



Topology of the sacred and agency: water sites of power in Bantu African and Brazilian culture, with considerations on baptism

Topologia do sagrado e agência: sítios de água do poder na cultura bantu africana e brasileira, com considerações sobre o batismo

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Abstract: On the background of resurging interest in “sites of power”, on both sides of the Atlantic, this essay presents a feature, sometimes marginalised in their theories: “agency”. It is understood that the recognition of the relation between “topography” and “agency” is required, to understand the dynamics of such sites, as experienced and codified in cultures and religions. This essay focusses on the “sites of water” as important archetypes of Bantu African and Brazilian Diaspora cultures and religions. On the assumption of ancient formative connections of the Bantu with the Afro-Asiatic cultures, to which the Hebrew belongs, corresponding reports and concepts from the Bible are included in this analysis, disclosing systematically interesting features on this matrix by “archaeology of culture”.

Keywords: Agency; sacred sites; Bantu culture; Afro-Brazilian studies; baptism; Umbanda

Resumo: No pano de fundo do interesse ressurgido acerca dos “locais de poder” em ambos os lados do Atlântico, este ensaio apresenta uma característica às vezes marginalizada em suas teorias: a de “agência”. Entende-se que é necessário o reconhecimento da relação entre “topografia” e “agência” para compreender a dinâmica de tais locais, como experientes e codificados em culturas e religiões. Este ensaio foca os “locais da água” como arquétipos importantes das culturas e religiões da diáspora africana e brasileira bantu. No pressuposto de antigas conexões formativas do bantu com as culturas afro-asiáticas, às quais o hebraico pertence, relatórios e conceitos correspondentes na Bíblia são incluídos nesta análise, divulgando características sistematicamente interessantes nesta matriz por meio da “Arqueologia da Cultura”.

Palavras-chave: Agência; topografia sagrada; cultura bantu; estudos afro-brasileiros; batismo; umbanda.

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The relation of topography and agency in the topology of sites of power

“Sites of power” in Bantu African and Diaspora cultures raise questions about what constitutes them as such. Considering that they are not marked by architectural means, nor marked as permanent and unique in the religious topography of their cultures, but that they rather appear as “archetypal,” manifesting themselves by shifting dynamics, the factors of “agency” determining these needs to be investigated.

It appears that “topography” and “agency” are factors that together determine the sacred topology of sites of power in Bantu cultures – and in those related to them: primarily Afro-Brazilian culture, as its offspring, with some development of its own, and, of Hebrew culture, based on the distant, but intensive exchange between the Afro-Asiatic language family, to which it belongs, and the Bantu cultures, and their predecessors, the Khoi-San, since the second millennium BCE. The latter will be discussed with reference to paradigmatic examples of such sites and their agency from Biblical literature. This essay thus pursues several objectives, systematic, cultural, and phenomenological.

My interest is, to explore the perceptive of “agency,” for the determination of sacred “sites of power” at waters, specifically, in Bantu cultures, on both side of the Atlantic. To this an excursus is added, that is based on ancestral prolonged cultural contact between the Afro-Asiatic cultures, to which the Hebrew belongs, and the Bantu (and their predecessors) in formative stages.

This serves to determine the significance of the relation of sites (topography) and divine or spiritual agency, that tend to be overlooked or regarded as irrelevant. The understanding emerging from the matrix of Bantu cultures – and their Afroasiatic (Israelitic) counterpart – may be relevant to Christian theology of baptism. It also contributes to understand the dynamics of the “re-Africanisation” of Christianity, observable in Pentecostalism and in African Instituted Churches. The Bantu background can elucidate the logic of rites of Umbanda at water sites too.

The growing literature on “sites of power,” in Germany, my country of residence, has certainly sensitized me to the relation of topography and agency in spiritual topology. There is an observable tendency to “objectify” them, as sites (of nature, or with shrines), with aesthetic and semiotic properties determined by the cultures and religions in whose contexts they are situated. The aspect of “agency,” that constitutes their history, and continued “life” as sites of pilgrimage, tends to be eclipsed. This imbalance, of reducing spiritual topology to features of sacred or cultural topography, at the expense of “agency” needs to be redressed, for a meaningful understanding of the dynamics of such sites.

In Bantu African culture and religion, these aspects are closely connected, so that a “topology of the sacred” that omits “agency” would be insufficient to grasp the dynamics arising from visits to special sites, like rock pools and waterfalls, on which this paper is focussed. A look, for comparison, at some sites of pilgrimage, as in the Roman Catholic realm, in Europe, shows, that the element of “agency” is important here too, in their genesis, and in their continued vitality.

In some of Protestantism, the divine agency, in baptism, tends to become separated from the topographic element of the “site of water,” represented “by the baptismal

font”. On this background, the renewal of the practice of baptism in rivers, in parts of recent Protestantism, can be understood as the (unconscious) retrieval of the “African” logic of sacred topology of the rite.

Renewed interest in “sacred sites” and “sites of power” as context of this essay

Sacred sites, or “sites of power,” have become fashionable in recent decades, beyond their religiously enshrined meaning. An experientially based access to the sacred, or to some power, is sought. This has revived the genre of books on such sites of power, with popular and academic publications (Kleinhempel, 2017, pp. 67ff.). One of the early authors of this revived interest in (sacred) sites of power, Gisela Graichen, introduces her book with a quote from the early 20th century poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, who evokes the “agency” of such sites, in a text entitled “Worpswede”:

We play with dark forces, which we cannot grasp with words, like children playing with fire, and it seems for a moment, as if all the energy so far lay dormant in the things, until we came to apply them to our fleeting life and its desires. But, again and again, in thousands of years, these forces shake off their names, and arise (Graichen, 1999, p. 7).

Important aspects of “agency” are thus evoked for her book: the ontological assumption, that such “agency” is not merely a matter of ascription, but to be found and encountered at such sites, then, that it is indeed necessary to raise or evoke them, by relating to them, and, that their agency is not wholly controllable, not by the religion, that administers the sites, nor by those visiting them. The phenomenology of aisthesis, and experiences of “power” at such sites, is thus situated in a “relational ontology” that is presupposed.

In Europe, interest in sites of nature as spiritually significant revived in the era of Romanticism by its pan(en)theistic philosophy of nature. It assumed a spiritual bond between inner and outer “Nature,” markedly manifest at certain sites of nature, and experienced as “powerful”. The “genius loci” concept” of Greco-Roman Antiquity, was thus revived and reinterpreted (Kozljanić, 2004, pp. 159ff.). It was attributed to the “mood” of a place, as emerging from an aesthetic, and emotional relation between the visitor and the place (Kleinknecht, 2012, p. 310).

In “Naturalistic” views on the phenomenon, “energetic” perceptions are attributed to “sensory” qualities of a place, reinforced by cultural or religious attributions, – resulting in “constructions” of such sites, and “imaginings” of them, according to current views disputing “agency” (Drafts for an “Aesthetic of Religion” tend to follow this pathway).

On “agency”

The phenomenon of “sites of power,” determined by religion, culture, spiritism, psychology, aesthetics – and often in a combination of these – is quite universal. In

many cases, probably the most, it is connected to element of “agency”. This is eclipsed in some of the approaches to the spiritual and “energetic” experiences of special “sites of power,” tend to “reify” the perceptions about them. Effects are believed to result from the individual visitor, from the sites, or from the aesthetic relation between them. The history and dynamism, traditionally attributed to many such sites, often involves “agency”. Where this is ignored, perceptions about the “genius loci” tend to become deprived of “life,” which is essential to the dynamics of visits to such sites. This impacts on the mode of conceptualizing such sites, and of relating to them. The understanding that such sites may:

1. require access on special conditions,
2. be subject to certain rules,
3. be situated in certain biographic developments, especially spiritual itineraries,
4. be effective only on specific occasions, and
5. by preparations of participants,

is largely lost. The spiritual effects are believed to result either from the individual visitor, or from the sites, or from the aesthetic relation between them. The psychological state of visitors, and their knowledge of religious or cultural meanings attributed to such sites, are acknowledged as factors conditioning the experience. Kim Knibbe and Els van Houtert have addressed the problem and its background:

The anthropology of religion often studies topics whose reality is denied or considered doubtful in secular Western understandings, such as possession, sorcery, shamanism, healing, and other phenomena that assume the active agency of entities that are considered supernatural. To some extent, phenomenological approaches in anthropology were an epistemological project that challenged Western common-sense understandings as well as reductionist scientific approaches by taking seriously the idea that these phenomena are experienced as real. In other words, anthropologists drawing on phenomenology did so in order to plead for an “epistemological humility” and critique conventional empiricist ideas of science that require an explanation of such phenomena in terms alien to the lifeworld in which they occur (Knibbe et al., 2018, p. 3).

The issue of “agency” is highlighted here, as an essential in anthropology of religion. The arbitrary substitution of supposedly “real” causes and meanings, impedes even the documentation of the phenomena, as Knibbe and E. van Houtert observe.

In a critique of a study on spirit possession in Umbanda, D. Espírito Santo shows that ignoring the perceptions and experiences of “agency” leads to a systematic error:

Cohen ends up not being able to say much about the “cognition” leading up to and of spirit possession itself [...] In other words, because she separates so determinately native explanations from the so-called objective ones, Cohen is unable to transform ethnographic categories into vital analytical ones, permitting a rather one-sided conversation to take place (Espírito Santo, 2010, p. 164).

For the understanding of the “life” and dynamics of sacred sites, this however is indispensable. A report related to the sanctuary of Fatima (Portugal), may illustrate the point. The renowned singer of Fado, Marisa (Mariza) dos Reis Nunes (born 1973), told

the following personal experience: her son, born prematurely, had a grave defect of the lungs. His condition was critical, with poor prospects of survival. Despite considering herself a secular person, she went to the sanctuary of Fatima, which she considered to be merely a “commercial operation,” up to then, praying her heart out. Her experience of “agency” there, by the recovery of her son, and her inner transformation through encounter with Mary, is documented:

Até há pouco tempo, a “cantadeira de fados” Mariza considerava que o santuário de Fátima “era uma realidade comercial,” mas essa ideia “desapareceu completamente” após o nascimento do filho. [...] É na primeira pessoa que a fadista relata a sua “conversão” ao grande recinto da Cova da Iria, em texto publicado na mais recente edição da Fátima XXI, a revista cultural do santuário. [...]

Com o nascimento prematuro do meu filho, deparo-me com uma situação muito grave: o Martim tinha um problema pulmonar; se não evoluísse favoravelmente no prazo de duas semanas, diziam-me, teria de se desligar a máquina que o ajudava a respirar! Nesse momento, não sei por que razão, telefonei à minha mãe e disse-lhe: “vamos para Fátima”, escreve Mariza. Após uma semana, e “contra todos os prognósticos,” o filho melhorou [...]

Quando fez um ano, o Martim ficou completamente livre de perigo. Eu peguei no meu filho e, logo no dia a seguir, fomos a Fátima... ele é tão meu filho como o é de Nossa Senhora de Fátima. É de nós as duas. Agora, o Santuário tem para mim um valor muito, muito, muito especial. Passei a olhá-lo de uma forma completamente diferente,” sublinha. [...] “no Santuário de Fátima, senti que estava a falar com uma mãe, e de mãe para mãe. [...] E Nossa Senhora de Fátima atendeu-me. Fátima ensinou-me a amar,” conclui Mariza (Martins, 2016).

Mariza’s experience of “agency” at Fatima, observed for her son, and experienced inwardly, as transformative, certainly explains the “life,” the “dynamics,” and continued attractiveness of the sanctuary, in culture. Sites of pilgrimage, that continue to be vital, have records of similar histories. Similar pattern may be traced in Bantu culture.

Epistemic background considerations on transcendent agency

Although views on the ontological status of the transcendent entities, encountered and experienced at such sites of power, vary considerably, their exclusion from consideration, is circular, and essentially unscientific in approach.

Following J. Habermas ethics of “methodological agnosticism,” as explained by J. Bohman and W. Rehg (Bohman et al., 2017), such controversy may be bracketed. Perceptions, and experiences of “transcendent agency,” as told by those who made them, are facts in themselves. Often, but not necessarily, they were made in agreement with the epistemics of their cultural or religious communities, verified as credible by them. To dismiss it, would imply the claim, that members of these cultures would be in a constant state of delusion, lacking psychic health, and essentially unable to distinguish the delusional form the “real”. Basic inter-cultural and interreligious etiquette – and acceptance of the limits of knowledge systems, including the own – demands respect for the phenomena, and for their witnesses, as emphasised by K. Stoeckl (Rosati et al., 2012, p. 3).

The arbitrary imposition of epistemics of Euro-American Naturalism, are uncritical, transgressive, and reminiscent of “colonial” attitudes, to devalue phenomenological and perceptual realities of different cultures (Pons, 2017, pp. 77ff.) This implies that culturally and religiously conditioned faculties of perception may not be uniform all over the world, and, that differences may indeed exist. Habermas emphasised the value of bringing such differing epistemics into mutual awareness:

In post-secular society, the realization that “the modernization of public consciousness” takes hold and reflectively alters religious and secular mentalities [...] is gaining acceptance. [...] both sides can, for cognitive reasons, then take seriously each other’s contributions to controversial themes in the public sphere (Habermas, 2006, p. 258).

In practical terms J. Habermas suggests, that the idea of a “post-secular” requires a reflection and possibly revision of some assumptions of secular Western modernity, such as Positivism and Materialism, in recognition of other world views.

It is thus of interest, how such phenomena are researched and conceptualized in recent anthropological literature. Latin America, with its rich heritage of coexisting cultures, and its widespread acceptance of paranormal perceptions, phenomena, and spiritual practices, has some interesting responses to this condition of epistemic diversity, in anthropological literature. The ethnologist, philosopher, and psychologist Diana Espírito Santo applies concepts such as “ontological recursivity” (Espírito Santo, 2016a, p. 37f.) or “ontological plasticity” (Espírito Santo, 2016b, p. 88) to account for phenomena and perceptions of “agency” of transcendent entities. Observing their inter-relation with specific religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, she carefully notes the different “agencies” of actors in a setting (Espírito Santo, 2014, p. 93).

The notion of a field, in which “place,” “occasion,” ritual and faith, participants in embodied personals state and spirits, interact, creating or eliciting “agency,” depending on these interrelations, is explored, for the ontological effects resulting (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2013, p. 214ff.) In their investigation of Bantu-derived Cuban “Palo Monte” ritual processes, pertaining to “muertos,” the spirits of deceased – important at Bantu water sites too, – the authors conclude:

“Panagiotopoulos” section attempted to expand on these notions of unpredictability, un-containability even. The fact that muertos are not simply ascertained through materials, but can indeed escape material forms and embodiments – through dreams, for instance – means also that we should be wary of materializing their significance too tightly through the things that can become their bodies [...] This reminds us [...] that “a corrective is needed to the imputing of agency and materiality to persons and things as “ready-mades,” as existing constituents of thought”[...] (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2013, pp. 214ff.).

This insight into fluid and inter-connected agencies, and resulting phenomena, ontological and experiential manifestations, can also be applied to the Bantu “sites of power” of water – and possibly even to the understanding of a fundamental stratum of similar Biblical sites, inasmuch, as cultural connections (deep in history) can be assumed. The latter is thus a tentative perspective.

Rock pools and waterfalls in Bantu culture, and their agency in relation to the calling to divinership in Bantu cultures

Rock pools and waterfalls have a special significance as sites of encounter with the spirit realm – for those who are called by it, to relate to it and to be transformed and empowered by it. The topography of such sites varies, according to circumstance. Its main feature appears to be moving, “living” water, and seclusion or distance from the cultivated realm. The aesthetic and symbolic features, such as dramatically falling water, abysmal depth of the rock pools, reminiscent of gates to an underworld, or seclusion by reeds, appear to enhance the “agency” encountered at this site. Although it is believed that the spirit agents encountered here reside here, their “agency” is assumed (and experienced) to take effect far before, and outside of this realm, leading the “chosen one” to this site, when the “call” is heeded in the appropriate way.

The South African psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, B. F. J. Laubscher who worked in a hospital in a quite traditional area of the Xhosa culture, learnt about the spiritual and spiritistic views, experiences, and rites of the Xhosa culture, through his patients, and from a traditional diviner, Solomon Daba, a friend of his. He writes about the “agents” at such sites, and their relation to those, who experience a call, to become diviners:

The Abantubomlambo is a race of people who live in a world of their own underneath the deep pools of the flowing river. The word means “The River People”. [...] the Abantubomlambo have a connection with the people living on the land. [...] They have a “call” for earth people and he who receives this call will be unable to resist it. Only he or she will hear the call and no one else, for it is heard inside the head, although some may think it comes through the ears. Often someone who hears the call is restless for days and wanders about aimlessly and then suddenly runs to the river or deep pool and plunges into it. [...]

The Abantubomlambo had greater wisdom than those living on earth. They knew the thoughts of people and were also the guardians of the tribal customs and traditions, because the Abantubomlambo work with the Izinyanya [plural of Inyanya: “ancestors” who qualified to become a spiritual guide from the otherworld – functionally comparable to Catholic or Orthodox saints] [...]

The Xhosa Isanuses [senior diviners] describe many facets of this strange experience of ukutwasa [the state of experience or suffering a mediumistic “calling”], the chief characteristic however, remains an awareness of things and events far beyond the world of our senses. Ukutwasa can take you out of yourself and even visit the Abantubomlambo, and gain a contact by means of which wisdom can flow (Laubscher, 1975, p. 23ff.).

This passage has dense information:

(1) A topography of “sites of power” is given: “deep pools of the flowing river”. The repetition indicates that both features are relevant: the element of flowing water, and the depth of pools. This relates to the determination of this site as borderland to the realm of spirits. According to Bantu spiritual cosmology, they reside under the water here, perceived as “uncontrollable,” and responsible for callings (Janzen, 1992, p. 95f.)

(2) Outlines of the “spirit agents” are given: a generic class of spirits is mentioned: the “river people”: the Abantubomlambo. Then specific spirits, evolved out of the ancestral spirits of a person – here a chosen candidate called to divination – are mentioned: the Izinyanya. They are understood as personal “mentor spirits”. “Nature spirits” that

feature in other reports, are also believed to reside here. Bantu cultures differ about the specifics of spirit classes, and their respective influence and authority. Tensions are discernible (Janzen, 1992, p. 98).

According to the general pattern, “nature spirits,” common and personal ancestral spirits, and, sometimes, alien spirits, of earlier inhabitants of the land, or of foreign people, interact in the process of a “calling” and in its resolutions, by training to divinership. This involves the recognition and incorporation of diverse spirits, according to the individual and culturally specific conditions. Unanimity exists, that the ritual steps of initiation proceed in response to such a calling, and in fulfilment of its obligations (Hall, 1994, pp. 67ff.).

(3) The form of agency is described: The (senior) “river people” act, in cooperation, with personal ancestral spirits, the *Izinyanya*, possibly by mediation of them, to “call” a chosen person. This is described clearly as the first step in the process of “agency”.

(4) The mode of agency is determined to take effect thus: The person chosen, does not do so out of his or her own free will. Rather, it is stated that a sort of rapture befalls that person, after perceiving that “call,” either in the form of idea, or by audition, inwardly although perceived as if it were an audible call from outward. This perception is confined to that person. Normal life may be disrupted, when a person wanders about, as if in trance, restlessly and aimlessly, as observable by others too.

(5) The resolution ensues by following the call. The “chosen one” is drawn, as if by higher force, to go to the site of power of the spirit agents, to immerse him- or herself at the river site. This is connected to the idea of “entering the underwater realm,” which is usually done in trance. It is also enacted, ritually, by immersion there. It is during the training stage, but also later as reinforcement (Hall, 1994, p. 221).

Water sites, and their agency, in T. M. Mofolo’s biography of King Shaka

The spiritual role of sites of power at rock pools, is depicted dramatically by the “classic” Sotho poet, Thomas Mokopu Mofolo (1876 – 1948, in Lesotho). He wrote a famed novelistic biography of the great king *Sahaka ka Senzangakhona* (1787 – 1828), who ruled the Zulu Kingdom from 1816 up to his death. In this novel, entitled *Chaka*, (published 1925), Mofolo depicts spiritual events, to account for the extraordinary development of this ruler. His introduction of the sacred topography of sites of power, and their spirit agency, in Bantu culture, into world literature is noteworthy.

Shaka rose, from the disowned son of a small chieftain, to become the ruler of his father’s kingdom, making it a formidable power, by astute diplomacy, innovative military means and social organization. His ruthlessness, that led to his assassination by his half-brothers, evidence a dark and troubled side of his personality. Mofolo attributes this to the ambivalence of his specific spiritual endowment. He tells about a woman diviner who presages his career, and who acts on behalf of the spirits, to direct him to empowerment by them, at a rock pool, at appointed times. Mofolo frames Shaka’s rise in analogy to the development of a diviner (Kunene, 1981, pp. xiv ff.).

T. M. Mofolo, a Christian, was well familiar with Zulu customs and religion, as well as those of his own Sotho people. His depiction of Shaka includes all of these. Mofolo presents the key instruction of the woman diviner to young Shaka's mother as follows:

When Chaka was getting a young lad, Nandi took him to that doctor of hers so that he would be strengthened with potent medicines which would protect him from these people who were intent on killing him. The doctor took some medicinal powder, mixed it with other medicines, and gave it to them, saying: "The day the moon goes into darkness, Chaka must go into the river very early in the morning. When he finishes bathing, he must vaccinate himself with these medicine [...] I want to state very firmly again that this child will receive blessings that exceed all expectations. Tell me, have you ever seen anything at the river while you were bathing? Chaka said he had not (Mofolo, 1925, p. 14).

The diviner appears as gifted with foreknowledge about his future destiny. She fortifies him, by magic medicine, and sends him to the river to encounter his protective spirit. She indicates, that, although acting on behalf of the spirits, she is limited too. Some other diviner will take on the responsibility of mentoring him, after her time. The decisive encounter comes after many visits to the river, some years later.

It was once again Chaka's day for rising early and going to the water, and indeed he went at the earliest light of dawn. His mother, being conscious of the evil spirit among the people, went with him. [...] Chaka washed himself. It happened that, as he was about to finish, the tuft of hair on his head shivered and shook, and the skin under it felt warm and it rippled very quickly, and just as suddenly as it began, everything was quiet again, dead still. [...] High up from the place where he stood was a tremendous waterfall, and at the bottom of that waterfall, right by him, was an enormous pool [...] in this pool the water was pitch dark, intensely black. On the opposite bank, directly from where he was but inside the water, was a yawning cave [...] a little way from where it began, the water was covered by a very dense growth of reeds [...] While Chaka was looking over there in the deep where the water was rippling, he saw the head of an enormous snake suddenly break surface and appear right here next to him. [...]

Stricken by fright, Chaka shut his eyes so that, if that snake intended to kill him it should kill him with his eyes closed, avoiding looking in its face. Slowly he raised his hand and grabbed the tuft of hair, which he had been told to hold tight if very frightened; at the same time, he whistled gently to call his mother. [...]

When eventually Chaka opened his eyes, he realised that it had not touched him, he saw the snake, its eyes still gazing straight into his- [...] and then it returned into the water backwards, keeping a steady gaze on his face. [...] A small column of thick mist arose from the deep pool ... and then out of the reeds over there something boomed with a heavy stentorous voice: "Mphu-mphu hail, mighty monster in the water, / It is seen only by the favoured ones / It is seen by those who will rule over nations" (Mofolo, 1925, pp. 21ff.).

In Zulu culture, snakes are regarded as "messenger animals" (Bernard, 2001, p. 37). The details of the scene depict an "initiatory death". However, by this visionary experience, at this rock pool, Shaka finds himself blessed – and he hears a spirit voice, foretelling him his destiny to become a great ruler. In Bantu culture, such "vision" is accompanied, even introduced, by specific bodily sensations, as internal participation. As to the ritual aspects of this "topology," a ritually appropriate time for the bath preparing for meeting the spirits, is appointed, to be early, before dawn. In the aspect of

“aisthesis,” the site is described as eerily “otherworldly,” as if inhabited by mischievous spirits (tokoloshe) (Mofolo, 1925, p. 22), as an ambivalent “site of power”.

The further steps develop, when Shaka is prepared to become a ruler at the grave of his father, in a process, that includes further visionary spirit encounters, and importantly, his legitimation, by the “raising of his ancestors” in a trance session by the male diviner who officiates in this rite and accompanies this period of Shaka’s ascendancy to power (Mofolo, 1925, pp. 76ff.).

Mofolo is emphatic that at no time, the initiating and empowering encounter of Shaka with the spirit there, could be understood as resulting for artful manipulations by ritual. Despite the firm belief in the efficacy of magic means in Bantu cultures, Mofolo is clear, that the “medicines” that Shaka receive, merely have protective effect preparing him or this encounter. The “agency” of the diviner is in fulfilment of the instructions, received by vision or intuition of the spirits.

This structure of agency is confirmed by the academic psychologist L. R. Nomfundo Mlisa, who wrote her dissertation in anthropology on her own calling and initiation into diviner-ship, as Igqirha, in an extended and arduous process, involving many initiatory rites, and rigorous examinations of her mediumistic faculties, that were merely developed through the process (Mlisa, 2009, pp. 5ff.).

Such rock pools are also visited by diviners in later stages of their careers. Philip Nel tells of a sacred site in the mountains bordering on Lesotho:

At Motouleng the chief religious leader (Ditaba tsa Modimo) is often consulted by graduated and novice healers for advice and for strengthening of the ancestor calling. These acts of “reconnection” with the ancestors are humbling but simultaneously also empowering experiences of re-attachment to the sources of their spiritual power. Diviner-healers experiencing difficulties in their practise or a decline in clients, will seek spiritual connection with the ancestors [...] This may occur more than once during the career of a diviner-healer (Nel, 2014, p. 288).

Encountering spirit entities at water sites in Umbanda: agreements and differences in a Bantu-derived religion of the Diaspora

In Umbanda, rituals by the waterfall are done in the initiation to mediumship, in a secluded setting called “Camarinha”: here the initiates are brought to a waterfall for purification, subsequently for spiritual reinforcement. Here, the Bantu meaning of the rites by the waterfalls persists, as gates to the otherworld of the realm of the spirits. This is reflected for the ritual by the waterfalls, described in a handbook of Umbanda by Vera Braga de Souza Gomes:

Macaia. Name given to a ceremony enacted in direct contact with Nature, generally in forests where there is a waterfall. Its objective is to fortify the mediumistic faculties, to remove negative fluids from all participants and to transfer more “aché” [also: “axé”: a Yoruba concept denoting vital spiritual energy] or, be it, more spiritual power to the spirits attached to the “terreiro” [the ritual community]. [...]

Mediumism is developed through most extended exercises and is fortified by the “lavagem de cabeça” [the “washing of the head”] in the waterfall. The occasion is

taken for certain obligations of devotion, to consolidate (ritual) works done before, by the washing of the “guias” [the ritual beaded necklaces which bear specific powers of the spiritual entities with whom the wearer has been connected by initiation] and to perform any act of magic of major portent, which demands the utilisation of forces taken directly at the original source. [...]

The natural energetic components of the water of a waterfall are taken to reinvigorate the crown chakra by which consequently the mediumistic faculties are perfected. They are also indicated to remove any negative vibrations of the aura.

The washing of the head [...] is also called “firmeza,” a name given to a special “imantação” [a ritual “magnetisation” with the specific spiritual energies of a deity or spirit] for security of/by the cult houses. [...]

The ceremony has variable duration. Generally, it begins in the first hours of the day, lasting until the evening. When they enter the forest the Umbanda adherents usually sing a hymn in which they ask permission to enter and to perform the solemn rite (Braga Da Souza Gomes, 1984, pp. 214ff.) [my translation].

In this passage most features of Bantu rites and perceptions of sacred topography and agency of such sites can be recognised. They determine the logic of the rites and its features. Layers of interpretation, and sometimes of specific traits of ritual, derived from other sources, have been added. They derive from Kardecism, from Tantric Yoga and from Esotericism. Perceptibly, they do not disrupt or displace the Bantu structure.

However, a certain shift, as regards “agency,” can be observed. This may be due, in part, to a certain asymmetry of comparison, in the texts chosen. V. Braga de Souza Gomes depicts the Macaia, as a regular rite of spiritual reinforcement. The Camarinha, presupposed here, as primary initiation into mediumism, resonates more with the initiatory events, described above. In Bantu African culture, the emphasis of agency is clearly more markedly with the spirits.

In Umbanda, a shift has occurred, in line with influences from Kardecism and Esotericism, to emphasise a general endowment with mediumistic faculties, that may be developed. The specific gifts of mediumism remain acknowledged however, and are required for admission to Camarinhas, leading to the recognition as “medium” in Umbanda. The understanding, that spirits (“spirit entities”) are the masters of the process, and the “rulers” of the sites of power at the water, esp. the waterfalls, in the wild, remains. The criterion of “agency” thus appears as a useful tool to identify and to understand agreement, similarities, differences, between Bantu African and Bantu-derived Brazilian diaspora religion and culture.

Sacred topology and agency at water sites in the Bible: Afro-Asiatic relationship

A comparison of the understanding, and phenomenology, of sites of power in African Traditional Religion (ATR) with reports from the Bible, is indicated, because striking similarities, of cultural expression and of religious motifs, have often been recognised (Masoga, 2018, pp. 1ff.). There are reasons to assume that these are not merely coincidental, but due to a formative, genetic link by early cultural contact.

The early Bantu came into formative cultural contact with the Afro-Asiatics, to whom the (later) Hebrews belong, during the Bantu migration from west to southern Africa. This can account for several shared features of culture and religions.

The validity of such long-term perspectives has been presented by Michael E. J. Witzel, in a study focussed genetic connections of the world's mythologies, in relation to cultural history (Witzel, 2012, pp. 8ff.). He too emphasises the importance of the East African corridor, connecting the Egyptian-Levantine and the south-eastern Bantu and Khoisan realms (Witzel, 2012, p. 293).

In East Africa, the Bantu – like some Khoisan before them – adopted significant cultural complexes, from the Afro-Asiatics, like the “cattle complex,” with cultural, economic, social, and religious features (Blench, 2007, pp. 9ff.). The Khoisan bequeathed important religious elements to the Bantu, regarding ritual and calling for rain, including sites of water. The Khoisan and the Bantu have intermarried extensively, with the Bantu, who adopted much from the Khoisan (Pakendorf et al., 2017, p. 15). A brief exploration of this ancient connection may serve to disclose significant features of both, Bantu and Biblical, water sites of power. It is a hermeneutical horizon taken note of here.

Initiation at the margins of heaven at the River Jordan: Elijah and Elisha

One of the eldest reports on sacred sites of power, in the Old Testament, is the report about Jacob's dream of the “ladder to heaven” (Eissfeldt, 1956, pp. 225, 238). In this legend (Genesis 28: 10-22), divine agency is recognised to exist across the horizons of different religions. Jacob remembers that this derelict temple site where is slept, had been a sacred site in Canaanite religion. This depiction shows that the authors of the book Genesis acknowledged “continuity of cult” of sacred sites, and “continuity of divine agency” there, from the context of one religion to another, in a theologically reflected and endorsed presentation.

This set the example for the later appropriation of Pagan sacred sites by the Christian Church, including pilgrimage and ritual. In African Instituted Churches, pre-Christian sacred sites are re-appropriated, to reconnect spiritually to the land, and to the “ancestors” manifesting themselves there, as explained by M. Masoga (Ngobese et al., 2019, p. 297).

This implies that “divine agency” is not perceived to be a function of Christian or Jewish consecration of a site – and thus to be secondary to it, as specific religious “ascription,” but is recognised to precede it, even across religious boundaries.

The understanding, that a dialectic relation exists between (recognised) sacred sites, and transcendent agency, be it spiritual or divine, is fundamental in Bantu religious thought. Specific sites of residency of divine agency – be they permanent or temporary – are revealed by divination or epiphany in experience (Masoga et al., 2014, pp. 72ff.).

In the chapters dedicated to the powerful prophet Elijah, the river Jordan is depicted as the border to the realm of death and the “other-world”. The prophet Elijah was a

model for St. John the Baptist, and for Jesus. The story of Elijah's death – his “passing over the river Jordan” – and of the transfer of his visionary and “shamanic” powers to his disciple Elisha – so that Elisha could “see” Elijah's rapture to heaven. The report is given in 2. Kings 2: 1-15. The connection to Bantu traditions, regarding the role of such sites for the attainment of divinership, resonates with this report: when Elisha returned, back, “through the river Jordan,” as by a transformative passage of initiation, he is recognised as having attained prophetic powers, by his peers: "And when the sons of the prophets which were to view at Jericho saw him, they said, the spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha. And they came to meet him and bowed themselves to the ground before him" (2. Kings 2:15).

This location and its events become an archetype for the rite performed by John the Baptist, as the New Testament scholar Klaus Berger, explains (Berger, 1994, p. 110).

Sites of Power and transcendent agency at the Water: The Baptism of Jesus as initiatory rite

Given these ancient cultural and religious links, an interpretation of the New Testament depictions of baptism at such sites, is of interest. The gospels report that Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist at a site by the river Jordan. Thus St. Mark tells:

(4) John did baptise in the wilderness and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. (5) And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and they were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins. [...] (9) And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptised in the river Jordan. (10) And straightway coming out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him. (11) And here came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in who I am well pleased. (12) and immediately the Spirit driveth him into the wilderness. (13) and he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him (St. Mark, 1:4-13).

The salient features, for our analytic purposes, of comparison with archetypal sites of Bantu religion, and for the interrelation of topography and agency, are:

1. This rite of “baptism” takes place at a special site at a river.
2. The site is “in the wilderness,” well beyond the realm of settlements.
3. It is described as a rite of transformation, of ethical renewal by confession of sins.
4. It involves submersion in the water – as if for ablution, purification, or symbolic death and rebirth – according to later interpretation.
5. It involves the encounter with higher spirit forces – here, the epiphany of the (Holy) Spirit, descending on the initiate.
6. An audition of the Holy Spirit proclaiming the true spiritual nature of Christ, follows his ritual immersion in the river. This resonates with Bantu reports, depicted above. It is thus a systematically important feature., preserved in Christian ritual by the invocation of the Holy Spirit, understood as agent of the baptismal rite.
7. A period of seclusion “in the wilderness” follows. This going onto the “wilderness,” is done “driven by the spirit,” who has the agency here. It is comparable to the process in Bantu initiations.

8. This long stage involves mediumistic visions and experiences of different kinds of spirits: for Jesus, the Satan and angels are mentioned, with temptations and support. Wild animals also serve him. In Bantu cosmology they can appear as messenger beings.
9. For Jesus, his public mission in a new role, with new powers, begins only after the successful resolution of this stage. This too agrees with the Bantu sequence.

This background is necessary to understand the baptism practiced by John the Baptist. This ritual is not a standard, established rite, at the time. It appears to have emerged from different sources in Mosaic and in neighbouring religious cultures (Berger, 1994, pp. 106ff.). The requirement that baptism as to be done in free-flowing waters, as of rivers, or of fountains, is affirmed in Acts 8:38. It is still to be found explicitly in early Christian literature, the third century “Contestatio” of the Pseudo-Clementines (Berger, 1994, p. 108). The name of “baptismal font,” and often the design, preserve the notion of a “fountain” of “living water”. The idea of “agency” by the Holy Spirit, is connected to this archetypal site. Originally represented by a special building, the “baptistery” as a shrine, the baptismal font later became incorporated into the church buildings proper (Poole, 1907).

Conclusions

The pattern of sacred topography of water sites and their agency, in Bantu spirit topology, and its comparison to its derivatives in Afro-Brazilian religion, as in Umbanda, indicate, that the Bantu African pattern appears as more complex, and consistent, regardless of secondary developments that have happened in Umbanda. Reading this “pattern” of sacred topology, with its specific manifestations of “agency” that rule the experience, phenomenology, and rituals, at such sites, during spiritual “visits, especially in response to a calling, lets significant features emerge.

On this background, seemingly unique features in Biblical reports, about the passing of Elijah and the initiation of Elisha, and of the baptism of Jesus, reported in the New Testament, appear as systematic features, when compared to the phenomena experienced at water sites of power during initiation, according to Bantu culture. Spirit and spiritual “agency” here, determining the ritual, with its performance, perceptions, and transformative experience by the initiate. This comparison “as by cultural “archaeology,” of ritual, thus appears as systematically meaningful and fruitful, regarding structure, “topology,” “agency,” and the processual features emerging.

To a non-African reader, the tracing of African features in Christian religion may appear unfamiliar. Its dynamic developments in Africa and in the Afro-Diaspora realm, including the reappropriation of ritual, spiritual topography, of agency, and their dynamics, thus appears as facilitated by a common substratum. The comparative analysis of his central complex of spiritual topology, agency, and topography, that are dynamically connected in the response to the calling to divination and spirit endowment, elucidates a common “archetype,” that continues to be vital in cultures. The identification of an

“archetype” preserved in Bantu African and Brazilian cultures, provides a key to the understanding of these developments.

It also facilitates the understanding of the “logics” of important rites, of Afro-Brazilian religions, as shown for the initiation to mediumism, and its subsequent ritual reinforcement, in Umbanda. “Agency” is essential here too.

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Editora responsável: Suzana Ramos Coutinho
Recebido em: 11/07/2021
Aprovado em: 08/11/2021