

Gender and Religion Within Santo Daime: ‘Marian Devotion’, ‘Environmentalism’ and ‘Feminism of Difference’

Camila de Pieri Benedito¹

This short presentation will explore how, in a Santo Daime community from Minas Gerais/Brazil, environmentalism and the feminism of difference were co-opted as political agendas, and created gendered experiences and essentialisms. The community explored is Céu da Flor da Laranjeira², a Santo Daime church based in the rural area of a small city in the southern part of the State. I conducted fieldwork there between the years of 2015 and 2016, integrating ethnographic work, semi-structured interviews, and the reading of liturgical material.

Santo Daime’s origins

The genesis of Santo Daime goes back to Raimundo Irineu Serra who, in 1930, started it as a small eclectic cult in a rural neighborhood of the capital of Rio Branco, a city distant from the geographic limits of Minas Gerais where Céu da Flor da Laranjeira is located. The foundation of the Céu da Flor da Laranjeira is the deployment of an expansion movement of the Santo Daime started in 1970 by Sebastião Mota de Melo, which allowed the foundation of communities beyond its original territory.

The religion is not a cult composed of a centralized and centralizing hierarchy - as in the case of Roman Catholicism - but rather by a group of Brazilian and foreign communities that, because of their belief in a common genealogy, and shared conceptions of institutional and faith, unite under the same name: Santo Daime (Goulart, 2004). For classificatory and illustrative purposes, the specialized bibliography divided these communities into two main lines: Alto Santo and CEFLURIS.

The communities of Alto Santo are characterized as having remained almost totally restricted to Rio Branco. Its affiliates are related by strong consanguineous bonds and the communities fight for the position of legitimate follow-up of the

¹ Email: camis.benedito@gmail.com.

² [Heaven of the Orange Blossom](#), a fictional name for a real community.

community founded and institutionalized by Raimundo Irineu Serra. Most of the affiliates are from northeastern origin and descend from rubber tapper families. In the origins of the cult many were, as the founder, people of color and former rubber tappers with low education level. Santo Daime was crucial for their survival in a fast changing society with both economical and social challenges (Moreira & MacRae, 2011).

The communities of CEFLURIS have as patron the late Sebastião Mota de Melo, a former follower of Irineu who, after the former's death, founded a new movement. The communities of CEFLURIS differ demographically since they are comprised of the white middle strata of large urban centers outside the Amazon and the Brazilian limits. Ritualistically they differ in the absorption of new cosmologies and rituals, and have incorporated many practices from countercultural and New Age movements.

Currently, the community founded by Sebastião Mota has the name ICEFLU (Church of the Eclectic Worship of the Universal Fluent Light, Patron Sebastião Mota de Melo) and is led by his son Alfredo Gregório de Melo. Many of the communities interpreted anthropologically as coming from the CEFLURIS line are not affiliated with ICEFLU, and have developed other cosmological and ritualistic specificities. Such is the case of Céu da Flor de Laranjeira.

Céu da Flor de Laranjeira

My fieldwork highlighted cosmological and ritualistic specificities of Céu da Flor da Laranjeira in relation to ICEFLU and Alto Santo. This community was founded in 1987 as a branch of ICEFLU but in the 1990s, after the death of Sebastião, it broke away from the institution and began to develop its own particularities. The affiliation of its leaders to the historical line of Sebastião Mota de Melo and its geographic and demographic characterization, however, keeps them anthropologically linked to CEFLURIS. It is from this historical lineage that the environmental values which guide the group have emerged.

CEFLURIS founded, through the exchange with the countercultural movement and New Age spirituality, an environmental agenda that popularized Santo Daime as an ecological doctrine. In Céu da Flor de Laranjeira, by its specific cosmology,

environmentalism became linked to Marian devotion through what they understand by the Mother Era, understood as a Marian and maternal age founded through Santo Daime.

Mary is important to Santo Daime cause it's believed that Irineu, the founder, received the religion through Mary herself, who appeared to him as the Queen of the Forest and also as the Virgin of the Conception. Because of this, daimistas from all lines consider themselves as soldiers of the queen, and devotees from Céu da Flor de Laranjeira believe that their duty as soldiers is to value Mary by valuing her 'material' expressions: women and nature.

A "feminine doctrine"

Feminine and masculine are interpreted through an approximation with the spiritualist quantum³ in which the creation of the universe is understood as the result of the union of female and masculine particles. These particles are believed to be present throughout the universe and reflected in nature. Hence it is conceived that the prominence of one of the particles in a body would make the gender distinction between men and women and that the Daime brew integrates the perfect balance of these particles, with the jagube vine representing the masculine, and the chacruna leaf the feminine⁴.

These conceptions are emulated in the rituals and division of tasks, which are distributed by gender in the daily life of the community. The *feitio*, the long lasting ritual where the brew is made, is an interesting time for observing how the feminine and the masculine are elaborated in the Céu da Flor da Laranjeira. During *feitio* the marked division between men and women, elaborates the clear conception of the inevitability of both the existence of genders and their essential differentiation.

This view relates the feminine to the moon, to Earth, to introspection, to cold, to water, to intuition, to changeability, and to nature; while the masculine is attached to the sun, the heat, the active, the hot, the fire, the punctual, the rational. They are, as proposed by Butler (2003), constructed and performed identities. And it is from this performativity that the universe gains meaning and the political proposal is realized in the group.

³ Movement also related to the New Age cosmology.

⁴ Daime is the sacred brew in which Santo Daime is build upon. It's made by the infusion and the cooking of the jagube vine (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) with the chacruna leaves (*Psycotria viridis*).

In this context historical feminism - or feminism of equality (Rohden, 1995) - is often interpreted as aggressive and even counterproductive. Historical feminism, originating in the second and third feminist waves, had as its main guidelines the reproductive rights, sexual freedom and the universalization of women's rights, especially regarding equal educational and employment opportunities. In Céu da Flor da Laranjeira, however, the equality of rights challenges a fundamental question of its cosmology: the maintenance of the essential differences between men and women and, consequently, a sacred balance.

A similar movement occurred among feminist Catholic theologians, as treated in Fabiola Rohden's (1995) thesis. From the Basic Ecclesial Communities (Comunidades Eclesiais de Base), they created a feminist theology based on Marian devotion and the differentiation between men and women, which is why it became known as "feminism of the difference" in opposition to the "feminism of equality". This movement relates the valorization of the feminine and its essential characteristics, most notably maternity, to a contemporary revolutionary necessity in which the feminism of equality is rejected.

Rohden notes that this has placed feminist theologians in direct dialogue with ecofeminism, a movement born in California that relates nature to the feminine, rescuing fertility goddesses from diverse cultural backgrounds as objects of devotion. Through this perspective scientism, rationalism and environmental disasters came to be seen as the result of misogyny, and feminist practice began to integrate environmental protection. The religions of the goddesses and the sacred feminine arise at that moment⁵.

In Céu da Flor da Laranjeira the alignment to the feminism of the difference opened doors to the absorption of the sacred feminine, to goddess religions and to concepts of ecofeminisms. In the community, this cosmological integration feminized nature and transformed it in an expression of the Virgin of the Conception. Devotees argue environmentalism has a political and spiritual component: and since they consider themselves soldiers of the Virgin of the Conception, environmentalism is their fervent mission.

Final considerations

⁵ The Sacred Feminine is a religious movement in which women are believed to have the mission to redeem their connection with their body and therefore to nature for using them as spiritual vehicles.

However, valuing a feminism of difference while devaluing the proposals from feminism of equality limits how gender – and also sexuality – may be experienced by Céu da Flor da Laranjeira devotees. The holy maternity of Mary connects the very experience of being a woman to maternity, to the household, and to marriage. Rare are the cases of men and women who aren't married with children or aren't planning to be, and even more rare is the overt presence of homosexuals and non cisgender people. The very gendered religious experience strangles possibilities.

In the course of my doctoral thesis I intend to interrogate the possible impacts of these conceptions on sexualities and reproductive rights, and consider whether these religious groups can contain dissenting voices, sexualities and bodies that are outside the spectrum of normative heterosexuality. What is being seen is that even though there is a hegemonic ideal, there also are individual resistant practices that emerge from the very individuality of ecstatic experiences, when each devotee creates their own gendered experiences and logics, as was already proposed on Cavnar's works (2014).

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