CHAPTER 21

The Globalization of the John of God Movement: Cultural Translation as Glocalization

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Introduction

This chapter investigates how João de Deus, an illiterate Spiritist healer from central Brazil who was unknown outside the country until the late twentieth century, has become the global ‘guru’ John of God, travelling the world to conduct healing events and attracting foreigners to his healing center in Brazil (see Rocha 2017). Some argue that religion was the first globalizing force (Rudolph 1997); certainly, religions have always been mobile, and cheaper and improved means of communication and transport in recent history have increased mobility, contact, exchange and negotiation. However, not all religions travel well: Csordas argues that to spread transnationally, religions need to have a transposable message and portable practices. Transposable messages are those whose “appeal contained in religious tenets, premises, or promises can find footing across diverse linguistic and cultural settings” (Csordas 2009: 5). Portable practices are those that “can easily be learned, require relatively little esoteric knowledge or paraphernalia, are not […] linked to a specific cultural context, and can be performed without commitment to an elaborate ideological or institutional apparatus” (Csordas 2009: 5).

This chapter considers the ways in which John of God’s cosmology has acquired portability and transposability. It argues that his beliefs and practices ‘travel well’ because of his foreign adherents’ intense work of cultural translation. Through their talks, books, websites, documentaries, TV programs, meditation sessions and international activities, foreign adherents de-link John of God’s cosmology and healing practices from the Brazilian cultural context enough to fit foreigners’ worldviews. Indeed, rather than a process of ‘McDonaldization,’ in which locality comes under siege in modern societies, globalization entails a tension between homogenizing global impulses and heterogenizing local forces (Appadurai 1996). Ethnographic work on local cultural practices shows that foreign objects, practices and ideas are reinterpreted by the local (Wilk 1995; Yan 1997). In some cases, this process of reception may constitute a mode of resistance against hegemonic forms of global culture. Robertson popularized the term ‘glocalization,’ which he defined as a dialectic
between “the particularization of the universal and the universalization of the particular” (Robertson 1992: 178; see also Robertson 1995), to make explicit that the global and the local are two facets of the same process.

Here I show the ways in which 'glocalization' has assisted the global expansion of this until recently very local Brazilian religious movement. While Brazilians may share John of God’s beliefs and understanding of his healing practices, most foreigners are only able to engage with them through an interest in the New Age movement, Spiritualism and alternative practices disseminated in global popular culture (Rocha 2009, 2013). The gap between the healer’s practices and this global milieu needs to be bridged by foreign adherents’ work of ‘glocalization.’

This chapter draws on fieldwork research conducted since 2004. This has included in-depth open-ended interviews with Brazilians and foreigners (in Australia, New Zealand, New York and London, as well as Abadiânia in Brazil), and participant observation at John of God’s healing center in Brazil, at meditation circles in Australia and at four international healing events, two each in New Zealand and Germany.

**The Healer John of God**

John of God is a Brazilian Spiritist medium who purportedly performs miraculous cures, operating on people with a kitchen knife and scalpel but without asepsis or anesthetics. He was born João Teixeira de Faria in Cachoeira da Fumaça, a small village in the state of Goiás in central Brazil in 1942. From a very early age he started prophesying. At sixteen he left home to look for work, as his family was too poor to support him. According to books by his followers, he had a vision while bathing in a river. Saint Rita de Cássia (an important Catholic saint in Brazil) appeared to him and told him to go to a Spiritist center in Campo Grande, capital of the state of Mato Grosso do Sul. Upon arriving, he fainted, and when he awoke he was told that he had healed many people while channelling/incorporating King Solomon. This was the first entity (spirit) of more than thirty he presently incorporates (channels) while in a state of trance.

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1 Here I will use ‘Kardecism’ for the normative Spiritism organized and regulated by the Brazilian Spiritist Federation (FEB). The term ‘Spiritism’ will be deployed for more diffuse practices and beliefs, which vary across a continuum between, on the one hand, Afro-Brazilian religions, and on the other, Kardecism. For more on this continuum, see Carmargo (1961).