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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Brazil's "Nation" of St. Francis

Review by Matthew Meyer

Spiritual Currency in Northeast Brazil

by Lindsey King

University of New Mexico Press, 2014

In the backlands of Northeastern Brazil, where Vatican Catholicism has long vied with “folk” religious practices for the loyalty of the people, there is a saying that the Holy Trinity is not the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but instead St. Francis, God, and Padre Cícero. If this saying defines a tenuous relationship to the Catholic Church, a similarly distant relationship to the Brazilian state is expressed in the idea of a “Nation of St. Francis” that gathers together and protects those marginalized by Brazilian society. Faced with a distant Church and a neglectful state, these people turn to St. Francis to work miracles in their lives, and, when he does so, they repay him with pilgrimages and votive offerings.

This situation forms the backdrop of Lindsey King’s new book, *Spiritual Currency in Northeastern Brazil*. King’s text foregrounds the production of *milagres*, a category of votive offerings (*ex-votos*) made by pilgrims to the shrine of St. Francis of Wounds (São Francisco das Chagas) in Canindé, Ceará state, Brazil. These *milagres* (“miracles”) are hugely variable in form, but they most often use wooden carvings to represent body parts, telling the story of a malady from which the pilgrim has been cured, and are deposited at the shrine as payment of a “promise” (*promessa*), understood as a contract between the supplicant and the saint.

The many ways to pay a promise to St. Francis include “women cutting off their beautiful hair, people circumambulating the basilica on their knees, purchasing and lighting candles, [and] carrying heavy crosses.” A bewildering array of votive objects are offered, too, from “X rays, sonogram pictures, biopsy results, contact lens cases, saline drip bottles, and disposable syringes” to “army uniforms, soccer balls and jerseys, body casts, false teeth, orthodontic retainers...pieces of machinery,

spark plugs, roofing tiles, leg braces, orthopedic shoes” and rural products, presumably in thanks for good harvests: “bottles of oil made from castor beans and carnauba palms, dried corn stalks, jars of beans, dried gourds ...manioc meal, and machetes and hoes.”

The most common way, though, to generate the “spiritual currency” to make good on one’s promise to the saint “is by creating a mimetic ex-voto representative of the promise and depositing it in the receptacle in the Casa dos Milagres” at Canindé (which, after Assisi, is the largest shrine to St. Francis in the world). King catalogs, in both the text and the dozens of black-and-white photographs that accompany it, the variety of subjects (animals, houses, or occupational equipment materials) and media (clay, paper, cloth, wax, Styrofoam, and others) that figure in the devotional forms she observed in Canindé, but she’s most interested in the carved wooden representations of the human body made by pilgrims to repay St. Francis for healing their afflictions. These carvings – detached heads, hands, feet, hearts, and other body parts—are the primary focus both because they’re the most prevalent, according to King, and, especially, because they allow her to discuss what she really wants to talk about: what the making and offering of mimetic milagres “reveals about the ‘dis-ease’ of the social body from the perspective of the Northeast’s rural population.”

The portrait of Brazil’s Northeast that King develops harmonizes with familiar imagery of a drought-stricken region laden with natural suffering made worse by inhumanity. King did not, at first, appreciate the enormity of human misery in the region. In the book’s second chapter, she narrates her arrival in the field, telling of a sick cat she found in the street, and of the dismay she felt when no one could be bothered to help her care for it. It led her to a revelation: “I realized that in a situation where existence can be a daily struggle, where just getting a child to live through infancy can be an accomplishment, caring if a stray cat lived or died was a luxury these people could not afford. I got it. ... Shaken and humbled, I finally began to see, and I began to be an anthropologist.” The piles of arms and legs accumulating in the shrine’s offering bin began to speak to her, and she began to collect the stories of the pilgrims who came to pay St. Francis.

While some of the pilgrims bore obvious signs of physical trauma, King found that most of those who came to Canindé sought relief from “problems that might be directly construed as socially related.” These include headaches, temporary paralysis, and “culture-bound” afflictions such as *susto* (enervating fright) and *encostos*, burdensome spirits that weigh one down. In the “folk” Catholicism of many Northeasterners, it is these complaints of everyday life that are the focus of ritual activity, rather than salvation in the afterlife. King puts repeated emphasis on this point throughout the text in support of the notion that the carved offerings are both markers of individual suffering and, by virtue of their collective ritual presentation, “metasocial commentary” on the inequality that produces the suffering.

This quest to descry the meaning of milagre-making both energizes and confounds King’s efforts. It leads her to inspired passages, such as this one, where she waxes poetic on the connections between illness and social marginalization: “where does rage, or for that matter any emotion, have to go but to turn inward? You want to talk back, but you cannot, so the voice disappears. You cannot look at instances of injustice anymore, so your vision spontaneously disappears. When you long to raise your arms against your employer but cannot, paralysis sets in.” In this light, one can appreciate King’s likening of the milagre bin at Canindé, with its ever-swelling testament to the suffering of the poor and disenfranchised, to a kind of “flag” for the “Nation of St. Francis” that shows them they’re not alone. But the interpretive imperative sometimes seems to go too far: repeated references to the this-worldly concerns of folk Catholicism make a puzzle of their intense religious devotion – a puzzle that’s too easily solved here as veiled political speech, despite passages that demonstrate King’s understanding of the interpenetration of the everyday and the mystical in Brazil. Caught between her stated aim simply to tell the stories of Canindé’s pilgrims, and pressures from unknown quarters to explain, King won’t satisfy all her readers, but still teaches us a lot about making milagres.

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