CHAPTER 9

Religiosity and the Problem of Belonging for Amerindian Young People in Brazil

Maria de Lourdes Beldi de Alcantara

Introduction: Personal Encounters and Reflections on Social Change on the Dourados Reservation

The move away from the singularities of ‘class’ or ‘gender’ as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions – of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation – that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These “in-between” spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.

Bhabha 1994, 1–2

In this chapter I want to describe and analyse aspects of the places of belonging in which the indigenous youth of the Dourados Reservation (Reserva Indigena de Dourados), in the state of Mata Grosso do Sul (Brazil), construct and reconstruct their identity strategies in order to meet the challenges of belonging in this community. In this analysis I will try to show how these Amerindian young people are creating, and being located in, spaces that can be characterised, following Homi Bhabha (1994) as being ‘in between’. Social, cultural and economic changes, in this sense, create spaces in which new ways of being and belonging are created for, and demanded of, young Amerindians. These ‘in between’, often ephemeral, spaces are being negotiated between young people and the community in processes of ongoing, often profound change. I want to suggest that in the face of these emerging realities in Dourados particular forms and practices of religion become what Marcel Mauss (1990[1954]) calls a “total social factor.” Religiosity, and its particular manifestations in these spaces, provides a “privileged place” from which to gain an understanding of the dynamics of identity for Dourados’ Amerindian
youth. For Mauss it is from inside the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of a ‘social fact’ that we are able to understand the whole society.

I began my association with the Dourados Reservation in 1999 when the impact of cases of suicide among young Indigenous people began to appear in media headlines in Brazil. What drew my interest and attention at that time was that instead of exploring this issue from the perspective of Amerindian young people the media emphasised older people’s points of view. Although the facts of suicide among young Amerindians were alarming, there were no studies, let alone systematic research, about the subject. In addition, projects about the Guarani indigenous people were no longer undertaken. It was widely assumed that these people were already in the process of “acculturation,” and the anthropological research in Brazil was focused on indigenous peoples who were considered more different, more ‘distant’ from the non-indigenous populations around them. Indeed, the only reliable data came from the studies that Professor Egon Schaden carried out in 1946 and published in 1967. Those reports focused on “acculturation” and on the relationship between the Guarani-Kaiowa people and the Western culture. Although this data came from a very ‘aged’, in ethnographic terms, theoretical project, it was important for my research as the situation at the Reserva de Dourados in 1999 wasn’t too different from the one studied by Schaden.

The importance of a study that sought the perspectives of young people was very unusual in Brazil, since they were considered people in transition, who didn’t deserve much attention and had little voice inside the community. It was in this context that I started a prolonged period of extensive and intensive fieldwork with the Amerindian young people of Dourados. The first two years were like a ‘rite of passage’ in which it was both important and uncertain if I could be accepted by them. From a theoretical-methodological perspective there wasn’t the possibility of conducting fieldwork without both complicity and reliability. On many Saturdays and Sundays I participated in activities with the young people, such as soccer and volleyball, as well as visiting/working in the only school they had at that time, the Tenga Tuy.

During this prolonged period of fieldwork it became apparent that there was a distinct division among the Guarani (Kaiowa, Ñandeva) and Aruak (Terena) young people in Dourados. They never mingled and there were significant tensions between them. Over time I came to realise how they stood and how they dealt with each other. Attempts to gather them into a conversation happened through the activities on Saturdays and Sundays and in school. One day, after the first two years, some young people asked me if I could start an association with/for them. From these beginnings the Ação dos Jovens Indígenas (Indigenous Young People Action) was created. Very slowly, the