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Ethnography In-Sight: The Elevated City

Credit: Performance of Labareda de Fogo. Photo by Martijn Oosterbaan, Rio de Janeiro, March 30, 2011.

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This photo captures four members of the Evangelical samba (*pagode*) collective Labareda de Fogo (Flame of Fire) midway their performance in a small Pentecostal Church in the neighborhood of Cidade Alta (Upper City) in Rio de Janeiro. The two men holding characteristic *pagode* instruments—a *pandeiro* and a *tantan*—are sweating as they push the samba groove that elevates the people inside to higher planes. The wall in the background exhibits a landscape with a waterfall (*cachoeira*), a natural phenomenon revered by many Pentecostal and Afro-Brazilian religious worshippers in Brazil.

The small church where the collective performed that night was packed. The pastor put plastic chairs outside so all members could partake in the event, but during the performance no one sat down or stayed outside. Inside, people drew close to the small stage, sang along, and shouted hallelujahs. The church's low ceiling and its brick and concrete walls turned it into a musical pressure cooker that fused Pentecostal praxis with samba ecstasy. One woman had brought her own *pandeiro* (tambourine) and played along with the band; others clapped loud and danced rhythmically. As the performance progressed, some of the audience members entered a trance-like state, evidently filled by the Holy Spirit.

The church service took place not long after the start of my research project on gospel samba (Evangelical samba) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Labareda de Fogo's lead singer had invited me to accompany them to a performance, which resulted in a nightly drive through Rio's periphery and brought us to Cidade Alta, a neighborhood that is dominated by an armed *comando* (gang) to this day. I was very excited about the upcoming performance, as Evangelical worship practices rarely included *pagode*. For a long time, the genre was regarded as inappropriate for Evangelical worship on account of its historical entanglement with Afro-Brazilian religious musical practices. Things were changing, though; Labareda de Fogo's innovative fusion marked a broader trend in Evangelical circles in Brazil to blend Afro-Brazilian-flavored genres with Pentecostal styles of worship (see Oosterbaan, this volume).

I had set out to document the merging of gospel and samba music, but I did not foresee that this night would show me the blurring of more phenomena hitherto deemed incompatible *and* elucidate the extraordinary appeal and force of Pentecostalism in neighborhoods such as Cidade Alta. As the nightly church service taught me, Pentecostal entertainers promise to defuse the malevolent powers of a variety of local practices, while seizing their persuasive styles to fight back and regain terrains caught by the devil. Despite promising clear and rigid boundaries between godly and demonic practices, this transformative technique produces seeds that undo strict and permanent moral boundaries, creating a vibrant terrain of unforeseen mixtures—and new boundaries.

I was thrilled to accompany the band on their nocturnal drive to Cidade Alta. Pentecostal preachers and musicians from different denominations form a mobile

segment of Rio's urban Evangelical population. Many Pentecostal adherents live in the city's favelas, where they congregate in self-built churches made of brick and cement.[1] Preachers, musicians, and so-called *missionários* (missionaries) frequently travel to these small churches from different corners of the city, coconstituting an urban web of Evangelical practices, music, goods, and people. However, their lively circulation contrasts with the border-making practices of gangs and militias. Many of Rio's favelas are the terrain of *comandos*, armed groups that peddle cocaine and marijuana and uphold rudimentary "laws" to sustain urban order (Penglase 2009). *Comando* members rigidly surveil favela territories to guard against police raids and enemy invasions.

While commonly called a favela, Cidade Alta's urban history sets it apart from the surrounding favelas made up of self-constructed buildings. Cidade Alta also goes by the name Conjunto Habitacional de Cordovil (Cordovil's Housing Complex).[2] The housing complex, built in 1969, accommodated families that were relocated from other neighborhoods in the city. In the 1960s and 1970s, the municipal government of Rio de Janeiro eradicated favelas and they particularly aimed their arrows at favelas located in the south side of the city, near the upper-class neighborhoods of Ipanema and Leblon. Many families that were housed in Cidade Alta came from the eradicated favela Praia do Pinto, situated between the sea and the lagoon (Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas).

The characteristic high-rise apartment buildings of Cidade Alta featured prominently in the award-winning movie *Cidade de Deus* (City of God), codirected by Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund (2002). Cidade de Deus is a peripheral neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro, which, not unlike Cidade Alta, originated as a *conjunto habitacional* and was also built in the late 1960s to house displaced favela residents. In an interview about the making of the movie, Meirelles explained that they decided not to shoot the scenes for the movie in the favela Cidade de Deus because the urban territory at the time was divided among different *donos* (*comando* bosses) who occasionally engaged in rivalrous combat. This made filming in Cidade de Deus very precarious. Cidade Alta, according to Meirelles, had one *dono* and, despite the fact that he was imprisoned, the directors could consult him to seek his "blessing" to film in the favela without restrictions or conflicts.[3]

I was reminded that *comandos* scrutinize local filming and photographing when I reached Cidade Alta that night. Upon arrival at the church, I introduced myself to the pastor and asked if I could take pictures of the event. With approval, I fervently started taking pictures of the church's facade and the street, but not long after, a young man arrived on a motorbike and approached the pastor. The pastor turned to me and sternly said I should stop taking pictures for a moment as it was not allowed to randomly take pictures in the favela streets. As I knew from earlier fieldwork, *comando* bosses attempt to regulate photography in the favela because they want to avoid the identification of fellow members. I cooperatively shut off

my camera and tucked it away. The pastor indicated he would have a talk with the man to explain that I was part of the band's entourage, and there to take pictures of the performance. After their brief exchange, the young man gave his approval and drove off.

One of the enduring tragedies of favela life is that many adolescent men, born and raised in the favela, are recruited by local *comando* branches, after which they find themselves in a life riddled with violence. In these contexts, some young men turn to a Pentecostal community as a possible way out of gang life. The self-disciplinary regimes that promise a born-again future predict a firm break with the past. Nevertheless, the narrativized oppositions between *comando* life and Pentecostal salvation are frequently paired by affective continuities and intense entanglement. Pentecostal residents wage spiritual warfare against malevolent entities that steer *comando* violence, yet they live in the messy reality where brothers, nephews, or sons might join a local gang because it offers them status and income (Oosterbaan 2017).

Despite its antagonistic language, Pentecostalism has the extraordinary capacity to keep close that which it demonizes, to straddle the oppositions it reproduces itself. This became even more obvious after Labareda de Fogo's performance had finished. The church members had calmed down somewhat but not for long. Soon after the band had left the stage, a young man in suit and tie climbed on: MC Delei. Without ado, he began to deliver an energetic funk rap on top of a thumping beat.[4] A medley of songs fused references to the *comando*'s use of firearms with the spiritual firepower of the Bible while addressing the youngsters who are susceptible to the lure of *comando* life: "Don't trust the weapon you are holding in your hand, pick up the Holy Bible and join the Christian gang." MC Delei's performance invigorated the church members once more, especially when he employed a persuasive call-and-response technique that depicted the Bible as weapon: "Aim and apply," MC Delei sang. "With the Bible in your hand you chase the beast away," the church responded, collectively raising their Bibles in the air. MC Delei's depictions of the congregation as a Christian gang drew on favela experiences of *comando* rule while picturing Christian communities as truly victorious squads: "This team is the best, no one can beat it, if you want to join us raise your hand and say 'amen'!"

I was blown away by the performance. At the time, MC Delei was one of a handful of Evangelical artists who produced *funk gospel*–the Evangelical variant of the most popular dance music genre among the youth in Rio de Janeiro: *funk carioca*. This genre derives its name from the funk parties (*bailes funk*) from which a music arose, which combines elements from Miami Bass with rap and Brazilian styles of singing and sampling. During the eighties, *carioca* funk became extremely popular among favela youth when funk crews (*equipes de som*) started organizing *baile funk* parties on favela territory (Lopes 2011; Vianna 1988). Pentecostal adherents, on the other hand, demonized *funk carioca* because they associated it with the ungodly

and immoral sides of favela life. *Baile funk* parties are venues for the joy-related practices that Evangelicals regard as highly sinful. In many favelas, the parties provide a stage for the local *comando* to flaunt its power, expressed also in a subgenre called *funk proibidão* (very forbidden funk) (Novaes 2016). MC Delei's bold appropriation of *funk carioca* demonstrates the aptitude of Rio's peripheral Pentecostalism to include the pop cultural genres it once demonized. This Evangelical syncretization (Oosterbaan, this volume), which attempts to defuse the demonic force of things, pictures, and sounds—taking hold of their sensory power—offers avenues for seemingly limitless blending of opposites.

This became clear when *comando* members also started to convert to born-again Christianity in the past decade. Tellingly, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020, a young *comando* boss seized control over a number of favelas—including Cidade Alta—and baptized the urban territory under his rule, Complexo de Israel (Israel's Complex). To underline the theological underpinning of their rule and to signal it wide and far, the *comando* placed a big, neon sign Star of David on top of one of the towers of Cidade Alta. Remarkably, the boss and his gang explicitly identify themselves as Evangelicals, something that would have been unthinkable twenty years ago, when *traficantes* (*comando* members) and *evangelicos* were considered to be mutually exclusive categories. Since the turn of the millennium, however, *comando* members have begun to identify themselves as Evangelicals, complicating neat moral distinctions between peaceful converts and violent gang members. While Pentecostal Churches continue to present themselves as the primary moral and spiritual forces against *comando* mischief, the *comandos* have turned to Pentecostalism to express the legitimacy of their rule (Cunha 2018).

One of the problematic side effects of the mergers between Pentecostalism and *comando* life is the *comando*'s aggressive attitude to Afro-Brazilian religious groups and expressions. In the past, *comandos* generally framed their rule in terms of Afro-Brazilian and Catholic symbols, but in many favelas, members have ransacked *terreiros* (Afro-Brazilian temples) and have erased the traditional syncretic paintings that fused Catholic Saints and Orixás (Afro-Brazilian deities) (Cunha 2018). This new iteration of religious oppression of Afro-Brazilian religious movements is profoundly tragic in light of the historical struggles of Rio's favela dwellers of Afro-Brazilian descent, whose religious expressions have been persecuted throughout the twentieth century (Deus 2019). One can only hope that the ongoing fusions of Afro-Brazilian and Pentecostal styles, such as the *gospel samba* produced by Labareda de Fogo the night of the photo, soften or undo this aggressive rigidity.

Notes

[1] As Janice Perlman (2010) also explains, the word *favela* has negative connotations, but all the alternatives suggested (in English and Portuguese) similarly present connotations and, in many cases, fail to conjure the typical urban, material, and political characteristics of the neighborhoods. My interlocutors did not object to the use of the term *favela* when used in a respectful manner.

[2] The municipal region of Cordovil, which became urbanized in the 1960s, was named in the beginning of the eighteenth century after the royal *fazenda* (plantation) administrator: Bartolomeu de Siqueira Cordovil. For an insightful description of the history of the neighborhood, see: http://www.multirio.rj.gov.br/index.php/leia/reportagens-artigos/reportagens/14753-cordovil-e-a-expansao-do-rio-para-a-zona-norte;http://www.receita.fazenda.gov.br/historico/srf/historia/catalogo_colonial/letrap/provedorias.htm

[3] See http://revistaepoca.globo.com/Epoca/0,6993,EPT384848-1655,00.html.

[4] See a recording of an open-air performance by MC Delei in Cidade Alta: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whXBphTqNS4.

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