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Feiticeiras and donas-de-casa: the afro-brazilian spirit entity Pomba Gira and the cultural construction of femininity in Brazil

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Abstract: Based on ethnographic fieldwork, the author examines the characteristic behavioral problems that are diagnosed as the work of the controversial spirit entity named *Pomba Gira*. Described in myth and song as the spirit of a woman beholden to no man: a prostitute, courtesan, demonic enchantress, or wife of seven husbands, *Pomba Gira* represents the antinomy of respectable Brazilian womanhood. Practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions believe that this entity can influence and even take over the bodies of the unwary or unprotected, provoking debauchery, sexual exhibitionism, and other immoral or self-destructive activities of various sorts – above all, behavior that transgresses conventional norms of gender and sexual expression. Such problems may be resolved through a protracted training process, in which the afflicted learns how to recognize, appease, and eventually control *Pomba Gira*, initiating a relationship that may include regularly receiving that spirit in possession trance rituals.

Keywords: Pomba Gira; Afro-Brazilian religions; spirit possession; gender; sexuality

Hechiceras y amas de casa: la entidad espiritual afro-brasileña *Pomba Gira* y la construcción cultural de feminidad en el Brasil

La autora, basada en trabajo de campo etnográfico, examina los problemas de comportamiento característicos que se atribuyen al trabajo de la controvertida entidad espiritual femenina Afro-Brasileña *Pomba Gira*. Descrita en mito y canción como el espíritu de una mujer libre de todo hombre: una prostituta, encantadora demoníaca, o la esposa de siete maridos, *Pomba Gira* representa la antítesis de la mujer brasileña respetable. Practicantes de *Umbanda* y otras religiones Afro-Brasileñas creen que esta entidad puede influenciar e, inclusive, tomar posesión del cuerpo de los desvalidos y sin protección, provocando libertinaje sexual y exhibicionismo, así como otros actos inmorales o actividades auto-destructivas de varios tipos que, ante todo, transgreden las normas convencionales de género y expresión sexual. Tales problemas pueden ser resueltos a través de un prolongado proceso de formación, en el cual la persona afectada aprende a reconocer, apaciguar y finalmente, a controlar el espíritu de P*omba Gira*, iniciándose una relación que puede incluir la recepción regular de dicho espíritu, en trance y posesión, mediante ceremonias y rituales.

Palabras-clave: Pomba Gira; religiones afro-brasileñas; posesión espiritual; género; sexualidad

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A autora, apoiada em trabalho de campo etnográfico, examina os característicos problemas de comportamento que se atribuem ao trabalho da controvertida entidade espiritual feminina afro-brasileira Pomba Gira. Descrita em mito e canção como o espírito de uma mulher livre de todo homem – uma prostituta, encantadora demoníaca, ou a esposa de sete maridos – Pomba Gira representa a antítese da respeitável mulher brasileira. Praticantes da Umbanda e de outras religiões afro-brasileiras acreditam que esta entidade pode influenciar e mesmo tomar posse do corpo dos necessitados e desprotegidos, provocando libertinagem sexual e exibicionismo, assim como outros atos imorais ou atividades autodestrutivas de vários tipos que, acima de tudo, transgridem as normas convencionais de gênero e expressão sexual. Tais problemas podem ser resolvidos através de um prolongado processo de formação, no qual a pessoa afetada aprende a reconhecer, a apaziguar e, finalmente, a controlar o espírito da Pomba Gira, iniciando uma relação que pode incluir a recepção regular de tal espírito, em transe e possessão, mediante cerimônias e rituais.

Palavras-chave: Pomba Gira; religiões afro-brasileiras; possessão espiritual; gênero; sexualidade

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1. *Feiticeiras* and women of ill repute

A flamboyant representation of feminine power, the spirit entity known as *Pomba Gira* is a controversial figure among practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions, inspiring both trepidation and admiration. In the stories and *pontos cantados* [ritual songs] through which her mythology circulates, *Pomba Gira* appears as a "woman of ill repute," sometimes a high-born courtesan, other times a prostitute, but always a woman whose erotic life while on earth contravened the norms of female propriety, and whose disembodied spirit continues to be linked to the world of the living. Because of this close proximity to the material plane, *Pomba Gira* is believed able to erupt into the human world in unpredictable ways.[1]

Devotees of the spirit maintain that as a result of her own morally ambiguous life, *Pomba Gira* possesses an intimate knowledge of human affairs, most especially those involving the heart and loins, and the mystical power to intervene in the human world. Others view this entity, and her followers, far more ambivalently. For them *Pomba Gira*'s refusal to be bound by moral convention makes her a troublesome and even diabolical entity: a *feiticeira* [sorceress] "capable of dominating men by her sexual feats"[2] and leading women into promiscuity and wickedness (Prandi, 1996:141). Proponents of this view allege that the unscrupulous deploy *Pomba Gira* for malevolent purposes, such as monopolizing someone else's sexual attention or financial resources.

Organized veneration of this spirit tends to be most evident among the urban working-class population, but *Pomba Gira* is recognized well outside the bounds of a particular religious tradition or community. Indeed, she is a familiar figure of the Brazilian cultural imaginary and references to her may be found in *telenovelas* [prime time soap operas], cinema, music, street slang, and popular culture. In the

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[1] Editor's note: This article is part of a larger research project conducted by the author in Rio de Janeiro in the early 2000s, on which her PhD dissertation *Black Magic at the margins. Macumba in Rio de Janeiro. An ethnographic analysis of a Religious Life*. (University of Chicago, Department of History of Religions, 2004) is based.

[2] Quotations and interview extracts, originally in Portuguese, have been translated into English by the author.

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small stores that sell religious paraphernalia to Rio's *povo de santo*[3] statuary and images depict *Pomba Gira* as a nubile woman scantily attired in red and black. Often she appears bare-breasted, hands on hips and feet planted firmly apart, striking a pose that is less erotically enticing than brazenly defiant (Figure 1). Other times she is depicted as a demon-like figure, surrounded by flames or brandishing a trident (Figure 2). As Reginaldo Prandi observed, *Pomba Gira* is singular but she is also plural,[4] and each particular manifestation of this mythic persona is characterized by her own preferences, symbols, traits, and a more or less developed life story (Prandi, 1996:149).

Figure 1

Figure 2

[3] Literally "people of the saint;" that is, practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions.

[4] In order to differentiate, I capitalize the term when using it as a specific denominative and use the lowercase for the generic.

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Despite these variations, all *pomba giras* pertain to a distinctive, even archetypal character type: the woman whose sexually trangressive behavior contravenes social and moral norms. Indeed, the erotic and aggressive aspects of femininity are central to the imagery and mythology of *Pomba Gira*: her most marked characteristic is an exuberant sensuality, unrestrained by marriage or conventions of feminine modesty and respectability. A favorite theme in *pontos cantados* is *Pomba Gira*'s beauty and ability to beguile, and she often is described as having multiple husbands, among them Lucifer himself. A culturally resonant personification of female sexuality divorced from its reproductive and maternal aspects, *Pomba Gira* embodies a force that is both seductive and pleasurable but also threatening and potentially diabolical. "*Pomba Gira* is a woman with seven husbands", warns a popular *ponto cantado*, "don't mess with her, that girl is dangerous."

Practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions believe that *Pomba Gira* can influence and even take over the bodies of the unwary or unprotected, provoking alcoholism, debauchery, sexual exhibitionism, and other immoral or self-destructive activities of various sorts – above all, behavior considered unseemly or sexually improper. Typically, problems determined to be the result of an unruly *pomba gira* are resolved through a protracted process of training in which the afflicted learns how to recognize, appease, and eventually control the perturbing entity, initiating a relationship that may include regularly receiving that spirit in possession trance rituals. Devotees believe that once ritually tamed, *Pomba Gira* guides and protects them as well as those who petition her favors.

In this essay, I draw on my own ethnographic research in Rio de Janeiro to examine some of the characteristic afflictions that are interpreted as the work of these quixotic spirits. My findings suggests that the kinds of crises attributed to *Pomba Gira* involve conflicts between the afflicted individual's own desires and the expectations of family members and their larger social milieu. Although I focus on women here, the fact that *Pomba Gira* is incorporated almost exclusively by two segments of the urban, working-class population in Rio de Janeiro, married women and effeminate or homosexual men, indicates that this entity speaks particularly to conflicts around issues of gender, sexuality, erotic desire, and morality.[5] After delineating the underlying logic that afflictions associated with *Pomba Gira* have in common, I examine some of the sociostructural factors that contribute to this phenomenon. I argue that for women in particular, problems involving *Pomba Gira* are closely linked to gender constraints and their intimate relations with men.

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[5] By effeminate men I mean those males who for whatever reason cannot (or will not) fulfill the role of the dominant macho, sometimes referred to as the *homem de verdade* [real man].

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2. *Maria Molambo*

The case of Dona Nazaré, a working class housewife, mother, and current leader of a small *terreiro* [temple] on the periphery of Rio, illustrates many of the characteristic behavioral disruptions commonly attributed to *Pomba Gira*. Like others plagued by this volatile entity, Nazaré believes that *Pomba Gira* provoked a series of problems in her life, which she later understood as attempts to call her to the spirit's service. Nazaré's trajectory from affliction to healing is typical of many women who claim to work with *Pomba Gira* as a medium or *zeladora* [caretaker], that is, one who serves the spirits.[6] By her own testimony, Nazaré's relationship with Pomba Gira is deeply intertwined with the unsatisfactory relationships that she has had with the men in her life: most particularly Nilmar, her husband of thirty-five years.

Nazaré claims that *Pomba Gira* first began to perturb her when she was a young child, provoking episodic behavioral disturbances in which she said and did things of which she later had no memory. Family members later reported that these episodes were characterized by aggressive behavior and verbal outbursts of which Nazaré denied any knowledge. These seem to have occurred initially in the context of Nazaré's fraught relationship with her father, an autocratic, abusive figure who frequently beat his wife and daughter. At the age of fifteen, after moving in with and later marrying Nilmar, her first boyfriend, Nazaré's strange behavior began to be directed at her new husband.

Like most women of her generation and social class, Nazaré aspired to become a housewife and mother. The realities of married life, however, did not match the idealized imagery conjured up by an unhappy adolescent with little experience of the world. From the very beginning, her relationship with Nilmar was troubled by a climate of mutual distrust and conflict. Nazaré's desire for children and successive pregnancies were a major source of dispute between the couple throughout the early years of their marriage, and the births of their first three children were interspersed with a series of separations and reconciliations. Throughout that time Nazaré suspected that Nilmar was seeing other women and feared that he would abandon her and their children. Nilmar, who dreamed of pursuing an education and escaping the poverty into which they both had been born, resented having to abandon his studies to support his rapidly growing family.

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[6] *Zelador* or *zeladora* is the term that many Afro-Brazilian religious practitioners use to describe their affiliation with the spirits.

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Nilmar confided to me that soon after the birth of their third child Nazaré began to behave strangely. He described incidents when he would arrive home after work, greet his wife, and then retire to take a shower and change clothes. When he reemerged, Nazaré would act surprised to see him even though they had just spoken. Other times he would come home to find pots and pans strewn around the house, the children filthy, and a disoriented Nazaré claiming to know nothing of what had transpired. More than once, she left the burners on the stove unattended, burning through all the cooking fuel.

At first, Nilmar attested, he thought that Nazaré was trying to play a joke on him or was angry and wanted to provoke him. But her behavior grew more and more outrageous. He described explosive rages in which Nazaré would destroy household items or physically threaten him, and then later deny that she had done so. Once she came after him with a kitchen knife and tried to cut him, a confrontation of which she later claimed to have no memory. Other times Nilmar awoke in the middle of the night to find his wife in the street clad only in her nightclothes, with no knowledge of how she had gotten there.

Nor was Nazaré's odd conduct limited to the privacy of their home. In social gatherings with Nilmar's colleagues from work, Nazaré would behave in ways that Nilmar found inappropriate: flirting with the men and making rude commentary about their wives, using vulgar language, or suddenly erupting in loud, noisy *gargalhadas* [throaty laughter].[7] Throughout, Nazaré maintained that she was unaware of her actions during these episodes. As she put it: "*I would do these absurd things without realizing it and without having any memory of it. I wasn't conscious of it, but I also didn't want to believe it.*"

Convinced that his wife was mentally ill, Nilmar considered committing her to a psychiatric hospital. In despair, he finally confided the extent of his domestic troubles to an older colleague, who advised him that Nazaré's behavior sounded like a spiritual problem, not a mental one, and counseled him to seek help in the Afro-Brazilian religion of *Umbanda*. With this friend's help, Nilmar arranged to bring his wife to an *Umbanda terreiro* or temple. It was there that Nazaré's affliction was diagnosed as the work of a well known *pomba gira* named *Maria Molambo*[8], said to be the disembodied spirit of young woman who ran away from an arranged marriage, was disinherited by her wealthy father, and forced to prostitute herself on the streets to survive.

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[7] *Gargalhada* is the distinctive, throaty laugh that signals the presence of *Pomba Gira* in ceremonial rituals.

[8] Literally *Raggedy Maria*.

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From Nazaré's point of view, this event marked a period of great struggle and internal anguish. Far from accepting the *Umbanda* leader's diagnosis, Nazaré fought against it. Having been raised in a traditional Catholic family, the thought of being possessed by spirit entities terrified her. She began to think that maybe she really was crazy. Significantly, in her explanation she linked these thoughts to deep feelings of ambivalence about her role as a housewife and mother. As she recalled it:

> Many times I thought Nilmar was right, that I was crazy. Because many times I would look at my children, and in spite of being the "Supermother" that I always was, at times I didn't want children around me. So I thought that maybe I really was disturbed in the head. That was when I decided to talk to them [the spirits], since there already was something wrong inside me. I wanted to know what they wanted from me. If they wanted something from me, they would have to change my attitude towards them. And they did. It took time, but they did.

Despite her initial resistance, Nazaré underwent a series of rituals under the tutelage of various *Umbanda* leaders and began to frequent *Umbanda* ceremonies, gradually learning how to control what she and Nilmar had come to understand as episodes of spirit possession and to limit them to the appropriate times and places. As she gained ritual mastery over *Maria Molambo*, the behavioral disturbances that had plagued the couple's home life became less frequent, although their relationship remained volatile.

Within the interpretative framework of *Umbanda*, by ritually recognizing *Maria Molambo* and learning to incorporate the spirit, Nazaré was able to redirect the spirit's energy towards beneficial rather than destructive ends. Practitioners of *Umbanda* and other Afro-Brazilian religions maintain that spirits need human beings just as human beings need spirits. When neglected, spirits can provoke persistent physiological, psychological, economic, or personal problems for human beings. When regularly acknowledged in the context of ceremonial rituals, troublesome spirits are believed to cease their disruptions and to offer guidance, protection, and practical assistance to their human devotees. Within the holistic perspective of Afro-Brazilian religions, wellbeing lies in recognizing and ritually cultivating the mutual ties between the world of humans and that of the spirits. Or, as devotees sometimes say, they serve the spirits and the spirits serve them.

As Nazaré herself explained it, Maria Molambo needed her. The spirit was "wafting in the shadows" between worlds, looking for "light":

> She needed light. She too was wandering with no direction. And so when she incorporated in me for the first time, she also was gaining a little bit of

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> light, she was indoctrinating herself because she was adrift in the world. So she also used me, you see?

Here Nazaré employed an explanation common among *Umbanda* practitioners, who conceptualize the universe as a series of hierarchical planes occupied by various spirit entities in different stages of spiritual evolution. According to this view, the spiritual levels closest to the terrestrial world are inhabited by the least evolved entities: *pomba giras* and other *povo-da-rua* or [spirits of the street] whose lives while on earth were characterized by debauchery or vice. Due to their primitive stage of spiritual development, these entities need to be "indoctrinated," or instructed about their proper place in the universe, and taught to help human beings. *Umbanda* adherents say that by performing acts of *caridade* [charity], low-level entities make amends for their flawed lives and may ascend to the upper echelons of the spiritual universe, eventually becoming pure *guias de luz* [spiritual guide entities of light]. Without indoctrination, however, they will continue to perturb humans in a misdirected quest for *luz*.

The "cure" for Nazaré's behavioral disturbances, therefore, was not to expel the perturbing spirit, but for Nazaré to learn to *trabalhar* [to work] with *Maria Molambo* by regularly incorporating her in the context of *Umbanda* ceremonies. By serving as *Molambo*'s material vessel, Nazaré enabled the spirit to return to the human world where she could assist others with their own suffering and by doing so, gain light and eventually evolve. This partnership also transformed Nazaré's life, for as *Maria Molambo* developed a reputation among her friends and family as a powerful *guia* [spiritual guide entity] others began to consult the spirit for help with their own troubles and Nazaré opened a little room in which she conducted these consultations. In time, she began to cultivate other spirit entities and eventually was initiated into the cult.

As she deepened her relations with the Afro-Brazilian spirit world, Nazaré began to organize regular drum and dance ceremonies in the basement of her residence, and to offer a variety of ritual-therapeutic services to a paying clientele. During the time I conducted my fieldwork in Rio, she presided over a small *terreiro* of her own and was able to supplement her family's income through her spiritual activities. Among the various spirit entities that she received, Nazaré considered *Maria Molambo* her most powerful *guia*, the one who has protected and defended her since early childhood, and the one most responsible for her success as a *zeladora*. However, even though Nazaré has successfully indoctrinated *Maria Molambo*, the entity herself has scarcely been domesticated. "Maria Molambo is a double-edged sword," Nazaré advised me. "If you deserve it, she'll fuck you up. If you don't, she can't hurt you."

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3. Gender afflictions: transgressing the norms of feminine propriety

While the details of Nazaré's relationship with *Maria Molambo* reflect the circumstances of her particular life, in its broad outlines Nazaré's story is not unusual: indeed, I observed salient parallels in the life histories of other female devotees of *Pomba Gira* who I met in Rio. A sixty-six year old housewife and grandmother whom I will call Dona Roberta told me that she began to suffer from periodic dizzy spells followed by blackouts as a young newlywed. Afterwards she would awaken in strange places, like crossroads or cemeteries, and had no memories of the "crazy things" that others reported she had said and done during those times.[9] "From my point of view, I experienced blackouts," she told me, "but for others, I continued to walk and talk and do other things." It was not until Roberta sought help for an apparently unrelated problem that she discovered the reason for her blackouts.

"I would get pregnant and lose the baby, get pregnant again and lose the baby," she told me. After "three or four" such miscarriages, Roberta was informed by her doctors that she would never be able to carry a child to term. Refusing to accept this shocking prognosis for, as she put it, "the dream of every young woman when she marries is to be a mother, and mine also was to be a mother," Roberta embarked upon a lengthy and increasingly desperate quest to restore her fertility, visiting various specialists and pursuing different folk remedies. Eventually she ended up at a *terreiro* where her problem was diagnosed as the work of a *pomba gira* named *Sinhá*[10] *Maria* who had "bound" her womb. According to Roberta, after promising to "seat" the spirit, creating a special altar in which *Sinhá Maria* could receive offerings, and undergoing a period of training in which she learned how to ritually incorporate the spirit, she successfully gave birth to two children. Roberta's marriage, however, did not survive the tumult provoked by *Sinhá Maria* and the couple separated.

Significantly, Roberta told me that *Sinhá Maria* had first manifested in her at her wedding ceremony, where the spirit's bawdy manner and off-color jokes – conduct considered most unbecoming for a virginal bride – provoked a scandal among family members. In retaliation for the ill treatment she received on that occasion, *Sinhá Maria* prevented Roberta from having children until Roberta and her family acknowledged the spirit. "The only thing that she could do to get my attention," Roberta explained, "was to put me in shameful situations so that I would see that something wasn't right." Typically these situations involved disgraceful or unlady-

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[9] Crossroads and cemeteries are places associated with Pomba Gira in myth and ritual.

[10] Short for *Senhora* [Madam], *Sinhá* is the term that slaves used to refer to their mistress.

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like behavior for, according to Roberta, *Sinhá Maria* is *uma mulher sedutora e debochada*, a seductive libertine with a vulgar mouth and a taste for men and drink.

It was not until Roberta began to ritually cultivate *Sinhá Maria*, regularly receiving her in possession trance ceremonies, that the spirit ceased to trouble Roberta and instead became a protective force. Today, Roberta informed me, "Sinhá Maria is primary in my life. She helps me, she defends me, she takes care of me." *Sinhá Maria*, she continued, "likes to say that she doesn't perform miracles, but she has done many miracles in my life." According to Roberta, the spirit also has performed many miracles in the lives of the clients who procure her services at the *terreiro* outside of Rio that Roberta runs with her second husband.

Although the literature on Afro-Brazilian religions provides scant detail about the specific problems that are diagnosed as the work of *Pomba Gira*, social anthropologist José Guilherme Cantor Magnani briefly described the case of Dona Teresa, a middle-aged housewife in São Paulo whose peculiar behavior scandalized her family and seriously disrupted their domestic life (Magnani, 2002). The details of Teresa's affliction and the manner in which it was addressed not only illuminates the kinds of behavioral changes associated with *Pomba Gira*, but it also suggests some of the deeper, structural conflicts that underlie this phenomenon.

According to Magnani, Teresa suffered from intermittent episodes of mental illness in which she neglected her domestic duties, tried to run away from home, and didn't recognize her children or remember her husband's name. During these episodes the otherwise decorous *dona-de-casa* was unable to sleep and would patronize bars clad in revealing attire and acting provocatively or would go to the bathroom in inappropriate places throughout the house. More than once, family members found her causing a scene in a supermarket in the city center. Other times she invited her children to share her bed while undressing suggestively (Magnani, 2002:8).

After trying various forms of treatment without success, Teresa's family brought her as a last resort to an *Umbanda terreiro* where the *mãe-de-santo* [priestess] identified the *pomba gira Maria Sete Saias*[11] as responsible for the most serious of Teresa's maladies. The *mãe-de-santo*'s approach to Teresa's behavior is particularly revealing. Addressing herself to the *pomba gira* she admonished:

> Maria Sete Saias you are bothering the wrong person. She is a married lady, a mother with children, a respectable lady. If you were destined to become her protector, you should protect her so that she doesn't engage in immorality, so that she doesn't think about wicked things, as she shouldn't, as is not permitted for a married lady. (Magnani, 2002:12).

[11] Literally, Maria Seven Skirts.

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Clear in the *mãe-de-santo*'s rebuke to the spirit is the notion that a respectable wife and mother like Teresa would never conduct herself in so scandalous a way, since such immorality in thought or deed "is not permitted for a married lady." From this perspective, Teresa's inappropriate behavior could not reflect her own will or desires, but rather indicated that she had fallen under the sway of a *pomba gira* who needed to be properly socialized.

The resolution to Teresa's problem, as in the majority of such cases, involved working with *Maria Sete Saias*; that is, establishing a relationship of mutual reciprocity with the spirit. As the *mãe-de-santo* explained to Magnani, after she had spoken sternly to *Maria Sete Saias*:

> Then she [the *pomba gira*] left and requested that she [Teresa] give her a red skirt with a ruffle and a flower to put in her hair. She said that she wouldn't bother her any more. But she [Teresa] had to work with her. And then the husband said that it was precisely that one [the *pomba gira*] who was the one talking while taking off her clothing and calling to the children… (Magnani, 2002:12).

The *mãe-de-santo* assured Magnani that by the time her patient left the *terreiro*, where she had remained for seven days and nights, Teresa recognized both her husband and their children and had returned to her previous self: calm, quiet, and behaving once again as a proper housewife and mother.

Magnani reported that he was not able to follow up on the case, but it is likely that in order to bring *Maria Sete Saias* under control and thereby contain her outrageous behavior within ritually defined boundaries, Teresa undertook an intensive process of developing her relationship with the spirit, perhaps learning how to receive her in possession trance, as Nazaré and Roberta did. At minimum, Teresa's experience at the *terreiro* provided her and her family a framework through which to understand the strange behavior that had disrupted their domestic lives, and a form through which Teresa could channel whatever conflicting feelings or desires that these episodes manifested into a more socially recognizable form.

For my purposes here, what the details of Teresa's case succinctly demonstrate is the incompatibility of behaviors associated with *Pomba Gira* with those considered fitting for a respectable woman. Indeed, although the specific problems that eventually led Teresa, Roberta, and Nazaré to *Umbanda* may appear unrelated at first glance, they share an underlying commonality: all involve examples of conduct that is socially unacceptable for a decent *dona-de-casa* [housewife] and mother. Within the interpretative framework of *Umbanda*, this inappropriate behavior was identified not as the product of the afflicted woman's own will or desires, but rather that of *Pomba Gira*, the archetypal embodiment of improper femininity.

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While neither Teresa nor the two women that I interviewed said so openly, permeating their individual testimonies is a sense of deep dissatisfaction with the limits and drudgery of being a housewife. Lacking any other outlet, this dissatisfaction simmers just beneath the surface, erupting in ways that the women themselves refuse or are unable to recognize or acknowledge. Perhaps frustrated at days spent performing household tasks and caring for small children, they periodically flee domesticity, either physically or psychologically: Teresa refuses to recognize her husband and children and abandons all housework; Nazaré throws pots and pans around the room and burns through the cooking fuel; both women run away from home at various times. They each engage in various acts of aggression towards their husbands, forgetting their names, ignoring or lashing out at them verbally, threatening them with violence. Even Roberta, whose description of her problems with *Pomba Gira* focused more on her desire for children, referenced unseemly behavior that had scandalized her husband and other family members. As she characterized it, *Sinhá Maria* had "put her through many shameful situations" before she learned to control the spirit. Notably, all three women recount episodes of erotic behavior considered unsuitable for a married woman: telling bawdy jokes at a wedding, visiting bars at night dressed provocatively, flirting with male colleagues or coworkers, or engaging in sexually suggestive behavior inappropriately focused on children or men other than their own husbands.

The conflicting feelings that these women act out – and which later are interpreted as the influence of *Pomba Gira* – appear to be largely inchoate. Operating below the threshold of individual consciousness, rarely are they the subject of explicit reflection on the part of the afflicted or those around her. The closest that I ever heard anyone come to articulating dissatisfaction with her role as housewife and mother came when Nazaré admitted that despite being a "Supermother," sometimes she "didn't want children around." Notably, it was this realization – not the strange behavior reported by family members – that finally convinced Nazaré that maybe she "really was disturbed in the head." Consciously committed to an idealized maternal identity, it seems that she could not readily assimilate the ambivalent feelings that actual motherhood occasionally provoked, instead interpreting them as a sign of mental illness.

While we could analyze these three cases in Freudian terms as a kind of defense mechanism by which an individual manages disquieting feelings or desires through dissociation, splitting off the parts of herself that do not conform to an internalized ideal and either repressing or projecting them outside of the self, the fact that possession by *Pomba Gira* is a culturally recognized and relatively widespread occurrence in Brazil suggests that our analyses must go beyond the level of the individual psyche to examine the underlying sociostructural tensions that both

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contribute to, and shape, this phenomenon. From this analytical perspective, afflictions associated with this entity almost always involve conduct that transgresses conventional standards of propriety. Among women, this includes examples of overt aggression or hostility, exaggerated or vulgar sexual conduct, rejection of the role of *dona-de-casa*, or other failures to conform to a domesticated ideal of femininity. For men, it usually consists of effeminate self-presentation or overt expressions of erotic attraction to other men. In the vast majority of cases, it is behavior that is *inappropriately gendered* that is likely to be seen as evidence of *Pomba Gira*.

So, even as the particular problems associated with this entity occur in the context of interpersonal (usually domestic or marital) relationships (a point to which I will return), they also externalize deeply felt disjunctures between an individual's own will or desires and the expectations that regulate her or his conduct as a gendered being. In other words, afflictions involving *Pomba Gira* express characteristic tensions that erupt within cross-cutting, and often contradictory, systems of gender, sexuality, and morality. I delineate some of these structural contradictions in the next section, focusing especially on their implications for middle and working class women like Nazaré, Roberta, and Teresa.

4. *Cross-cutting systems of gender, sexuality, and morality*

Brazil is not a monolithic society and there are important regional differences within the country, along with significant stratifications along the lines of class, race, age, educational level, affluence, economic conditions, etc., which shape local understandings of what constitutes appropriate conduct for men and women. The past several decades in Brazil have witnessed accelerating and uneven processes of development accompanied by political and social changes that have transformed life in many ways, creating new opportunities for women in the public sphere and contributing to the emergence of new family structures, sexual subcultures, personal freedoms, and forms of gendered and sexual self expression. And yet, despite the heterogeneity of Brazilian culture and its varied social arrangements, traditional ideas about gender and sexuality continue to exert a powerful influence over everyday life, constituting, as Richard Parker observed, a kind of "cultural grammar" that structures other kinds of social interactions (Parker, 1999:29).

For example, patriarchal notions about men and women continue to be prevalent in Brazil, and the culture of *machismo* remains pervasive, sometimes contesting and other times coexisting with more egalitarian understandings of gender relations. Within this system of meanings linking masculinity to social and sexual

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dominance, men are expected to perform the role of household head, providing for wives and dependents from their labor outside the home, while women are expected to become housewives and mothers whose lives center on the domestic sphere. Perhaps paradoxically, the culture of *machismo* seems to be most intense among those who are least equipped financially to uphold its standards for the division of labor. But while economic realities often dictate other household and financial arrangements in practice, a traditional model of gender roles remains an ideal to which many middle and working class Brazilians aspire, if few fully achieve.[12]

Within this system, men and women have different levels of involvement in and expectations about marriage, sexual intimacy, and family responsibility, and are subject to different standards for moral and sexual behavior. Normative understandings of masculinity, for example, associate manliness with sexual virility. Extra-marital sexual relations are socially tolerated, and even expected, of men, and the number of a man's sexual conquests generally enhances his reputation. This doesn't mean that wives tacitly accept their husbands' philandering, but that there is little social sanction for it, and both women and men view it as a common feature of conjugal life. For men raised to exercise authority but unable to do so in the realm of the working world, sexuality and relationships with women often becomes a primary arena in which to assert their dominance.

Women's reputations, by contrast, are closely tied to their roles as mothers, household managers, and faithful wives who confine their sexuality to the domestic sphere and the marriage bed. Modesty and chastity are the traditional virtues associated with proper femininity, embodied by the woman whose sexual and reproductive capacities are channeled towards her husband and the production of children. Women whose sexuality is not under male control or whose behavior transgresses the norms of female propriety threaten the system and are likely to be disparaged as *vagabundas* [tramps] or *putas* [whores], terms that connote sexual immorality. As this suggests, sexuality and morality are entwined for women in ways that they are not for men, and a woman's nonconformity to gendered standards of behavior elicits moral judgments that are freighted with sexual meanings. The underlying logic of this system links moral femininity to the domestic sphere and the role of wife and mother.

This patriarchal ideal of domesticated female sexuality, however, is complicated by a pervasive objectification of women as erotic objects, which varies from an intense social emphasis on female sensuality to ubiquitous advertising featuring

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[12] Rebhun (1999) analyzed the social effects of machismo as they play out in men's and women's differing conceptions of love, marriage, and sexuality in *The Heart is Unknown Country: Love in the Changing Economy of Northeast Brazil*.

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women in various states of undress. Evaluating women according to male-defined standards of desirability is a favorite national pastime, undertaken everywhere from the street corner to the *Sambódromo*.[13] As a result, from the time that they are young girls, women are taught in a thousand ways that their social worth lies in their ability to convey their sensuality and attract male attention.

In an environment where women are subject to male-defined norms of desirability that construe them as erotic objects, while at the same that time "decent" women are expected to become faithful wives and mothers, women experience deeply discordant messages about their sexuality. Faced with competing demands to be both sexually attractive and chaste, an object of male desire and a virtuous wife, many internalize these conflicts. And in the absence of alternative means of coping with these and other contradictions, they can manifest as a variety of behavioral, psychological, or other kinds of disorders.

Anecdotal data suggests that such disjunctive messages about female sexuality may drive diverse social phenomena, from the national obsession with plastic surgery among wealthy women to the troublesome presence of *Pomba Gira* among those less favored by fortune. A psychiatrist friend in Rio told me that a significant number of his affluent female clients sought his help after repeatedly seducing strange men, usually delivery- or repairmen who came to their homes for work-related reasons. Observing that these socially prominent, middle-aged housewives spent an inordinate amount of time and money maintaining their figures at the gym and having regular beauty treatments, he hypothesized that as his clients aged their ability to attract male attention declined, provoking a crisis of self. Socialized to experience themselves as erotic objects and with few other audiences for their efforts, they sought male attention in ways that were unlikely to have repercussions for their marital status or social standing. These trysts, however, generated significant psychological distress for the women involved, who saw them as compulsive behaviors over which they exercised little control.

For women who lack the financial resources or inclination to consult a psychiatrist, *Pomba Gira* may provide an alternative way of conceptualizing sexual impulses or desires for attention for which there are few other socially acceptable outlets. In keeping with this entity's erotically uninhibited character, exhibitionism or other sexual compulsions are widely considered evidence of *Pomba Gira*'s influence. Rosemary, a single woman in her early thirties whom I interviewed in Rio, told me that before she gained ritual control over her *pomba gira*, the spirit would take over and Rosemary would black out, only to find herself in bars flirting

[13] The stadium that hosts Rio's official Carnival parade.

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with strange men or seducing her female friends' lovers, incidents that provoked all kinds of *confusões* [misunderstandings] and *brigas* [fights].

In a series of articles about *Pomba Gira* that they coauthored for the newspaper *Correio da Bahia*, journalists Jane Fernandes and Éden Nilo reported similar findings. Among the people whom they interviewed, *Pomba Gira* was associated with various sexual problems. A man named Paulo echoed Rosemary's complaints, recalling how his *pomba gira*, Herundina, "would seize me, go to the bar, get drunk, pick fights, make a point of putting me in ridiculous situations" (Fernandes & Nilo, 2004). "There are those who have gone crazy," another woman assured the journalists, "hunting for sex in an unstoppable compulsion" while under the influence of *Pomba Gira* ((Idem).

As these examples indicate, *Pomba Gira* can perturb men or women independent of their age, sexual orientation, or marital status. Despite the diversity of *Pomba Gira*'s victims, however, the disturbances attributed to this spirit almost always are linked to behavior that transgresses conventional norms for sexual or gender expression. My research suggests that among men, this often takes the form of overt homosexuality or effeminancy, while for women, troubles with *Pomba Gira* frequently occur in the context of intimate relations with male lovers or husbands.[14] Nazaré and Roberta, for example, both described their relationship with *Pomba Gira* as unfolding in response to and in the context of various conjugal tensions. In the next section, I examine Nazaré's alliance with *Maria Molambo* in more detail. Her stories about the spirit's involvement in her tumultuous marriage to Nilmar suggest that for women who find themselves caught within normative conventions of gender and sexuality that prescribe for them a subordinate role in relationship to men; limit female power to the domestic sphere; and stigmatize female sexuality while permitting men a range of sexual outlets, *Pomba Gira* can be a valuable ally.

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[14] In my research I encountered no sociological studies of *Pomba Gira* devotees, and very few studies of the figure of *Pomba Gira*. Of the small number of works that have focused in any significant way on *pomba gira* spirit practices, Stefania Capone made the clearest association between these spirits and women's intimate relationships with men (see Capone, 1999). Although not as explicit, these associations are also evident in Goldman & Contins (1984:104-132). In his discussion of *Pomba Gira*, Reginaldo Prandi observed that this spirit was most commonly called upon to resolve romantic and sexual problems, but he does not elaborate further (see Prandi,1994:91-102). James Wafer's ethnography provided a glimpse into the cultivation of the *Pomba Gira* among working class, effeminate males in the urban periphery of Bahia. Although neither gender nor *Pomba Gira* was the focus of that work, his data is illustrative of the complex that I have described (see Wafer, 1991).

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5. Domestic conflicts: *Pomba Gira* and the sexual double standard

In a series of life history interviews that I conducted with her, Nazaré consistently portrayed Nilmar as a womanizer whose constant infidelities both humiliated her and threatened her household. "There were many women," she told me, "many telephone calls, many of his lovers calling the house." According to Nazaré, so time consuming were her husband's affairs that Nilmar "didn't participate in the births of any of our children," since he was "always away in hotels [with other women]." She was certain that even Nilmar's mother had been complicit, helping hide the evidence of her son's philandering.

Asked why she hadn't divorced Nilmar, Nazaré replied "where would I go? My father didn't want me and I had nowhere else to go." She had moved out once, she told me, but found herself unable to support herself and so had reconciled with Nilmar. "I was raised in a very traditional manner," she concluded, "and I learned that you find a man and stick with him." Despite her attempts to "stick with" Nilmar, however, Nazaré's deeply ambivalent feelings seem to have surfaced in other ways. Unable to return to her parent's household and unwilling (or unable) to leave Nilmar for good, she ran away from home periodically. Nilmar reported that more than once he had found her wandering the streets with no memory of how she had gotten there. On one of these occasions, according to Nazaré, she remained on the streets for a week completely unaware of her surroundings. Although she hadn't known it at the time, *Maria Molambo* had protected her until she was found by a policeman and returned home. Nilmar, meanwhile, had "gone crazy" looking for her. Other times, as we have seen, Nilmar was the target of acts of aggression and even violence that Nazaré refused to acknowledge.

Significantly, once *Maria Molambo* had been successfully indoctrinated and became a source of guidance and protection in Nazaré's life rather than a problem, the spirit began to communicate to her clandestine details about her husband's affairs. "Nilmar was always with other women," she told me, "and she [Molambo] saw that it was bad." Whenever Nilmar was off with one of his paramours, Nazaré claimed, Molambo "came in my dreams, whispered in my ear, or sent a message," informing her of his whereabouts. Once *Molambo* had even caused the word "motel" to appear on Nilmar's forehead when he returned home unexpectedly one afternoon. The spirit, she affirmed, "always protected me against my husband and anyone else who wanted to hurt me."

When Nilmar was laid off at the bank where he had worked for over twenty years, Nazaré saw it as indisputable proof of *Molambo*'s protection. In her narrative account, the loss of Nilmar's job constituted the final act in a larger drama of spiritual retribution: *Molambo* had wreaked terrible vengeance on her errant hus-

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band for the suffering and humiliation that he had caused her. "Molambo finished him," she told me. "He can't get anywhere, can't succeed at anything, not even I can help him. It is the punishment that he has to bear. He lost everything because of [other] women."

Indeed, since that time Nilmar had been unable to find steady employment. When I met them in 2000, Nilmar had been unemployed for eight years and was scraping together a living doing odd jobs around the neighborhood. When I asked Nilmar whether he thought *Maria Molambo* had anything to do with his reversal of fortune, he shrugged his shoulders. "This I don't know how to explain to you. She [Nazaré] says it. And since then, I have nothing." While Nilmar himself was equivocal about *Molambo*'s involvement, others in the community had been persuaded. As Nazaré's oldest daughter affirmed when I put the question to her: *Molambo* "saw [my mother's] suffering, everything that was happening, so she engineered his downfall… Maybe she didn't do the whole thing, but she gave that little push for sure."

Nazaré's stories about *Maria Molambo*'s involvement in her life always unfolded as a *ménage-a-trois* with Nazaré in the role of victim, *Molambo* as her spiritual avenger, and a villain (usually Nilmar) whose treachery provided the occasion and necessary conditions for the spirit's mystical interventions. What is most striking about these tales of conjugal woe is not Nilmar's philandering itself, but its flagrancy. This is expressed in florid examples: Nazaré births their children alone because her husband is with other women; there are constant telephone calls to the house from his lovers; even his mother is complicit in his many indiscretions. The very outrageousness of these stories suggests that they serve not so much as factual accounts to be understood literally, but rather as illustrations of something deeper: Nazaré's sense that her position as *dona-de-casa* was under constant threat. Against this backdrop, Nazaré's stories about *Maria Molambo* highlighted the spirit's consistent attention and loyalty, whereas the figure of Nilmar represented a source of humiliation and betrayal. If only at the level of narrative, *Molambo* always protected Nazaré against those who would hurt her – including her husband, whom the spirit eventually punished harshly for his disloyalty to Nazaré.

In addition to permitting Nazaré to narratively reconstruct her relationship with Nilmar, re-situating periods of conjugal discord within a larger drama of spiritual protection and vengeance, her relationship with *Maria Molambo* offered other resources for dealing with some of the tensions that her marriage to Nilmar seems to have provoked. Working with *Maria Molambo*, for example, permitted Nazaré to establish an identity as a *zeladora* independent from her role as Nilmar's wife, a relationship that was a constant source of insecurity and humiliation for her. In serving the spirits, Nazaré has dramatically expanded her social network

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and her sense of place in the world. As a *zeladora*, she enjoys a degree of independence rare among the women of her neighborhood, whose lives revolve around home and children, and is able to earn her own money, which has made her less dependent on Nilmar and less fearful about the future.

In Nazaré's social world, women are expected to become wives and mothers whose activities are limited largely to the domestic sphere and who are dependent on their husband's financial support of the household, a position of limited autonomy and power. This position is constantly threatened by a sexual double standard that allows the husband to have sexual partners outside of the marital bond, while compelling the wife's fidelity. Nazaré's ongoing distress over her husband's alleged philandering, partly manifested in the form of behavioral disturbances, is a poignant reminder of the precariousness of this situation for women. In this context, *Pomba Gira*, as her devotees like to say, is a double-edged sword, capable of wreaking havoc in their lives, as well as providing a means with which women can change their situation – although within certain limits and with other entailments.

Some, like Nazaré and Roberta, are able to transform their relationship with *Pomba Gira* into an independent identity as a *zeladora*. Others, like Teresa, find temporary respite from everyday life or a periodic outlet for feelings and desires otherwise unacceptable for women of their station. All find a social environment in which their eccentric or compulsive behavior is recognizable, and an alternative framework within which to express it. Reinterpreted as signs of *Pomba Gira*, otherwise disruptive or disturbing incidents are integrated within a larger interpretative framework that assigns them meaning as a sign of a spiritual calling. And because the existence of spiritual forces is widely accepted in Brazil (although there is great debate about the nature of these forces or the desirability of cultivating particular ones) husbands or other family members have little choice but to accommodate themselves to the demands of the spirits if they want their wives to become well.

6. Conclusion

A personification of the dangerous aspects of female sexuality when unrestrained by marriage or conventions of feminine propriety, *Pomba Gira* is a product of a normative gender schema that both fears and attributes great power to female sexuality. Described in myth and song as the spirit of a woman beholden to no man: a prostitute, courtesan, demonic enchantress, or wife of seven husbands, *Pomba Gira* represents the antinomy of respectable womanhood. Practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions believe that this entity is able to act in the human world in

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ways that are conceptualized as immoral and even diabolic: seducing her victims into debauchery, rebellion, or other "perversions" of accepted forms of gender and sexual expression. Devotees aver, however, that once indoctrinated or brought under ritual control, *Pomba Gira* can become a spiritual *guia* [spiritual guide entity] whose mystical knowledge and power can be constructively brought to bear on their own and others' lives.

I have argued that problematic behaviors associated with this entity usually involve socio-structural conflicts around issues of gender and sexuality. Some of these conflicts arise from disjunctures between an individual's own experiential realities and prevailing expectations about what constitutes appropriate femininity or masculinity. Others manifest the fault lines within an androcentric social order that both condemns female sexuality outside of marriage and fetishizes women as erotic objects, while glorifying male virility and stigmatizing men who are sexually attracted to other men. Such conflicts generate subjective states that are experienced as unintelligible, disturbing, or unmanageable. By objectifying inner experiences for which the only other discursive framework is that of mental illness, *Pomba Gira* integrates otherwise incomprehensible or isolated incidents into a meaningful pattern. This not only changes the afflicted individual's experience of the situation, but can transform the situation itself.

For example, when recast in a visceral form as afflictions provoked by *Pomba Gira,* conjugal conflicts such as those reported by Nazaré are transposed to a metaphysical realm beyond the frustrating limitations of everyday life. The introduction of a third, spirit agent disrupts the *status quo* in various ways, transforming the afflicted woman but also impacting her relationship to her male partner (as well as other family members). The dynamics of this triangulation and the particular forms that it takes vary from person to person, but generally it produces a fundamental change in the afflicted person's understanding of their identity, and provides new possibilities for interpreting and acting in the world.

This is so because the solution to problems provoked by *Pomba Gira* is not to expel the spirit but rather to reach a sort of accommodation through which the spirit and her human host become linked in a relationship of mutual reciprocity mediated through ritual. This relationship is conceived as on-going and permanent, and it transforms the afflicted into a devotee who "works with" the spirit. Typically, this work includes ceremonies of spirit possession in which *Pomba Gira* is summoned with song and dance to the human world where she manifests in the bodies of her devotees, who claim to have little memory of what transpires while under the influence of the spirit. In the rituals where *Maria Molambo*, *Maria Sete Saias*, or other *pomba gira* spirits are incarnated, the possessed dance provocatively, showing off their décolleté in sumptuous gowns, flirting with adoring

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audiences, making bawdy jokes, drinking and smoking to excess, and generally indulging in those activities not permitted for proper married ladies.

In Nazaré's case, the spirits enabled her to deflect responsibility and therefore blame (and perhaps consciousness as well) for periods of disruptive behavior in the early years of her marriage, episodes that seem to have been closely linked with her suspicions about Nilmar's fidelity. As time went on, her growing mastery of the spirits enabled Nazaré to assert a new identity as a *zeladora*, a subject position which in some ways was an extension of her wifely role outside of the bounds of her own small family. Here again, it was the spirits who bore responsibility for this transformation: it was, she claimed, *Maria Molambo* who first had opened a little room for her in which she could see clients.

This spiritual calling enabled Nazaré to exercise greater autonomy and eventually establish an independent career as a spiritual healer. Working with *Pomba Gira* provided a context within which she could be glamorous and powerful, respected and feared, a virtuous mother and an audacious whore. *Umbanda* offered Nazaré a "code of action and interpretation" (Brumana & Martínez, 1989:13); that is, it both established and legitimated for her a world that did not correspond to dominant norms, particularly conventions of womanhood, as well as a language and ritual repertory with which to articulate these alternative meanings. This was a world where powerful spirits offered protection as well as vengeance and a husband's treachery could be punished by mystical means. As Adeline Masquelier observed, spirit possession does not so much solve or simplify situations as it "thickens them – introducing new agencies, new relations, and new perspectives" (Masquelier, 2002:50). In *Pomba Gira*, women like Nazaré find a supernatural ally in their struggles with male partners and the limitations society imposes on them because of their gender.

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