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The Devil and the Land of the Holy Cross: Witchcraft, Slavery and Popular Religion in Colonial Brazil

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Devil and the Land of the Holy Cross: Witchcraft, Slavery and Popular Religion in Colonial Brazil. Laura de Mello e Souza. Translated by Diane Grosklaus Whitty. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. xxiii + 350 pp., tables, notes, glossary, bibliography, index. \$24.95 (paper). ISBN 0-292-7023601. [www.utexas.edu/utpress]

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The Devil and the Land of the Holy Cross, Diane Grosklaus Whitty's translation of Laura de Mello e Souza's *O Diabo e a Terra da Santa Cruz*, brings a classic work of Brazilian scholarship to English readers. Specialists consider Mello e Souza's book indispensable for those concerned with the history of popular religion in colonial Brazil. Yet Mello e Souza's book is also a true "history of the present," and her examination of the interlacing of European, Indian and African beliefs and practices is of interest to historians as well as to scholars of religious syncretism and cultural hybridity in Brazil today.

What is outstanding about Mello e Souza's approach to her subject is how she complicates the simple dichotomy, so pervasive in many treatments of popular religion in colonial Brazil, between African sorcery and European repression of it. She highlights the ways in which European beliefs made sorcery plausible and in effect encouraged the practice of magic in daily life. In fact, as Mello e Souza writes, her book is not a study of sorcery per se "but rather of the meaning sorcery may acquire in a setting of unique historical relations, woven from the extremely varied cultural traditions of three continents: Europe, America and Africa." (p. xiv).

Mello e Souza points out that at the time of the conquest of the New World, the undiscovered ends of the earth were a source of rich fantasy in the European imagination. The faraway land of Brazil was no exception; explorers alternately described it as an abundant Eden and a swampy inferno. Thus, Mello e Souza's central metaphor for the colonial condition is that of purgatory, a place between heaven and hell. Yet she points out that the colony revealed its edenic and infernal aspects differently to different groups. For example, while the colony was a purgatory for whites it was clearly a hell for slaves.

The early explorers saw this liminal, purgatorial land as inhabited by monsters and the fabled "wild men" of European lore. These expectations shaped the views of the European colonial settlers, who characterized the natives of Brazil as animals, cannibals and demons living in infernal conditions. The inhabitants of the New World were not only monstrous but diabolical, and the discourse of sorcery further demonized them.

As Mello e Souza emphasizes, the European colonizers of Brazil were already intimately familiar with sorcery. The Catholicism that came to Brazil from Europe was itself steeped in popular beliefs about spiritual beings and magical practices. Indeed, early in the European middle ages, demons and magic formed a familiar part of everyday life. In colonial Brazil this form of religiosity continued and even thrived in the context of plantation Catholicism, a decentralized and heterodox set of traditions that represented a confluence and syncretism of European, African and indigenous influences.

Mello e Souza points out, however, that at the same time as the colonization of Brazil, the early modern Church in Europe was seeking to gain control of the realm of the pagan. Demons and magic, which in medieval society were innocuously integrated into daily life, came to be seen as forces that sought to drag men into hell. Mello e Souza describes how the Inquisition in Brazil faced a popular religion rife with irreverence towards religious symbols, blasphemy, and heterodox beliefs about the saints—not to mention lechery among the priestly class. She maintains that for the inquisitors and the colonial elite, this popular religion was a source of horror.

If the Catholicism that many of the colonists brought to Brazil was almost tolerant of sorcery, how can we understand the attitudes of the inquisitors and the elite? Mello e Souza points out that the Inquisition and the witch hunt emerged along with the rise of the centralized state in Europe. That is, along with the emphasis on codification and standardization in the realm of the state came the stress on orthodoxy in the realm of religion. Thus, in the early modern period, which coincided with the colonization of Brazil, an antagonism arose between ecclesiastical and folkloric culture. It was those who remained most entrenched in feudal systems who remained most tolerant of sorcery and the “moderns” who were most horrified by it.

What is perhaps most fascinating from the perspective of the twenty-first century reader is that the modernizing elite did not “disbelieve.” To the contrary, as Mello e Souza demonstrates throughout her book, sorcery was a coproduction of elite and popular culture. She points out that demonologists and theologians constructed the image of the Satanic orgy while at the same time the Inquisition produced confessions and stories that fit these fantastic images. She argues that:

In the course of an inquisitorial trial, the figure of the witch depicted in the inquisitor’s symbolic universe was momentarily absorbed by the accused or superimposed on her or his beliefs ... This is not to say that the Inquisition “created” the stereotypes of the witch ... The tribunal tampered with the inner workings of the popular cultural universe, altering and expunging the significance it assigned to magical practices (p. 217).

Obviously, this did little to actually eliminate sorcery. In fact, the integration

of the figure of the witch into elite discourses, the existence of organized legal practices centered on the persecution of sorcery, and the notoriety generated by the inquisitorial trials no doubt *increased* the perceived power and effectiveness of magic. Mello e Souza points out that it was not until after the colonial period that the realization hit that “the best way to eliminate witches was to make them look ridiculous” (p. 212).

Sorcery, of course, is alive and well in Brazil today. Following the lines of Mello e Souza’s argument, one might suggest that this reflects Brazil’s uneven modernization. On the other hand, we might also view the resilience of certain common denominators of Brazilian popular religion—including the pervasive use of magical practices—as a form of resistance to modernity on the part of the Afro-Brazilians, cabolcos, and poor whites who have been marginalized by the project of modernization.

Histories and Historicities in Amazonia. Neil L. Whitehead, editor. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. xx + 236 pp., maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$25.00 (paper). ISBN 0-8032-9817-X. [unp.unl.edu]

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Histories and Historicities in Amazonia, edited by Neil L. Whitehead, is based on papers presented at a special session of the American Society for Ethnohistory. In the introduction the editor outlines the starting point for the collection by stating that Amazonia can be seen as the “last frontier for the study of history” (p.vii). Due to its inaccessibility, social and cultural marginality, and lack of historical sources, Amazonia has been seen almost exclusively through the perspectives of its colonizers. This colonizing history suffers from a lack of “cultural significance and historical depth” (p.vii). Only during the last decade have there been significant efforts towards challenging and correcting this record. However, according to Whitehead, in spite of recent promising historical and anthropological research, the methodological problems created from the lack of historical materials and the bias of the existent materials still prevail in the study of Amerindian histories. Whitehead proposes simultaneous archival and ethnographical research as the key to solving these methodological problems.

The aim of the volume then is to investigate the cultural schema and attitudes that make the past meaningful, that is, to produce “historicities.” Whitehead underlines the importance of the distinction between history and historicities for the ways of doing ethnography and for anthropological theory in general. By *history* is meant the different culturally constructed representations,