its own" or "I saw a dense forest, I think that's where my entity dwells." Even experienced mediums may sometimes ask: "Is it me or is it my entity [that said or did such and such a thing]?" These comments indicate that in the course of 'spiritual work', and especially of 'incorporation', participants simultaneously perceive the mutually exclusive perspectives of the client/medium and of the spiritual entities. In turn, this affects the way in which participants relate to each other as a result of their practice.

The same holds true for the individual propitiatory rituals that the entities prescribe to their clients, even if, unlike their messages, gestures, and kinetic commands, they are stated very clearly. Entities give precise instructions concerning the elements to be used, which usually include one or more candles, a glass of water, and a 'spiritual bath' composed of leaves and/or flower petals, among other ingredients, all intended to strengthen their clients' relationship to their own spiritual entities. The medium's assistant notes these carefully and passes them on to the client after the ceremony is over. It is often the entity's prescription that serves as a starting point for the discussion that follows the consultation. This debriefing usually directs the explanation and the interpretation of the spiritual entities' actions and/or utterances toward the client's 'spiritual development'. Whether they concern a particular message, a bodily sensation, a vision or a thought inspired by the entities' gestures and commands, or the details of the ritual that has been prescribed, these elements are often difficult to articulate, both for mediums and for clients. Yet participants are compelled to try to make sense of the entities' ritual actions and utterances.

Prescribed Reflexivity

The importance of debriefing the entities' messages and acts in the Temple is distinguishable in the announcement the senior medium in charge of conducting the weekly public ceremony makes at the end of the ritual. This medium reminds the attendees to 'take stock' (*faire le point*) of the consultation, especially of the ritual prescriptions they may have received. Although everyone is invited to do so, this practice does not have a specific designation and does not follow a precise procedure as does the consultation. Most often, the debriefing happens after the ceremony's ritual closing in the presence of three parties—the client, the assistant, and the senior medium. Drawing more or less heavily on the Temple's vernacular expressions, this interaction actually reiterates the consultation in apparently non-ritual terms, producing a mirror image thereof. Indeed, together these individuals share their impressions and any significant details they may remember. Thus, however personal and intimate the experience of the interaction with spiritual entities is intended to be, it is hardly a private matter.

It is worth noting that, by the same token, participants may comment upon any other ritual they take part in during their attendance at the Temple. If in the latter cases narratives on ritual experience ensue in a considerably more spontaneous and informal fashion than after the weekly public ceremony, such appraisals are just as regular. Most participants willingly 'share' their impressions, thoughts, and questionings with their peers after the collective and individual rituals they take part in. For example, a medium may say to another at the end of a ritual: "Your *caboclo* [male Amerindian entity] must have the same vibration as that of [so-and-so]. All throughout the ritual, I thought he was by my side and not yours." Some may recount their own entities' dispositions: "I felt that my *exu* [a particular category of entities invoked in the frame of private ceremonies] needed company." However that may be, such instances of 'sharing' are inherent in the Temple's ceremonial endeavors and, in this case, help to explain the shift in self-perception they provide and the mechanisms of ritual refraction they rest upon. These are most conspicuous in the debriefings that follow weekly public ceremonies.

While, in principle, the debriefing is intended to clarify the details of the propitiatory ritual that the entity may have prescribed and to make sure that the consultant understands exactly how to perform it, it systematically entails discussions concerning the whole of the consultation, personal impressions and experiences, the particularities of the entities and/or deities mentioned, and the Temple's cosmology and tenets. It therefore refers to the transmission and learning of ritual procedures and cosmological knowledge, the power relationships and issues of authority that they imply, and the reproduction of the group through discipleship. However, it is not so much because they may eventually deepen and widen participants' knowledge about 'spiritual work' that these interactions are meaningful. It would be reductive to consider that the debriefing is solely aimed at understanding and explaining spiritual entities' utterances and gestures and that participants necessarily succeed in doing so. This would imply that a number of consultations are doomed to failure, as, in fact, undecipherable elements often remain.

Two contrasting examples show how the debriefing and the 'sharing' that ensues relate to the consultation, that is, to the ritual action proper. The first illustrates a debriefing from the perspective of the consultant. In this case, the consultant produced a narrative that testified to the effectiveness of the 'spiritual work' she had submitted to. The second presents a debriefing from the perspective of the mediums who try to interpret the consultation. In this instance, although the spiritual entity's message was quite elliptical and may seem incomplete, it cannot be considered ineffective. As we will see, what is at play in discussing ritual experience is not merely the attempt to understand the consultation, but also, more importantly, the reiteration of the spiritual experience it afforded—that is, being an individual endowed with a 'spiritual dimension' and a particular sensibility. In that regard, the relational patterns that are displayed by 'sharing' in the Temple are most enlightening. While participants do not necessarily speak more discernibly than spiritual entities do when assessing what occurred during 'spiritual work', their words gain performative power by virtue of horizontal refraction.

In the first example, a regular client who later became a medium received a prescription involving candles and stones from the entity she consulted. With regard to the actual information conveyed, the instructions were quite precise, although their aim was not made explicit. Two candles of different colors were to be lit at the beginning and at the end of the ritual, which consisted in collecting two different stones—one ridged, one curved—in a natural place and asking them what they have to 'teach'. The link between the deities invoked with the candles, the ritual ingredients and procedures, and the client remained thus undefined. When sharing her experience of this ritual, the client had no qualms about admitting that she doubted that asking the stones to 'teach' her would help her in any way. She decided, however, to follow the entity's directions and was astonished to discover that the ritual succeeded, as she expressed at that particular moment:

> I [lit] the candle, I took the stone—it was as if it was moving—and words came to me. It was a teaching about [the element] water. Vaguely, it was related to each stone. Both were made of the same material, but they were molded by events in completely different ways. The one with the edges had been molded brutally from the outside; its form was defined by sudden and brutal blows. The other one was curved and had been slowly molded by water, which gave it a harmonious form. So water is fluid, but it's as strong and powerful as the material stones are made of because it can change their form. It's fluid power. Water, emotion, gentleness … Over time … with patience, time, and gentleness we can have an effect on things, on matter. Nothing is stronger than water.

The elements in this account establish a metaphorical relationship between the client and the stones. It converges to a representation according to which she is not only someone who understood a 'teaching about water', but someone who is capable of phrasing it and putting the 'power' of this element in the service of her transformation in 'gentleness' or of her 'gentle' transformation (from a ridged stone into a curved one). The discrete elements that compose 'spiritual work' in this instance—the ritual instructions the entity gave, the propitiatory ritual performed, the thoughts and feelings of the consultant concerning it, expressed in a reflexive way during this 'sharing'—seem scattered with regard to the client's narrative of her experience. It is by virtue of her assessment that they gain consistency.

The 'teaching about water' that comes out of this effort of interpreting the ritual that the client undertook is not an objective piece of knowledge that can be appropriated by anyone and passed on independently of the ritual that inspired it. Indeed, in itself, this observation about the physical power of water is obviously trivial. What makes it meaningful is the reflexive stance the whole of the ritual imposes on this participant. It is precisely the act of recounting it that allows her to see herself as someone open to an unusual personal experience—that of 'learning from stones'—and to spiritual entities' teachings. In sum, in her 'sharing' of her experience of this ritual, this medium-to-be formulated what the entity she had consulted may have intended to convey by means of the prescription of an individual ritual whose purpose and outcome were unforeseeable for all of the parties involved. In this case, by virtue of 'sharing', this participant speaks not just for an entity but as if she herself were a spiritual entity. As a result, her interlocutors—the medium and his assistant—or any other fellow participants can appreciate her as someone affected by a spiritual entity and thus as a person committed to 'spiritual development'. In turn, by recognizing her as such, participants enhance their own spiritual nature.

The second example, which relates my own ethnographic experience as a client, illustrates that sometimes a 'message' can prove to be downright unintelligible and that there may be no clear explanation for or shared understanding of the reasons behind the entity's actions or the ritual it prescribed. In this instance, the elements to be accounted for were considerably more meager than in the previous case, yet the medium I consulted and his assistant attempted to provide an explanation. The only detail we were all sure about was that the entity had spoken about the importance of the 'Earth element' in my life and had given me its blessing. Yet this lack of information did not invalidate the consultation or the debriefing in any way. It is significant that the medium and his assistant were in no way embarrassed or frustrated by the fact that we were unable to determine the entity's message and purpose. As is so often the case, tentative clarifications were sought in the Temple's intricate cosmology, on the one hand, and in my putative spiritual needs or essence, on the other. The medium and his assistant presumed that the entity might have wanted to encourage me to reinforce my relationship with that particular element, which, according to the Temple's cosmology, symbolizes work in everyday life and "all that sustains us and keeps us alive," they explained. In what followed, the senior medium and his assistant filled

out the gaps of the entity's message with their cosmological knowledge and personal experience in order to encourage me to comply with the entity's opaque suggestions. Although the entity had not prescribed any propitiatory ritual, they advised me to 'work' with earth, recommending that I could repot my plants, if I had any, or plant new ones with a particular 'intention' and that contact with earth may be very beneficial at times when we have projects to carry out.

While in this example the consultation and the debriefing that followed seem incomplete, the way that the senior medium and his assistant assessed it reveals roughly the same pattern as the first one. In both cases the conversation revolved around how participants perceive what the entity may have wanted to convey and may have seen in the client. In the same spirit of the first example, 'working with earth' was likely to 'teach' me something about my relationship to this particular element and induce me to adopt a new perspective regarding the challenges I might have been facing—that of an individual endowed with 'spiritual consciousness'. By the same token, in assessing the 'spiritual work' that the entity performed, however enigmatic it was, the mediums acted as individuals capable of appreciating the teachings and directions of a spiritual entity, whereby they too can perceive others' 'spiritual dimension'.

Even more salient in the second example is that 'sharing' one's experience in the frame of such an interaction, along with the effort of elucidating the consultation's details, is not only aimed at the consultant's instruction, but also affects the medium and his assistant. Whether they come to a possible conclusion concerning the entity's actions and utterances or not, the practice of speculating on 'spiritual work' and how it may affect them and/or others is, in this case, itself indexical of the 'spiritual consciousness' they strive to cultivate. By assessing rituals, commenting on their expected effects, and 'sharing' the thoughts and feelings they inspire, participants testify to their spiritual, non-ordinary self-understanding, that is, to the fact that they are willing to submit to spiritual entities' commands and to adopt their perspective. Such a practice therefore makes the presence of the entities implicit beyond the consultations and what is generally considered as the ritual itself. While 'sharing', participants are compelled to speak and act according to the perception they assign to the entities they have met. In turn, their peers, by articulating their own experiences, acknowledge this shift in self-perception. The reflexive practice of 'sharing' can thus be considered performative inasmuch as the perlocutionary effect (Austin 1962) of the entities' 'spiritual work' is completed and accomplished by means of participants' appraisals.

Concluding Remarks: Speaking of the Ineffable

As we have seen, the practice of 'sharing' relies on the complementary mechanisms of vertical and horizontal refraction. Unlike vernacular expressions suggest, it is not chiefly in finding a satisfactory explanation for spiritual entities' actions that 'taking stock' intervenes. In the process of 'spiritual development', demonstrating the willingness to understand ritual action matters as much as actually understanding it. While 'sharing' necessarily allows for the validation and objectification of the participant's experience, it is not merely a way of externalizing thoughts and emotions that would otherwise remain private and inchoate. Extending the entities' action beyond the consultations, 'sharing' also implies that those who take part in them experience a shift in self-perception, becoming persons endowed with a 'spiritual dimension', which they are willing to enact. This observation points to two possible ways of pursuing this reflection on how reflexivity is linked to ritual action in this case.

The first is to further examine the multiple forms that reflexivity takes in contemporary spiritual practices and the way they connect to such 'derived reflexivity', and conversely. Reflexivity is indeed paramount in New Age and Neo-Pagan practices, as several founding ethnographies imply and/

or tackle more directly. While Sutcliffe (2003: 45) qualifies New Age "seekership" as a "reflexive institution," Lindquist (1997: 48–49) and Pike (2001: 223–224) both point out the consistency of Neo-Pagan identity constructions and the issue of authenticity with the concept of 'self' as a reflexive project in the late twentieth century. Similarly, Magliocco (2004: 117) notes that among the 'Reclaiming witches' of San Francisco, "magic [is] not waving a wand to get a desired result, but a focused process of self-examination, reflexivity, and creative problem-solving." We may thus suppose that reflexive attitudes emerge not only in the subsequent appraisal of ritual endeavors, but also alongside the practice and even in the crafting of new rituals (see Fedele 2014). While the Temple Guaracy's rituals leave little room for idiosyncratic initiatives, other Neo-Pagan and New Age practices often allow more spontaneity, as the recurrence of ritual acts is subordinated to creativity, that is, participants are free to undertake actions that they 'feel' are more suitable than others when carrying out a ritual (Houseman 2010). If, as I have argued, in this context the collective assessment of ritual action that necessarily follows it is as important as its performance, reflections and comments that emerge in external forms of reflexivity, such as those that precede it rather than follow it, may be just as important in the understanding of these rituals and of the process of self-enhancement. While further and more diverse ethnographic data are necessary to look deeper into this question, the pervasiveness of reflexive attitudes in contemporary spiritual practices and the ethnography presented nevertheless suggest the hypothesis that their study may enhance jointly our appreciation of the internal dynamics of these rituals and of the particular subjectivities they produce.

The other path concerns more closely the ethnography of 'sharing' in the Temple Guaracy and may support further inquiry into the use of language in contemporary spiritual practices. Indeed, it is also in this context that the *lingua franca* of 'self religiosity' is put to work. However, it seems that it does something more than express the basic tenet according to which "the self … is held to be perfect, the natural source of all that is good in life" (Heelas 1993: 104). As we have seen, this discursive practice raises paradoxical constraints.

Practitioners are compelled to speak about their experience, which is recognized, at the same time, as being opaque, difficult to express in words, and they are expected to become knowledgeable mediums while the spiritual entities' reasoning is held to be beyond human understanding. By virtue of their formal characteristics, such speech events reinforce the sense that they are the result of entities' actions on participants. In this respect, in the same way that entities do not address their words and actions to their clients' intellect, when participants assess their ritual experience, their speech supposes the 'spiritual dimension' that the entities strive to bring forth. It is thus implicit in the identity-refracting experience of 'sharing' that practitioners are not the sole authors of their words: spiritual entities or the 'inner light' may also account for them. By the same token, the imperative of 'sharing' is likely to create a non-ordinary experience on its own.

If in the frame of ritual action, the roles of participants should in principle be clear-cut—that is, mediums should be clearly distinguished from entities—in the post hoc interactions described above, this is not the case. This, of course, does not preclude possible doubts concerning the authenticity of a medium or the eventual usefulness of a given ritual prescription. However that may be, in the course of sharing, all ambiguity is displaced from the entities to the human agents. In ritual action, one may ask, as in other religious contexts that underline the ontological gap between human and non-human agents, "who is speaking/acting now?" (see Keane 1997)—or, in the medium's words, "is it me or is it the entity?"—whereas when 'sharing', participants might instead ask "who am I when I speak about what entities do and say?" This leads, in turn, to the hypothesis that in contemporary spiritual practices horizontal refraction, while intrinsically connected to ritual action and efficacy, may stand as a ritual device 'in its own right' (Handelman and Lindquist 2005), activated in determined speech events in which reflexive discursive practices, and more generally language, must be understood as exerting an extra-propositional action.

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■ NOTES

1. Founded in 1973 in São Paulo by a medium known as Pai Buby, the Temple Guaracy acquired its transnational dimensions in the 1990s.

2. In doing so, I wish to specify that my goal is not to establish distinctions between more or less traditional forms of Afro-Brazilian Umbanda. A scarcely prescriptive religion, Umbanda stems from a blend of nineteenth-century European Spiritism and Afro-Brazilian religions, founded on the worship of a virtually infinite number of spiritual entities and, to a lesser extent, of the *orixás* of Candomblé, another Afro-Brazilian religious practice in which elements of African origin are more conspicuous. (On the origins and founding myths of Umbanda, see Giumbelli [2003] and Rohde [2009].) As Cavalcanti (1986) notes, the variability of Umbanda's doctrines and rituals is so pronounced that it makes their precise description practically impossible. Nonetheless, the Temple Guaracy's specific practice may be labeled 'New Age' in the sense that it is put to the service of a self-conscious process of self-discovery and self-transformation in which all religious traditions are held to have a common aim—the spiritual awakening of individuals and, eventually, of humankind. As inclusivity and malleability are major characteristics of Umbanda, this element is certainly crucial to the innovations and New Age reinterpretations effected in the Temple. In some aspects, Umbanda might even be seen as presenting intrinsic affinities with New Age and Neo-Pagan thinking—a dimension that is probably favored by the fact that Spiritism and Theosophy (in which the term 'Spirituality' is central) both have influenced Umbanda and the New Age. The investigation of this dynamic, however, lies beyond the scope of this article.

3. In the present article I will not elaborate on the characteristics of the Temple's mediums and sympathizers or on its social organization. All Temples are organized according to the same hierarchical principles determined by their Brazilian leader who oversees their activities and appoints senior mediums as 'coordinators' to manage the Temple's different offshoots. Mediums of the Paris Temple, as well as those of other countries, regularly visit the central shrine house in São Paulo where initiatory ceremonies are performed under the supervision of the Temple's leader. For further details on the establishment of the Temple in France, see Teisenhoffer (2015).

4. To take only one example among others, the Paris Temple's 'coordinator' at the time of my fieldwork now leads a series of workshops called "Psychology of Nature" that is partially inspired by the Temple's tenets and rituals.

5. In addition to these emblematic categories of spiritual entities, Umbanda mediums embody entities that act as children, sailors, cowboys, peasants from northeastern Brazil, Gypsies, crooks, and prostitutes.

6. Such a universalizing tendency may also be observed in other recent and more or less intellectualized variants of Brazilian Umbanda (Espírito Santo 2016), although with cosmological and exegetical elements that are quite distant from those convoked in this case.

7. Fieldwork in the Brazilian Temple Guaracy showed that despite some cultural differences between mediums from different countries, the representations of spiritual entities and of their powers is rather homogeneous.

8. Let us note that the vocabulary of 'energies' and 'vibrations' is common to the universe of the New Age and Umbanda and certainly descends from the parascientific language of nineteenth-century movements aimed at exploring the capacities of the human mind, such as Spiritism and Theosophy.

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