

# Wicked Women and Femmes Fatales

This entity that was incorporated in her was *gargalhando* [cackling] horribly and saying, “She is mine, I am going to take her to the cemetery, I am going to take her to the grave, to the sepulcher, she is mine!” She was grimacing and gnashing her teeth and we were trying to get her to go inside, but she wouldn’t, she had a force inside of her and she wouldn’t budge. But finally, we succeeded in getting her inside, and she was cursing me and glaring at me and it wasn’t her in there. And I became terrified at that, by that thing that had dominated her.

—Nilmar

## CIGARETTES, *CACHAÇA*, AND CEMETERIES

Recalling the fearsome, cigarette-devouring entity that had taken possession of his wife, Nazaré, some dozen years before, Nilmar glanced around the small, street-side kiosk where the three of us sat huddled across a table before continuing in a low voice:

And this is something that I knew if I told anyone outside, they would never believe me, but she broke all the bottles in the place, as she was passing by, they just exploded. She never touched them, but they exploded. And then she sat there on the ground, in the middle of the temple, and began to light cigarette after cigarette and to eat them—lit cigarettes. She ate them one after another, and at the time she didn’t smoke. She grabbed a bottle of *cachaça* [rum] and guzzled the whole thing down.<sup>1</sup>

For those familiar with the Afro-Brazilian spirit world, Nilmar’s account of his wife’s strange behavior clearly indicates the presence of the

raucous Pomba Gira. The generic term for a class of female spirit entities, all of whom share certain features as well as a specific denominative,<sup>2</sup> Pomba Gira is recognizable by her distinctive *gargalhada* (throaty cackle), brazen manner, and appetite for cigarettes and strong drink. In the stories and songs through which her mythology circulates, Pomba Gira is portrayed as “a woman of ill repute,” sometimes a courtesan, sometimes a prostitute, but always a woman whose erotic life while on earth contravened the norms of proper feminine comportment and whose disembodied spirit continues to be linked to the world of the living. Because of these ties, Pomba Gira is believed capable of erupting into people’s lives in unpredictable ways.

Drawing on dominant notions of female sexuality as both alluring and perilous, images and statuary of Pomba Gira depict her as a voluptuous demon clad in red, sometimes brandishing a trident (figure 1). Such representations link her to a long European Catholic tradition of seductresses, succubae, and other diabolical female figures. Another branch of her family tree connects her to Africa and to the deities of the Central and West African peoples who were brought to Brazil as slaves during the three-hundred-year course of that transatlantic trade. Adepts of Umbanda and other Afro-Brazilian religions frequently describe Pomba Gira as the female form or counterpart of Exu, the mercurial trickster figure derived from the Yoruba deity Esu, who in Brazil became conflated with the Devil.

Like the figure of the Devil, Pomba Gira is recognized far outside the confines of sectarian religion. She has become a stereotypical figure in the Brazilian imaginary, and references to her may be found in popular *telenovelas* (prime-time soap operas), literature, cinema, popular music, and street slang. As a result most Brazilians know at least the broad outlines of her popular mythology. Indeed this profile is familiar to any inhabitant of the Western world, for Pomba Gira is the quintessential femme fatale, that perilous seductress depicted in pulp fiction and film noir. Possibly evil, definitely dangerous, she embodies a uniquely Brazilian envisioning of femininity’s dark side. Like other ambivalent, erotically charged representations of supernatural femininity, such as Vodou’s Erzulie Danto or the Hindu goddesses Durga and Kali, Pomba Gira symbolizes the dangers that female sexuality poses to a social order in which positions of formal power are occupied almost entirely by men. By developing a relationship with this entity, devotees channel this ambivalent force in ways that can be individually—if seldom collectively—transformative.



FIGURE 1. Pomba Gira statues. Photo courtesy of Márcia Ines Alves.

Hailed as Sovereign of the Cemetery, Queen of the Crossroads, and Mistress of the Night, among other titles, Pomba Gira is venerated in myriad incarnations in small temples throughout the city of Rio de Janeiro and other urban centers. Each of these *pomba giras* has her own specific preferences and a more or less developed life story, although all share a family resemblance. They seem to be most popular among inhabitants of the poor and working-class neighborhoods that cling to Rio's steep hill-sides and ring its periphery, a population that sees in their stories aspects of their own lives and attributes to them the supernatural power to resolve their troubles. In midnight ceremonies devotees ritually summon these entities with drum and song to the human world, where, incarnated in the body of one or more trained mediums, individual *pomba giras* commune with admirers and attend their petitions. These are events of great revelry for it is said that *pomba giras* return to the human world not only to assist petitioners but to *se divertirem* (have fun): to dance, sing, enjoy their favorite vices, and be adored. Uncontrolled such spirits may possess the unsuspecting at will, provoking all manner of affliction and scandal. Abrupt or striking changes in an individual's manner, particularly those involving licentious or provocative behavior, unpredictable mood swings, vulgar language, rebelliousness, or debauchery, may be interpreted as evidence of possession by an untamed *pomba gira*.

According to Nilmar, it was just such disruptive conduct on the part of his wife that convinced him to seek help. After numerous episodes of odd or uncharacteristically aggressive behavior of which Nazaré vehemently denied any knowledge, Nilmar confided his troubles to a colleague, who advised him to consult a spiritual healer. Following this advice, Nilmar arranged to bring his wife to an Umbanda temple, telling her that they had been invited to visit a friend. Describing the events of that memorable afternoon, Nilmar recalled that, as the temple's leader emerged to greet them and Nazaré perceived the ruse, a terrifying force overcame her with an intensity that shattered glass bottles:

And the leader said to me, "Look, we have to do a *trabalho* [ritual work], she has to develop this spirit. You will need to buy the things for this *trabalho*." He told us the day that the ceremony would be held and we bought the things required and we went. And so we began there, in this way. And only later, I began to find out that the crazy things that she was doing were the result of these entities.

Nazaré, who had been sitting silently throughout Nilmar's account, interjected, "I heard from my own mouth, but it wasn't me talking, that what [the spirit entity] wanted was *luz* [light]." Following the leader's instructions, the couple purchased the various items necessary for a complex ritual work, or *trabalho*, that would help Nazaré to "develop" the spirit, a popular incarnation of Pomba Gira named Maria Molambo das Sete Catacombas (Raggedy Maria of the Seven Catacombs). After this initial *trabalho*, Nazaré began to frequent Umbanda ceremonies, gradually learning how to ritually control what she and Nilmar came to understand as episodes of spirit possession and to limit them to the appropriate times and places.

Practitioners of Umbanda and other Afro-Brazilian spirit-based religions say that by "developing the spirit," or establishing an intimate relationship of ritually mediated exchange, the afflicted is able to transform a disruptive experience into a constructive one. In return for their offerings of food, drink, praise, material items, and—temporarily—their own bodies, devotees believe that the spirits will mystically intervene on their behalf in the affairs of the human world. Such ritual exchanges between human and spirit are understood to generate various effects directly measurable in the lives of individuals, including healing, success in romantic or business endeavors, family harmony, well-being, protection from harm, the resolution of affliction, and other material benefits.<sup>3</sup>

This notion of reciprocal commitment between human and spirit is expressed by the polyvalent term *trabalho*, or work, a central organiz-

ing concept in Afro-Brazilian religions. Not only are certain rituals and offerings referred to as *trabalhos*, but devotees say that by providing the corporeal form by which the spirit can manifest itself in the world, they *trabalham* (work) with the spirits. In return spirits come back to the terrestrial world in order to *trabalhar*, attending the requests of humans in need of their spiritual assistance.<sup>4</sup> Some say that by helping petitioners realize diverse desires, *pomba giras* gain the *luz* (light) necessary for their own spiritual progression. Among the spirit's devotees, mutually beneficial exchange is at the heart of Pomba Gira's cult, although the actions of such unruly entities can never be wholly controlled.

Nazaré spent the next decade cultivating her relationship with the spirits under the tutelage of different Afro-Brazilian spiritual leaders and honing her mediumship skills. As she learned to work with Maria Molambo and other spirit entities, the behaviors and feelings that she had come to understand as possession episodes became less disruptive to her home life and more amenable to ritual control. Like many who work with the spirits, in time she started her own cult center, holding ritual ceremonies and providing a range of spiritual and therapeutic services for clients in the basement of her home. Nazaré attributed this endeavor not to her own agency but to that of Maria Molambo, whose reputation had begun to attract clients and petitioners from the neighborhood seeking the spirit's assistance. Those in the know say that Pomba Gira specializes in resolving intimate questions of love, erotic attraction, money, and power, those problematic arenas of life where deeply held desires often clash with dominant moral codes.

This connection with the hidden or illicit dimensions of human desire and with the rituals intended to realize these desires links Pomba Gira with *macumba* or *quimbanda*,<sup>5</sup> pejorative terms for those Afro-Brazilian spiritual practices that outsiders classify as immoral or malevolent—that is, black magic. As a result many people distance themselves from Pomba Gira and her devotees. Yet for those who claim to work with these spirits, receiving them in possession trance, Pomba Gira can be an efficacious if ambivalent ally. A marginalized figure herself, Pomba Gira speaks to many of the lived realities of her devotees. At once reviled and celebrated, demanding and dangerous, she embodies the volatility and stigma of life on Brazil's urban margins.

## WORKING ON THE SELF AND THE WORLD

In this book I examine the intersections of magic, morality, and social marginalization in contemporary Brazil as they are embodied in and through the figure of Pomba Gira. However, though the bawdy spirit is my ostensible subject, what follows is neither a history nor a biography of a supernatural being. Rather than abstract this imaginative persona from the human dramas in which she figures, I focus on the significance of Pomba Gira in the life of an individual devotee, Maria Nazaré de Souza Oliveira, a working-class housewife, mother, and spiritual healer who lives with her extended family on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro.<sup>6</sup> Situating the spirit within the particularities of Nazaré's life, I explore her relationship with Pomba Gira as a means for "working on the self and the world," to borrow the historian Robert Orsi's formulation.<sup>7</sup> The book's real subject is the myriad ways that individuals endeavor to transform both themselves and the world around them through stories and ritual practices invoking this spirit entity, and how they are transformed in the process.

Because Pomba Gira is a widely recognized persona within Brazil's cultural imaginary—that inventive landscape of legendary beings, supernatural entities, and archetypal characters that exists in every society, I begin by describing the main characteristics of this spirit as portrayed in the stories, songs, and images through which her mythology circulates. Although she appears in multiple forms, Pomba Gira is always a woman who defies patriarchal criteria of feminine respectability. Historically speaking, she seems to have first emerged as a distinctive entity with her own characteristics and skills among urban Afro-Brazilian cult practitioners in the early twentieth century from a matrix of European and African conceptualizations of femininity, sexuality, and magical action.

Like all supernatural beings, however, Pomba Gira takes on the breath of life—that is, she exists and is meaningful—only at the permeable interface between an external, social environment and an internal world of personal experience. Stories and rituals involving this entity must accord with consensually accepted meanings in order to be accepted as authentic, but to be effective they also must address issues or conflicts particular to the afflicted person herself. So after outlining Pomba Gira's culturally determined and collectively shared features, I consider Nazaré's experience in more detail, exploring this entity's role in the circumstances of Nazaré's life, both as she narrated it to me and

as I observed it from 2000 to 2002 and in subsequent visits of shorter duration since that time.<sup>8</sup> This provides the setting for a more detailed discussion of the role of Pomba Gira in the intimate struggles of daily life on the poor and working-class fringes of Rio de Janeiro.

Close attention to the interplay between Nazaré's narrative and ritual invocations of Pomba Gira and events in her life highlights the strategic appeal of this "woman of the street," who is regularly called upon in situations of domestic distress or romantic intrigue. Nazaré's case illustrates how appeals to this spirit function in a social setting where men and women have different levels of involvement in and expectations about sexual intimacy, marriage, and family responsibility and are subject to different standards of moral behavior. In a move that initially might seem paradoxical, by invoking the spirit of an unruly harlot Pomba Gira's mediums avail themselves of an alternative envisioning of spiritual power that, in rupturing established norms of feminine conduct and moral action, holds out the possibility for effecting various transformations.

Moving from the collective world of normative meanings and values to the inward experiences of individuals and back again, my interpretive strategy situates narratives, possession performances, and ritual works involving Pomba Gira within a broader landscape of Afro-Brazilian spiritual traditions and contemporary social dynamics in Rio, as well as within the more intimate setting of one woman's domestic life. This analytical frame highlights Pomba Gira's function as a symbolic agent mediating individual bodies and experiences and conventional discourses within Brazilian society about gender, sexuality, desire, and moral action.

To put it in slightly different terms, I approach Pomba Gira as a form of social discourse: a conceptual and experiential frame for the expression of various disjunctive experiences, interpersonal conflicts, perceived threats to the self, or other stresses, for which there may be few other socially acceptable outlets.<sup>9</sup> As is the case with other examples of spirit-based traditions in which women predominate, such as Candomblé, Santería, Puerto Rican Espiritismo, urban Vodou, Korean Shamanism, and the Zar cults of North and East Africa, to name a few, working with Pomba Gira can be seen as a creative yet culturally sanctioned response to restrictive gender roles or inadequate love relationships, a way to express otherwise forbidden thoughts or feelings, and an economic strategy for women who have few options beyond the traditional wifely role.<sup>10</sup> Yet the fact that this entity is incorporated

overwhelmingly by two segments of the urban population in Rio de Janeiro, housewives and effeminate or homosexual men, indicates that she speaks particularly to problematic issues involving gender, sexuality, morality, and desire—particularly those desires condemned as illicit or improper.<sup>11</sup>

The disjuncture between normative mores that are continually reinforced in various ways and the life experiences of Pomba Gira's predominantly lower-class and working-class devotees provides significant fodder for interactions with this spirit entity. Through their narrative and ritual invocations of Pomba Gira, individuals like Nazaré give form to otherwise inchoate experiences produced by, among other things, deeply felt incongruities between their own circumstances or desires and prevailing social norms. Embodied in Pomba Gira, the holy harlot, these tensions are made dramatically manifest in the material world, thereby becoming subject to human reflection and manipulation. In this sense Pomba Gira and other Afro-Brazilian spirit entities provide a set of symbolic resources and ritual strategies by which individuals are empowered to work on themselves and the world around them.

But we also may see in the phenomenon of Pomba Gira something like what Stephan Palmié referred to as “ghostly revenants of disavowed pasts,” the spectral evidence of a conceptual universe that, rather than having been superseded by modernity and its correlative systems of knowledge and social control, serves as its illegitimate other.<sup>12</sup> In other words, narratives about and ritual performances of Pomba Gira participate in an alternative moral imagination that has been systematically delegitimized within and by more hegemonic discourses. This alternative moral imagination relies on different configurations of gender, sexuality, and power and offers different interpretive possibilities for narrating the self and acting in the world. Within its universe of meaning, ritual works that appeal to Pomba Gira function as strategic forms of action that attempt to make sense of what is experienced as “morally senseless or qualifiable as outright evil” by forging other connections between cause and effect.<sup>13</sup> Among those who serve Pomba Gira or procure her services—men and women who have seen little improvement in the quality of their lives despite social and economic transformations in Brazil over the past several decades—this spirit promises to intervene in the occult flows by which scarce and desired resources seem always to flow to well-positioned others.



POMBA GIRA IN NARRATIVE AND  
RITUAL PERFORMANCE

Although Pomba Gira's actions are intimately related to the circumstances of their own lives, devotees like Nazaré understand this spirit as a wholly autonomous being with her own desires and volition. They describe Pomba Gira as an active if unpredictable presence and frequently recount stories about her mystical activities, integrating their personal experiences with themes drawn from a larger mythological corpus. More than an interpretive lens that orders and imparts coherence to the world, these stories also are employed to reimagine events over which their narrators otherwise have little control, disclosing an occult world of alternative possibilities and meanings. Always the figure of Pomba Gira is portrayed as a vehement, passionate force that devotees rely on to bring clarity to troublesome situations.

The qualities of vehemence and passion also mark Pomba Gira's physical presence among her devotees. As in many other spirit-focused religions, the phenomenon of possession in Afro-Brazilian traditions is expressed by alterations of behavior, voice, gesture, bodily posture, and—according to practitioners—subjective experience, whose characteristics and governing codes are widely known. Embodied, *pomba gira* spirits are at once flirtatious and aggressive, grandiose and vulgar, and those who incorporate them, whether men or women, are temporarily transformed into powerful queens and outrageous whores who strut, preen, frolic, curse, and revel in the communal adulation of their audience (figure 2). Though mediums typically claim to remember nothing of the experience afterward, incarnating these spirits undoubtedly permits them an exhilarating moment in the spotlight, an opportunity to engage in an erotically charged performance of feminine power, and an occasion to experience themselves as glamorous, dominant, and adored.

Moreover, because Pomba Gira is known to have a sharp tongue, those who incorporate these entities are free to admonish members of the community, often to the point of insult. One of her most defining traits is a blunt candor that can provoke scandal and discord but also, in exposing social rifts, can set in motion a process of healing. As a young admirer advised me, Pomba Gira “speaks the truth even if it hurts.” In the guise of the spirit, possessed devotees may criticize or make demands of family members, a husband, and other loved ones.<sup>14</sup> And as Nazaré's example illustrates, those women who successfully claim to incarnate Pomba Gira—who provide the human body through which this entity is made



FIGURE 2. Nazaré dressed as Pomba Gira.

materially present—can expand their autonomy, reputation, and ability to earn a living in ways that adherence to more conventional female roles precludes.

However, though the rewards of working with this spirit can be significant, so are the sacrifices. Pomba Gira is a difficult mistress, capable of wreaking havoc in her devotees' lives as well as restoring domestic tranquility. Those who work with her believe that they enter into an intimate, lifelong relationship with an entity who demands unfailing loyalty and is quick to castigate those who displease her. Fulfilling one's obligations to Pomba Gira involves a significant investment of time, energy, and money and can strain a medium's relationships with her flesh-and-blood family. By their own testimony, many women experience their affiliation with these spirits as both an asset and a burden and frequently emphasize its onerous aspects. As Nazaré characterized it, "I don't have free choice, I don't have it. I don't have my own life. I am a slave of the [spirit]."

Beyond the extensive ritual obligations that mediums incur, some of the greatest difficulties engendered by working with Pomba Gira are

those that arise from the triangulated relations between a medium, her possessing entity, and her loved ones.<sup>15</sup> For women in particular, balancing the demands of Pomba Gira with the demands of husbands or male partners is an ongoing process fraught with jealousies, clashes of interest, and power struggles. Successfully managing this convoluted intersection of human and spirit requires considerable skill. And because many of the conflicts that are produced cannot themselves be resolved through appeals to Pomba Gira, mediums must resort to other strategies. Nazaré's example is instructive because it shows not only the license that working with this transgressive entity can grant her mediums, but also its very real limits. As we will see, Maria Molambo's actuation in Nazaré's life has provoked as many difficulties as it ostensibly has resolved.

#### MORALITY, BLACK MAGIC, AND *MACUMBA*

Although remarkable in certain ways, Nazaré is not unique. The experiences that eventually led her to Umbanda are ones shared by many women living in Rio's urban periphery. How she transformed these experiences into a career as a spiritual healer also is not terribly unusual. Indeed Nazaré is characteristic of women who serve the spirits: an urban, working-class housewife and mother who claims to cede her body regularly to a host of *pomba gira* and other Afro-Brazilian spirit entities and who struggles to balance the demands of this spirit work with the demands of her family. Yet little has been written about people like Nazaré, the everyday practitioners of an eclectic and de-centralized spirit tradition that freely combines elements from various religions, emphasizes innovation over fidelity to a putatively ancestral heritage, and focuses in ritually concrete ways on the pragmatic and material problems of its devotees.<sup>16</sup> More often these practices have been dismissed as charlatanism or *feitiçaria*, that is, black magic.

Although the academic literature on Afro-Brazilian religions has not reflected the perspective of people like Nazaré, diffuse, eclectic, innovative, and pragmatically focused spiritual traditions have played an important role as a contrastive foil against which particular Afro-Brazilian modalities have been defined as authentically legitimate and systematized according to specific criteria. The amorphous category of *feitiçaria* has long been critical both for scholars interested in defining and identifying "legitimate" religion, and for elites concerned to police the nation's black and working-class masses.<sup>17</sup>

In Brazil African-derived spiritual traditions were a perennial source of concern for slave owners, civil authorities, lawyers, educators, criminologists, scholars, newspaper editors, and chroniclers of city life since enslaved Africans were first brought to the former Portuguese colony in large numbers in the eighteenth century. With the final abolition of slavery in 1888 and the establishment of the first Republic in 1889, the legal recognition of formerly enslaved blacks as citizens meant that a racialized hierarchy was no longer explicitly encoded in law. But of course a social order predicated on unequal relationships is neither created nor dissolved solely through legislative means, and so after the final abolition of slavery the forms of domination shifted, reconfiguring in diffuse and less codified systems.

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth elites cloaked their racial concerns in the language of hygiene, criminality, and a paternalistic nationalism, warning of the threats posed to the country's physical and moral health, as well as its national development, by its dark-skinned masses.<sup>18</sup> Various measures were adopted as prophylaxis, including the infamous policy of *branqueamento*, which brought thousands of Europeans (principally Germans and Italians) to the Brazilian hinterlands, where, it was hoped, they would both increase the country's economic production and mate with the natives, gradually producing a whiter—and more evolved—population.<sup>19</sup> In Rio public health campaigns were implemented to clean up “unhealthy regions” and demolish crowded tenements, forcing their predominately Afro-Brazilian occupants out of the city center.<sup>20</sup>

Even more perturbing to elites were the spiritual practices of the blacks and lower classes, believed to reflect their inferior mental state and credulity but also the potential—in the form of *feticaria*—to wreak social havoc. Although Brazil's Republican constitution guaranteed freedom of religion, legislation prohibiting the “illicit” practices of medicine, magic, and curing granted the state de facto jurisdiction and punitive power over Afro-Brazilian religions and their adherents.<sup>21</sup> As a result, from the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth practitioners of these traditions were subject to prosecution by civil authorities and their ritual objects periodically confiscated in police raids.<sup>22</sup> Lurid news accounts throughout this period portrayed African-derived religions as depraved and their followers as prone to immoral and criminal acts, and outraged readers regularly wrote to newspaper editors demanding that the authorities put an end to the scourge of black sorcery. As late as the 1970s,

according to some observers, Afro-Brazilian cult groups were still subject to episodic incidents of police persecution.<sup>23</sup>

Given the virulently anti-African atmosphere of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth it is surprising that the classic scholarly works on Afro-Brazilian traditions, with some notable exceptions, focused on the demonstrably African aspects of these religions.<sup>24</sup> The bulk of this scholarship was produced between the 1930s and the 1960s, a time when many government officials, prominent intellectuals, and other elites considered Brazil's Afro-descendant populations to be the remnant of an inferior race (or, as Arthur Ramos put it, a "backwards class") whose debased spiritual activities threatened the public welfare.<sup>25</sup> Against this prevailing sentiment writers like Ramos, Edison Carneiro, and Melville Herskovits in the 1930s and 1940s, and later Roger Bastide and Pierre Verger, argued that the spiritual practices of blacks constituted a legitimate religion insofar as they had preserved an ancestral African heritage brought to Brazil by slaves and their descendents.

This so-called quest for African survivals helped bring international scholarly attention to Brazil, where it was believed that African traditions had been preserved remarkably intact.<sup>26</sup> As J. Lorand Matory observed, Brazil quickly became a locus classicus in the social science literature, as well as in intellectual debates about the degree and significance of the New World's African heritage.<sup>27</sup> From this convergence emerged an interpretative framework that understood variances in Afro-Brazilian cult groups as a product of their putative ethnic provenance in Africa, organized around two broad, cultural-linguistic categories: the West African Sudanese (which included the Yoruba, referred to as Nagô in Brazil) and the Central African Bantu.<sup>28</sup>

For a variety of reasons Nagô religion was seen as more advanced in mythological, ritual, and organizational complexity than Bantu (sometimes referred to as Congo or Angola) religion, which was described consistently as impoverished and therefore highly susceptible to admixture.<sup>29</sup> In hindsight it is clear that this understanding was partly a result of the fact that Nagô-oriented Candomblé communities in Bahia served as important field sites for scholars studying Afro-Brazilian religions. Representatives of these communities were able to shape the discourse on these traditions by their own activism as well as alliances with politicians and scholars, the latter of whom reproduced the interested claims of their informants in their own work.<sup>30</sup> In spite of the problematic nature

of the assumptions underlying this Nagôcentric interpretive framework, over time it came to structure academic as well as popular perceptions of Brazil's African-derived religions.<sup>31</sup>

From the perspective of scholars and religious spokespeople interested in Afro-Brazilian religions as exemplars of African traditions preserved under the fragmenting conditions of slavery, signs of eclecticism and innovation were diagnostic of a process of decay or admixture that compromised the integrity of this African heritage.<sup>32</sup> As a consequence popular spiritual traditions that freely combined African-derived elements with those derived from folk Catholic, Amerindian, Spiritist, or other sources, or that focused on the material desires of practitioners, tended to be seen as adulterated forms of one or more originally intact religions. Called variously *macumba*, *feitiçaria*, or low spiritism,<sup>33</sup> these eclectic Afro-Brazilian forms were thought to have become perverted in the course of absorbing multiple influences, losing their original integrity and degenerating into magic. One influential proponent of this view was Arthur Ramos, whose description of *macumba* is characteristic of the general attitude toward Afro-Brazilian heterogeneity in the 1930s and 1940s:

Macumba today is a generic term in all of Brazil that has come to designate not only religions of the Negro, but various magical practices—*despachos* [hexes], diverse rituals—that at times only remotely retain a connection with the primitive religious forms transplanted from Africa. Today there are macumbas for any purpose. The work of syncretism knows no limits. Macumba has invaded all spheres. It is at the root of popular forms of magic, which inherited much from the Negro but also has strong roots in the magical corpus of European origin.<sup>34</sup>

For Ramos and many others, such eclecticism indicated that a process of corruption had transformed the practices in question from the category of licit interactions with the supernatural (i.e., religion) to the category of illicit interactions (i.e., magic).<sup>35</sup> Those who engaged in such adulterated and ignoble practices were dismissed as charlatans and sorcerers.

By insisting on the dissimilarities among various traditions, whether rooted in categorical oppositions between religion and magic or in the different cultural origins of African slaves, this interpretive framework both overestimated the separateness of various traditions and oversystematized them to accord with various criteria of legitimacy. Although it enabled the discursive establishment of certain forms of Afro-Brazilian tradition as authentic religions, it also stigmatized others and, overall, minimized their multiple articulations.

Concerns about the legitimacy of various spiritual practices continue to be widespread in Brazil, even as more recent scholarship has moved away from morally loaded typologies that oppose authentic and inauthentic forms of Afro-Brazilian religiosity. When learning of my interest in Afro-Brazilian religions, for example, colleagues and friends counseled me to turn my attention to Candomblé, particularly the form associated with the traditional houses of Bahia. They considered Candomblé an authentic religion, whose “pure” African heritage made it worthy of serious study. For them, Candomblé’s African ancestry was forcefully symbolized by the *orixás*, African deities at the center of Candomblé ritualizing, whose cult is highly formalized and complex, requiring years of apprenticeship to master. Although too polite to say it outright, those offering collegial advice implied that Nazaré’s spiritual life, centered on the troublemaking Pomba Gira, ought not to be considered a legitimate religion but something closer to the illicit pole of magic, or even *feticaria*, maleficent black magic.

But what separates religion from magic, legitimate spiritual practices from illegitimate ones? Who is empowered to define which appeals to the supernatural constitute religion and which do not? By what criteria? What are the ramifications of these classifications on the ground, in the lives of those whose spiritual pursuits are denigrated as black magic by those more able to disseminate their own point of view as normative? These are issues that I confronted repeatedly in the course of my fieldwork, as I struggled to comprehend the fault lines that divide the Afro-Brazilian religious field into various factions and the subtle (and not so subtle) ways these internal divisions were discursively produced and reproduced—even as the very classificatory distinctions at stake seemed to dissolve at the level of practice.

From the beginning there was the problem of nomenclature. Observing that Nazaré and the members of her community frequently referred to their distinctive spiritual practices as *Macumba*, I too began doing so, until Nazaré took me aside and cautioned me to use the more neutral term *Espiritismo* (Spiritism) when talking about her religion to outsiders. Although I didn’t fully realize it then, the term *macumba* summons a host of imaginative associations in the minds of many Brazilians,<sup>36</sup> conjuring up a world of hidden malice, pacts with the Devil, and clandestine midnight ceremonies, of savage desires given free rein and malevolent powers unleashed by pulsing drums. In other words, for most Brazilians *macumba* is synonymous with witchcraft or black magic: an occult practice drawing on mysterious powers for diabolical purposes

through the use of sacrificial offerings, incantations, or other suspect practices. Fully aware of the derogatory sense of the term, Nazaré and her followers nevertheless employed it among themselves to refer to their distinctive spiritual practices and objects, for which they denied any malevolent intent. In fact so unremarkable and ordinary was their usage that I did not initially perceive the irony.

Espiritismo, unlike *macumba*, carries no negative connotation. Both broader and more vague, the term refers to a number of traditions focused on the interactions of human and spirit beings through the practice of mediumship or other forms of spirit communication. To a Brazilian audience it denotes a set of spiritual beliefs and practices influenced by the writings of the French mystic and philosopher known as Allan Kardec, popular in Rio since the late nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup> Kardec claimed to have received insight into the true nature of the universe from various spirit entities, including those of deceased philosophers and statesmen, to whom he posed a series of questions through the intermediary of a medium. In *The Book of the Spirits* (1857), his most popular work, he presented these insights as a rational system fully congruent with modern science. Partly because of their claims to scientific legitimacy and influence among elites, Kardec's theories gained wide social acceptance in Brazil and informed a variety of "religious, philosophical, pseudo-scientific, parapsychological, and therapeutic movements" loosely classified under the term *Espiritismo*.<sup>38</sup> Today, like Candomblé, Espiritismo is widely considered a legitimate spiritual path and therefore a suitable subject for a foreign researcher.

At the time the finer distinctions and implicit connotations of these various terms, so clear to my interlocutors, were lost on me. In search of clarification, etymological and otherwise, I turned to the scholarly literature. There I found that although the term *macumba* has a long history of usage, there was little agreement among various authors about its meaning, linguistic origins, or the specific practices it denoted.<sup>39</sup> Despite these differences, *macumba's* deviant status was a point of widespread (although not unanimous) accord. Sometimes this deviancy was linked to *macumba's* alleged impurity, primitivism, or debauchery. At other times *macumba* was equated with charlatanism or described as *feitiçaria*, an accusation that once was applied to all African-derived religions in Brazil. Over time the term *macumba* came to designate that set of spirits, practices, and religious goals classified as illegitimate by a diverse set of actors in the struggle to assert the legitimacy of their own set of spirits, practices, and religious goals. As the criteria for religious



legitimacy changed, both in the works of various authors and over time, so did the characteristics attributed to *macumba*.

This ambiguity in the usage of the term *macumba* continues today. Some scholars and practitioners use it in a relatively neutral sense to refer to the Afro-Brazilian religions of Rio and the Southeast in comparison with Candomblé of Bahia and the Northeast. More often, however, *macumba* is used in common parlance to designate the ritual practices and associated objects (and places) that the speaker believes to be employed for morally questionable purposes. As a consequence of this prevailing usage, Afro-Brazilian practitioners like Nazaré tend to employ the term in an ironic fashion when speaking of their spiritual pursuits to other insiders, acknowledging its negative semantic valence while simultaneously affirming an alternative meaning. Used in this way *macumba* expresses not so much a specific set of practices or goals as what Vânia Cardoso referred to as a “form of sociality,” a shared vision of the world as permeated by spirit forces that can be influenced by human beings for good or ill.<sup>40</sup> Moreover in defiantly reappropriating the term as a form of positive self-identification, *macumbeiros*, or those who profess to practice *macumba*, manipulate its associated stigma for their own ends, among others, instilling fear among outsiders.

A note on my own terminology is therefore in order. For the sake of linguistic convenience and clarity, I use the terms *Umbanda*, *Candomblé*, *Espiritismo*, and *Macumba* throughout this book to refer to related but variant forms of Afro-Brazilian religious practice. In general I have followed the usage of my informants, who tended to use the term *Candomblé* to refer to communities professing adherence to an African heritage in which (1) the cult of the *orixás* receives primary or exclusive emphasis; (2) Yoruba or other African languages are used for liturgical functions; (3) rites of formal initiation involve a period of seclusion, animal sacrifice, and the observance of alimentary and sartorial taboos; (4) members are hierarchically organized based on initiatic age and level of ritual knowledge; and (5) ritual responsibilities are determined based on ties of fictive kinship forged through initiation, one’s gender, and the gender of one’s ruling *orixá*.

In contrast with Candomblé, my informants used the term *Umbanda* for communities that cultivated spirit entities in addition to the *orixás* and generally did not conduct formal rites of initiation, practice animal sacrifice, or employ a specialized liturgical language. *Espiritismo* and *Macumba* were used as generic terms for Afro-Brazilian religions in the ways that I discussed previously. Despite these and other differences in

matters of ritual, liturgical language, pantheon, and mythological corpus among the traditions ostensibly designated by these terms, there also are significant overlaps in practice, as I have mentioned. Further muddying the waters, individual practitioners often draw on multiple sources to structure their own engagement with the Afro-Brazilian spirit world and may employ any one of these terms when speaking of their religious pursuits, often using different terms when speaking to different audiences. Consequently the reader is advised that designations like *Candomblé* and *Umbanda* have a broader semantic range on the ground than might appear from the written page.

#### EXU SPIRITS AND THE MORAL ECONOMY OF THE STREET

*Macumba*'s morally ambiguous potential is both symbolized and confirmed by its association with a class of ambivalent spirit entities called *exus*, derived from the Yoruba deity Esu (Exu in Portuguese). A trickster figure, Exu was transformed as the lives and needs of his New World devotees changed, losing some of his African characteristics and gaining characteristics specific to his new environment. Today a rich and open-ended mythology permits some Afro-Brazilian practitioners to emphasize a singular Exu who, like his Yoruba antecedent, is considered primarily a messenger deity and a playful, if unpredictable, *orixá*.<sup>41</sup> Others perceive Exu through a Spiritist-influenced theological framework as a plurality of powerful and unruly "spirits of the shadows," who represent the darker aspects of the human psyche. Catholic theodicy contributed yet another layer of evocative associations to this figure when clerics and missionaries and their charges in both Africa and the New World equated Exu with the Devil, an identity that continues to be affirmed forcefully by some and contested with equal vigor by others.<sup>42</sup>

Among practitioners of Umbanda, an Afro-Brazilian variant that emerged from the encounter of popular, African-derived traditions and Kardecist Spiritism sometime in the first three decades of the twentieth century, Exu represents not only a singular being but a class of colorful entities that includes Pomba Gira.<sup>43</sup> Known as *exus*, these entities are described as the spirits of former human beings who, for a variety of reasons, remain linked to the world of the living (figure 3). They are connected especially with urban street life and its illicit desires—vice, lust, crime, and sensual indulgence—and are represented as prostitutes, hustlers, conmen, cabaret girls, and others forced by circumstance to



FIGURE 3. Statues of various *exus*. Photo courtesy of Márcia Ines Alves.

live by their wits. Many practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions affectionately refer to them as *povo da rua*, or people of the street.<sup>44</sup>

Given its eclecticism there is no one authoritative version of Umbanda cosmology, and it is difficult to point to a discrete set of beliefs or practices common to all practitioners. Nevertheless some general ideas seem to be shared widely. *Exus*, for example, constitute only one category of entities within a large and heterogeneous spirit universe that is sometimes arrayed along a hierarchical continuum from more “evolved” to less “evolved” spiritual planes. The most exalted of these spiritual planes is occupied by the Supreme Being, identified sometimes with the Christian God or with Olorun (or Olodumare), the Yoruba creator deity. Beneath it are a number of spiritual levels inhabited by an eclectic assortment of disincarnate beings who refer to diverse historical moments and represent social types prominent in folklore and collective memory. This myriad collection of spirit entities pays homage to mythic characters whose stories largely are excluded from official versions of Brazilian history but who remain continually present in the lives of Umbanda practitioners as sources of knowledge, healing, and affliction.

Umbanda systematizers often group these entities into different *falanges* (phalanxes) or *linhas* (lines), typically seven in number, each responsible for a particular aspect of existence. These entities range from

the “most evolved,” who rarely descend to the terrestrial realm (Jesus Christ, the spirits of European philosophers, popular Catholic saints, and the *orixás*), through a series of lesser-evolved entities (archetypal figures of Brazilian folk history such as *pretos velhos* and *caboclos*, said to be the spirits of elderly black slaves and indigenous Indians), lower-level entities like *exus* and *pomba giras* (the spirits of hustlers and prostitutes), and finally *eguns*, the generalized spirits of the dead.<sup>45</sup> Some Umbanda centers also recognize entities representing other marginal social types, among them *ciganos* (gypsies), *marinheiros* (sailors), *boiadeiros* (cowboys), and *cangaceiros* (rural bandits).<sup>46</sup>

While the most evolved of these spirit beings exist in a dimension far removed from the human realm, those who occupy levels closer to the terrestrial world can be persuaded to work on behalf of humans, that is, to mystically intervene in human affairs. Some practitioners say that by helping human beings these entities evolve in the hierarchy of spiritual beings, eventually reaching the upper echelons. A main objective of Umbanda ritual is to mobilize this spiritual aid for the physical, financial, or romantic problems of participants. Spirit possession ceremonies open to the public are one of the ways those in need access the various supernatural entities recognized by Umbanda. In addition many Umbanda leaders offer private sessions with particular spirits as well as divination and other ritual services to clients seeking help with maladies that range from persistent misfortune and illness to domestic difficulties.

Practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions sometimes classify spirit entities according to two spheres of moral actuation: the “line of the right” and the “line of the left.” Spirits of the right are said to work only for good, that is, in ways that accord with dominant moral codes. This division includes the *orixás*, African-derived divinities associated with ancestral lineages, natural forces, and cultural activities, as well as two popular categories of Umbanda spirits: *pretos velhos* (spirits of elderly black slaves; figure 4) and *caboclos* (spirits of Brazil’s native inhabitants; figure 5).

While Umbanda adepts acknowledge the *orixás* with offerings of food, drink, flowers, and candles, many focus their ritual attention on *pretos velhos* and *caboclos*, who, because of their own difficult experiences while on earth, are thought to understand the sufferings of their human petitioners and to possess the spiritual resources to help them. Recalling a long gone and highly romanticized past, *pretos velhos* and *caboclos* return to the earth in periodic ceremonies during which, in-

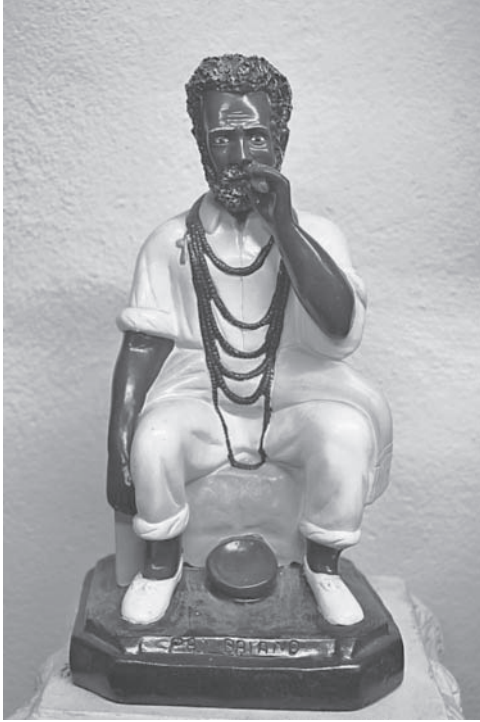


FIGURE 4. Statue of a *preto velho*. Photo courtesy of Márcia Ines Alves.

corporated in the body of a medium, they “consult” with petitioners and execute a variety of spiritual cures. *Pretos velhos* may also be consulted for domestic problems, as these spirits are known for their considerable life experience and insight into human nature, gained through their difficult lives of forced servitude.

Within this schema Pomba Gira and other *exu* spirits pertain to the “line of the left,” considered by some practitioners to be less “evolved” than *caboclo* and *preto velho* spirits. As entities connected to the cut-throat world of the street, they offer decisive action unfettered by considerations of domestic virtue, loyalty, or affection. In return for payment in the form of their favorite items, *exu* spirits are believed to execute any request. As a result they may be contracted to work for objectives perceived as morally suspect or even malevolent: material gain, personal advancement, vengeance, monopolization of another’s sexual attention or financial resources—pursuits condemned as black magic.



FIGURE 5. Statue of a *caboclo*.  
Photo courtesy of  
Márcia Ines Alves.

Despite the tendency of Umbanda codifiers to classify spirits and rituals into moral dichotomies of right and left, benevolent and malevolent (a central preoccupation in Umbanda literature and polemics, and one that reflects the ideological dominance of Christianity), such divisions are far less clear in practice. For example, some devotees claim that they appeal to *exu* spirits only to counteract the nefarious works of others or to “open pathways” obstructed by an enemy. Some who admit to working regularly with these spirits acknowledge that they may be employed in acts of black magic but seldom characterize them as intrinsically evil or bad, arguing that “the devil isn’t evil, it is humans who do evil.”<sup>47</sup> As Nazaré explained it, “Pomba Gira and the other *exus* are not evil themselves—it depends on what you ask of them. If you ask them to do ill then it is you yourself who intend evil.”

Petitioned for material, financial, or romantic success, to thwart an enemy, or as a defense against the malicious acts of others, *exu* spirits operate in difficult situations where the line between good and evil is hazy at best. Umbanda, while sharing Christianity’s dualistic vision of the universe

to some extent, also understands the human being as a totality, with all the attendant flaws, contradictions, frailties, and ambivalent emotions that characterize the human condition. From an analytical perspective, *exus* may be seen as embodiments of deeply human desires—above all those desires censured or at odds with a normative Christian moral order in which good and evil are ascribed to mutually exclusive domains—and as instruments through which humans attempt to realize those desires.

How people choose to deal with these spirits, whether they avoid them, expel them, attempt to indoctrinate them, or fully embrace them, also suggests how they channel their own ambivalent desires for love, sex, vengeance, success, or material possessions—the passionate, acquisitive side of human nature. Phrased in another way, *exu* spirits permit polysemic explorations of the moral dimensions of human desire and action, since for these spirits “no request is forbidden, no desire prohibited, no aspiration unattainable.” “It is as if,” Reginaldo Prandi observed of Pomba Gira, “there existed a world of happiness whose access she controls and governs, that is the exact opposite of the frustrating world of everyday reality.”<sup>48</sup>

Whether cultivated as powerful allies or condemned as dangerous malefactors, *exu* spirits operate in the world as it is, not as human beings might wish it to be. In this sense they provide a way of understanding and dealing with civilization’s less salutary aspects; unlike more “evolved” Umbanda entities, the Holy Spirit, or other spiritual beings cultivated in Brazil, *exus* are at home in a world where consumption conveys status, the pursuit of wealth and power is lauded, and the gratification of individual desires trumps older ideals of cooperation and the collective good.

The contradictions between this system of values, so intrinsic to contemporary capitalist economies, and a more traditional system that places group welfare and mutual responsibility over the individual’s own interests can be particularly acute in low-income neighborhoods, where survival often depends on the sharing of limited resources and jobs are difficult to come by. Rituals dedicated to *exu* spirits speak to these contradictions, casting them into the world as concrete and thus subject to human action. Among a population for whom other means of influencing, altering, questioning, or protesting the conditions of their lives are largely unavailable or perceived as ineffective, *exus* represent a powerful means of objectifying diffuse social forces and articulating modes of thought and action more compatible with their circumstances.

So rather than seeing *exu* spirits as wholly nefarious, as many Afro-Brazilian practitioners do, I prefer to approach them as dramatic

embodiments of various contradictions at the heart of modern Brazil: the incongruities between capitalism's promise of a better life and the lived experiences of those whose labor is commodified and invested in the profit of others; conflicts between a rigidly dichotomous moral system of Christian teachings and the pragmatic problems of everyday life; tensions between a dominant morality that condemns female sexuality outside of marriage and simultaneously fetishizes women as erotic objects; and the discrepancies in a system that promises justice and equality for all but systematically fails to deliver them to the majority of the population. These are conflicts that permit no easy reconciliation since they rarely become the subject of conscious reflection, but their effects are lived out in dozens of ways in the course of daily life.

Regardless of how they might seek to temper these spirits, those who work with the *exus* consciously trade on the highly ambivalent reputation of these entities, staking their own social identity on their proximity to dangerous and potentially malignant forces. This can be a risky strategy, for it plays into ideologically dominant notions of good and evil, licit and illicit interactions with supernatural powers. As I argue in chapter 8, this can be seen as an example of what James Scott termed the "infrapolitics of the powerless,"<sup>49</sup> a means to enhance one's power in a social environment whose inhabitants routinely are seen as a threat to public order and morality. Rather than condemn *exus* and those who work with them as sorcerers, my goal has been to situate beliefs and practices related to these entities within the broader context of contemporary social dynamics in urban Brazil.

#### ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

In its content and structure this book makes extensive use of life history interviews and participant observation data from field research that I have been conducting in Rio de Janeiro since 2000. Because it combines elements of biography and ethnography, I think of it as akin to what Michael Herzfeld, in another context, termed an "ethnographic biography."<sup>50</sup> And yet if we take the word *biography* to be the primary subject of that designation and *ethnographic* to be its modifier, the book doesn't fit easily within the genre of biography, since I am not concerned with illuminating the character of a significant personality or exploring the trajectory of a fascinating life. Because of its close focus on a particular individual, neither is it a traditional ethnography, a form that, as Herzfeld



noted, typically explores social dynamics within a larger-scale social group.

Rather it is something in between: drawing from the biography and experiences of one woman, the book engages the larger question of how spiritual beliefs and practices are strategically employed by individuals, under what conditions, and with what consequences. For me what is interesting about Nazaré's experiences are what they reveal about the interface between an ordinary individual and a larger constellation of disembodied forces—social norms and expectations, religious constructs, economic pressures, and historical conditions particular to a specific time and place—and how these forces are expressed in and through Pomba Gira.

By situating my inquiry within the particularities of an individual life, my aim has been to provide an empathetic picture of how spiritual practices function in the everyday struggles for which human beings look to the supernatural for answers and assistance.<sup>51</sup> At this level I do not see Nazaré's religious life as essentially different from that of a Christian who prays to God for guidance, discerns his will in the events of her life, or invokes his authority to justify her actions. Obviously the details of how the supernatural-human interaction is imagined and the mechanisms through which it is operationalized are very different in each case. Many readers may find the beliefs and practices that I describe unusual, even bizarre. Others may find their assumptions about what constitutes religion challenged. This is to be expected if, as David Chidester observed, "one of the responsibilities of the academic study of religion is to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange."<sup>52</sup>

Beyond making the strange familiar, in showing how claims about the supernatural both emerge from and exist in a constant dialogue with the mundane events of everyday life I hope to shift our attention away from religion as a set of more or less institutionalized discourses and practices that exist apart from individuals, to the myriad ways individuals employ these discourses and practices in the course of confronting life's varied challenges, an approach that has been called "lived religion."<sup>53</sup> From this perspective religion is neither the sum of its codified forms (institutions, theological traditions, sacred texts) nor some unmediated and qualitatively unique experience (of the "sacred," "holy," "wholly other," and so forth), but is situated at the encounter of individual and society, squarely amid the mundane concerns of life. "Lived religion," as Robert Orsi observed, "cannot be separated from other practices of

everyday life, from the ways that humans do other necessary and important things, or from other cultural structures and discourses (legal, political, medical, and so on).”<sup>54</sup>

Informed by this way of looking at religion, the book is divided into four sections, each addressing the specific junctures of self and society that are relevant for my analysis. Part I, comprising this chapter and the next, introduces the book’s main themes and arguments in a preliminary way. In chapter 2 I consider the figure of Pomba Gira in more depth, sketching for the reader what in Brazil is widely disseminated knowledge about her distinctive attributes and proclivities, information that is part of a shared world of meanings inherited by Afro-Brazilian religious practitioners like Nazaré. After discussing representative examples from an open-ended corpus of popular stories, songs, and images of Pomba Gira, I conclude with a description of my own first encounter with Pomba Gira as ritually incarnated, the same occasion at which I met Nazaré for the first time.

Part II (chapters 3 and 4) moves from Pomba Gira to the social terrain within which this entity operates and the characteristic tensions to which she speaks. Where chapter 2 situates the figure of Pomba Gira within a culturally specific religious imagination, chapters 3 and 4 turn to the social aspects of Nazaré’s world; they chart the material conditions and normative structures that shape daily life in the urban neighborhoods where Pomba Gira is most popular. Following Janice Boddy’s approach in her classic ethnography *Wombs and Alien Spirits*, I think that the characteristic behaviors, proclivities, and powers of Afro-Brazilian spirit entities are usefully understood as a refraction of the human realm that speaks about it in a variety of subtle, and not so subtle, ways.<sup>55</sup> Because it is important to understand the relevant social landscape before delving further into the specifics of Nazaré’s relationship with Pomba Gira, in these chapters discussion of Pomba Gira and Afro-Brazilian religions in general temporarily drops away.

To give the reader a more nuanced understanding of the realities of daily life on the urban periphery, chapter 3 explains the history of Rio’s *favelas*, or shantytowns, and the physical and symbolic characteristics that mark these areas, and their inhabitants, as socially marginal and morally suspect. Chapter 4 continues this discussion by examining prosaic conventions of gender, sexuality, and morality, conflicts regarding which may be said to constitute Pomba Gira’s special area of actuation. Here I focus my attention particularly on what are otherwise implicit

notions of personhood and propriety that are constituted and continually reinforced by daily experience.

Having laid this groundwork, I turn in subsequent chapters from the social dynamics in Rio's urban periphery to the more intimate sphere of individual experiences and draw heavily on oral interviews and other ethnographic data obtained over the course of several years and in the context of ongoing conversations with Nazaré, her husband, Nilmar, and her biological and spiritual "children," as well as participant-observation in Nazaré's ritual and day-to-day life. Part III (chapters 5, 6, and 7) focuses on discourse about Pomba Gira and is structured around various examples of Nazaré's spirit narratives. Chapters 5 and 6 incorporate material from a series of life history interviews to chart Nazaré's developing relationship with the Afro-Brazilian spirit world based on her own and Nilmar's retrospective accounts. These chapters discuss Nazaré's early experiences of behavioral disturbances, eventually determined to be of spiritual origin, and follow her increasing participation in different Afro-Brazilian cult groups leading to her present-day role as a *zelador*, one who serves the spirits.<sup>56</sup>

In chapter 7 I examine the internal logic of Pomba Gira discourse, analyzing a story that Nazaré narrated about Maria Molambo's deadly vengeance on Nilmar. My analysis of Nazaré's story and its impact on her marriage develops many of the themes that emerge in previous chapters, underscoring the connections between Pomba Gira and male-female relations, marital conflict, betrayal, and ambivalent desires. Taken together, the chapters in part III pursue two interrelated analytic projects: an examination of Pomba Gira discourse as a kind of dialogue with normative ideals—of morality and femininity in particular—and the license and limits of this dialogue, and how this dialogue affects and is affected by the labile state of intimate relations within the family, especially those between husband and wife.

Part IV (chapters 8 and 9) moves from stories about Pomba Gira to the ritual practices by which this entity is invoked and through which she is believed to interact with clients and admirers. Chapter 8 discusses the distinctive *trabalhos*, or ritual works, that mobilize Pomba Gira to intervene in the human world on behalf of a petitioner. Involving intricate assemblages of objects, materials, and symbols particular to the situation at hand, these ritual works symbolize social forces and hidden desires—jealousy, rivalry, retribution, or ambition—whose occult operations are believed to directly affect an individual's life. Conceptualized as exchanges

with the spirit, these works articulate a specific vision of the contemporary world and function as part of an alternative moral economy.

In chapter 9 I examine the economic aspects of Nazaré's spiritual work with Pomba Gira in more detail, considering the constant balance that a *zelador* must strike between the demands of clients and those of her family. My analysis in this chapter pulls together some of the themes that run through previous chapters. In an effort to better reflect the ongoing, open-ended nature of Nazaré's engagement with Pomba Gira and other spirits, however, I deliberately have refrained from imposing an overly systematized conclusion that connects all of the diverse points that I make.

Inevitably such a close focus on the spiritual life of one individual means that many aspects of Afro-Brazilian traditions go unexplored within these pages or remain part of a colorful but hazy backdrop. Devotions to the *orixás* and other supernatural beings, for example, are virtually absent from my discussion, though such practices are important for many Afro-Brazilian adepts. Compared to Pomba Gira, these entities play a lesser role in Nazaré's life story and contemporary healing work, and as a result they hover in the background of my analysis. Nor do I talk about the complex pharmacopoeia shared by all Afro-Brazilian religions that is itself an important source of healing knowledge and authority.<sup>57</sup>

Similarly although I address the issue of race (and racism) in Brazil at various points, it does not receive the level of sustained attention and careful analysis that other classificatory taxa, such as gender and class, do. Partly this is because race did not surface as a major issue in Nazaré's spiritual and daily life in the same way that dynamics of gender and class did, although race may be extremely significant for other devotees. Race in Brazil is a notoriously fraught and complex subject that, in itself, could well fill a volume, and my reticence should not be taken to mean that skin color does not intersect with gender and class in ways that reinforce patterns of social inequality, or that racialized prejudices are absent from Afro-Brazilian religions. Readers interested in these issues will find a body of literature in Portuguese and English that offers the kind of sustained analysis not possible here.<sup>58</sup>

The choices that we make as analysts inevitably mean that certain aspects of the social field come into sharper focus while others recede. In choosing to focus on Pomba Gira I have bracketed Nazaré's engagement with other spirits who, in conjunction with that entity, also played supporting roles at different moments in her life.<sup>59</sup> Although Nazaré's

appeals to Pomba Gira are, broadly speaking, representative, each devotee's relationship with this entity takes form in the context of that person's unique biography. Afro-Brazilian spirit entities are highly condensed, polysemic, and collective representations with whom people interact in multiple ways, bringing their own problems and desires. Sustained attention to the specifics of another individual's life might well highlight features of Pomba Gira that remain peripheral in my account because they were not salient for Nazaré. For example, this spirit often is associated with sexual compulsions, exhibitionism, or other erotic behavior that defies prevailing social norms.<sup>60</sup>

Given the complexities of meaning, motivations, power relations, desires, and other factors at play in any aspect of social life, it is important to remember that my analysis is provisional and partial. While Nazaré's case suggests how appeals to Pomba Gira can open up alternative possibilities of action and interpretation, my analysis should not be taken as evidence that an individual's claims about the spirit are always efficacious, successful, or accepted as legitimate, or that incidents of possession regularly empower the possessed. Spirit possession is a complex phenomenon that serves multiple psychological, social, and pragmatic functions and is capable of generating multiple interpretations among the social actors involved. As Boddy aptly observed, "[Spirit] possession has numerous significances and countless implications: it defies simple explanation. It has no necessary cause, no necessary outcome. Its province is meaning, and it is best addressed in that light."<sup>61</sup> The interpretations that I propose therefore should not be seen as exhausting Pomba Gira's potential range of meanings. Nevertheless I am persuaded that Nazaré's case illustrates some of the principal social dynamics to which this spirit speaks and the complicated and often paradoxical role that she plays in the lives of her devotees.

#### FIELDWORK, NARRATIVES, AND THE ACT OF NARRATION

When I met her in 2000 Nazaré had built a reputation in her neighborhood as a dedicated *zelador* and an effective spirit healer, a fact that allowed her to maintain a small group of adherents who met collectively for rituals of various kinds. Because she drew freely from her own experiences with different religious communities, Nazaré presided over what is sometimes called a *casa traçada*, or crossed house, that is, a community that combines ritual practices and entities typically associated with

Candomblé with those typically associated with Umbanda. Such crossed houses are not unusual and are an important reminder that the realities of religious practice continually confound our efforts to classify them.

The regular schedule at her *terreiro* (ritual center) included bimonthly *toques*, sessions in which various spirits were ritually summoned with drum, song, and dance, as well as *festas*, more elaborate celebrations held in honor of specific spirit entities.<sup>62</sup> These *festas* occurred on specific dates and attracted anywhere from twenty to a hundred people, including participants and spectators. In most cases they were preceded by private rituals in which animals, usually small fowl and goats, were ceremonially sacrificed in order to “feed” the spirit being feted. Over the course of a year Nazaré might hold half a dozen of these large-scale, public *festas*, punctuated by smaller *toques*, which were also open to the public. In addition to these collective rituals, Nazaré offered an array of private *trabalhos*, including divination readings, herbal treatments, purifications, and spiritual fortifications, to clients seeking her spiritual assistance. She also conducted lengthy rites of initiation modeled on those found in Candomblé *terreiros*, a process referred to as *feitura de santo* (“making the saint”), *assentar o santo* (“seating the saint”), or *raspagem do santo* (“shaving the saint,” a reference to the shaving of the initiate’s head during the rite).

While living in Brazil in 2000–2002 I attended all of Nazaré’s grand public *festas* and various smaller *toques* and private rituals, including the initiations of three people.<sup>63</sup> My custom was to arrive several hours early to observe the preparations and lend a hand when needed. In addition to these ceremonies, several times a week I visited with Nazaré and whoever happened to be at her *terreiro* that day. My regular and frequent presence offered opportunities for interviewing other community members and clients. Because Nazaré informed everyone that I was writing a book about her, these interviews felt forced in the beginning as my subjects, faced with such an important undertaking, became guarded and formal. With time these interviews became more relaxed and more informative.

In my initial interviews with Nazaré I attempted to elicit basic information about her childhood, family life, and early memories of spirit possession, since part of her self-presentation as a religious healer is based on the claim that she began receiving spirit entities at a very young age. I tried to pin her down on dates and as many other concrete details as I could, comparing these with others’ memories of the events that she had related, where possible. However, human memory is notoriously fickle and self-serving, so I was less concerned with the veracity of the events

that Nazaré recalled than with how she herself made them meaningful—and thus made herself meaningful—by imbuing them with mythological parallels drawn from the world of Afro-Brazilian spirits.

Early in the process Nazaré's tendency to wander away from what I considered straightforward questions into meandering stories frustrated me. Trying to understand these stories literally—that is, trying to abstract from them a transparent account of past events—left me baffled, for they often shifted abruptly back and forth in time, were highly repetitive, or featured improbable details. As I spent more time with Nazaré I began to perceive these stories as circular accounts that were not structured chronologically, as in a linear narrative, but in terms of repeated themes and patterns.<sup>64</sup>

Once I became less focused on how her stories didn't answer (or even engage with) my questions and more attentive to their internal rhythms and symbolic language, I was better able to appreciate them as narrative acts of self-fashioning that imbued past events with mythological resonances even as they worked to constitute and reinforce a particular identity. All of Nazaré's narratives abounded with details significant within a larger religious framework. Like myths, many of these stories stretched credibility to its very limit, and I initially was surprised to find some of what I considered their more implausible aspects confirmed by others. Sorcery and enchantment are part of the fabric of everyday life in Brazil, and I came to see these stories as integral components of Nazaré's charismatic self-presentation, necessary for her religious work and perhaps for her psychic survival.

In the chapters that follow I try to present these stories in the manner and, where possible, in the voice in which they were narrated to me. This means that I am not concerned with interrogating the empirical validity of the claims that are made in the stories. Rather I am interested in how they function as part of a larger process of identity construction and signification in which the unpredictable actions of the spirits continually introduce new levels of meaning. The Afro-Brazilian spirit world is conceived as a parallel universe that is invisible to human beings yet contiguous with their world. Although spirits penetrate all facets and levels of human life, the reverse is not true: humans can never fully perceive the shadowy world that lies just beyond sensory awareness but can apprehend it only incompletely. The spirits who appeared in Nazaré's stories and those of other informants erupt into everyday life, transgressing the boundaries of spirit world and terrestrial world, constantly unsettling categories and presenting new possibilities for interpretation.

In my analysis I am most interested in the transformations that these interpretive possibilities facilitated for Nazaré and her clients.

When retelling people's stories I have tried to preserve as much as possible each individual's style and idiosyncrasies while translating their words into English, a language none of them spoke. In some chapters I draw heavily on material transcribed from lengthy interviews, and in others I use short excerpts or quotes to illustrate particular points of my argument. To avoid interrupting the narrative flow of long passages of transcribed material I have contained my editorial explanations to separate sections or footnotes. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Portuguese are my own.

Although I occasionally use the expression *spirit possession* to gloss the phenomenon that I am describing, this is not how practitioners themselves characterize their relationship with a tutelary spirit, and it carries certain connotations that may be misleading. In addition to the negative meaning that possession has in the context of Euro-American Christianity, the term also obscures, as Joan Dayan observed in the case of Vodou, the reciprocal nature of the relationship between spirit and *serviteur*, its constancy, and the gradual disciplined training of mind and body necessary for the temporary manifestation of the spirit to take place.<sup>65</sup> Practiced mediums like Nazaré describe this relationship in relational terms: they “work” with the spirit or “receive” it (*receber o santo*) as one would receive a guest. Manifestations of the spirit take place along a continuum of consciousness, and a medium may perceive the presence of a spirit in dreams, auditory or visual signs, bodily sensations, or other altered states, as well as during ritualized trance states. Mediums also communicate directly with spirits through divination, prayers, or other techniques. Once cultivated, the relationship between medium and spirit may last a lifetime and require considerable effort and expense on the part of the medium.

In the course of my research I observed different levels of engagement with the spirits, which I have tried to describe consistently and systematically throughout the book. For example, I make a distinction between *devotees* of Pomba Gira and *mediums*. Although my informants did not use these terms (or their equivalents in Portuguese), I have found them useful for the purpose of distinguishing and characterizing two different types of relationship with the spirit. In my usage devotees of Pomba Gira include those who actively cultivate an ongoing relationship with the spirit: maintaining a home altar, providing periodic offerings, and regularly attending ceremonies in which the spirit is made present in the bodies of



others. Devotees may also claim to receive messages from the spirit in dreams or through divination techniques.

I use the term *medium* to denote those devotees who, in addition to the activities just listed, also receive the spirit in possession rituals, thereby providing the material form through which Pomba Gira is made manifest in the human world. The difference between devotees and mediums is one of degree rather than kind; both of these terms indicate an ongoing relationship with the spirit that requires a certain level of commitment and is understood as mutually beneficial.

By contrast, I use the term *admirer* to indicate a person who maintains a more casual relationship with the spirit that does not involve regular offerings or other activities that mark a devotee's level of commitment. An admirer may consult the spirit on occasion, attend ceremonies, offer a gift or other form of homage, or petition a specific *trabalho* but otherwise does not maintain an ongoing ritual relationship with the spirit. I use the terms *follower* and *admirer* interchangeably. Finally, a *client* is a person who petitions a medium for help with a particular problem through the intermediary of the medium's spirits. A client's relationship with the medium and her spirits is occasional, pragmatic, and oriented toward the achievement of a specific goal.

In addition to the voices of my informants, I draw on a range of academic disciplines in constructing my analysis, incorporating the work of historians, anthropologists, sociologists, scholars of religion, political scientists, social activists, and policy analysts. As a result my narrative strategy is polyphonic; sometimes I rely heavily on the voices of my informants, building my analysis around their words, and at other times their voices recede into the background as sociological, historical, or theoretical issues come to the fore. Descriptive, first-person ethnographic vignettes are woven throughout the text, especially in chapters 2, 3, 8, and 9. These vignettes are "word paintings" intended to provide what novelists refer to as local color, but they also provide a contrapuntal narrative of my own experiences in the field.

#### RECIPROCITY, OBLIGATION, AND BETRAYAL: HIGHS AND LOWS IN THE LIFE OF A *ZELADOR*

In the years that I have known her, Nazaré has experienced both highs and lows in her religious and her personal life. When I first met her she was enjoying the high side: her center was doing well, she had a house full of regular members, and an affluent client, Seu Zé, provided substantial

work for her as well as access to a lifestyle to which she could otherwise only aspire. A year and a half before my arrival in Brazil Seu Zé had sought out Nazaré for help resolving a legal matter. As was her custom for problems involving finances or romance, Nazaré worked with her *pomba gira* spirits on Seu Zé's behalf, setting into motion a series of ritual works. When the case was finally resolved in his favor, Seu Zé became one of Nazaré's most important clients and a regular participant in the ritual life of her *terreiro*, one of the few regulars who came from outside the neighborhood or its immediate environs.

Despite her success in opening the judicial pathways for the resolution of Seu Zé's court case, Nazaré's relationship with him eventually soured, triggering a particularly low period. I returned from a brief trip to the United States in January 2001 to find that they had parted ways. I analyze these events and their aftermath in more detail in chapter 9, but for now it is enough to note that at issue was the ambiguously defined nature of reciprocity and mutual obligation.<sup>66</sup> Tellingly Nazaré and Seu Zé charged each other with exploitation, an accusation that signifies a rupture in the structure of relational reciprocity. From that point on Nazaré referred to Seu Zé as the person whose exploitation of her had been most egregious and whose "treachery" nearly ruined her.

As of my most recent visit, in 2008, Nazaré had been forced to cede the space that housed her *terreiro* to a daughter who, due to financial difficulties, had lost her own residence and now was living there with her husband and three small children. Lacking sufficient space, Nazaré was unable to hold regular collective ceremonies for the spirits or perform *trabalhos* for clients; instead she was earning money selling snacks, drinks, and homemade food from a converted garage in front of the building. It remains to be seen whether this setback has ended Nazaré's career as a *zelador* or simply provoked a temporary hiatus. She herself remains sanguine about the future, assuring me that she has needed a break for a long time. She still cares for her spirits, maintaining their altars and providing offerings on a reduced scale, but she does not regularly hold the public ceremonies in which, accompanied by the drumming and singing of the gathered faithful, the spirits are invited to manifest themselves in her physical form.

Nazaré's labile relationship with the spirits reminds us that religion is best approached not as some inner state—an orientation to a "sacred" or "ultimate reality" independent from everyday cares—but as a set of discursive and practical claims about the superhuman that are deeply embedded within the circumstances of human lives, a dynamic and on-

going endeavor that takes distinctive form in relationship to the individual's social position, gender, material circumstances, and interests, and that acts on that individual's world in pragmatic ways. At the same time that people inherit certain religious frameworks, as Robert Orsi noted, they also freely appropriate, invent, modify, and improvise in the course of meeting life's challenges.<sup>67</sup> This dynamic context of use, situated at the interface between a particular individual and the world in which she lives, is the subject of this book.