

# **Marriage, knowledge, and morality among Catholic peasants in Northeast Brazil**

Maya Miranda Mayblin

London School of Economics and Political Science

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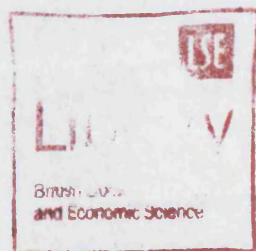


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# Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic study of marriage, religious practice, and concepts of morality among a group of peasant farmers in Northeast Brazil. It investigates how, over the individual life-course, concepts of moral accountability develop and change, and how people negotiate such changes through specific discourses on labour and suffering. Such discourses stem from a particularised Catholic ideology which grows out of the social and economic history of the region. The existential problem of living both morally and productively in the world manifests itself most explicitly in local understandings of marriage; revealing a perceived tension between the states of innocence and knowledge. The thesis shows how this tension feeds into a heightened concern over the various stages of transformation in a person's life, particularly the transformation from childhood to adolescence. Tied to such transformation is concern about the correct moral management of knowledge, which is founded upon the gendered performance of sacrifice. However, it emphasises that the passage from innocence to knowledge is as fraught and inevitable for men as it is for women, and that while men's and women's physical expressions of this problem differ, they are ultimately bound and shaped by the same moral dilemmas. Thus the thesis argues that while the analysis of gender difference is an important task, it should not obscure local understandings of the relationship between the sexes that downplay concepts of difference while emphasising the basic similarity of moral concerns. In this way, the thesis offers a contrast to much of the literature on Catholic and Orthodox peasantries that has made gender difference the central focus and defining trope in understanding marriage, religious practice, and concepts of morality.



# Contents

List of Figures	4
Acknowledgements	5
Maps	9
Introduction	10
Chapter One: <i>Background and History</i>	26
Chapter Two: <i>Marriage in Santa Rita</i>	49
Chapter Three: <i>The Importance of Suffering</i>	74
Chapter Four: <i>Working to Sweat</i>	103
Chapter Five: <i>Virtuous Husbands, Powerful Wives</i>	131
Chapter Six: <i>From Innocence to Knowledge</i>	158
Chapter Seven: <i>From Knowledge to its Moral Management</i>	178
Chapter Eight: <i>Conclusion</i>	204
Plates	212
Bibliography	219

# List of figures

## Maps

Brazil	9
Northeast Brazil showing location of fieldsite	9

## Plates

1. 'Sofredora', Santa Rita	212
2. 'Trabalhador', Santa Rita	213
3. Couple on their wedding day, Santa Rita	214
4. Children dressed up as bride, groom, and priest for <i>casamento de matuto</i> , Santa Rita	214
5. <i>Rezadeira</i> drawing out evil through yawning, Santa Rita	215
6. <i>Rezadeira</i> curing patient suffering from <i>peito aberto</i> , Santa Rita	215
7. Woman scraping manioc, Santa Rita	216
8. A family at home, Santa Rita	217
9. View of central street of Santa Rita	217
10. Women and children gathering on sidewalk, Santa Rita	218

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For my parents



## Map

Northeast Brazil showing the location of the fieldsite

‘ So you are the girl who has come to study us people. Tell me then, is there a chance that one day we will finally understand the ways of Man?’

*(Geraldo, 42 years old, Santa Rita).*

## Introduction

### Getting there

Boarding the coach at Recife is a sticky affair: the cloying humidity of the tropical coastline weighs heavily in the air causing hair to stick to temples and flesh to weld to the back of plastic seats. In the semi darkness of the lower-ground floor boarding platform, I wait with the other passengers for the coach to fill up. Outside my window, small boys with loud voices sell hot tapioca and cans of coke from scuffed polystyrene boxes slung about their necks, porters in blue uniforms lean against trolleys smoking, and lycra-attired women with proud, waist-length hair board buses with infants and suitcases under their arms. The air on the coach is stagnant with the scent of engine oil, deep-fried station snacks, and perfumed sweat. The windows are open as far as they will go; there is no escape from the sauna-like heat. We wait for what seems like an age until, finally, the engine starts and we pull out of the station and into the mid-morning sun. Gaining speed on the highway, people lean, squinting, into the hot breeze. It is a four hour drive inland from the lower altitudes of the lush, humid coast to the higher plateaus of semi-arid *agreste*. And even now, almost a year into fieldwork, this journey fills me with a mixture of excitement and apprehension.

Leaving the *favelas* (shanty towns) on the outskirts of Recife, we drive for an hour or so past undulating seas of vivid green: miles and miles of sugar-cane rolling up to and away from us, then fading into the horizon. Small sugar-plantation towns appear and disappear periodically: ram-shackle houses nestle on slopes thick with tropical vegetation. Lonely restaurants and garage workshops litter the main highway, and, on the outskirts, the ubiquitous petrol station also stocking specialities of the region: cotton hammocks, clay figurines, coconut and papaya sweets. The coach passes through these tumble-down towns leaving tethered donkeys, stray dogs



and open latrines behind, while continuing its way upwards into tunnels sliced through the red clay hills. After a slow, uphill wind the road progresses straight and the air, quite rapidly, dehydrates. Gradually the landscape flattens out and the colours fade. Rather than the brick-red loam and emerald vegetation of the coastal strip, we are flanked on either side by beige plains scattered with grey-green scrub. Entering the *agreste*, the heat becomes drier and more bearable; small towns come and go, and isolated *fazendas* (farms) dedicated to cattle-breeding begin to appear. In the far distance, on the north-western horizon, lie the bluish outlines of the Serra de Ororobá. The people boarding the bus now are familiar to me: a sun-leathered man with sparkling blue eyes, a dark haired woman with a blonde haired child. I am gradually distracted from the apprehension of having to return by the fact that I recognise these rural accents and expressions, the contours of the landscape and this vast, unravelling sky. It never fails to surprise me how, in the midst of my homesickness, I can feel so at home. Every once in a while the coach pulls into a station to let passengers on and off. At Caruarú the driver turns around to inform us that there is time to buy regional delicacies at the station shop: *carne de sol* (dry salted beef), *queijo de manteiga* (butter cheese), and *goiabada* (guava sweet). Four hours later, as we approach the town of Lajedo, I spot the slaughter-house that is my landmark to get off. The coach grinds to a halt leaving me alone in a hot cloud of dust by the roadside.

I continue my journey south-west, towards the foothills of Garanhuns, clinging to the torn leather seat of a local motorbike taxi. Turning off the main highway, we bump onto a dusty white track that leads deep into the *sítio* (cultivated countryside). The young man is an experienced rider: he knows how to negotiate the potholes and just how fast he must go to prevent his bald wheels from skidding on the sandy roads. We judder up and down cracked, muddy inclines, and as we approach the narrow slips - devoured during the rains and barely the width of the tyres themselves - I hold my breath and prepare to fall. Each time we survive I marvel at the skill of my flip-flopped driver, who handles the motorbike as though it were an extension of himself. As far as the eye can see on either side of us are peasant *roçados* (fields), the staple crops of maize, beans, and manioc springing from their sandy, arid top soils. Occasionally an irrigated pocket gives way instead to vegetable crops: cabbages, tomatoes, peppers and coriander. Large cacti and lonesome palms dot the landscape, and small birds flit in the grassy hedgerows: the black and white *lavandeira* ('washer woman'), the dark red-chested *sangue de boi* ('bull's blood'), and the deep blue *azulão* ('big blue'). The road and its potholes are old, familiar friends of mine. The scar is still there on my arm from the time I skidded off my own motorbike. Every part of this rolling landscape is significant to me, traced as it is not only with *their* memories and experiences, but also with my own.

As we descend into the valley, the village of Santa Rita comes into view: higgledy lines of small brick houses criss-crossing the stream and surrounded on two sides by hills of semi-deciduous thorn forest. The village is quietly alive with activity: dogs snooze, wooden carts rumble past, the occasional radio on someone's front porch plays *forró* (regional music). Summer is approaching and women sweep neat lines in the dust in front of their houses; men drive cattle to pasture up in the hills, or walk along, tools in hand, calling out 'O Pa!' to those they meet on the way. Passing the *casa de farinha* (flour mill), one can hear the dim, continuous murmur of the machinery and catch the acrid smell of wood smoke and rotting manioc peel. Outside, young men – white with *farinha* (manioc flour)– load long baskets with manioc which they carry to the women in pairs. Inside, women sit in semi-darkness on low stools, peeling 100 kilo piles of roots. They stop and look up as the motorbike goes by; I can just about make them out against the blackness of the peeling room, smiling and pointing me out as we pass. We slow down near the school to navigate our way through scattering children. When they recognise me they call out 'O Ma-a-ya!' in teasing tones. 'O Ma-a-ya!' they call out over and over again as I pass by. I wave and they run after me giggling and shouting my name. This has become something of a tradition and I have long given up being embarrassed by the commotion I seem to cause.

## **The focus of this thesis**

I first arrived in the village of Santa Rita intending to study children and processes of child labour. But as fieldwork progressed I realised that to understand children's participation in labour relations, I first needed to understand the kinds of discourses that adults produced about their own labour in the flour-mills and fields. With time, it became apparent that adults' discourses about their work made little sense viewed solely within the narrow framework of the labour context. It was only once I started to connect these discourses with other discourses about marriage, morality and especially religion that they started to make sense. As I broadened the scope of my original project, I became more interested in the wider social, practical, and cosmological context in which such labour occurred. As a result, this thesis is about how a group of peasant farmers in the Northeastern interior of Brazil relate to the divine. It is about the way in which they deal, practically and philosophically, with the moral paradoxes and conflicts of interest that their religion engenders for them. In particular it examines their attempts to counteract the spiritual pollution generated by living productively in the world – i.e. marrying, labouring, and reproducing – through discourses about labour and suffering.

A major theme running through much of the anthropological literature on Christianity is the logical difficulty that Christians face between the world of daily life and the world of ultimate religious meaning (Cannell, 1999, In press; Pina Cabral 1986). The tension is generally attributed to the other-worldly focus of Christianity which promises access to transcendent divine power, 'but only at the cost of a privileging of the 'life after death' over the life of this world, and the future life of the spirit over the present life of the flesh' (Cannell, 1999: 197).<sup>1</sup> João Pina-Cabral has provided an important discussion of these issues in European peasant Catholicism (1986: 234–6). Faced with an orthodox discourse on world renouncement that is impossible for persons other than celibate religious specialists to emulate, the Portuguese peasants of the Alto-Minho seek to tap divine power through various unorthodox forms of mediation and to thereby reintroduce it into the world. Mediators include a cult of 'non-eaters' who live off the Communion wafer alone, a cult of the dead souls in Purgatory, and a cult of incorrupt bodies. For the Spanish Catholics of William Christian's study, a similar predicament is negotiated via the performance of purificatory rites at sacred sites around the villages of the Nansa Valley. According to Christian, such a sacred geography is central for the 'transformation of divine energy for human purposes' (1972: 101).

However, as Cannell notes, the notion of 'transcendence' which is usually taken to be a central characteristic of Christianity can be traced not only within Christianity itself, but also within the Platonic philosophies of the Greeks and Romans which, in different ways, argued for the existence of a set of abstract moral principles which stood above social obligations and therefore potentially conflicted with them (In Press). Indeed, it could be argued that recognition of a tension between the mundane and the transcendental order marks not only Western philosophy and Christian thinking but also other world religions.<sup>2</sup> Anthropological perspectives on this tension have been important for understanding the problems as well the answers that religious orders generate. As Sherry Ortner has argued:

'Religion can be minimally defined as a metasystem that solves problems of meaning (or Problems of Meaning) generated in large part (though not entirely) by the social order, by grounding that order within a theoretically ultimate reality within which those problems will "make sense". At the same time it must be realised that religion, by virtue of being a metasystem that is separate from and yet addressed to the social order, itself engenders paradox, contradiction, and conflict. When one says that religion is an autonomous element of a sociocultural system, one is not saying that it floats free of a social base; one is simply saying that while it is responding to (both

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<sup>1</sup> However, Cannell questions the notion that Christianity is exclusively a religion of transcendence, arguing that historically, theologically, and cross-culturally 'transcendent' Christianity 'was never unambiguously "other worldly", and even orthodox Christianity contained within it the shadows of its own alternative ways of thinking' (in press).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Bloch and Parry (1982) who argue that transcendent logic is a property of religion and, more specifically, of ritual in general.

“reflecting” and attempting to solve) some problems, it is creating others.’ (Ortner 1978: 152).

Ortner’s classic study of Sherpa hospitality reveals both a religious critique of the social order and a social critique of the religious order. Ortner argues that while the Buddhist devaluation of sensuality implicitly denigrates Sherpa hospitality, from the secular perspective hospitality ‘opens a serious question concerning the morality of the religious world view and ethos, for it is hospitality that, according to the culture, renders people cooperative and mutually supportive, as opposed to a religious orientation in which it is every man for himself, pursuing his own salvation’ (ibid: 152). The socio-religious problem faced by the Sherpas of Ortner’s study is not dissimilar to that faced by the Catholic peasants of this thesis. From a Santa Ritan perspective, ideal religious purity can only be achieved by humans through a kind of spiritual innocence and worldly detachment that are materially unproductive and ultimately anti-social. For the people of this study, a desirable life is a productive one. It is one in which a child grows up to be knowledgeable and clever, marries, works for a living, is sexually active, and produces her own children. Yet such a life is pitted with spiritual risk and danger. If negotiated successfully, the person remains ‘close to God’ (*perto de Deus*) and respected within the community. If not, they risk spiritual death and social failure.

In writing this thesis I have engaged with a wide and somewhat eclectic range of comparative literature. Alongside studies carried out on rural workers and peasantries in other parts of Brazil (Brun 1989; Fukui 1979; Garcia 1990; Harris, Mark 2000; Heredia 1979; Johnson 1971; Moura 1977; Scheper-Hughes 1992; van Halsema 1991; Wagley 1968; E. Woortman 1995; E. Woortman and K. Woortman 1997) and Latin America (Melhuus 1992, 1996; Nash 1993; Olivia Harris 2000; Stolen 1996) I have engaged with some of the literature on Catholic and Orthodox cultures in other parts of the world (Cannell 1999; Sallnow 1991; Morinis 1992) and particularly within the Mediterranean (Caraveli 1986; Christian 1972; Dahlberg 1987, 1991; Dubisch 1995; du Boulay 1974; Pina-Cabral 1986; Seremetakis 1991). Gender and ritual are common and recurrent themes in much of this literature, whether they are treated together or analysed separately. Either way, I was surprised to find that the general picture presented by the literature on these topics did not correspond with Santa Ritan people’s experiences, and similarly, that the analytical models commonly deployed by many theorists were unhelpful when it came to understanding my own data.

In much of the literature, for example, there is a heavy focus upon cultural and religious expression in extra-ordinary and ritual contexts. From the various religious cults described by Pina-Cabral (1986), the lively and colourful festivals documented by Max Harris (2003), the Catholic rituals and forms of devotion

analysed by Cannell (1999), Christian (1972), du Boulay (1974), and Pessar (2004), the activities of religious pilgrims discussed by Dahlberg (1987, 1991); Dubisch (1995); McKevitt (1991); Morinis (1992); and Sallnow (1991), to the death rituals studied by Caraveli (1986), Danforth (1982), and Seremetakis (1991), the literature on Catholic and Orthodox cultures is, not surprisingly, replete with references to ritual forms of various sorts.

I was therefore somewhat struck by the lack of ritual elaboration in Santa Rita, and at local people's apparent disinterest in ceremony and formality in religious affairs. Although many participated in the various major festivals and rituals of the Christian calendar, an equal number would not. Pilgrimage to holy places was not a strong tradition within the community, and save for the local chapels and church, the area did not contain a sacred geography of built shrines and other places of divine significance. Nevertheless, it was clear that Santa Ritan people were intensely religious, and believed quite strongly in the importance of communing with the divine. This led me to pay attention to the ways in which people sought to tap divine power in ordinary, everyday contexts. Rather than investigating human-divine relations via the offices of rituals or special cults, as so much of the literature does, I have chosen to investigate the nature of such relations in ordinary, unspecified contexts; in contexts that are categorically un-removed from the ordinary time/space of the workaday world. In doing so I seek to address the same questions as previous authors: what is religious practice and what are its aims? What kind of relationship do people seek to establish with the divine? My own focus on human-divine relations in non-official, and non-sacralised contexts has led me to dissolve assumed distinctions between activities such as 'work' and 'religious practice', and 'everyday conversation' and 'ritual'. It has also prompted me to question the relevance of various taken-for-granted concepts such as 'cleansing' and 'purity' in the understanding of Christian belief and practice.

In much of the literature on patriarchal peasant societies in Latin America and the Mediterranean, authors have drawn special attention to the effects of rigid divisions and separations of gender. Men and women's roles are presented as differing radically in terms of labour, power, moral standards, religious practice, and sexual propriety. In the literature on Greece, for example, writers have laid particular emphasis on women's exclusion from the public arena, the social rules that place women under male control, and the necessity of female modesty for the maintenance of male honour (Campbell 1964, 1966; Delaney 1987; du Boulay 1974, 1991; Gilmore 1983, 1985; Herzfeld 1985, 1986, 1991, Peristiany 1966).<sup>3</sup> In the 'paradigm' of the Mediterranean that results, a kind of functional division is assumed between the sexes: with 'black-clad rosary-telling women' adopting the role of pious

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<sup>3</sup> For an overview on the themes of gender and sexuality in this literature see Loizos and Papataxiarchis (1991).

religious observers, and honour-bound macho men indulging in 'flamboyant anti-clericalism' (Cannell in press).<sup>4</sup> However, as Cannell observes:

'What in effect appears to have happened, is that in advancing the well-known division between 'male' culture and 'female' domesticity, some of these early ethnographers also made a less-widely-noticed assignment of Christian practice to the female, and therefore implicitly non-cultural sphere' (Cannell: in press)

Perhaps in response to the implicit relegation of the female to the 'non-cultural', more recent works such as Dubisch (1995) and Seremetakis (1991) have addressed Greek women's roles in public rituals, thus challenging the idea that women are excluded from political processes and public life. However, although such work has gone a long way towards counteracting the androcentric bias of much of the previous literature, it has done so by elaborating opposite 'feminine' models of practice and ideology and has therefore continued to reproduce an image of cultures grown out of rigid oppositions and divisions of gender.

The body of work on gender in Latin America is large, spanning several decades, and it is not my intention to offer a detailed review of its content here.<sup>5</sup> In general, however, it might be said that the study of gender in Latin America has developed from one concerned with 'rescuing' women's voices in order to counteract the androcentric bias of academic discourse, into one that emphasises intra-categorical differences between men and women, and the ambiguity and complex multiplicity of gendered forms. Towards such ends, theorists have stressed multiplicity, not only in constructions of femininity, but also in manifestations and images of masculinity (Archetti 1996; Harris, O. 1994; Lyons 2000; Nencel 1996; Prieur 1996; Wade 1994;).

Theorists of gender in Latin America have also been concerned to reveal the centrality of gendered representations for the ordering of other significant distinctions such as race and class. Whereas some have shown how gender structures discourses on ethnicity (Crain 1996; de la Cadena 2000; Rostas 1996; Stølen 1996a), others have argued that gender provides a language through which discourse on nationalism or politics is constructed (Archetti 1996; Krohn-Hansen 1996; Melhuus 1996; Paulson 2002). Other works, moving beyond a concern with the force of hegemonic gender ideologies in legitimising and naturalising structures of power, have examined how gender may be 'mobilized in, or impinge upon, the restructuring of discourses, practices, institutions, or communities' (Frazier et al. 2002: 3). In such work, the concern has been with the 'emancipatory potential of ordinary people's gendered practices' (ibid. 2002: 4). Thus Montoya (2002) argues that Nicaraguan

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<sup>4</sup> Note, however, that Pina-Cabral (1989) challenges the notion of the Mediterranean as a 'culture area'.

<sup>5</sup> For general reviews of gender studies within anthropology, see Moore (1988, 1993, 1994). For reviews of gender studies in Latin America see Nash (1986), and Melhuus and Stølen (1996: 9-14).

women's knowledge about the workings of their local gender ideologies allowed them to negotiate greater rights to sexual and conjugal choice across their life cycle. And in Lyons' (2002) work on contexts and notions of resistance among Quichua speakers, he suggests that resistance in the Ecuadorian Andes is centrally informed by gender ideologies.

In an influential contribution to the study of gender in Latin America, Olivia Harris (2000) has emphasised the duality and complementarity of gender relations and symbolism in indigenous Andean culture in which the complementary unity of the couple is closely tied to the economic role of the household, centred on the married couple. In contrast to peasant societies in many other parts of Latin America, gender relations in Northern Potosí are said to be non-patriarchal, context-related and not, therefore 'consistently weighted on one side' (2000: 164). As such, observes Harris, while the ideal model of relations between husbands and wives is based upon principles of unity and complementarity, in other contexts, when men act as a group, asymmetry in the gender relationship is revealed. Harris critiques the literature on women for its overemphasis on the conjugal relationship 'to the exclusion of many other roles played by both women and men' (ibid.: 164). In doing so, she questions the common assumption that the symbolic representation of woman and man can be derived solely from the biological basis to their relationship.

Nevertheless, in the literature on patriarchal, *mestizo* societies, the dominant picture of gender relations is that they are hierarchically structured and encompassing of individuals in almost all contexts (Melhuus 1992, 1996; Melhuus and Stølen 1996; Stølen 1996a, 1996b; van Halseman 1991). Male domination is thought to be based not only upon the notion of an inherent difference in the nature of men and women, but in male control of female sexuality embodied in the common cultural emphasis on female chastity and virginity. Within this literature, women's sexual propriety is held to be at the core of the differential power relations that exist between the sexes, and emphasis is laid on the power that men hold over women. According to theorists such as Melhuus and Stølen, the cultural emphasis on female chastity is not merely a question of sexual propriety but one of morality itself, generating different schemes of evaluation for men and women. Thus Melhuus argues that where men are classified according to degrees of masculinity, women are discretely classified according to their moral character. Along such lines, gender, as a significant carrier of meaning, is claimed to be '*central to an understanding of Latin American reality*, past or present, whether we are concerned with economic, political or cultural processes.' (Melhuus and Stølen 1996: viii, emphasis my own).

Yet such an approach, in my view, is problematic as it views gender difference as axiomatic and therefore fails to differentiate between gender as a symbolic construct and the gendered or ungendered ways in which people live their everyday

lives. Furthermore it assumes that gender difference is necessarily a constituent part of (and, in some cases, prior to) other categories such as morality, personhood, and religious practice; all themes central to this thesis. The weakness of this kind of analysis became evident to me whilst carrying out fieldwork in the village of Santa Rita, for there the supposition of such a critical difference between men's and women's lives, and their concomitant outlooks on the world, did not appear to hold. Rather than a radical separation of gendered outlooks, what was striking in the Santa Ritan context was the amount of confluence in men's and women's discourses, practices, and views. Santa Ritan people were always somewhat reluctant to objectify 'men' as one social category and 'women' as another. I was surprised to learn that women were totally uninterested in viewing their experiences collectively, or in presenting themselves publicly as ideal feminine types. They would look at me bemused when I talked about 'women' in the collective sense, and opposed their experiences to those of 'men'. It is not that gendered identities or idealised concepts of femininity or masculinity did not exist, but that these were not salient in local discourse. The people I knew tended to assess and regard one another in terms of their moral personhood in a non-gendered sense, rather than as gendered individuals. The only difference that was significant, in this regard, was a person's age. This was in keeping with the culturally elaborated tendency to emphasise similarity among persons – to proclaim that all humans were 'God's children' or that 'we are all one blood' – despite differences of sex or gender, wealth, power, or race. Rather than stressing the idea that men and women were inherently unlike, Santa Ritan people emphasised that they were differently positioned but similarly motivated. In other words men and women were viewed as fundamentally strong and weak, powerful and powerless, moral and immoral in the same or equivalent ways: a woman was held to be as capable as a man of wielding power, and of acting nobly with love (*amor*) or selfishly with pride (*orgulho*). The manner in which she demonstrated such capacities would differ from a man's, but this did not change the basic nature of what was demonstrated.

Strathern's recognition that the person is 'both symbolically linked to and differentiated from gender' (1981: 179) has been particularly useful for understanding my Santa Ritan informants lack of emphasis on difference and antagonism between the sexes. For as she points out: 'That a contrast or difference between male and female is used to symbolise a disjunction of values does not ipso facto imply an antagonism between men and women' (ibid: 178). By building upon this view, the arguments put forward in this thesis challenge the over-drawn emphasis on gender and difference in the related literature. Thus whereas previous writers have put issues of gender at the very core of concepts of personhood (Howell and Melhuus 1993); morality (Melhuus and Stølen 1996); public performance and



religious expression (Caraveli 1986; Dubisch 1995; Seremetakis 1991), I argue that gender is less relevant for understanding such issues in the Santa Rita context. By examining local religiosity in non-ritual and non-institutional contexts I challenge the popular anthropological assignment of 'morality' and Christian practice, in Catholic and Orthodox societies, to the female, and show that men are just as morally concerned and religiously enthusiastic as women are. I argue that a problem with some feminist critique is that while it is quick to rail against the absence of complicating categories of gender difference, ambiguity and multiplicity in anthropological studies, the same categories tend to be assumed unquestioningly. Rather than reifying gender difference and assuming its importance, I interrogate its relative insignificance in the local context. My aim is not to deny that cultural practices and forms of expression are in some sense gendered – indeed I strive to show that they are – but to show that perceived gender differences are often more symbolic than they are encompassing of persons and practice.

## **Fieldwork Methodology**

Fieldwork was carried out over an 18 month period between September 2001 and March 2003, fifteen months of which I spent living in the village of Santa Rita. My first two months in Brazil were spent living in a market town in the interior, helping out at a children's project run by a friend and learning the local dialect of Portuguese. Eventually I moved to a small rented house in a semi-rural neighbourhood on the outskirts of the town whose inhabitants all worked in the flour-mills. There I hoped to carry out my fieldwork in the mills, on children and child labour. Unfortunately I had not bargained for the difficulties of integrating myself into the community without a formal introduction from a known and trusted person. The flour-mill owners were suspicious of me and, convinced that I was some kind of government agent sent to spy on them, refused me entry to their mills. To make matters worse, I found living alone to be hard work and emotionally isolating. Five weeks later, no closer to making acquaintances or gathering any data, I decided to move away. It was at this time that a friend of mine who happened to be the local doctor in a rural village several kilometres away convinced me that I should give this village a try. In no time he had prepared the way for my arrival, explaining to people the purpose of my stay and arranging for a family to take me in.

I arrived in the village of Santa Rita in the middle of the night, sat aboard my collection of furniture on the back of a pick-up truck. After the disaster of my first field site I was feeling nervous, self-conscious, and scared. It was therefore somewhat unfortunate that half the village had turned up to watch me arrive. As soon

as we pulled up, young men and children clambered onto the truck and started to unload my belongings and carry them swiftly off somewhere into the night. A crowd of faces watched in amused silence as I awkwardly picked my way down from the truck. The mother of the house where I was to live stepped up to greet me. When I opened my mouth to speak people laughed and asked one another what I'd said. Nobody could understand my accent, and they did not appear to understand why I talked so differently from them. 'What is wrong with her, is she retarded?' I overheard one man ask. I burned with embarrassment. Never before had I felt so ludicrous in front of such a large crowd.

With my first uncomfortable days in the village behind me, I began to feel very much more at home. During my stay in the village I lived in the house of the same family throughout, who treated me as a 'daughter' and gradually integrated me into their daily routine. The household was composed of Amauri, his wife Dida, and their two teenage daughters Fabiana, aged nineteen, and Katiana, aged fourteen. Along the stretch of pavement beside my house were the households of four of Dida's siblings. It was not long before I came to know this extended family and became particularly close to Lucinha, Dida's sister-in-law and Lourdinha, Dida's sister. Both of these women were instrumental to my research: patiently showing me the correct way to do things, introducing me to new people, assisting me with interviews, explaining terms and discussing issues that were crucial to my research. In the end, I came to spend as much time in their houses as I did in my own.

Whatever the drawbacks of my choice of field site, the communicativeness of its inhabitants more than made up for it. With the odd exception, people were talkative (the most talkative were known locally as '*conversadores*' conversationalists), and filled with a lively sense of curiosity about their world. The Santa Ritans I knew were always willing and eager to talk to me about whatever it was I was interested in, and most did not have a problem with my noting or recording them. Inevitably, the best conversations would occur when I least expected them to and under circumstances in which it would have been inappropriate for me to whip out a recorder or notebook. In fact, much of the time I preferred to leave my recording equipment behind because I felt it compromised the process of establishing people's trust. Consequently, most of the recorded interviews I carried out were towards the end of my fieldwork with people I had already come to know quite well.

For the obvious reason that I myself was a woman, the bulk of my participant observation was carried out amongst women, performing activities such as attending chapel, gardening, preparing food, washing clothes, and scrapping manioc. It was during such times when gossip was exchanged and women tended to forget about my presence that I felt I learnt the most about Santa Ritan life. Opportunely for me, women were also in the habit of paying visits to one another in the late afternoon and

those I knew well would encourage me to tag along with them. Rather than being based around the performance of some communal work activity, visits constituted a form of social interaction between women which involved simply sitting and talking together, either in the front room or back kitchen, whilst sampling homemade cakes or sweets. Such occasions were usefully appropriated by me for lengthier conversations with people about their lives. 'Ask a question, ask!' my closest friends would demand whenever I came to visit, and would seem disappointed if I did not have some interesting new topic to explore.

My participant observation with men was inevitably more limited. Having gained acceptance within the community as 'a daughter' in the house of a local family, it would have been inappropriate for me to accompany men I did not know to work, or to enter those male spaces such as the pool room and drinking shack where men tended to spend most of their time when they were not in the fields or at home. I was therefore unable to collect data on a significant aspect of village life: the male world of the bar room, where men drink prolifically, build alliances, discuss *negócio* (business) and contest and affirm their social status. However, the fact that I was part of a family in the village allowed me to spend legitimate time in the company of its immediate male members. Over the course of my stay, 'my father' Amauri, who was at first distant, became a good friend and a key informant. On occasion I would accompany him on the back of his motorbike as he made his daily rounds, and would observe quietly as he bartered and negotiated the sale of livestock and other objects with various male acquaintances. Amauri's old father, Seu Mané, was another man with whom I was able to spend much time: watching as he tilled the earth or fed the livestock, or simply sitting with him in the shade of his backyard, talking about the moral politics of 'right' and 'wrong'. Unmarried men of my own age were more difficult to access as they tended to keep a respectful distance from me. A notable exception to this was 21 year old André who, because he was Fabiana's fiancé, would often interact with me quite freely. Once I had firmly established a granddaughter-like relationship with Seu Mané, it became easier to become acquainted with some of Amauri's younger brothers who I was able to consult for their views on certain topics. As my research progressed and people became accustomed with my particular project, I was eventually able to arrange visits and/or interviews with various older men in their homes. At these, I would be received somewhat formally, and would carry out my interview in the presence of one or more of the man's family. In this way I strived as best I could to balance out the female bias of my data collection, and although I cannot claim to have eradicated it entirely, I feel that I have managed to offer a more balanced picture than I might ordinarily have done had I not made the conscious effort to do so.

Before going to the field I became rather concerned about the problem my marital status would pose. From my reading of the literature I had assumed that I would be entering a radically gender divided and strongly *machista* world where women could only survive under the guidance and protection of their male kin. Various people had led me to believe that being a young, single woman would seriously hinder my capacity to carry out proper fieldwork: I was told that I would be sexually harassed by men, that married women would not speak openly to me about their lives, assuming that I would not understand, and that I would have my movements restricted and be treated like a child. So great was my concern that I genuinely considered buying a fake wedding band and pretending that I was a married woman. But after giving it much thought, I decided to be honest about my status and resigned myself to the problems it might cause.

In the end, the world I entered was not nearly as *machista* or hostile towards single women as I had been led to believe. Although I was clearly something of an anomaly in that I was a young, single woman who was independent of her family and who travelled freely about the country on her own, this did not constitute a breach of any rule. With time I came to realise that had I been married, my behaviour might have been considered wrong, for it is in fact married rather than single women who are expected to comport themselves ‘properly’ and to live under the constant watch and ‘protection’ of a man. As Santa Ritan people never tired of reminding me, had I been married there would have been no way I could have spent so long apart from my husband, living among them. As a married woman with an absent husband, it would have been harder to integrate myself as a daughter into Dida and Amauri’s home. Moreover, as a married and therefore ‘sexually aware’ woman without a husband around, I might also have been more open to sexual harassment from other men. In the end, therefore, I found my status as an unmarried woman rather liberating: it meant that people accepted my mobility and independence on the understanding that I was not yet beholden to a husband; it was supposed that this was my time in life free from responsibilities (a time that would one day end), and that I was therefore entitled to make the most of it.

My fears that married women would not speak frankly to me about their experiences also proved to be unfounded. The fact that I was unmarried in fact prompted women to bring the subject up much more than they might otherwise have done. Indeed it seemed to be their very assumption that I knew nothing about married life that spurred women to describe their own experiences to me in such detail. Time and again, married women I knew would go out of their way to talk frankly to me about topics that I, in theory, would not relate to: sex, contraception, domestic violence, and so forth. I often had the feeling that this was partly because I was an outsider – someone to whom they could relate such things without the risk of

being judged – but I also sensed that it was generally what older married women did with younger women of marriageable age. Many such descriptions were offered in the form of warnings about the difficulties and travails that marriage and motherhood entailed. Therefore the fact that I was unmarried turned out to be to my advantage in terms of gathering data as women somehow felt compelled to prepare me for my own potential future as a mother and wife.

Much has been written by anthropologists about the difficulties of turning lived field experiences into written text. The politics of anthropological representation is a well worn theme in anthropological discourse and it is difficult to find anything new to say about it. As McCallum has succinctly put it: ‘Anthropology is not a ‘neutral’ science, but rather a positioned knowledge of peoples who are made part other by the observer’s eye, and part kin despite it’ (2001: 2). Thus I am somewhat obliged to point out to the reader that what this thesis represents is a partial and, in many ways, subjective account. Had I lived with a different family or been a different person, I would no doubt have produced a rather different piece of work. The process of constructing an academic argument invariably forces one to open up certain lines of inquiry whilst shutting down others. Writing is a difficult task as any ethnographer knows, and I, like others before me, am aware of the betrayal that my representation involves. Despite my best efforts I have been unable to do justice to the individual personalities of the people I knew; I have been unable to fully convey the open-ended complexity of their world. If I have presented Santa Rita as a bounded ‘culture’ whose diverse aspects fit neatly into a hermetically sealed system of interpretation, this is more to do with the constraining problems of language and academic convention than any overt desire to do so. Nevertheless, I hope that what follows will give the reader some insight into the moral and ontological dilemmas that Santa Ritans face in their everyday lives, and a perspective on some of the solutions they propose.<sup>6</sup> My principle aim has been to write an ethnography about Santa Ritan people in which their own voices are clearly present; one in which they might recognise themselves even if they disagreed with the arguments I have put forward. In the limited time I have had available, I have tried, wherever possible, to let my informants own terms guide and inform my analytical approach.

## **Structure of the thesis**

Following Chapter One, which describes the ethnographic and historical background to the area where I carried out research, the thesis is organised around six core

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<sup>6</sup> All place names and names of people have been changed to protect identities, with the exception of names of people who requested that their actual names be used.

chapters which detail themes which become salient at different stages of individuals' lives. For the sake of simplicity, the stages covered can be roughly divided as follows: childhood (from four years until about ten years); youth (puberty until marriage); and adulthood (from marriage onwards). I have chosen to subvert the somewhat predictable chronology of these stages in the ordering of the thesis by beginning, in chapter two, with marriage itself – the moment of transition, as it were, from youth to adulthood. Following this, in Chapters Three, Four, and Five, I discuss themes that apply exclusively to married adults. In chapters six and seven I deal with childhood and youth, in the last chapter, bringing us back to the stage described at the very beginning of the thesis, where young people become ready for marriage.

I have chosen to begin with the topic of marriage because it is the moral and spiritual conflict that marriage generates – the fact that marriage makes spiritual salvation harder to achieve – that constitutes the existential problem underpinning this thesis as a whole. Thus, in Chapter Two, I describe the different types of problem that marriage creates for people ranging from the practical hardships of supporting one's own household, to the moral dilemmas of split kinship loyalties and the spiritually-polluting necessity to sin. If marriage is necessary but dangerous because it leads individuals away from spiritual salvation, the chapters that follow examine how people attempt to counteract this problem. In Chapters Three and Four, I discuss some of the alternative religious discourses and practices by which married men and women, respectively, attempt to deal with the spiritual pollution generated by conjugal life, labour, and reproduction. Chapter Three focuses upon women's narratives of suffering while Chapter Four explores (predominantly) male discourses on labour.

In Chapter Five, I discuss the sexual politics of power within the conjugal relationship. I continue to show, as I did in Chapter Two, that marriage is a morally fraught and spiritually (if not physically) dangerous state of being which men and women must negotiate in socially appropriate ways. But here I examine what happens when it all goes wrong; when a marriage falls irreparably apart through acts of violence perpetrated by husbands and wives. I discuss local understandings of power within the conjugal relationship, and show how these contrast with received gender-based analytical models that have been used by other writers to understand power relations between the sexes, and the sexual politics of domestic violence. It is in this chapter that I elaborate my critique of the gendered emphasis in the literature discussed above.

Having discussed the ways in which married adult men and women deal with the existential problem that marriage poses for them as individuals, in Chapters Six and Seven I examine how they, as parents, deal with the problem that marriage poses for their children. Parents desire that their own children grow up to marry, be

knowledgeable, live well, and produce their own families. But because they are implicitly (or explicitly) aware of the existential problem that marriage generates, they are faced with the task of educating and preparing children for the spiritual and moral dangers such a path entails. Because children are held to be spiritually pure and morally unaccountable they are simultaneously idealised and problematised in adult discourse. In Chapter Six I explore this paradox by contrasting local concepts of knowledge (*conhecimento/sabedoria*) and innocence (*inocência*). I go on to describe adults' interaction with younger children in two particular contexts: in everyday speech-games and an annual secular ritual known as *casamento de matuto*. I show how both types of interaction constitute a means of educating children about the inevitability of sin and moral conflict in a productive (i.e. a married) life. In Chapter Seven I continue along the same vein, this time investigating the way in which adults attempt to shape older children and teenagers into proper moral persons. I give an analysis of child labour practices as they occur within the context of the overall life-cycle, and suggest that these constitute an important aspect of the moral, spiritual and psychological conditioning that young people are said to require if they are to counteract the moral and spiritual conflict that their future conjugal life will entail. In the Conclusion I bring together the various themes and arguments of the preceding chapters under an overarching notion of sacrifice, and in doing so I elaborate, in more detail, the model of self-sacrifice that threads throughout the thesis.

## Chapter One

# Background and History

In this chapter I offer a general overview of the historical background to which the people of Santa Rita belong.<sup>1</sup> I follow this with a general history of the village itself and a description of its people, layout, and social organization during the period of my fieldwork. As most historical accounts of the region make plain, the state of Pernambuco where Santa Rita is located is significant for being part of the conglomerate of Brazilian states that make up the '*Nordeste*' (Northeast). Given that Santa Ritan people proudly identify themselves as *Nordestinos* (Northeasterners), my account is partly intended to assimilate with the wider body of literature that contextualises past and present processes in different areas of this region in relation to a generalised concept of a Northeast. Nonetheless, I suggest that we have to be aware of certain dominant narratives within the social-scientific and historical literature on the Northeast which offer a partial view of its history, and neglect to take proper account of the diversity of the region, in particular the social and economic history of peasant small-holders such as those from the village of Santa Rita.

## The concept of the Northeast

In a detailed historical tracing of the concept of the Brazilian Northeast, Albuquerque (1999) has pointed out that it was only through certain specific historical developments that the concept of a 'Northeast' became salient at all. During the nineteenth century, Northeastern regionalism began to take hold and the concept of the Northeast began to be romanticised in literature, defined by geographers, and intellectually objectified as having a particular history and character.<sup>2</sup> It must therefore be remembered that to talk about 'the Northeast' is to talk, simultaneously, about a historical, geographical, political, juridical, economic, and romantic concept laden with a particular set of folk and scholarly connotations.

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<sup>1</sup> For general accounts of the history of the Northeast, see Andrade (1980); de Castro (1966); Forman (1975); Levine (1992: 67-119); Scheper-Hughes (1992: 31-64); Schneider (1996); and Slater (1986: 25-55).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Oliveira de Andrade (2000) for essays on the cultural and intellectual tradition of the region.



The Northeast of Brazil has traditionally been defined as the area encompassed by the nine coastal states between Maranhão and Bahia.<sup>3</sup> It covers an area larger than Italy, Spain, and Portugal combined and has a population of approximately 47.5 million, about twenty-eight percent of Brazil's total.<sup>4</sup> Three hundred years ago the Northeast was among the richest areas of the Americas with a monoculture of sugar founded on slave labour. The decline of the region began to intensify during the nineteenth century when differences arising in the relative fortunes of its sugar industry and the coffee industry in the south started to combine with inequitable investment by the national government, favouring the south. Today the Northeast is famed as one of the poorest and most under-developed areas of Brazil. As the anthropologist L.A. Rebhum notes:

‘...the South boasts the major universities, museums, and cultural resources, the largest cities and busiest airports, the most modern banking system, and the biggest shopping malls...The Northeast seems almost a separate country from the South, forming a sense of abandonment reflected in persistent rumours of its sale to Japan in return for national debt relief’ (1999: 38).

Present day poverty in the Northeast is the result of a multitude of factors, the greatest of which is the huge level of inequality in land distribution (Pereira 1997). The land problem has its roots in the early colonial practice by which the Portuguese Crown handed out enormous land grants to prominent politicians (*donatários*). These politicians, in turn, bestowed extensive tracts known as *capitanias hereditárias* to individual colonisers. *Latifúndios* (large land-holdings) were thus established from the beginning of the colonial period and one of their effects was to produce a polarised, highly inequalitarian class system which is still immediately recognisable in the present day.<sup>5</sup>

Even during the late 1960s and 1970s, when Brazil's military dictatorship propelled the country toward a rapid industrial growth, making it the Western world's eighth largest economy, millions of Northeasterners continued to suffer high levels of poverty, unemployment, hunger, and disease (Pereira 1997). Throughout the Northeastern interior where rainfall is low, social inequality has been periodically intensified by the incidence of drought. At various points in Brazil's history, global climatic factors have caused massive crop failures in the Northeast, sometimes lasting for years. The famines that resulted were generally magnified because of the failure, on the part of the ruling elite, to invest in proper irrigation projects and to stem the environmental degradation caused by cash-crop production and large-scale

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<sup>3</sup> The states of Bahia, Sergipe, Alagoas, Pernambuco, Paraíba, Rio Grande do Norte, Ceará, Piauí, and Maranhão.

<sup>4</sup> According to the 2000 census, Brazil's total population stands at approximately 169.5 million ([www.world-gazetteer.com](http://www.world-gazetteer.com)).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Mitchell (1989: 1).

cattle farming. It is thus unsurprising that *seca* (drought) continues to loom large in the collective memory of Northeastern people, and the fear of *fome* (hunger) and *sede* (thirst) remain dominant preoccupations among the poor.<sup>6</sup> This has led to stark characterisations of the region by various writers. Amongst them de Castro, who in 1969 described the Northeast as ‘600,000 square miles of suffering’; Galeano, who in 1975 defined the area as ‘a concentration camp for more than thirty million people’; and Scheper-Hughes, who in 1992 wrote in her monumental *Death Without Weeping* of the ‘pockmarked face of the Brazilian Northeast’.<sup>7</sup>

Although the Northeast covers an incredibly large and varied area of the country, travel, migration, literature, and popular media have led to a general awareness among ordinary Northeastern Brazilians of this wider regional identity.<sup>8</sup> Nowadays, Northeast Brazilian folk artists proudly participate in this emblematic depiction of their region, producing ceramic figurines and woodcuts depicting scenes from folk tales and rural life. Most famous of all are their mass produced images of *retirantes* – hard-bitten families fleeing the drought of the *sertão* desert. As such, the Northeast of Brazil has come to stand in the national imagination as a place of tragedy and heroism; a ‘*terra de contrastes*’ (land of contrasts) in the words of Bastide (1964), a land – in the words of Scheper-Hughes – of:

‘cloying sugarcane fields amid hunger and disease, of periodic droughts and deadly floods, of authoritarian landowners and primitive rebels, of penitential Christianity, ecstatic movements, and liberation theology existing with Afro-Brazilian spirit possession’ (1992: 31).

## Climate and geography

As the first region to be colonised by the Portuguese, the state of Pernambuco, which lies in the heart of the Northeastern region and covers an area of 37, 946 square miles, was once the country’s richest and most important province. Today it is the region’s second most populous state at approximately eight million, and also one of Brazil’s poorest.<sup>9</sup> Like other Northeastern states lying along the Atlantic coast, it is composed of three geographic-cultural zones corresponding to the progressive dryness of the climate in which different agricultural practices and industries predominate.

<sup>6</sup> For detail on the socio-political causes and consequences of drought in the Northeast, see Andrade (1985); Hall (1981a); and Reis (1989). For an anthropological study of modern-day hunger in the sugar-plantations see Scheper-Hughes (1992), which also talks about drought (pp 68-72).

<sup>7</sup> De Castro (1969: 220); Galeano (1975: 75); Scheper-Hughes (1992: 31).

<sup>8</sup> Some of the most classic and oft-televised novels of Jorge Amado (*Gabriela, Cravo e Canela; Tieta do Nordeste; Dona Flor e Seus Dois Maridos*) are set in the Brazilian Northeast, and play upon the image of the region.

<sup>9</sup> 2000 census (www.world-gazetteer.com.)

Along the Eastern littoral that extends from Rio Grande do Norte to Southern Bahia is the *zona da mata*: a flat, highly populated humid strip, originally covered in Atlantic forest and now dominated by sugar plantations. West of the coast is the vast interior region known as the *sertão*: a drought prone wilderness of scrub growth ribbed with rocky mountains, and occupying approximately forty-nine percent of the Northeast as a whole (Andrade, 1980: 21). In this region, where cattle rearing is the dominant occupation, rainfall averages only twenty-five inches in a good year. Because of the climate agriculture is generally limited, but in a good year *sertão* farmers will plant cotton, carnauba palms, sisal, castorbeans, and cashews.

In the transitional area between the humid *zona da mata* and the vast, semi-arid *sertão* is the region known as the *agreste*, where rainfall is fairly reliable averaging thirty to thirty-five inches per year, but decreasing gradually in proportion to distance from the coast. One of the distinguishing features of the *agreste* is its geographic diversity – resembling the semi-arid *sertão* in its driest parts, and the more thickly vegetated *zona da mata* in its most humid zones. The *agreste* occupies the eastern portion of the Borborema Plateau, and extends towards the mountains of Rio Grande do Norte and the southern part of Alagoas. In the Pernambucan *agreste*, where I carried out my fieldwork, the degree of moisture is insufficient for sugar cultivation but permits the cultivation of coffee, cotton, beans, manioc, maize, and, in certain more humid parts, fruits and vegetables.

These three major regions shade into one another and are linked by the constant movement of people and goods. Indeed, many of the people with whom I carried out research claimed to have descended from parents and grandparents hailing from the *sertão* or the coast. In particular, the fact that the *sertão* and *agreste* have been subject to periodic droughts means that movement between these regions has been especially great. During the droughts of 1744, 1790, 1846, 1877, and more recently in 1932, 1958, 1965 and 1987, thousands of inhabitants left the *sertão* to settle in the *agreste* and the *zona da mata*.

## **Settlement of the interior from the seventeenth century onwards**

The written history of the Northeast is a history dominated by the culture and politics of sugar. Sugarcane was established in the *zona da mata* by the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century and has been a potent influence on Brazil's economic, political and social history ever since. From the earliest days of colonisation sugar attracted large numbers of settlers from Europe, and, apart from minor fluctuations, it drove the economy of the whole region throughout the colonial period. Through the

social and economic exploitation of African slaves, plantation owners (*senhores de engenho*) were able to prosper, whilst providing a steady flow of revenue for the Portuguese crown.

The power and politics of the plantation system and the stark social inequalities it spawned are widely accepted as having defined almost every aspect of life for slave and freeman, wage labourer, sharecropper, and migrant worker from the seventeenth century through to the present day (Bastide 1964; De Castro 1969; Fragonal 1976; Freyre 1986; Galloway 1968; Genovese 1971; Hall 1981a; Scheper-Hughes 1992). The scholarly works that address this topic are numerous and greatly outnumber those that concentrate on other Northeastern areas and political economies. One of the most famous contributions to this body of literature was made by Gilberto Freyre in his epic work *The Masters and Slaves* (1986), in which he dealt with the culture and social institutions of the plantation from an anthropological as well as from a personal and nostalgic perspective. Others, such as de Castro (1969), Fragonal (1976) and Scheper-Hughes (1992) have tackled the history of the plantation from Marxist perspectives, describing its victims as 'sad half humans crushed like cane between rollers that leave only juiceless husks behind' (de Castro 1969: 7), and the industry itself as a 'whoring social and economic social formation if ever there was one' (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 34).

Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that while the social, political, and economic history of the region as a whole grew out of and continued to be shaped in major ways by the sugar economy in the coastal humid zone, there is another story to be told: not about sugar and slavery but about leather, cotton, and tenant farming. Far less has been written, particularly in English, on the history of the Northeastern backlands. Most of what exists is somewhat outdated and recent historical scholarship on the interior is scarce. However, from the historical accounts available, it appears that Tupinamba Indians were the principle inhabitants of the interior of Pernambuco before the Portuguese arrived, and that they remained so for most of the sixteenth century following Cabral's 'discovery' of Brazil in 1500. Because of the concentration of the sugarcane economy on the coast, colonists were relatively slow to penetrate the vast hinterlands. Since the earliest colonial times livestock had been an important subsidiary economic activity to sugarcane cultivation, as the mills themselves and the transportation of the sugar required a great number of cattle and horses. As coastal lands once reserved for pasture became absorbed into the plantation economy, ranchers had no choice but to drive more deeply into the interior. The settlement of the back-lands was thus achieved little by little, by cowmen, Jesuit missionaries,<sup>10</sup> outlaws, and runaway African slaves who travelled up

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<sup>10</sup> Due to their direct ties with Rome, the Jesuit missionaries were eventually expelled by the Portuguese Crown from both Brazil and Portugal in 1759. The Brazilian clergy remained weak throughout the rest of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the colonial church serving more as an

the Ipanema river and proceeded inland along dry riverbeds. According to Kelsey, the cattlemen who eventually founded the great cattle and cotton estates of the semi-arid interior were 'free colonists': descendents of Portuguese farming folk who were 'ineligible through lack of capital and credit, name and rank to receive grants of the fat lands on the seacoast' (1940: 163). Unable to plant sugarcane in the *zona da mata*, they took advantage of climatic conditions in the *sertão* and *agreste* that were favourable for growing cotton and grazing cattle. In the process they usurped the native people's land, enslaving them wherever possible. The more powerful tribes that remained withdrew into the mountains to the high wet areas less accessible to the Europeans and less coveted by the cattle raisers. In this way, huge cattle ranches were established and, since each animal required several hectares and very little tending, the area, for 300 years or more, remained sparsely populated.

The Dutch presence in the Northeast (1630-54) slowed down formal settlement of the backlands, although many of the guerrilla fighters linked to the Portuguese government in Bahia frequently took refuge in the region and came to remain there. After the Netherlands' defeat, some Dutch settlers also fled into the sparsely populated interior where they made their homes. When a sufficiently large number of squatters had moved into a given area, the colonial authorities would normally present the land in question as a *sesmaria* (land grant) to a powerful cattleman. In return for legal title to land, the recipient theoretically enforced the dictates of the Portuguese monarch. However, owing to the distances involved and the difficulties in communication, rural chiefs known as *coronéis* lived and ruled more or less independently from the crown, employing bands of hired gunmen (*jagunços*) to enforce their own laws.

A problem with much of the available historical literature on the backlands is that it is somewhat generalised, and does not elucidate the process of settlement and agricultural development in quite as critical a manner as that pertaining to the area of sugar plantations. A further difficulty is posed by the fact that of the literature which attempts to offer a more in-depth historical perspective on the interior, by far the majority is concentrated on the *sertão*. Thus, while it is possible to encounter entire works on the social landscape and history of areas within the *sertão*, rare is it to find studies of comparable depth on the *agreste*, and any references that do exist tend to occur as footnotes or single paragraphs in otherwise generalised texts.<sup>11</sup> This seems strange given that, historically, the *sertão* as a region was far less populated and

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arm of the civil bureaucracy. Throughout the period between 1500 and 1822, only a handful of clerics served the interior and most communities had little or no contact with the official church. Popular religion was based around home altars and folk rituals, and many inhabitants followed messianic movements. There is an extensive bibliography on the history of the Catholic Church in Brazil. See, for example, Levine (1980: 252-259); and Bruneau (1982). On historical and other aspects of folk and popular Catholicism within Brazil, see Azzi (1978); and Brun (1989).

<sup>11</sup> One notable exception is Andrade's (1980) classic work, which dedicates an entire chapter to the social and economic geography of the *agreste*.

economically developed than the neighbouring *agreste*. However, the *sertão*'s traditional status as something of a 'wild frontier' land, and its dramatic associations with drought, banditry and mysticism appear to have made it more attractive to scholars. As wrote Kelsey of the *sertão*, in the 1930s:

'When the full scale of this turbulent and little-known region, the Brazilian equivalent of North America's "wild and woolly" West, is told, the exploits of Buffalo Bill and Jesse James, of cowboys and desperados, of Indian raids, prairie fires and mountain blizzards and all the rest will become very pale indeed... Within these boundaries are the desiccated *sertões*, lands where short-lived rivers run and arid plains form a tragic background for periodic droughts and for one of the great Brazilian types, the *sertanejo*... a man of endurance and daring, rustic and undisciplined, an extremist whether he takes to religion or to crime. ' (1940: 162).

This stereotype, which has been romanticised through the ages via popular verses and ballads, continues to make a strong impression in writings about the region, informing, in my view, some of even the most recent scholarly works.<sup>12</sup> A result of this is that anyone seeking to gain a rough impression of the social and historical make up of the Northeastern interior would be forgiven for thinking it was nothing more than the story of the *sertão*; a *sertão* whose population was made up entirely of powerful, warring cattle barons, bandits on horseback, and wandering religious fanatics.

However, alongside such famous bandits as Lampeão and charismatic mystics such as Antonio Conselheiro and Padre Cícero, it is clear that the *sertão* and *agreste* were also inhabited by a class of rural tenant farmers (*forreiros*) who practiced subsistence agriculture on the land of the cattle barons. Peasant farmers were necessary to the *latifundio* system as their agricultural produce was essential to a regional economy otherwise dominated by large scale cash-crop cultivation and commercial cattle farming. Moreover, in the *agreste* in particular, tenant sharecropping within the boundaries of large *fazendas* proved an ideal way to clear forest and create pasture for the forever expanding cattle stock of the *fazendeiro*.

The majority of tenants, however, suffered terribly under the exploitative terms of contract with patrons. Although the specific rights and duties of these landless farmers of the interior varied, tenants were usually obliged to hand over to the landlord from a quarter to half of their food or cotton production, and/or to furnish

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<sup>12</sup> For examples of popular works of literature, see the novel *Cangaceiros* by José Lins do Rego, and the various cordel poems dedicated to the lives and exploits of the famous *sertanejo* bandit Lampião, and the mystical leader Padre Cícero. For examples of scholarly works on religious mystics and messianic cults in the Northeast see da Cunha (1944); Levine (1992); Pessar (2004); and Slater (1986). For recent scholarly works on banditry and violence in the Northeast, see de Mello (2004); Freixinho (2003), who identifies religious fanaticism, violence, and banditry as the dominant influences on the history and culture of the *sertanejo*; and Marques (2002), who discusses the historical roots of violence in the *sertão* in relation to modern-day manifestations of violence and vendetta among *sertanejo* families.

him with a certain number of unpaid days of labour each week. Tenants were also supposed to vote as their patron directed and to defend his interests as part of a militia, should the need arise.<sup>13</sup> According to received historical opinion the insecurity born of droughts, bandits, and warring *coronéis* in the interior meant that most landless farmers had little choice but to accept the exploitative terms of their patron. The unwritten one-to-one contracts binding landowners and tenants theoretically offered protection in return for deference.<sup>14</sup>

In the literature on the Northeastern interior, social relations between economic classes are historically portrayed as involving extreme levels of violence, expropriation, and enslavement; levels similar to those which occurred in the sugar dominated *zona da mata*. It is argued that from the onset of colonisation, the pattern was set for a rural social structure based on extreme levels of economic dependence (Forman 1975: 21-23). Indeed, Goodman speaks for many commentators when he writes that:

‘In all the sub-regions [of the Northeast] the same man made characteristic is present: an extreme inequality of land tenure which has, from its beginning, shaped a rural structure in which there is an equally extreme social inequality between classes untempered by any significant sense of noblesse oblige or humanism on the part of the landowner to those working on the land’ (Goodman 1981: 4).

But while most historical accounts eloquently spotlight the social extremes of power, subversion, wealth, and poverty that existed throughout the Northeast in the past, far fewer focus upon social relations that did not fit this pattern, or that fitted it to a less extreme degree, as, for example, with relations among small-scale producers themselves.

Far less elaborated in the literature is the fact that a substantial number of the rural poor were independent small-holders, itinerant traders, and semi-nomadic people who survived by combining slash and burn agriculture with hunting, gathering, and fishing. These were poor people for whom tenant sharecropping was not the only means of survival, and for whom servitude to a single patron was not necessarily a permanent or inescapable condition. Indeed, one of the ongoing problems faced by plantation and cattle-ranch owners in the second half of the nineteenth century, and which intensified after the abolition of slavery in 1888, was the lack of a disciplined labour force among the free rural population. Many peasants of the interior shunned patron dependency in favour of a semi-nomadic lifestyle. The mobility and inherent flexibility of this way of life enabled a certain amount of

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<sup>13</sup> For detailed discussions of the Northeastern land tenure system see also Johnson (1971); Kutchner and Scandizzo (1981); and Mitchell (1981), which offers a series of essays focusing on the socio-economic problems that have continued to affect share-croppers of the Northeast.

<sup>14</sup> This sort of patron-dependent network is in no way limited to Northeast Brazil. See, for example, Foster (1961); Scott (1972); and Wolf (1966).

resistance to the low wages and exploitative conditions that accompanied a more sedentary life on the margins of the cattle-farming and plantation economy (Carvalho Branco 1997).

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the decline of the sugar industry and changes in Imperial land policy contributed to an increase in the interior's population. The Land Act (*Lei de Terras*) of 1850, which extinguished the law of the *sesmarias* by introducing private ownership of designated territories, opened up the way for a new class of small-producers with legal-property rights over the land they cultivated. By the late 1850s, most inhabitants of the region were subsistence farmers. The great majority of these remained tenants and sharecroppers on larger landholdings, but many more had come to privately possess their own small plots.

In the second half of the twentieth century, rising urban demand for agricultural produce and the spread of the road network stimulated commercial production and brought about greater integration of regional markets. During the 1960s, under the economic drive of the military dictatorship, the infrastructure of rural areas was developed: dams were built and there was an introduction of energy, schooling and health posts. In 1963 the *Estatuto de Trabalhador Rural* (Rural Labour Statute) obliged landowners to provide holidays, minimum wages and pensions to tenant workers. The introduction of such regulation provoked a decrease in the size of *latifundios* as many landowners, in order to avoid the implications of such regulation, parcelled up and sold off tracts of land thus enabling more tenants to become small-proprietors.<sup>15</sup> Thus for brief periods in history, factors have conglomerated allowing for a greater proliferation of small-farmsteads (*minifundios*). This was especially the case within the food-producing *agreste*, so that by the 1970s, more than eighty-five percent of the agricultural establishments of the *agreste* were made up of properties or occupied areas of fewer than twenty hectares. These, however, covered only fourteen percent of the total area of the *agreste* region (Andrade 1980: 127).

Because of the limited and intermittent nature of land reform in the region's history, most of the land in the *agreste* has remained in the hands of large landowners who are mainly absentee. Over the course of the twentieth century Brazil's agricultural policies have promoted a process of modernisation that has favoured large agribusiness and the transnationalisation of production. This has, in fact, led to a greater concentration of land, greater mechanisation, increased use of expensive inputs and the removal of tenants and smallholders from the land (Pereira, 1997).

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<sup>15</sup> For insight into the social and economic transformations in the land tenure system see Chandler (1972). For discussion of the modifications in social and economic structure within the Northeast see Forman (1975); Fukui (1970); and Webb (1974).



As a result of all this, small holdings throughout the *sertão* and *agreste* have become smaller and less productive as peasants have been squeezed out by cattle-farming on the one side, and sugar cultivation on the other. Consequently, there has been a steady flow of migration from the rural interior to the cities on the Northeastern coast and in the South. Before 1960, most of Brazil's population lived in rural areas, but between 1960 and 1970 one in five Brazilians migrated to cities (Perlman 1976:5). By 1980, only forty-five percent of Northeasterners lived in rural areas (de Arujo, 1987: 167). In Pernambuco urbanization and rural migration was especially acute, with seventy percent of the population living in urban areas by 1980 (Pereira 1997: 11). However, the overcrowded *favelas* (shanty-towns), unemployment, hunger and disease encountered by rural migrants in the South appears, in recent years, to have provoked a reversal of this trend, with many migrants returning to the Northeast to live as farmers once again.

For generations, then, farmers in the *agreste* have moved about the country and struggled to defend possession of the small family holdings they have cultivated. In this, they have been helped, to varying degrees, by the Peasant League Movement, which originated in Pernambuco in the early part of twentieth century and gained momentum in the 1950s. Pereira has described Northeastern rural people as 'peasantariats', lacking a total commitment either to subsistence agriculture or to a wage economy. However, it would seem that it is precisely this 'lack of commitment' that has allowed them to survive and even to retain a degree of social and economic freedom. Economic diversity has long been a characteristic of the Brazilian peasantry, and continues to be so even today, with individuals shifting between legal, illegal, temporary, and seasonal wage labour in cities, or on plantations, and periods when they work small plots as squatters, tenants, sharecroppers or owners.

Having given a brief overview of the historical background to the region as a whole, I shall now describe the recent history of the village and people of Santa Rita itself.

## **The history and origins of Santa Rita**

The village of Santa Rita is located approximately 1300 meters above sea level in the foothills north of the *agreste* city of Garanhuns. It was founded in a once-remote region inhabited by jaguars, and covered in semi-deciduous thorn forest. Today, however, much of the original wildlife has become extinct, most of the forest has been cleared for pasture, and the village lies approximately nine kilometres away from the nearest market town. A precise history of Santa Rita and its surrounding

territory is difficult to reconstruct: historical studies of the local region are scarce if non-existent, and surviving documentation is difficult to locate due to the fact that the area has pertained to three different municipalities in the past 200 years. Nevertheless, from archival research and the oral history of some of my informants, it appears that the village was founded some time towards the end of the nineteenth century, and, in 1904, contained four houses built by unrelated men. At this time the landscape surrounding the village was still heavily forested, but who it belonged to is unknown. According to older inhabitants, the land was *terra devoluta* (free land) which therefore belonged to anyone that worked it. Over the decades, the descendents of these original four families cleared the forest to plant a mixture of staple and commercial crops such as manioc, beans, cotton and pineapple, thus establishing usufruct rights over the land they cultivated.

Back then, as now, a central part of the peasant subsistence economy in the Northeast was the *casa de farinha* – a manually operated mill where manioc is processed into flour (*farinha*). The first *casa de farinha* was owned and built by one of these founding men who operated it on a payment-in-kind basis. Thus a household would use the mill to produce their own *farinha*, paying the owner for the use of his machinery with a percentage of the *farinha* produced. With the improvements of roads and the regional integration of markets in the 1960s, the mill switched from the subsistence, family-based system of production to a system of commercial production run on wage-labour, whereby families sold their manioc crop to the owner who produced the *farinha* using hired labour.

It was not until 1980, when representatives of Ministry of Agriculture arrived to register land usage, that villagers gained legal title to their plots. There is strong evidence, therefore, that the original inhabitants of the area were not tenant farmers contracted to a particular patron but free peasants – descendents of poor Portuguese farmers, Indians, and runaway African slaves – who had previously maintained a semi-nomadic existence practicing itinerant agriculture and labour on cattle-ranches before adopting a more sedentary lifestyle in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The land surrounding the village that they eventually came to occupy on a more permanent basis would thus have been *terra liberta* or *terra devoluta*. That is, land that was uninhabited, uncultivated, or not pertaining to any particular *fazenda*.

Be this as it may, subsistence farmers, as many historical accounts suggest, were hardly ever free from the encroaching expansion of the *latifundio*, and it is likely that over the decades some kind of disagreements over land use would have occurred. It is difficult, however, to ascertain the exact extent to which the original inhabitants of the area depended upon or conflicted with the more powerful landowners of the region as those I talked to had no recollection of a rich *fazendeiro* or powerful, landed *coronel* making his influence felt in the area. As one old man

emphatically said: 'There were never any big *coronels* around here. We never had anything like that. All we ever had were farmers like us, but with a little more wealth.'

In local terms, the wealthier peasant farmers of the village were (as they still are in the present day) direct descendants of the original four families. These included the owner of the *casa de farinha*, and all those who possessed in the region of fifteen to thirty hectares of land rather than two to three hectares. Although these small-producers worked alongside everyone else practicing a mixture of subsistence and commercial agriculture, their larger land-holdings meant that they were slightly better off than the majority of village inhabitants. As benefactors and patrons, these men were more influential in the lives of the subsequent village settlers than any powerful *fazendeiro* who owned vast tracts of land and commanded his own militia. When in 1958 and 1965 new settlers arrived in the village, fleeing the drought of the *sertão*, some of these original inhabitants donated the *chão* (floor) for them to build houses on in return for a defined period of labour; and later hired them to work in their fields and in the *casa de farinha*. In several cases, descendants of original inhabitants and newer arrivals went on to marry. This intermarriage indicates the patron-client relation that existed (and still exists) within the village between these strata did not really compare to that which existed between the peasantry and the truly powerful rural elite. Then as now, the better-off peasant small-holder may have provided the small-plot owner or landless farmer with living quarters and/or with work in his fields and mill, but the terms and nature of this exchange were more equal, and the peasant landlord was not culturally distant from his workers as was the landed *coronel*.

The only ranching family to occasionally be mentioned in people's recollections were the Batistas, who, around the turn of the last century, were reported to have owned large tracts of land exceeding 1000 hectares. Today they are mostly based in a small local town some eight kilometers away, and their landholding is said to be somewhat reduced. Having given rise to successive generations of local mayors, however, the Batistas have remained a family of some influence. Older villagers recall that Batista land, which was located to the north-east of the village, at one time extended down as far as the village borders to include what is today the land on either side of the reservoir. It is not known whether or not the peasant families settled on the borders of this territory ever experienced conflict with this landowning family; but in 1972, a large portion of Batista land, including that nearest to the village, was appropriated by the Ministry of Agriculture for redistribution among the landless.<sup>16</sup> It was in this period that three landless families

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<sup>16</sup> As part of the government initiative to redistribute 29% (43,000 square kilometres) of the land in Pernambuco (Folha de S.Paulo, August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1972).

within the village, all descendents of the 1958 drought settlers, gained title to small plots. Then, in 1978 the village of Santa Rita grew substantially once again with the arrival of many more peasants seeking work on the construction of the dam which was to provide water for two of the local towns. A further fifteen hectares or so of Batista land to the north-eastern side of the village was, at this point, bought by the state for flooding. The dam took roughly a year to complete, after which several of the families who had worked on the construction built houses within the village and remained.

## **Santa Rita in 2002**

Nowadays the village of Santa Rita has 144 houses and a population of 565 people. Its amenities include a primary school, a health post, a chapel, a *casa de farinha*, one small grocery shop, one butcher's shop, two *barracas* (drinking shacks), and a well with a pump that serves the entire village. These major amenities are strung out along a central street, and are interspersed with houses occupied by descendents of the village's oldest families. On the fringes of this central street, reaching up into the hills, are smaller tracks where newer clusters of houses lie. Further away on remote hilltops lie various isolated houses, surrounded by agricultural land, but still pertaining to the village of Santa Rita. In addition to the well, the centre of the village is crossed by a stream that swells into a river during the winter months, and which residents use for bathing, fishing, and washing clothes. The large reservoir on the borders of the village, that was created in 1978 to serve the neighbouring towns, is also used by the residents for fishing. Although it does not officially supply water to homes or for farming purposes, some villagers with land next to the reservoir are able to irrigate their fields in order to plant green vegetables.

A typical household in the village would be composed of between three to five people: a married couple plus their children. Of the 144 houses in the village, 102 are composed in this typical way; a further twelve are composed of couples raising children and/or grandchildren; and ten contain couples without any children (seven elderly, three recently married). A total of five households are headed by a couple who have a widowed parent or both parents living with them, and in all such cases, the parent or parents belong to the wife. Thirteen households are composed of single people, (seven women, six men) and only two households contain pairs of unmarried brothers and sisters. When a couple raises their own grandchild, this is usually because the grandchild's parents have moved to the city, or because the couple's daughter is a single mother. Therefore, with the exception of when a couple looks after a set of elderly parents, it is unusual to ever find more than one married couple

living under the same roof. This kind of situation will only arise when there is no other alternative, and is an arrangement that never lasts for more than a few months.

### Making a living

Work in Santa Rita is based around semi-subsistence agriculture and livestock rearing. Sixty-five percent of households (ninety-three houses) own small-holdings of land on which they will grow any combination of the staple crops of manioc (*mandioca*), beans (*feijão*), and corn (*milho*) for both sale and consumption. The other thirty-five percent of households (fifty-one houses) in the village are landless, and survive by combining seasonal waged labour on other people's land with various share-cropping and shared live-stock rearing arrangements. The busiest time in the agricultural cycle is the rainy winter season which begins in May and ends in September. The time for planting beans and maize is May, for harvesting in August. Manioc, however, has a much longer cycle. It may be planted at any time of the year and harvested one to two years later.<sup>17</sup> The summer months, which comprise the rest of the year are characterised by the absence of rain. During this time, work in the fields is greatly reduced and it is common for male members of the household, particularly young, unmarried men, to seek work on local *fazendas*, on sugar plantations nearer the coast, or as itinerant traders at fairs throughout the region.

A major source of employment to the poorer landless strata, which is in operation all year round, is the *casa de farinha* (flour mill). The *casa de farinha* is located at the heart of the village, along the same stretch of dirt road as the chapel, school, and health post. It is a large brick shack, comprising two large windowless areas whose large stable-like doors open onto the street. The first area is where the women work, sitting on low stools scraping the dark, soily skin off the roots with knives and peeling implements (*raspadores*). The second room is where the men work the heavy machinery in shifts. Here, the peeled roots are processed into fresh pulp which is pressed to remove its toxic liquids, then further dehydrated through heating, and finally ground into the coarse whitish powder known as *farinha*. The machines in the processing room are large, rustic, and powered both by precarious electrical installations and by hand. Large wood-fired ovens built into the back of the mill belch out constant clouds of thick, sour smoke. Once it has left the ground, manioc is quickly perishable. For this reason, it has to be processed without interruption almost from the moment of its harvesting. Thus work in the mills does not follow a fixed pattern of hours, tending to begin at almost any hour of the day and normally ending at a very late hour of the night – if, indeed, it ends at all.

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<sup>17</sup> For a detailed description of this kind of agricultural cycle and of the types of labour it involves, see Woortman and Woortman (1997).

The *casa de farinha* is, as Santa Ritan people themselves profess, a social and economic linchpin of the village. The mill itself resembles an extended household: a place where kin work alongside one another, drop by, and pass whole days discussing news and exchanging gossip. It also provides the major source of income for fifty-six individuals from a total of thirty-nine households. In addition to those who work inside the mill are households which gain from the sale of manioc to the mill's owner. The conditions of work for men and women in the *casa de farinha* vary substantially. Men are paid on an hourly basis and take home a fixed rate salary of forty-five Reals per week plus a monthly supply of the *farinha* for their families. Unlike men, women are not allowed to take home *farinha* and are paid per 100 kilos of manioc scraped. Thus a woman working the same hours as a man is able to earn approximately eighteen Reals a week, and only this if she is an experienced peeler and the manioc is 'good' for scraping. The amount that women are able to earn in a week depends not only upon how much manioc has been bought or is available to buy that particular week, but on how old the manioc is. Old manioc – that which is at least two years old at harvest – is preferred to young manioc (six to twelve months old) because the roots are larger, more evenly shaped, and the skin thicker and easier to peel off. Young, small manioc that comes in thin wiggly shapes with hard-to-peel skin will take experienced peelers almost twice as long to peel.

People in Santa Rita universally define themselves as *agricultores* (farmers), although few families survive solely through agriculture.<sup>18</sup> Some of the men are builders, carpenters, or butchers, others small traders owning shops and businesses in and outside the village, and many women earn extra cash giving manicures, taking in sewing, or by making cheese, straw hats and brooms for sale in the market. Finally, sixteen percent of households (twenty-three houses) contain a member who works for the local council either as a teacher, a health-post assistant, a cleaner, or a lorry driver. Although differing forms of wage labour evidently do exist, wage work is inherently small scale, informal and flexible. Dependency upon a sole employer is rare, and Santa Ritans tend to value the relative freedom this affords them to chop, change, and negotiate a living.

For Santa Ritans, as for most poor rural Brazilians, survival involves a complex relationship with the social and natural environment. Agricultural work is contingent not only upon the season but upon the climate which, in the semi-arid northeast, is notoriously unpredictable. As is the case throughout the interior, droughts and 'dry years' (years where the rainfall is less than normal) have had a massive influence on the collective memory of villagers, and numerous are the

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<sup>18</sup> The use of the term *agricultor* as an occupational description became widespread in the 1980s when state pensions would only be granted to rural people whose identity cards and marriage certificates registered this as their profession. Before this official amendment, women were more likely to define themselves as housewives and men would cite other types of occupation which they perceived as carrying more status than that of *agricultor*.

stories and personal recollections that speak of hunger and the hardships of migration in search of a 'better life' (*vida melhor*) in the South. However, peasant migration has not only been a response to drought, but part of an overall way of life based around seasonal flux and itinerant agriculture, as described above, and so forms part of a long tradition.

In Santa Rita it is not just agricultural work, waged or otherwise, which is seasonal and cyclical – therefore demanding different styles of making a living in the long summer months when there is little or no harvest – but work for the state as well. People who are employed by the *prefeitura* (local council) are dependant upon political seasons. As is common throughout most of Brazil, state employment occurs along lines of kinship, histories of friendship and favour owing through vote buying. Local elections are therefore fierce and passionate battles which involve rupture and intrigue at every level within the community, as people would often tell me. In Santa Rita, employment in local government is extremely desirable as it means a regular, if minimum, monthly wage. However, persons holding such jobs are only too well aware that a state employee's financial security is only as long as the political term of the administration that employed them. Should the opposing candidate win at the next election, all employees from the old administration are generally replaced.

Although Santa Rita is a relatively stable community of sedentary independent producers, a predilection for movement and flexibility (especially among the landless strata) is revealed in the continual assertion by Santa Ritan people that they are essentially free (*livre*) to live and work wherever they please. Indeed, during my fieldwork, I was often struck by the amount of travelling families claimed to have done, and by the apparent ease with which certain people I knew continually moved house, even when they were moving to a house which was only 200 yards away. The switch in residence and mode of living was particularly pronounced in the case of one young man named Leozinho, who was born into a landless family in Santa Rita but lived and worked as a stone mason in a small town in the neighbouring state of Ceará.

I had been in Santa Rita for a while before Leozinho brought his family back to try life in the village. Houseless and landless, the family of five set up home in a relative's empty chicken coup and Leozinho took up work as a hired hand on the land of some neighbours. After a couple of months of this, Leozinho's wife grew tired of life in the village and returned to Ceará. Leozinho decided to stay in order to make a go of life in Santa Rita, but ended up following on a few weeks later. Three months later, Leozinho was back again, this time on his own. He had left Ceará after being dismissed from a new job at a different quarry for turning up to work drunk. Leozinho took up a sort of casual residence between the house of his brother and that of his parents. The winter months had started, and people were beginning to harvest,

so Leozinho was able to hire out his labour to various people in the village. At the end of the rainy season when the harvesting period was over, Leozinho left again to try and find work in the city of Maceió, where he was reportedly to be reunited with his wife and children. No one I knew ever showed the slightest preoccupation at Leozinho's semi-nomadic existence. In fact, his family seemed almost proud of his ability to do 'every kind of work' (*todo tipo de trabalho*) in order to fashion a living out of his challenging circumstances.

Work – or life, one should say – is therefore inherently about seasonal change and shifts in political fortune. However, following Mark Harris (2000), I would avoid the suggestion that Santa Ritans are merely products of their adaptation to environmental pressures and political and economic markets; a suggestion which has been popularly put forward by other writers on Brazilian peasantry such as Moran (1974), Ross (1978), and Wagley (1967). Harris argues of northern Amazonian peasants, that the notion of adaptation to ecological or economic circumstances negates the way that people directly intervene in the making of those circumstances. Rather than focusing on peasant societies in terms of what they lack Harris emphasises, rather, how peasants have been relatively free to organise their regular economic and social lives. In doing so Harris remains faithful to Northern Amazonian peasants' own sense of identity, which is geared around the shifting rhythm of the Amazon, arguing that it constitutes an 'ideological commitment' rather than simply 'a survival technique' (1999: 209). This, I suggest, is a fruitful way to apprehend the context of existence in Santa Rita where work forms part of an overall 'rhythm' – to borrow Harris's phrase – in which change and seasonality has to be appropriated as an opportunity rather than endured as an obstacle to a proper life.

## Local Religion

Out of 130 households in the village of Santa Rita only two adhere to Pentecostalism; the rest are Catholic. The research that this thesis is based on was carried out among the Catholic families of the community, therefore this section shall focus upon the various perspectives and practices that make up Catholic religiosity in village life.

Although the major sacraments of baptism, confirmation and marriage all occur in the parish church in the local town, religious life centres upon the village chapel. It is at the chapel that weekly catechism classes are held for village children, the youth group meets on a monthly basis, and occasional meetings are held by the chapel overseer to organise charity collections and discuss up-coming events. Twice a week, a group of roughly twenty to thirty villagers – mostly women and children – gather in the fading light of day for an hour or more of rosary. Sometimes these



sessions are complemented with a group discussion on a certain passage of the Bible. Once a month, the local parish priest arrives to celebrate a mass in the chapel and, on occasion, to offer confession. On occasions when the parish priest takes ill and is unable to celebrate mass, or during special religious occasions, villagers might gather in the chapel without an ordained priest for a type of service known as *celebração da palavra*. *Celebração da palavra* is similar to an ordinary mass, but somewhat shorter due to the absence of holy communion. Normally the sermon will be prepared and delivered by the chapel overseer.

Since the chapel's construction in 1968, all the chapel overseers have been local women. In Santa Rita, it would not be overstating the case to say that women are the religious leaders of the community. Although priests are men, everywhere throughout the region they rely upon teams of women who organise, mould, and put into practice religious events and rituals. In the village of Santa Rita, women's implicit domination of the religious sphere is manifest in various ways. It is a small minority of women who liaise with the parish priest, organise and oversee all the masses, processions and special religious occasions within the community. It is these women who deliver sermons at *celebração da palavra*, catechise children, lead processions, look after the keys to the chapel, control access to the chapel coffers and compose the songs and prayers that form part of the village's traditional canon. Moreover, it is women who make up the majority of the congregation at masses and rosary sessions. Male participation in chapel events is strongest on special religious occasions such as at Christmas and Easter. At other times, their participation in religious activities is limited.

Throughout the year, the church observes various saints' days by organising special masses and processions. Whether or not local people participate in such rituals, most will turn out for the *festas* (fairs) which follow such occasions, comprising of music, dancing, and other attractions. The patron saint's day of the village is celebrated in May with a special mass in the local chapel followed by three days of *feira*. At such time, the village is entirely taken over by music, food stalls, and fairground attractions. For those who participate in them, saints' day processions are particularly important for the payment of *promessas* (votive promises). *Promessas* can be fulfilled in a variety of ways, but a popular way of 'thanking' or returning a saint for his or her intercession in curing a sickness or solving a financial problem is to participate in his or her procession barefoot, or wearing a monk's habit. The largest and most lively of these celebrations are those of St Peter (*São Pedro*) and St John (*São João*), held during the rains and intensive agricultural activity of June. The *São João* celebrations are marked by the performance of a secular ritual known as *casamento de matuto* (which I shall discuss in Chapter Six); the consumption of special corn based dishes; the building of commemorative bonfires;

and all night dances. However, the major festivals in the annual calendar remain Christmas and Easter. In the village of Santa Rita, Christmas is a time marked mainly by increased prayer and attendance at special church services. In local terms it is less important than Easter, during which many more folk customs and practices are performed. Whereas the famous Brazilian carnival is not particularly celebrated in the Northeastern interior, the fasting, abstinences, Passion plays and early morning *via sacra* processions of Holy week are generally observed. At this time, the village is awash with visiting relatives, and contrary to the sombre mood that is supposed to prevail, there is an air of merriment as men get drunk on red wine instead of *cachaça*, and mealtimes consist of special fish and coconut dishes, replacing the more normal consumption of chicken or beef.

At home, many people maintain small shrines replete with votive images of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and various saints. The practice of pilgrimage to public shrines dotted about the Northeast tends to be linked to family tradition and is not a prominent custom among the more established families of Santa Rita. In neighbouring communities it is, however, and each year many people from the area will make the famous pilgrimage to Juazeiro do Norte, home of the popular mystic and spiritual healer Padre Cicero.<sup>19</sup>

Although the majority of villagers will turn out on special religious occasions such as commemorative saints' days, Christmas and Easter, not all villagers attend weekly mass, rosary, or *celebração da palavra*. Even among those who do, levels of deference towards the Church and its practices vary. Many people profess not to have time for official religious practices, while others claim that they live too far away from the centre of the village, suffer from ill health, or lack the transport to travel to church and participate in events. Moreover, Santa Ritan people often manifest critical attitudes towards priests and other clergy: censuring priests for beginning or terminating masses too early or late, and criticising the style or content of their sermons. Behind their backs, local priests are often accused of being selfish, rude, hypocritical and authoritarian. Above all, they are often accused of failing to understand the ordinary person's plight and circumstance.<sup>20</sup>

The ambivalent respect Santa Ritan people show towards the Catholic clergy is echoed by an ambivalent attitude towards official forms of religious practice. In matters of religion, many Santa Ritan people are strongly suspicious of anyone that strives too hard to 'keep up appearances'. Villagers who go to church obsessively are often ridiculed as '*baratas de igreja*' (church cockroaches). Pentecostalists are also mocked for their conservative modes of dress and tee-total behaviour. The argument given is always that these kinds of practices are superficial rather than noble; they are

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<sup>19</sup> See Slater (1986) on pilgrims in Juazeiro.

<sup>20</sup> Anti-clericalism is a widely noted phenomenon among Catholic peasantries. See discussions by Pina-Cabral (1986: 210-212), Christian (1972:145-152), and Cannell (in press).

concerned simply with outward appearance and do not represent a proper sacrifice in emulation of Jesus. For Santa Ritan people, faith and worship revolves around an intricately human – almost fallen – image of Jesus. Theirs is a theology and practice rooted heavily in the idea of humility, sacrifice and imperfection; in the idea of *emulating Christ* rather than pleasing God through worldly abstinence and conformity to rules and regulations. The difference between these kinds of practice, which I will elaborate on in the chapters to follow, hinges upon the perceived distance between the human and the divine. It lies behind the popular assumption that regular church-attendance, while good, is not necessarily a sign of faith or closeness to God. It also lies behind the notion that reading and owning a Bible is not necessary to proper worship. Among those who rarely attend church are illiterate men and women who are widely respected for the apparent depth of their faith (*fê*). Such people might be known to pray daily at small home altars, maintain strong devotions to particular saints, or to possess a wide knowledge of biblical stories and moral parables. Some are even renowned spiritual healers.

Nonetheless, Catholic Santa Ritans are extremely aware of the rapid growth of Pentecostalism across the region. Consequently, they are passionately defensive about their own religion. Constant interactions and arguments with people converted to Pentecostalism has led to a heightened awareness among ordinary Catholics of the various differences between their own and more evangelical forms of belief and practice. During the time of my fieldwork, knowledge of the Bible was a favourite topic of discussion because it was felt to present something of a problem in the ongoing battle to defend the Catholic faith. Despite their disdain for the Pentecostal religion, many Catholics marvel at Pentecostals' intricate knowledge of the written word, and their ability to wield a Bible like a weapon in theological debates: quoting scripture and singling out paragraphs and phrases to back up their arguments. The Catholic Santa Ritans I knew regretted their comparative lack of knowledge about the Bible, and felt that there was a need to encourage Bible reading among the young. This was not for purposes of practice or worship, but in order that they might defend themselves adequately against Pentecostal criticism in the future. Thus although the Bible is not an integrated aspect of daily worship and practice it is nonetheless accepted as the word of God, and therefore as the ultimate source of mystical and religious authority.

Although intricate knowledge of the Bible is limited among Catholic Santa Ritans, a certain basic knowledge of various Christian myths is not. Of these, Genesis and the Passion are the most important: frequently referred to both in local art and literature, and in everyday discourse. For Santa Ritan people, Genesis is an important ontological myth that explains both the origins and the nature of the world. When attempting to explain to me their past, and to answer questions such as 'who

do the people of this region descend from?’ Santa Ritan people would often look at me somewhat incredulously and ask ‘have you never heard of the story of Adam and Eve?’ When trying to explain to me the basic charter given to them at their creation – the reason for death, social inequality and physical suffering – people would invariably refer to the story of the Fall. This, they generally explained as having come about less through the Devil’s trickery, and more through Adam and Eve’s collective disobedience to God in eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. As one young woman emphasised in her own telling: ‘It was the nature of man from the start to be curious, to want to eat the fruit and disobey God. The snake helped to increase that evil curiosity.’

This is very much in line with the manner of local thinking about the nature of evil. Only very rarely do local people talk about *o Diabo* ‘the Devil’ as an external force. For Santa Ritan people evil is not something exterior to the person, it is internal – an inextricable and ambiguously useful aspect of the Christian person in the world. The moral and religious problems people face by living and sinning are less the result of some actively diabolical principle than the result of a natural state which impedes the flow of grace (*graça*) from God to man.

It is also noteworthy that local accounts of the Genesis myth never seemed to lay any emphasis on gender. The fact that Eve was made from Adam, or that she was the first to consider eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge is acknowledged to be true, but is given a very abstract and peripheral significance, if it is given any at all. Never did I hear these ideas used as a justification for women’s supposed inferiority to men. Indeed, gender did not turn out to be as fetishised a concept among villagers as I had initially expected it to be. Categories of gender were rarely discussed, and when they were, they tended to be subsumed beneath the perceived merits and failures of individuals in relation to specific contexts rather than the perceived merits and failures of ‘women’ as opposed to ‘men’ in generalised terms.

If the Genesis myth explains how and why things are the way they are in the world, the story of the Passion is, in local thinking, the template *par excellence* of how things could be. Jesus’ life of benevolent self-abnegation is viewed as the ideal model of human being-in-the-world; one that is theoretically achievable by all ordinary people. Catholic Santa Ritans make constant allusion to the Passion in their daily discourse and practice. Rather than viewing it as significant primarily in terms of salvation in the hereafter, Jesus’ incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection in the world is viewed, first and foremost, as proof that heaven may be achieved in the here and now. Indeed, over the course of my fieldwork I came to realise that although Santa Ritan people clearly acknowledge a split between a ‘this-world’ (*o mundo*) and a ‘next-world’ (*o céu* ‘heaven’; *o paraíso* ‘paradise’), they remain relatively uninspired by heavenly or edenic-like concepts of time and place. What interests

them much more are the possibilities of divine manifestation in this world. Thus the Pentecostal emphasis on the idea of a New Jerusalem made, literally, from gold and silver is ridiculous to many Catholic Santa Ritan people. As one man once explained:

‘My sister-in-law who is a *crente* (Pentecostal) told me that paradise is made of silver and gold; an absolute marvel to behold. Now, these Pentecostals read the Bible very literally. This gold, this silver, doesn’t mean to say it is real gold. When Jesus speaks of gold, he is talking of a treasure, a good thing: his reign. This is why he came into the world. Have you ever imagined the village of Santa Rita where there was only good? Wouldn’t that be a place of gold? If here in Santa Rita, all of us here, did like Jesus wouldn’t it be heaven? It would!’

It is important to stress, however, that although rough generalisations are possible, every person’s attitude to religion is idiosyncratically their own. Not only does the salience of religion in Santa Ritan peoples’ lives vary but so, too, do basic cosmological notions. There is no singular take on the particulars of birth, death, and the trajectory of souls (*almas*) in the afterlife. People are generally agreed about the existence of souls, which they believe are sent into the world by God, and detach from bodies at physical death to enter either heaven or hell. However, they are vague and divergent on the details of such processes: at what point during conception and gestation the soul enters the body; what happens to the soul immediately after physical death; what heaven and hell, as places, actually look like. When I asked about such topics directly, I found that people were often quick to profess that they ‘knew nothing’ about such matters and were the ‘wrong people’ to talk to. Nonetheless, I was constantly struck by the lively interest and speculation that these subjects provoked in my informants.

Indeed in retrospect, it seems that my research was driven more by my informants’ own curiosity about matters of morality, personhood, and religion than my own. Fundamental questions about God’s motives and the ultimate meaning to human existence fascinate Santa Ritan people, and are regularly debated by them in a variety of formal and informal contexts. Whether in Church workshops, people’s kitchens, in the *casa de farinha*, or sat in the shade of one another’s doorways in late afternoon, discussions might suddenly veer onto the subject of what does or does not constitute sin; whether it is truly possible to ‘love one’s enemy’; or whether or not God regretted having given Man his freedom. During such debates certain individuals tend to maintain an air of curious detachment, professing their ignorance and listening interestedly to other people’s opinions. Others who stand firmer in their beliefs will deliver spontaneous and elaborate sermons, sometimes with a good deal of performative hyperbole. Styles of moral-religious philosophising vary, however, and people spend much of the time broaching the same topics through the medium of humour. Jokes, stories, and ironic, light-hearted banter pervade daily discourse and mediate much of the moral-ontological discussion that occurs. Under-girding so

much of the ironic humour common in Santa Ritan daily discourse is a sense of pessimism about the human condition. A feeling that in the end, as one man put it, 'a person does more bad things than he does good.' And, as I will show in what follows, it is perhaps for this reason that Santa Ritans devote so much energy to redressing the balance in other contexts, or at least in re-phrasing the existential problem that confronts them in more resolvable ways.

...There is no turning round.  
It might be darkness ahead,  
or maybe a break

(Andrew Motion, *The stormcloud of the Nineteenth Century*)

## Chapter Two

# Marriage in Santa Rita

A few nights before her daughter Fabiana's wedding, Dida and I were trying to imagine which young woman would be next to get married. 'If it is you' Dida declared, 'I will advise you to wait. Put it off for as long as you can.' 'Why?' I asked, puzzled. Dida looked me directly in the eye and said: 'Maya, married life is a risk. If I could go back I would not marry again. Fabiana, poor creature, doesn't know what is in front of her. How can she? I didn't understand either when I was *solteira* (single). It is only afterwards that you see how life changes.' I must have looked confused because she lowered her voice and continued to explain: 'Life when single is good because one is free to do many things. If you make a mistake it hardly matters. Once married, all your mistakes count.'

In Santa Rita, most people subscribe to the view that it is only through the ambivalent pleasures and pitfalls of a marriage that a person comes to understand the true limits of his or her strengths and weakness. Indeed, to survive a marriage and be happy is to successfully negotiate life's most difficult obstacle course. If a marriage goes well it is, as my friend once said to me, 'the best thing that God left' (*a coisa melhor que o Deus deixou*). However, lest one become too optimistic, there are plenty of those who will attest to the opposite view, trotting out the refrain *casamento não é brincadeira* 'marriage is not child's play' whenever the subject arises. As a young, female, and *unmarried* anthropologist, I became a favourite target for thinly veiled warnings about the dangers married life entailed: the physical hardship, the weight of responsibility, the beatings and fights. 'The life of the married person is suffering' an elderly woman once informed me somewhat unexpectedly in the middle of a wedding feast. At the time I was startled but also intrigued; for it had increasingly started to appear that marriage for Santa Ritan people was a vexing issue: enshrined and celebrated by state and church, yet stalked by risk and danger.

In this chapter I shall focus upon the experiential changes young people undergo upon marrying, and look at how such changes are perceived and talked about. My aim is to investigate the differences between unmarried and married life that lead the latter to be characterised in local understanding as something of a risk (*risco*). In doing so I hope to come closer to understanding the particular claim, made by my adoptive mother Dida, that once married ‘all your mistakes count’ (*todos os erros da pessoa contam*). What this statement means in practice and how people attempt to negotiate such a problem is the subject of the thesis as a whole. Therefore, in this chapter I aim not only to set out and explore a specific problem, but to set the ethnographic scene for the chapters that follow.

I shall start the chapter by providing a general description of life as a young single person and of the process of courtship and marriage, and go on to focus upon the claims, made by various married people, that marriage is an occasion of great and sudden change (*mudança*) in a person’s life; an experience of frightening responsibility (*responsabilidade*), and of potential suffering (*sofrimento*). I shall approach such claims by looking at the actual changes that marriage occasions in men’s and women’s lives, and also by examining some of the lived concrete problems and social and spiritual dilemmas commonly faced by married people. Finally, I shall explore attitudes towards those who have sought an alternative path to that of marriage; namely Catholic priests and religious ascetics. I shall argue that people’s attitudes towards such alternatives are at best ambiguous, and at worst openly hostile. The ambiguity of people’s attitudes towards these alternatives suggests not only that marriage is a socially productive and therefore necessary path, but also, that although its spiritual risks are great, so are its spiritual rewards.

## The marriage process

### Being young, being ‘solteira’

To be ‘young’ (*jovem*) and ‘single’ (*solteira*) in Santa Rita is to be more or less any age provided one is unmarried. Even those who clearly have a long-term boy/girlfriend (*namorado/namorada*) are still considered ‘single’, and will be until the day they become officially engaged (*noivos*). Children live with their parents until the day they marry at which point they will move, with their new spouse, into a house of their own. Thus, men and women may stay living under their parents roof well into their thirties, and if they never marry they are unlikely to leave at all. Most households are headed by the conjugal couple, and all others living with them are, regardless of age, under their authority. This situation is particularly marked in the



case of children who are expected to demonstrate towards parents the utmost levels of respect. Children must address their parents in the distant, respectful register; every morning they must ask for each parent's blessing, and over the course of the day they must obey parental orders, carrying out all basic household chores and duties without complaint. Older people recall that in the past, children were also expected to stand up when a parent walked into a room and to ask for forgiveness if they wished to cross a parent's path. Today the rules for showing respect are fewer, but those that remain are strictly observed.

Although young, unmarried people may experience conflicts of interest whilst living under parental authority, they are not expected to make a financial contribution towards the basic upkeep of the house. They are, however, expected to 'help' (*ajuda*) their parents in their labour, and can be found working from a young age either at home, in the *casa de farinha*, or in the fields. The types and organisation of labour performed by children will be discussed more fully in Chapter Seven, and need not be detailed here. It is important to note, however, that young, unmarried adults are encouraged to labour primarily in order to buy their own school supplies, clothes, toiletries, and any other luxury items they might want or need. Only in the poorest of families, or under exceptional circumstances such as the death or illness of the household's main earner, are children expected to contribute towards the cost of food and/or the cost of electricity. In many households, therefore, young unmarried men who work are financially better off than their own fathers. They own consumer goods such as watches, motorbikes and stereos, and have the money to eat and drink in highway *churrascarias* (restaurant specialising in roasted meats) and local *barracas* (village drinking shacks).

Once their basic household duties have been performed, whether or not, and how much, young men and women work outside the home is up to them. In contrast to married adults, unmarried people tend to have a lot of spare time on their hands which they spend in a variety of ways. Girls fill their hours attending school, going to *festas* (dances/fairs), watching local football matches, sitting on the chapel steps in groups talking, and watching Brazilian soap operas on television. As well as attending *festas* and playing football, young men are likely to spend time riding and polishing their motorbikes, playing pool with other men, and drinking at a local *barraca*. Young men are also likely to spend less time than girls attending school and more time working to earn their own money.

If one spends any length of time in the village, one becomes acutely aware of differences in the quality of life between married and unmarried people. Unmarried people generally spend larger amounts of time outside the house in leisure pursuits than their married, peer-group counterparts.<sup>21</sup> Young, unmarried women will expend

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<sup>21</sup> The exception being older unmarried women or men who live alone and head their own households.

entire days watching soap operas, or lounging on the chapel steps gossiping while their mothers and married sisters bustle about transporting washing, balancing buckets of water on their heads, shelling beans, herding livestock, cooking and sweeping. Young, unmarried men will rev through the village streets showing off their motorbikes while their fathers and married brothers set off to work on foot in dirty, ragged clothes. It is interesting to note, however, that although such differences are explicitly evident and frequently commented upon, they are also basically accepted. Parents are customarily strict with children, demanding extreme levels of respect and deference from them and wielding tangible power over their lives. But they are simultaneously indulgent of young adults, believing that so long as they remain unmarried, they possess certain rights over their own money and free time. One day, sensing the moment was right, I asked Dida why her two teenage daughters did not perform more chores around the house. 'Ah, I let them be' she replied dismissively 'for once they marry, they, too, will have to work like I do'.

### Festas and courtship

In Santa Rita, the stated preference is for marriage within the village. Boys are encouraged to marry non-related girls from within the village because, it is said, that way they already know everyone and will not have trouble fitting in.<sup>22</sup> Marrying within the village is also held to be ideal because a girl remains close to her parents. In practice, many men end up marrying women from neighbouring villages, however, the endogamous ideal is sustained as much as possible through a preference for marrying women from villages within a seven to eight kilometre radius.<sup>23</sup> Aside from the preference for marrying within the village, who one marries is a matter of personal choice. Most marriages occur after a period of dating (*namoro*) which has lasted for at least a year or more. Residence has a tendency to be virilocal in that a woman will move to a house built on her husband's family's land. The rare exception is when landless men marry landed women; in this event the man is likely to move into a house on his wife's family's land.

Sex before marriage is held to be a great *pecado* (sin) for both men women. In practice, however, men are encouraged and allowed to be sexually active from an early age, regardless of the fact that it constitutes a sin, whereas girls are strongly expected to be virgins on their wedding day. However, sexual intercourse does commonly occur before marriage, but is an extremely secret affair. It was only through conversations with the local doctor that I learned that sexually transmitted diseases were rife among young, unmarried men and women, and also that many unmarried girls practiced anal sex in order to maintain their hymen intact. Pre-

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<sup>22</sup> Related would include nieces and first cousins from either the mother or father's side.

<sup>23</sup> A similar finding is reported by Fukui (1979: 132) among peasants of the Sertão.

marital sexual activity is not, however, a recent phenomenon. Many of the older married women I knew admitted that they had not been virgins on their wedding day. Some had only agreed to sleep with a man once they were officially engaged to be married to him, others had fallen pregnant and been forced by their parents to marry in a hurry in order to avoid a scandal. Pre-marital pregnancy still constitutes a scandal, even today. During my fieldwork there occurred one marriage in which the girl was already pregnant, and this provoked a groundswell of disapproval. Discussing the subject one old woman, now in her 60s, recalled that in her youth, it became known that her older sister had 'given herself away' (*se-entregou*) to a local man. Despite the fact that she never fell pregnant, the scandal it caused was so great that her father refused to speak to her and even to be in the same room as her for the rest of his life. The girl never married and remained living in her parents house; however, from that moment on and until the time that her father died, when the girl walked into a room, the father walked out of it.

Many young people start dating someone of the opposite sex at a *festa*. Throughout the year and across the region *festas* are held in different towns and villages in order to commemorate patron saints' days, celebrate religious holidays and – in the run-up to an election – to rally support for the local political administration. A typical *festa* runs for two or three days and involves fairground rides, food stalls, bars, and a constant stream of different bands that play *forró* music. Although *festas* are attended by people from all social backgrounds, they are particularly popular with young people from rural areas who live in more isolated kin-based communities and have little or no opportunity to meet members of the opposite sex who are not their immediate cousins, nieces or nephews. When boys reach the age of about sixteen, they become obsessed with buying motorbikes that will transport them out of the village and across the region to meet girls at *festas*.

The *festa* of Santa Rita held in the village each May is a large and animated affair that takes over the entire village for three days and nights. Weeks beforehand, rumours begin as to who will be wearing what, which bands will be playing on what nights, and how many people are expected to come from other parts of the region. As the sun goes down on the first night and stars begin to light the evening sky, a line of headlights can be seen moving down the western hill. Well before the band is due to take to the stage in front of the chapel, young men start pouring into the village in threes and twos on polished, gleaming motorbikes. As this happens, village girls begin to emerge from their houses wearing their tightest jeans and brand new lycra blouses. For the first couple of hours until the *festa* gets going, the young men lean about their parked bikes, drinks in hand, watching the girls who cluster nearby. As the night wears on, a popular local *forró* band will take to stage, drowning the village in music. The music and dancing will last for several hours, sometimes going on

until day break. Dancing is the principal way in which young people of the opposite sex demonstrate interest in one another. Like most dances performed with a partner of the opposite sex, *forró* is conveniently versatile: it can mean nothing more than a simple dance, or can be done in a sexual and intimate manner. The connection between dancing, 'rhythm' (*rítimo*), and sex is fairly well elaborated in local discourse. People say that a man who lacks rhythm for dancing not only lacks rhythm in bed, but lacks wit and rhythm in his 'conversation' (*conversa*) as well. Men are expected to use dancing as a way of signalling their interest in, and becoming intimate with, women. If a woman likes a man she will do the same. The day after a *festa*, girls sometimes discuss which of their partners had erections whilst dancing with them and tease one another for having encouraged it through their movements.

Given the sexual connotations of dancing with the opposite sex it may seem strange that despite the preoccupation with chastity and virginity before marriage, dancing is something that only unmarried people do. Married people never dance, and if they do, it is only for very brief, curtailed periods. Nevertheless, married people will often recall how well they used to dance when they were *solteiro* (single) as they stand around watching unmarried people shuffle and gyrate. Occasionally an older woman will express disapproval of the sexual style of dancing 'these days' (*hoje em dia*), but most older people regard the sexual undercurrent of the *festa* as somewhat inevitable and more or less legitimate. 'Let them dance now' a married, middle-aged woman once said to me, regarding the couple gyrating before her; 'once they are married, all that will end'.

### Bikes versus bricks: the process of building a house

When a boy and girl begin dating they will still attend *festas*, but mainly to dance with one another. Every Sunday, the man will pass the day at his girlfriend's (*namorada*) house. There on the front porch, under the watchful gaze of her entire family, the couple carry out most of their courtship. Secret sexual liaisons are easily arranged, however, particularly if the girl has a pretext for leaving the house alone (such as attending school) and the boy has his own transport. When a couple have been in a serious relationship for some time, it is expected that they will eventually marry. For many young couples, the intention to marry arises gradually over the course of a steady relationship. Before actually discussing the prospect of marriage with his girlfriend, a boy begins to demonstrate his intention to marry by embarking upon the protracted process of purchasing materials with which to build a house. Early on in my fieldwork I asked Fabiana whether she planned to marry. 'By the end of the year I hope' was her reply. Surprised, I asked whether her and her boyfriend

Andre were already engaged. 'Not exactly' she responded, 'but he has started to buy the bricks, so it is only a matter of time before he asks'. Once a boy has secured a plot of land from his father, or perhaps bought a plot of land on which to build on for himself, he begins to invest his money in bricks that will pile up slowly, either in his father's front yard, or on the plot of land where the house is to be built. Gradually, month by month, the pile of bricks increases in size. Only when it has reached a reasonable height (i.e. sufficient to build the outer walls of the house), will he begin to purchase additional materials such as sacks of cement, timber, terracotta tiles for the roof, a plastic sink for the kitchen, and so forth. The construction of the house will then commence and continue sporadically from month to month depending upon the amount of money available to be spent upon it. When the house is nearing completion, it is the boy's responsibility to furnish it with all the essential items. For couples belonging to small-holding families, the absolutely basic furniture requirement for marriage is a bed, a table with chairs, a sofa, an aluminium rack or basic wooden dresser for the kitchen, and a television with a separate antenna. Fridges and gas cookers are luxury items, and can be purchased or acquired in the years to come.

The practice of purchasing building materials gradually rather than saving up money to buy everything in one go was explained to me in terms of inflation. For Santa Ritan people on low and often-unsteady incomes, long-running and dramatic fluctuations in the Brazilian currency from one month to the next makes saving money seem like a risky option. The pervasive attitude is to buy whatever one can as soon as one can, before its market value increases. However, this protracted and rather public process of purchasing materials, whether or not it is primarily motivated by economic consideration, has a certain social function as well. It works as way of signalling to the families of both the boy and the girl that the couple intend to marry, and gives both sets of parents time to grow accustomed to the idea and to either embrace or reject it. Thus by the time the boy has reached the stage of having to officially request his future father-in-law's permission to marry the girl, he has a fair idea of whether or not the request will go smoothly. Normally, if a boy has been diligent enough to work hard and plough his earnings into bricks for a house, he will be considered a suitable future husband for a girl and there will be no objection on the part of her parents. During my fieldwork I observed that the only occasions on which there were objections from the girl's family were in those cases where the boy had not purchased any materials with which to build a house, either because he preferred to spend his money on pursuits such as *festas* and drinking, or because he was unable to acquire a plot of land on which to build one. In one such case, where it was evident that the girl's parents disapproved of marriage, the couple eloped to Recife. In another case that was talked about, the young couple had eloped only for a

short period, and upon their return the girl's parents helped the couple to build their own house.

Couples intending to marry do not always need to build their own houses. On occasion one or another partner will inherit a house, or if one set of parents are well off, the couple might have a house bought or built for them. If the boy is particularly poor, or not given to the idea of committing his earnings to building materials, it is not unheard of for a girl to work and invest her own money in a pile of bricks and cement. It was well known that one woman in Santa Rita had effectively built her own house, thus speeding up her marriage to a man who was otherwise comfortably ensconced in the house of his parents and disinclined to sacrifice his own earnings towards the construction of a home. In the majority of cases it is the boy that takes on the major financial commitment in establishing the future household, while the girl watches with interest as the pile of bricks slowly increases in size.

In Santa Rita the size of a pile of bricks and the speed with which it grows is viewed as a sign of a man's level of commitment to his future spouse. On average, a pile of bricks takes just over a year to grow into a proper house, depending upon the success of that agricultural year, the regularity of the man's income, and his eagerness to get married. However some piles take much longer – five to six years in some cases – because some men will start piles of bricks and then forget about them for months at a time. When dating couples fight or break up, piles of bricks may stop growing. The most common reason for a pile to stop growing is because the man's income has been diverted into some other major expense such as buying or running a car or motorbike. One girl I knew had been waiting for a pile of bricks to transform into a house for three years. She was constantly frustrated by the length of time that it was taking and blamed it on her boyfriend's passion for motorbikes. Everyone in the village agreed that the house was taking rather a long time to construct, and many older women voiced the opinion that the boyfriend should give up the motorbike to complete the house and 'settle down' (*ficar num cantinho*).

The contest between bricks and motorbikes is, in many ways, a deeply symbolic one. It underscores the gender driven tension that men confront throughout their lives between mobility and fixity. Married women, for example, never ride motorbikes on their own, although they might have done when they were still single. From the moment that a woman gets married the ideal is that she gives up a large part of the former independent mobility she may have enjoyed, and becomes ever more fixed – like the bricks of her house – to the domestic space. In time, the house and the land surrounding it become inextricably a part of her. It is a well-voiced fact in Santa Rita that although men build them, in the end houses belong to women. If a couple separates, the woman always keeps the house that her husband originally

built, even when the house is on her in-law's land.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, men in Santa Rita, whether married or unmarried, place an extremely high value upon owning transport for it signals masculinity. Cars and motorbikes not only symbolize wealth and status, but allow men to define themselves in opposition to women as *mobile*.

The importance of private transport for defining masculinity is well summed up in the case of one young man called Dimas. Dimas' brother-in-law had offered to sell him his part of their shared ownership of a truck, making Dimas the sole owner of the truck and considerably better off in the long term. Dimas had long desired to become the truck's sole owner but the only way he could afford to buy the other half was by selling his car. The car was of no financial use to him – he used it simply to get about on personal errands, to *festas* and so forth – and yet it was his most prized possession. Dimas deliberated many days over whether to take his brother-in-law up on his offer, knowing that if he did not, his brother-in-law would sell his share to another local man. In the end he decided not to buy the other half of the truck for the sole reason that he could not bear to be without a car. 'I cannot be stuck in the village like a woman' he explained to me when I queried him about it. 'A man likes to be free to leave the village at any time. For that he needs his own wheels' he said. In Santa Rita a free-roaming male is implicitly defined as a virile one for he remains unencompassed by the feminine domestic sphere symbolized by the house and its immediate grounds.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, through their roles as husbands and fathers, men are intrinsically bound up with the domestic, the feminine, and with the sense of bricks-and-mortar fixity that it holds. Young men are therefore extremely reluctant to give up the transport they own and will try, as far as possible, to keep their motorbikes (or cars) running while at the same time striving to invest in the conjugal home.

## Weddings and trousseaus

Once the house is nearing completion, the boy pays a visit to the girl's family and formally requests her father's permission to marry her. Only once permission has been granted may he place a gold wedding band on the ring finger of the girl's right hand and wear one on the same finger himself, as a symbol of their engagement. When the house is ready but still unpainted, the girl organises a *mutirão* (voluntary work party) made up of unmarried female age-mates to help her *lavar o chão* 'wash the floor' of the house. The group of girls enter the house with buckets and brooms

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<sup>24</sup> The same practice is noted by Rebhum (1999)

<sup>25</sup> With a motorbike a man is also thought to be freer to have sexual encounters with women other than his wife or girlfriend. Therefore wives in particular take a ubiquitously ambivalent attitude towards their husbands' motorbikes: they enjoy being driven around when they need transport, but claim to 'hate' them and are constantly trying to persuade their husbands to sell them.

to sweep out the dirt of the construction process and to wash the walls and floor down, leaving them clean for the paint and the furniture.

At this stage a girl will become increasingly concerned to complete the trousseau that she is likely to have been collecting from the time that the first bricks were purchased. The trousseau is made up of all the lighter furnishings that the house will require, such as bed linen, table-cloths, towels, pillows, cutlery, plates, and kitchen utensils. To this end will be organised an afternoon *chá de cosinha* 'kitchen tea-party' which all the young, unmarried, and recently married women in the village are obliged to attend, bringing with them the gift of an item for the house. All males over the age of eight are banished from the house and the girl's mother and older female relatives lay on a large spread of food and drink for the visiting crowd of gift-bearing women. Gifts are stored in the back bedroom as the guests arrive, and are only brought out mid-way through the party for a game that involves the bride-to-be being blindfolded and having to guess what each item is. If she fails to guess correctly, she is forced to drink a shot of cachaça and to take an item of clothing off. The result is normally a very noisy and raucous crowd of women surrounding a drunk and naked future bride.

In Santa Rita marriage consists of a civil ceremony in the local registry office in the nearest town, and a church ceremony that occurs a week or so later. A couple are not considered truly married until the church marriage takes place and it is only during the church ceremony that the engagement rings are swapped from the ring finger of the right hand to the ring finger of the left hand. However, what is arguably more important than even the church ceremony is the feast afterwards that will last long into the night, involving copious amounts of food, drink, music, and dancing. It is a well observed fact that wedding feasts are cripplingly expensive affairs, and those occurring in Santa Rita are no exception. In Santa Rita the wedding feast is financed by the bride's parents and traditionally takes place in their home, or at least in the bride's natal village. When Fabiana, the eldest daughter of the house where I lived, was to be married to Andre, her father, Amauri, agonised for months beforehand about the expense and the problem of who to invite and who not to invite. On one occasion he became so exasperated with the mounting pressure and expectation upon him that he threatened to cancel the feast altogether, but his wife, Dida, reminded him that Fabiana was 'not the daughter of a dog' and eventually he came around. A few weeks before the wedding was to take place, Amauri went from house to house issuing a formal verbal invitation to each household to attend. The invite had to be received by the male head of the house, for only this way would it include every person within the house. Then, two days before the wedding, the slaughter of animals for the feast and other food preparations began. Almost half of



the village were involved and several batches of manioc cake were baked to supply the volunteers with snacks as they helped to prepare.

## **Marriage, transition, and spiritual risk**

Before the Christian wedding, engaged couples in Santa Rita are officially required to attend a special session run by the Catholic church, in which they learn about the nature of the spiritual commitment they are about to take. In this session they are taught that in order to marry they must truly love one another and that once they are married, living well together means living by the Christian commandments. At one particular session that I attended, men were encouraged to treat their wives fairly by abstaining from excessive drink and violence. 'A Christian husband doesn't beat a wife. He loves her and consults her when making a decision!' stressed the priest; 'remember, she is an equal in the eyes of God and deserves your respect.'

Back in the village, in the run-up to the wedding, future brides and grooms are exposed to pre-nuptial advice of a different sort. Boys receive jocular tips from married peers about how to sexually satisfy a wife, and girls receive warnings from married female kin about the 'hard work' (*trabalho duro*), the 'suffering' (*sofrimento*) and the pain of childbirth that awaits. Although an impending wedding is, for the most part, viewed positively and looked forward to with much excitement, it is also an occasion for ambivalent reflection about the nature of married life. It is in the run-up to a wedding that older, married people are most likely to issue warnings about the responsibility that the young couple are about to assume, and to intimate that marriage is a 'risk' (*arriscado*) to be taken seriously.

The transformation and danger that marriage occasions in men's and women's lives is widely acknowledged and frankly expressed – particularly by older, married people. During my time in Santa Rita I heard the subject discussed on numerous occasions by people of both sexes. However, it was only by closely observing and speaking to younger, newly-wedded people that I began to build up a picture of how this transformation was actually experienced and felt. Whereas some changes were physical and habitual, having to do with work and survival, others related to moral personhood and the individual's spiritual state. In practice each transformation simultaneously implies and reinforces the others, amounting to a palpably real and holistic experience of discontinuity between one kind of life and the next. In the next section I will use ethnographic description to evoke the changes in social status that recently married people undergo and the practical hardships that often accompany them. In the subsequent section I shall explore some of the moral and spiritual dilemmas that married people are exposed to; dilemmas which cause

marriage to be categorised as a 'risk' (*risco*) because it necessitates entering into sin, leading the person *away* from God.

### Practical survival and social responsibility

Giovani and Isabela were a quiet, unassuming couple in their early twenties. They had been married for two years and had a one year old daughter. One day I prompted them to explain to me what married life was like. 'How does marriage differ from life when you were single?' I asked. Isabella and Giovani looked at one another shyly. The air was suddenly thick with contemplation. It was apparent that the pair were considering my question deeply. 'It is different' said Isabella, tentatively, after a while had passed. 'From one day to the next, everything changes.' Giovani, who had been looking pensive, broke in: 'Married life is a lot harder. How can I explain it?' He paused for a few moments to think and then he said, with a gentle emphasis: 'When single, if you work you eat, if you don't work you still eat. When married, if you work you eat, if you don't work you don't eat'.

For some reason, Giovani's statement on marriage communicated more to me than the obvious fact that marriage entails the setting up of an independent productive unit: it conveyed a feeling of new and overwhelming responsibility. I had often picked up on such a feeling when in the company of young, recently married people; noting in them a peculiar mixture of burden and bewilderment, and a newfound sense of seriousness in the face of increased social obligations. Upon my return to Santa Rita, one year after fieldwork, I went to visit my old friends Marcio and Edivania in their new house. The pair had been engaged during the time of my fieldwork. In my absence they had married, and by the time I returned they had been married for two months. I had come to know both Marcio and Edivania as fun loving, and light-hearted people. On the day I went to visit them they warmly welcomed me into their house. In accordance with his role as head of the household, Marcio proudly showed me around the two cement rooms of their recently built house. He offered me a seat on their brand new sofa and ordered Edivania to bring me a glass of beer. Before me, on a spotless shelf, were displayed the precious objects they had received as wedding gifts: a small alarm clock; a bowl containing plastic roses with clear perspex dew drops on the petals, and a brightly coloured ceramic figurine of a little blonde girl. 'Would you like to see the wedding album?' Edivania asked, handing me a photograph album carefully wrapped in a polythene bag. I couldn't help but notice a difference in Edivania. She seemed tired, preoccupied, and quietly overwhelmed. Upon getting married she had found it necessary to take on work as a travelling saleswoman in addition to her regular work in the *casa de farinha*. My visit was causing her to worry about making a proper

impression. 'Ave Maria! I have not had time to make *doce* (pudding) for the guests' she suddenly exclaimed. And before I could protest she had disappeared to a neighbour's house to fetch some. As I looked through the photos, I asked Marcio if he was enjoying married life. With a slight grin he replied that he was. I then asked him how married life compared with life as a single man. At this, Marcio furrowed his brow and paused for moment to think. 'It is another life' (*é outra vida*) he said. For a while he looked studiously out of the open door. 'It is not all happiness, no' (*não é tudo alegria não*) he went on; 'one can't compare it with before. That was one life, this is *another* completely'.

The notion that marriage constitutes 'another life', entailing a sense of rupture with the life that came before, is well elaborated in local thought. Older married people spend much time wistfully contrasting 'life before' (*a vida antes*) they were married, or life 'when I was single' (*quando eu era solteira*) with life 'after' (*a vida depois*); or 'married life' (*a vida do casal*). Women are particularly able to recollect the feelings and experiences of change (*mudança*) they underwent at marriage. Changes that seemingly occurred, as one woman in her forties put it, 'from one day to the next' (*de um dia a outro*). The woman explained this sudden change to me by contrasting memories of her own wedding day with the day afterwards:

'Back in those days, people were still innocent before they married. There was no knowledge of the different life to come. It was very much like this: the day of my wedding I was still a *moça* [girl], the day afterwards I was *uma senhora* [a woman]. On my wedding day I got up and asked for my father's blessing. The day afterwards I got up and my father was not there. My mother did not give me breakfast. I had to make it myself. The day before my work was to sweep the house, the day after I had to do everything without any help.'

Dona Valdomira, a woman in her seventies, had married at the age of twelve. In an interview she described the change it had wrought for her in typically humorous but ambiguous terms:

'When I married I was such a child. Such a child that I even took a box of dolls with me to my husband's house. One day I was so busy playing that I forgot the beans on the stove and they burnt. Ave Maria what smoke! I was scared thinking my husband would come home and beat me. But he did not. He put fresh beans to cook...he said to me: "don't let this happen again."....Even though God made me a respectable marriage, I preferred my life before. After I married my mother would visit and I would cry and say "mama don't leave me here". She would say "daughter, you have to look after your husband now"....'

When a couple marries they indeed undergo a literal overnight change in status. A young woman goes from being referred to as a *moça* (girl) to a *mulher* (woman), and switches from living in her parents' house under their authority, to living in her own where she is the *dona da casa* (female head of house/housewife). A similar change in

status is experienced by the husband who turns from a *rapaz* (boy) into an *homem* (man) and becomes the head of his own house (*dono da casa*). There is no doubt that marriage offers young people a welcome escape from their parents' authority and an increase in power and status. However, and as one might expect, the pleasures of conjugal autonomy come at a price.

The responsibilities of married life descend immediately upon a couple the day after their wedding, and once they have descended, they are with the person for life. For men, marriage means working to support one's household. Most young men will have started working full-time long before getting married therefore the amount of labour they perform may not actually increase. After marrying, however, work is no longer a matter of choice. A married man is *obliged* to labour. The newfound sense of obligation to labour and to spend all of his earnings on the conjugal unit is experienced by men as a radical change in their lives. In the majority of cases an unmarried man has no dependants, and what he earns is his to spend as he likes. How much money he spends on the construction of his own future house is his decision and what is left over is likely to be spent on motorbikes, *festas*, and drinking sprees with male friends. Once a man marries, his earnings must be spent first and foremost on his household and wife. In almost all cases, the transition in spending priority makes masculine recreational activity difficult to finance, and a conflict of interest emerges. It is often the case that in the first years of marriage, a wife will be less able to earn money outside the home due to the pressures of pregnancy and gestation. This is the time that a man is most likely to relinquish whatever transport he might own; a difficult act for it means relinquishing the status and mobility that it affords him. Men would often speak regretfully about the change in lifestyle that marriage had wrought upon them. Upon my return to the village, Andre and Fabiana had been married almost a year. Once, as I sat reminiscing with Andre about the *festas* we had been to in the past, he reminded me that when he was a single man he had owned a motorbike and had lots of fun. 'Boy' he said thinking back 'I used to go to every *feira* that was on. Now it is different. Now I have a wife and we have to eat, where is the money going to come from?'

For women, marriage bestows a similar if not heavier set of obligations. Depending upon the social and economic status of her husband, a woman may acquire the responsibility of working outside the home to support the household. This is often the case due to the fact that women tend to achieve a higher level of education than men and are thus more likely to gain salaried work as teachers and health post workers. In addition to this, marriage is likely to confer upon women a hitherto unknown amount of domestic work. One of the key chores that separate married from unmarried women, for example, is the washing of clothes. A young unmarried woman living at home may help out with smaller tasks such as the

wringing and hanging out of washed items, but the decision to do a wash, and the bulk of the wash is always the responsibility of the *dona da casa*. Washing clothes by hand is a tiring job that requires a lot of strength to do. The larger a woman's household, the more hours she must spend scrubbing and wringing out denim jeans, cotton shirts, and woollen blankets. It is a job that takes up, on average, two days of every week. And it is one that many women say they only do *a pús* (reluctantly, by force). For a woman, one of the unwritten rules of getting married is that she may never depend upon her mother to wash her clothes ever again. The same applies for the preparation of food: if a recently married girl is unable to cook, both she and her husband will go hungry. Once married, it is unacceptable for a couple to turn up at the house of either of their parents expecting to eat without having been invited.

For girls, marriage is always more complicated in practice than it appears when single. The young wives I talked to were full of stories about how they thought they were prepared for the tasks of married life only to find, upon marrying, that there was still so much to learn. Fabiana, for example, was still unable to kill a chicken months after having been married. She would routinely beg Dida to perform this task, while Dida would forcefully urge her to learn to do it herself. Isabela recalled for me how she did not know how to bake the cornmeal cake that Giovanni, her husband, liked to eat before work in the mornings. At her first attempt she used up all the eggs, burnt the cake, and ruined her only aluminium baking pan. After scrubbing the pan she borrowed more eggs from her neighbour and tried again; however on the second attempt she forgot to add the sugar and the cake was inedible. She told me how Giovanni had fought with her for wasting the week's food supply, and went off to work without eating anything at all. She had been frightened that he would consider her a 'useless wife' (*mulher que não presta*).

The sudden transition involved in marriage is generally acknowledged as producing problems for young women who may not have yet acquired all the skills necessary for running a house. It is therefore common, in the first two weeks following the wedding, for female kin to spend a lot of time 'visiting' the new bride in her home, offering to help her with her work and providing advice on how to do things. In the week following the wedding, Fabiana's house was filled virtually all hours of the day with visiting female relatives helping her sweep her floor, hanging out her washing, and offering her advice on cooking. On one occasion I was present as Dona Maria, Fabiana's mother-in-law, appeared at the back door as Fabiana was cooking. 'You have to add coriander to the meat while it is cooking or it won't do' she said, leaning against the doorframe with folded arms. Dishcloth in hand, looking mildly beleaguered, Fabiana peered into her pot. Dona Maria came into the kitchen, pushed up her sleeves, and began to instruct Fabiana on the correct way to prepare lunch.

## Moral dilemmas and spiritual accountability

The overnight increase in responsibility is also matched by an overnight change in spiritual status. In local perception, marriage is a place from which there is no return; not merely in the sense that divorce is strongly sanctioned, but because it is a stage in the life-course which is deemed to irrevocably change the inner person both in the eyes of society, and in the eyes of God. Despite the fact that a marriage is a profoundly welcome and celebratory event, it brings a whole new set of moral conundrums to bear on the lives of the newly weds. As it bestows full adulthood on persons, it marks the moment from which they are held fully accountable by those around them and also, it is believed, by God for sinful thoughts and wrongful acts. Thus I was told that married persons needed to confess more often than non-married persons, and that married persons who died without having made time for God were more likely to go to hell (*inferno*) than non-married persons. Indeed this is exactly what Dida meant when she commented to me that ‘once married, all one’s mistakes count’. However, it was a remark that Dida made to her future son-in-law, a couple of weeks before the wedding, that confirmed for me a general perception about married life: ‘You have to go and confess’ she admonished André, ‘and soon. Because once you are married you really start to sin’.

Dida’s comment to Andre alerted me to the widely held belief that married life is spiritually polluting. As my friend Lucinha, in an interview, once explained: married people are more likely than others to be proud, covetous, greedy, and selfish:

Lucinha: To be frank with you, when one marries, life becomes more complicated. When you are single, all you think about are foolish things: ‘what will I wear to the next *festa*?’ that sort of thing. When a person marries, his world changes and he starts to notice things that he never noticed before.

Maya: What sort of things does one notice?

Lucinha: When I married I noticed that we were poor. If one is a *dona da casa*, one notices what the house next door is like – if it better or worse than yours. One becomes more aware of who has and who doesn’t have.

Maya: But do you think that God minds if a person wants to have a nice house?

Lucinha: No, I don’t think God minds. But it does say in the Bible that to want what other people have is a sin. And also, one cannot have too much pride in one’s things. The business of pride is very big sin.

For both men and women, then, marriage is a stage in which social competitiveness is thought to come most naturally to the fore. Married people, as largely self-reliant persons, are perceived as having a greater tendency to compare their success against that of others. They are commonly recognised as being more susceptible to feelings of envy and pride regarding the products of marriage such as houses, work, and

children. And pride and envy, as either conscious or unconscious expressions of evil, are widely acknowledged to be serious *pecados* (sins).

One of the most problematic aspects of marriage, however, is that it marks the moment from which people become socially recognised as sexually active. In Santa Rita it is generally recognised that sex, even within marriage, is dangerous and potentially spiritually polluting. Jokes and stories about brides and grooms depict marriage as an ambiguous spiritual concession to the inevitability of *desejo* or *tesão* (lust, sexual desire).<sup>26</sup> Although reproduction is acknowledged as a positive consequence of copulation, *desejo* – that yearning arising from sexual relations – is inherently problematic for several interconnected reasons. Many people I talked to regarded the fall of Adam and Eve, in true Augustinian fashion, as being down to the acquisition of a type of consciousness that led to sexual desire.<sup>27</sup> Some of my informants saw this as part of the justification of the Catholic church's prohibition on the use of contraception, and any sexual practice that does not allow for conception to occur. A very real dilemma is thus faced by most Santa Ritan women upon marriage when they have to decide whether or not to use contraception.<sup>28</sup> In the same interview, Lucinha told me that the most difficult decision of her life had been her decision to operate against having more children after the birth of her third child. Afterwards she had felt an urgent need to confess her '*pecado*' (sin) to her priest, but was unable to pluck up the courage to do so. Eventually she travelled to another town where she confessed to a priest who didn't know her.

In discussing this sensitive topic with me, however, Lucinha also made it clear that she regarded sexual pleasure for its own sake, within marriage, as a necessary means of 'living well' together with her husband. The danger of sex, she told me, lay in the fact that it made people think 'only of pleasure, only of themselves' (*só em prazer, só em si mesmo*). In order to illustrate this point, she recounted the well known story of a local woman whose sexual obsession with her lover had led to jealousy and caused her to shoot herself in the head. The woman's attempt to kill herself had tragically failed, leaving her paralysed from the neck down, and unable to speak. She was henceforth cared for by her sister for seventeen long years before she eventually died. When Lucinha recounted this story for me, she argued that it was the woman's sexual desire (*tesão*) for her lover that had awakened the selfish and sinful

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<sup>26</sup> For anthropological discussions of the Christian problematisation of sex and sexuality, see Christian (1972); du Boulay (1974); and Pina-Cabral (1986). For general discussions of sex and sexuality in Christian theology and discourse, see Pagels (1988); and Warner (1976).

<sup>27</sup> St Augustine's doctrine of original sin fused sexuality and sin indissolubly in the imagination of the Christian West. He taught that in the garden of Eden, married sex had been good – a part of God's plan. After the Fall, sexuality became a sign of humanity's inherent sinfulness and disobedience to God.

<sup>28</sup> The contraceptive pill is readily available at the village health post and operations are widely encouraged for women who already have two or three children.

side of her nature, causing her to commit, what in her opinion, was the gravest sin of all in taking her own life.

According to local discourse, it is more often the egocentric emotions generated by sex such as greed (*guloso*), pride (*orgulho*), vanity (*vaidade*) and jealousy (*ciúme*), rather than the act in and of itself, that are the cause of spiritual pollution and, potentially, of spiritual, social, and even physical death. All sexual jealousy between couples that results in violence is put down as evidence of this fact. And it is precisely within marriage that the consequences of such emotions are most violently and poignantly played out, thus accounting for the beatings (*batidas*), hurts (*desgosto*), and betrayal (*traição*) perceived as common to married life. In Chapter Five, I will explore this theme in more detail. What I want to point out here is simply that for the Santa Ritan people I knew, it is less sexual intercourse itself that spiritually pollutes the person, and more the feelings of possessiveness that it consequently generates that lead, in turn, to sinful, violent acts.

If the moral dilemma of contraception is one that is faced predominantly and most overtly at marriage by women, another moral dilemma, that of *negócio* (*commerce*), is taken on most obviously by men. An important part of any man's role as family provider lies in his ability to *negociar* (deal in commerce/do business). *Negócio* is a skill that both men and women may develop, although it is predominantly associated with men. Traditionally, it is a husband's role to negotiate an exchange for any livestock or agricultural produce that his household produces, once or twice a year, with the owner of the local *amarzem* (grain store). It is also a husband's role to make the weekly food purchase at market. To be good at these essential tasks a man must have a *cabeça fria* ('cold head') and be *sabido* (knowing, cunning, clever). The moral, religious problem that such personal qualities pose shall be discussed further in Chapters Six and Seven and therefore need not delay us at this point. What needs to be stressed here is that for Santa Ritan people, a talent for commerce involves an ability to *pensar em vantagem* (think of how to get the upper hand). This is a quintessentially selfish act whereby one man profits at another's expense. It was pointed out to me on various occasions that innocent people could not be *sabido*. Being *sabido* implies a certain knowledge of the world and especially of people (*gente*) based on worldly, lived experience. Children, for example, are categorically opposed to *gente sabida* (cunning, clever people), and hence adults in possession of childish innocence are said to be *ruim de negócio* (bad at doing business).

For men, however, the doing of *negócio* is not restricted to weekly trips to market or an annual negotiation with the owner of a local *amarzem* or *casa de farinha*. It is a constant and ongoing obsession. The buying and selling of goods and livestock for profit is done as much to improve one's social status and for



*divertimento* (enjoyment) as it is to make money. All the men I knew were obsessed with doing deals and were constantly seeking to barter for or buy one another's cattle, caged birds, motorbikes, bicycles, and other items which they thought they might be able to sell on to somebody else for a profit. The apical expression of this obsession is the *feira de troca* (exchange fair) which occurs once a week in the local town on the day of the food market. On a jumbled side street, set apart from the main market, men can take along virtually anything for sale and exchange. Items on display at this fair tend to range rather eclectically from worn-out pairs of shoes, broken watches, and newborn puppies to brand new bicycles, helmets, and motorbikes. Men who are very *sabido* can make a lot of money through *negócio*, and although little of the income derived in this way is, in practice, expended on the household, it is generally believed that a man's talent for *negócio* will benefit his family at least in terms of prestige. Thus the ability to *pensar em vantagem* (think about how to get the upper the upper hand) is acknowledged as being one of the skills necessary to be classed as a good husband/provider. When a young man called Luciano became engaged to be married, other men joked that he was too *burro* (naïve, stupid) to be a good husband. This was based purely on the supposed fact that Luciano was bad at *negócio*. He was mercilessly teased that his new wife would have to take charge of his *negócio* if she didn't want to spend the rest of her life eating her food 'pure' (*puro*) – 'pure' meaning rice and beans without any meat.

Above all, however, it is the whole new set of affinal relations which marriage brings about that forces the married couple into making morally difficult choices about whose side of the family their *joint resources* should be divided with. The moral dilemma faced in such circumstances is particularly acute for men who, in most cases, have the final say in decisions about how to spend and divide up resources such as land and accommodation. In Santa Rita, kinship is reckoned bilaterally and inheritance is equally distributed between males and females. Residence is predominantly virilocal, but once a woman is married she is thought to have an equal claim over her husband's resources, as does he over hers. After a couple is married, kin on both sides continue to exert demands on the couple's time, labour, and particularly upon their resources. The injunction to share land and labour with close consanguineal kin is strong, and this, unsurprisingly, can lead to accusations of selfishness and wrongful conduct from either side of the family. Men, in particular, always face pressure to work in partnership with brothers rather than brothers-in-law. A classic tension thus arises when a married brother goes to work in São Paulo and is faced with the choice of leaving his parcel of land in the hands of a male consanguine or an affinal brother-in-law. In the majority of cases, the land is left (or 'lent') to a consanguineally-related brother rather than divided on a more equal basis with an affine, and this occurs even in those cases where the land being

left is the actual inheritance of the wife. This happened to Dida and Amauri when they moved to São Paulo for three years prior to my stay. The land that was Dida's inheritance was the only land that the couple owned, and, much to Dida's consternation, Amauri decided to allow his brother who owned no land at all to work it alone while they were away. This was despite having received an offer of sharecropping from Dida's brother.

Similar tensions arise when it comes to caring for aged relatives. If a couple have no sons and no unmarried daughters at home to help look after them, they may depend upon the material support of a son-in-law. A man in such a position is often divided between having to support both his own and his wife's parents. Such a situation often leads to marital disputes, as occurred in the following case. Floreci and Biu were a middle-aged couple with four children living at home. Floreci was the only surviving daughter of Dona Irene, a critically diabetic widow who lived on her own in the neighbouring village with her aged brother Tadeu. When Tadeu died, Floreci decided to build a small house next to her and her husband's for her mother to live in. Initially Biu agreed to this (the plot of land was his inheritance), and he also agreed to pay for the building of the small house. However, when the house was nearly finished, Josué – Biu's brother who had been living in the city – returned to live in Santa Rita with his wife Paula. Because the couple were destitute and had no house of their own to return to, Biu allowed them to move into the small, unfinished house on his land for as long as was necessary for them to be able to build their own. Floreci was upset at this turn of events: she fought publicly with Biu and later accused Paula of stealing some money that had been left in the kitchen. Everyone knew that Biu's own parents, who lived in Santa Rita, had a spare room in their house which Josué and Paula could have occupied. It was therefore generally felt that Biu had acted wrongfully towards his mother-in-law who was elderly and, it was believed, had equal right to benefit from the couple's help.<sup>29</sup> In the ensuing months, Floreci's feud with Paula became worse, and it was rumoured that Floreci was planning to leave Biu to go and live with her mother until such time as Josué and Paula moved out. The prospect that Floreci might leave forced Biu to issue his brother with a warning that he should seek somewhere else to live. In the end, however, a young niece of Dona Irene's was found to move in and look after her, and the situation was temporarily resolved. The tension between the in-laws, however, lingered on.

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<sup>29</sup> It is probable that the reluctance for married couples to live under the same roof contributed to Biu's decision.

## The alternative to marriage

Although marriage situates the individual within webs of conflicting relations and brings about a greater temptation – if not a certain necessity – to sin, those who do not marry are regarded as anomalies. Older bachelors are rare, but spinsters are common due to the custom parents have of encouraging at least one daughter to remain unmarried in order to look after them as they age. In return, a spinster eventually inherits her parent's house where she will continue to live – usually with the company of an adopted niece or nephew. A spinster (*solteirona*) is most often referred to as a *moça* (girl) regardless of her age; a term that connotes her supposed state of continued virginity. In Santa Rita such women are superficially liked and respected but they are also pitied for not having had their own children, and are frequently ridiculed behind their backs. Most young women display no desire to remain unmarried, and will even joke of their intentions to warn their parents that they will not be the one to remain behind to look after them in their old age.

The path of priesthood or religious asceticism is another alternative to marriage that is open to Santa Ritans, but this, too, is regarded somewhat ambivalently. As discussed in Chapter One, within the Northeast there is a strong tendency amongst the laity towards anti-clericalism. One twelve year old boy in the village who prayed a lot and attended church on a frequent basis, was regularly teased by people for his unusual piety. Another young boy was quite open to everyone about the fact that he wished to become a priest. The boy's mother was the only member of his family who seemed quietly proud of this fact. Everyone else was dismissive or ambivalent, and teased him about it mercilessly.

There is less of a tendency to be openly and overtly antagonistic towards monks and nuns because these types of people do not have any direct or regular dealings with lay communities. Moreover, the ascetic calling is felt to have its place, and is, on a certain level, a fundamentally respectable one. Were ascetics not felt to have some kind of special access to the divine, it is unlikely that there would exist such a widespread belief in the supernatural efficacy of certain ascetic's prayers.<sup>30</sup> However, there exists an alternative discourse challenging the notion that the ascetic's access to divinity is necessarily a privileged one. This discourse manifests itself most explicitly through the depiction of nuns, monks and priests as hypocritically dominated by, rather than in command of, their sensual passions. Thus when someone is thought to have a larger than usual appetite for food, people joke that they 'eat like a Padre'. World-renouncers such as monks and nuns are similarly targeted through humour and ridicule, not only through jokes and anecdotes but in

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<sup>30</sup> The huge popular devotion within the Northeast of Brazil to the friar Freire Damião is just one example.

clay figurine artisanship, woodcuts and popular poetry. The humorous rendering of monks with erections and nuns with pregnant bellies may not be specific to Brazilian Catholic culture, but the logic of the humour – the context and nature of the dialectic it sets up – may well be.<sup>31</sup> The fact that this kind of humour is commonly relished among the Northeastern laity reflects, amongst other things, a deep-seated mistrust of ascetical vocations for reasons that cannot be fully dealt with here. The point I wish to bring out in the context of this chapter, is that in Santa Rita, the same ambivalence about boys becoming priests pertains to girls becoming nuns. During my time in the field, a young woman called Maria do Carmo was preparing to become a novice nun. Maria do Carmo's parents had initially been against the idea for fear that her entry into the convent meant losing her as their daughter. Eventually, however, they had come to accept the idea, although Maria do Carmo's father was clearly still ambivalent about his daughter's vocation:

'When I heard about her wish to become a nun I was against it. What father doesn't want his daughter to marry and give him grandchildren? I said: "My child, if you are sure you want that life, you have my blessing. But be conscious that God is smiling in heaven for those of us who are not perfect, for those of us who work, who live in the world, as well as for you" ...'

The notion that nuns do not 'work' was echoed on another occasion when Dida lost her temper with her two daughters for not having cleared away the breakfast things and swept the house. From my room in the house I heard her chastising them: 'What laziness is this? At this rate you girls might as well join a convent and become nuns. Lock yourselves away and give up on the world!'

What, I would argue, all this suggests, is that for the lay people of Santa Rita, closeness to God and spiritual permanence can be achieved in two ways: either by completely by-passing the polluting nature of sex, commerce and divided kinship loyalties via priesthood and other institutional forms of asceticism, or by submitting to spiritual pollution via marriage and yet somehow overcoming and transcending it. Although it is clear that on one level Santa Ritan people accept that ascetical technologies of self and body may afford the ascetic a certain intimacy with the divine, they are nonetheless sceptical that it is the most privileged or ideal way. As the clerical/ascetic option is only for the few, the majority must take the path of marriage. But as marriage represents a submission to the polluting possibilities of life 'in the world' (*do mundo*) it stands to reason that the manner in which one submits to such possibilities takes on crucial importance. For it is not, then, whether or not one marries that will ultimately determine the destiny of one's soul in the afterlife, or the

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<sup>31</sup> For an interesting discussion of humorous genital symbolism in popular Portuguese culture, see Pina-Cabral (1992).

nature of one's relationship with God in this life; it is how one performs and embodies the challenge of being a married person.

## Conclusion:

In this chapter I have shown how marriage tends to be experienced by persons as an overwhelming transition to a state of increased social responsibility, bringing hardship and a sense of radical rupture from the life that went before. I have also shown how marriage places persons in a morally difficult positions, requiring that they perform spiritually polluting activities. However, the most important change that marriage brings about is a change in the level of the person's spiritual accountability. Married people are generally perceived as more 'knowledgable' about the world than non-married people by virtue of the fact that they must immerse themselves in it more intensely via the processes of labour and reproduction. Because married people are regarded as fully responsible adults, they are also held to be more spiritually accountable for their actions. Hence Dida's perception that once married 'all one's mistakes count'.

Nevertheless, for all its polluting qualities, marriage is a religious sacrament and the significance of this fact should not be overlooked. According to João Pina-Cabral, it is the sacred character of religious marriage rather than the polluting nature of sexual union that forms the basis of the understanding of marriage for the Portuguese peasants of the Alto Minho:

'Marriage and the household assume a sacred character precisely because they mediate between the evil of sex and the necessary reproduction of the group. Divinity and perfect sanctity are beyond the reach of ordinary human beings. Nevertheless, within the household, and via the sacrament of the marriage, the ideal of purity in reproduction is achieved.' (1986: 50).

And for the Greek peasants of Juliet du Boulay's study, marriage is a divine ordinance; one that plays a strong legitimising role for women who, unlike men, are perceived as inherently impure: '[a woman's] nature holds the seeds of the greatest corruption—a lack of intelligence and a predisposition to sensuality' (1974: 134). Therefore, because marriage turns debased, impure women into valued mothers and housewives it represents the only relationship 'which makes possible for woman the transcendence of her nature which is a part of her social and metaphysical heritage' (ibid: 135).

However, whereas Pina-Cabral and du Boulay have drawn out the sacramental nature of marriage epitomised by the Church wedding, and the redemptive possibilities it holds for women in particular, William Christian has proposed a more negative view of marriage, emphasising its ultimately profane character. For

Christian, writing of Spanish Catholic peasants, marriage is morally and cosmologically problematic *in spite of* its social productiveness and sacramental tenor:

‘The final step of the descent from the mountain, the irremediable exit from the Garden of Eden, is marriage. In San Sebastian the mothers cry when their daughters are wed. I asked my widowed landlady why. Her response was, “Because they know in advance what kind of life the couple is in for. And it will not be good. Crosses, Crosses, and more Crosses.” Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden to live by the sweat of their brow. Eve had to suffer the pains of childbirth, and even Jesus had to carry his Cross before the Resurrection’ (1972: 157).

Thus for Santa Ritan people, as for the peasants of Christian’s study, what seems to dominate is the notion that within marriage, the ‘ideal of purity in reproduction’ is *not* achieved. For Christian, the polluting nature of marriage is based primarily upon the inherent impurity of sexual union, but it also overlaps with those active years of the life cycle (for any adult) that manifest a tension between the concepts of human nature as ‘dominated by self-interest’ and human nature as ‘devoted to the service and glory of God.’ (ibid.). A similar analysis applies in the case of Santa Rita. However, there it would seem that it is not sexual union in itself that is polluting, but the fact that it generates selfish and possessive emotions. Moreover it is the fact that marriage places individuals in morally compromising positions by situating them within sets of conflicting relationships. Within this complex sphere, moral knowledge about the world and the ability to compete selfishly by using it are necessary for survival. The Santa Ritan case would therefore appear to support Christian’s analysis that marriage (for men as much as for women) represents a symbolic exit from Eden – provided that one goes beyond locating its impurity in the biological pollution of birth and sex.

The social and spiritual risk that lurks within marriage is, I have argued, palpably real for those who must negotiate it. This will become clear in Chapter Five where I examine the kinds of social and physical violence that marriage can lead to by exploring attitudes to violence between spouses. In this chapter, however, I have tried to reveal the spiritual problem marriage gives rise to by showing how it brings the individual into conflict with close consanguineal relatives and affines; how it involves commerce that is explicitly predicated upon ‘gaining the upper hand’, and how it facilitates sexual union that in turn arouses sinful emotions such as lust, jealousy, and pride. It is for these reasons that marriage, in spite of its sacramental nature, is considered by Santa Ritans as a dangerous path to tread, leading the person to sin, and thus ever away from God.

Yet it is also plain that despite such social and spiritual transgressions, marriage is necessary for the reproduction of the household, and religious celibacy is not considered a desirable alternative choice. From an analytical perspective we are

forced, therefore, to entertain the notion that transgression is itself a permissible social form; one that may be central to Christian-folk philosophy itself. What will interest me in the chapters that follow is how Santa Ritan people attempt to reframe the transgression that marriage entails. And to show how in doing so, what appears at first to be a negative predicament, comes to be seen as a positive strategy in the encompassing social and spiritual order.

...like an eggshell a scrap of paper

Blessed are those who carry  
For they shall be lifted

*(Anna Kamienska, 'Those Who carry'. Trans. Tomasz Krzeszowski and Desmond Graham.)*

## Chapter 3

# The importance of suffering

## Introduction

One hot, still afternoon as I was at the chapel altar (the coolest place I could find) writing up field-notes under the watchful gazes of Saint Judas and Saint Rita, a woman called Moça stuck her hands through the open upper half of the wooden back door and clapped to get my attention. Leaving the coolness of the altar I stepped outside to see what she wanted. 'Maya' she whispered urgently when I appeared, 'I would like you to meet my aunt Tia Ana. She is a marvellous woman. Greatly suffered you know.' Before I could even respond, she started off down the track.

Tia Ana lived alone in an old fashioned house on the river's edge. Upon arrival I was ushered into a spartan white-walled living room where hung a dusty portrait of a serious looking couple – probably in their twenties, although the austerity of their pose seemed to suggest a lot older. Beneath this portrait, on a once-splendid, red PVC couch sat the widowed Tia Ana; hunched with age but gazing reverently at the wall in front of her, and as composed as the stern, youthful image of herself behind the glass frame. The only movement in the room came from a thin curtain that separated the living-room from the kitchen, bowing gently in the breeze. Moça motioned for me to sit down while she went off to look for a chair for herself. I took a perch next to the old lady who pretended not to notice me until her niece came back and said loudly into her ear: 'Tia, this is the girl from England. I've brought her to hear about your sufferings'. Tia Ana turned to regard me somewhat suspiciously and said nothing. Moça continued her urging: 'Tell her Tia, go ahead and tell her about how hard you have worked. The life of suffering you've had. There was nothing you wouldn't do for us was there Tia?' Tia Ana remained silent. Moça and I waited and waited but the old woman continued to be quiet. Finally, in a voice



more to herself than to us she said: 'I have suffered, yes, and now I wait for Him'. The old lady looked out of the open doorway with an air of thoughtfulness, but no more was said. We waited a long time in silence, with Moça, gazing at her aunt willing her to speak, and I, discomfited at the turn the visit had taken. Finally Moça said 'Oh Tia, why won't you speak? Is it because you don't want to re-live that suffering?' Tia Ana looked faintly stoical and remained quiet. Moça stood up and gently tucked a wisp of white hair behind the old woman's ear. 'Let us go' she said, 'my aunt is not used to visitors.'

As we walked away, Moça, who was obviously dissatisfied with the result of the visit, went on to tell me herself about Tia Ana's life of suffering. She told me how Tia Ana had travelled about the country in search of work to feed her children, and of the years that she had spent caring for her blind mother-in-law before she had died. She spoke about Tia Ana's late husband's compulsion to gamble away the money that Tia Ana had sweated hard to earn, and of the terrible hunger that she had endured at various points in the past. Given that I had not suggested to anyone that I was particularly interested in learning about suffering, I found the situation mildly puzzling. And yet, on some implicit level I understood Moça's insistence that I learn about her old aunt's suffering. I recognised that it was in some way important that I perceive Tia Ana first and foremost for what she was popularly perceived to be: a *sofredora* (suffered one).

In Santa Rita suffering is a powerful and pervasive idiom. It may be deployed via speech acts or physical behaviours in various contexts: from casual greetings to formal visits; from devotional and healing ritual to political gatherings. In many ways it could be read as belonging to what I shall term a 'tradition of suffering' within Orthodox and Catholic cultures, in which suffering is publicly 'performed' and expressed. The tradition is especially drawn out within the Mediterranean ethnography on women's death rituals (Danforth 1982; Caraveli 1986; Seremetakis 1991), and Catholic and Orthodox pilgrimage (Christian 1972; Dahlberg 1987, 1991; and Dubisch 1995). In this literature, women's ritualised expressions of suffering are seen as central to processes of expiation and divine mediation (Caraveli 1986; Seremetakis 1991), social bonding (Caraveli 1986; Dubisch 1995), historical embodiment (Pandolfi 1991), gender construction (Caraveli 1986; Dubisch 1995; Magrini 1998; and Seremetakis 1991), and even social critique and political empowerment (Caraveli 1986; Dubisch 1995; Magrini 1998; and Seremetakis 1991). Nonetheless, few theorists whose work deals with ritualised expressions of suffering have examined why suffering, of all emotions, should be such a productive idiom in these various contexts. Rather than unpacking the concept of suffering itself, there is a general tendency to treat it as a self-explanatory emotion embedded within the specific social context. Thus there is a certain level of inconsistency in the work of

such theorists who stress the culturally constructed nature of emotions, but nevertheless treat suffering as something of a 'natural phenomenon' connected to biologically universal experiences of womanhood.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I examine women's expressions of emotional pain and suffering. In doing so, I draw from a theoretical tradition that has stressed the culturally constructed nature of emotions (Lutz 1988; Lutz & Abu-Lughod 1990; Lutz & White 1986: 408; Rosaldo 1987).<sup>2</sup> Hence my concern is not with biologically universal emotions of suffering so much as with suffering as an embodied, conceptual, and moral construct. According to Overing and Passes (2000: 20), emotions need to be considered in terms of 'the interesting marriage of intellect and feeling', and they criticise the continued tendency within academic writing to split the two. This point relates closely to the literature on Amazonia, where the affective conditions of community life are integrally linked to knowledge and moral value (Alès 2000; Belaunde 2000; Gow 2000; Kidd 2000). While I aim to consider suffering as a moral value my intention is not to deny the 'feeling' side of affective life (Leavitt 1996), for as the ethnography I shall present shows, elaborated performances of suffering are just as much about the internally 'felt' experience of pain or sorrow as they are about other things, including the desire to elicit from other people an appropriate response.

The chapter is split into two main sections. In the first I present some of my own ethnographic data on expressions and performances of suffering in Santa Rita. In order to convey something of the power and pervasiveness of this concept in the Santa Ritan lived-world, I shall draw it out in relation to a mixture of everyday and ritualised contexts. These range from speech genres specific to social visits and greetings, to actions within healing rituals. I then go on to examine the metaphor of containment by which suffering is locally conceptualised. This metaphor, I shall argue, arises in a variety of interlinked contexts, thus embedding different categories of person in an overarching semiology of suffering, gifting, and spiritual redemption. The examples I provide centre mainly upon women; however, I would advise the reader that this is more a product of the way I have chosen to divide up and present the data than a reflection of any fundamental difference between genders. It should

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<sup>1</sup> Obvious exceptions are Asad (1983) Taussig (1987) and Scarry (1985) who, following Foucault (1979), have all observed a relation between pain and confessional discourse in the construction of the truth claims of a dominant institution. In so doing they remind us of the fact that pain as an institutional, juridical and political idiom is a central social construct in many political cultures. While the focus of these theorists has been upon the painful domination and manipulation of the subject by institutions, others have revealed the subject's use of pain in order to challenge and resist institutions (Bynum 1987, Caraveli 1986, Dubisch 1995, Seremetakis 1991). In this context, the techniques of domination and the techniques of resistance are characterised by the same problematic: the relationship between the force of suffering and the establishment of truth claims.

<sup>2</sup> As Lutz & White point out, the social impact of emotional communication is based on moral inferences shared by social actors. Situated emotional expression can therefore be seen as a "language of the self" that generates and actively reproduces specific social structures and ideational configurations (1986: 417).

be borne in mind that the argument I make here is both coterminous with, and complementary to, data presented in the following chapter that relates mainly to men. I raise this point in order to make a key distinction between my own theoretical position and the gendered perspective that dominates the Mediterranean ethnography.

In the second part of the chapter I examine some of the afore-mentioned literature in which expressions of suffering are an integral part of women's worlds. Contrary to anthropologists such as Dubisch who explain the phenomenon in terms of an encompassing need to produce and express gender difference, I argue that expressions of suffering are a response to an essentially un-gendered existential problem – one that is merely shaped by, but not derived from, a need to produce social difference between the sexes. Using the work of anthropologists such as Dahlberg (1987, 1991); Eade (1991) and Sallnow (1991) on Christian pilgrimage, I shall offer a different perspective on what the expression of suffering produces, as well as addressing why *suffering*, more than any other emotion, should be socially productive at all.

## **Narratives and monologues of suffering in Santa Rita**

One day, Dona Lourdes, Amauri's mother, agreed to be interviewed. Her life story began with these words:

'I was a suffered person. Ever since the beginning I suffered. I don't like to recount my life, no, because just from speaking about it, I cry! I was raised in the house of my grandmother. There my mother started to raise us with suffering. She suffered, suffered so much to raise us.....look, seems there were nearly twenty of us children there in the house; in my grandmother's house. And didn't I then go and have twenty-two of my own?...

These words were recorded in the context of a life-story interview, but in many ways they differed little from the narratives and verbal complaints produced in more ordinary, mundane contexts, as the following example shows:

Early one morning there was a knock at the front door. It was a middle aged woman called Dona Maria who had come from the next village to buy a sack of sweetcorn from Dida. Dona Maria was ushered into the kitchen and offered some breakfast. Dida, who was busy tending to the animals in the adjoining back yard, could not attend to Dona Maria immediately. Dona Maria, however, was in no hurry, and seemed content to sit in the kitchen and wait. After a while, she started to talk about herself to no one in particular. 'Since my husband became ill' she said out loud, 'I

have not been able to leave the house. Morning, noon, and night I make his food, take him his medicine, and bathe him. My son was the one who worked our fields. Now he has left to seek work in São Paulo. My health is failing me and soon I will be left on my own. Yes woman, my life has been suffering...' Dida, who was in and out of the kitchen, paid the woman little attention; however, this did not seem to bother her, and for the next half hour she continued to talk. One by one, members of the family woke up and shuffled into the kitchen. They nodded greetings to the unknown woman sat in the corner, ate their breakfasts, and carried on about their business. Whilst having my own breakfast I observed Dona Maria as she sat at the end of the table. She appeared to be reciting a lengthy list of mundane personal troubles with the habitual intonation of a *Pater Noster*. Periodically she would shift in her seat and utter the refrain 'yes woman, how I have suffered' (*é mulher, como tenho sofrido*).

In Santa Rita, narratives such as Dona Maria's are not unusual. They belong to what one might class as a local type of 'speech genre' pertaining to casual and everyday contexts in which people greet and visit one another, talk about their lives, and exchange news and gossip.<sup>3</sup> Such a speech genre is typical to women and often takes the form of a narrative like that of Dona Maria's, which casts ordinary life events in a meta-language of suffering, endurance, and heroic self-sacrifice. I became familiar with such forms of expression when out on long walks about the village and its surrounding region with my good friend Lucinha. On occasion, Lucinha would wish to drop in on a particular female relative. Upon arriving outside a house we would clap our hands and call out to its owner. If the doors and windows were open but there was no response, Lucinha would weave a path through the cactus plants and pecking chickens to the back entrance. There in the stillness of the dust and beating sun we would generally encounter the *Dona da casa* washing pans or preparing food. Upon catching sight of us, these women would stop what they were doing, smile a greeting, and usher us inside their houses; all the while requesting in the standard way that we forgive the humbleness of their homes.

Having entered the kitchen and sat down to drink water, polite conversation between Lucinha and the host would invariably come to focus upon the health and well-being of various people known to both women. Knowledge about other's illnesses and ailments would be discussed and described – often in spectacular detail – before the women would move on to talk about their own various *sacrificios* (sacrifices), *doenças* (ailments), and *problemas* (problems). Children and other related men and women would generally appear and disappear throughout the course

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<sup>3</sup> Following Bakhtin, a speech genre is not a form of language, but a typical form of utterance which corresponds to typical situations of speech communication, typical themes and also to 'particular contacts between the *meanings* of words and actual concrete reality under certain typical circumstances' (1986: 87).

of such visits, and it was to this shifting and informal audience that women were likely to produce what one might call 'narratives of suffering'.

Such narratives typically grow out of a particular piece of news or story: somebody's ill health, or word of a long departed relative. They might then move from this to centre upon tales of past hardship and sufferings. In the telling of their narratives, women might employ a lamenting intonation and repeatedly incorporate certain stock phrases such as 'it is so, woman' (*é mulher*), 'life is like this' (*a vida é assim*) and 'life is a struggle' (*a vida é uma luta*). At times, the lament-like element might be heightened by physical behaviours such as rocking or sighing, or, more rarely, by understated weeping. It is appropriate for those present to interject with remarks such as 'it is' (*é*), 'it is so, woman' (*é, mulher*) and to offer platitudes such as *Jesus também sofreu* 'Jesus also suffered' or *O sofrimento é o caminho pra céu* 'suffering is the path to heaven'. The banal and somewhat formulaic dimension to this genre of expression is commonly evident: a woman may suddenly interrupt a narrative to scold a child or see to her cooking, or those listening might watch television or carry on a different conversation while the woman is still talking.

When a woman produces a narrative of suffering, the texture and power of her words will sometimes lead her to display signs of emotion; emotion that is attributed to the fact that she 're-lives' (*revive*) her suffering. However, moments of particular emotional intensity draw no special comment, and other people present will not try to distract a woman from her sighs and tears. Those who witness such displays of emotion rarely appear moved by them; the characteristic attitude is neither to encourage nor to alleviate the symptoms of emotional affliction. Yet this, rather than signalling a lack of respect and a certain insensitivity to the feelings of others is very much in keeping with the situated nature of such narratives. The narrative performance is as much a bringing-forth of suffering as it is a discursive reflection of it. Counteracting this process with utterances designed to dilute or distract would be to divest the speaker of her chance to re-live, and thus to make productive her suffering. And as we shall see further on, it would also deny her a legitimate basis for social, material and spiritual exchange relations with the divine, as well as with other human beings.

Nonetheless, people will worry that a woman 're-living' her suffering in this way may be in danger of becoming *nervosa demais* 'too anxious' – an experience that can lead to illness. On one occasion I was present as the old, widowed mother of a woman I was visiting began to recount the hardship she had endured as a young woman, struggling to raise her seven siblings during a time of drought in the 1950s. 'Talk on another subject, mother' the daughter said 'or you will re-live that suffering'. The old woman continued to talk, and her daughter interjected once again 'If you upset yourself now your blood pressure will soar'. In Santa Rita, the

physiological consequence of suffering is a topic of much obsession, and women in particular devote large parts of any conversation to the effects of psychological anxiety on their bodies. A common complaint was blood pressure, which in every woman I knew was either too high or too low, and attributed to the *nervos* (nerves) of suffering. When women were attacked by *nervos*, a young woman named Rita, who was trained as an auxiliary nurse, would normally be summoned to check the woman's blood pressure. News of Rita's arrival generally provoked a small stir as women and children from neighbouring houses gathered to watch the patient have her blood pressure checked in the relatively 'public' space of her front living room.

### The politics of labels

During my time in the field, my informants would routinely point out to me those women – usually of middle age or older – that bore the title of *sofredora* 'sufferer'. I would be introduced to such women with phrases such as 'this here is Dona X, she's a sufferer' (*esta é a Dona X, ela é uma sofredora*), or 'this is the suffered one, Dona X' (*esta é a sofreda Dona X*). More rarely such a title extends to men, and also to deceased relatives – something I learned through hearing my host mother talk incessantly about her late mother, and what a suffered and noble person she had been. The title of *sofredora* bears particular significance because it is bestowed by other persons. Thus, while any woman might present herself as a suffering person, being known and labelled as *a sofredora* is, in a sense, an act of consummation, to use Bakhtin's phrase; it is to go one step higher. Only a select group of older women were regularly and publicly defined in this way. All carried about them a particular air of gravitas and, despite their ordinary roles as mothers and housewives, were women who commanded a noticeable amount of prestige and respect.

Titled *sofredoras* were always greeted with an unusual display of warmth (touching of hands, patting of shoulders), would have seats given up for them at social events, and those who attended church would generally sit in the front pews nearest to the chancel. The fact that *sofredoras* were constantly singled out for me, and the manner in which I would be taken about the village and presented to them not only indicated the certain respect and esteem in which these women were held, but suggested that displays of suffering were meant to elicit some kind of return or response from the person who witnessed them. Thus I often felt obliged to form a relationship with such women, to visit them regularly, and to offer them small gifts.

However, the pressure to respond to suffering was not restricted to me as a 'wealthy' outsider; it clearly affected people within the village itself. Dona Lourdes, Amauri's mother, was a case in point. As a well known *sofredora* and an excellent performer, her crises of suffering managed to elicit a constant stream of visits and

attention from her grown-up sons and daughters. Dida and Amauri would often argue about Dona Lourdes. Amauri was often worn down by his mother's dramas and demands, and would order Dida to go and visit her on his behalf. Dida, however, claimed that she had been doing this for years and admitted that she was tired of the old woman. In a moment of frankness, when Amauri was not present, she said of Dona Lourdes 'Yes she is a sufferer. But you can give the woman ninety-nine percent of your time, and still she asks why it isn't a hundred'.

### Suffering as containment

What does it take to be a good sufferer? According to my informants, the rightful way to suffer is, like Jesus or *Nossa Senhora das Dores* (Our Lady of Sorrows), *com paciência* (with patience). Ideal sufferers are consequently those who do not display exaggerated signs of suffering affliction. This idea is frequently interchanged with concepts and idioms of bodily weakness as opposed to bodily integrity. Thus good sufferers have 'strong', integral bodies, capable of containing suffering. Here I use the term containment to mean 'continuing to behave normally' (*continuando a comportar-se normalmente*). A good sufferer is therefore somebody who does not let her suffering affect other people, does not cause others to suffer alongside them.

When Santa Rita women produce narratives or make formulaic statements about their suffering, they do not present themselves as victims but in fact define themselves as survivors; as people with a productive capacity and a special talent for suffering. In such contexts, suffering is not simply something that happens to a person; something that is experienced passively or submissively. It constitutes a skill, an ability – above all a *capacity for endurance* that pertains to some but not to others. Underlying this idea is the notion that certain kinds of bodies are 'good' for suffering, whereas other kinds are not. Bodies that are good for suffering are strong (*forte*) and 'closed' (*fechado*). Bodies that are not are weak (*fraco*) and open (*aberto*) (see also Brun, 1989). Strong bodies are basically like strong containers: vessels that can be filled up with pain and worry without any danger of rupture. In general, adults are thought to have stronger bodies than children. This explains, not only why children are supposedly more susceptible to illness, but also why they are more susceptible to evil-eye (*mau olhado*). In this section I shall discuss some of the idioms via which suffering is related to the body. In particular, I shall look at treatments for the 'weak', 'open' body.

In Santa Rita, suffering may be signified by a variety of phrases, many of which connote an idiom of carrying and containment. A common shorthand for signifying that having many children or much work leads to suffering is via the term *carregado*, deriving from the root verb *carregar* meaning 'to carry'. Hence one hears

phrases such as *ela é carregada de filhos* 'she is carried/weighed-down with children' or *ele está carregado de trabalho* 'he is carried/weighed-down with work', implying a sense of encumbering and suffering. Another word used in lieu of the verb *sofrer* is *aguentar* 'to withstand, to bear up under'. Thus, when producing narratives of suffering, women will commonly talk in the past tense about the hunger, loss, or pain that *eu aguntei* 'I withstood/supported'. In this sense, the linguistic metaphors and social contexts that relate to the concept of suffering in Santa Rita are evocative of the Latin root of the word *sofrer* which means 'to bear, to contain, to carry'. So that just as a pot could be said to 'suffer' water, people 'suffer' pain and worry.

Verbal expressions of suffering as containment echo ways in which the body is often depicted. Suffering is presented as being linked not only to the subject's personhood in an abstract, intentional, or volitional sense, but to its manifestation in the world as a human being in possession of a physical body. Herein the suffering person's body is like a container; one that may just as well rupture from content. Such was the case with one woman who everyone declared was *doida* (crazy), and had been since her eldest son had drowned some years ago. It was said that this woman was afflicted with an 'open' (*aberto*) or 'weak' constitution and hence could not bear her own suffering.

It is interesting to note, however, that women who commit suicide as opposed to going mad are severely disparaged. Suicide and other overt attempts at self-destruction are regarded as signs of selfish immorality, particularly when they apply to married women who have husbands and other dependents. Rather than being understood as resulting from suffering itself, or being taken as a sign that a person's body was too weak to suffer, suicide is perceived as a selfish *unwillingness* to suffer. An important distinction is therefore made between those who are afflicted with a weak body and are therefore unable to suffer correctly, and those who opt selfishly to escape from suffering.

The folk sickness *peito aberto* is an interesting case to consider because it appears to leave people with a weakened capacity for suffering. *Peito aberto* 'open chest' is a common ailment affecting both men and women, which is curable only through prayer by a *rezador* (prayer-person). There is no precise or singular definition of its cause or symptoms but most people describe *peito aberto* as a peculiar feeling in the back or chest that occurs when the chest (*peito*) becomes 'open' (*aberto*). This, it is said, happens from excessive 'lifting of weight' (*carregando peso*) or 'heavy work' (*trabalho pesado*). When a person has *peito aberto* their capacity for physical labour is impaired; it is emphasised that they



‘cannot work’ and ‘cannot do things properly’ (*não podem trabalhar, não podem fazer as coisas direitinho*).<sup>4</sup>

The prayer for *peito aberto* is one that I saw performed on several occasions for both sexes. The *rezador* begins by measuring the circumference of the person’s rib cage with a towel or length of cloth. The cloth is then placed back around the rib cage of the afflicted and the ends are twisted together where they meet in the middle of the person’s chest. Using one hand to forcefully twist the material, an action which ‘closes’ the chest, the *rezador* uses the thumb of her other hand to repeatedly press the sign of a cross into the centre of the person’s upper chest, whilst repeating chants under his breath. At the end of a lengthy period of chanting and tight twisting, the *rezador* uses the cloth to measure, once more, the circumference of the person’s chest. She then shows the person how much her chest has been closed by. This understanding of the chest as a typically closed structure that may become open is not only metaphoric but literal, and people are always very interested to see exactly how much their chest has been closed by. Once a person is cured, she is able to *aguentar* ‘withstand’ heavy loads and work once more. It is in cases of *peito aberto* that the container-like notion of the body becomes most evident. But the concept is implicit in two other contexts as well: child-bearing and healing, both of which I shall describe in the following section.

### The mother as container

In Santa Rita, pregnancy is the capacity to bear *par excellence*; the womb, the archetypal container of content. Women make this connection explicit by describing pregnancy as an event in which a specific child/person is ‘carried’. Thus they sometimes make statements to the effect ‘that happened while I was carrying X [name of son or daughter]’ (*aquilo aconteceu quando eu estava carregando X*). However, it is not only or specifically children that women ‘carry’ in this sense, it is suffering. Pregnancy is held to be a painful and uncomfortable condition, and pregnant women are generally described as *doente* (ill). When a woman goes into labour, her ‘illness’ increases with each passing hour. When her labour is advanced – when she has become ‘very ill’ (*muito doente*) – it is thought time to admit her to hospital.

One morning as I was walking alongside Dida, we stopped to talk to a woman called Rosa who was sweeping the front step of her house. Dida knew that Rosa’s niece, Lucia, had gone into labour the day before and inquired after her. ‘Yes’ said

<sup>4</sup> In his study of Brazilian peasants of the Sertão, Brun (1989) discusses a similar folk category of affliction known as *corpo aberto* (open body). The symptoms of this affliction, however, is not physical pain, but untoward behaviour. Unlike *peito aberto*, it is classed as a form of spirit possession and can only be cured by a spiritual medium of the sort more associated with Afro-Brazilian religions such as Umbanda.

Rosa, 'the baby was born last night. Lucia suffered a lot. She suffered so much that Niudo [the baby's father] couldn't bear to see her like that, and almost fainted'. As we continued on our way, Dida matter-of-factly relayed the news of Lucia's suffering to every person we met. The baby itself, however, was barely mentioned.

When a woman gives birth, people are generally keen to know two things: the sex of the child, and whether or not the woman 'suffered a lot' in labour. During the groundswell of social interaction following the birth of the child, a large amount of attention is focused upon the mother. During visits to the new parents, polite conversation centres upon the mother's physical state and sense of well being. Women are particularly apt to dwell on the topic of the labour itself; wanting to know how long it lasted, whether there were any stitches, how much pain there was, and so forth. This fascination is fuelled, at least in part, by the general belief that the suffering of childbirth leaves a woman temporarily *livre de pecado* (free of sin); a belief that was often and openly discussed. For example, I once listened as one woman told two others that giving birth was the only time she had felt her sins 'disappear' (*desaparecer*). Another time an older woman informed me that, in the past, women were more likely to go to heaven by virtue of the fact that they were more likely to die in childbirth. This particular woman had herself borne 12 children:

'In the old days childbirth was a risk. Ave Maria, many women died back then because there was no medical assistance. Today there are doctors, hospitals, and everything. But those poor women that died, we would say at the wake of such women, that it was one more angel in heaven'

In the initial three months following childbirth (or at least until sexual intercourse resumes once more), because of the suffering she has undergone, a woman is generally supposed to be, and often feels herself to be, spiritually fortified. Nonetheless, for the great majority of women childbirth offers a very temporary return to a sinless state. Before long, the woman is immersed once again in the spiritual risks and polluting practices of productive family life: sexual intercourse, commerce, covetousness, envy, and pride.

At this juncture, a woman's capacity to 'withstand, endure, contain' becomes important once again as the process of child raising is widely acknowledged to involve suffering (*sofrimento*) and self-sacrifice (*sacrificio*). Here we see that for Santa Ritan women, the suffering involved in child-rearing is a blessing in disguise for it offers an effective – although more protracted – chance to redeem themselves in spiritual terms. Paradoxically, the rupture of childbirth may be seen to have threatened this capacity. This is because, as my informants explained, childbirth is a protracted process of opening that leaves the body 'too open' (*aberto demais*). Aside from the obvious opening of the vagina radically transforming a woman from her once sealed and virginal state, childbirth results in a holistic rupture that leaves the

woman's body open, weak, susceptible to illnesses such as evil eye (*mau olhado*) and thus – as with *peito aberto* – unable to 'work' or to 'do anything'.

It is for this reason that a few months after the birth of a child, a *rezadeira* is called to perform a *rezado de parto* (birth-prayer) designed to 'close' the body. Despite the practice having been all but abandoned by younger generations of women, older women remained firmly convinced of its importance. During my fieldwork I was unable to witness a post-partum 'closing' prayer, however, the accounts I collected described it as involving a female *rezadeira* who comes to the house of the mother and prays for her. The prayer spoken functions to protect both the mother and child from any potential evil eye that might afflict (or already have afflicted) them during the vulnerable period immediately following the birth of the child. In addition to this, the prayer serves crucially to 'close' (*fechar*) the woman's body, making her strong once again and able to 'work and raise her children' (*trabalhar e criar seus filhos*). Different *rezadeiras* would use different methods to perform the prayer. Whereas some simply chanted whilst making the sign of the cross with a sprig of leaves over the body of the mother, others daubed the mother's body with blessed water, or with ashes from the hearth.

It might be noted that the post-partum prayer ritual bears some resemblance to the Catholic ritual of churching women after childbirth; a practice technically defined by the church as an act of thanksgiving. According to Christian, however, the symbolism of the churching ceremony speaks heavily of purification:

'The ritual has the woman being first purified with holy water, then escorted back into the most sacred part of the church by the priest...The fact that popular belief clings to the notion that women are impure until churched testifies to the clarity with which the symbolism is perceived' (1972: 154).

The notion that Catholic women are perceived as polluted after childbirth is echoed strongly by Dahlberg who observes that:

'The central activities of pilgrims at Lourdes involve purifying the self, especially the physical self. Bathing and washing in the water are about cleansing oneself from sin....what are the specific sins these women hope to rid themselves of? They are the sins of the open body; sexual pollution and its product, birth.' (1987: 244)

The argument that women in Christianity stand for the biological evidence of original sin is one that has been amply made elsewhere in the literature (Bloch and Guggenheim 1981; Bloch and Parry 1982; Pina-Cabral 1986; Warner 1976) and will not concern me at length here.<sup>5</sup> All that I wish to draw out is the metaphorical

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<sup>5</sup> Cannell, however, challenges this popular analysis, arguing that women's experience of Mary is historically and regionally variable, and pointing out that some Catholic women may choose to invert the notion of Mary-as-model, choosing instead to understand Mary as a woman whose experiences are modelled on their own, human experiences of maternal love and grief (1999; and in press).

preoccupation, evident in much theological discourse, with women's bodies as 'unsound vessels'. As the work of Warner shows, through different historical periods, the Church's veneration of the figure of Virgin Mary has invariably contrasted the female body 'opened' through sexuality and birth with the ideal 'whole' and 'pristine' body of the Virgin Mary:

'The biblical images that the Fathers applied to the birth of Christ reveal that they conceived of a virgin's body as seamless, unbroken, a literal epiphany of integrity. The Virgin Mary is a "closed gate", a "spring shut up", a "fountain sealed".' (Warner 1976: 73).

All this lends credence to the sense of 'feminine unworthiness' postulated by Christian (1972: 154) among Spanish Catholic women. And it begs the question of whether Santa Ritan women, also, sense themselves to be biologically tarred. If, indeed, they do, could it not be that the post-partum prayer ritual is a folk manifestation of the churching ceremony aimed at purifying the polluted feminine body and re-asserting its metaphorical virginity?

For three main reasons, I would answer that it is not. Firstly, while such an explanation is superficially plausible, it does not do justice to the complexity of the manner in which bodies are imagined as containers that are either strong or weak in their capacity for suffering. Secondly, it does not help to explain the *peito aberto* prayer, which is similar in principle to the post-partum prayer, but applies equally to men. Thirdly, it cannot account for the apparent productiveness of suffering in itself whereby women emerge from the pain of childbirth feeling not polluted, but spiritually fortified.

Whatever its manifold implications, the post-partum prayer, like the cure for *peito aberto*, is quite literally aimed at 'closing' the open body. The fact that women must repeatedly give birth, and both men and women continually labour and repeatedly suffer from *peito aberto*, suggests to me that these rituals are not necessarily about re-sealing the body, or restoring it to an original state of purity or integrity. What they do is restore the body to a productive state as one strong enough to *contain* suffering; that is, as container both of and *on behalf of* others. For we have already seen that heavy manual labour and childbirth are both metaphorical substances that may fill the body; both processes require it to contain a certain amount of physical suffering. The ruptured body, on the other hand, becomes weak like a broken vessel. It fails to remain ridged under the volume of suffering placed inside it. In the case of *peito aberto*, cure involves closing the open chest. Once this is done, the person is made able to continue bearing the burden of heavy manual work, and thus to suffer towards his or her salvation. In the case of childbirth, a woman is closed in order to be able to 'bear'(suffer) once again: not necessarily childbirth *per se*, but the years of child-raising that lie ahead of her. For the ability to

suffer, as will become clear, defines the moral person: it allows the person to bear, strain, and expend herself for the benefit of others. As such, it is said that an ability to suffer brings the person closer to God, thus allowing her to achieve spiritual redemption.

### The suffering rezadeira

Having discussed two healing processes connected with the suffering body, I turn now to consider the role of suffering in the lives of *rezadores* (prayer-persons) themselves. A *rezador* is defined as someone who has a faith (*fê*) strong enough to overpower evil and channel God's healing through the power and technique of her prayer. *Rezadores* are called on to cure a number of ailments including *peito aberto*, as we have seen above. But by far the most common affliction that a *rezador* treats is *mau olhado* (evil eye). Different *rezadores* use different chants and techniques, but the standard practice involves the use of a fresh sprig called *mato*, taken from any small leafed plant. The *rezador* uses the *mato* to make the sign of the cross over the afflicted person whilst chanting under her breath. As the evil is sucked out of the patient it gets absorbed primarily by the sprig of leaves, which wilts in the process, and secondarily by the *rezador* herself who yawns widely to *tirar* 'take away' the *mal* (evil). In the process the *rezador* cries silent tears. Her crying, it is said, is a measure of the malevolence afflicting the person: the more evil she 'takes,' the more copiously she weeps.

People would always state, unequivocally, that anyone could heal through prayer. In theory, a *rezador* could be a man or a woman (i.e. a *rezadeira*), a boy or a girl, a rich person or a poor person. All that mattered was the strength of that person's faith. It was sometimes stressed to me that a young, female, virgin was ideal for such a role, yet no one I knew had ever heard of a young or virginal *rezadeira*. Nor had anyone ever encountered a *rezador* who was rich, or at least known to be comfortably off in material terms. In practice, *rezadores* (whether male or female) generally come from the very poorest enclaves, are landless, and belong to the lowest socio-economic stratum. They are always middle-aged or older, and are married with children. In theory they may be of either sex; however, the majority of them are women (Brun, 1989).<sup>6</sup>

Much could be said about the social and political role of the *rezador* within Northeastern culture, and there is a substantial literature dealing with folk medicine in Northeast Brazil, and the role of the *rezador* in diagnosis and healing of spiritual and physical affliction (Brun 1989; and Rebhum 1993; 1995). What concerns me here is simply the fact that in practice good *rezadores* – because of their age, life

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<sup>6</sup> Of the eleven *rezadores* that I came to know, only two were men.

experience, and lack of material wealth – are always perceived as supremely suffered people. Most *rezadores* are poor and many live in visible, abject poverty. Despite this condition of necessity, the power and efficacy of the work they do rests upon the fact that they do not charge for their services. The *rezadores* I knew were consciously aware of their celebrity as *sofridores*, and some even seemed aware of the irony of their predicament. One *rezador* I knew was constantly thinking about giving up praying because, as he put it, *o rezador nunca vai pra frente*, ‘a *rezador* never goes forward [financially]’.

The most powerful and renowned *rezadeira* in Santa Rita was Celestina, a woman known and titled as a *super sofridora*. Celestina was in her late sixties, and a mother of five. She lived with her husband and the rest of her family on a steep incline some distance from the village, in a crumbling brick shack lacking water and electricity. She and her husband were landless, but cultivated a little maize on the rocky soil surrounding their house. In many ways Celestina was no different from the other landless peasants living in poverty on the margins of village life, but her hardship was commonly noted as being (and certainly appeared to me as) more than the average person’s lot. For instance, Celestina’s husband and eldest son were both alcoholics who ‘never worked’, her second son was in prison for theft, two of her adult daughters were unmarried single mothers and still lived at home with their children, and her youngest daughter was retarded. In addition to this, Celestina’s sister had stolen her identity some years ago and had used it ever since to claim a state pension. Because of this deceit, Celestina, burdened with the task of feeding a twelve person household, struggled to survive quite penniless.

Despite her personal situation (or perhaps because of ) Celestina was the most renowned *rezadeira* in the region, and people would walk miles from neighbouring villages to see her. Those of her clients whom I spoke to found it difficult to explain to me why, exactly, they considered Celestina better than any other *rezadeira*. All they knew was that her prayer was strong, and that it worked to cure them of their afflictions. Yet Celestina’s renown clearly seemed to stem as much from her suffering as from the power of her prayer; suggesting to me a link between these two aspects. Her well-known capacity for personal suffering suggested to people a heightened ability to take on the suffering of others. In this sense, Celestina’s faith (*fê*) (which determined the strength of her prayer) and her suffering were importantly linked. Indeed, this is what Celestina herself intimated when I put the question to her:

*Maya*: Why would you say people seek you out more than any other *rezadeira*?

*Celestina*: Because my faith is very strong. People see how strong it is, and that is why they come.

*Maya*: Why is your faith so much stronger than theirs?

*Celestina*: For many out there who have everything in life, there is no need for God. Why have need of prayer when your heaven is on earth? For someone like me,

suffered the way I am, faith is everything. People know this, they think, 'Surely, if she didn't have faith, she wouldn't be alive at all'

Thus if spiritual power in the form of faith is indexed by suffering, suffering is the encompassing value in terms of which everything else is expressed. This goes some way towards explaining the apparent disjuncture between verbally elaborated theories about ideal healers and ideal healers in practice. Theoretically, the efficacy of prayer rests upon faith coupled with youth, purity and virginity. In practice, however, the efficacy of a *rezadeira's* prayer rests not on her youth or virginal purity, but on the suffering she endures as a worldly, aged, and sexually-experienced person. A parallel thus becomes observable between the archetypal suffering mother and the respected *rezadeira*: the *rezadeira* is the acme of suffering; she is the paradigmatic suffering 'mother' and hence a powerful vessel for the channelling of God's grace (*graça*). The techniques of prayer recapitulate a semiology of suffering based on bodily containment. The act of containment is an act of sacrifice in that it involves the *rezadeira* sacrificing her body for the benefit of her patient. As she prays, the *rezadeira* yawns and absorbs the pain of another; in doing so she suffers and cries. In this way, like the mother who bears suffering on behalf of her children, the *rezadeira* bears malediction on behalf of the afflicted.

## **Suffering and 'womanhood' in Catholic and Orthodox cultures**

Having explored some expressions of suffering in the village of Santa Rita, I want to expand and consider these against expressions of suffering in other Catholic and Orthodox cultures. This wider 'tradition of suffering' that I mentioned in the introduction has been noted in passing by several theorists, but has been given most expression in an article by Magrini. According to Magrini (1998), the involvement of Catholic and Orthodox women throughout the Mediterranean in behaviours such as: crawling towards shrines on their knees, walking barefoot, dragging the tongue on the ground, breast-beating, shouting, crying, and swooning, (whether in death rituals or devotional practice) constitutes a 'work of pain' specific to women. Magrini explains her choice of the term 'work of pain' by drawing out its parallel to the term 'kin work' adopted by Di Leonardo to describe American women's task of sustaining family networks (1984). However, she does not suggest what the end product of such 'work' might be and remains vague about the underlying reasons for its existence. In this section, I shall consider some of the explanations offered by theorists in connection with ritualised expressions of suffering, and will offer an alternative

suggestion of what the 'end product' of such suffering might be. Before doing this, however, I wish to give a sense of the kind of ethnography I am engaging with, and to explain my reasons for comparing it with Santa Ritan data.

In their work on death ritual in Greece, Seremetakis (1991) and Caraveli (1986) elaborate upon the cultural idiom of *ponos* (pain) that pervades the lamenting and non-institutional rituals carried out by women in connection with death. Antiphonic laments are about both the pain of the survivor in the throes of mourning and the pain that the deceased bear during the course of their lives. Like other artistic media, the words of laments are constructed to bear witness to the hardships of social life: poverty and alienation, illness and intrigue, and the violence of love and separation. In the mourning lament, the poetic discourse of the mourner is simultaneously a 'revelation, a disclosure, a witnessing and an objectification of pain and suffering' (Seremetakis 1991: 105); something that may be said of its physical performance more generally:

'One day, my husband and I were at the grave site when Tomais entered the cemetery. She made a dramatic entrance – armloads of fresh flowers, black scarf loosened, and already lamenting at the top of her voice, even before leaving the public road to enter the cemetery. During the entire performance, she did not acknowledge our presence once, even when – her grief having driven her to a seemingly uncontrollable state – we tried to raise her from the grave and stop her lamentation.' (Caraveli 1986: 187)

However, public displays of suffering are not only manifest in women's mourning ritual; they are also central to their devotional behaviour at shrines, on processions, and during pilgrimage. In one particular passage, Dubisch describes the painful uphill ascent to a church by a young woman on her knees on the Greek island of Tinos. This vow took over two hours to complete, and was accompanied by a large throng of engaged onlookers. It is worth quoting at some length in order to reveal the sense of performance involved:

'As we drew closer, I realised that the woman was not old, as I had originally thought. She was young (about twenty-five, I soon learned) and in great distress, such distress that my next thought was that she must be very ill. She would rise from her prone position to her knees, crawl a few steps, and then collapse, crying out to the woman accompanying her, "Maria, I can't! I can't!" [...] Some of the passersby and some of those watching from doorways of shops along the street stepped up to the woman and encouraged her not to give up [...] "Have courage! Keep going!" [...] The outside lights of the church had been illuminated just after we arrived on the scene, and they shone invitingly, outlining the building at the top of the hill. A man who had just joined the onlookers bent over the young woman, telling her that the lights had been turned on for her. "The *Panayía* [Icon of the Virgin Maria] is waiting for you" (*I Panayía se periméni*), several other onlookers added [...] The woman on her knees continued to have difficulty. She would get up and crawl rapidly for a few yards on her hands and knees and then collapse again, crying out [...] By the time the woman began to make her way up the first steps and across the outer courtyard of the church, the crowd had grown to perhaps 150 or more...Two



gypsy men had now taken charge. (Until now the participants in the drama had been almost all women.) They yelled at the crowd to step back and make way so that the woman could ascend the stairway to the outer plaza of the church.' (1995: 49-53).<sup>7</sup>

The pervasive idiom and 'performance' of suffering in the ethnography cited, although somewhat more dramatic, bears striking resemblance to that which I encountered in Santa Rita. Therefore I feel that the wider religious context and texture of the Mediterranean literature overlaps with my own material enough to serve as a starting point for some reflections on this theme as a whole. Certain contextual and socio-historical differences, however, deserve to be mentioned, such as the theological, liturgical, and practical variation between Greek Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholicism. In answer to this, I would stress the fact that both of these religions draw broadly upon the same cultural and biblical tradition and share many of the same rituals. As Dubisch herself observes, on the Greek Island of Tinos, Catholicism is felt to be 'similar enough to Orthodoxy to be considered a Christian religion' whereas Protestantism is not (1995:59). Points of minor variation aside, the focus in this chapter (as with much of the literature cited) is not on 'official' religious outlook or institutionalised practice, but rather on folk rituals and perceptions. Moreover, by considering the folk practices of Orthodox people alongside those of Catholics, this chapter forms part of an attempt to develop a more encompassing 'anthropology of Christianity'.<sup>8</sup>

Another problematic issue concerns the nature and range of differing contexts in which suffering expression has been identified. Whereas theorists such as Dubisch, Seremetakis, and Caraveli elaborate upon expressions of suffering in highly ritual contexts, my own material discussed above focuses on narratives, expressions, and behaviours in mainly non-ritual and everyday situations. By deliberately locating the suffering complex in a wide variety of social and ritual frameworks, I have tried to draw out the cosmological significance of suffering within Christian culture more generally. Thus I aim to discuss the concept, not in terms of analytical divisions between the ritual and the 'everyday', the sacred and the profane, but more as I believe it is lived and experienced: in a time/space marked by a sense of continuity between these realms.

I take my lead, in part, from the literature cited, none of which suggests a clear demarcation between women's performances of suffering in ordinary and ritual contexts. Both Seremetakis and Caraveli, for example, were able to record lament

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<sup>7</sup> According to Dubisch, this case was unusual because the girl involved was said to have been possessed by the devil. Ascending the hill on one's knees is more usually carried out as a vow in return for an answered prayer and when performed by a healthy woman, normally takes no more than thirty to forty-five minutes (1995: 51).

<sup>8</sup> In his 'Notes toward an anthropology of Christianity' Robbins (2003) discusses the difficulties and potential benefits to be derived from the establishment of an anthropology of Christianity in which 'people working in different geographical areas...seek to develop a set of shared questions to be examined comparatively' (2003: 192).

performances in everyday non-ritual contexts, and both draw attention to the fact that lament singing may achieve as intense and extraordinary an emotional state in the singer outside the context of a wake or funeral as within it. Caraveli observes that as well as during wakes and funerals, laments may be sung whilst tending graves, carrying out agricultural labour, or in a moment of sadness when walking through an abandoned field. The extension of performance contexts, she argues, not only suggests an expanded definition of laments, but also an expanded use of them 'as instruments for airing grievances on an everyday basis' (Caraveli 1986: 191). In a similar vein, Seremetakis argues for a subtle blurring between the 'patterns' of ritual time/space and those of everyday social life. This blurring occurs not only via the 'expanded' contexts in which laments may occur, but via the process of dreaming and death divination; a process which she terms 'ritualisation'. Here ritualisation is defined as the processual representation of death in a variety of social contexts and practices that do not have the formal status of a public rite (Seremetakis 1991: 47).

If Seremetakis emphasises the more heterogeneous and encompassing contexts of ritual, Dubisch makes the converse yet equally valid observation that ritual does not always entail a complete release from mundane structure. She writes: 'pilgrims to Tinos (and to other shrines in Greece) do not sever, even temporarily, their social bonds, or leave behind the social networks that enmesh them in everyday life' (1991: 95). Indeed it was a certain element of continuity between the roles and behaviours of women in ordinary and pilgrimage contexts that first drew Dubisch's attention to the role of suffering in all areas of Greek life. By this she came to view suffering, much as I did in the context of Santa Rita, as a 'pervasive cultural expression'; not only in the more dramatic representations of religion and of modern Greek history, but also in the context of everyday life (ibid: 214). Thus she notes the existence of what she terms 'competitive suffering' in everyday life – a phenomenon which manifests itself in constant complaints about the difficulty of daily life: 'the problems with work, illness, or (particularly for women) personal relationships' (ibid.). Despite these writers' acknowledgement of the existence of suffering in non-ritual contexts, they nevertheless emphasise ritual suffering as prior to its expression in non-ritual contexts.

### The gender of the sufferer

I turn, then, to consider these analyses of ritualised suffering put forward in the works cited above. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to offer a comprehensive overview of the theoretical implications of such work, as the mourning and devotional practices themselves are clearly complex and difficult to divorce from the

specific contexts to which they relate.<sup>9</sup> My aim in this section therefore, is not to provide an exhaustive and detailed comparison of the literature with my own material, but to elaborate upon a specific theoretical thread running through it, in which suffering is correlated to questions of gender.

Suffering, according to Dubisch 'may serve as a basis for women's identification with other women' (1995: 214). This, she suggests, can be seen in the Greek concept *ponos* (pain) especially as it is applied to the experience of death and mourning. Caraveli, too, speaks of a 'community of pain' which unites women (1980, 1986), and which her entry to was facilitated by her own experience of loss and motherly suffering. In particular, she points to the female mourning lament as a way of enacting and negotiating significant relationships among women across kinship and generational lines; 'between the old and young', and 'between master performer and apprentice' (Caraveli 1986: 178). Such relationships are, she writes, 'vital to both the women themselves and the larger world of the village that they inhabit' (ibid.). In these rites, the vocalisation and physical display of pain is theorised as constructing an affective enclave of women in conflict with the 'male' social structure.

By way of illustration, I quote from a passage by Seremetakis in which the socio-political marginality of Greek women is starkly juxtaposed against the impressive force of their ritualised suffering:

'Maniat women move discreetly and swiftly in their towers and through the narrow streets between towers. They move close to walls and avoid public spaces defined as male. They emerge from the low entrances and exits of their tower-houses, from underneath a heavy load of wood or water carried on their backs, only to bend again over a rocky terrain during agricultural work, over an open or covered grave in the cemetery, over the protected cistern at the bottom of their towers. When the "whisper" of death comes, these bent women, creatures of the back alleys, stand up. They stretch their upper body and throw the head back, pulling out their loosened hair. They raise their fists against the sky, beating their chests in anger, scratching their faces, screaming. It is then one sees Maniat women in their full height.' (1991: 75.)

In the above passage, Seremetakis depicts the ritualised suffering of death as the forum *par excellence* for 'private', politically silent women to assert themselves within those male dominated realms defined as 'public'. Seremetakis speaks of pain in such contexts as both 'an emotional force' and a 'bodily symbolism' that evokes discontinuity and disorder. She further notes the correspondence to Bauman's (1975) notion of performance spaces as disruptive alternative social structures within or at the margins of social structure. Indeed, one of the aspects of lament performance

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that the mourning lament in particular, is a complex and multivalent phenomenon constituting an 'alternative and exclusive sphere of aesthetic, religious, and social interaction, in which the participants vent creative impulses, undergo emotional catharsis, and reinforce their individual identity and group membership' (Caraveli, 1986: 178).

most convincingly drawn out by Caraveli and Seremetakis is its function as an instrument of social protest. Caraveli shows that the thematic conventions allow the focus of the song to shift from the plight of the deceased to the plight of the mourner: 'Since the performers of these ritual laments are women, the grievances thus voiced often relate to the social role of women in the context of the androcentric village' (Caraveli 1986: 181). The scope for social commentary and critique within the lament discourse is extensive and may be directed at 'male' institutions such as the Church, the medical establishment, and the juridical system. Suffering thus functions as a performance event where 'the silenced and semantic value' of female experience is 'recuperated', and then 'transformed' into a media of cultural empowerment (Seremetakis 1991: 208).

Although writing about a different context, Dubisch advances a similar proposition. She argues that the elaboration of pain and suffering in devotional practices and everyday life more generally, constitutes a 'poetics of womanhood' in which women 'construct distinctive and powerful images of womanhood' (Dubisch 1995: 223).<sup>10</sup> In devotional contexts, the identification with the Virgin Mary as a suffering mother 'lends a particular moral force to their own performance of suffering as enacted at the pilgrimage site, for it draws on powerful religious imagery and aligns women with the major figure of Orthodox devotional practice.' (ibid.: 217). Such performances of suffering reveal the culturally constructed nature of womanhood; they present a means for women to perform 'being good at being a woman' (ibid.: 207).

At this juncture, it is important to note that the theorists I am writing about have developed their positions in relation to a particularly dominant theoretical concern with gender within Mediterranean anthropology. In her book, Dubisch takes lengthy issue with theorists such as Herzfeld who have regarded womanhood as tied unproblematically to 'natural' biological processes and the 'private' domestic realm and, thus, as not requiring the same public performance as manhood. For example, Herzfeld (1985) noting the importance of swaggering self-display among Cretan men, analyses it as part of a 'the poetics of manhood'.<sup>11</sup> He argues that Cretan men, in order to break away from the feminised, domestic world, present themselves in a type of public performance in which 'being a good man' is less important than 'being *good at* being a man' (1985: 16).<sup>12</sup> According to Dubisch, the key word is *public*: she protests that 'ideas about femaleness are no less publicly expressed and negotiated than those about maleness' (Dubisch 1995: 207). The 'dramatic' and

<sup>10</sup> A term also employed by Caraveli (1995) and Magrini (1998).

<sup>11</sup> Herzfeld explains that the analytical term *poetics* is adopted because it goes beyond the more restricted *performance* to address historical and ideological processes in addition to describing the interactional strategies involved. (1991: 81).

<sup>12</sup> Men's swaggering 'performances' are part of an ongoing struggle in which individuals act as persons, as members of their patriline, as villagers, and as Cretans (Herzfeld, 1985).

‘articulate’ performance of womanhood is to be found, she suggests, in various practices, but particularly within women’s ritual excursions: ‘Visiting the cemetery, attending a liturgy at a country church, going on a pilgrimage’ (ibid.: 211). In addition to these she cites biography encapsulated within the ritual process of lament performance (Seremetakis 1991: 7), and women’s accounts about themselves as an example of narrative performance (Valentine 1992). Such accounts are not simply ‘personal’, she argues, they are about ‘being a woman’ (Dubisch 1995: 212).

Dubisch is right to argue that female, just as much as male, identity can be publicly performed and culturally elaborated. Moreover, given that suffering performances in all these contexts are produced by women, it is difficult to refute that they are, in part, a reflection and an enactment of ‘being a woman’. However, when it comes to explaining why *suffering* is such a favoured idiom for both resistance to the male dominated social order, and for the construction of femininity, explanations become somewhat tautological. Dubisch argues that women’s sufferings ‘call attention to what they must endure in order to carry out their roles’ (Dubisch 1995: 215). In another passage she states that ‘Greek mothers struggle to bear and raise their children’, and claims that iconic images of the suffering mother ‘remind them of the difficulties of the maternal role’ (ibid.: 219). In a similar resort to the supposedly obvious and ‘natural’ aspects of suffering in womanhood, Caraveli-Chavez explains the display of suffering in lament performance as down to the woman’s reproductive role: ‘A woman’s capacity for reproduction [...] also gives her firsthand access to the realm of the dead, as she becomes more vulnerable to pain and loss than men’ (Caraveli-Chavez 1980: 146). Likewise, Magrini observes that in the Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, the role of women as pain-bearers finds support in the cult of the *Mater Dolorosa*: ‘Since she represents the universal female experience of motherhood [...] Mary offers a model with whom Christian women can easily identify’ (Magrini 1998: 11). And she explains Southern Italian women’s enactments of loss and pain during Easter processions as an expression of the suffering caused to them by poverty, economic emigration, and the practice of uxorilocality by which mothers are separated from their beloved sons.

The difficulty with such explanations stems from the fact that poverty, motherhood, economic emigration, and uxorilocality (or, for that matter, virilocality) exist all over the world, but they do not, everywhere, give rise to ritualised expressions of suffering. The problem, I would argue, lies in the apparent desire to smuggle a universal humanism into discussions about ‘women’ and ‘motherhood’. Hence, despite her rejection of the notion that women are ‘naturally’ more emotional (Dubisch 1995: 213), Dubisch sees suffering as an inherent aspect of ‘womanhood’, and thus overlooks the ideological basis for its expression. To agree that both masculine and feminine gender must be culturally enacted does not explain why

suffering and pain, more than any other emotion, is the chosen medium, in such contexts, for the construction and expression of femininity. I am therefore inclined to question how far the 'poetics of womanhood' argument put forward by these theorists explains the phenomenon itself.

When I turn to my own ethnographic data, there are two central aspects to the Santa Ritan case which make me feel that suffering is not about gender *per se*. The first concerns the fact that not *all* women produce performances of suffering, whether in ritual or in other contexts. The second concerns the fact that men, too, have access to culturally recognised discourses on pain, endurance, and suffering. This second point shall be discussed more fully in the following chapter on labour discourse, and need not concern us here. The first, however, constitutes an important detail that is mostly unelaborated in the Mediterranean ethnography, and which I shall discuss below.<sup>13</sup> Together these two factors suggest that the public expression of suffering is not concerned with the construction of femininity in opposition to masculinity so much as with *morality* in opposition to *immorality*. Rather than being about disorder and resistance to social structure, it constitutes a form of exchange generative of sociality, and – given its role in eliciting and reinforcing the obligations kin hold towards one another – it could even be seen as generative of social structure itself.

### Age and suffering

In Santa Rita it is significant that only married women perform the suffering narratives I have described, or are labelled as *sofredoras*. Never did I hear an unmarried woman young, old, or middle aged produce a narrative of suffering or be defined as a *sofredora*. Even pressing various unmarried women on the topic of their own suffering, I found it difficult to get them to admit to having suffered. In certain cases, this was despite having experienced the same events (i.e. poverty, the loss of close kin, personal illness, etc) that had made up the suffering narratives of their married, female counterparts. Upon asking people whether particular unmarried women could, in their opinion, be described as a *sofredoras* I would be met with puzzled looks, as if the idea were slightly ridiculous. This happened even when the unmarried woman in question was middle-aged or older. Of course no one could affirm that anyone, whether married or single, had lived a life free from any suffering, but they would never go so far as to label an unmarried woman a *sofredora*.

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<sup>13</sup> With the exception of Christian who points out that it is categorically *adult, married* women who are most likely to visit shrines and engage in 'cycles of purification' (1972: 155).

The married-suffered / unmarried-unsuffered dichotomy expresses itself in other ways as well. In public, married people behave in a notably different way from single people; even when they are age mates. This is most apparent at village *festas* when married people of both sexes avoid dancing altogether. Young unmarried people, by contrast, dominate the central dance space while married women watch from the margins, and their husbands, who also do not dance, cluster together at the bar. The assertion that ‘married life is suffering’ (*a vida do casal é sofrida*) was often backed up with warnings to unmarried women to put off marrying lest they become ‘instantly old’ (*velha de repente*). Such a notion is significant, for it suggests a direct correlation between the concept of age and suffering. Not only does suffering age the person, but the more age and worldly experience a person has, the more sin they are likely to accrue, and thus greater is the necessity to suffer.

What does all this commentary on age and marriage have to do with narratives and labels of suffering? To my mind, the most important connection lies in the fact that the cultural performance of pain and suffering is the preserve of ‘older’ i.e. *married* women (including those who might only be cohabiting). For women in particular, then, it is a label intrinsically predicated upon sexual experience and worldly knowledge; both of which are spiritually polluting and work to distance the individual from God.<sup>14</sup> Given that suffering is ‘performed’ exclusively by married women, it would seem that it offers some way of dealing with the dilemma of having to live productively, yet sinfully, in the world, and hence of re-vivifying one’s failing relationship with God. Marriage is thus central to understanding the suffering complex: it simultaneously creates an existential problem and offers a solution for it. In the following section I shall explore the logic of exchange that underpins the suffering discourse, and makes suffering such a socially productive idiom.

### The suffering narrative as a performance of sacrifice

In Santa Rita the ideal sufferer, as we have seen, is somebody who does not allow her suffering to affect (or to cause suffering to) others. It is also somebody whose suffering in some way benefits others. Thus a mother ‘suffers’ in order to feed and raise her children, and a healer ‘suffers’ to cure her patients. The Christian concept of sacrifice (*sacrificio*) is intrinsic to such a discourse. This became clear to me during fieldwork every time a Santa Ritan woman referred, explicitly, to the suffering of her poverty or hard work as a *sacrificio*. It was also evident every time somebody, wishing to empathise with another person’s suffering, uttered the words *Jesus*

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<sup>14</sup> While marriage and childbirth are intrinsically linked, it is interesting to note that married women who are childless are still labelled *sofredoras*. This suggests that the link between suffering and marriage cannot be reduced to the ‘natural’ experience of childbirth.

*também sofreu* ('Jesus also suffered'), thereby invoking the biblical Passion, which in local terms is conceptualised as the most perfect model of self-sacrifice of all.

Indeed, in the Catholic tradition suffering is intrinsically linked to a sacrificial discourse, which centres upon the image and exegesis of Christ in the Passion. In this sacrificial discourse, the suffering body comes, in some way, to resemble that of the innocent sacrificial victim, thus giving suffering a salvific value. In this sense, suffering – understood as a form of sacrifice – represents the quintessential moral act of giving up the self for the benefit of others. For the Catholic pilgrims of Dahlberg's study, for instance, a sacrificial discourse typifies thinking about the sick body. Sick pilgrims are cast as sacrificial victims after Christ. By this it is implicitly understood that the sacrifice of a healthy body in the present world will reap spiritual reward in the hereafter (1987; 1991).

In Santa Rita, a similar sort of discourse can be seen at work in a variety of shifting contexts. When a woman produces a narrative of suffering, what she in fact does is reconstruct and 'perform' that experience as one of sacrificial suffering. To understand how this happens it is necessary to view the narrative as the *creation* of a reality rather than merely its post-hoc reflection. According to Bakhtin, 'emotion, evaluation and expression [...] are born only in the process of its live usage in a concrete utterance' (1986: 87). And this, I would argue, is partly the point of such narrative performances: in the narration of suffering the woman undergoes an experience of emotional intensity in that she is said to *reviver* 're-live' her suffering. In such an event, the 'cross' she carries is rendered socially tangible and experientially 'real' to those who comprise her audience: her children, family, and visiting neighbours.

Thus it is only when suffering is performed through narrative in social contexts that it is meaningfully transformed. It is only the 'performance' of suffering, in various ways, that renders it as something more than just the passive course of fate. This becomes clear when the voluntarism of the narrative performance is compared to the voluntarism of mortification practices documented in the literature on Catholicism (Eade and Sallnow 1991; Sallnow 1991). The exchange of suffering for grace is a well-established notion within the Catholic tradition, and underlies the concept and practice of penance in which bodily privations such as fasting, self-flagellation, going barefoot, crawling on the knees, and so forth are thought to win the penitential devotee God's forgiveness and grace. The wilful subordination of the passions and the notion of self-discipline in the practice of bodily mortification suggests its *chosen* and self-inflicted character. This voluntarism is what defines the suffering as an offering or a sacrifice, thus differentiating the actual (or metaphorical) 'death' of the sufferer from the death of a victim of murder or suicide (Dahlberg, 1987).



For the suffering that derives from ordinary workaday contexts and experience to take on a voluntaristic and sacrificial flavour, it has to be actively reconstructed as such. The narrative ‘performance’ of suffering – a process that simultaneously creates an experience of suffering and objectifies it, submits to, and reifies it – achieves such a result. The significance of the Santa Ritan narrative derives not, as Seremetakis might suggest, from any rupture or disorder created by the drama of emotional display, but from the creative sense of order and agency it affords the narrator over events that might otherwise be experienced as meaningless, be instantly forgotten, or be put down to ‘fate’ (*destino*).

### Sacrificial suffering and symbolic exchange

If everyday narratives skillfully cast suffering as an act of self-sacrifice, the notion of sacrifice in turn suggests the gift-like potential of suffering. But what kind of gift is suffering perceived to constitute? On one level, one could clearly argue that it is the Christian ‘free gift’, exemplified in the sacrifice of Christ, that is echoed and embedded in the suffering discourse of Santa Ritan women. For Santa Ritans (as for Catholics more widely), to suffer on behalf of others is overtly recognised as a giving of oneself without expectation of return (Dahlberg 1987). In the Santa Ritan context, this idea attains its most elaborate expression in the injunction against paying the *rezadeira*, and against even uttering the word *obrigado* (thank you) in return for a healing session. The free gift embodied in the *ideal* suffering mother (or *rezadeira*) makes her part of the pantheon of human saints able to act as mediators with the divine. As one local saying suggests: ‘God created mother because he could not be in all places at the same time looking after his children’ (*Deus criou mãe por que não conseguia estar em todos os lugares ao mesmo tempo cuidando dos seus filhos*). And in the following popular verse, the mediative capacity of the eternally giving mother makes her into a saint like any other:

*Eu vi minha mãe rezando  
Aos pés da Virgem Maria  
Era uma santa escutando  
O que outra santa dizia*<sup>15</sup>

I saw my mother praying  
At the feet of the Virgin Mary  
It was one saint listening  
To what the other saint said

However, as Hubert and Mauss long ago noted, the abnegation and submission that defines the practice of sacrifice are ‘not without their selfish aspect...Disinterestedness is mingled with self-interest. That is why it has been so frequently been conceived of as a form of contract’ (Hubert and Mauss 1964: 100). According to Parry (1986), the

<sup>15</sup> Américo Falcão. Cited in Almeida (1947).

ideology of altruistic giving is inextricably linked to the ideology of the reciprocated gift and self-interest. In the Christian world, he argues, a 'universalistic conception of purely disinterested giving' has developed simultaneously alongside the notion of 'pure utility' (1986: 468). And certainly, in the Santa Ritan context, one finds a certain amount of ambiguity and conflict between these two ideologies, for while the selfless suffering and abnegation of Santa Ritan women is clearly meant to eschew notions of earthly reward, it is implicitly understood that it will reap spiritual dividends.

As Eade and Sallnow (1991) point out, for a strongly Salvationist religion such as Catholicism, 'it is questionable whether the notion of purely disinterested giving can be anything other than a fiction' (ibid.: 25). Indeed, much has been written about the overtly transactional ethic of devotional exercises in Catholic cultures. One sees the manifold self-interested exchanges between humans and the divine most clearly in the literature on Christian pilgrimage cults where, using the shrine divinity as a mediator:

'physical suffering and penance are exchanged for material and spiritual favours, contracts are forged with the saints, sin is amortized by means of a tariff of devotional or ascetic practices, and many indulgences may be earned merely by dint of having attended the shrine festival and having expended earthly time in doing so.' (Eade and Sallnow 1991: 240).

In his discussion of the Andean shrine of Señor de Wank'a in Southern Peru, Sallnow (1991) points out that bodily mortifications and devotional practices are primarily geared towards prompting thaumaturgic intervention in the affairs of the living here and now, rather than gaining grace and spiritual intervention in the hereafter. This would suggest that expressions of suffering cast as self-sacrifice may not necessarily be solely about securing reward in the next world, but also in this one.

The latter point can certainly be made for Santa Rita where, at times, suffering appears to be just as much about exchange with humans as it is about establishing credentials with the divine. Suffering could thus be said to be productive, not only because it elicits reward in the next world, but because of the productive social relations it gives rise to in the present one. In Santa Rita, sufferers are typically admired for taking the burden of bearing, feeding, and healing other people. The suffering that Santa Ritan women evince via their labelling, social behaviour, and narratives is thus necessarily derived from and predicated upon relations with other human beings. In this sense, the social significance of suffering derives purely from the effect that it has upon the perceptions and intentions of others. Sufferers cannot exist alone, they are defined and made significant by audiences; it is the listening audience who provides access to the other-worldly reward in the form of their

bestowal of the category of *sofredora* necessary for the act of sacrifice to take place. As well as this other-worldly reward, the listening audience provides a corresponding benefit in this-world, in the form of material goods, respect, and social status. As the application or withholding of the title *sofredora* reveals, suffering narratives represent a genre of politics in which individuals may compete and attain a certain amount of prestige. Being seen to have suffered constitutes a powerful way of eliciting care and material reward from those one has suffered for.

In a similar vein, therefore, suffering can be seen to constitute an essential part of the 'memory' that builds kinship (Gow 1991). For the Piro people studied by Gow, the activities of raising a child form the core idioms of relations between close kin. Herein production plays a central role as 'the food production of the parents is transformed in the feeding into memory and hence kinship' (Gow 1991:195). I would argue that the concept that it is by *providing* – or in the Santa Ritan case *suffering* to provide – for another's most basic desire (such as food) that memory and thus kinship is generated raises interesting questions about the social, (or this-worldly) significance of suffering for Santa Ritan people; however a full exploration of this theme is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

In returning to the theme of the gift, however, it should be noted that although sacrificial suffering in Santa Rita clearly constitutes a form of currency with which to elicit exchange, its power to evince a return derives, paradoxically, from the idea of it being a free gift. This is because in Santa Rita, to present oneself as selfless and alter-centred is to lay claim to the ultimate Christian virtue. Thus, suffering is only productive because it stands hierarchically opposed to the ideology of reciprocity and return.

## Conclusion

In the last chapter, I described the moral dilemmas and spiritual pollution that married people are particularly susceptible to. In this chapter I have tackled one solution to the existential problem that marriage generates through a focus on women's production of narratives of suffering. I have argued that suffering constitutes a sacrificial idiom through which married, adult women transfigure and deal with the problem of sin in their lives, as well as providing them with an effective means of fostering productive social relations. I have argued that the ideological basis for the expression of suffering turns upon a notion of bodily containment that arises literally and metaphorically in various contexts. Suffering is therefore evinced predominantly in terms of a capacity to bear on behalf of others, and the value of such a capacity derives from its sacrificial, gift-like nature. Thus, by making themselves into sacrificial containers of suffering, women create and define

the nature of their social relationships both with other human beings and with the divine.

The examples I drew upon, both from my own data and from the relevant literature, have all concerned women rather than men, and hence reveal a gendered aspect to this phenomenon. In Santa Rita, women are more likely than men to employ specific types of speech genres that help them to 're-live' their suffering, thus casting it as a voluntaristic and sacrificial act. Women are also more likely than men to symbolically capitalise on their suffering by assuming the role of paradigmatic 'gifting mother' through healership. It is perhaps because of this that women are generally more likely than men to be defined and labelled as *sofredoras*.

Nevertheless, to argue that this constitutes, above all, a 'poetics of womanhood' is to put the proverbial cart before the horse: it does not explain why suffering, in particular, is such a productive vehicle for this purpose. I have argued that by examining the ideology underpinning the concept of suffering, a deeper understanding can be gained. This coupled with the recognition that it is primarily older, married women – those who are most immersed in, and accountable for sin – who engage the suffering trope suggests that men in a similar position might also make a purchase upon it. And indeed they do, as evidenced by the fact that men, also, can and do become healers or fall victim to *peito aberto*. In this chapter, then, I have explored the suffering dynamic as it applies predominantly to women. In the following chapter I shall explore it as it relates to men. In doing so I hope to show that suffering, as both an experientially lived emotion and a morally productive discourse, is accessible by persons whatever their gender. What changes, however, are the terms and manner of its expression.

Doubled I stooped, climbing the field  
all the hot afternoon

for these red stigmata  
skin blisters on the mounts of  
both white palms...

*(Duncan Bush, 'The hook')*

## Chapter Four

# Working to Sweat

## Introduction

Over the course of my stay in Santa Rita I became accustomed to hearing people recite lengthy lists of the chores they had completed since waking. Typically this would happen as I chanced upon some acquaintance on a mid-morning stroll. Upon exchanging 'good mornings' I would enquire after the person, and in reply would receive a long summary of the various tasks they had been busy with. On one occasion, having politely enquired after a passing female acquaintance, she informed me that she had been up since the crack of dawn and had already been to the field, fetched water, swept the house, fed the livestock, washed a huge pile of clothes, and sorted the beans for lunch. Such verbal deluges constantly puzzled me. Why, I asked myself, were people inclined to respond to my standard and polite inquiries by listing every single chore they had completed since the break of day? For a long time I suspected it was a means of casting their lives in opposition to my somewhat anomalous and seemingly carefree existence. But this would only have made sense if they had never exchanged such dialogue with one another. Time and again I overheard women greeting one another at that crucial hour of the day. 'Oh *comadre*' a neighbour would call out over the small fence of her backyard to Dida, my adoptive mother, who at that time was usually at her outside sink, shelling beans, or straining cheese. 'What is it *comadre*?' Dida would ask. 'I've just finished sweeping the entire terrain', would come the reply; 'before that I carried the clothes to be washed, I took care of the animals, and I've been scraping manioc since four am'. 'It's a struggle *comadre*' Dida would respond, with a formulaic sigh, and continue at her task.

With time I appreciated that these unsolicited lists of chores completed expressed something central about Santa Ritans in general: the importance to them of *trabalho* (labour) as a form of self-sacrifice, and the concomitant value ascribed the *trabalhador* (hardworker).

In Brazil, as in other parts of the world, the concept of work has undergone complex historical transformations.<sup>1</sup> From the time of Portuguese invasion in the sixteenth century, work was intrinsically bound up with the violent and extractive project of colonial-capitalist expansion. Up until the second half of the nineteenth century, the context and nature of labour in agriculture, livestock rearing, and mineral extraction led to its perception as a degrading physical activity connected to the uncivilised domain of nature and disassociated from the superior realm of culture and commerce. Work, as something performed predominantly by slaves was a stigmatised concept and bore connotations ‘of pain, of terror and moral misery’ (Pordeus 2000: 129 translation my own). According to Pordeus, it was only with the abolition of slavery in 1888, the influx of German and Italian emigrants to the south of the country, and the growth of urban centres that the concept of work lost some of its more negative associations, and became a marker of personal identity and moral value (ibid.)

As Foucault (1986) argues, the pedagogy of work – the process of creating docile and productive bodies through institutional and ideological policing – became prevalent in Europe during the capitalist expansion of the eighteenth century. According to da Silva Diniz (1991), a similar process only got underway in Brazil at the end of the nineteenth century, precipitated by the same motives. It was at this point that Brazilian landowners and entrepreneurs were faced with the question of how to replace slaves with free workers in a historical context where large portions of the population had not been educated for ‘regular and disciplined work’ (da Silva Diniz 1991: 15). The conversion of large contingents of poor, freed men into disciplined workers demanded the creation of a juridical apparatus which obliged the freed man to integrate into the world of salaried labour, but in order to legitimise the new repressive measures, work needed to shed its negative connotations derived from three centuries of slavery. Positive changes in the conception of work among the bourgeois elite themselves led to the creation of schools of agriculture and centres of apprenticeship designed to educate and discipline the rural poor. At the same time, anti-vagabond legislation proliferated in an effort to discourage rural people from their subsistence based, semi-nomadic lifestyles. Prisons, orphanages, and corrective work-houses sprung up throughout the region as a means of punishing

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<sup>1</sup> For a wider historical overview of the concept of work in Europe, see Anthony (1977), Applebaum (1992), Beder (2000), and Bernstein (1997). For anthropological discussions on work, see, for example, Passes (2000); and the collection of essays contained in Wallman (1979). For an ethnographic discussion of work relating to Brazil, see Robben (1989).

those who refused to assume a sedentary existence based on wage-labour and comply with the new laws. According to da Silva Diniz (1991), the sum of such measures amounted to the propagation of a new ideology by the elite classes – one which equated the moral qualities of individuals with their dedication to wage labour. The concept of work in Brazil, he argues, was thus invested with a new set of noble and moral associations, and the poor free population was ‘invited’ to accept their entry into the cheap labour market (ibid.: 29).

One of the problems with this argument is that it offers us a very top-down and reductive view of labour ideology. The picture da Silva Diniz paints is of a somewhat reified ‘elite’ striving, in an almost calculated fashion, to impose their ideology upon an undifferentiated mass of poor workers. Issues surrounding people’s entry to the labour market were likely to have been a lot more complex than this. Moreover, it is unlikely that work was conceptualised in any singular way by all social groups of the era. Da Silva Diniz fails to take account of these factors by omitting any consideration of the manifest resistance to such ideology in many areas of the country, or of the possibility that a moral concept of work may have predated the abolition of slavery for certain groups of people.<sup>2</sup> Simply because work, before abolition, was considered a degrading activity among the wealthier classes who had the means to afford slaves and/or paid labourers, it does not automatically stand to reason that it would have been so for everyone. Indeed, one has to wonder to what extent the negative associations of work abounded in the pre-abolition era given that not all Brazilians were slaves or wealthy landowners. Santa Rita, like other communities of the region would have been originally populated in the early nineteenth century by the mixed race descendents of Portuguese immigrants, the vast majority of whom would have come from peasant and farming backgrounds in Europe. They would already have brought with them a certain concept and work ethic endowed, if not with a Calvinist or capitalist spirit, then with certain Catholic or Hellenistic ideas that predated the era of Brazilian conquest.

In this chapter, I discuss present day concepts of labour in the community of Santa Rita, and their role in establishing moral personhood. I shall begin by elaborating the ways in which work-like activities are classified and conceptualised. I will then go on to examine the narratives and discourses produced about labour, and to situate these within the broader socio-religious context. By drawing upon the work of theorists such as Leibowich and Bynum in particular, I shall go on to discuss how labour produces a distinctly *embodied* type of moral product based partly on an emulation of the Crucifixion. Although the current-day concepts and discourses on

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<sup>2</sup> It needs to be borne in mind that historically and up until the present day, peasants in many parts of the of the Northeastern interior favour a semi-nomadic existence based on itinerant agriculture, supplemented by hunting, gathering and fishing. The mobility and inherent flexibility of this way of life enables a type of resistance to the imposition of wage labour and the low salaries and exploitative conditions that accompany it (Carvalho Branco, 1997: 31-32).

labour that I present in this chapter are not immediately contrastable with those of a hundred years ago, they remind us that labour ideology, at least in practice, is a complex phenomenon; produced and made meaningful by the nature of the labour itself, as much as by those who perform it. As such, it would be simplistic to view it as something that can be created single-handedly by an elite, and imposed, top-down, upon the rural poor.

## Work vs 'true work'

As described in Chapter One, work in Santa Rita is based around semi-subsistence agriculture and livestock rearing. Most households work small plots of land (*roçados*) on which they will grow any combination of the staple crops of manioc (*mandioca*), beans (*feijão*), and corn (*milho*) for both sale and consumption.<sup>3</sup> In addition to this, a small proportion of the village work for wages in the *casa de farinha* (manioc flour mill) which lies at the heart of the village. Although people in Santa Rita universally define themselves as *farmers* (*agricultores*), agricultural labour is not the only means by which people make a living. Some of the men are builders and lorry drivers. Others are butchers or small traders owning shops and businesses in and outside the village. Outside the home, women commonly work as teachers, seamstresses, manicurists, and small traders; sometimes making cheese, straw hats, and brooms for sale in the markets.

Ways of making a living, however, are not always defined as *trabalho* (work), just as all activities defined as 'work' are not necessarily about earning money *per se*. All the same, if one were to ask a family who amongst them worked and what that *trabalho* was, the likely answer would be that the husband works and the wife does not. The husband's work would be defined purely in terms of that which yielded cash. In short, one definition of the word *trabalho* is any activity which involves an exchange of resources *outside* the immediate family unit. In reality the household is a jointly productive enterprise, but only the male head of the household – usually the father/husband – will negotiate an exchange or sale for the agricultural produce in the market or with a wholesale produce buyer. Accordingly, when wives and unmarried sons and daughters labour in the family *roçado* or tend to the animals, they are often described as helping (*ajudando*) rather than working (*trabalhando*). In this context proprietorship is unimportant: the land may belong to anyone within or outside the household or family, but only the person that negotiates the sale or exchange of produce from that land is said to 'work' it.

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed description of this kind of agricultural cycle and of the types of labour it involves, see Woortman & Woortman (1997).



This, however, is only one definition of the word *trabalho*. In a day-to-day context it bears more of a resemblance to the English word 'labour' in that it is used to denote any kind of purposeful and effort-requiring activity, whether or not it culminates in some form of material exchange. Thus women talk of having 'worked hard all day' at their various unpaid domestic enterprises, and young unmarried people talk of 'going to work' in the family *roçado*. In this day-to-day context, the word *trabalho* is used broadly to define everything from *fazendo a faxina* (doing the housework) and *negociando na feira* (doing business at the market), to *a colheita* (harvesting) and *criando filhos* (raising children). In the rest of the chapter I shall be discussing *trabalho* predominantly in terms of its broader, less specified meaning, and shall therefore be predominantly employing the English term 'labour' as opposed to work. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that in daily usage, the different senses of the word *trabalho* are often entwined, and cannot be neatly separated out from one another.

Although the single word '*trabalho*' is used in various contexts, what is significant for Santa Ritan people is that while not all laborious activities can be viewed as *trabalho* in the exchange sense of the term, not all remunerated *trabalho* can be classed as laborious – that is, as *trabalho de verdade* (true work). During my time in the field, I was unable to convince my informants that doing research was a type of *trabalho*. 'What you do is not *trabalho de verdade*', my host family would insist. I never ascertained exactly why this was, but in retrospect I believe it was because I did not produce an appropriate kind of narrative in relation to it. However, occasions where I performed 'true work' would always provoke comment, such as when Amauri caught me sweeping the house and remarked dryly: 'So you resolved to work after all, did you?' In the same way that people were given to doubting whether or not the work I performed was *trabalho de veradade*, they were given to doubting whether other types of people such as priests or politicians worked in the 'true' sense, or merely received a salary for performing a few, seemingly effortless tasks.

An important aspect of the Santa Ritan concept of labour or 'true work', then, is the idea that it is something requiring a degree of struggle; something that is essentially forced out of one. As such 'true work' is categorically distinct from other activities such as dancing, eating, conversing, and so on. In this sense, the Santa Ritan concept of work differs from the concept of work customarily noted by those writing about people of the Amazonian region, for whom productive work is not differentiated from other ways of 'being active'. As Thomas writes of the Pemon of the Venezuelan Amazon: 'work is part of life, not separate and estranged from it, and the pace steady but seldom forced' (1982: 43).

That ‘true work’ for Santa Ritans is something forced and effortful is revealed by some of the linguistic expressions used to denote work-like activities. The acts of harvesting beans and weeding are both described using the verb *arrancar* (wrench). Thus to ‘*arrancar feijão*’ is ‘to wrench beans’, and to ‘*arrancar mato*’ is to ‘wrench weeds’. This is distinct from the verb *puxar* (pull), which implies the same physical action but using less force. Conversely, live-stock rearing is one activity which is not traditionally described as work. People talk of land which is *para trabalhar* (for working) meaning agricultural work, as opposed to land which may be more stony and less fertile which is *para criar* (for rearing), meaning to graze livestock on.

Although rearing animals is not thought to require the same amount of effort as crop planting and is therefore not described as work as such, people in Santa Rita frequently use the verb *lutar* (struggle), in reference to labour involving animals. Thus it may be said of someone whose main income comes from cattle rearing, that they *luta com gado* (‘struggle with cattle’). Indeed, people often supplement the verb *trabalhar* for *lutar* for any work-like activity at all, therefore emphasising the sense of force and effort that ‘true-work’ involves.

### Work in religious discourse

It is noteworthy that concepts of labour in Santa Rita resound with certain tropes and narratives deriving from Christian mythology. In catechism, children are taught the story of the Garden of Eden as the source of original sin and the cause of mankind’s exposure to the passions, to sorrow, and to death. Here they learn that Adam and Eve are cast out of the garden of Eden for eating fruit from the tree of knowledge and are condemned by God to toil in the fields and to pain in childbirth. During the holy week of Easter, Padre Augusto gave a long sermon in the community chapel, in which he referred the congregation to Chapter three of Genesis: ‘cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life...In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground...’. ‘What does this mean?’ he inquired rhetorically:

‘It means that we, people of God, must toil to survive. And it is not easy, is it? No, you are thinking. And I hear you complain to yourselves: [puts on rural layman’s accent] “Ai, what have I done to deserve such punishment?”... In their heart, who amongst us likes to toil? I will tell you who: none of us! But let no one here be afraid to assume this cross, this heavy cross. If God, himself, could suffer, why not us?’

The meaning given to labour in this ontological story is, from the outset, a highly ambivalent one. Labour is, on one level, the result of sin and a form of punishment, but on another level it is imbued with a strong, soteriological significance. As we shall see in the ethnography that follows, the mental and physical demands work

makes on the person facilitates an oblique identification with Christ's bodily martyrdom. As discussed in the previous chapter, the idiom of the suffering Christ is pervasive in daily forms of discourse, and is often invoked to give meaning to individual narratives of suffering. Labour, however, occupies a privileged position in such discourse, as it forms part of the Brazilian theological and liturgical tradition.

During the 1960s, Liberation theology, with its tradition of humanistic Marxism, had a huge influence on the Brazilian peasantry, and was particularly influential in the land reform movement.<sup>4</sup> Liberation style worship took the form of 'Workers' Masses', popular missions and politicised Stations of the Cross, in which events surrounding the Passion were creatively re-worked so as to serve as the basis for a radical reflection on social oppression and human suffering. Traditional liturgy was also adapted: sermons were presented in the dialect and idiom of rural workers, and the hymns addressed Our Lady of the Oppressed and Our Lord of the Workers.<sup>5</sup> I was told by different people that on one occasion during this period, a radical liberation theology missionary visiting Santa Rita had invited the community to bring their hoes to an outdoors Workers' Celebration of the Word, in which they would reflect upon the value of labour and rally support for the land reform cause. Worshippers were enjoined to hold their implements aloft for a mass blessing, which was rounded off with the popular Liberationist chant: '*Viva o trabalhador! Viva o povo de Deus!*' 'Long live the worker! Long live the people of God!'

Liberationist literature from this period offers some insight into the way the movement strove to radicalise peasants through the valorisation of their labour. In the coffres of the local chapel was a rather dilapidated booklet of Liberation theology prayers and songs, which apparently had not been in use since the 1970s. Following are but some examples of religious songs that directly or indirectly imbue the act of labour with Christological significance:

*Do altar de Deus eu vou me aproximar  
O nome do Senhor eu vou glorificar*

I will go to the altar of God  
The Lord's name I will glorify

*Aqui eu vim dizer, que muito trabalhei  
Cumpri o meu dever, e em Ti eu confiei.  
Lutei o dia inteiro para ganhar o pão*

I came to say, that I worked hard  
Performed my duty, in You I trusted  
Struggled the entire day, to earn  
bread

<sup>4</sup> For an elaboration of Liberation theology, see Boff, C. (1978); and Boff, L. and Boff, C. (1986).

<sup>5</sup> For an evocative description of Liberationist practice in Northeast Brazil during the early 1980s, see Scheper-Hughes (1992: 517-527). For a discussion of Catholic Liberationist base communities, and an analysis of the demise of Liberationist style worship in Brazil, see Burdick (1993).

<i>Não pensei em dinheiro, pensei na salvação.</i>	Thinking not of money, thinking of salvation.
<i>Espero que encerre o mal do lavrador Que sofre sem a terra, que sofre sem valor.</i>	I hope the farmer's sorrow will end Who suffers without land, who suffers without value
<i>(Do altar de Deus)</i>	<i>(At the altar of God)</i>
<i>Somos povo, somos gente Somos o povo de Deus Queremos terra na terra Já temos terra no céu.</i>	We are people, we are human We are the people of God We want land on earth We have land in heaven
<i>Queremos plantar a roça Onde plantamos o amor Lavrador a terra é nossa De um afã é um só Senhor...</i>	We want to plant the field Where we plant love Farmer, the land is ours Rally yourselves, there is only one Lord
<i>(Somos povo, Somos Gente)</i>	<i>(We are people, We are human)</i>
<i>Canta, canta amigo canta Vem cantar a nossa canção Tu sozinho não és nada Juntos temos o mundo nas mãos...</i>	Sing, sing my friend sing Come and sing our song You alone are nothing Together we have the world in our hands
<i>Tu que me chamas amigo Vem provar-me que o és Vem para a roça comigo Na terra suja os pés</i>	You who call me friend Prove to me that you are Come to the field with me Dirty your feet in the soil
<i>Eu vou contigo pra roça Eu vou comer do teu pão Tu dás-me a força da vida Eu dou-te a minha canção (Canta amigo canta)</i>	I'll go with you to the field I will eat of your bread You give me the force of life I'll give you my song (Sing friend sing)

In the narrative of Liberation theology the peasant is an unequivocally heroic figure whose localised struggle against the landowning elite is a manifestation of a wider, ongoing Christian battle against evil. Rural labour is cast as humble, arduous, unremunerated, and dignified. In the *roçado* the peasant farmer plants love (*amor*), his labour a supreme symbol of Christian nurture and self-abnegation. Through this is produced the 'daily bread' (*pão de cada dia*) – the force of life (*a força da vida*) itself.

As I hope to show, certain aspects of this ideology echo in the way that ordinary Santa Ritan people conceptualise agricultural labour. However, there is an important difference: rather than viewing themselves as a class of righteous heroes pitted against the wider forces of evil, they perceive themselves as ordinary persons pitted – oftentimes via that arduous labour – against their own sinfulness.

The first sense in which the sphere of labour is polluting is tied to its sexual connotations. This is particularly true of work in connection with the *roçado* which begins for an individual at a point in their life cycle where they are becoming sexually aware. As I shall describe in Chapter Eight, initiating children into agricultural work is held to be both a way of controlling and encouraging that awareness. The process of digging holes (*cavando buracos*) to plant (*plantar*), or 'bury' (*enterar*) new crops is, unsurprisingly, envisaged as a sexual act. This is especially true in the case of the manioc plant which is grown from stiff pieces of stem called *maniva*, often referred to by the idiomatic term for penis, *pau*. The analogy is not lost on local people who joke that the manioc is 'born' after the *pau* has been 'buried' in the hole. The growth of the crop is often linked in local discourse to the growth of persons. New crops, like young people, *brota* (sprout). When a person is described as *broto*, the connotation is that they are innocent, naïve, or even stupid. As the crop, like the person, grows tall and ripe, it becomes (*maduro*) mature and fertile, like the married person. It is at this point (just before harvest) in the life cycle of both crop and person, that the *roçado* becomes the ideal place for sexual intercourse. It is purportedly common for married couples to take advantage of the relative privacy afforded by the *roçado* in this way, and it is said that an ideal way for a woman to conceive a child is through sexual intercourse in a crop field shortly before harvest. When crops are tall, jokes and innuendos about sexual encounters in the *roçado* are rife.<sup>6</sup>

The second sense in which the sphere of labour is polluting, relates to its connection with commerce. As discussed in Chapter Two, the exchange relations of market based *negócio* demands a certain degree of human awareness sometimes

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<sup>6</sup> Woortman and Woortman (1997: 138-140) make a similar connection between the sexual reproductive life of couples, and the reproductive life of crops. There a symbolic connection is made between the flowering crop in its 'hottest' phase and the 'hot' sexual appetite of women. It is observed that the *roçado* is analogous to the vagina. When a woman marries, she shaves her pubic hair, a process idiomatically described as 'clearing forest' for her husband to 'plant' in.

glossed as *consciência* (consciousness, awareness) or *esperteza* (cunning). Such qualities are perceived as antithetical to Christian moral values, and many people were of the opinion that intense and aggressive forms of haggling over prices constituted *pecado* (sin).<sup>7</sup> William Christian (1972) makes a similar observation with regards to perceptions of work among Spanish peasants. However, there the distinction applies only to migrant labour which occurs away from the village in the amoral space of the city: 'Because the city is an amoral place, all rules of behaviour are off...The active life outside the village, at least as recounted afterward, rests on the principle that human nature, if left to itself, has self-interest as the mainspring of its actions' (1972: 163). In Santa Rita, no such distinction is made. Vice is thought to be inherent to economic survival, wherever one works. Moreover, Santa Ritan people perceive themselves as intrinsically connected, if not to the city, at least to the local towns, where the moral sphere of kinship is somewhat less pronounced and perceived amoral exchange relations predominate. Nevertheless, the forced and difficult nature of laborious activity can counteract the amoral character of exchange, for it provides a culturally recognised context for the enactment of self-sacrifice – the ultimate religious practice of mimetic worship.

### Labour as an emulation of Christ

In the general religious discourse of the locality, there is a heavy Christological focus. When confronting dilemma and worldly temptation, Santa Ritans are continually exhorted by clergy and, indeed, by one another to 'imagine what Jesus would do'. Such exhortations make Christ into a supreme human example; one who evinces an authentically human life-style which people believe themselves to be theoretically capable of imitating.

Christ's fleshly, first-hand experience of the world is perceived by villagers most strikingly at Christmas and Easter in the remembrance of his birth and death. At Christmas, nativity plays, and special Masses are held to celebrate his birth. His death is then remembered on Good Thursday and Friday with long Gospel readings of the Passion, and is re-enacted in the *Via Sacra* procession.<sup>8</sup> But it is not only at these times of year that people enjoin one another to identify with Christ's human experience; throughout the year, villagers, young and old, are encouraged through

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<sup>7</sup> For moral attitudes to commerce in early Christian, Hebrew, Roman and Greek philosophy, see Hengle (1974: 1-5) and Beder (2000: 19-22).

<sup>8</sup> An Orthodox identification with Christ's humanity is drawn out rather well in the work of Du Boulay. Writing about Greek peasants' Easter celebrations, she observes that 'when the villagers gather around the Epitaphios and kiss the icon lying there, it is clear that this for them is no mere sign, or mnemonic, it is Christ's dead body itself which is the object of their grief. In the great events of the Easter period the villagers are not spectators but actors in a drama, living witnesses of a burial' (1974: 52).

schooling, church sermons, and Eucharistic worship to make themselves *como Jesus* 'like Jesus'.

However, eucharistic devotion is perceived as an especially appropriate vehicle in the effort to become like Christ because the eucharist *is* Christ. As the doctrine of transubstantiation suggests, one *becomes* Christ's passion and crucified body in *eating* Christ's flesh. In the opinion of many Santa Ritans, imitating, or *being* Christ stands as the ultimate form of worship. One woman that I interviewed explained it in the following way:

M: What is more important in your opinion, prayer or behaving like Christ through actions?

A: Prayer is very important but behaviour is even more important. God sent Christ to earth. Why? For us to become like him, to imitate him. We must try and *be* him. This is the best way of worshipping God.

M: But how can a person *be* Christ?

A: When we take the Eucharist, for a moment we are completely one with Him. This is why it is important to commune. But also, when we obey the teachings of God – we act with respect towards others – even if some days we don't feel very Christian inside, we should imitate Christ anyway. This is what really counts, to make our lives an imitation of his.

Outside of the liturgical context, however, precisely *how* one emulates Christ is a matter of diverging opinion. Many Santa Ritan people insist that imitating Christ in everyday life through showing kindness (*gentileza*) and 'love' (*amor*) to others, itself constitutes an act of religious worship. Clergy, however, emphasise worship as inward contemplative prayer, and subservience to the Catholic institution. Thus in their sermons, local priests continually reprimand lay people for not attending Mass and confession on a regular enough basis. Men are especially singled out for such criticism, following their habit of only attending church on the major religious feast days. The importance of emulating Christ is also generally linked, in local sermons, to the matter of tithe-giving and the performance of special acts of charity. On one occasion, the local priest devoted an entire sermon to the issue of tithe-giving. He proclaimed that most people did not give enough, and that those who did, did not do so 'with the right spirit'. Actions unaccompanied by worthy intentions, he argued, were useless. 'Look inside yourself' he waxed vehemently from the pulpit, 'ask yourself, is this the way to be like Jesus? Are my intentions pure? What is the state of my soul?'

For the Santa Ritan people I knew, with families to sustain, the daily grind of life, and the precarious battle to make ends meet, made putting aside time for inward meditation, and going out of one's way to perform charity, a difficult task. Although people were apt to agree that time spent in active prayer and inward contemplation was important, they did not suppose that this was in any sense more effective for establishing a relationship with God than properly performed social interactions. An

important point to grasp is that whilst the state of a person's thoughts and intentions clearly mattered to Santa Ritan people, these were not perceived as crucial to a person's spiritual redemption. 'How does a person avoid sinful thoughts?' I once asked Amauri. His reply, similar to others I had received, came with a certain degree of off-handed humour:

'Look Maya, I can't tell you, I'm not God. But it seems to me there is no way to avoid it: not at home, not in the *roçado*, not in one's sleep! In the end, no matter how hard he tries, a man thinks more bad things than he does good!'

It is significant that this sense that one cannot keep the mind 'pure' at all times was never constructed as an unsolvable problem. Indeed, the much-vaunted 'Catholic guilt', which I had somehow expected to encounter when first starting out on fieldwork, was strangely absent in everyday intercourse. This, I suggest, has to do with the fact that Santa Ritans subscribe to a very literal notion of 'becoming like Christ'; one that does not centre upon Christ's thoughts and intentions so much as upon physical, embodied experience. For them it is Christ's passion – the intensity of his bodily, lived experience in the world and, most importantly, his death – that is to be imitated. The way one does this is via the ordinary process of sociality: caring for others, labouring to feed one's dependants, and suffering as a consequence.

## Narratives of labour

In Santa Rita people are always eager to comment on whether or not a particular person is a *trabalhador* (hard worker). As time went by, more and more people were singled out for me in this manner: Dida or Amauri, when discussing the problems or dispositions of some person, would customarily end their observations with the assertion that the person in question was a *trabalhador* (in the case of a man) or a *trabalhadeira* in the case of a woman. In much the same way that certain women were known, locally, as *sofredoras*, certain men and women were known as *trabalhadores* – a title which conferred a certain amount of respect and prestige.

The significance of this form of labelling was such that it was frequently the target of parody among Santa Ritan people themselves. On one occasion, for example, I was present as a young man performed an impression of his mother describing a prospective son-in-law: 'He's a very good man, extremely *trabalhador*!' he mimicked humorously. Although both women and men are singled out in this way for their commitment to work, a gendered element is discernible. Whereas women are more likely than men to be labelled as *sofredoras*, they are nevertheless also observably *trabalhadeiras*, indeed it is in their work that they most clearly suffer.



Men, however, are more likely to be singled out and labelled as *trabalhadores*, although the value of this label comes from the suffering it implies. The label of *trabalhador* is therefore used and applied predominantly in relation to men. However, the implicit prestige of being a *trabalhador* is no more or no less, than that of the female *sofredora*. The key point I want to make is that whereas women tend to frame their narratives through a generalised idiom of suffering, men tend to frame theirs through the more specific idiom of suffering through labour.

The opposite of being a *trabalhador* is to be *preguiçoso* (lazy) a term that implies a certain lack of morality towards others. To label a person *preguiçoso* suggests that they have no consideration (*consideração*) or respect (*respeito*) for others; it denotes someone unprepared to exert themselves on behalf of their kin and neighbours. Another term somewhat opposed to that of *trabalhador*, but not as serious an insult as *preguiçoso* is that of *marajá* which, literally translated, means ‘maharaja’ but actually denotes somebody who earns a lot of money without appearing to work very hard to attain it. It was once explained to me that to be *marajá* is to be lazy (*preguiçoso*) as well as cunning, clever (*esperto, sabido*). It denotes an immoral person: one who gets rich by exploiting the labour of others.

In addition to such labelling, there exists the practice of exchanging stories about labour. This became clear to me, not only through interviews in which I pursued the subject, but through the spontaneous narratives people would tell amongst themselves when gathered socially. The stories and narratives I listened to and collected were striking for the attention they paid to the concept of physical suffering. In all narrations the body was in some way central; with the teller sometimes breaking off mid-sentence to show-off a bodily scar or deformity acquired through some form of labour.<sup>9</sup> Following are four labour narratives produced by different persons. I have selected them for the range of age, gender, type of work, and social status they represent.

The first of these is by a thirty-five year old married woman called Gloria who works as a primary school teacher. She has secondary education, a teaching diploma, and belongs to one of Santa Rita’s older, wealthier families:

“I get up at five in the morning to sweep the house, make the breakfast and prepare the lunch. I leave everything ready so that my girls can heat it up for their father. By six I have left the house for work. It takes me one and half hours to get to the school where I teach. I go on foot to town; it takes me one hour to get there. From there I catch the bus to the school. And then I teach all morning until midday. Look, I have been teaching for eleven years. Eleven years of suffering. Only Our Mother in Heaven knows what I have endured. It falls to me to discipline the children; to teach

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<sup>9</sup> In the run up to the 2002 general election, Lula was a popular candidate amongst villagers because it was well known that he had lost a finger during his time as a metalworker in São Paulo. This, along with the fact that he was also known to have experienced hunger in childhood, was taken as ‘proof’ that he was a suffered *trabalhador* and would therefore make a caring and hard working president.

them. And we have no resources to do the job. Do you think the *prefeitura* (local political administration) gives us any resources to teach with? It gives nothing! I work hard. When I work very hard Maya, my blood pressure drops. It drops very low... I feel a pain in my legs and have to put salt under my tongue or else I fall...'

Antonio, twenty-seven years, is unmarried and lives with his widowed mother. Although never having graduated, he has several years of secondary schooling and does various casual jobs (mostly in local commerce) in addition to working family land alongside his three older brothers. The following quote comes from an account of a past job as a travelling cigarette vendor; work which had involved spending long weeks travelling to distant villages. One afternoon he fell asleep and was robbed of all his possessions. He was left without cigarettes and without money to catch a bus home.

'What could I do? I decided to walk. I had not eaten all day and the sun was burning hot. Twenty-four kilometres I walked to get home...What I suffered! I had lost everything, I was thirsty, and I was on foot. By the time I reached my house I was half crazy with thirst. This is what the poor man suffers. Work around these parts is always difficult.'

Seu Luis is a small-holder and has worked all his life as an independent producer. He is married, in his early forties, and father to four children. Following are some of his memories of working the land when young:

'I was brought up to do every kind of work there is. When I was eight, my father put me to work on the heavy stuff. This high I started going to the *roçado*. I did everything my father did: planted fields, cleared weeds, dug holes, slaughtered pigs, sold offal – father worked doing everything, and that is how I learnt. When I got older I also worked *de meia* [sharecropping] to help my parents. Ave Maria, I didn't have time to play like young people today, no, back in those days there was no tractor, no machine for threshing *feijão*. It was all on the *enxada* [hoe]... Clearing forest, now that was heavy work; one's arms would ache, ache, ache, from breaking soil. I would leave the house everyday with a hat bigger than a parasol on my head, to protect me from the sun. When I was a boy during the harvest we slept in the fields, working all the day. In the drought years there was almost no crop and we lived on grated manioc; Mother put it through the grater and made *beiju* [manioc pancake]. I learnt to work the hoe on an empty stomach. Back then one's stomach obliged one to work, but often we were hungry....Only God gives strength. Today the work the *roçado* gives is less because we have the machines to help. Today, thanks to God, we are all rich. But it is still my habit to work hard....'

The final account was produced by a sixty-eight year old man called Seu Mané, who has fathered twenty-two children of whom twelve survived. Seu Mané has been a landless labourer all his life. Over his lifetime he has performed virtually every kind of rural labour to sustain the children who, as he put it, 'God kept sending'. A state pension finally relieved him of the need to work everyday, but he claims to actually miss it. 'I can't be still' he would tell me, and was often to be spotted in a ripped shirt and fraying hat, helping out other men with their livestock. On the countless

occasions that I conversed with Seu Mané, descriptions of his work always involved a vivid evocation of the physical suffering he had endured. Here, in his own words, is a description of what he remembers as the most arduous work of his life, working in the *casa de farinha*:

“Mixing manioc. Today they don’t do it anymore, no. Today people make manioc flour in a factory, everything with an electric motor, everything motorized. To mix flour in the old days, was with one’s arms. It was virtually the heaviest work there was in the world. Very heavy...Back in those days I worked the whole week for three cruzeiros. I started on a Tuesday, worked until Saturday, often Sunday. There were nights I worked at night, the day, the night, and the day after that until six am. I didn’t stop mixing. Yes, my child, I suffered...Look, I mixed that flour in the mouth of the oven, the heat was so intense, see this leg here, all the hairs on this leg burnt off. This was the thing: there were times I passed two, three days there working without stop. Without being able to come home. The shift was thirteen hours, but sometimes the next guy to take my place wouldn’t turn up, so I couldn’t leave work. My patron would say “You take on his shift and tomorrow early you go home to sleep so you can start back again at night.”...so I would do thirty-six hours. All that was left was for me to drop dead, Maya....Ah, it was too much, too much. And do you think I had the strength to reach home and say like this “Ah, now I’m home I’ll have a bath!” – who on earth would have had? Many times I would just wash my feet and fall asleep right there. Another thing Maya, I tired of leaving the *casa de farinha* with this leg of mine, hot, hot, from the heat of the ovens, and when I reached the river – back in this time there was lots of rain – I’d arrive and the river would be this high. Often I’d have to take off my trousers to pass. That cold river; I imagined like this: I’m going to enter but I won’t get out because surely before that I’ll die. I was afraid for my life, afraid that from the heat of the oven I would explode there in that cold water. The water was icy, and I would have to ascend the road flooded with that water. I walked in that icy water until I reached home. Now this wasn’t only one time, nor two, nor three, no. I did it because I had to. Not because I wanted to....Look, I suffered and thank God I never became disabled with this business. I suffered a lot, worked a lot, today I don’t work any more, but then I can’t. Today I live with a bad back. Yes, I suffered, Ave Maria, I suffered.’

When I prompted Seu Mane for his reason for enduring such conditions, he pointed to his family: ‘What else could I do?’ he asked me.

‘Every year, my wife at home with another baby. If I had been another kind of man I would have left them, gone off into the world. There are many men who will do that, as you know. Imagine if I had! I would have suffered less that way. But as a father I had to feed my children. So I stayed.’

I shall return, further on, to look at reasons for the performance and representation of labour as suffering. Before this, however, it is important to observe that work-as-suffering is not a discourse elaborated only by peasant villagers. It pervades Brazilian social structure and emerges in formal contexts and political discourse. In his analysis of the social organisation and practice of Rural Workers Syndicates, for example, Comerford (1999) observes the pervasive references in speeches made by Syndicate leaders, to notions of struggle (*luta*) and suffering (*sofrimento*). Such references emerge both in their general depictions of rural work, and in their personal

stories (Comerford 1999: 43-45). In Santa Rita, the use of such discourse by the powerful was not at all uncommon. On one memorable occasion the local doctor called a village meeting to raise awareness about the spread of dengue (at the time, a national crisis), and to inform villagers on how to take precautions against it. The meeting went on for an hour, the first forty-five minutes of which were taken up with a speech by the doctor about how hard he worked: the long hours he spent commuting across states, the low pay, the weeks spent living apart from his new wife and beloved family. In doing so he implied that his 'suffering' was for the Santa Ritan people's benefit. As I looked around I was surprised to notice that people were rapt in attention. None of the poor villagers present seemed in the slightest bit indignant that the gold-watch wearing, large car owning doctor should lay claim to the experience of suffering. Flanked by his two auxiliary nurses, the doctor's oration built up, gradually, to a climactic finale. His work – his 'mission' – he proclaimed, was arduously difficult and it was for this reason, no other, that the people of Santa Rita should listen carefully and obey the following instructions on how to avoid the spread of dengue.<sup>10</sup>

In each of the above accounts, suffering – either physical, mental, or emotional – is in some way articulated. In several of the accounts attention is drawn to the elements at play during the performance of the labour itself: floods, drought, hunger, and the ubiquitous Northeastern hot sun. However, it is not simply the labour itself that causes suffering, it is having to travel long distances on foot to the place of labour itself; miss out on sleep, and so forth. The physical toll of work on the body is particularly prominent in the account produced by Seu Mané, whose position as a landless labourer left him no choice but to perform some of the most arduous and exploitative work there was.<sup>11</sup> And yet the ultimate reason given for enduring such conditions, in most instances, is to benefit others; either generally (as in one's patients or students) or specifically (as in one's own family). What is remarkable about the narratives presented above is their similarity of rhetoric, despite being produced by people with varying occupations and from substantively different backgrounds. It is clear, however, that for the typical Santa Ritan who works the land, or in the *casa de farinha*, physical hardship is the paradigmatic form that suffering in labour takes. Yet all, be they doctor or landless peasant, finds a way of making a purchase on the same labour discourse. The question that arises is why?

<sup>10</sup> In a similar fashion, whenever the *prefeito* (mayor) of the local town gave a public speech either in campaign for an election, or to publicise a new construction or public work, he would dedicate the first portion of his speech to how much suffering he endured in his job; emphasising the hours he sacrificed away from his family; the lack of financial reward, and so forth.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the socio-economic background affecting forms of rural labour in Brazil, see Correia de Andrade (1998); Garcia (1990, 1991); and Velho (1982). For a sociological perspective on the exploitative conditions of labour among the Northeastern peasantry in particular, see Esterici (2001), and for an account of Brazilian peasant resistance to exploitative working and living conditions, see Reyes Novaes (2001).

One way of arriving at an answer is by focusing on the fact that suffering forms part of an overall aesthetic of living that derives from a complex mixture of historical factors and Christian mythology. Such an aesthetic of suffering is, as discussed in the previous chapter, captured by a notion of ‘carrying’ (*carregando*) and containment. Thus a mother contains suffering on behalf of her children, but the metaphor is infinitely extendable. The wider social implications of caring for and respecting one’s kin is made plain in the saying ‘*Quem não respeita a mãe, não respeita a gente*’ ‘He who doesn’t respect his mother, doesn’t respect people’. If labouring for others is the basis of sociality, by depicting their labour as suffering, Santa Ritan people implicitly present themselves as generators of life and of society. But as I shall argue in the following section, there is also a spiritually redemptive tone to such discourse, for when labour is framed as a form of suffering, the *roçado* or the *casa de farinha* become a type of Calvary.

### Labour as atonement

Although the type of person making a claim on the work-as-suffering discourse varies impressively, those most likely to engage with it are married men. Married people, as I discussed in Chapter Two, are necessarily mired in spiritually polluting activities. Be this as it may, some married people are tempted to worse misdeeds than others. Indeed, the significance to being a *trabalhador* only became fully clear to me when I began to hear it used specifically in connection with two local men, both of whom were widely known to have committed serious offences.<sup>12</sup> Sandro was a poor, landless labourer, and the father of a large group of young children who ran about the village looking unkempt and begging for food at people’s houses. Sandro was prone to occasional violent outbursts, and it was reported that on one occasion he had purposely set fire to his house with his wife and eight children inside it. Luckily, the family had escaped unharmed but Sandro had left Santa Rita for a time while the police had been looking for him. The other man, Seu Roberto was in his late sixties, and had long ago murdered his wife with a scythe in a fit of drunken jealousy. Attitudes towards the offence committed by Seu Roberto are more complex than I am able to deal with here, and will be discussed more fully in the next chapter. Given their nature, one would expect such acts to have caused irreparable damage to each man’s relations within the community, but surprisingly this was not the case. In fact, both men were fairly well integrated in the small community, despite public knowledge of their serious offences.

When I asked people why these men had been accepted back into their respective families, explanations circled around the fact that they were *muito*

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<sup>12</sup> All names and some details in the following accounts have been changed.

*trabalhadores* ‘very hard workers’. In talking about Seu Roberto, people would often comment on the long hours he spent alone on his land, labouring without help – not, apparently, because he could not afford it but because he was a spectacularly hard worker. Similar comments were made about Sandro who worked as a sharecropper, in addition to hiring out his labour making, firing and transporting bricks, digging wells and ditches, and loading sacks of *farinha* onto trucks for transportation. Even to my eyes, Sandro appeared to be constantly at work, constantly doing something to feed his ten-strong household. Yet it was plain to see that for all his effort, Sandro’s economic position was such that he could never earn quite enough to properly support his growing family. On one occasion, Dida and Amauri were discussing Sandro’s predicament. Dida was complaining about the fact that Sandro’s children were a nuisance: sleeping in the streets and begging for food at other people’s houses. Amauri, however, came to Sandro’s defence. ‘The man may be poor’ he said ‘but no one can deny he is a true *trabalhador*. Do you think it is easy for a man to feed ten stomachs?’ Thus, although the value of Sandro’s labour in material terms may have been small, the sacrificial value was high, and for this reason people were able to overlook his occasional acts of transgression.

An interesting parallel may be noted between the redemptive work ethic of Santa Ritans and that which Weber (1967) linked to European Protestantism: both posit labour as a route to spiritual salvation. However, the two discourses differ in a subtle way, for whereas Santa Ritan people reject the idea that labour’s moral production is in any way connected to its level of material production, in Weber’s understanding of Calvinist theology, material and moral production may merge in that wealth can signal God’s blessing. Weber argued that following the Protestant Reformation, the acquisition of wealth became an approved and worthy goal: economic productivity was potentially a *sign* of God’s grace and being a hard and diligent worker presented a way for individuals to demonstrate their predestination.<sup>13</sup> Thus, those who accumulated came to be considered, in the words of Marshall, ‘the very pinnacle of morality itself’ since they testified to the bourgeois virtues of thrift, diligence, hard work, dedication, and persistence (Marshall 1982: 107).<sup>14</sup>

In the Catholic Santa Ritan tradition, however, the two spheres of morality and economic productivity are maintained as distinct. Although wealth and moral worth are in no way incommensurable, wealth is viewed rather unequivocally as a danger to the soul and a hindrance to righteousness. Wealth, although always desirable, has

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<sup>13</sup> The doctrine of predestination is based upon the notion that God’s grace is a gift, not a reward. This means that God has selected some from the mass of fallen humanity who are predestined for salvation. For a fuller discussion, see McGrath (1997 [1994]: 449-451).

<sup>14</sup> It is important to note, however, that although the attainment of wealth as a fruit of labour in a calling was a sign of God’s blessing, the pursuit of wealth as an end in itself was highly reprehensible. According to Weber, the Protestant-capitalist ethic involved the pursuit of profit for an end other than the goods, pleasure, and position it could buy. It stressed ‘worldly asceticism’ through ‘restless, continuous, systematic work’, and the reinvestment of profits into business (Weber 1967: 157).

the ability to transform individuals into *marajás* (lazy, amoral persons), and in this sense can jeopardise one's chance for salvation. Ceaseless industriousness is not, as the Calvinist position might imply, a sign that a person is already saved, it is simply a *means* of attaining salvation. The difference is one of chronology: in the Calvinist philosophy salvation comes earlier; in the Catholic tradition it comes later. This variation stems from the concept of grace which in the Augustinian philosophy is a gift, but in the Catholic tradition may be earned in equal exchange for suffering.<sup>15</sup>

In Santa Rita, the spiritual redemption of even the very best *trabalhador* is in no sense a foregone conclusion, and people I knew were only too quick to point out that men like Seu Roberto and Sandro were not paragons of virtue. It was simply the *potential* for redemption, via their chosen bodily suffering, that was worthy of comment. Whenever I asked informants whether they believed that Sandro or Seu Roberto were contrite in their hearts, I would be met with a refusal to speculate. In fact, people were not generally very interested in other people's mental sins and inner states. All that mattered was a person's outward behaviour; the level of sacrificial effort they appeared to make on behalf of their dependants and neighbours.

Similar observations were made of other sorts of sinners. I was often struck by the constant observation that although certain men were notorious drunks, they were also *trabalhadores*. The example of drinking is pertinent given that Santa Ritan men tend to drink prolifically. Heavy drinking goes hand in hand with the discussing of *negócio* (business), and the building up of male networks of friendship and favour-owing. With the exception of Good Friday, there is no real restriction on the times or occasions suitable for drinking and local *barracas* (drinking shacks) tend to do a steady trade throughout the year.<sup>16</sup> The most common type of drinker is the weekend *cachaçeiro* (cachaça drinker). This is the man who works all week but spends his Sundays solidly inebriated. On Sundays local *barracas* open especially early, and by seven a.m. are doing good business. I soon grew used to the strange phenomenon of customarily quiet, polite and serious men habitually transformed on Sundays into belligerent, staggering drunks.

Women, who tend not to drink alcohol, customarily disparage their men for drinking too much. However, there is a notable difference in attitude towards the

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<sup>15</sup> The debate can be traced back to the Pelagian controversy which drew attention to the question of whether salvation was a reward for good behaviour, or a gift from God. Grace according to Augustine was God's freely given and unmerited gift to humanity's frail condition. In this view, sinners could not earn salvation, in that there was nothing which they could achieve or perform which would oblige God to reward them. For Pelagius, grace was understood as inhering in human faculties, thus supporting the view that humans could earn their salvation through their own achievements. In the late medieval period the debate continued under the growing influence of *voluntarism*. Whereas for Aquinas, writes McGrath: 'the divine intellect recognises the inherent value of an action and rewards it accordingly,' the *voluntarist* approach placed the emphasis upon the divine will, such that 'there was thus no direct link between the moral and meritorious value of a human action' (1997 [1994]: 436).

<sup>16</sup> On Good Friday, drinking is theoretically prohibited. In reality, men continue to drink, but substitute beer and cane spirit for red wine.

serious alcoholic who is constantly inebriated – a figure universally ridiculed – and the weekend *cachaçeiro*. The reason for this became clearer to me as I walked through the village early one Sunday morning with Lourdinha, a woman who was herself accustomed to dealing with a husband regularly passed out from alcohol consumption. Lourdinha was an energetic and intelligent woman who possessed a firm moral outlook on the world. I had often heard her complain that weekend *cachaçeiros* made the village ‘ugly’ and were a bad example to the young. I was therefore surprised when on this particular day she called out affectionately to a man slumped at the foot of the *barraca* in an advanced state of drunkenness ‘Oh José, we all know that you struggle all week just to escape with a little *cachaça* at the end!’ The rationale Lourdinha was tapping into was one I had noted in my interviews with men that drinking, aside from its obvious social functions, offers a means of ‘forgetting’ the hard work one has endured during the week. It is not simply because he spends his week upholding his duties as a family provider that the weekend drunk is tolerated, but because he is cast quite specifically as a suffering man. Paradoxically, heavy weekend drinking may be interpreted as testament to the existence of sacrifice and suffering in a man’s life, and therefore as a public statement of his moral worth.

## Love and fatherhood

Moral people are often referred to as *peessoas de amor* (people of love). The concept of love, which I elaborate more fully in the next chapter, is hugely significant in Santa Rita as it underpins ecclesiastical teachings about morality which extend to virtually all areas of life. A ‘good’ or ‘loving’ man, it was often stated, was to be found in two places: either in a field swinging a hoe, or at home with his family. Once, as I sat passing the afternoon with Amauri on the doorstep, the conversation turned to adultery. Amauri lamented the fact that all the cuckolded men he had ever known were not bad men who had treated their wives unfairly, but good men who had loved their wives and children dearly. He knew this, he told me, because everyone in question was a *trabalhador*. When I asked him why being a *trabalhador* should signify love, he referred to a villager known to us both:

‘Take Zé Preto. He is what I would call a good man, a man who shows his love for others. He’s not one of these who lives only to drink and have fun. Every single day he passes by the house, he doesn’t miss a day of work. You must have seen him pass by, early, with his hoe. There is a guy that lives to sweat...goes from his house to the hoe, from the hoe to his house. As far as I’m concerned a man like that has to love his family.’



Similar ideas were expressed by women in relation to older male kin. I found it striking, for example, that despite the constant reference to the importance of ‘love’ in everyday social interaction, no woman I asked had ever heard the words ‘I love you’ pass from her father’s lips. Conversations with women about relationships with fathers would typically veer towards descriptions of a father’s work. Many would go on to describe their fathers as somewhat authoritarian figures who had displayed little physical affection towards them. But this, it seemed, mattered little if the man in question had been a *trabalhador*. Desilda’s father had passed away some years ago. The following dialogue, taken from a ‘life-story’ interview I did with her, offers a perfect example of the form this topic typically assumed:

M: ‘People often say it is important to have love for others. Would you say your father was a loving man?’

D: ‘My father was a *trabalhador*...all his life he worked and took care of us. My father was the one around here who made the wooden wheels for people’s carts. We would watch him, early in the morning when he started, how he would lift those heavy pieces of wood and metal. Banging them into shape *pah, pah, pah!* Sometimes he would get orders and still be working at midnight, the night before a market. This was when he was not in the *casa de farinha*, making *farinha* for us. Ah, my father worked a lot. And I’ll tell you something else, every single week he would ride his cart to market, and return with our food...he never missed a market in his life. We never went hungry.’

M: Did your father talk much to you when you were young?

D: No, father was never one for conversation. He never made even the smallest conversation with me. He was very closed.

M: But would you say your father loved you?

D: With certainty I would. See, he was like the other people of that time: ignorant of how to talk, but a *trabalhador* nevertheless. Yes, he loved us.

For Desilda, as for others, parental love is primarily a demonstrative phenomenon, not a verbal one. This notion, I would argue, is particularly applicable to married men whose gender precludes them from verbally expressing their emotions. Herein, the supreme expression of a father or husband’s love tends to lie in his alter-centred deeds; in the labour he enacts on behalf of his household.

Although both mothers and fathers labour to provide for households, fathers are the ones most likely to do wage work. Moreover, at least half of what a household as a unit produces from its land will be turned over for sale in the market to wholesale dealers in agricultural produce, and this dealing with outsiders is generally a husband’s job. The role of provider is more strongly associated with men than it is with women – for as Seu Mané put it earlier, ‘a man’s obligation is to feed his children’. Thus it is men who, in local imaginings, bear the larger load when it comes to providing for the entire family. Moreover, in a region historically afflicted by drought, poverty, and land shortage, feeding a family is implicitly associated with hardship and struggle. In local imaginings providers are persons universally burdened with an exceptionally ‘heavy cross’. I suggest that the merging of such a

perception with latent symbolic configurations about labour derived from the Genesis myth, and the concept of work-as-suffering, casts the 'provider' as a kind of worldly hero ordained on a mission of biblical import. The father-provider is simultaneously identified with Adam, cast out into the world, and the crucified Jesus. His fate is to emulate both the pain and death of righteous castigation and the pleasure and redemption of spiritual rebirth.

It would be mistaken, however, to overplay the gendered aspect of the work-as-suffering complex. For as I have tried to show, women are as apt to make claims on the discourse as men. This is hardly surprising given that both men and women exist in the same universe of symbols, and are exposed to the same scriptural doctrines and preachings. Bynum makes a similar point with regards to gender in Europe in the late Middle Ages when she points out that whereas male ascetics tended to renounce wealth and power, women ascetics tended to renounce food (1987: 295). However, women's piety, she argues, was not inherently different from that of men's, but rather a different appropriation of symbols towards the same ends. Indeed, in the Santa Rita context, what stands out is not the issue of differentiation so much as correspondence between the various kinds of gendered narratives produced. The analogy between suffering and containment noted in the last chapter with regards to women, re-surfaces here in relation to men. Just as women bear the burden of pregnancy, that is, of growing children *inside* the womb, men bear the burden of provision – of growing children *outside*, in the world.

## **Labour, the body and redemption**

As I argued at the very beginning of the chapter, the view of the Brazilian concept of work espoused by da Silva Diniz is a rather instrumentalist one that cannot account for the processes by which workers themselves imbue their labour with meaning and value. In Santa Rita, the value of work-as-suffering derives not, I would argue, from elite ideology centred on the value of material productivity, but from the concept of sacrifice embedded in what Catholics regard as the pivotal moment of Christian history: the Crucifixion. It is categorically death (the Crucifixion) rather than life (the Resurrection) that draws the crowds to mass in the run-up to Easter – as the local priest on one occasion explained. He was not particularly pleased about this fact as stiff competition from Evangelical churches had recently provoked calls for the Catholic clergy to revoke the traditional emphasis on crucifixion in favour of incarnation. Discussing this with me one day, he mentioned his displeasure at the fact that every year his church was filled to bursting on Good Friday with men, women, and children who never turned up for mass on any other day. It was the only

day of the year, he informed me, that the congregation literally spilled out of the church and onto the street. 'Every year it is the same', he lamented, 'and every year I remind them that it is important that they come back for mass on the Sunday of the resurrection. But do they come? Come Easter Sunday, the church is half empty again!' He then went on to complain about the annual battle amongst the men of the parish to carry the cross on the *Via Sacra* procession.<sup>17</sup> 'They make a big show of emulating Christ on that one day of the year' he commented dryly, 'and yet they fail to emulate Him in their everyday lives where it really matters'.

I would argue, however, that behind the Santa Ritan concept of work-as-suffering is a strong and actively constructed identification with the Crucifixion. Through elaborate discourses on labour-as-suffering, Santa Ritans strive in a conscious way to project themselves in the image of Christ as worthy, alter-centred beings. Rather than emulating Christ's divine spirit via extraordinary acts of charity and contemplative prayer, they choose to emulate the Passion through ordinary living: marriage, labour, and suffering. Such exemplarist soteriology posits Christ as a supremely *human* kind of divinity. By emulating his physical death and bodily suffering Santa Ritans lay emphasis on the 'fallen' (i.e. human) side Christ's nature. In doing so, they contract the ontological gap between God and man.

Such a conceptualisation of labour is not without historical or contemporary resonance either in Brazil, or in other parts of the world. The moral-philosophical maxims of ascetic suffering, moral perfection, and physical labour have been noted in other parts of the world, most notably in Russia, by the cultural and literary theorist, Leibovich.<sup>18</sup> Through an analysis of Russian folktales and popular aphorisms, Leibovich (1995) argues that whereas Western conceptions have elevated labour from the demeaning status of an activity associated with pain and effort to a 'glorious position' associated with property, wealth, and personal ambition, in the Russian conception work 'continues to be associated with resigned suffering, the heroic deed and self-sacrifice' (Leibovich 1995: 8). The peasant experience amplified a sense of identification with the suffering Christ to include the most vital period of the agricultural cycle – the summer field work. Crop gathering, which was associated with back breaking work and with death (the death of the plant) 'bore the seeds of the promise of future life – the simulacrum of Christ's suffering, his painful death on the cross, and the promise of resurrection.' (ibid.: 28). Such a connection is evident, she argues, in the semantic meaning of the Russian word for peasant (*krestianin*). The root of the noun *krest* (the cross) invokes Christ carrying the cross

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<sup>17</sup> A strong identification with the Passion and Crucifixion is well documented in Catholic cultures, and the significance of the numerous rituals and processions associated with it, well analysed (see for example Cannell 1991; du Boulay 1974; Magrini 1998). It is not my intention to add to this body of literature, but simply to note that in the local town nearest to Santa Rita, the annual *Via Sacra* procession held on Good Friday was the largest of all the local processions.

<sup>18</sup> See also Seremetakis (1991: 201-206), who observes that rural Greek women make an explicit connection between the pain of agricultural labour and the pain of loss through death.

on his way to Golgotha and a sense of partaking alongside Jesus in the same torment of suffering. She also cites the dictionary definition for the Russian word *strada* (summer field work) as ‘various kinds of suffering’ and ‘the process of dying’ (ibid.).

The ‘process of dying’ is perhaps a fitting definition of the imagined labour process in Santa Rita for it ties into that pre-eminently creative act through which both individual and cosmos is reborn: sacrifice. The concept of sacrifice is deeply embedded in local labour discourse. In the narratives discussed, labour is portrayed first and foremost as a form of self-sacrifice that allows new life to flourish. Within such discourse, it is generally emphasised that the nature of the *trabalhador*’s sacrifice is a physical or bodily one. But it might also be interpreted as a voluntary sacrifice of the *alma* (soul) through the necessary immersion in the polluting processes of production. Through such a sacrifice, the existential problem marriage poses (i.e. the moral and spiritual problems that it generates) is, in some sense, resolved in that the *trabalhador* asserts the moral aspect of his personhood and existence-in-the-world. This is true even when labour is spiritually polluting. Because the spiritual pollution that accrues to the *trabalhador* in such contexts is for the survival and benefit of others, it provides him with powerful redemptive leverage.

One of the strengths of a labour discourse rooted in the notion of sacrifice becomes clear when we compare it to other strategies used by Catholic lay people to attain salvation. The Spanish peasants of Christian’s study, it could be said, are involved in a similar project: to resolve the inherent tension based on living in the world. To these ends they employ two main strategies. One of these is ‘a sensible recognition on their part of the impossibility of the ethical demands made upon them’ (Christian 1972: 158). The other is to cyclically ‘cleanse themselves’ of pollution through informal ‘rites of purification’ at shrines. Purificatory rites such as those documented by Christian revolve around an intensely asymmetrical human-divine relationship in which the person takes on the more passive role of requesting forgiveness and salvation through prayer, but without knowing for sure whether or not it will be granted. The *trabalhador*, on the other hand, by tapping into the generative potency of sacrifice, constitutes himself more equally in relation to the divine. Through his conscious decision to suffer, he wields a certain creative agency in his own salvation that the humble petitioner does not.

### Sacred matter(s)

As Jonathan Parry observes, in the Judeo-Christian tradition ‘the gates of heaven have in theory always been open to those who remained in the world’ (Parry 1994:

271). Since salvation is to be obtained within it, the world is less radically devalued in Christianity than it is in other major world religions, as for example in 'orthodox' Theravada Buddhism, where only those who renounce the world can aspire to salvation, and the laity are left with the lesser religious goal of achieving a better rebirth (ibid.). Nevertheless, as Christian (1972) aptly points out, the symbolism and structure of the Roman Catholic Church manifest a clear ambivalence towards the social order. Such doctrinal ambivalence towards the world is arguably the product of a dualistic epistemology that values spirit more highly than matter. The Cathars of the thirteenth century were among the first of various extreme Christian and quasi-Christian positions to denounce flesh and matter. Starting from the premise of a cosmic dichotomy between spirit and matter, the Cathars rejected the doctrine of the Incarnation and argued that the holy or 'perfect' must flee the flesh in this life (Bynum 1987: 252). Thus, historians have often seen the extravagant penitential practices of past eras as the manifestation of a world-denying and flesh-hating Cathar-religious philosophy (ibid.).

Cannell (1999; in press) demonstrates how early Christian debates about the nature of flesh versus spirit, have contributed to the scholastic notion of Christianity as the 'impossible religion'. She writes:

'Discussions of the problems which Christianity poses for people in ordinary life have a long pedigree which (although few anthropologists seem inclined to make the connection) was probably first articulated by Hegel as the 'unhappy consciousness' which is the fate of humanity when power is seen to withdraw from immanence in the material world to a transcendent world beyond, leaving mortals, as it were, orphaned [...] The same problem was rephrased in more familiar works by Durkheim [...] who claimed that '...it is only with Christianity that God goes beyond space: his kingdom is no longer of this world. The dissociation of nature and the divine becomes so complete that it even generates into hostility', and again with Leach [...] who emphasised the need for mediation in Christianity.' (Cannell 1999: 197)

Cannell's (2004) recent study of American Mormon culture has shown, however, that the Christian celebration of the world 'beyond' is not always a conceptually 'impossible' one. Indeed, the extent to which the traditional split between spirit and matter actually expresses itself in local forms of religiosity has also been challenged by anthropologists of Catholic societies who note the prevalence of a sacrificial discourse centred upon the body (Dahlberg 1987, 1991; Eade 1991; McKevitt 1991; Sallnow 1991; and Sallnow and Eade 1991). As Sallnow suggests, the doctrine of the physical resurrection of the unblemished body on the Day of Judgement, which early Christianity inherited from Judaism and which is maintained by both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, 'has always had the effect of blurring the distinction between the spiritual and material domains, between the soul and the body' (Sallnow 1991: 22). Dahlberg advances a similar position, arguing that the

unique Catholic emphasis on the body derives from teachings about the Real Presence in the consecrated host, and in particular from the Catholic institution's opposition to contraception:

'Implicit in here in the teachings on human sexuality and reproduction, are ideas that the divine is embodied in, and that spiritual relationships are founded through, the human body' (Dahlberg 1991: 47).

Indeed, a concern with matter and corporeality has long been at the forefront of Christian, and particularly Catholic expression. As Bynum (1987) demonstrates, the humanity of Christ, understood as including his full participation in *bodiliness*, was a central and characteristic theme in the religiosity of the late medieval period. The sense of identification with Christ lay in the background of Eucharistic devotion, but came out in various other ascetical practices. For female ascetics in particular, the often excruciating pain of fasting, self-flagellation, and abstinence was not a flight *from* but *into* physicality. Religious women in the middle ages saw in their own bodies not only a symbol of the humanness of both genders, but also a means of approach to God himself:

'The goal of religious women was thus to realize the *opportunity* of physicality. They strove not to eradicate body but to merge their own humiliating and painful flesh with that flesh whose agony, espoused by choice, was salvation. Luxuriating in Christ's physicality, they found there the lifting up – the redemption – of their own' (Bynum 1987: 246, original italics).

Thus Bynum argues that late medieval asceticism cannot be interpreted as an expression of a dualistic theology because instead of degrading matter, it was an effort to 'plumb and realise all the possibilities of the flesh' (Bynum 1987: 294).

In Santa Rita, local forms of religiosity also betray a heightened concern with corporeality and with sensuality, stemming, I would argue, from the bodiliness of Christ's humanity. But although Santa Ritans place a quintessentially positive value on the bodiliness of Christ, their outlook differs subtly from that of both radical Cathar dualism and Bynum's female ascetics. In Santa Rita, the dualist doctrine that *carne é fraca* 'flesh is weak' is propagated by the Church and is, in many contexts, the accepted view. But whereas the weakness of flesh, from an orthodox perspective, categorically devalues it in relation to spirit, for Santa Ritan people it does not. Through redemptive labour narratives that draw attention to bodily passions, weaknesses, and suffering, Santa Ritans invest flesh with a certain autonomy distinct from the volition of the spirit/self. It is this which allows them, wherever necessary, to subscribe to the contrary view: that flesh, although weak, has certain moral advantages over spirit.

I return here to the notion of emulating Christ and to the example of Sandro and Seu Roberto: by continually affirming their status as *trabalhadores*, people in Santa Rita draw attention to the strength and remarkable ability of the flesh, via labour, to emulate Christ in its suffering; to the ability of the body to perform moral, alter-centred actions even when the spirit has lapsed into sin. Emulation, in this context, is a type of bodily theatre that need not necessarily be accompanied by inward contrition or grace. Even if a person labours, unreflectingly, out of a sense of obligation towards those with whom they live, those actions are still perceived, by and of themselves, as moral (i.e. essentially alter-centred) deeds. Therefore one might say that *because* of its very weakness and its resultant capacity to conduct suffering, flesh is an appropriate mediator between two states of being: the fallen and the redeemed. In the labor context, it is *because* flesh is separate from, and not merged with, spirit that it can be this kind of mediator. In other words, Santa Ritan religiosity does not do away with the spirit/matter distinction, but neither is it rooted in an *irreconcilable* dichotomy – in a radical sense of spirit entrapped by body. It grows from a gentler dualism, mediated by an enduring sense of continuum between the two poles.

Religious philosophies should not be divorced from the context in which they surface, and the type of person that holds them. By focusing on the extraordinary mortifications of mystical ascetics, Bynum's argument is developed in a context very different from my own. The late medieval ascetics of her study saw a certain rupture with ordinary, worldly life as a mark of religious commitment and as such, practiced a 'studied ignoring of the special demands of family love and loyalty' (Bynum 1987: 280). For Santa Ritans, on the other hand, the demands of family love and loyalty, rather than a hindrance to religious commitment, are potentially the vehicle to sainthood itself.<sup>19</sup> What underlies such reasoning is the local Christian emphasis on love and alter-centred practice as the root to salvation. And for the people I knew, the most obvious and fundamental context for the practice of such ideals was the familial, workaday world. A distinction thus needs to be drawn between labour-based self sacrifice and that involved in confessional penance, for whereas labour is grounded in sociality and directed for the benefit of others, confessional penance is anti-social in that it benefits only the self.

Of course, many monastic orders throughout the ages have stressed the role of labour and charity over that of contemplation, but the context in which those sacrifices are performed differ in an important way: nuns and monks may make sacrifices of the flesh by suffering austerities. However, by not marrying, they do not sacrifice an original state of purity; that is, they do not sacrifice their souls. The

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<sup>19</sup> The classic example cited to me by my informants was Santa Rita herself, who became sanctified as a result of her sufferings as a mother and wife. It was only late in life, after her role as mother and wife had been fulfilled, that she entered the convent.

giving up of original purity is, I would argue, what makes the ordinary Santa Ritan's workaday sacrifice different from that of the ascetic, and lends it its perceived edge. This is not to say that formal asceticism is not a respected means of expressing one's religious commitment, but it is not, as I argued in Chapter Two, hailed as some kind of ideal form from which lay people fall invariably short. Rather than choosing to emulate Christ by separating themselves from the polluting productive and reproductive world, Santa Ritans remain within it. They do not do this passively, as though it were simply a default state, but strive to shape it, via their narratives and discourses, into an exalted form of mimetic worship.

### Conclusion:

In concluding the chapter I return once again to the people described at the beginning whose custom it was to recite their tasks. Such sharing of everyday experiences has a certain purpose: to construct the person as a *trabalhador* whose capacity for hard work says something significant about their moral worth as a member of the community, and as an individual in relation to God. People's casual commentaries on their chores accomplished are, on this level, no different from the lengthier narratives produced by men on the toughness of agricultural labour; no different from the teacher who talks of the difficulty of working with children, or the cigarette seller who was robbed. What I have tried to show in this chapter is how labour, by being constructed as the basis of sociality, represents a vehicle rather than an obstacle for attaining salvation. It achieves this, not by somehow coming to stand in opposition to the sinful and profane, but by being located firmly within it. Rather than representing an alternative purificatory rite involving separation from worldly pollution, labour is a conscious and necessary form of physical and emotional engagement with the polluting, workaday environment. When done for the benefit of others, however, such active engagement with pollution and danger is an elevated form of self-sacrifice, and an efficacious means of establishing a connection with the divine. As the discourse on 'loving fathers' in particular attests, such sacrifice is enacted through enduring the physical pain and mental tribulation of labour in its various forms: the sheer difficulty of covering one's costs in an uncertain market, the travails of travelling to and fro, the endurance of hunger and economic exploitation, or the physical effort of swinging a hoe.



'To marry without love is not a sin, but to die without having learnt to love is.'

*(Seu Luis, 54 years old, Santa Rita)*

## Chapter Five

# Virtuous husbands, powerful wives

Lucia's brick hut stood at the end of the dirt track. As I approached it in the thick afternoon heat I felt strangely apprehensive. Perhaps because I sensed why Lucia had called me. As I came closer I could see her leaning against her doorframe, smoking a cigarette. She greeted me with a warm smile and invited me into the house. Entering the front room I noticed that Lucia had placed the photograph I had taken of the two of us on top of her television. 'Maya' she said to me as I sat down, 'I am going to tell you about my mother's death and I want you to write it down. When you understand about this terrible thing that happened, you will understand my life.' Without much preliminary talk, Lucia then began to narrate to me her version of how her father, Seu Roberto, had murdered her mother, Dona Beta, with a scythe, fifteen years ago:

'I was young, only thirteen, my life was dedicated to playing. I never dreamed, never thought, you know, about marriage, nothing like that. But Maya, on that day at that hour I had become so anxious. I was at home with my mother washing dishes under a cashew tree. And there I was crying; so anxious that she sent me off with the neighbours daughter, Velta. I said "Mama I have this bad feeling in my heart"; she said "Go with Velta now, disappear, go and play". So I left her and went.....Then, at Lulu's house where we went, they arrived. Me already with that terrible feeling. They arrived and said "Lucia, your mother has been killed. Your father killed your mother just now"....Ave Maria, at that moment I went crazy! I ran, crawled under the barbed wire, scratched myself all over in desperation to reach her. Madrinha Quiterinha caught up with me – they did not want me to go back to the house – but I pulled away. When I arrived at my house, there was already a mass of people, and there she was: fallen on Jecinda's front terrain. She had fallen, Maya, I held her...I saw that a load of men were already with my father, restraining him, and the women were all crying .....They said it happened like this: that when he went after her, Jecinda yelled 'Run, Beta, run, the door is open for you to enter, he's going to kill you...run!' She left the house running but could not run very fast because she was weak from an operation....Then, when she was nearly there, she tripped up almost at Jecinda's door and that was the moment he got her. They say Jecinda screamed for her to run but it was too late. He got her with three swings of a scythe. If it had not been for Décio who arrived at that second, he would have finished her off instantly.....No one could stop me going to her. I held her in my arms, I rolled on the ground there sobbing. When I lifted her arm I could see her bone sticking out and

her head soaked with blood. Her hair was already becoming hard with blood. The last thing she said to me was "Lucia, your father has killed me. Why has he done this?"....'

\* \* \*

In the previous chapter I considered the role of labour discourse in dealing with the spiritual problems generated by marriage. In this chapter I shall examine gender relations within the conjugal relationship, focusing in particular upon the moral problems that surround the balance of power between husbands and wives. Using the event described above as a central example, I seek to comprehend how intra-conjugal violence is conceptualised and understood by Santa Ritan people themselves. In doing so, I aim to take a critical look at how concepts of morality and gender identity fit together, and to forward an alternative perspective to that which has been proposed in some of the related literature.

From marriage by capture and elopement to the playful punches and tiffs that, according to writers like Harris (1994) and Allen (1988), characterise amorous encounters in the Andes, the literature on indigenous South America and elsewhere is filled with references to the violent and competitive process by which intimate relationships are formed outside kinship and marriage occurs. But as many note, the violence often does not end after the wedding transaction is complete. Ongoing physical confrontation between spouses has been theorised as an expression of everything from the ritualised construction of masculinity (Harris, O. 1994), to the positive production of kin out of affines, where, according to writers like Harvey (1994) and Toren (1994), physical force is simultaneously an idiom of integration and separation; a means of establishing order and hierarchy in a relationship predicated on difference, danger, disorder, and desire.

For those writing about Catholic mestizo societies, intra-conjugal violence is understood more through gendered constructions of sexual propriety (Melhuus 1992, 1996; Melhuus and Stølen 1996; Stølen 1996a, 1996b). Drawing upon Mediterranean concepts of honour and shame, these writers have argued that male violence is both perpetrated and justified by masculine codes of honour that supersede local conceptions of virtue and morality. In such works, the notion that men's status depends upon the ability to control women is given analytical prominence, and this feeds into the notion of the existence of an overarching antagonism between the sexes.

Melhuus and Stølen's (1996) discussion of sexuality and domestic violence is typical of a particular feminist approach wherein analytical concepts of power are variously deployed to reveal the differing interests of men and women and this

*difference* is fore-grounded as the problem for analysis par excellence. In Latin America in particular, the power of Catholic gender imagery and the prevalence of patriarchal structures has long led gender theorists to focus on the supposed tyranny of *machista* men and their oppression of women. As is argued in the introduction to one of the most recent edited collections on gender in Latin America by Hurtig et al. (2002), works that elaborate on the politics of gendered practices are “particularly urgent given this profoundly dystopian moment in Latin America and the world at large” (Hurtig et al. 2002:4). Within this field approaches vary. While writers such as Melhuus (1997), Stølen (1996a & 1996b), and Prier (1996) have emphasised the complicity of women in their oppression by their acceptance and reproduction of dominant gender ideology, writers such as Alonso (2002), Montoya (2002), and Villareal (1996) have pointed to the multiple strategies and beliefs used by women to subvert masculine power. Other theorists have been more critical of monolithic notions, arguing instead for the ongoing construction of multiple and sometimes contradictory gender identities (Wade 1994; McCallum 2001). According to Wade (1994), it is the multifarious and contradictory nature of gender production, which brings radically differing values into collision within the home, and accounts for violence of various sorts .

It has been asserted before, however, that gender, being ‘good to think with’, is often used as a social metaphor to give voice to important binary stereotypes that are essentially abstract and dialectically present in all persons regardless of their sex (Ardener 1975; Harris 2000; Strathern 1988). And in this chapter, I wish to extend a point made originally by Marilyn Strathern (1981), who argues that ‘[w]e should not assume for cultures that make heavy symbolic use of the antithesis between male and female that it literally divides men and women into social classes – so that we then have to account for each class as having its own model’ (1981:169). Reflecting upon such a problem has led me to pose a specific question of my own: might an overdrawn concern with contrast and difference lead us to overlook indigenous categories of correspondence between the sexes?

In this chapter, I question the relevance of gender-based models for understanding sexual politics and conjugal violence. For in the Santa Ritan case, what gets stressed is not *difference* – be it complementary or conflictual – between men and women, but the *similarity* of their moral concerns. And power, rather than being – as it so often is in feminist analysis – the preserve of men and the scourge of women, is locally conceptualised as a consequence of the knowledge (*conhecimento*) and self-awareness (*consciência*) that develops in persons through married life, and is thus wielded by both men and women.

The chapter is divided in two sections. In the first section, I shall expand upon local understandings of power relations in a variety of different contexts. In doing so

I focus on the moral discourse surrounding such relations; a moral discourse that turns about the dichotomy of love and pride. I shall go on to examine how Santa Ritan people apprehend the power relation between husbands and wives. This will lead me back to an analysis of the account of Dona Beta's murder given above.

In the second half of the chapter, I shall contrast my own theoretical position with the theoretical model of power and gender advanced by Melhuus (1992, 1996), and Stølen & Melhuus (1996). I shall argue that the analytical concept of power elucidated by these theorists is too abstract to be useful in understanding intra-conjugal violence in the Santa Ritan context, because it fails to capture the complexity of the moral discourse that surrounds the exercise and abuse of power in local terms. The only way in which one can truly understand the power play within gender relations, as I hope to show, is by taking seriously what people have to say about it themselves.

## Concepts of power in Santa Rita

Lucia's story was one I had heard before. That Seu Roberto had murdered his wife because of her (purported) unfaithfulness was well-known. But no one seemed to hold it against the old man who was in his seventies and still lived in the house where the event had taken place. In order to understand why this was, it is important to first make a number of observations regarding conceptions of power in a more generalised sense.

In Santa Rita, *poder* (power) is a rather nebulous concept that can be recognised as anything from a given structure of relationships, or a quality that can be possessed, to a situationally relative effect that one person can have on another. A frequent way of alluding to persons in a position of power is to speak about them as *pessoas que têm*, persons 'that have'. To 'have' in this sense, can mean money, property, mobility, strength, position, education, social connections, charm, or sexual allure – virtually anything that a person could use to benefit or oppress another. This is taken as a fact that one cannot escape and society is seen as being made up of a series of subtly asymmetrical relations to be successfully negotiated; as much from the point of view of 'the haves' as from the 'have-nots'. The point to be emphasised, however, is that asymmetrical relations between persons or groups are problematic for Santa Ritans, not because they believe, deep down, that they should not exist, but because they must follow a morally correct form.

In what follows I shall focus on the moral discourse about the exercise of power, rather than on local understandings of what power is. In doing so I am partly motivated by an observation put forward by Lambek who writes that 'if the study of

religion draws, from social theory, a serious concern with the ubiquitous workings of power, perhaps it can contribute the pervasive significance of morality. It can serve to remind us, as the saying goes, that while everything may be political, politics isn't everything.' (2000: 312). Lambek proposes that morality is a significant third domain alongside power and desire, one that is neither reducible either to power or desire, or to refereeing the struggles between them. His suggestion that power is never exercised without a space for reflection is supported by my own research. As I hope to show in what follows, the exercise and discussion of power is saturated by moral discourse, which turns upon the opposition between *amor* (love) and *orgulho* (pride). Where love for others and, more to the point, a *lack of pride*, is what makes the power that an individual wields legitimate and acceptable; pride and lack of love is what makes it potentially dangerous.

## Power and love

'What is love?' This was the question that young people in Santa Rita, having got to know me a bit better, were always curious to ask. My answers were never very satisfactory either to me or to them, perhaps because the question continually caught me off guard. In retrospect, it need not have, as *amor* is a central moral principle to Brazilians, and a well elaborated concept in Christian tradition and theology, which reaches beyond the sphere of religion and extends to every area of life.

For Santa Ritans, people with power should ideally wield their power with (or as an expression of) love for their subjects. According to local views, it was only because God *loved* man so much that he sent his son, Jesus, to die on earth. In one particular sermon the local priest reflected on this point, dwelling upon the love that a father has for a son, and extending the metaphor not only to the relation of God to man, but to the laity and the Catholic hierarchy. In this way, he attempted to justify the structure and power of the Catholic church to a congregation increasingly attracted to more egalitarian evangelical groups. But his sermon also legitimised the concept of hierarchy to the laity, forcing the message that both social and spiritual hierarchy is acceptable, so long as the more powerful are loving, generous, and giving; having their subjects' best interests at heart.

Love, for Santa Ritan people, is not just a way of speaking about alter-centred behaviour that could just as easily be glossed by the notions of decency or respect. It is conceptualised in opposition to knowledge and thought. One man explained the point to me thus:

'Jesus was a man of love. He did not need to think before he helped someone, he never let what was in his head stop him from doing good, from curing the blind.

Jesus *was* love. That meant he *felt* from the heart for all those around him. He really loved his brothers'

In its ideal form, then, love is an emotion in the classic anti-rational sense: visceral, divine, and opposed to all thought.

In Santa Rita, the moral behaviour expected of those in positions of power means that no type of relationship is perceived as inherently antagonistic. It only seen to become so if one or another person, usually the more powerful, is deemed to lack love. Priests, landowners, and politicians, for example, would generally be judged on the basis of personal merits and failures. Rarely were they ever abstracted as belonging to a particular kind of class. Personal relations being the dominant means of accessing the services and resources of others meant that people strove to classify all local persons of some power as a *conhecido* (acquaintance), or, better still, an *amigo* (friend). Such terms worked to personalise the relationship, and facilitated claims on the affective grounds of love.

To give but one example, older people who were reaching their official age of retirement would often inform me that this year or the year coming they would *pedir ajuda a prefeitura* 'ask the local council for help'. Lengthy bureaucratic battles for pensions were common. Any progress made would not be conceptualised as gaining one's well-earned civil right, but as being down to the fact that someone in the administration was *uma pessoa decente, de amor* 'a decent person, a person with love', good enough to have 'helped'. Conversely, people would often describe the failure of local politicians and administrators to help them as being down to the fact that they were persons who *não tem amor para os outros* 'have no love for others'.<sup>1</sup>

## Power and pride

To be in a position of power is, nevertheless, perceived as somewhat dangerous. The reason that power and advantage is thought to be dangerous for humans is that it is said to induce a state of heightened self-awareness; a mixture of vanity and egotism, often glossed as *orgulho* (pride). In Santa Rita, people were quick to remind one that the other side of sacred *amor* was worldly *orgulho*, and it was generally stressed that only God could embody power in a totally pure, controlled, and benevolent way. One person with whom I was apt to discuss such things was my host grandfather Seu Mané. Seu Mané was typical of most men in that he hardly ever went to church. However, he was theologically reflective and especially passionate on the topic of

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<sup>1</sup> Rebhum describes something similar when she posed the question to Northeast Brazilians 'What does the word *amor* mean?' and received answers that focused more on honest business practices, interpersonal respect, public obligations to support and protect the weak and courtesy in general, rather than on deep personal affection, intimate acquaintance, or sexual attraction (1996: 65-66).

pride. He once explained to me that during his incarnation, Jesus had been 'King on earth', but a king who had 'slept and eaten in the houses of the poor because he had no pride'. Stressing the point he said: 'God can be hurt, can be happy, can be sad, but he is never proud'.

The concept of pride was often alluded to when talking to or about wealthy people. The greatest compliment that could be paid to such a person was that they were '*uma pessoa sem orgulho*', a 'person without pride'. Even I, occasionally, received such praise: much to my embarrassment, people would announce to rooms filled with people that despite being rich and highly educated I was not a proud person, and therefore I sat in their houses, ate their food, and contributed money towards various village causes. The manipulative element to these announcements were not lost on me. However, I was not the only one. The same treatment would be given to visiting dignitaries and the local doctor, whenever he decided to make a home visit or take his lunch in a villager's house.

By contrast, unpopular people of wealth and standing were constantly derided for being *orgulhoso demais*, having 'too much pride'. It was widely rumoured that the last village doctor had only lasted two months in his post because he was 'too proud' to make home visits to the elderly and infirm who could not leave their homes. Various local politicians came under the same fire. Seu Julio, the last local mayor, was one who had left people feeling particularly embittered. It was said that once he realised he was not going to win the next election, he stopped paying salaries to the functionaries in order to extract the money for himself. The last four months of his office were, according to accounts, chaotic. Families went hungry, and angry mobs gathered to shout outside his house. According to Dida, Seu Julio had originally been a simple, honest man: owner of the local pharmacy and popular with everyone who knew him. When he became town mayor he changed. The change was attributed to the new found power that had made him proud. He became a man, in the words of Dida *sem amor* (without love), he no longer ate food in the houses of the poor, no longer had time for people – it was said he became *orgulhoso demais* (too proud).

People who did not own land in the village would sometimes tell stories about land-owners they had worked for in other parts of the region. Some such stories were filled with praise, others were more like biblical parables filled with moral outrage. On one occasion I went to collect fruit from the tree of an absent land-owner with Katia, a young woman who lived some distance away in a neighbouring hamlet. On our way, we went across fields filled with fruit trees which we could not touch because their owner was likely to shoot at us if he found out. Katia knew every single plot of land on our four kilometre hike, who it belonged to and whether or not they were good or bad. We were headed for the land of Seu Severino, who she

described as *uma pessoa boa, de amor* (a good person, a person of love) because he was known for letting the landless families living nearby help themselves to his crops and fruit whenever they liked. She went on to tell me about another landowner who had since passed away:

‘That one was too proud. He wouldn’t let anyone pick his fruit, he wouldn’t even let people take water from his *açude* [water reservoir]. Just because he *had* and we didn’t he thought he was so much better than us. Then, one day he suddenly died of a brain tumour. See how God punishes people like that?’

### Power as a reflection of knowledge

It took me a while to grasp the moral complexity of the power relation in local thought. For a long time I assumed, rather simplistically, that the disparaging narratives I had heard about bad patrons and corrupt politicians signified a generalised antagonism between richer and poorer classes. As such, I once asked my host father Amauri whether he thought that the rich were less likely to go to heaven when they died. I fully expected him to say yes and to perhaps make some reference to Jesus’ saying about the camel and the eye of a needle. But to my surprise he did not. In his opinion, the rich and the powerful were more likely to go to heaven when they died. In moral terms they had the advantage over the powerless poor because they had the means with which to effect good acts. ‘The rich man has the means to do good whereas the poor man is already born with a hot head’, he explained. Continuing, he said: ‘for a poor man like me it is so much harder to be good. But I think God must understand and that is why he reserves us poor a place in heaven’.

Amauri was not the only person to hold this opinion. It was widely believed that the rich, acting with love, were in a position to redistribute their wealth and influence amongst those who most needed it: donating land, saving the poor from miscarriages of justice with the state, and even saving lives by paying for much needed medical assistance. However, as Amauri implied, God does not ‘reserve a place in heaven’ for the rich. The suggestion being that although the rich and powerful may have a certain advantage over the majority in their potential to perform kind acts, they crucially have less of an excuse to fall short of the high moral standards expected of them.

The following example makes the same point in a different way. In Brazil, the law entitles a person with a ‘superior level of qualification’ (i.e. with a university degree or higher) to separate and superior cell conditions in a police station or prison while awaiting and during trial. If that person is eventually found guilty they must carry out their sentence in the same conditions as everyone else. The first time I learnt this peculiar fact was during a conversation with a group of men and women



after a chapel service. These men and women were discussing this law under the mistaken belief that the superior cell conditions also applied to such persons after they had been convicted. A middle-aged man was waxing angrily about the injustice of it all. According to him, people with superior qualifications ought to be put into worse cells than the common poor as their crimes were inherently worse. A person like that, he said, ‘with all his knowledge’ (*com todo seu conhecimento*) deserved worse punishment for wrongful conduct, not better.

By linking the severity of a crime to the level of a person’s knowledge, the man was making the same kind of point that people made on a daily basis in relation to sin and morality. Gossip about the immoral conduct of ardent church-goers (*pessoas que vivem na igreja* – people who ‘live in the church’) was generally perceived as more shocking than that about people who never bothered with church at all, precisely because it represented a more serious break from the path of righteousness. As my friend Lucinha (herself a devoted church goer), explained: ‘If the person who goes to *church* makes a mistake, everybody talks about it because they think that person should know better’.

In this sense, knowledge of the world, and of good and evil, is necessary but dangerous. Power is problematic because it is associated with being in a state of knowledge (*conhecimento*), much like that which Santa Ritan people maintain marked the beginning of the Fall – a point which I shall explore in more detail in the following chapter. In this sense, power is dangerous to those who actually wield it themselves. For a person to possess any real power or advantage over another she has to be *aware* of her own power and/or effect on others. She has to have what Santa Ritan people define as *consciência* (self-awareness). Thus it is generally acknowledged that if animals had self-awareness they could potentially dominate humans. For example, it is often commented that the only reason people have power over horses and oxen is because these animals ‘do not know’ (*não sabem*) their own physical strength.

*Consciência* is part of what Santa Ritans see as necessary knowledge for living well in the world. Knowledge of good and evil, and of right and wrong is what makes a proper moral person. If one knows what is right one can do what is right. It is for this reason that persons are constantly reminded of the needs of others around them in subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways. Just as rich anthropologists and powerful dignitaries are made aware of the moral stakes of their position through veiled compliments about their loving nature or lack of pride, men and women both young and old must forever be brought to awareness by family and friends. For awareness about one’s position in relation to others is what allows one to act morally and with consideration. However, as I have just described, if self-awareness embedded within a loving disposition *makes* the moral person, without love, it may

*break* them. Therefore, a crucial concept underwriting all such discourse is that of *limites* (limits). There is a strong notion that awareness has limits. The more aware one is, the stronger the pull towards pride. When persons are said to have acted *sem limites* without limits, the supposition is that they acted egotistically. That is, they were self-aware but dominated by pride. Knowledge and self-awareness, then, is the central problematic for Santa Ritan people and underpins the sexual, physical, and economic power that men and women are believed to wield over one another in various different ways.

This brings me on to the final point of this section, which is simply to draw attention to the sense in which asymmetrical power relations are not, for Santa Ritan people, inevitably antagonistic. On one level they offer the ideal solution to the problem of knowledge which confronts all people as they grow older and wiser in world. In their ideal form – although only in their ideal form – asymmetrical power relations are viewed as containing advantages for the less powerful because they allow them to remain in a somewhat safer position whilst deriving some of the benefits of another person's knowledge, strength, ability and influence. Persons with more power are in an inherently more dangerous position vis-à-vis moral personhood. The responsibility they shoulder is greater and therefore so are the potentially negative consequences of their *consciência* (self-awareness) and *conhecimento* (knowledge). As such, a less powerful person has the advantage of trying to derive benefits from the relationship without the dangers of the self-awareness and pride that such benefits entail.

Having described the moral discourse that surrounds asymmetrical relationships, I will now turn to look at how Santa Ritan people articulate the power relation between husbands and wives. The moral dichotomy upon which power turns, that of love versus pride, is thought to apply as much to the conjugal relationship as to any other. There is a difference, however, because rather than playing upon the asymmetrical nature of the power that either sex has over the other, people tend to stress the symmetry and complementarity of the relation. This is because marriage is strongly viewed as a partnership in which each member has as strong a purchase on what the other has to offer – something which, for example, often is not the case between patrons and clients.

## **Gender roles and the division of labour in Santa Rita**

In the day-to-day running of a household all members are expected to collaborate. The conjugal relationship is viewed, on a practical level, very much like a business partnership in which both husband and wife have equal stakes. Each sex may strive

to argue that they work harder than the other: wives often disparage their husbands for the hours they spend stretched out in the shade in the afternoons, while they themselves sweep the terrain, wash the lunch plates, and plan the evening supper. Husbands, however, will retaliate that their work requires more skill and practice than women's work. They point out that while anyone can wash a plate, not everyone has the skill to negotiate a good price at market. Women will agree that negotiation requires skill, but they frequently chide their men for the bad financial deals they do outside the house, or accuse them of being good at making money but even better at drinking it all before they reach home.

The roles that men and women assume in the running of the household, however, are characterized by mutual need. And this, ultimately, is what my informants stressed to me when I asked them about it '*É como uma parceria. Sem a outra pessoa, nunca se realiza a vida boa*' – 'It [marriage] is like a partnership. Without the other, you can never achieve a good life'. With regards to work around the house, it is a man's job to provide his household with gas and/or firewood for cooking; all other tasks related to the domestic sphere fall to women. It is a woman, for example, who fetches water, cleans, cooks, looks after children, and washes clothes. Purchases for the household tend to be made by both sexes, although there are certain things such as clothes and toiletries that a man would never buy. If necessary, a woman will buy everything that is needed, particularly if she has her own income. It is more common, however, for women to restrict themselves to the purchase of household basics from local shops such as cooking oil, margarine, salt, rice, soap, and coffee. In such instances, it is a husband's role to attend market to buy staple produce such as meat, vegetables, beans, and *farinha* (if the family do not produce these items themselves). Bread, if it is eaten, can be bought fresh from the local grocer everyday by any member of the household.

Tasks related to the *sítio* tend to be divided more evenly between the sexes, although men have greater responsibility over the raising of horses, cattle, and goats; and women over the raising of pigs.<sup>2</sup> Chickens, unless bred in large quantities, are also the responsibility of women, although this is not rigidly defined and both sexes will look after the other's livestock if needs must. The work tends to be complementary, however, as the milk that a man takes from his cows or goats will be made into cheese by his wife, and the pigs that a woman raises will be killed and butchered by her husband. It is a woman's task to tend to the fruit and vegetables she might grow in her garden. It is also a woman's task to cook for her family; however, in the preparation of food, certain tasks such as shelling or sorting beans, roasting

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<sup>2</sup> The *sítio* denotes the land surrounding any one household upon which animals are kept and fruits or garden produce grown. It does not include the *roçado* – land which is usually farther a field from the house, used for agriculture or pasture.

and shelling cashew nuts, and putting the rice on to boil are all acceptable for men to do.

Although work in the *roçado* is ideally defined as the task of men, women carry out as much work there as men do, and this is not regarded as problematic in any sense. Often, a husband and wife will till the land, sow crops, weed, and harvest in partnership – usually with the help of their children. In the absence of her husband, a woman will assume full responsibility for all work done in the field, the rearing of livestock, transport to market, and sale of the produce. If necessary, she will contract and pay for additional labour. Therefore labour outside the household is not strictly divided although there are certain areas where it is more so. In the *casa de farinha*, for example, it is women who skin manioc roots, and men who work the heavy machinery that processes the peeled roots into flour (*farinha*). Other activities also tend to be divided along gender lines, so that teachers are mostly women, and market traders are mostly men. There are always, however, exceptions to these rules.

### Men, power, virtue, and pride

Men in Santa Rita are socially recognised as *chefes de família* (heads of family), as it is usually they who control the household's resources, and they who, in a family dispute, have the last say. This is one sense in which wives admit that their husbands hold power over them. Their most frequent complaint is about investment. Upon selling off livestock which belongs to the household as a unit, a man will usually decide how and where to re-invest. Women commonly want repairs or extensions made to their houses whereas men want to invest in modes of transport which will enhance their prestige. However, if a family is doing well enough to feed itself, no one will disparage a man for spending his family's money as he pleases.

Men who abuse their economic power, however, are often described as proud, egotistical, and irresponsible. During my fieldwork, certain men who appeared to spend more money on drinking and motorbikes, than on food for their families, were frequently described in this way. Such men would come under as much criticism from other men as they did from women. Other men were praised for sustaining their households well, but were said to be '*ignorantes*' (ignorant) because of the excessively jealous and violent behaviour they showed towards their wives. It is generally held that a husband's greater physical strength over his wife is something of which he must be aware. If loving, he uses it solely to carry out the harder physical tasks and to protect her from harm. If proud, he uses it to beat and to hurt her.

In various imperceptible ways, then, the power of men over women is continually counterposed to the moral ideal of love. Before marrying, young men are

apt to receive friendly warnings and pieces of advice from women and men of different ages. Some of it will be in direct reference to the position of power he is about to assume as household head. To give but two examples: when Andre and Fabiana got engaged, Andre's male peers advised him to be fair in his treatment of his new wife. Fabiana was still at school and due to finish in two years time, but most people suspected that, once married, Andre would put pressure on her to give up and become a fulltime housewife. Andre's friend warned him: '*Rapaz!* (boy), you have the rest of your lives together. For the love of God, let her finish her studies'. A similar warning was issued by Amauri, Andre's future father-in-law, on the night Andre requested Amauri's permission to marry his daughter. Amauri gave his permission for the couple to marry on the grounds that Andre promise to be a good husband and act always *com limites* 'with limits'. What he meant by this was that Andre should not drink excessively, be selfish with his earnings, or beat his new wife.

A man's physical violence against his wife is commonly perceived as the biggest abuse of his power over her. The threat and carrying-out of murder was well elaborated in local discourse. On one occasion, I was visiting a married couple in their late sixties. The conversation had turned to the topic of male drinking, and the wife commented, as her husband sat next to her: 'Ah, the bad treatment I used to get when he would return home, face filled with drink.' To this, the husband replied: 'Listen Maya, even she will tell you I was never the kind of man to raise my fist to hurt her. Never beat her once in my life.' 'That is true', agreed the wife, 'He never raised a fist to my face, no, but raised knives to kill me many times.' Another time, a woman showed me the place where she hid the meat cleaver whenever her husband went out. The woman was accustomed to doing this, she told me, because of her husband's habit of coming home drunk, jealous, and going straight for the kitchen drawer.

When I asked Dida why women married men who were known to be *ignorante* (in this context 'violent') she responded that most such men were not like that before marrying, they only became so once married. The discourse about 'ignorant husbands' was most prevalent amongst women of middle age or older. Such women invariably asserted that men who did not change for the worse after marriage were *bom* (good) whereas those who did were *ruim* (bad). Change here was perceived as an effect of the power that came with marriage. This was in keeping with a fear I had repeatedly noted among younger women with regards to marrying their long term boyfriends: the fear that afterwards 'he might change' (*ele pode mudar*).

## Women, power, virtue, and pride

A wife's power over her husband is equally a mixed advantage because of the pressures and responsibilities it comes with. When Fabiana was about to get married to Andre, visiting female kin and neighbours were full of advice and warnings. Amongst other things Fabiana was warned that she should show *muito respeito* (much respect), towards her husband, no matter how difficult things were at the start of married life. The advice Fabiana received was mostly designed to make her aware of the new position of power she was about to acquire, and to inform her of the rightful way to handle it. Thus Lourdinha, her maternal aunt, made it very clear to her that even though Fabiana's parents would always welcome her back into their home at any point in the future, she was not to come running back to her parents' house at every little upset as this would be an abuse of her power over Andre. 'If you keep deserting him, how will he eat?' she queried, 'A husband *needs* his wife' she reiterated.<sup>3</sup>

In Santa Rita, there are various ways in which a wife is recognised as having power over a husband. Via her male consanguines, in particular, a wife has a recognised amount of control over her man. Residence is predominantly virilocal, but young wives constantly suggest their power by threatening to go back to their natal homes. Power is also connected to children. Due to the stronger affective ties between mothers and children, older wives whose parents may no longer be alive, have married sons and daughters as their closest allies. In Brazil, a woman and her child constitute *uma família* (a family) whereas two siblings or a man plus his children do not. The popular saying '*pai pode ser qualquer um, mas mãe só tem uma*' – 'your father can be anyone, but your mother is unique', expresses the common knowledge that whether or not there is shared substance between fathers and children, fathers are generally less significant in terms of consanguinity.

A woman's power, however, does not reside solely in her kin ties. It resides primarily in her sexual awareness and the power that it gives her over men. Male desire is felt to be strong, and young men are said to act with *doidice* (craziness) when in pursuit of girls they desire. There is a tension here, as young unmarried women are expected to respond as demure innocents, while at the same time remaining aware and cautious of the *doidice* they inspire in men. Once married there is no more pretence. A married woman is thought to be one who undoubtedly

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<sup>3</sup> As parental obligation lies strictly with one's children, parents habitually welcome their married daughters (and sons) back into their household when they are experiencing marital problems. In such situations, the young husband or wife's affines have little power of persuasion to make them return. As such, it commonly falls to someone like a parent but slightly more removed such as a maternal aunt, to urge them back to their own house. Sinara, a young woman who had married two years before, was famous for the number of times she had returned. She had reportedly gone back to her parent's house three times in the first year of her marriage, and in the end it was her maternal aunt who told her off for doing so.

realises the effect she has on the opposite sex, and fully appreciates the potential power it gives her.

The fact that a woman's sexual appetite is thought to be naturally more *frio* (colder) than a man's means that she can be easily satisfied by her husband alone. By contrast, a man's sexual appetite is said to be naturally *quente* (hot), which justifies, in an un-spoken way, his extra-marital affairs. But this, rather than appearing to work in the interests of men, works just as easily in a woman's favour. This is because a man's infidelities have no effect whatsoever on a woman's social standing and personal reputation. Repeated betrayal by a husband (whatever private sadness it may cause), can bring a woman a certain amount of social prestige as she comes ever more to resemble a virtuous, suffering, and morally superior wife.

By contrast, a woman's infidelity is perceived to be a conscious form of violence against a man precisely because it is so widely perceived to destroy his social reputation, and potentially his life. Over and over again, men would say that the worst thing they could imagine happening in their lives would be to become a cuckold, for the shame and loss of reputation involved amounts to a social demise. 'Your life is as good as over,' said one friend. Pressing men on this issue, I found they were only too keen to explain. The cuckold becomes, in the words of one, *como um porco* 'like a pig': an object of ridicule and disgust. Others said that the betrayed man loses his appetite for food and for sex, and comes to exist alternately enraged and withdrawn. The masculine world of bars, markets, and snooker rooms becomes an unbearable place to be, and this affects his ability to drink and *negociar* (do business) with other men. Both these activities are essential means by which men create solidarity and broaden social networks.

A man's loss of connection to his family was cited as another tragic effect of a woman's adultery. 'The man who walks out of his house, leaves his children behind', a male friend explained. He was referring to the strong affectual link between mothers and children which means that in almost all eventualities, children stay by a mother's side. He was also referring to the fact that although houses may be built by men, in the end they belong to women. It is widely recognised that should a couple separate, the man is the one who must leave the conjugal house, in which case any initial economic investment in its building will be his loss. Stories abounded about men whose lives were a testament to their love for their families, and who had been destroyed by their wives' infidelity. These were not, it was said, men who passed all their time drunk in bar rooms, but good men who suffered the hot sun every day out of love for their families. And it was continually emphasised that for such men, betrayal had been tantamount to death. Thus, because of the destruction it causes, adulterous behaviour in a woman is considered to be as despicable a form of violence against her husband, as a man's physical violence is against his wife.

## Love and consideration

I turn now to briefly consider the ideal model of relations between a husband and wife. In local terms, a good marriage is based upon *amor e respeito* (love and respect). Consideration (*consideração*) is the continuous demonstration of that love and respect in deed, gesture, and intention. The ultimate expression of considerate love in a marriage, people would tell me, is being willing to suffer on behalf of one's partner. The concept of *consideração* crops up in connection with concepts of love in much of the Brazilian literature. Both Robben (1989) and Rebhum (1999) make mention of it in their respective discussions of Brazilian conjugality. Robben, describes *consideração* as 'the anticipation of another person's needs without, however, experiencing their fulfilment as a duty or obligation' (1989: 183). Thus a woman would describe cooking for her husband as *obrigação* (obligation), but cooking his favourite meals as consideration.

Santa Rita people are familiar with such concepts although there is often considerable disagreement between couples over which terms describe their relationship best. Both men and women describe a good marriage as one in which 'both have love and consideration for the other'. However, men tend to see a wife's cooking of a favourite meal as an act of obligation rather than consideration. Men describe providing food for the house as their obligation, and acts such as taking one's wife on outings as consideration. On certain occasions it was plain that couples could use such concepts to make the other feel guilty. Women were to be frequently overheard complaining in the presence of husbands, that they lacked consideration, that they spent too much money on drink and not enough on meat for the family table, that they never took them to *festas*, or back to their natal villages to visit relatives, and so forth.

Indeed, the concepts of *consideração* and *obrigação* are usefully broad and interchangeable, reflecting the constantly shifting emphasis of marital power relations, so that in certain contexts, the husband has the advantage over his wife, and in other contexts, the wife wields power over her husband. Couples tend to deal with this constantly shifting balance of power over one another by eliciting the potential virtue in the way power is exercised. Thus men and women make constant reference to notions of love, respect, obligation, and consideration when talking to and about their spouse. A spouse's power, when exerted with their partner's benefit at heart, ideally through the visceral offices of love, becomes an act of virtue. Any potential pride in the social advantage they possess is thus rendered less damaging. However, it is also widely recognised that, like politicians, both husbands and wives can be corrupted by the power they have, as evidenced through the discourses on ignorant husbands and adulterous wives. Such pathologies, as Santa Ritans see them,



may manifest themselves differently but are the same in kind. Both derive from a level of awareness that has surpassed some unspecified limit. A man's consciousness of his physical strength over a woman, and a woman's consciousness of her sexual power over a man, is legitimate knowledge, so long as it is not infected with pride.

If the major immanent danger for men in marrying is – in its most extreme form – social death, the major immanent danger for married women is physical death. However, at this point it is important to stress that both men's and women's violence, even as a form of retribution, is in no sense prescribed. It does not amount to an acceptable code of behaviour in connection with notions of honour. In the Santa Ritan context, intra-conjugal violence is highly transgressive and is always treated as a breakdown of order. Thus, although violence and death within marriage does occur, it is thought to be avoidable.

What the above ethnography suggests to me is that ideas about morality are prior to concepts of gendered difference and it is with this in mind, that I shall return to the story of the man that murdered his wife with a scythe. In what follows, I hope to show how this event had come to be remembered in Santa Rita as a warning tale about what happens when the delicate balance between power and awareness in married life is disturbed on either side.

### Betrayal and the abuse of power: Seu Roberto and Dona Beta

Seu Roberto's story was a familiar one. I was told of three similar cases which had occurred in the locality over the past twenty years. In talking about these murders with different people, I was initially puzzled at how the concept of *honra* (honour) was never once alluded to. When I asked whether a husband who used violence against an adulterous wife did so in order to restore his honour, the unanimous response was no, because ultimately he was not treating her with *respeito* (respect).<sup>4</sup> *Honra*, I was told, is 'the same as' *respeito*, in that a man (or woman) who acts with *respeito* has *honra*. Thus, while both men and women claimed to understand a man's motivation to kill a cheating wife, they nevertheless maintained that anyone who does such a thing ultimately destroys his honour by giving in to selfish pride (*orgulho*). As such, to label such murders 'honour killings' would have been contradictory and people appeared to avoid doing so in order not to impart a spurious rationale to the actions of the men involved.

Rather than embedding the story of Seu Roberto and Dona Beta in discourses about masculine honour or female victimhood, and thereby skewering moral judgement in favour of one or another sex, both men and women treated the matter in

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<sup>4</sup> *Respeito* is a much used and reflected upon concept in Santa Ritan. The consensus being that one must treat with *respeito* even people who do not have *respeito* for you. In doing so one follows Jesus' example, by 'turning the other cheek'.

what I found to be a surprisingly balanced way. The story would generally be narrated to me in two parts: from the position of the woman and the position of the man. In all such narrations, the point was not to draw out the gendered difference between them, but to underscore the sense that despite their obvious differences, they were in essentially the same situation. As such, both husband and wife were cast as essentially good people who had fallen victim to the complexities of power within the conjugal relationship. Lucia, herself, spoke highly of both parents. Her mother had been, in her own words: 'a good, good person'. Her father, she emphasised, had been the archetypal *trabalhador* (hard worker) who had expressed his love for his family by sweating in the fields and making weekly trips to market.

Moreover, just as other people confirmed that Seu Roberto's downfall had been an egotistical desire for extreme control, Beta's downfall, according to accounts, had been her pride (*orgulho*). It was said of Beta that she had been proud of her appearance, and had enjoyed the power it gave her to have affairs with other men. Seu Roberto, it was said, since the day he married, had always been a brute. Beta, on the other hand, would have realised the destruction she was causing to her husband's life through her affairs. Indeed, it was in relation to this that one man emphasised to me the suffering of the cuckolded man. Talking about Seu Roberto's discovery of the situation, he said:

'Now, after he knew about this business, time passed, and his condition was such...Ave Maria!....He lived as if he were asleep, lost all taste for life.'

In all the accounts I listened to, however, there was an overwhelming emphasis placed on the redemptive suffering of both involved. Beta's suffering was made explicit for me, countless times, not only through descriptions of her death, but in reports about the violence she was subjected to by her husband in the years preceeding her death. For this violence, Seu Roberto was roundly condemned. Seu Roberto's own suffering was regarded as stemming not only from Beta's affair, but from his own abominable action. This, I later realised, helped to explain the remarkable level of forgiveness I had noted towards Seu Roberto within the community. His daughter Lucia's forgiveness was something I struggled particularly hard to understand. In the end, she explained, it came down to the fact that she regarded her father as an extremely suffered and penitent man.

The suffering of Seu Roberto was often cast for me as the effect of a virtual death; a feeling that he did not live but existed moribund, in a perpetual state of loss and regret. His house and marriage, the enduring symbols of a proper life, destroyed. As Seu Mané said, again:

‘Look, I know he acted without limits, but today he doesn’t live! He is someone for whom the world ended.... In the same house he lived in with her, he now lives alone. That house is finished! Isolated.... Today nobody goes there. And he won’t even look for another woman. They don’t want him’

Since killing his wife, Seu Roberto had stopped frequenting the local bars and snooker room and had become withdrawn from the masculine world of networking and prestige. However, he had also become unable to serve as an example of virtue to his own children. On one occasion I was told about an incident that had happened the year before my arrival, when a small crowd looked painfully on as Seu Roberto tried to intervene in the drunken fight of Geraldo, his eldest son. Geraldo, I was told, did the unspeakable thing of pushing his father onto the ground. ‘Who are you to tell me what to do!’ he shouted over and over again until he was hoarse. Seu Roberto could do nothing but retreat silently away as the crowd looked on. Upon recounting this episode to me, one man remarked that to be a father and to be unable to console or advise one’s sons must be the same as being dead. Thus, the fact that Seu Roberto had remained inside the community was invariably contrasted with the new life he might have had, had he gone to live somewhere else. His staying was conceptualised as a chosen form of penitence, for it actively perpetuated his state of death-within-life or life-within-death.

By the time I arrived to carry out fieldwork, the case of Seu Roberto and Dona Beta had come to be remembered and talked about as a parable of marital relations. Seu Roberto’s act was never once described to me as legitimate, but rather, as an egotistical act of pride. By losing his sense of humility and allowing consciousness of his physical advantage over Beta to overcome him, he took her life. Indeed, people used the story to highlight to me the dangers of pride and the misuse of power. In the re-telling, the woman abused her power over the man and he abused his over her.

For Santa Ritan people, the conjugal relationship is, above all things, the delicate handling of *consciência* (self-awareness), and the constant struggle of love over pride. To tip too far in either direction will not do: too much awareness leads to violence, even to death; to avoid marriage altogether, however, is to avoid life. The case of Seu Roberto and Dona Beta cannot, therefore, be understood simply as a tale about the oppression of women by powerful men. The ways in which the killing illuminates certain classic patriarchal structures, is complicated by local understandings that downplay the *difference* between men and women, and foreground the *similarity* of their moral plight.

## **Conjugal violence: a question of honour or a question of pride?**

Similar killings to the one described in this chapter have been analysed, elsewhere as evidence of an overarching antagonism between the sexes in Catholic cultures. They epitomise that which has led feminist anthropologists to debate the universal dominance of men over women. Thus scholars attempting to characterise constructions of sexual propriety in Mediterranean, Latin American, and Caribbean societies have tended to present a portrait of cultures divided by gender into complementary but conflicting segments. Rebhum writing of Northeast Brazil suggests that there 'women and men view one another through the filter of stereotypes fed by social separation, differences in point of view, and the misleading perceptions of desire itself.' (1999: 109). Among such stereotypes are those based on theories of honour and shame developed from study of Mediterranean societies.

According to the literature, honour, defined as both a personal virtue and high status, preoccupies Mediterranean men. As described, the Mediterranean honour complex centres upon men's right to respect and on the relationship of each gender to sexual intercourse and its proprieties. Important attributes include the protection of legitimate wives and daughters from any contact with other men's sexuality, and a readiness to use deadly force to avenge any implication about the honour of any member of the household (Gilmore 1987; Greenberg 1996; Miller 1993; Schneider 1971; Stewart 1994). Critics have identified a number of problems with the model, including its rigidity, its disregard of women's point of view, and what some have seen as its ethnocentric nature (Brandes 1987; Cole 1991; de Almeida 1996; Hertzfeld 1980, 1984). Some have also questioned its applicability to Latin American societies, where the formula tends to be discussed in the literature on machismo (Gutmann 1996; Moraes-Gorechi 1988; Oliven 1988; Robben 1988, 1989a,b). Nonetheless, it has remained influential.

In an attempt to elaborate a model more applicable to Afro-Caribbean societies, Wilson has suggested the substitution of the terms 'reputation' and 'respectability' (1969, 1973). Thus men build 'reputations' in the public world of politics and the street through sexual conquest, eloquent speech, and land ownership whereas women pursue 'respectability' in the opposite fashion, by staying at home, remaining chaste, and behaving with modesty. Feminist scholars have, however, critiqued Wilson's portrayal of Caribbean women as house-bound and uninterested in politics, citing their long history of resistance both in slavery and freedom. Besson (1993), for example, has pointed out that women as well as men may pursue 'reputations' in the extra-domestic world through land ownership and business deals.

In Brazil, a slightly different slant on the gender dichotomy was put forward by Roberto da Matta (1985) through his discussion of the house (*casa*) and the street (*rua*) as complementary gendered spheres in Brazil, with *casa* being the domain of women and *rua*, that of men. Notwithstanding the obvious overlap of these two spheres - men living in houses and women moving about on streets - da Matta described conceptual differences, partly contiguous with the physical architecture of buildings and roads, as intertwined with ideas about being a proper man or a woman. Here, the *casa*, characterized by familiarity, hospitality, love, and 'honourable dealing' becomes the realm of women and children (da Matta 1985: 41-42). The *rua*, by contrast, is considered to be a masculine realm of violence, and exploitation; a realm where individuals fight for dominance. Da Matta argues that the division between *casa* and *rua* may be seen as a distinction between that area where love structures actions, and morality prevails, and that where love and morality is lacking (ibid: 47).

#### Dichotomous women and continuous men

In an article entitled 'The troubles of virtue', Melhuus (1997), who carried out research among rural Mexican mestizos, tackles gender through the relation of two killings spurred by the defence of male honour. Both cases constitute women as focal objects in a struggle between men. Melhuus suggests that not only do these types of stories reveal that some particular aspect to femininity is intrinsic to the construction of masculinity but that they also indicate that men's honour is something that has to be defended in order to be upheld. Embedded in this construction, Melhuus identifies a tension present in the discrete categorization of women as either 'Madonnas' or 'whores'. In using the wider literature on honour and shame to understand such killings, she homes in on an 'inherent ambiguity' to configurations of Mexican gender, and argues that 'representations [of gender] can be meaningfully grasped only within the terms of this ambiguity' (1996: 230). Hence she is driven to elucidate on what she describes as the 'enigma' of Latin American gender imagery: 'a male dominant society which nevertheless places its highest value on the feminine, indicating a split between power and value' (ibid.: 230).

According to Melhuus, this 'enigma' lies in the difference in the forms of evaluation of men and women where men are evaluated according to their power and women according to their virtue. Whereas masculinity is inscribed in notions of power (*el poder*) and *machismo*, femininity is mediated through the veneration of the Virgin Mother and the local meanings of virginity which are reflected in a particular perception of the ideal of suffering. These representations of gender, she argues, are articulated through a local moral discourse based on the notions of

honour and shame. Following authors such as Paz (1988) and Bartra (1989), Melhuus describes feminine and masculine in terms of 'openness' and 'closedness' respectively – where being closed is the 'active' desirable state because 'it serves as a protection against the world, a defence of one's own intimacy as well as of others' (1996: 233). Conversely, opening up is seen as a weakness and a 'disgrace' symbolising 'the inert, passive one who is open and opened' (ibid.).<sup>5</sup>

*Machismo*, Melhuus argues, is used synonymously with masculinity. Above all, it is said to imply the ability to penetrate and is associated with being active, closed and unyielding. Lomnitz-Adler writes, 'the value or aesthetics of "closedness" is a kind of idiom of power where penetration stands for domination and "impenetrability" stands for power' (1992: 259). As such, points out Melhuus, the stereotype of the macho is 'the violent, often drunk, unfaithful husband, or the hard-drinking, aggressive, sexually assertive young man' (Melhuus 1996: 241). Dominance is expressed through men's overt control over women and contested control over men. Discourses of power, she thus argues, are 'inherently male, explicitly sexual, and often conveyed in an idiom of violence' (ibid.: 240).

Concomitantly, the stereotype of the female counterpart is 'the self-effacing, suffering and enduring mother, and the demure, withholding young lady...' (Melhuus 1996: 241). Whereas men are evaluated as men according to the power and control they have, women are evaluated as good or bad according to their sexual state. The feminine ideal of moral purity is stressed through the symbolic value of virginity. However, when a woman marries, and hence loses her virginal purity, she 'renders herself incomplete' (Melhuus 1992: 165). Melhuus suggests that women make up for this through expressions of suffering in day-to-day conversations, and through weeping in empathy with the *Mater Dolorosa* at Easter day parades. Inasmuch as it is an act of reconciliation for the impure carnal state of women and their virginal aspirations, Melhuus maintains that this discourse on suffering is one that 'circulates among women' and 'excludes men' (Melhuus 1996: 247). Women, she asserts, must be the moral anchors of men, although men, themselves, she states, seem to be given 'more leeway' (morally speaking) in their doings – as is indicated in the ambiguous connotations of the term *macho* (Melhuus 1992: 188).

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<sup>5</sup> In his critical reflections on the Mexican myths of La Malinche and the Virgin of Guadalupe, Paz (1988) links the devalued 'openness' of women to a dominant 'master narrative' of the Conquest. In this, it is women, through their openness to rape and marriage, who lay themselves bare to the power and force of European conquistadors. La Malinche was the Indian woman who was given to Hernán Cortés in tribute after he had defeated Indians on the coast of Tabasco in 1519. According to various authors on the topic (Bartra 1989; Martin 1992; Paz 1988) Malinche has come to symbolize the Conquest and the form of the 'encounter' between the Spanish invaders and the subjugated native populations. The Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego (a converted Indian) in 1531. In the myth, she leads her people, through her suffering and sacrifice, to victory. Hence taken together, both myths attempt to come to terms with the past and the future through the idioms of sexuality, loyalty, and betrayal.

In summary, Melhuus' model contrasts the discrete categorization of women with that of men. As there are degrees of power and thus of masculinity, masculinity is 'continuous' and femininity 'dichotomous'.<sup>6</sup> In other words, whereas men are classified according to degrees of masculinity in that one is 'more' or 'less' a man, femininity is something of a 'non-issue' – a woman is either good/decent or bad/indecant. The relation between men and women is thus made ambiguous by the contradiction between (male) dominance and (female) value; that is, between powerful men and sacred women. Femininity is cast in moral terms and masculinity is cast in a language of power. This, Melhuus suggests, is what results in the 'enigma' of suffering, virtuous women and powerful, *macho* men.

Melhuus' work is interesting because it bears witness to many of the same elements I came across carrying out my own research. However, her analytical model makes several problematic assumptions: firstly it constructs 'power' somewhat unambiguously, as a concept which is not subject to virtue; secondly it suggests that masculinity can be singularly defined through the notion of dominance and, concomitantly, that women are not powerful, cannot (in her own terms) be dominant over men; thirdly, it assumes that femininity and virtue are not subject to a sliding continuum – i.e. that one can be 'more feminine' or 'less feminine' or 'more virtuous' or 'less virtuous' as opposed to merely good or bad. The overall implication of these points being that firstly, men are not subject to virtue, and hence are excluded from suffering; and secondly, that women are not wielders of power.<sup>7</sup> There is not space here to deal with each of these assumptions individually. In what follows I will focus specifically on Melhuus' suggestion that power and virtue represent two distinct categories and her concomitant claim that as femininity pertains to one realm, and masculinity to the other. As she puts it, '[n]ot only are men and women constituted differently, but their significance for each other and for themselves is different' (1996:198).

In beginning to address this claim, I follow Strathern who asks of feminist writers 'If the relation between men and women is conceived in a contrast, then what is the point of contrast? What form of power is framed by the exclusions and oppositions?' (1988:63). What Strathern points out is the lacuna that lies in the failure to ask what the nature of the relations is (ibid.).<sup>8</sup> Thus she takes to task analyses concerned with gender identity that take the relationship between the sexes as axiomatic; as one where the tenor of the relationship is seen as arising from the need of each sex to carve out an 'antithetical definition'. In particular, Strathern

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<sup>6</sup> See also Carrier (1976, 1985) for a similar claim.

<sup>7</sup> Suffering, in this context, is meant in the 'morally prescribed' sense described in Chapters Three and Four.

<sup>8</sup> This, she suggests, stems from the fact that much feminist scholarship is assimilated to its own political position (Strathern 1988: 63).

notes the overwhelming insistence that men carve out their masculinity from the 'natural' identity of women, 'subjugating women and natural process itself to their own control' (Strathern 1988: 63).

Melhuus' depiction of dominance, and of what she terms 'power' is problematic for several interconnected reasons. The 'masculine power' Melhuus speaks of is not only heavily Freudian in character through its emphasis on phallus and acts of penetration, it is simplistically unidirectional, and lacks convincing reference to the views of her own informants on such matters. Moreover, one is left wondering whether power, in the ethnographic context she speaks of, can really be perceived as so divorced from the sacred, particularly given the fact that her informants are Catholic, and that Catholic ideology generally promotes an idea of a hierarchically-ordered realm of powerful *and* sacred authority. One suspects that the amoral, penetrative power Melhuus talks of resonates more closely with the literary analyses of authors such as Paz and Bartra than it does with local conceptions. And yet, even if such a concept of power were grounded in local conceptions, it surely would not constitute the only understanding.

In itself, there is nothing so wrong with using analytical concepts to elucidate ethnographic data, for the point of anthropological analysis is clearly to go beyond the simple reproduction of folk categories. However, a failure to properly engage with local categories confines us, in the end, to a limited view of what is being constructed in these relations. In the case of the Santa Ritan killing I have described, it would prevent an understanding of how people themselves make sense of extreme acts of violence between men and women.

### Gendered morality?

Having examined Santa Ritan people's own conceptions of power and conjugality, I come back to the theoretical proposition of Melhuus, who argues that: 'a moral order based on notions of honour and shame is first and foremost characterized by being gender specific: it is a gendered morality' (1992: 123). I would question whether the moral code *itself* is gender specific or merely gendered in its particular expression. I argue, based on the evidence I have presented here and in the preceeding chapters, that there is no such thing as a 'gendered morality'. To maintain that there is, not only assumes 'a naïve correspondence between the sexed individual and the autonomy of 'male' and 'female' viewpoints' – to borrow Strathern's words (1988: 63), but also involves a false prioritising of terms. In the Santa Ritan context at least, morality is an ungendered value; it is prior to gender rather than the other way around. What may appear to be striking differences in its form of expression are differences of expression, rather than of *kind*.



Is it not then possible that strong differences in style, aesthetic, and manner of expression between men and women in Catholic, patriarchal cultures have led theorists like Melhuus to wrongly assume that the agendas of men and women are inherently different as well? I would argue that it has, and that the propensity arises from a naturalisation, not of sex, but of gender. In such an equation, gender tends to be treated as a self-evident 'fact' that is necessarily constituent of all kinds of social and analytical categories, from kinship, and morality, to personhood. However, it is not at all obvious that in all cultures this will be the case. As Strathern has argued for Melanesia (1988), and Overing for Amazonia (1999), an antagonism about matters of morality that distinguishes public and domestic concerns is not always typical of gender relations. And as the ethnography I have presented in this and the preceding chapters shows, there is no simple correspondence between the sexed individual and the nature of 'male' and 'female' morality, or 'male' and 'female' views. Men's and women's differently presented narratives in fact betray the same fundamental concerns. Thus it cannot be that men are singularly concerned with power and women with virtue, as Melhuus would have us believe, but that these two categories collapse into one and the same.

As the re-telling of the story of Seu Roberto and Dona Beta made clear, the power that is thought to exist between couples is forever shifting, ambiguous, and wholly subject to moral reasoning. Both women and men are constantly engaged in conflicts between love and pride. Hence, a man's physical and economic power over a woman, if abused, will leave him open to condemnation. Depending upon the situation, a man's misuse of power over his wife may be transformed into a source of redemptive suffering for her. Equally so, the power a woman has over a man, if misused, will leave her open to moral condemnation and may, depending upon the circumstances, provide a source of redemptive suffering for the wronged man.

## Conclusion

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, anthropologists have attempted to interpret the difficult subject of domestic violence in various ways. However, the portrait painted by much of this literature is, ultimately, of cultures divided by gender or by affinity, into complementary but conflicting segments – that is, of cultures divided, at every turn, by categories of difference. In this chapter I have pointed out that the problem with such a portrait is not so much in the rendering of gender or division itself, as in the fetishisation of these structures to the point that everything comes to stand for difference and all analogy is erased. In relation to the material I have presented here, it is the concept of sameness, not contrast, that evinces perceptions of violence and death within marriage. And this sameness is to be found,

not in analytical concepts of power per se, but in moral discourses that surround it. As Lambek observes, to argue that people are political or desirous subjects does not preclude them from being moral subjects (2000:11). To talk of desiring yet moral subjects, however, requires us not only to supplement rule-bound structural accounts of morality with attention to moral practice, but also, to supplement accounts of practice with attention to morality.

I return to the issue of gender, for it is of course true that in Santa Rita, as elsewhere in the world, men and women occupy significantly different positions in the sexual division of labour, and that difference between the sexes is continually constructed through everyday praxis, speech, and form. It is also true that in certain contexts Santa Ritan men and women choose to evoke gender in terms of differing camps of competing values. However, the binary distinction between 'male' and 'female' that structures social life here should not blind us to the presence of a logic that emphasises the universality of moral concerns.

What I have tried to show through my own ethnographic data is how discourses of men's suffering reveal how morality informs notions of power and masculinity as much as it does notions of sexuality and femininity. Men are as likely to be cast as suffering husbands and fathers as women are suffering mothers and wives. Equally, I have tried to show that women are acknowledged to have power and that their power, like that of men, can be of a virtuous or non-virtuous sort. If this is so, then in Santa Rita a clear cut distinction in the way gender is constructed for men and women cannot be made. Rather than pertaining to two distinct categories of 'power' and 'virtue', as Melhuus suggests, the masculine and the feminine pertain to one in which both these elements are thoroughly mixed.

In saying this, my intention is not to simply re-state what has been stated many times before, that gender difference is not necessarily indicative of gender hierarchy. Rather, it is to draw attention to the similarity in the predicament of men and women vis-à-vis one another. In as much as marriage makes explicit the process of a person's loss of innocence and acquisition of power, both husbands and wives must live with the fact that each represents the other's 'fall from grace'. More relevant than the articulation of gendered identity, here, is the production of an androgynous, non-gendered discourse about social conduct and moral personhood. For though men and women's sources of power may be different, what regulates it is said to be the same. Thus in local perception, intra-conjugal violence and murder such as that which I described above are paradigmatic manifestations, not of difference surpassing identity, but of pride surpassing love.

The problem, following Strathern, lies in analyses that take the relationship between the sexes as axiomatic; as one where the tenor of the relationship is seen as arising from the need of each sex to carve out an antithetical definition to the other

(1988). Rather than carving out antithetical definitions, what Santa Rita people strove to get across was that what legitimised or de-legitimised power was the *same* for all categories of person concerned. In the presence of love, marriage is fulfilment; in the presence of pride, it delivers death. And when it strikes, love or pride, be it male or female, is commensurable. As one woman, Dona Lourdes, opined in reference to Seu Roberto and his wife: '*ela morreu, ele não morreu, mas foi o mesmo que tivessem falecido os dois*' 'She died, he didn't die, but it is as if both passed away'.

## From innocence to knowledge

It was not yet eight in the morning but already the market was hot and crowded. Seven-year-old Ignacio was leading me through the clatter of trade to his father's stall. On our way he was pointing out the produce of other traders and telling me their trade secrets. It was difficult keeping sight of him as he zigzagged ahead, leaping in nimble, flip-flopped feet, over corners of out-stretched tarpaulin piled high with brightly coloured lycra garments and various plastic items. 'And how do you help your father?' I asked, catching up. 'I do everything' he replied, 'At the end of the day, when my father has lots of bananas left, he puts half in the wheelbarrow and I go to sell them on the other side of the market where the trade is better.' We had stopped in the street, and when I looked around, I saw it was because we were suddenly stood before a wooden trestle piled high with fruit belonging to Josa, Ignacio's father. Josa was a young man in his twenties, but dressed, rather unusually, in the traditional checked shirt and smart trilby hat of the older generation. He nodded me a greeting. He was in the middle of shovelling produce into a blue polythene bag for a customer. When he finished he turned to me and said 'So Ignacio has been telling you everything about the trade? I tell you the boy is innocent no more, he is *sabido* (cunning), already, like his father'.

### Introduction

The passage from innocence (*inocência*) to knowledge (*conhecimento*) is believed, by the people of Santa Rita, to be fraught and dangerous. It is fraught because innocence – a spiritually elevated state – must be relinquished in favour of knowledge, a state that allows people to commit sin and takes them away from God. Nevertheless, it is a passage that must be undertaken by all, and so it is hardly surprising that the perceived problem this presents looms large in local discourse.

Whereas in the previous chapters I focused upon the predicament that knowledge and sin presents for married adults, in this chapter and the next, I explore the problem that knowledge and sin is thought to present for children and young, unmarried people. I shall do this by exploring a locally perceived tension between the two opposing states of innocence and knowledge; investigating the contradiction it produces as children grow up into adults. In this chapter, I will examine two types of cultural interaction that appear to be largely about the problems of knowledge and

self-awareness: the first is a common speech game played with young children; the second, a yearly ritual called *casamento de matuto*. My reason for considering these two forms of interaction together is that both position children as interlocutors in morally ambiguous scenarios, and deal with the possibility of children's transition from a state of innocence to a state of knowledge both symbolically and practically.

In what follows I shall begin by elaborating upon the perceived problem of innocence versus knowledge, outlining the implications of this problem for Santa Ritans in their everyday lives. I shall then go on to explore the concept of the child and its relation to moral personhood, before turning to describe the two forms of child-adult interaction which constitute the focus of this chapter. I suggest that we need to understand such interactions from both children's and adult's perspective, because while for adults, such practices present a means of transcending the tension inherent in the knowledge/innocence dialectic, for children, they present a means of submitting to them.

## Problems with knowledge

To Santa Ritan people, innocence – that state of being free from compromising knowledge – has a divine origin. It is, my informants told me, the human state that most mirrors that of Adam and Eve before the Fall. In discussing the myth of Genesis with the church youth group, one girl said the following to me:

'In my opinion, before they [Adam and Eve] disobeyed God they lived well, because they didn't have knowledge. The problem with people today is they have to know about everything – Man wants to be like God, all knowing, and this is wrong.'

The opposite of innocence (*inocência*) is a state of knowledge characterised by cleverness (*esperteza*) and cunning (*manhosa*). Persons that possess knowledge are, by definition, not innocent. However, to possess knowledge does not automatically imply a lesser moral state, for it is how one uses knowledge that counts. Moreover knowledge comes in different forms. Knowledge of the Bible, of manners and custom, of how best to treat people is considered to be moral knowledge which all should have. The word most often used to denote this kind of knowledge is *educação* (education). Practical knowledge, denoted by terms such as *habilidade or jeito* (skill/manner/ability), of how best to plant a field, domesticate a horse, or play an instrument is also good knowledge in the sense of being necessary and beneficial to life. Another category of knowledge that is useful in life is *erudição* (learning), abstract and academic knowledge; that which is gained through schooling, and books. In themselves, these types of knowledge are neither morally good nor bad;

however, they can be dangerous if they are abused, or if they lead a person to arrogance and pride (*orgulho*). The type of knowledge that is perceived as most morally dangerous, is knowledge about *gente* (people). People claim that it is when children begin to *saber de gente* 'know about people', that *pecadinhos* (little sins), start to occur. Very much linked to morally dangerous knowledge about *gente*, is carnal knowledge associated with *desejo* (desire). Knowledge arising from sexual relations is socially and spiritually problematic for the several interconnected reasons already discussed in Chapter Two.

There is no simple translation for what exactly is meant when people talk about *o saber de gente* 'knowledge about people'. It constitutes a type of knowledge that is predicated upon a highly developed sense of self-awareness (*consciência*) that makes it possible to read the minds of others, and hence, to manipulate them. A person with a highly developed sense for such knowledge is generally described as *sabido* (shrewd/ knowing/cunning/clever). It is precisely this kind of knowingness that is most likely to lead a person to sin. There is no fixed way to learn being *sabido* as it is thought to be acquired naturally and inevitably through an active engagement with the world. When pressed, people speak about it entering the person and taking hold via the senses: through speech (*pela fala*), through sight (*pela vista*), and through hearing (*pelo ouvir*).

A common way in which Santa Ritans reflect upon the fundamental problem of being in a state of knowledge is through the idiom of animals. The perceived dumbness and unselfconsciousness of animals contrasts sharply with local concepts of human personhood. One day Seu Mané and I were talking about a young man from a neighbouring hamlet who had recently gone to prison for the purported theft of a car. Many people were of the belief that the man was innocent, but Seu Mané did not agree. In explaining his position he said to me *nunca se vê uma vaca presa* 'one never sees a cow in prison.' The absurd image of the cow behind bars remained with me as an illustration of the more general belief that in self-awareness lies the root of all evil (*maldade*). On another occasion, a young man was found shot dead in a field, with his hands tied behind his back. The following day comments that contrasted animals with humans were rife. One woman exclaimed that in recent times, it appeared more people were being killed than cattle. Another man speculating about the reason for the shooting argued that the shot man must have done something wrong to provoke it, *porque o homem não é como o passarinho para ser atirado sem razão* 'because men are not birds to be shot down without reason'.

In this sense, people known for being *sabido* are in some way frowned upon. When I refused to sell a bicycle to my host father's brother for ten reals instead of the forty it was worth, he loudly accused me of being *sabida demais* 'too clever'. When an old and somewhat unpopular woman called Dona Dada decided to take in

the mentally-ill widow of a neighbour who had died, people thought she was doing it to get her hands on the deceased man's pension that had passed to his wife. *Aquela Dona Dada é sabida!* 'that Dona Dada is cunning!' they would declare, every time the subject arose. Another man in the village who lived by *negócio* (business), had a reputation for being brutally *sabido* and was, I was warned, to be avoided at all costs. It would often be said of this man's wife, by way of absolving her of blame for her husband's nefarious activities: *ela não sabe o homem com quem se casou* 'she does not know the man she married'. Thus contrasting her relative innocence against her husband's level of knowledge.

## Problems with innocence

In Santa Rita discourse, humans differ fundamentally from animals not only in terms of their possession of self-awareness but in their possession of a concept of time. People would sometimes point out that, unlike humans, animals do not store grain or accumulate wealth in preparation for times of scarcity ahead, thus suggesting that they are 'innocent of the future'. The biblical injunction to give up selfish preoccupation and planning for the future in order to devote oneself entirely to God in the here and now, is, however, considered a particularly hard one to obey. As Dida and Amauri once expressed, such an idealised level of innocence is totally unrealistic:

Dida: 'God requests of us that we do not worry about tomorrow....but Maya, look here, life is a thorn; it's hard! If I wasn't to worry about tomorrow, if I wasn't to work today to eat tomorrow, how would I eat?....If I eat everything I have today, what will I eat tomorrow? How can I not worry about the future? It does not make sense! I myself do not understand how a person can live like this...'

Amauri: 'I worry about tomorrow, and a lot. This business not to plan, it does not make sense. When I get up in the morning, I awaken with a head hot with worry, like a burnt match. One has to worry, right? There is no other way!.....especially not for the poor like us!'

In other words, although innocence may allow a certain closeness to God, it does not permit one to operate effectively in the world, and people in Santa Rita would frequently wax anxious over this conundrum. Following is another such case:

Francisco, a mentally-handicapped man in his mid-twenties, lived with his parents Seu Zé Mário and Dona Severina. The family had been trying for a long time to qualify Francisco for an early pension due to his incapacity to work. The official procedure regarding state pensions given out in cases of mental and physical

disability was, however, becoming ever more stringent. A recent measure had decreed that such people were only entitled to an early pension if they lived in a house where no more than one other person was also in receipt of a state pension. As both Seu Zé Mário and Dona Severina were retired and claiming state pensions, their son Francisco could not qualify. Thus the couple came up with the plan of pretending that Francisco lived in the house of his older brother, half a mile away. The plan failed, however, because Francisco had to be interviewed alone by a person from the *Prefeitura* (local council) and was unable to lie about anything, least of all about where he lived. The day after Francisco's interview, I decided to pay a visit to the family to find out how it had gone. I arrived to find Seu Zé Mário sat on the cement step of his front veranda, recounting the episode, somewhat sardonically, to a couple of passing neighbours:

'Beforehand we tell him [Francisco] over and over, tell him, "You live with your brother. Understand?" We say, "When the woman asks where you live, you say *I live with my brother*." We make him repeat it. Each time, the creature starts to cry saying that he does not want to live with his brother. We say, "It's not real boy, it's pretend!" Yet every time we ask the question he answers [imitating Francisco's slurred and laboured speech] "I live with my father!" "No!" we say, "you live with your brother!" ...and then ask him again. Again, "I live with my father!".....So what do you think happened when the woman from the *Prefeitura* came? She asked him where he lived and he said "I live with my father!" [Slaps hands together] There went the money!'

The passing couple laughed long and hard at Seu Zé Mário's humorous account and regarded Francisco, who was sat in the corner of the veranda, with renewed interest. 'You'll never do as a husband, will you Francisco? You just cannot lie!' teased the man. Dona Severina, who was leaning in the doorway, nodded her head in agreement and said, 'This one is God's child.'

Although I was aware that people in Santa Rita were constantly weighing up the relative merits of living effectively in the world against the weight of sin required to do so, the existential problem this presented did not truly hit me until the day I myself was cheated out of a very large sum of money, whilst attempting to buy a car. Everyone in the village knew about my desperate search for a vehicle. I was in a rush to acquire a car, not only so that I could get about more easily within my field-site, but so that I could occasionally get away from it. Being in such a hurry, I failed to listen to the advice I had been given by my host father Amauri and his brothers, to wait for someone they knew and trusted to sell me a decent car at a good price. Instead I went ahead and bought one off a man from the local market town. Unbeknownst to me, the man was a highly disreputable character with criminal links and a violent reputation.

When the vehicle arrived in the village, the family with whom I lived were up in arms. They could see immediately that I had been ripped off. The rusty car sat



outside the house in the late afternoon sun attracting a crowd of inquisitors. Somehow, in the space between my handing over the money and having the car delivered to me, it had lost several small parts of its engine, its horn, and windscreen wipers. Gathering men would take one glance at it and tut loudly at my stupidity. Amauri could barely stand to look at me. 'You should have listened!' he barked, 'A person like you is unable to negotiate with someone like that!' He kicked the wheel of the car and made a swearing action with his arm. I was stunned. Never had I seen Amauri so angry. Everyone present was worried about the mess that might ensue if I decided to try and get my money back. All around me people were muttering about the potential trouble my naivety had landed the family in. Others, in my defence, were saying 'It's not her fault, she *did not know*'.

The tension on this occasion built up to such a point that I started to feel tears welling, and was ushered inside the house. There I sat in the kitchen, weeping before a small audience of women and children, whose disbelief at my stupidity was now edged with sympathy. Embarrassed at the commotion I had caused, I uttered various apologies for having been so naïve. Dida, who was visibly alarmed at my sudden emotional display, replied: 'Listen Maya, you are innocent, yes, but it is also a good thing. In fact, it is so good we should be pleased you were robbed!' The humorous contradiction of this statement was not lost on the audience and giggles erupted. Dida, carried on entertaining the crowd: 'It's good that you were robbed! What do you want to be *sabida* for?'

The argument here concerns an explicitly recognised tension between the states of innocence and knowledge, and the question this poses for our understanding of Santa Ritan society overall. The example involving the car is simply one manifestation of a wider contradiction between the need to make a profit and the injunction not to lie. As I discussed in Chapter Two, an ability to do *negócio* (business) is a valued worldly skill, although it is predicated quite specifically upon a lack of innocence. To have a reputation for being good at *negócio* is very much prized amongst men, and is especially important in the context of marriage, where a household's income depends on the kind of economic deals a husband is able to perform outside the house. A certain loss of innocence is thus a necessary prerequisite to caring for others.

The concept of the child and the problem of growing up in the world.

In Santa Rita, as in the rest of Brazil, a concept of the child (*criança*) as distinct from the adult (*adulto*) exists. Indeed, Santa Ritan ideas about the child are strongly resonant with Christian notions concerning the state of the soul. People believe that all children come from God and are born with a soul (*alma*). A baby's soul, however,

is different from an adult's. Rather than being a fully developed entity imprinted with an individual history of good or bad deeds, it is nothing more than a *capacity* for thought and emotion. A baby's soul does not automatically confer moral personhood, and the young, un-socialised infant is often regarded as more animal-like than human. This is suggested by frequent use of the term *bicho* (animal/creature) when referring to babies and infants up to the age of two to three years.

In baptising a child, which can occur anytime up to the age of three or four, parents claim that they show their child *respeito* (respect). Through baptism, a child is enabled to grow into a moral human being capable of returning the *respeito* it has been shown. In confluence with ideas about baptism providing the child with a point of entry to the Christian faith, people regard baptism as setting the child's soul on the correct path – towards God as opposed to away from Him. It is then the job of the child's parents and Godparents to keep the child upon this path, through raising it properly and sending it to catechism classes in preparation for first communion around the age of ten or eleven. In this pre-communion stage of childhood, children are believed to possess a basic level of innocence which marks them out as closer to God. Their innocence and hence purity derives from their having arrived only recently in the world. Adults, correlatively, are less pure, and further away from God. The essential innocence of pre-communion children has been noted before, particularly in reference to the widespread Catholic belief that young children and infants who die are without sin, and so destined to become 'little angels' (Nations and Rebhum 1988, Scheper-Hughes 1992).

Santa Ritan people place a certain value on child-like innocence. In the local school room there is a handmade poster proclaiming the saying of Christ: 'Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven' (Mathew, 28.1). When I asked the school teacher Dalva about the poster, she explained to me that Jesus had loved and valued children *por causa de sua inocência* 'because of their innocence'. On another occasion during a sermon in the local chapel, the priest exhorted the congregation to become open and receptive to God *como crianças* 'like children'. He elaborated upon the innocent trust that a small child places in its parents, and used it as a model of the trust that an adult should have in God. A child's innocent trust in its parents, he suggested, allows it to jump into the darkness when it hears a parent's voice calling. Adults too, he declared, must be able to make such a jump if they hear God calling them.

For ordinary Santa Ritans, however, the value placed on children's innocence is tempered by the fact that such a value is essentially a hollow one. Santa Ritan people recognise that a child is a being that does no evil only because it knows none.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As the philosopher Archard writes, the child, in this conception 'does not fear power because it does not see what power is. It does not defer to status because it does not understand what status implies' (1993:40).

Local conceptions of the child do not extend to incorporate romanticist notions about child-like wisdom. Whereas, in the tradition of writers such as Rousseau, Blake, and Wordsworth a child's innocence allows it to possess a preternatural wisdom uncorrupted and blinded by formal education, Santa Ritan people insist that children are not wise (*sábio*) because they do not know right from wrong. This is the primary reason for catechism classes, schooling, and disciplining children at home. Children need to acquire knowledge because it is useful, and because they need to know the correct way to treat people and go about in the world.

The concept of the child is thus based as much upon an inner state of ignorance (*ignorância*) as it is upon one of innocence. But whereas innocence is positive because it suggests a lack of morally dangerous knowledge (such as knowledge about *gente*, and carnal knowledge), ignorance is the inverse, implying a lack of the kind of knowledge that makes one into a proper moral person (i.e. knowledge about God, good manners, and so forth). The problem for Santa Ritan people lies in the fact that each state implies the presence of the other. Thus, while adults must strive to rid children of ignorance, it is impossible to do so without ridding them of innocence. All desirable knowledge implies its undesirable inverse. Because of this, people often hint at the immoral potential embedded in all kinds of knowledge and skill.

The way in which children in Santa Rita are treated suggests that childhood is implicitly understood to be made up of two distinct periods: an earlier period that lasts until first communion (around the age of ten), and a later period that lasts up until marriage, which I shall discuss in more detail in the following chapter. First communion is the marker of the child as a full participant in the life of the Church. Furthermore, first communion also confers moral personhood because it marks the end of catechism classes and the commencement of the child's ability to recognise good from bad and right from wrong. Pre-communion children are therefore perceived as less accountable for misdeeds than those who have been fully catechised to partake in the Eucharist, and as such tend to be treated more liberally by adults. Thus when pre-communion children misbehave they are scolded, but not as severely as their catechised age-mates. Pre-communion children are also allowed a good deal more freedom than older children to go where they like, and do as they please. Parents do not police the comportment or behaviour of pre-communion children in anything like the same way that they do their post-communion counterparts. Furthermore, as I shall discuss further in the following chapter, whereas pre-communion children are allowed to play (*brincar*) quite freely, post-communion children are not. Linked to this is the observable fact that pre-communion children are engaged significantly more by adults in their own forms of joking and banter. Such playful interaction is normally very affectionate, and involves lots of physical contact.

The essential differentiation between the earlier stage and the later one is the relationship of the individual toward knowledge. While children are perceived to be constantly learning about the world, life in the pre-communion stage is accepted as constituting the period *par excellence* for the acquisition of knowledge, simply because it is the least restricted phase for doing so. Several factors point to this: for most children, childhood will be the only time of their life that they attend school. It is also the time during which they are expected to acquire their basic knowledge of the Bible, and of Christian practice through catechism. Also, as will be shown further on, it is the only period of life where there is relative freedom of expression and explorative play is allowed. In all these senses, then, children are perceived as inhabiting a stage in which their prerogative is to learn. And to learn, not just about good (via school and catechism) but about bad as well. In the rest of this chapter I shall focus attention on children's acquisition of potentially immoral knowledge (particularly that bound up with marriage) through the two forms of adult-child interaction mentioned in the introduction to this chapter.

## **Acquiring knowledge through speech games and ritual**

In Santa Rita, then, a central factor for distinguishing a child from an adult, in addition to physical development and level of social and economic dependency, is her inner level of knowledge about the world. With this in mind, I turn now to examine a very common type of speech game that occurs between children and adults, and which I witnessed on countless occasions during my fieldwork. I use the word 'game', here, in a loose sense to denote what is actually a form of playful interaction. Such interactions are not formally articulated practices; they do not have 'winning' or 'losing' as their objective, but constitute a style of communication with a particular purpose. It is worth noting that the game is always played among kin, and tends to occur whenever people are grouped together. Two or more adults plus children of differing ages are often present for the interaction, suggesting the importance of an audience. During the interaction, the child performing, as it were, appears to be aware of their entertainment value to the others present. If the interaction lasts for a long time and is very humorous, it will often pull a larger crowd. All spectators, whether adults or children, find the banter being channelled through the child greatly amusing. The more outrageous the insults that are channelled through the child, the greater the amusement value to the onlookers.

## Speech games between children and adults

One morning I returned with Amauri from town where we had been to buy medicine for his goats. On our way, we stopped by at his brother-in-law Gilberto's house. Gilberto was sat outside the house with his son Luciano (aged three), and his two adult daughters Chrislane and Sofia. Amauri and I sat down with them to converse. The following interaction occurred between the two men and Luciano the boy:

A: Hey, Luciano, aren't you going to ask for your favourite uncle's blessing?

[Luciano looks shyly at Amauri and turns to bury his face in Gilberto's lap]

A: Hey, *moleque* (rascal), I'm talking to you: aren't you going to ask for my blessing?

G: [to Luciano] Say 'You are not really my uncle', say it.

L: You are not really my uncle.

[laughter from all present]

A: [to Luciano] What sort of disrespect is this?!

G: [to Luciano] Say, 'You are not really my uncle, you are too poor to be my uncle!', say it..

L: You are not really my uncle, you are too poor to be my uncle!

[hearty laughter from everyone present]

G: [to Luciano] Say 'If you were a rich man, I would call you uncle', say it.

L: If you were a rich man, I would call you uncle.

A: [to Luciano] Is that so? Then you won't find many uncles around here. [laughs]

Later on that same day, after several hours had passed, the family and I were having supper together. Luciano ran into the house, as often he did after he had finished supper at his own house, and climbed onto Dida's lap. Regarding the young boy with unabashed affection, Amauri repeated his question of earlier that day: 'Aren't you going to ask your uncle for his blessing?' With a mouth full of half-chewed food, Luciano replied 'You are not really my uncle, you are too poor to be my uncle'. At this Dida and her two daughters, who had not witnessed the afternoon exchange, gasped with amazement at how one so young could have come up with such a thing. Amauri did not qualify where this phrase had come from. 'You see how intelligent the boy is?' he said beaming with pleasure, 'Ave Maria, he is clever indeed!'

Another example of this speech game occurred in the house of an elderly couple called Dona Maria and Seu Adalberto on an occasion when I had been invited for lunch. Their daughter Roseli and granddaughter Cassia (aged four) were also present. After we had finished eating, Seu Adalberto got up from the table and announced that he was going down to the *barraca* and would be back later. Cassia sprang to the old man's side and asked to go with him, to which Seu Adalberto replied that where he was going was no place for her. Dona Maria cast her husband a withering look and started to busy herself with dirty dishes. It was clear that she did not approve of her husband's sudden leave-taking for the *barraca*. The following interaction occurred between the old couple and their granddaughter:

M: [To Cassia, while backwards and forwards, clearing table] say, 'But where you are going is no place for an old man like you', say it.  
 C: [Coquette and suddenly aware of having acquired an audience] But where you are going is no place for an old man like you.  
 A: [To Dona Maria] Ah, I won't be gone long woman.  
 M: [To Cassia] Say, 'No, just long enough to come back stinking of *cana!* (sugar cane, a euphemism for cashaca)', say it.  
 C: No, just long enough to come back stinking of *cana!*  
 [Laughter, from everyone present]

With an embarrassed smile, Seu Adalberto stuffed his hat under his arm and shook my hand goodbye. He stepped out of the back door and made down the path. Dona Maria, without a glance at her departing husband, addressed Cassia: 'Run after him and say: "If you have too much *cana* you can spend the night in the *curral* (pen for keeping cattle, goats)"'. Roseli, myself, and Dona Maria laughed as Cassia raced after her grandfather to deliver the last line.

In yet another exchange Deia, a poor woman who worked in the *casa de farinha*, was passing by the house of her wealthier brother. Her sister-in-law who was standing outside, waved to Deia and her three year old daughter as they passed. Deia said to her young daughter 'Wave back and say: "O *tia* (aunt), give us some money so we can also live in a beautiful house"'.

### Speech games as meaningful actions

Two important points need to be made about this kind of interaction overall. The first of these concerns the age of the participants. The game is always initiated by adults and with children between roughly between the ages of two to four years. Although slightly older children will sometimes be roped into such interactions, younger children tend to be favoured over older ones because, while they are basically old enough to grasp the 'rules', their language is not yet fluent or mature. This is because linguistic ability is generally taken as signifying intellectual understanding. Thus, by virtue of being foreign and not knowing the local language very well, I was frequently co-opted into similar forms of interaction myself. In fact, it was my own experience of being made to utter sentences whose meanings escaped me that alerted me to the same form of interaction between adults and the very young. Notwithstanding my own experiences, however, it is clear that this kind of speech game is ideally for and about children. This is because, as I have mentioned, Santa Ritans view linguistic development in infants as signifying the development of an inner state of knowledge. A direct correlation is therefore made between the child's ability to speak and its capacity to 'know' about the world. Adult foreigners are, of course, acknowledged as something of an exception to this rule.

The second point I wish to make concerns the relationships of those involved. The child will always be a close relation of one or both of the adults involved (i.e. son/daughter, nephew/niece, or grandchild). To co-opt a child one does not know into such a game would be unthinkable. While the relationship of the child to the adult who is levelling the insults appears relatively flexible (the child may be almost any relation to that adult so long as there is a certain level of trust and closeness between them) the relationship of the child to the adult receiving the barbed comments or insults is more restricted. For example, it is significant that not one of the many instances I can recall involves husbands or wives channelling insults to one another directly through their own offspring. This, I suggest, would be crossing the line with regards to the deep level of respect children must accord parents. Deep levels of respect must also be maintained between generations. Therefore, adults channelling insults will only do so to people within their own generation and never older. From older to younger can and does, however, occur. However, with regards to the relationships between the adults involved, all the interactions witnessed involved the channelling of insults between affines. We can see therefore that all the examples given centre around the moral problematic that marriage and affinity tend to generate, a problematic I discussed in Chapter Two.

### Children as both initiates and purifiers of knowledge

We have seen that although children's innocence is perceived as a spiritually elevated state, it limits them in worldly terms, and they are therefore obliged to escape from it. This leads to a situation in which adults struggle hard to negate the moral ambiguity and sin of worldly life (marriage, commerce, sex, and so forth), whilst having to bring their children up to embrace it.

I therefore suggest that we understand the speech play of the sort described above as one which enables adults to negotiate the moral minefield knowledge produces. It is significant, for example, that affines would never address one another so disrespectfully under such ordinary circumstances. However, as we have seen, children may become safe channels for the expression of such immoral hostility. A child's perceived innocence takes the immoral edge off an adult's words without stripping those words of their message. In understanding how this might be possible, it helps to reflect, for a moment, upon local notions of spiritual healing which I discussed in detail in Chapter Three. In Santa Rita, religious healers known as *rezadeiras* are considered to be closer to God than the average adult person. The *rezadeira's* spiritual power is talked about as a kind of capacity to bear and absorb the negative forces that afflict other people. Therefore, when a person is being healed of the evil-eye, the *rezadeira* yawns widely in order to take in the evil, and cries tears

as she absorbs it. Powerful *rezadeiras* are said to have a great capacity to bear suffering, just as ordinary women, through marriage and childbirth, become metaphorical containers of suffering. The significant point here is that a *rezadeira* cures by absorbing the evil afflicting others and ‘bearing’ it herself. Once inside her body, evil loses its force.<sup>2</sup> In a similar way, then, children act as absorbers for the evil embedded in words. By acting as vessels (or ‘bearers’) of what is, essentially, morally dangerous knowledge, they make its existence less dangerous in the world. As mentioned before, this is borne out by the fact that two adults passing such comments directly to one another, even jokingly, run a significantly higher risk of rupturing their relationship irrevocably.

In seeking to understand such adult-child interactions, I draw upon Briggs (1998), whose reflections upon Inuit adult-child ‘morality play’ led her to the conclusion that, whatever its intention and outcome, adults subconsciously ‘reaffirm their own emotional commitment to their worlds and so both recreate culture and renew themselves as they dramatize, manage, and sometimes negotiate the issues in their own lives through their charged interactions with children’ (Briggs 1998: 207).

I would argue that the ‘morality-play’ of Santa Ritans offers adults a similar opportunity: to render the difficulty of certain relationships visible and, in doing so, to ‘recreate culture and renew themselves’. However, unlike Briggs who argues a certain open-ended-ness to this kind of play, I have pointed to the specific nature of children in local thinking and to how this fosters a particular sort of objective. The objective, I suggest, is to transcend the problems inherent in being in a state of knowledge. By channelling immoral intentions through innocents, persons reduce the risk of social and spiritual rupture.

When we consider the agency that children have, however, a dual aspect to such interactions comes to light. In short, interactions such as those described are not *solely* between or about adults, as if the children were entirely pawn-like in adult affairs. We see this most clearly with Cassia, who is being taught that going off to get drunk is morally wrong. However, in that particular interaction, Cassia is also being taught a confrontational and disrespectful way of addressing a husband. It seems that adults themselves, recognise the potential effects such games may have upon children. As we saw in the case of Amauri and Luciano, the possibility – indeed the inevitability – that children will take up such dangerous knowledge themselves and be changed by it does not pass unnoticed. Here is where the similarity between *rezadeiras* and children breaks down. For whereas *rezadeiras* have the capacity to bear content without being changed by it, children do not. So it

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<sup>2</sup> The *rezadeira* has absorbed the evil. Her purity cancels it out which is why it will not, in turn, afflict her. It is important to note, however, that people always stress that theoretically she might become afflicted. In a way, this contributes towards the sense of danger healing holds, and the sacrifice healing involves of the self, on behalf of others. This is how such healers earn their respect.



would seem that this possibility of change is a large part of, and perhaps a motivation for, such interactions. Children need to learn to survive successfully in an imperfect and hostility filled world, and through the process of such speech games, children are made aware of the fraught and immoral element to social life. I turn now to look at a form of interaction between adults and children that happens only once a year, to examine how it deals with the same theme in a different form.

### ***Casamento de matuto: a ritualised loss of innocence***

During the June festival of São João, children and young, unmarried people perform a theatrical dance called *Casamento de matuto* (wedding of the country bumpkin). The dance itself, called a *quadrilha*, involves an equal number of male and female participants and takes the form of couples dancing to instructions spoken by a caller. A small play performed before the dance tells the story of a shotgun wedding, and involves a bride (*noiva*), groom (*noivo*), bride's father (*pai de noiva*), priest (*padre*), and local chief of police (*delegado*). The other *quadrilha* dancers comprise the wedding guests (*convidados*). Optional characters include the bride's mother (*mãe de noiva*), God-parent witnesses (*padrinhos*), and armed assistants to the chief of police (*ajudantes*). The story behind the wedding is not made explicit at any point in its staging, but derives implicitly from the characters that partake in it, and the dialogue they perform. The story behind the wedding is as follows: a girl becomes pregnant by her boyfriend and her father demands that the boy marry her. The boy attempts to flee, so the father asks the local *delegado* and his armed guards to intervene. The boy is caught and brought to the altar where the pregnant bride awaits him. The wedding is performed by the *padre*, under the watchful eye of the *delegado* and his armed *ajudantes*. Once the marriage has been performed, the bride, groom, and other characters join the guests for the 'celebration' and the *quadrilha* commences.

The performance is meant to be comic, and characters dress humorously in parody of the *matuto* (bumpkin). Girls wear traditional floral-print frocks with petticoats, collars, and frills. Hair is worn plaited, adorned with a profusion of bows, and make-up is applied coarsely. A typical *matuta* has thick blue shadow on her eyelids and big pink circles of rouge on her cheeks. Freckles may also be drawn across her face and one or two front teeth may be blacked-out to look as if they are missing. Boys wear patched trousers, white shirts, brightly patterned bow-ties, and straw hats. Some might add painted-on freckles and blacked-out teeth. Prepubescent boys, in particular, often paint on false beards and moustaches. The only characters to deviate from this look are the bride, who wears a white wedding dress (sometimes

including cushioning around the waist to make her appear pregnant), and the *padre* who wears a black or purple gown.

Curiously enough, there is no attempt amongst people to disassociate themselves from the parody of the *matuto*. As one woman exclaimed when I asked her what a *matuto* was: 'What is a *matuto*? It's us! Us! People who live the way we do'. It seems that the willingness to simultaneously mock and embrace the *matuto* image was part of a wider tradition people had of telling self-deprecating stories about themselves in relation to modern technology in both the present and past.<sup>3</sup> If, then, one considers that the *matuto* is nothing more than a person with less learning and sophistication than someone from a metropolis, a positive association with innocence becomes apparent. In popular culture, the *matuto* is both a buffoon and a type of anti-intellectual hero.

Every year, school children perform the *casamento de matuto* with their class. For the entire week of São João, afternoons are filled with staged performances by classes of school children, to which parents are invited to attend. It is important to note, however, that performances by younger children often involve only the minimum number of characters, such as a bride, groom, and priest. Dialogue before the dance commences is also pared down and the performance really consists of nothing more than the *quadrilha*. Performances by older groups of children are likely to involve more characters and dialogue, but revolve primarily around the dance itself. It is only performances by teenagers and young, unmarried adults that include the full dialogue and all characters. It is therefore this performance that makes the moral content of the story most explicit.

In school performances, an accordionist and a drummer provide the live music for the dancing. Following the performance, drinks and traditional specialties such as cassava cakes, sweet tapioca pancakes, and cornmeal puddings are served. Amongst young girls, there is always some competition to be the bride. For boys, being chosen to be the groom is not as competitive an event, although it is still considered a special part.

With the exception of some of the boys in their early teens, children revel in the opportunity to dress up like adults. Weeks before the *casamento de matuto* takes place, children start nagging their parents to help them put together an outfit. On the day of the performance, they strut proudly around the village showing these off. With their newfound confidence born from their outfits, many children normally too shy to speak to adults they do not know will run up to them, inviting them to admire their frilly frocks and painted on beards. Adults clearly enjoy helping children

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<sup>3</sup> There were several funny stories of this type. For example, one revolved around the first time a car arrived in the village and how the men, thinking it was a beast, started beating it with sticks. Another involved the first ever time a group of people from the village rode on an escalator in the shopping centre in the nearby town. There were several others concerning misunderstandings over first sightings of aeroplanes. All such stories suggested, in different ways, a moment of loss of innocence.

prepare for the day. Mothers take time out of their normal routines to dress their brides and grooms, sew patches on trousers, and hunt desperately around for the right kind of hat. When the children are ready, they wander through the village in groups, turning up at the houses of adult relatives, whose duty it is to closely inspect and laugh appreciatively at their costumes. Men try on the boys' hats and, tongue-in-cheek, offer them cigarettes and alcoholic drinks. Sometimes a boy will be asked '*Cadé a mulher sofrida?*' 'Where is your suffered wife?', producing much amusement. The 'groom' is often singled out for special attention by adult women and men. When they see him walking past, women will say loudly, in mock disapproval '*Lá vai o safado*' 'There goes the rascal'. Men tease the groom for his *safadeza* (cunning naughtiness), they ruffle his hair and say things such as '*Veja o condenado!*' 'See the condemned one!' Boys derive much enjoyment from this kind of interaction and some will brag to adults about their numerous amorous conquests. A favourite game among small boys is 'being drunk', which involves pretending to be drunk and falling over a lot.

Girls wander around the village seeking attention in much the same way as the boys. Rather than make fun of them, however, adults concentrate on admiring their clothes. The bride will be gently teased with comments such as 'It's your wedding day!' and 'Where is your fiancé, has he run away?' If the bride is a little bit older, she might also be asked 'When is the baby due?' Such types of question cause much laughter among adults and embarrassment to the girl. Whether or not a child is aware of the story behind the *casamento de matuto* will depend upon their individual level of awareness. Adults never spell out the full story or its moral implications to children, it is simply assumed that as children get older, they piece it together for themselves.

As stated before, the biggest and most elaborate performance of *casamento de matuto* is carried out by unmarried men and women in their teens and early twenties. This performance is arranged by the young people themselves and is a much more polished affair. Participants are likely to be linked through kinship and locality, or will know one another through school or church. In Santa Rita, the big performance by young people occurs at night, and is watched by people from neighbouring villages all around. A small stage is built in the centre of the village for the musicians to play, and special lights are rigged up to illuminate the dance floor. The night air is permeated by the rhythmic percussion of the band, and the scent of smouldering bonfires. Before the performers arrive, people throng the area consuming food and drink brought along for the 'wedding celebration'. Men drape the bar, drinking cachaça, and children hover around the man roasting cobs of corn on his brazier like insects around a frame. Eventually, the 'guests' arrive and make two lines on the centre of the dancefloor, forming an aisle at the top of which stands the *padre* and

the *delegado*. A horse-drawn cart decorated with palm fronds and paper chains pulls up carrying the bride and her father. Upon reaching the top of the aisle representing the altar, the bride takes her place and the short piece of dialogue is performed in humorous rhyming verse.

The bride bemoans the fact that the groom has not shown up. The bride's father consorts with the *padre* and *delegado*, and the *delegado* offers to go and look for him. The *delegado* disappears and then returns accompanied by his armed guards, marching the groom in front of him. The groom is shoved into place next to the bride and the wedding ceremony commences. The *padre* asks the groom if he 'takes this girl to be his wife', to which the groom answers: 'no, but if I do not I'm going directly to my coffin'. He asks the bride the same, to which she replies, 'all I know is that they brought me here today and told me to say yes.' With the brief ceremony complete, the *padre* declares '*viva os noivos!*' 'long live the couple', and the guests shout '*viva!*' in return. The *padre* then enjoins everyone to celebrate with a dance. Here the dialogue part of the performance ends, and the *quadrilha* commences.

### *Casamento de matuto* as cosmology and as practice

*Casamento de matuto* is a dramatization of the most crucial stage in the life-course for any Santa Ritan person: marriage. In local perception, marriage is a place from which there is no return; a stage in the life-course which irrevocably changes the inner person, both in the eyes of society, and in the eyes of God. In as much as marriage represents the final loss of innocence in a person's life, it is an apt symbol through which to reflect upon and rephrase the problems inherent in the acquisition of knowledge. The *casamento de matuto* is, however, about the problems of knowledge *par excellence*. It depicts the inevitability of sexual desire and its consequences through differing layers of subtext. On a certain level, one can read the performance as a straightforward parable about the preservation of virginity. In this rather obvious sense, it constitutes a warning tale to unmarried people about the potentially dangerous consequences of sexual intercourse. Young women and men perceive the shame that pre-marital pregnancy brings upon parents, and confront the idea of violent reprisals and/or of being coerced to spend the rest of their lives with someone they would rather not.

However, there is another level on which the story can be read. Rather than a parable about the immorality of pre-marital sex; the sexual act and pregnancy of the *noiva* are metonyms for the aggregate loss of innocence involved in marriage overall. In the enactment of the *casamento de matuto*, positive and negative – both pleasure and pitfall – are compressed: the serious social implications of pre-marital sex with the humour of its rendering; pain of death with the fertility of the *noiva* and the

proclamation of 'viva!' at the end; and the unwillingness of the couple to marry with the gleeful, celebratory dancing of the guests. The performance dramatizes a deep seated conflict between religious ideals and the pragmatic requirements of worldly social life. The religious ideal devalues marriage as the most prominent manifestation of human self-awareness and the condition for sin it creates. Social pragmatism, however, indicates that the loss of innocence is unavoidable, and must be embraced. Marriage may be predicated upon a dangerous state of knowledge, but it is a socially constructive life-stage which leads as much toward life (production and reproduction) as toward death (cunning, egotism, and a distance from God).

Santa Ritan people themselves claim that the *casamento de matuto* is performed every year *pelas crianças* 'for the children'; it is primarily *uma tradição das crianças* 'a children's tradition' because it is children and young people who perform it, and who enjoy themselves the most. When I asked what the purpose of its performance was, I was told that it was simply to have fun. As one woman replied when I asked her why *casamento de matuto* was performed: '*é apenas uma brincadeira, é para divertimento – para a gente se divertir!*' 'it is only child's play, it is for enjoyment – for people to have fun!'

In order to understand the *casamento de matuto*, it is important to recognise that the 'fun' of its performance does not start with the play and dance, it starts hours (sometimes days) before the actual performance of the dance, with the organisation of costumes, the process of dressing up, and the casual interactions that occur as dressed-up children wander around the village. From the moment that children don their 'adult' *matuto* costumes, they begin to 'perform' being adults. The very fun and sensuality of such improvised performance is, for Santa Ritan people, the principle objective of the ritual, and I would argue that it is this performative and somewhat indeterminate aspect which allows the ritual to achieve a social transformation in the wider sense. A performative approach to ritual is extremely useful for understanding the *casamento de matuto*, as it recognises that it is via the human creativity and physicality of performance that people fashion rituals that in turn mold their world (Austin 1975; Burke 1987; Goffman 1974; Turner 1969, 1974).<sup>4</sup>

I return, then, to the fact that *casamento de matuto* is proclaimed to be a 'children's tradition' in the sense that it is children and, more generally *un-married* people that perform it. I see two main reasons for this. The first has to do with the symbolic dimension of the performance. In relation to the analysis described above, children, I would argue, stand as metonyms for innocence. If we accept that the ritual is a dramatization of the tension between being in a state of innocence versus one of knowledge we may notice that all the characters involved fall into the latter category.

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<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive summary of practice and performance based theories of ritual, see Bell (1997: 72-79).

The only possible exception being the *padre* who falls into neither as he is more knowledgeable than a child yet, through his lack of carnal knowledge, more innocent than a married person. The fact that the *casamento* is enacted by children closes the circle, as it were, representing within the ritual, all three states. Converging with the presence of children is their status as *matutos*, which suggests innocence once again. As described before, the *matuto* is a kind of anti-intellectual hero in the Brazilian imagination. He is defined largely by his *lack* of knowledge and learning and stands in opposition to the sophisticated and knowledgeable town dweller.

The second reason for the use of children relates to the practical, performative side of the ritual. For the purposes of analysis I suggest it helps to regard the *casamento de matuto*, in this context, as a creative form of adult-child interaction, much like the speech games described earlier. Within the process as a whole – a process encompassing everything from the creation of costumes, the dressing-up and wandering about before the central performance, to the *quadrilha* itself – children are encouraged by adults to partake of the immoral world. The apparent paradox is that what makes it entertaining and humorous for adults is the innocence, and hence the ultimate inability, of children to really do this. However, and as with the speech games analysed above, the process is designed to render a transformation in the children, for through their performances they acquire new knowledge about the world.

Indeed, Santa Ritan people seem clearly aware of the way that children, through games and play, increase their self-awareness (*consciência*), and gain dangerous knowledge about people (*gente*) and the world. In short, through play (*brincadeira*) children are recognised as having the capacity to transform themselves; a point to which I shall return in more detail in the following chapter. Thus, just as ordinary child's play is filled with a certain dangerous and transformative potential, so is that involved in the *casamento de matuto*.

Herein we can see that, as with the speech game described earlier, divesting children of a certain innocence is one of the outcomes of the ritual. For it is useful to observe that whereas adults have some level of control over their children's acquisition of certain types of knowledge through disciplining them at home and sending them to school and catechism classes, they have little or no control over their acquisition of the other types of more dangerous knowledge, such as carnal knowledge and knowledge about *gente*. In light of this, a ritual such as *casamento de matuto* offers a structure through which adults may, through playful inversion, claim some control over the other side of the transformation that children are destined to undergo. By bantering with them about their imagined *noivos*, *noivas*, and *mulhers sofridas*, adults ascribe children the sexual agency of adults. In doing so they elicit

from them an individuated consciousness of the immoral side of sexual activity and the dangers it entails.

It might be said that *casamento de matuto* addresses both the constructive and destructive side of sexual knowledge. It addresses the fact that marriage involves sin and danger, but as a means toward reproduction, constitutes a celebratory event. Yet what children and adults ultimately do or do not take from the ritual is open to speculation as its message and symbolism is open-ended and dependent upon the context of its performance. Nevertheless it can be said that the performance of the *casamento de matuto*, with all its humorous interaction between generations, contains a definite potential: the potential to *achieve* a loss of innocence as well to address what such a loss would mean.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to show how knowledge and innocence prevail in the Santa Ritan imagination as a set of competing discourses. Such discourses are particularly pertinent with regards to children. The playful interactions I have chosen to describe here consist of speech games and a yearly tradition wherein children perform the immoral behaviours and predicaments inherent in adult relationships. I have shown how for adults, the innocence of young children is both a source of anxiety and a resource to be mined. Their lack of knowledge about the world makes them ideal interlocutors in morally ambiguous situations between knowing adults. However, children's innocence is constantly under subtle surveillance, as adults perceive the process of growing up in the world as one requiring careful management. Through the mutually creative and playful processes described, children are encouraged to acquire both good and bad types of knowledge. Thus they are enabled to survive successfully in a world of competing values. In this sense, rather than subscribing to liberal Western discourses that speak of a need to cherish innocence and prolong childhood for as long as possible, Santa Ritan people subscribe to a different idea. For them, innocence should not be preserved, but attenuated early on through playful initiations into the moral ambiguity of the adult life-world.

## From knowledge to its moral management

### Introduction

In this chapter I continue along the same vein as in the last chapter, looking at child-adult interaction, and focusing on adults' perceptions of children's social development. Whereas in the last chapter I focused heavily on younger children (i.e. pre-communion, approximately ten years and under) this chapter will focus primarily on *jovens* (youth). *Jovens* are not only older than *crianças* (little children), but are perceived as being well on their way to attaining an adult-like self-awareness (*consciência*). However, while the development of self-awareness in *jovens* is thought to involve a certain amount of spiritual risk and inter-personal danger, this is managed and dealt with through the practice of child labour.

I shall therefore begin my discussion by examining some of the literature on child labour, focusing upon the situation in Brazil and Latin America. Following this, I will describe how youth (*juventude*) is constructed as a phase of the life cycle which poses a unique ontological problem. I shall then explore how child labour practice apparently offers a solution to this problem, before concluding the chapter with a discussion of some historical Christian conceptions of children and childhood.

### Debates about child labour

The existence of child labour in different parts of the world not only raises the issue of what is produced, but also of what it suggests about 'childhood' as a cultural and historical construct. In Latin America particularly, surprisingly few studies of contemporary children consider the possibility that there may be multiple forms and concepts of childhood coexisting with one another at a single moment. Still less, that the terms and limits of these socially-constructed notions are partially set by children themselves (Hecht 2002: 247).<sup>1</sup> For example, one study of children in a shanty town in Rio de Janeiro that also makes reference to children in Northeast Brazil suggests that 'in Brazil, childhood is a privilege of the rich and practically nonexistent for the

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<sup>1</sup> In his child-centred study of Brazilian street children, Hecht points out that rather than remaining dependent upon their parents, poor children actively seek work, and are likely to take pride in working and bringing in resources for the household (1998).



poor' (Goldstein 1998: 415). Another Brazilian scholar, commenting upon the lack of separation between 'work and childhood' laments that poor Brazilian children are 'unable to fully live their childhood' (Campos 1993: 151). However, as other scholars have pointed out, even in rich countries, it is only relatively recently that childhood has come to take on the specific form it has today. According to Zelizer, ideas about childhood as a time of freedom from work and economic responsibilities are both culturally and historically peculiar. It was only from the 1930s onwards, that children in the U.S. came to be seen as 'economically worthless but emotionally priceless' (Zelizer 1985: 110). Likewise, in his history of U.S. children of newly urbanized, working-class families in the early part of the twentieth century, Nasaw writes: 'There was nothing new or extraordinary about asking children to go to work. Only recently has childhood become – almost by definition – an age of irresponsibility' (Nasaw 1985: 41-42).

In an article dealing with the history of child policy in Brazil, Rizzini examines the emergence of the idea that childhood was key to the future and to the overarching goal of "civilizing" the country. She focuses on how poor children came to be represented as a social problem for the larger project of nation building and were thus subjected to increasing control and institutionalisation in order to defend the country from crime, disorder, and anarchy. In the first years after the republic was established in 1889, the state's role on behalf of such children was defended as part of a larger 'patriotic and civilizing mission of healing' (Rizzini 2002: 168). The child-saving movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was, she writes, based on the belief that 'a harmful environment coupled with certain innate proclivities made monsters of children, a situation that could have devastating consequences for society as a whole.' (ibid.).<sup>2</sup> Rizzini's analysis follows in the footsteps of Platt's (1977) critique of the North American philanthropic movement. Children, Platt argues, were inextricably linked in the alarmist discourse of reformers and philanthropists to notions of disorder. Rather than offering a humanitarian challenge to the emerging capitalist system, the impetus for the movement was to protect the established order.

Speaking of contemporary Brazilian children, Hecht's (1998) distinction between rich 'nurtured' and poor 'nurturing' children has drawn out one of the key aspects of this debate: the need for many children to contribute toward the household income through labour. In the wider literature dealing with this topic more generally, child labour is predominantly analysed as a consequence of global economic markets and neo-liberal policies aimed at minimising the costs of commercial production

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<sup>2</sup> On the historical link between children and larger socio-political orders, see Szuchmann (1988), who argues that children have been vital to Argentinian notions of authority and nationhood, and Del Priore (1999) for treatment of Latin American children in relation to labour, crime, maritime history and other topics.

(Boyd 1994; Corrêa & Gomes 2003; Lavalette 1994; Nieuwenhuys 1995, 1994; Rodgers and Standing 1981). The dominant 'protectionist' discourse states that children work out of poverty, not choice, and that their participation in a wide range of activities, from minding other children to tending farm animals, is therefore a form of aberration (Bequale and Boyden 1988; Corrêa & Gomes 2003, Kenny 1999; Myers 1991; Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998; Vittachi 1989).<sup>3</sup> For example, in Kenny's (1999) ethnographic study of child-labour in the Northeast-Brazilian city of Olinda, children's labour is analysed as an extreme adaptation to crippling poverty, and as such is situated by the author beyond the margins of cultural comprehension. Railing against analysts who see child-labour as 'part and parcel of the cultural repertoire of the lower classes' Kenny states emphatically that: 'The persons of this study do not have a *cultural preference* for child labour or see it as more *valuable* than education, any more than they have a cultural preference for crowded conditions, unemployment or malnutrition' (1999: 382, original italics).

A paradox in much of this literature is that while children's production of value is often admitted by theorists as being a crucial contribution towards basic survival, that very production is nevertheless de-legitimised as aberration, denying it any deeper cultural or moral significance. Other, more nuanced and ethnographically situated accounts, however, appear to challenge such assumptions.<sup>4</sup> Particularly interesting are those which focus on children themselves, such as Reynolds' (1991) study, which is one of the few that makes an important link between child-labour and kinship. It describes how Zimbabwean boys of around seven years strategically and independently offer their labour to older men running errands, tending their fields, helping to care for livestock, and so on. In this way the boys foster relations with other people and, through doing so, shape the nature of the emotional and material support they will receive in return as they get older, particularly when it comes to collecting bridewealth.

Part of the reason it is so difficult to generalise about child-labour, however, stems from the diverse forms and contexts in which it occurs. There is little comparison to be made, for instance, between the more extreme cases of bonded or incarcerated child labour in brothels, mines, and factories, with the mundane chores children perform in around the household as part of daily life. Whilst recognising the serious ethical issues at stake in some of child labour's more extreme forms, this chapter deals only with the more mundane types of labour that occur when children participate alongside kin in agricultural work. Given that such labour is never forced

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<sup>3</sup>The protectionist perspective, as I have termed it, is strongly aligned with the politicised view of childhood as a period of freedom from social and economic responsibility. Common to this perspective is the notion that children should be 'protected', at all costs, from the physical and emotional stresses of adult labour.

<sup>4</sup>See Cosminski and Scrimshaw (1982); Heredia (1979); Reynolds (1991); and Schildkrout (1978,1980).

and does not preclude children from attending school, the focus will therefore be on a different set of issues to that of more extreme forms of child labour and its connected debate.

### Types and contexts of child-labour in the Brazilian Northeast

In the rural Northeast, patterns of child labour in agriculture are greatly varied and range from the production of charcoal, coffee, cotton, vegetable products, and sugar cane in the fields, to the production of bricks and manioc flour in *casas de farinha*. Historically, children's participation in these kinds of labour has been explained as a response to poverty and a lack of agricultural mechanisation, but it has also been strongly linked to high levels of indebtedness, land fragmentation, and the growth of share-cropping (Goodman 1981; Wyer 1986).<sup>5</sup> According to certain literature, child labour in the rural context has traditionally occurred within the framework of endogamous kindreds and patriarchal domestic organisation. Small-holdings are jointly exploited by groups of close kin; thus a father plus a number of grown and married sons, cousins, uncles, nephews and affines will work together in various labour arrangements. Children thus tend to work for close consanguineal kin, especially those with substantial landholdings (Stolke 1984, Wyer 1986).

In Santa Rita also, child labour occurs within kin-based contexts, although it tends to be organised more tightly around the domestic unit. Thus children commonly work with parents and unmarried siblings on the land belonging to their parents, and sometimes as sharecroppers and wage-labourers on the land of others. Aside from the labour of semi-subsistence farming, boys occasionally migrate with male kin to participate in seasonal labour in cash-crop agriculture. The most common destination for seasonal migrants from the village are the sugar plantations of the littoral region. Girls also, in addition to semi-subsistence farming, are often worker in the local *casa de farinha*. Both latter types of children's labour (on sugar plantations and in the *casa de farinha*) have been recently singled out by the state for eradication. In what follows, I shall briefly outline some of the more recent government initiatives designed to combat child labour, and comment upon how these have been generally received by the parents of working children in Santa Rita.

### The Brazilian state and the battle to end child labour

For a long time in Brazil, civil organizations such as workers' unions, churches, and NGOs have been lobbying for governmental programs to address the perceived

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<sup>5</sup> In many areas, soil erosion and environmental degradation have also played a part. See, for example, Bunker (1980).

problem of child labour. In 1988, the federal constitution of Brazil pronounced children and adolescents to be an 'absolute priority' (Article 227), and supported the prohibition of nocturnal, dangerous, or unhealthy labour for children under eighteen years of age, and any type of labour for children under the age of fourteen, except in a situation of learning or professional training. In 1990, Law 8.069 (the Statute of Children and Adolescents) article 60 ratified the prohibition of labour for children, which prohibits children under the age of fourteen from working, because of the harm to their 'physical, psychological and moral development' (Gustafsson-Wright & Pyne 2002).

At the national level, programs to eradicate harmful forms of child labour in Brazil have included the National Forum for the Eradication and Prevention of Child Labour (1994), which is linked to the Ministry of Labour and receives technical and financial support from the ILO and UNICEF. There is also the *Programa para Erradicar Trabalho Infantil*, Program for the Eradication of Child Labour (PETI), which was established in 1996, and provides cash stipends to low-income families to keep their children (who must be between the ages of seven and fourteen) in school and out of work. The other main program at the federal level is the *Bolsa Escola*, a minimum income guarantee program, anchored predominantly in the school systems of metropolitan areas. The *Bolsa Escola* program provides cash grants to all school-age children in poor families, on the condition that children have ninety percent school attendance.

In 1998, PETI became operative in Santa Rita as part of the regional project to tackle child labour in the *casas de farinha*. Of the twelve children from seven different families that were then participating in the scheme, only two had continued to work on a regular basis in the *casa de farinha*. The risk of receiving a state fine had led Seu Jô, the owner of the mill, to cut down on the numbers of children working directly for him, but he said that there was little he could do to stop children from passing the time of day in and around the mill, and helping out their parents. The mothers of the beneficiaries were all women who worked in the *casa de farinha* themselves, and who received the cash stipends on behalf of their children. All of these women claimed that the money was a significant help to them and a strong incentive for keeping their children away from the *casa de farinha*, but many also appeared sceptical about the benefits of the project to their own children. Most worried that their children, by not being allowed to work when young, would not acquire the necessary skills needed to work when older. One woman decried the project as designed to produce *malandros* (devilish/tricksters) and another I talked to was particularly worried about the effects of the scheme on her children's future lives:

'I say it is good that children do not have to work the whole day, but they have to learn the skills somehow. Now PETI has started, how do they learn to work?... They go to school, they come back, before they came here to help me, now they wander in the streets until I come home... My daughters are becoming weak for work. Soon there will be no future for them, in the life we have around these parts'

According to this woman, children who do not participate in the work tasks of their parents when young are ill equipped to take over such activities when they grow up. Her comment reflects a more general malaise I noted in adults towards their younger charge; a malaise that stems from a deeper preoccupation with the state of the moral individual and their capacity to perform redemptive labour. It is thus to an understanding such parental anxiety, that I shall now turn.

## The problem of youth

As I have argued in chapter one, the level of knowledge and awareness that marks one out as an autonomous and fully accountable adult person is not achieved until marriage. Nonetheless, older children and young, unmarried adults are explicitly recognised as different from *crianças* (younger children), and are referred to as *jovens* (youth). Being in the classic turn of phrase, 'betwixt and between' innocence and full knowledge, *jovens* are a frequent source of adult preoccupation and are subject to increasing discipline.

The first sign that a child is becoming a *jovem* occurs around (or slightly before) the age of puberty. At this time, brothers and sisters who may have shared a room and even a bed together will finally be given separate rooms to sleep in. Parents of children approaching puberty will often complain about the financial cost of having to build extensions onto houses in order to separate sons from daughters. My friend Lucia, who had one daughter and two sons, had been planning to build a small room at the back of the house for Jenifer, her eldest daughter, ever since I had arrived. When Jenifer's room was finally built, with much financial sacrifice, it was just about big enough to fit a single bed. This was something I had come across in various houses before: extra rooms built to separate brothers from sisters, yet virtually no bigger than the size of the beds they contained.

More often than not, due to sizes of families and restrictions of space, separate beds, rather than rooms, are arranged. Other strategies include sending one or more of the *jovens* to sleep in the houses of nearby relatives or neighbours that have spare bedrooms, and/or are needful of the company. Typically this will be the house of grandparents, an elderly widow whose children have moved away, or an older, unmarried aunt who lives alone. Children who do this, however, are thought of and

describe themselves as still 'living' with their parents because they spend the days there, and take their meals at home.

Another change that occurs around this time relates to the expected comportment of *jovens* during church services. It is usual for children of all ages, including babies, to accompany their mothers to church. During any church service, one can be distracted by the playful *kafuffles*, bored sighs, and unorthodox observations of children and infants. Children are highly visible in church, not only because of their different comportment within it – running instead of walking, climbing instead of sitting, etc – but also because of the way in which they use the church space. Whereas the place for adults is within the seating area of the congregation, facing the crucifix and altar, young children are allowed to sit upon the step of the inner chancel and, like the priest, face the congregation with their back to the altar. In this arrangement of bodies within the church, a manifest connection is made between the spiritual purity of the innocent child, the unmarried (childlike) priest, and that of God embodied in the crucifix. The elevated purity of these categories is expressed through their occupation of the most sacred space within the church, separated from the nave where the (impure) congregation sits.

As children turn gradually into *jovens*, they cease to run, climb, and sit on the raised platform of the chancel. Although children as old as ten and eleven will utilise church space differently from adults, the place for children who have had their first communion is firmly within the congregation. Most children appear to adapt their behaviour without ever being told to do so. On occasion, however, a concerned looking mother will call an older child away from the chancel step. If there is no space left on the pews, the child might sit on the floor in one of the aisles, but must sit *facing* the altar. Similarly, although young children are allowed to charge down the central isle at the beginning or end of a church service, older children doing this are likely to be caught mid-gallop and physically scolded.

The change in bodily comportment within the church should be mirrored by a new fervour towards attending it. Whereas young children who do not wish to go to mass are allowed to stay behind in the care of another adult, older children are not let off so easily. This is particularly the case with girls who, once they start attending catechism classes, are expected to attend every mass and rosary.<sup>6</sup> On several occasions I was surprised to witness how parents who were not particularly church-going themselves reprimanded older children for missing church services. On one such occasion I was sat with my host family and fourteen year old Katiana announced her intention to miss prayer that evening. Her father Amauri asked her why, and Katiana replied 'Because it is boring'. 'Boring!' he roared back at her

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<sup>6</sup> In theory, older boys should attend church as regularly as girls do. But as men tend to participate far less in official church activities than women, in practice, boys face less pressure.

‘Things of God are not to be judged as boring’, and he ordered her to leave for church immediately.

### The dangers of playing and ‘doing nothing’

In accordance with the spatial and comportmental changes wrought by adolescence, children are expected to manifest a change in attitude towards childish occupations. As children become older, their play (*brincadeira*) comes under increasing scrutiny from adults. Parents are forever trying to prevent older children from joining in the games of younger siblings. On any typical afternoon, close kin and neighbours will gather in the shade of one another’s doorsteps to sort beans, plait straw for hats, and gossip. As they do so, an assortment of younger and older children will dart from courtyard to courtyard playing tag, rolling marbles in the dirt, and climbing the skinny guava tree in the centre of the village. During such times parents call out intermittently to older children, ordering them over to the shade of the doorsteps to *deixar os pequenos brincar sozinhos* ‘let the small ones play alone’. In relaxed contexts such as these, older children often ignore their parents’ requests without arousing too much anger. However, if there is the slightest suggestion of an argument or scuffle amongst the children, older children will be sternly called or pulled away, and made to sit down amongst the adults.

The problem of play is often made explicit by anxious parents. Women frequently talk about the need to teach their daughters an occupation such as crochet or embroidery in order to *pará-las de brincar* ‘stop them from playing’. Dona Cicera once made a similar point, but in reference to her eleven year old son:

‘I got so nervous watching him play all the time with his younger brother that I asked Seu Vincente to let the boy look after his horses. Thank God, now he does that, and his playing has stopped.’

The reason parents normally give for preventing older children from playing is that ‘they are already knowing/cunning’ (*eles já estão sabidos*). In Santa Rita, play is an ambiguous kind of activity deemed to be both creative and potentially sinful. The danger of play, as some described it, is that it can lead to *malandragem* (devilry/trickery).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, local concern over the nature of play maps onto a wider preoccupation with the creative but dangerous potential inherent in all unstructured, imaginative, and open-ended forms of social interaction. In the local imagination, play is analogous to the ‘trickster eudemonic’ that appears in Jamaican ritual and

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<sup>7</sup> In Brazilian culture more widely, play is an elaborated form of expression and features in many Brazilian rituals, the most famous of which is carnival. See, for example, da Matta (1997), who has interpreted the Brazilian carnival as rite of ‘disorder’ which functions to challenge and invert social hierarchy.

folklore. According to Austin-Broos (1997), in Jamaican folk tales, the trickster figure of Anansi uses the enigma of play to question the logic of moral discipline and to 'resurrect sensuousness and the 'fallibility of a rational world' (1997: 49). In doing so he 'inevitably creates an openness in life, a liminal beyond controlling norm' (ibid: 47; see also Pelton 1980: 63-67). Thus, while playful games and forms of interaction are indulged in by people of all ages, they carry a certain amount of risk. The risk for younger, more innocent children is considered to be fairly innocuous, and in full adults, is considered to be easily controllable. However, for *jovens* who are between innocence and knowledge, play is neither innocuous, nor readily controllable.

If parents are anxious about the problems of play, they are equally as worried by the idea that their *jovem* 'does nothing' (*faz nada*). Whereas nobody notices what a younger child is doing, adults maintain a constant suspicion that their *jovens* 'do nothing'. I became accustomed to asking women how they were, only to hear that they were deeply *nervosa* (anxious) or *triste* (upset) because one of their *jovens* appeared to 'do nothing'. My next door neighbour was consistently threatening to send her two teenage daughters to work for an uncle in São Paulo because, as she told me, '*elas não fazem nada*' 'because they don't do anything'. This was puzzling because to my eyes, it appeared both girls did quite a lot: every morning they swept the house, fed the animals, and helped to prepare lunch; every afternoon they watched television, washed the lunch dishes, and every evening they went to school. In other words, the weight of parental anxiety often seemed in excess of what *jovens* actually did or did not do to arouse it. An interesting case in point would be Jeferson, the fifteen-year-old son of Ivanulda. Whenever I saw Ivanulda, she would complain at length about Jeferson. Part of the problem seemed to be his waning interest in school. Ivanulda explained this as down to fact that her son was *fraco* (weak), and lacked the motivation to study everyday. Much like other parents I knew, Ivanulda was apt to compare her son's 'weakness' for study with her own *força* (strength). 'But look at me', she would exclaim, 'Every day, even when I am tired, I prepare the dinner, wash the plates, feed the animals, and sweep the house. I am strong.' Ivanulda's perception that her son 'did nothing' stood in splendid contrast to her own sense of strength and activity.

Hard as I tried to understand it, Ivanulda's anxiety seemed a little excessive. As far as I could tell, Jeferson was an obedient, polite, and helpful boy who never drank or caused any trouble. One day I was present as Ivanulda, her sister, and Otávio (Ivanulda's brother-in-law), were discussing Jeferson. Otávio declared that he intended to resolve the problem by paying for Jeferson to visit a prostitute: 'The boy is at that age where he needs to experience women'.<sup>8</sup> Ivanulda responded by saying

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<sup>8</sup> The practice among older males, of paying for a teenage boy's first sexual experience with a prostitute is common throughout the region. Woortman and Woortman observe of peasants in Sergipe,



that Jeferson had never missed a *festa* in his life, and had already had several girlfriends. *Ele já é sabidinho!* ‘he is already knowing/cunning’, she proclaimed. Nevertheless, Ivalnuda was not adverse to the idea that her son sleep with a prostitute, and even agreed with Otávio that his plan was a useful one, but she suggested that in addition to this, Jeferson should start accompanying his father to work in the family *roçado* (field) in order to *pará-lo de fazer nada* ‘stop him from doing nothing’. Her sister and brother-in-law nodded their understanding. What Jeferson needed most, they all agreed, was to build his own *roçado*.

It is hard not to notice that the solutions suggested to Jeferson’s problem appear to strike in opposing directions: whereas sleeping with a prostitute is an inherently selfish and sinful kind of activity, working the land is geared towards others and thus good. Nevertheless, as I have strived to show elsewhere in the thesis, certain kinds of sin are perceived as essential for a productive life. I therefore suggest that the adult strategy here mirrors adult strategies in the previous chapter. In both cases, adults are actively striving to divest children of innocence, so that they might live more successfully in the world. I shall come back to the case of Jeferson towards the end of this chapter. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to point out an important difference between Santa Ritan conceptions of *jovens* and Euro-American conceptions of teenagers. In Santa Rita, as in many other parts of the world, parents are used to conceptualising *juventude* (youth) as a stage of life characterised by *dificuldade* (difficulty) and *perigo* (danger). In the West, adolescence is generally perceived as a time of hormone driven rebellion. Parents worry about teenagers experimenting with sex and drugs, and having to suffer the consequences of immature decisions. In Santa Rita, by contrast, there is no concept of hormone driven ‘teenage rebellion’. Interestingly, many Santa Ritan adolescents claim to disapprove of young people known to them (either personally or on soap operas), who go against their parents’ wishes. Respect for the authority of parents and elders is strongly adhered to, particularly amongst adolescents. As one boy of seventeen put it: ‘Why would I go against my father when it is he who will give me land to work, and to live on?’ Indeed, and as I will show further on, young people have a vested interest in *not* rebelling against their parents, as parents are a means, rather than an obstacle, to establishing independence.

As in the example of Ivanulda discussed above, parents are apt to point out that their *jovem* is already *sabido* (cunning/known) at the same time as worrying that

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that when a boy reaches 14, his sexual initiation is likely to take place with a prostitute paid for by his father. This kind of initiation rite may also take place in group form alongside other initiates via the holding of a special *festa* in which prostitutes are hired to perform the role of *pastoras* (hostesses) who entertain the crowd by dancing and singing in a semicircle. During this performance, each father present chooses a *pastora* and pays her to dance with his son. After dancing with the boys, each *pastora* discreetly takes her partner off to a distant location where she administers a lesson in the ‘art of sexual intercourse’ (Woortman & Woortman 1997: 140).

they are *fraco* (weak) and *faz nada* (do nothing). The problem *jovens* pose for their parents, I suggest, is not linked to the notion of hot-headedness or rebellion, but to the perception that *jovens* have knowledge, but lack the tools to handle it appropriately. That is, they lack the skills to redeem themselves. In the following section, I will explore how Santa Ritan people deal with this problem through the idioms of labour and education.

## School as labour and labour as education

### School

Universal schooling has only been a priority in Brazil since the 1950s, and it was not until 1969 that the first state school was built in the village. Before that, the nearest school in the town about nine kilometres away, and rural children whose parents wanted them to study had to make the journey on foot. Old people, when remembering their childhoods, frequently talk about the (*sacrifício*) sacrifice of getting an education. Typically, days would begin at four a.m. when most able bodied members of the family, from about eight years upwards, would leave for the fields. At approximately eight a.m., the workers would stop for a cup of coffee and maybe a bowl of cornmeal and milk. Around midday the morning's work would end and children would stream home for a plate of beans, before setting off on foot for school. Old people who had been to school emphasised how tiring such routines had been, and pointed out that, despite having completed four or five years of basic schooling, they still could not read or write.

For the old, however, the importance of schooling did not appear to lie so much in being able to read or write as it did in being able to say that one had attended a respectable institution, and was not therefore a completely backward *matuto* (country bumpkin). Thus it is variously stressed that although fluent reading and writing have always been highly desirable skills, they are impossible to achieve under certain conditions, and are not all that necessary for a life of agriculture. Indeed, many people argue that the point of school for rural people is not to graduate, it is simply to attend *por que é bom* 'because it is good'. Part of the reason for this, everyone agrees, is that literate or not, a person needs to learn how to write their own name. And this, it is often said, is the main reason for sending children to school, even today.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Among the Northeastern peasantry, being able to sign one's name is an important marker of human dignity and respect. People who are unable to sign their name have to depend upon an assignee (*procurador*) for everything they wish to do. For men in particular, this usually involves a humiliating relinquishment of power to a more literate and powerful male *patrão*. The alternative is to use the

It is interesting to note that rather than focusing on what was learnt during school time, elderly people's accounts emphasise the heroic endurance of children of the past who walked on foot in shimmering heat to face the punishment and demands of exacting teachers. Such heroism is often contrasted with the laziness of using modern transport to get to school, as children now currently do. As one old woman said to me: 'We had to make such an effort back then, but it made us strong and respectful. We suffered to go to school, but we also learned much, much, more than the young do today.' Thus for the older generation, the value of school appears to lie less in what one learned in classes, than in the effort one made to attend.

Today, schooling is an obligatory part of any child's day.<sup>10</sup> For children in the village itself, the long walk in the hot sun is no longer necessary. Primary and junior education is available in the village itself, and secondary education, which is available in the local town, is served by a state run bus that leaves the village twice a day. The majority of younger parents see schooling as a desirable way of fashioning their children into respectable adults. And now, as in the past, being able to read and write, at the very least one's name, is perceived as essential. Nevertheless, people are reluctant to suggest that secondary schooling leads to better paid jobs in the future, for while they recognise a potential truth in this argument, they emphasise that few better paid jobs are open to people like them, as most young people with secondary schooling end up working in the *casa de farinha* or the *roçado* anyway.

It is thus unsurprising that as well as learning to read and write, parents want children to learn the skills necessary for a life in agriculture. Besides this, it is important to observe that school is only three and a half hours per day, with children attending either in the morning, the afternoon, or the evening. The hours left over are a source of preoccupation for parents who fear that they are too easily appropriated for 'doing nothing' or 'too much play'.

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fingerprint, but this, people say, makes a person no different to an animal (*bicho*). The importance of signature may also be linked to an especially protective attitude towards names noted by Slater, who argues that in the Northeast, knowledge of the name represents a form of power over the individual to whom it belongs, thus explaining the common practice of hiding behind an alias (1986: 19). From my own data I would add that, in the Northeast, names appear to have a peculiarly powerful and generative agency of their own. The custom of giving rhyming first-names to offspring creates kinship among siblings; the name simultaneously creates the unique individual, and forges their identity with a particular group.

<sup>10</sup> As my focus in this chapter is on adult's conceptions of children and childhood, I do not deal with the attitudes of children, themselves, towards school. However, it is worth mentioning briefly that those I collected varied greatly. Whereas some children appeared to like school because it offered a break from household chores and a chance to be with friends, others disliked it, either because they found it boring, or because it took them away from the enjoyment of work. Only a very small number of older children with a flair for study, seemed intent upon working their way towards higher education. In their pragmatic view, school was the chance for a better life in the future.

## Labour

From birth until the age of about eight, both boys and girls are linked tightly to the domestic sphere where they are looked after by their mother and/or an older female sibling. Life until this time involves going to school, playing on the surrounding terrain, and for girls especially, performing small domestic chores. As soon as they are able to, girls start performing tasks such as watering plants in the *horta* (garden), helping to look after younger siblings, lighting the stove, laying the table for meals, drying plates, bringing dirty clothes out for their mother to wash, hanging wet clothes out to dry, mincing corn, feeding the poultry, and fetching items such as bread and cooking oil from the village store. From eight to ten years onwards, a girl will start to perform additional tasks such as fetching water, killing and plucking chickens, making cheese, preparing and cooking food for meals, and sweeping the house. Up until about eight years of age, boys are relatively free of chores. Their only tasks are to help out watering plants, feeding poultry, and running to the local store for goods. From eight to ten years upwards they take on tasks such as grooming horses, taking cattle to and from pasture, birthing and milking cows, feeding swine, and taking lunch out to older kin working in the *roçado*.

Between the ages of eight to ten, boys and girls undergo a change, both in terms of increased responsibilities and in accompanying status. As described in the last chapter, this period is when most children commence catechism classes in preparation for communion around the age of eleven. Coincidentally or not, it is precisely at this stage that older kin start to take note of whether or not a child is showing signs of becoming a *trabalhador* (hard worker). Boys and girls who are good at performing their tasks and, most importantly, who appear to enjoy them, will be singled out for praise. When talking amongst themselves about their daily workload, adults will often draw attention to the quantity and quality of the help received from children in this age bracket. They will comment that a particular girl is  *muito trabalhadeira* 'very hardworking', already able to do the things her mother does, or that a particular boy is  *muito trabalhador* as he never fails to get out of bed to feed the animals, even on the coldest days. Others, who register little interest or aptitude for household tasks are just as likely to be singled out, but for teasing and criticism. As Lulu once joked of her ten year old daughter Edilma in the presence of their neighbours 'This one here is terrible for work'.

Such singling out for praise and criticism is linked to a significant event that occurs around this age: the participation in labour away from the domestic sphere. From eight to ten years of age, both boys and girls become interested in, and are actively encouraged to start labouring alongside their parents in the *roçado*. Only a generation or two ago, a child, upon reaching the age of eight, would receive the

present of a hoe (*enxada*) from his father. The hoe given to a child of this age was special for being smaller and lighter than one used by an adult. Such hoes were not fashioned especially for children, they were simply old ones worn down from years of use by adults. If the handle was too long for the height of the child, the father would cut it down to the correct size. The receiving of one's first hoe in this way used to be something of a rite of passage, and can be specifically recalled by most older adults. The day following its presentation, the child would be expected to leave for the field along with all the other working members of family.<sup>11</sup> Although these days children do not receive hoes specifically for their birthdays, from the day they decide to follow their parents into the fields *para trabalhar mesmo* 'to really work', an appropriately sized instrument will be found. The traditional age for starting to work is no longer eight years, as it was in the past, and varies greatly among households and individuals. The factors that affect whether at all and how much a child labours will also vary. What is generally true, however, is that children are encouraged, but never forced, to labour. Parents say that the decision has to be the child's own, and my data from children themselves appears to support this. Whereas some children I knew had begun working from the age of eight, others had not started until they were fifteen. Later than fifteen was highly unusual.

Children thus begin their agricultural careers by watching and imitating their older siblings and parents. In his first season, a child usually tills the soil closely beside an adult who will correct any mistakes and go over any badly-covered patches. With minimal verbal instruction, the child observes his more experienced relatives and learns to move his body and arms in the most effective way. When he becomes tired or bored, he will abandon his hoe to sit down or play, and this is considered acceptable. Only very gradually, as a child becomes older and starts to acquire the height and physique of an adolescent, will he be expected to work more consistently.

During this initial phase, children are still considered by adults to be *pequenos*, (little ones). Therefore they work alongside their parents in the main *roçado*, and the work they perform is under their father's direction. The produce of their work does not belong to them but to their father; it is destined, as is all produce from the main *roçado*, for household consumption. However, after a year or so, and depending upon his own interest and aptitude, the child will be given a piece of the family

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<sup>11</sup> Woortmann and Woortmann (1997) note a similar practice for peasants in the Northeastern state of Sergipe. They argue that the age and condition of the agricultural implement used by a person symbolises their level of productive contribution to the household and hence their place within the family hierarchy. Thus the newest implements are the most 'productive' and belong to the father whose activity constitutes work (*trabalho*). Once they become more worn and less productive, they are passed on to the wife whose use of it constitutes help (*ajuda*). Finally, when very worn out, they will be passed on to children whose use of the implement constitutes leisure (*lazer*) (Woortmann and Woortman 1997: 137-138). While the connection made between the age and utility of the implement and the material productivity of the person is interesting it overlooks the question of moral production tied to labour, which is the focus of my own discussion.

*roçado* to plant his own *roçadinho* (little field). In the majority of cases this stage will only be realised if the child has been working in the main family *roçado* for some time, and has proved himself willing and capable of working independently.

The planting of a *roçadinho* happens in two stages. The first involves a period of continued apprenticeship. As Seu Luis explained it in reference to his eldest son:

‘When I gave him land to make a *roçadinho*, he still did not know how to work properly. I had to teach him until he could look after it by himself. While they are young, one has to help them with everything: laying fertiliser, hoeing, all of it. And then one helps them to harvest at the end. As they get older they can work for themselves.’

During this initial period of learning, the work of tilling, sowing, and weeding is effected under the direction of the father. The money for fertiliser and seeds are also provided by the father who will also work the *roçadinho* with the child, helping him to plant, tend, and harvest it for the initial seasons.<sup>12</sup> In this initial phase, the produce of the *roçadinho* belongs in theory to the child, but in practice tends to get appropriated for household consumption. If the harvest is a good one, part of the credit will go to the child, and a token amount of the money earned will be turned over to him to do with as he pleases.

Once the initial period of learning is over, children become the sole labourers of their *roçadinhos*, and the actual owners of its produce. They plant the same crops that their fathers plant in the main *roçado*: manioc, beans, and corn; or if irrigation is possible, cabbage, coriander, and peppers. However, rather than being destined for household consumption, *roçadinho* crops are destined for sale in the market.<sup>13</sup> From this period up until marriage, children work their individual *roçadinhos* as well as continuing to work a certain number of days each week on the family *roçado*. The amount of time a child has to spend working his own *roçadinho* will vary greatly depending upon his father’s capacity to pay for additional workers, how big the parcel of land is, and how many siblings there are to divide up the labour. In times of emergency, a father has the right to appropriate the produce or cash earned from his child’s *roçadinho* for his own or the household’s needs. At some point in the future, however, the father is obliged to make a token repayment to the child he has

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<sup>12</sup> This, as Heredia observes, incurs a debt that will never be, nor is ever meant to be repaid. Instead it bonds the child to his father in a perpetual relationship of submission to his patriarchal authority (1979: 111).

<sup>13</sup> The crops, once harvested, are turned over to the member of the household (usually the father, or the eldest son) that normally deals with wholesale produce buyers. If the family sell their own produce directly in the market, the child turns the produce over to the person who runs the stall. With time, male children will be initiated into handling this process themselves. The skill, as already discussed in Chapter Two, is to *negociar* (do business) and is considered an important one for both sexes to muster. Being a predominantly male activity, however, it is more common to see boys helping to sell produce in the market.

borrowed from. Such repayment is rarely ever the full amount owed, but serves, symbolically, to sever the debt.

Although I have focused on children's labour in the *roçado* and *roçadinho*, it is important to stress that this type and structure of work only applies to children whose parents are proprietors of an adequately sized plot of land. For those whose parents are landless, wage labour is sought on the land of others, or in the *casa de farinha*. In all cases, work is in *addition to*, not in place of schooling, although the extent to which it is allowed to interfere with study will vary. Wage work in these other settings assumes much the same structure, involving an initial phase of apprenticeship under the aegis of an employed parent or older sibling, and a later one in which the young person starts to work and earn money for himself. For example, girls will begin work in the *casa de farinha* by accompanying mothers as peelers. In the initial phase, a girl sits next to her mother and learns the skill by helping her mother to peel her 100 kilo pile of manioc. In this phase which may last for a year or more, the young girl learns to perfect her technique. She is not bound to the same hours and patterns of working that her mother is, and may break or wander off whenever she pleases. In this phase, her labour is undifferentiated from that of her mother, whose pile she works and who is the main earner. However, as she becomes more proficient, she acquires her own *tamborete* (stool), *faca* (knife), and *descascador* (peeler), and starts working her own pile, for which she will be paid independently. The sons of landless men are more likely to start their working lives in the fields rather than the factory.<sup>14</sup> Boys will accompany their fathers as seasonal labourers on sugar and coffee plantations in the littoral region, or will help in their fathers' sharecropping activities at home. Others, whose fathers make most of their living from *negócio* (trade/business), will assist in the purchase and re-sale of bicycles, motorbikes, and livestock, and so, like their landed counterparts, gradually come to earn their own income.

The phase in which children begin to earn for their own labour coincides with the early phase of youth (*juventude*). Both adults and *jovens* identify this period as one in which a person begins to need a certain amount of personal spending cash. Parents claim that it is precisely at this time in life that young people start making excessive material demands on them for clothes, toiletries, and other accessories. For example, some girls cited to me the sudden need to buy sanitary towels, amongst other things, as a motivation for working.<sup>15</sup> Other toiletries commonly desired by adolescents I talked to were perfumes, hair products, and deodorants. The desire and

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<sup>14</sup> This is because male work in the *casa de farinha*, rather than being paid on a pro rata basis, is paid on a fixed wage basis. Also, the type of work, involving individuals operating heavy machinery, does not lend itself to the participation of others. Boys do not generally begin to work in the *casa de farinha* until they are over 16, because of the physical strength required for the job. When they start, they do so on an individual wage.

<sup>15</sup> During my fieldwork, sanitary towels were perceived as an expensive luxury rather than a necessity. Many older women shunned them in favour of homemade material ones.

need for luxury personal products cannot, however, be seen solely as the result of recent capitalist marketing. It seems to extend back a long time, to periods when there were few products available to buy and no official advertising. Old people, describing their own *juventude* in the 1930s and 1940s, would cite the desire for new clothes and soap as a major reason for earning their own money. Heredia who carried out research in the late 1960's reports the same. She records one father as saying: "I give soap to nobody. When people want to smell nice, they have to put in the effort"...' (1979: 112. Translation my own).

The money *jovens* earn, however, is not just destined to be spent on small consumer items for immediate use. Much of it will be invested in the long term project of marriage. As described in Chapter Two, in their mid-teens, boys become obsessed with saving up to buy motorbikes that will transport them out of the village to *festas* where they can meet girls whom they may eventually marry. From the moment a boy starts thinking seriously about marriage, he will begin to invest his money in bricks and materials to build a house. The expense of running a motorbike coupled with that of building and furnishing a house can be considerable, providing a strong motivation to labour.<sup>16</sup> Girls thinking about marriage begin to spend their income on items for their trousseau. A girl's pre-marital expense is smaller than her future husband's, but as girls work less hours for money due to their heavier load of domestic chores, and receive less pay than men for waged work the effort involved is more or less equal (Gustaffsson-Wright & Pyne 2002; Muniz 2001).

The practice of allocating land for *roçadinhos* has been discussed by Heredia (1979) and Moura (1977) and is common among small holders throughout the Northeast. Heredia explains the practice as a means of conferring individual status and independence on young people, but also as a way of preserving the authority of the patriarch. She explains this in two ways; firstly, by identifying the ongoing relation of debt and dependency it creates between the child and the father who invests his money in the initial phases of production, and continues to maintain ownership of the land; secondly, by pointing to the potential threat to the father's authority embedded in the work that children contribute to the household *roçado*. Heredia notes that as children grow older and require money of their own, conflict may arise over how to spend the income earned from the main *roçado*. Allocating parcels of land for independent labour avoids such conflict and any potential challenge to a father's authority (Heredia 1979).

While I do not disagree with Heredia's theory, I do not believe that the preservation of a father's authority is the dominant cause or motivation for such a

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<sup>16</sup> It leads, I would argue, to the massive drop-out rate of boys from schooling. Girls, on average, stay in education for much longer, and are twice as likely as boys to complete secondary education.



practice. Far more significant, I suggest, is its educative element. Indeed, Heredia hints at this when she writes:

‘Individual *roçados* have an important meaning in the socialisation process of members of the unit...They constitute...a fundamental preparation for the unit which each [child] will construct in the future’ (1979: 107-108. Translation, my own.)

In addition to being a means of preserving patriarchal authority, Heredia notes that a *roçadinho* provides young people with essential knowledge of how the business of planting a field is done. However, she fails to pursue this interpretation any further and is unspecific about what, exactly, is taught or passed on. Pursuing this idea, I want to suggest that in addition to its economic and material functions, the *roçadinho*, as with other forms of labour, offers a moral counter to the problems of playing (*brincando*) and doing nothing (*fazendo nada*). In other words, we need to think about the practice as part of an overall strategy for dealing with root assumptions about the nature of people in the world. Viewed within the wider trajectory of the life-cycle, labour constitutes a dominant means of caring for others, and thus of redeeming oneself. Once children have been wrested from innocence and encouraged to immerse themselves in the polluting aspects of the adult life-world, labour provides them with a method by which to achieve atonement. Labour is valued, not merely because of its financial potential, but for its role in developing an essential characteristic of morally accountable persons: *coragem* (courage).

## Coragem

### The concept of *coragem*

All kinds of purposeful activity, especially that associated with agriculture, that which is considered *pesado* (heavy), is thought to require one essential human quality: *coragem*. The word *coragem* is translated literally as ‘courage’. But this literal substitution of one term for its English cognate fails, as translations often do, to convey the richness of what it signified in the Santa Rita context. *Coragem*, in Santa Rita, is not simply the ability to disregard fear, it is a physical strength – a bodily state of being that enables one to do things that are either fearful, boring, uncomfortable, or difficult. Where in the person *coragem* resides is a matter of diverging opinion. Some people say that *coragem* resides in the arms (*braços*), because it is akin to *força* (physical strength). Others claim that *coragem* emanates from the heart (*coração*), or head (*cabeça*). According to my host mother, Dida, *coragem* is ‘like love’ (*como amor*) because it originates from God.

The variation in opinion just described reveals the polyvalency of the concept, which in certain contexts appears like a physiological characteristic (residing in arms), and in other contexts, like an emotional or psychological state (deriving from hearts and heads). The former sense arises when the word is used to allude to a bodily technique or particular muscle development needed for a certain kind of activity. An example of this occurred when I went to the river with a group of women to help wash bed clothes. The women were interested by how difficult I found it to wring large amounts of water out of heavy, sodden blankets and said it was because I lacked *coragem*. When I asked what this meant, one woman placed her broad, sturdy hands, muscular from housework, next to my smaller ones, and pointed out the difference. She then placed her hands over mine to wring with me, demonstrating the right force required. 'You have to have *coragem* to squeeze hard', she said. The latter sense occurs in reference to the psychological willpower and motivation one needs to confront a difficult, tedious, or uncomfortable task. This becomes evident when people say they lack the *coragem* to move far from their families, to leave the warmth of their bed in the chill of the early morning to start work, or simply to take a cold shower last thing at night.

The highly differential contexts in which the term gets used suggest, once again, its flexible application. However, in relation to its application to any purposeful activity described as labour or *trabalho*, a continuity of meaning occurs. Seu Luis chose to explain it as follows:

'Why does one need *coragem* to work? Because if one leaves the house early when it is still dark, lifts the heavy *enxada* (hoe) all day, works alone with the sun hot on one's head, one needs to have *coragem*. My work is finished for the day. But I had *coragem* to go to the *roçado* this morning'

In this context it becomes clear that *coragem* is an attitude that allows a person to perform work that is, in some way, mentally, emotionally and physically challenging. This attitude could be further defined as an embodied state combining both the ability to endure mental tedium and lack of financial reward with the ability to endure physical discomfort and pain. Although *coragem* in this sense is most commonly associated with work in the fields, it is also commonly spoken of in relation to the *casa de farinha* and household work. Indeed, *coragem* is thought essential for enduring the *tédio* (monotony), of predominantly female tasks such as washing clothes, washing dishes, sweeping the floor, and the like. The practical aspect of the concept was impressed upon me several times during my fieldwork through my own labour experiences. In particular, I was often struck by my own inability to endure not the physical strain, but the tedium of women's work. Especially tiresome is that which pertains to the *casa de farinha* which involves

squatting for hours on low stools in semi-darkness, often in silence, whilst peeling manioc after manioc and tossing the peeled roots into baskets. Although they did not appear to overly enjoy such work, the women I worked alongside in the *casa de farinha* did not seem to mind the tedium, and would attribute their tolerance to the fact that they had started when young and so ‘learnt’ to endure it.

The presence or absence of *coragem* is there at birth. Most people are born with it, but a few are born without it. However, even if a person is born with it, this is not enough for it to develop; it needs to be nurtured by parents by accustoming their children to labour. Speaking to my friend Dimas one day about why he had started milking cows at the age of eight, he told me that it was partly because he wanted to and partly at other people’s urging that he do it, in order to develop the right muscles in his forearms. He pointed out some of the muscles on the underside of his forearm and told me that his had developed differently from mine as I had never milked cows as a child. He added that it was impossible to learn this skill properly as an adult because it was too painful. His father, I was told, had initially been reluctant to let him milk the cows because, as a learner wastes a lot of milk, they risk making the milk dry up. ‘But if I had not started young, I would not have the *coragem* to do it now’, he said.

*Coragem* therefore develops or is acquired through laborious activity when young. Santa Ritan people take this concept very seriously, and will repeatedly reiterate that if a person does not start performing work activities by fourteen years of age at the latest, they will never develop the *coragem* necessary to confront such tasks when older. If pushed, people accept that not working in childhood will not prevent a person from working in adulthood, but they claim that such a person will never have the attitude needed to stick with difficult work for very long and will be likely to give up at the first hurdle. This, I suggest, is because *coragem* is perceived by Santa Ritans as a skill, like reading and writing, that requires a long period of time to develop. A common phrase uttered by older people, when asked about their schooling and education is *minha educação era na enxada* ‘the hoe was my education’. Such a phrase is uttered with pride, for Santa Ritan people are unequivocal about the nature of their work. It is true, they say, that a person can learn, in theory, the right way to plant a field or raise an animal. Equally true, they admit when pushed, that with a few days’ practice anyone can learn how to milk a cow or swing a hoe. But what they maintain that a person cannot learn – either in theory or with a few days practice – is how to endure the conditions of work: the climate, the rhythm, the discomfort, and the solitude; how to take all the difficulties and still return the next day, and the next.

## The purpose of *coragem*

Ultimately, the importance of *coragem* lies in its potential to create *trabalhadores* (hard workers). The *trabalhador*, as I elaborated in Chapter Four, is able to counteract the inevitable sin and pollution of life through demonstrative love for others. As previously described, *trabalhadores* are contrasted with *preguicosos* (lazy ones). Whether laziness is blamed upon the individual themselves or upon the individual's parents depends very much on the context, but becoming a *trabalhador* is seen as ultimately the joint responsibility of both the individual and their parents. It is assumed that for the majority, *coragem* is potentially present from birth, and needs parents to provide a context for it to develop. Once this context has been provided, however, the child is meant to make the most out of it. The idea that *coragem* may be absent from birth conveniently explains those individuals who fail to develop it despite their parents' best efforts, as well as those individuals with lazy parents who succeed in becoming *trabalhadores*. The following three examples demonstrate how far *coragem* is implicated in the moral formation of a person.

Certain young people who had failed to develop into *trabalhadores* were frequently the target of criticism. Edison was one such man: landless and unmarried, his only source of income was helping out on his brother's modest poultry farm. It took a great amount of provocation for Edison's brother to dismiss him – so strong is the injunction to help out and work closely with kin – but eventually he did due to Edison's unwillingness to wake up early in the morning or to return to work after lunch. Edison's *falta de coragem para trabalhar* 'lack of courage to work', was roundly disapproved of but it was also perceived as just one of those things. Both his parents were known to be incredibly hard workers. His own mother maintained that she did not know where his laziness came from as she had packed him off to work from the age of twelve and neither she nor his father had ever been lazy in that way.

At the other end of the spectrum was twenty-year-old Mauro whose lack of *coragem* was covertly blamed on his parents. Mauro's aunt was a close friend of mine and would often lament the fact that her nephew had never done a day's work in his life because her brother had never encouraged him go to the *roçado* when he was young. Mauro neither studied nor worked, but spent the majority of his time riding around on his motorbike. Nothing was ever harvested from the land his father had allotted him upon turning eighteen, because, it was said, he lacked the *coragem* to hoe, to weed, and to endure the hot sun. It was thought scandalous that, as a result, he depended upon his father to fund his bachelor lifestyle of motorbikes and *festas*. Worse still was the money, it was rumoured, that he regularly stole off his grandmother. 'Do you see the result of not accustoming children with hard work?' Mauro's aunt asked me. 'It is those who lack *coragem* to work who steal'.

In addition to people like Edison and Mauro, however, are people who were properly 'trained' in childhood and turned into adults with *coragem* only for non-agricultural types of work. In such cases it is recognised that some people simply are not cut out for certain kinds of work and there is nothing one can do to change that. Various people I knew had a story about a brother or a cousin who had been raised in a *roçado* with a miniature hoe, but who had never become accustomed to the toil. One such person was Davi. Davi was a tall, muscular man in his late thirties. His sheer size was held to attest to his physical strength, but it was well known that Davi hated *roçado* work. People said Davi had laboured as a boy and that then, as now, had possessed the physique to perform such labour – even to perform it better than most. However, it was said that he lacked *coragem* for *that type* of work. Davi's younger brother Dimas, admitted that he had less physical strength than his brother but the important difference between them was that he had *coragem* to work in the *roçado* whereas Davi did not. Dimas told me that as boys, their father had taken them to the *roçado* every day. Each was given a stretch of land to clear by lunch time, but Davi, unlike his younger brother, would lose interest after an hour or so and throw down his hoe. When Davi married, instead of taking up his right to independently work a portion of his father's land, he moved to Recife and found work as a mechanic. According to his relatives, Davi now 'lives well' and earns a decent living as a mechanic with his own workshop. Such work, I was told, was not the same as that of the *roçado* but was a type which Davi evidently did have *coragem* for.

In Santa Rita, then, it is recognised that there will always be a certain number of people like Davi who are born into a life of agriculture, but for whom agriculture is not their vocation.<sup>17</sup> But for others, a lack of *coragem* is a serious moral problem. Tales abound about people who left the village because they did not have adequate *coragem* for agricultural work. A key point, however, is that although lacking *coragem* to work is generally seen in a very negative light, no one disparages individuals for having given up on agricultural work, provided they laboured in childhood. As Dida would often say, people who leave Santa Rita and do well in the city are those who worked hard when young.<sup>18</sup> Using an idiom of kinship, she once explained it thus:

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<sup>17</sup> Although local discourse emphasises the regretful nature of permanent migration to the cities due to the migrant's separation from close kin, and their giving up of a common lifestyle and identity, there is some implicit recognition of the advantages to those who remain behind. Permanent migrants usually 'lend' on an indefinite basis, or sell their share of land to their siblings, thus allowing the productive capacities of household units to remain relatively stable over time. See Moura (1977)

<sup>18</sup> Upon further questioning she clarified that *roçado* work was not the only type to have this positive effect, other kinds, including housework and waged work in the *casa de farinha* would serve the same ends.

‘That is why we say the *roçado* is like a parent. It feeds and educates the young. When children work there, they have the *coragem* to do any kind of work when old. See how some of the young people who left here, left without ever having done a day’s work in their life...how can they work in the city? They can’t. These are the ones who will end up abandoning their own children and robbing to survive.’

In this way we can see how the *roçado*, like a ‘parent’, helps to form morally responsible persons regardless of whether or not they continue, in adulthood, to work the land. The question is partly an issue of choice. Santa Ritan people claim that young people must acquire *coragem* in order to make an informed decision about staying or leaving the village. Everyone should be given the skills to be able to stay in the village if they want to. It is not only unacceptable but sad to be forced to move far from family and home because one never learnt to endure the hard, physical graft of rural life.

The danger associated with ‘doing nothing’ during the *juventude* phase of life thus becomes clearer when we consider the importance of *coragem* in Santa Ritan thought. It seems clear that when adults say that young people ‘do nothing’, they do not mean that they literally do nothing all day, but that they do not do the right sort of thing. What parents want children to *do* is develop *coragem*. This is because *coragem* is the basis of alter-centred behaviour which, for the average person, emerges through the respect one shows for one’s kin, entering into a marriage and working to feed one’s family despite the problems such a path entails. This basic life skill, as I have shown, is presumed to be acquired via some form of meaningful labour. Labour teaches the child not only the value and skill of managing the body to generate resources, but also, how to offset the sin of marriage and reproduction. In later years, *coragem* will enable the person to labour on behalf of others, and hence to redress the moral ambiguity of being in a state of knowledge. As I argued in Chapters Three and Four, it is only through one’s love and suffering for others, expressed – not verbally – but through everyday sacrifice embodied in action, that one can negate the loss of original purity that occurs at marriage.

### Making sinners, making saints.

As I argued at the beginning of this chapter, much of the literature that deals with child labour does so from a highly materialist perspective. Children’s labour is viewed as necessary solely in terms of its material contribution to the household income and as such – from the protectionist perspective – gets classed as aberration. While I do not mean to suggest that the need to generate income is irrelevant to the question, I have argued that in the case of Santa Rita, children’s labour is fundamentally geared towards the production of moral rather than monetary value and cannot, therefore, be analysed purely as an adaptation to poverty.

Much of the debate and ethnography I have presented, however, turns upon a dualistic notion of childhood having its roots in a wider Christian dialectic between the opposing poles of good and evil. In his historical study of the concept of childhood, Cunningham (1995) cites a German sermon delivered in 1520, which suggested that “Just as a cat craves mice, a fox chickens, and a wolf cub sheep, so infant humans are inclined in their hearts to adultery, fornication, impure desires, lewdness, idol worship, belief in magic, hostility, quarrelling, passion, anger, strife, dissention, factiousness, hatred, murder, drunkenness, gluttony, and more” (1995: 49). In this understanding of children, little weight is given to the notion of innocence and far more is placed on the Augustinian and Calvinist tenets of original sin. Rather than pure and cherubic, children are cast as small, recalcitrant devils in need of civilisation and restraint. Thus, seventeenth and eighteenth century Puritanism conceived children as requiring rigid forms of discipline in order to instil a moral disposition. Following the advice of Proverbs, 29.15, ‘The rod and the reproof gives wisdom; but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame’, the puritan parent sought to produce a civilised and educated Christian (Archard 1993: 37).

Alongside the notion of the child as inherently evil, however, one also encounters that of the adult who, in order to be saved, must rediscover the state of childhood. In this more secular view of childhood, which emerged in connection with humanist notions of childhood in Renaissance Europe, children possess a purity which derives from their having arrived only recently in the world. They are, as Archard writes, ‘nature which society corrupts. Growing up is an inevitable degeneration, a growing away from original perfection’ (Archard 1993: 38). In this perspective, which has come to underwrite most protectionist concepts of the child, children are considered as vulnerable and innocent, and their innocence should be protected for as long as possible by their separation from the corrupting productive, political, economic, and recreational world of adults.

At different times and in different cultural contexts, then, there has been a selective slant on the Christian trope relating to childhood. The type of emphasis placed (i.e. whether on sinfulness or on natural innocence), appears to turn upon differing conceptions about the nature of society. On the one hand, society is a force for corruption, destroying what is essentially good; on the other, it is a force for education, constraining what is essentially bad. In Santa Rita, we see that concepts of children and thus of society demand specific responses. It is not simply that Santa Ritan concepts of children reflect either image depending upon the context, or that children are perceived as simultaneously perfect innocents and yet inclined toward sin. Rather, it is that the capacities of children are both imperfect and unchecked: while the ontological innocence of children is impractical, their capacity for sin is

unshackled by the knowledge of how to self-sacrifice. Santa Ritan strategies thus have a somewhat peculiar aim, to make of children both sinners and saints. In the previous chapter I revealed adults' attempts via speech games and the performance of *casamento de matuto* to corrupt the innocence of children by encouraging them to perform in knowledgeable ways, and thus to immerse themselves in the spiritual pollution of the adult lifeworld. In this chapter I have revealed adults' attempts to shape increasingly knowledgeable children into persons courageous enough to counterbalance such pollution through labour and other acts of self-sacrifice. The case of Jeferson encapsulates such a strategy: his mother's desire that he sleep with a prostitute *and* plant a *roçadinho* reveals a pragmatic recognition of the necessary continuity between morality and immorality involved in growing up well. The imbrication of these two spheres is evident to Santa Ritans in the (re)productivity of both (moral) labour and (immoral) sex. Parental strategies to divest children of innocence are thus, in a sense, strategies to make them productive in various ways. Encouraging a son to labour precipitates an ability to produce in the same way that encouraging him to have sex precipitates an ability to reproduce.

From this we can see that although the Santa Ritan problematisation of childhood is undoubtedly shaped by Christian philosophy and humanist discourse, its strategies for dealing with it differ substantially from both nineteenth century puritanical ideas, and those of modern-day liberal, 'protectionist' advocates. One way to characterise the difference would be in terms of the values assigned to the different elements involved. Whereas the proclivity to sin is, according to the 'original sin perspective', a wholly negative aspect, in the Santa Ritan perspective it is what allows a child to live a normal and reproductive life. By the same token, innocence, which in the 'natural innocence' perspective is a wholly positive element, in the Santa Ritan perspective is dangerous and impractical and must be attenuated early on in life. Society, if it could be said to exist as a concept at all for Santa Ritans, does not stand in opposition to the ontological state of man, but is an exact reflection of it, being both good and bad in equal parts. The local problematisation of childhood is not, therefore, a matter of needing to preserve what is good or suppress what is bad, rather it is a matter of needing to extract something good *from* something bad and vice versa.

## Conclusion: confronting sin, confronting labour

At the beginning of this thesis I showed how marriage is experienced as an apical moment of transition in a person's life. It is perceived as a state of 'no return'; one which finally sacrifices the primacy of innocence (*inocência*) for a compromised socio-ontological state of knowledge (*conhecimento*) and self-awareness



(*consciência*). This produces a paradoxical situation, for in order for people to reproduce they must marry and enter into morally ambiguous relations with neighbours and kin. One could say that in order for sociality to continue, a type of spiritual death must occur.

In this chapter I have tried to show that in Santa Rita, the youthful (pre-marital) phase of life is constructed as a period of difficulty and danger, primarily because it is perceived as a time of ontological uncertainty and impending transition; one in which an original state of innocence is ever-diminishing and being replaced with knowledge. In order for this transitional uncertainty to be managed and resolved, parents seek to balance the acquisition of knowledge with techniques of moral redemption through labour. Thus by encouraging children to work, parents are equipping children with the skills to handle the moral ambiguities and spiritual dangers of the adult lifeworld.

As I have generally sought to show throughout this thesis, the spiritual risk and distancing from God that occurs via marriage can and should be reversed. And when it finally is – when a married adult acquires the social status of being a truly moral, alter-centred person – her spiritual status is in fact superior to that which she possessed as an innocent child. For this to happen, a particular temporal path must be sought; one that works its way steadily across a lifetime, involving labour, consumption, love, and suffering, in order to yield a return to grace. The path I refer to requires *coragem* – a learned mixture of bodily techniques and psychological states. If children do not develop the *coragem* to follow this path, they will not live well as adults, and may die without having made the necessary transition from a state of knowledge, to a state of knowledge instilled with moral strength and spiritual grace.

## Conclusion

For the Catholic people of Santa Rita, the need to live both morally and productively in the world presents something of an existential problem. This problem, as it is locally perceived, crystallises around an ontological understanding of knowledge (*saber/conhecimento*), which comes about most explicitly through the loss of innocence (*inocência*) at marriage. For Santa Ritan people, it is knowledge that simultaneously defines the nature of human-beings in the world, makes socially productive relationships possible, causes persons to sin, and provides an obstacle to the attainment of spiritual salvation. In this thesis, I have tried to address the ways in which people strive to resolve this problem. Thus I have investigated how, from childhood to marriage, concepts of spiritual and moral accountability develop and change, and how people negotiate such changes through specific discourses on labour and suffering.

### Rethinking gendered perspectives

Gender is a dominant theme within the literature on Catholic and Orthodox, peasant communities. And although much of this work has been historically important, particularly within sub-fields of feminist anthropology, it has sometimes led to an exaggerated preoccupation with concepts of difference and antagonism between the sexes. The kind of data I have presented in the thesis has been interpreted elsewhere as being primarily about questions of gender difference. Throughout this thesis I have contested this idea by showing how the same moral and symbolic tropes that surround the practice and discourse of women, also surround that of men. Thus I have argued that the male discourse on labour and the female discourse on suffering are, in fact, two sides of the same coin: both concern suffering and both produce the same rewards.

In Chapter Five, I elaborated my critique of gender analyses through a discussion of the sexual politics of conjugality. I showed that local understandings of the observably charged and often violent relationship between husbands and wives do not draw upon analytical concepts of gender identity and difference, but rather on the ungendered – the ‘universal-nature’ of moral, existential concerns. I further argued that although a division in forms of expression may be observed between differently gendered persons, these do not necessarily equate with a division in viewpoints or moral codes. My aim, throughout, has not been to argue for the

irrelevance of gender so much as to redress the polarised image presented by the literature. Rather than focusing on the somewhat received differences between men and women in a Catholic, patriarchal society, I have been far more interested in the way in which they intentionally position themselves as similar to one another; in how they portray themselves as motivated by the same concerns.

### A model of suffering as sacrifice

Speaking about suffering is an event which is consciously performed for a listening audience. During the production of such narratives, labour and other forms of personal suffering are constituted as gifts, as sacrifices, for the benefit of others. Paradoxically, events that cause suffering mostly derive from spiritually-polluting processes: labour, commerce, childbirth, and marriage. Thus what is remarkable about the construction of suffering as sacrifice in the Santa Ritan context, is that what persons sacrifice is not merely the body (as for example, through the physical hardships of labour or childbirth), but the purity of the Christian soul, via the choice to marry and labour at all. At the beginning of the thesis I described how marriage necessitates entering into sinful relations, and at the same time exacts of persons, a large degree of moral accountability. The complex and often conflicting constellation of social relationships and social responsibilities attached to married life contribute to its ambivalent perception in local thought as a fundamentally sinful way to live, and therefore as something of a spiritual risk.

The declaration of suffering described above, effects a transformation of worldly pollution into divinely oriented *sacrifice*; an act which, '*through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned*' (Hubert and Mauss 1964: 13 original italics). Let us therefore look more closely at the model of sacrifice that has been described throughout this thesis, and at what this sacrifice achieves.

Using the schema originally delineated by Hubert and Mauss (1964) for rituals of sacrifice, the model of sacrifice I have identified is a type of self-sacrifice characterised by a compression of ritual roles into the single person. Thus the sufferer is simultaneously victim, sacrificer, and sacrificer.<sup>1</sup> However, for this kind of sacrifice to be effective within Christian cosmological terms, other people have to

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<sup>1</sup> This challenges the argument put forward by Hubert and Mauss, that sacrificial practices are dependent on the presence of an intermediary: 'we know that with no intermediary, there is no sacrifice' (1964: 100). According to this line of reasoning, the fact that in most ritual sacrifices the victim is distinct from the sacrificer and the god is important because it separates while uniting them: 'they draw close to each other, without giving themselves to each other entirely' (ibid.). The exception to this, they argue, is the sacrifice of the god, who is at the same time the sacrificer, is one with the victim and sometimes even with the sacrificer. Such mixing is possible, they state, 'only for mythical, that is, ideal beings' (ibid: 101).

benefit in some way. That is to say, there have to be two categories of sacrificer. In the context of the ethnography presented here, the first category is made up of individual 'sufferers' who, through discourses and performances of suffering, consciously cast themselves as sacrificial victims. The second category comprises the wider group of their friends and kinsmen: all those who make-up the social world of the sufferer, and who benefit either consciously or unconsciously from the sacrifices made on their behalf by the suffering person. Archetypal people to fall into this second category are the children of celebrated *sofredoras* and *trabalhadores* and the patients of *rezadeiras*. When people from this second category of sacrificer actively present other people as *sofredoras* and *trabalhadores*, they turn them into sacrificial victims, thus also performing the function of sacrificers.

For the sufferer, self-sacrifice is an act of simultaneous commemoration, communion, and expiation; a process of drawing together the sacred and profane. Rather than being a sacrifice *to* God, it is a sacrifice *of* God. This is because at its most basic level, it is an emulation and commemoration of the Passion; of the original sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. Indeed, as Hubert and Mauss long ago noted, sacrifice is one of the fundamental themes of divine legend. It is in the sacrifice of a divine personage, that sacrifice attains 'its highest expression' (1964: 77). This form of emulative commemoration, I have argued, constitutes a form of worship in itself. But it is also a process which effects a transformation in both the sacrificer and in God.

For the sacrificer, the transformation occurs via a process of sacralisation, turning the sacrificer into a spiritual mediator between the divine and profane worlds. This was illustrated most clearly in the case of the *rezadeira* Celestina, whose sacrificial identification with God was great enough to make her into a vessel for the channelling of divine grace. In such a case, it is not merely that the *rezadeira* is able to commune effectively with the divine, her own divine nature is emphasised. At its most extreme level, seen locally in the case of suffering *rezadeiras* (or more generally, in the suffering and martyrdom of certain canonized saints), identification with the Passion is complete. The sacrificer does not merely emulate God, she becomes divine herself. Her supernatural healing powers are testament to this.

A concomitant result, one might argue, is a certain transformation of God. Through the act of sacrifice, the asymmetrical nature of the human-divine relationship is reconfigured. The person constitutes herself more equally in relation to the divine, contracting the ontological gap, as it were, between the two realms. In the performance of suffering, and the emulation of the Passion, God comes to assume a pre-eminently human and worldly form.

But why the need to perform sacrifice at all? For Santa Ritans the requirement is brought about by the polluting process of living in the world. The

sacrifice has an expiatory value, working to emphasise the highest Christian value that inheres in people: that of selflessness. Through the performance (via narrative or other means) of being willing to suffer on behalf of others, a married man or woman's sins are attenuated, and their social and spiritual position is in some way redeemed.

It is difficult to assert exactly in what way such redemption is achieved. It may occur on a personal, subconscious level: instilling within the individual sufferer the sense that her sins are atoned for, that her place in paradise is assured. However, it is also clear that the sacrificial discourse depends for its functioning upon the role of the audience or group. As Valerio Valeri (1985) argues of Hawaiian sacrifice, the 'symbolic action' that effects transformations of the relationships of sacrificer, god, and group, happens 'by representing them in public' (1985: 71). For Valeri, a failing of Hubert and Mauss' sacrificial theory lies in the way it treats sacrifice as a bilateral relationship between the sacrificer and god, and fails to stress that the collective judgement of the audience always mediates that relationship. In the Santa Ritan context, as I have shown, it is the listening audience who consummates the sacrifice by accepting the gift of suffering that is proffered by the sufferer for their benefit. This, in turn, establishes the sacrificial nature of the narrative produced. The listening audience also plays an important role in reinforcing the message and product of sacrifice by reproducing suffering narratives, when necessary, on the sufferer's behalf; the ultimate reinforcement being the bestowal of titles such as *sofredora* and *trabalhador* to certain individuals.

Valeri's explicit recognition that it is the judgement of the collective audience that lends the sacrificial process much of its efficacy is an important one. But it might well be argued that the 'audience', although oblique, has never been entirely absent from the Durkheimian paradigm put forward by Hubert and Mauss. Indeed, as they themselves argue, sacrifice works to redeem individuals from 'social obloquy', thus enabling them to 're-enter the community' (1964: 103). Such an assessment certainly seems to be true in the context of those individuals who had committed serious offences. Had the man who murdered his wife with a scythe not carried the moral title of *trabalhador*, it is doubtful whether he would have been able to remain living within the community.

Within the different life stages I have discussed in this thesis, the direction in which sacrifice can be said to occur varies. Thus, the sacrificial narratives of married men and women might be read as producing a movement from a state of relative profanity to a state of increased divinity. However, according to my analysis of the *casamento de matuto* ritual, a sacrificial movement might be seen in the opposite direction. In the performance of *casamento de matuto*, children's innocence (and concomitant spiritual purity) is sacrificed in order that they acquire important

knowledge about the world. The movement in this ritual is not, then, to increase divinity but rather to expel it. Children are too pure, too close to God, and must be actively distanced from this state in order to live productively in the world.

In my discussion of children's participation in labour relations, sacrificial movement occurs in both directions. As children grow older they are shaped into properly knowledgeable persons, representing a movement away from divinity. But they are also given the tools to regain some of that lost divinity in due course. In particular, we saw how adolescent boys are encouraged to experiment sexually in preparation for marriage – an event that will eventually distance them from God. But adolescent boys and girls are also educated, via labour in the *casa de farinha* and fields, to have *coragem* (courage). In local terms, *coragem* is not just about being strong and having the skills to make a living, it is the single most important quality needed for the effective endurance of suffering. Thus by encouraging their children to labour, parents are teaching their children how to suffer. Learning to suffer is learning how to be a moral person. It is the preparation young people require if they, too, are to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of others, once married.

### Religious practice in non-ritual contexts

As I argued in the introduction to this thesis, much of the anthropological literature that deals with Christianity focuses upon practice within ritual contexts or sacred spaces that are distinct and removed from the space/time of the ordinary workaday world. Hence, there is a substantial literature on pilgrimage, worship at shrines, feast days, processions, novenas, burial and exhumation, and cults of the dead (Cannell 1999; Caraveli 1986; Christian 1972; Dahlberg 1987, 1991; Danforth 1982; Dubisch 1995; du Boulay 1974; Harris, Max. 2003; Pessar 2004; Pina-Cabral 1986; McKevitt 1991; Morinis 1992; Sallnow 1991; Seremetakis 1991). In much of this literature, religious practices comes to appear as though somewhat isolated from the rest of life, as standing outside of everyday space and time. Writes Dubisch of pilgrimage, for example:

'In addition to centring around a different sort of place, pilgrimage generally involves a different sort of time, time that is removed (to some extent at least) from ordinary life and that may reenact events associated with gods, saints, martyrs, and other sacred beings' (1995: 37).

In this thesis, however, I have identified a reenactment of 'events associated with gods, saints, martyrs and other sacred beings' in a time/space connected to ordinary life. While Santa Ritan people do perform public rituals in sacralised places, my focus has been on how they relate to the divine, and how they deal with the problems that their theological understanding poses for them, through labour and narrative in

everyday social contexts. The suffering narratives produced by adults in the ordinary space/time of the workaday world constitute an alternative means of divine communion, calling upon expanded definitions of ritual and religious practice in this context. The definitions I have chosen to work with throughout this thesis blend analytical distinctions between 'ritual' and 'everyday' contexts, and between forms of social narrative and forms of divine worship. To this end, I have found the concept of 'ritualisation', elaborated by performance theorists useful.

A common concept within the literature on Christianity is that of purity. Many writers discussing devotional practices do so using a language of purity and pollution. This maps onto a well-elaborated tension, supposedly inherent within salvationist religions, between the immanent and the transcendental. The sacred realm is, by definition, pure; the profane realm, by definition, polluted. Such a tension is particularly marked within the literature on Catholicism, leading William Christian to argue that Catholicism is a purity centred religion:

'In a religion that centres early and often on purity, young children are made living ideals of the way to be, as if to prove purity possible and remind adults that while they are no longer pure they hold the potential germ of purity...Over half of the images in the parish churches of the valley include a representation of the infant Jesus. The day-to-day life in these villages could be called child-centred because it is purity centred.' (1972: 156).

For the Catholic peasants of Christian's study, devotional activities and visits to shrines dotted about the landscape form part of an ongoing quest for purity. Such shrines are spatially removed from sites of profane activities such as villages and cultivated fields; their purpose, in part, being to 'cleanse' individuals of the pollution they incur at these sites. Devotees leave the shrines feeling spiritually 'cleansed', and restored to a state of spiritual purity.

In Santa Rita, however, the quest is for something different. Rather than emphasising purity as a virtue, we have seen how Santa Ritan people elevate categorically impure types of people to spiritual prominence. Moreover, we have observed how the practice of educating children about the ways of married adults via playfully ritualised games constitutes a way of ridding children of their innocence – of doing away with their spiritual purity. Indeed, given local understandings about the worldly impracticality of purity in general, it is questionable whether 'purity' is the right word to describe what any of their religious practice is about.

I would argue that rather than a quest for purity, the sacrificial discourse that this thesis has focused upon constitutes a quest for grace. For whereas purity is defined by the Oxford English dictionary as 'freedom from physical contamination or moral pollution', grace is identified simply as a 'divine and strengthening influence'. A quest for purity therefore implies an absolute distinction between two

incommensurable spheres, but a quest for grace is based upon the interconnectedness of the pure and polluted, and the sacred and profane.<sup>2</sup>

A problem with the notion of 'redemption', therefore, is that it can place a homogenizing gloss on the different processes by which people in Christian cultures seek to achieve it. Thus whereas the peasants of William Christian's study, (and Catholic pilgrims at shrines more generally) seek redemption by *cleansing* themselves of sin through acts of prayer, bathing, anointments, and the performance of purificatory sacramental rituals, Santa Ritan people seek redemption primarily by *transforming* sin into a sacrificial gift to others and to God. On a lived and daily level, Santa Ritan people strive to unite the two spheres – to *sin virtuously* rather than to expel pollution altogether and replace it with a state of purity. Rather than being 'child-centred' as Christian suggests, day-to-day life in the village of Santa Rita is adult-centred because it is *not* centred upon purity.

This is not to suggest that Santa Ritan people do not possess a concept of purity, but rather that the sacred is for them both a pure and polluted realm. In Jesus' Incarnation and bodily suffering on the cross, Santa Ritan people locate the profanely human side of God. In the various human saints that they worship, they locate the divine potential within themselves. The classic example always cited to me was that of Santa Rita herself, who, as I was often told, had been a spouse and parent '*como qualquer um de nós*' 'like any one of us'.

## A parting gift

It was my last week in the village and I was sitting in the back courtyard of the chapel feeling glum. It was nearing the end and I was tired; tired of missing my family, of being the constant 'outsider' and yet at the same time a listening board for peoples' problems and woes. 'Nobody appreciates how difficult things have been for me' I thought crossly. I had been a part of village life long enough by then to feel that I deserved some kind of empathy in return. Had I not provided them with enough slapstick entertainment? Listened patiently to their narratives? Had I not woken up at the crack of dawn to drive people long distances in my car without question, and allowed myself to be used as a convenient source of presents and loans? My silent catalogue of everything that was wrong with the village and its people was unexpectedly disturbed by the chapel door banging in the breeze. I looked behind me and was surprised to see it that it was open. Somebody was inside. Listening intently I could make out the sound of a broom being swept across the

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<sup>2</sup> I do not utilise Durkheim's distinction between impurity and profanity as this is not a feature of local thought. Santa Ritan people do not make a clear distinction between impurity as an active violation of the sacred as opposed to profanity as being merely outside the sacred system, or beyond it.



floor and, rising above it, a high, melodious voice singing one of the old songs. It was Dida preparing the chapel for mass the next day. I froze to the spot, listening and hoping that she would not come out and catch me there, alone and morose. Did she know I was there, I wondered, or was she unaware? Should I stay put or make my presence known? Suddenly there was another voice. A different woman had entered the church:

*Woman:* Oh Dida woman, I brought these flowers for the altar. The Padre likes the place to look nice. How is the English girl?

*Dida:* Maya? She goes back to her country next week you know.

*Woman:* Already? Virgin Maria! But it seems like yesterday she arrived. Why is she going already woman?

*Dida:* She finished that work that she came here to do.

*Woman:* Ah what work, eh, Dida? Work that takes you so far from home!

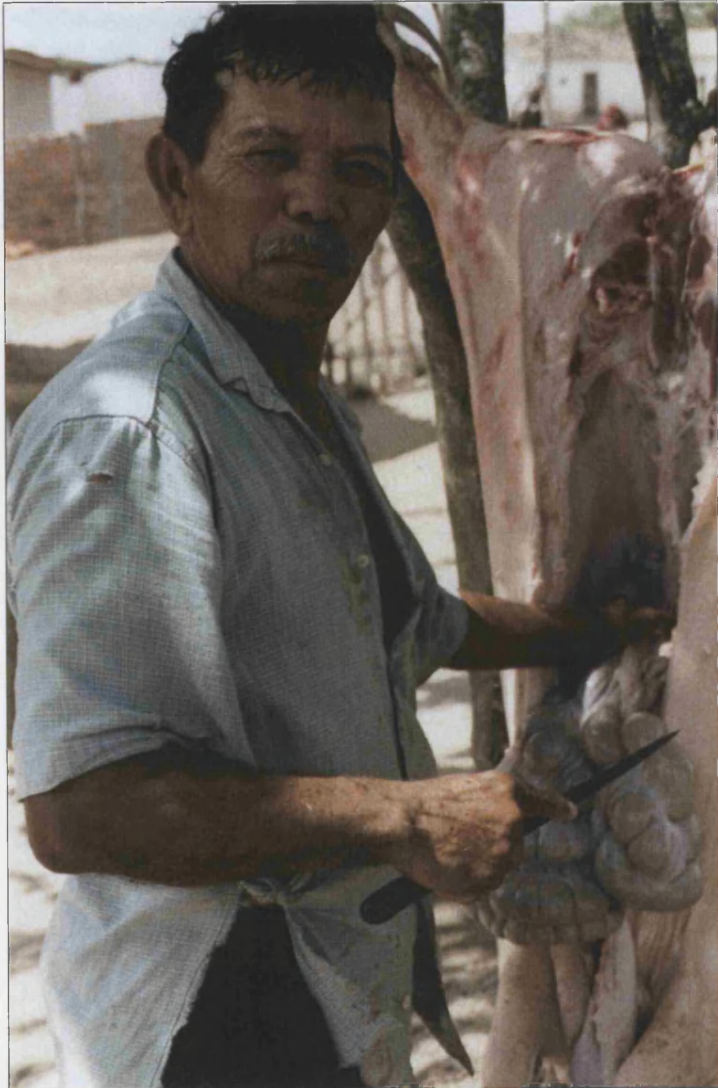
*Dida:* I know, woman. That girl suffers a great deal for her work. To spend so long away from her parents, to come here without knowing anyone – not even the language. Ave Maria! I could never, ever, have endured what she did. She has suffered, yes she has suffered.

*Woman:* What suffering! Poor creature must be grateful to be going home.

## Plates



*Sofridora,*  
Santa Rita



*Trabalhador,*  
Santa Rita



Couple on their wedding day, Santa Rita



Children dressed up as bride, groom and priest, Santa Rita





Drawing out evil through yawning, Santa Rita

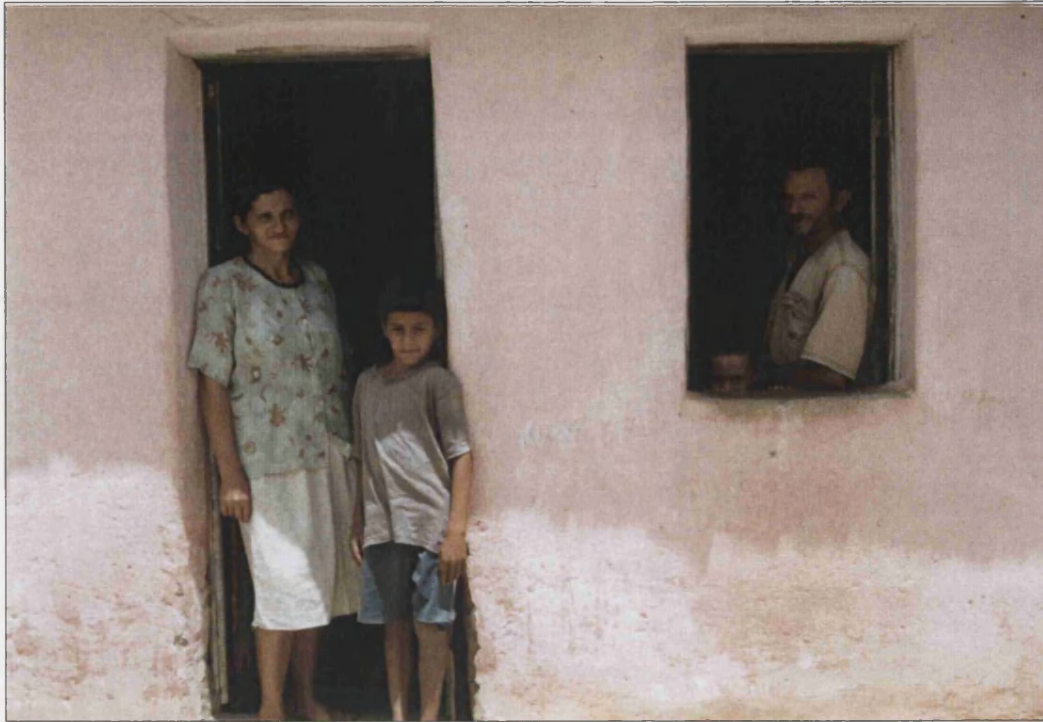


Curing patient with *peito aberto*, Santa Rita



Woman scraping manioc,  
Santa Rita





A family home, Santa Rita



View of central street, Santa Rita



Women and children gathered on the sidewalk, Santa Rita



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