

Reviews

Jaguars of the Dawn: Spirit Mediumship in the Brazilian Vale do Amanhecer. By Emily Pierini. Berghahn, 2020. 290 pages. \$135.00 cloth; ebook available.

Jaguars of the Dawn is the first full-length study in English of the Brazilian religion known popularly as the Vale do Amanhecer (Valley of the Dawn), notable for its elaborate rituals performed by adherents clad in distinctive, colorful vestments. Based on extensive ethnographic research at the movement's Mother Temple outside of Brasília, as well as temples in England, Portugal, and Italy, Emily Pierini's book focuses on the phenomenon of spirit mediumship central to the Vale do Amanhecer's ritual life and doctrine. Situating her ethnographic contributions within the larger scholarly literature on spirit possession, on the one hand, and religious learning and transmission, on the other, Pierini examines spirit mediumship as an embodied form of knowing that transforms mediums' sense of self and connection to the larger community.

In addition to detailing the complexities of the Vale do Amanhecer's cosmology, mythology, organizational structure, and understanding of human nature—itself a valuable contribution to the literature on new religious movements—the book shows how participants gradually absorb and integrate the movement's worldview through their training as mediums and come to see themselves as part of the spiritual tribe known as Jaguars. Pierini's careful attention to the cognitive, sensory, and emotional components of this multilayered process is one of the great strengths of the book and enables her to connect the life history narratives of her informants, as well as her own training as a medium at the Vale, with the scholarly literature with which she is in dialogue. As the book amply demonstrates, becoming a spirit medium is not primarily an intellectual process of transferring belief, but rather one of “enskillment” as novices learn to attend to an inner landscape of feelings, intuitions, sensations, and subtle shifts in consciousness and thereby to develop an embodied form of perception that both transforms their subjective sense of self and enables an ongoing encounter with forces construed as otherworldly (7, 16–17). By developing the perceptive skills associated with mediumship and mastering the codes governing its physical expression, adherents are able to progress in the community's complex hierarchy and gain access to ever more powerful forces. As they do, they are exposed increasingly to the Vale do Amanhecer's cosmology, mythology, and doctrine.

In structure, the book moves from the external world of sociological context to the more interior world of subjectivity, psychological states, and self-fashioning. The first chapter situates the Vale do Amanhecer as one of a number of mediumistic religions in Brazil and offers a brief discussion of Candomblé, Umbanda, and Spiritism—traditions that form part of the generative matrix out of which the Vale emerged. Pierini's discussion highlights the desire for powerful transcendent experiences and the role of social networks and biographical narrative as significant factors shaping people's religious trajectories. This "spiritual vitality" (36) not only explains the fluidity of the Brazilian religious field but also describes a religious path shared by the Vale's creator as well as many of Pierini's informants.

The centrality of phenomenological experience and the labile nature of human-spirit relations is a thematic thread that runs throughout the book and provides a useful frame within which to understand the establishment and growth of the Vale do Amanhecer. This is the subject of chapter 2, which presents the Vale's Mother Temple outside Brasília and introduces the founder Neiva Chaves Zelaya (1925–1985), known as Tia Neiva (Aunt Neiva). Pierini also explains the spiritual pantheon of the Vale, a complex hierarchy of "spirits of light" that pertain to two different "phalanxes": the "Indian Space Current" and the "White Currents of the Greater Orient." Tia Neiva claimed that she had been chosen by these "Great Masters" to continue their mission of fostering human evolution and alleviating suffering. This work was especially urgent, she taught her followers, because of the turbulence provoked by the Earth's transition to a new planetary cycle, known as the Third Millennium.

The next two chapters operate in tandem to explain the Vale's notion of the self as an entity that transcends limits of time and space. Chapter 3 details Vale cosmology and the community's collective identity as Jaguars, a spiritual tribe that has shared a common trajectory of past incarnations in various civilizations across time and space. Chapter 4 depicts the physical, psychic, and spiritual components that together form the self. This distinctive "ecology," comprised of invisible substances like ectoplasm, animal magnetism, and the perispirit, enables the self to expand into ethereal dimensions beyond the physical, to experience multiple lifetimes, and to affect and be affected by spirits.

Subsequent chapters describe the Vale's practice of disobsessive healing, mediumistic development and its epistemology, participants' spiritual tracks prior to joining the Vale, and how the embodied knowledge cultivated in mediumistic development can foster healing. Woven through these chapters are references to Pierini's own mediumistic training, which she deploys to great effect. As she explains, this training forced Pierini to attend to her own embodied experiences and develop perceptions she would not have otherwise. It also enabled her to

cultivate deeper relationships with Vale members as they discussed the subtle transformations involved in developing mediumship. Her insights into, and lucid explanations of, the complex process of enskillment and self-fashioning that such training requires make this an exceptionally rich ethnography.

Where the book falls short is its account of the Vale do Amanhecer's generative influences. Aside from a superficial mention of Theosophy, Pierini ignores the important role of esoteric and theosophical ideas on the Vale's cosmology, doctrine, and organizational structures. The esoteric influences on the Vale are many and prominent—including references to the Great Masters, the Indian Space Current, and the White Currents of the Greater Orient. One of the key stories legitimating Tia Neiva's unusual form of clairvoyance, which Pierini dutifully recounts but never scrutinizes, involves a Tibetan master who initiated her into "high magic." Concepts like the seven rays, initiatic cycles, and kabbalistic wisdom, as well as the Vale's own complex hierarchy of initiatic grades, also point to the generative influence of esoteric thought on the Vale's religious imagination. In Pierini's account, however, these references appear as disconnected idiosyncrasies.

Leaving aside these objections, *Jaguars of the Dawn* is, by far, the most comprehensive account of the Vale do Amanhecer in English. It is not a text friendly to undergraduate students or one that is likely to appeal to a general reader, however. But for scholars of new religious movements, anthropologists of religion, or those interested in the phenomenology of religious experience, embodied learning, or the therapeutics of spirit mediumship, *Jaguars of the Dawn* offers a thoughtful and detailed account of a fascinating—and internationally growing—new religion.

Kelly E. Hayes, Indiana University-Purdue University–Indianapolis (IUPUI)

Guest is God: Pilgrimage, Tourism, and Making Paradise in India. By Drew Thomases. Oxford University Press, 2019. ix + 212 pages. \$99.00 cloth; ebook available.

This nuanced study of Pushkar, a pilgrimage town in northwestern Rajasthan, India, incorporates an interdisciplinary range of interpretive perspectives that highlight religious, political, historical, and socio-economic dimensions of the site. Based on extensive fieldwork, interviews, participant observation, and careful analysis, the book illuminates the complex juxtaposition of myth, history, modernity, and the religio-economics of pilgrimage that make this site unique in contemporary India.