

9 **Wellbeing is the feeling of being ‘one with the world and my surroundings’: Reflection about the environmental dimension of wellbeing in Brazil**

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Introduction

In 2010, I accompanied a group of students from the University of São Paulo and their professor, Vagner Gonçalves da Silva, to the *Sanctuario Nacional de Umbanda* outside São Paulo City. It is described as an ecological sanctuary in the Serra do Mar, founded and administered by the Umbanda Federation. A road sign near the entrance to the building has this quotation from *pai* [priest] Ronaldo Linares, one of the leaders of the federation: ‘O umbandista não precisa de uma catedral como só o gênio humano é capaz de fazer, ele só precisa de um pouco de natureza como só deus foi capaz de criar.’ [‘The *umbandistas* do not need a cathedral that is created by humans, we only need nature which only god can create.’] The whole site covers a vast area at the edge of a forest, with several meeting houses that can be rented, outdoor places for sacrifices and other ceremonies, shrines for personal worship and impressive statues of various Orixas, the African deities at the core of the Umbanda pantheon, together with other spirits. The sanctuary offers a place to meet and worship close to nature. Many Umbanda communities in São Paulo do not have sufficient space for larger ceremonies due to the restricted space in such a huge mega-city. Worse still, however, is the lack of natural space which, while not required is desired, and indeed is integral to ceremonies.

Already during my earlier research in New York City, I often heard a complaint about lack of space or lack of the ‘right’ space. One of the temples of the Haitian religion Vodou I visited was in the basement of a residential house in Brooklyn. It had taken out the concrete floor in the ceremonial room and exposed natural ground. However, it became a health hazard: due

to frequent noise complaints from neighbours the windows had to be shut, which had led to increasingly dusty air. When the musicians complained that they could not perform under these conditions, the *mambo* [Vodou priestess] gave in and covered the floor again with cement. However, one small area was left without the concrete cover: a small area around the *poteau-mitan*, a pole in the middle of the room decorated with drums that symbolised the link between the different levels of the cosmology and links the human earth with the space of the *lwa* [African spirits] and the space of the ancestors. The pole enables spirits to move to the human level to that they can manifest themselves during a ceremony. And the earth around it allows sacrificial blood to enter the ground and reach the spirits. Dianne Stewart describes it as spiritual grounding that reflects that there is life underground (2022, p. 219, referring to Walter Rodney's text *Groundings*, 1975).

Another problem for communities in urban settings is what to do with the sacrificial animals after the sacrifice. While parts of larger animals are used to cook a communal meal, the rest, as well as the smaller animals, cannot just be discarded as they have become sacred during the sacrifice and ritual order dictates that they are given to the spirits. This needs to be done by putting them close to water or buried under ground in fresh earth which is quite a problem in mega cities. I heard that some communities in New York take the remains to public parks or the ocean, usually in the night as it is against the law to leave animal remains in a public space though animal sacrifice has become legalised in the USA under certain conditions. This is not just a problem for Vodou temples but also for other communities of African-derived religions and came up in several conversations in New York. In addition to the complex issue of animal sacrifice (Schmidt, 2013a), the African deities are associated with natural places such as water (thus, rivers, lakes and the oceans), forest or mountains. The female deities, for instance, are linked to salty or fresh water and a preferred place for ceremonies to honour Yemaja, the mother goddess, is the Atlantic Ocean, or at least the beach in Coney Island in New York.

In São Paulo, where animal sacrifice is allowed, wealthy communities buy property for ceremonies outside the city, preferably close to water and trees, while smaller communities can hire space in the Umbanda sanctuary that offers both. Consequently, the sanctuary is not just a space for ceremonies and meetings, it also offers a place for people to come close to the spirits within their natural environment. During my visit, while we walked around the sanctuary and admired the statues and observed some offerings, we came across a small waterfall, where I noticed a young woman supported by someone else in the pool of the waterfall. I was told later that she was embodying a caboclo (a spirit associated with the Amazon) which is often

around this place. While I attended other ceremonies of African-derived religions in and around São Paulo, the memory of this caboclo stayed in my mind. I realised that nature is not just important as a ceremonial place but also as an experiential place that allows experiences to occur. This little story sets the scene for the following discussion.

Focusing on the latter point – nature as experiential place – I will reflect first on the ways scholars discuss the importance of nature for spiritual experience before moving to reflect on the impact of the natural environment on wellbeing. I will use this section to criticise the One Health policy of the WHO which overlooks the spiritual dimension of wellbeing. This will lead to a discussion of wellbeing within the Brazilian context. I will illustrate that the environment is more than a place but is perceived as a living entity with which we develop relationships. Enriched by excerpts from interviews and surveys conducted in Brazil, the chapter illustrates the interconnectedness that is at the core of the expanding understanding of wellbeing.

Nature as experiential place

The natural environment is one of the core features within the study of religious experience as it inspires a feeling of awe and can trigger a non-ordinary experience, whether that experience is called religious, spiritual or ‘just’ unusual. This feature shines through in William James’ description of his own experience. James who is one of the founding fathers of a non-theological approach to the study of religious experiences described his own experience when walking alone in the Adirondack Mountains:

The streaming moonlight lit up things in a magical checkered play, and it seemed as if the God of all the nature mythologies were holding an indescribable meeting in my breast with the moral Gods of the inner life...the intense significance of some sort, of the whole scene, if one could only *tell* the significance; the intense inhuman remoteness of its inner life, and yet the intense *appeal* of it;... In point of fact, I can’t find a single word for all that significance, and don’t know what it was significant of, so there it remains, and mere boulder of *impression* (James and James 2008, pp. 76–77).

In a similar way, Alister Hardy, the founder of the Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC), recalled in his unpublished autobiographical notes his personal experiences during his walks along the banks of the river in Oundle,

Nottinghamshire that impacted on his life and might even have inspired him towards his later career in marine biology.

There is no doubt that as a boy I was becoming what might be described as a nature mystic. Somehow, I felt the presence of something which was beyond and yet in a way part of all the things that thrilled me – the wildflowers, and indeed the insects too. I will now record something [that] I have never told anyone before, but now that I am in my 88th year I think I can admit it. Just occasionally when I was sure that no one could see me, I became so overcome with the glory of the natural scene, that for a moment or two I fell on my knees in prayer – not prayer asking for anything, but thanking God, who felt very real to me, for the glories of his Kingdom and for allowing me to feel them. It was always by the running waterside that I did this, perhaps in front of a great foam of meadowsweet or purple loosestrife. (Hardy, cited in Hay, 2013, p. 2)

These encounters in nature – some of them even ecstatic experiences – had a transformative impact on Hardy and inspired him after his retirement in 1969 to collect personal accounts of spiritual and religious experiences that became the foundation of the RERC archive. Hardy's as well as James' experience can be categorised in Walter Stace's model as extrovertive mystical experience, as they were triggered by the external physical landscape and environment, inducing 'a sense of the underlying unity of the natural world' (Hunter, 2021, p. 4, referring to Stace, 1960, p. 15). We see therefore two features regarding nature and spiritual and religious experience. The natural environment is often the place for such an experience, and it can also call from an individual a spiritual connection to nature.

Both aspects are also reflected in the accounts collected by Hardy and his successors in the RERC. One of the first accounts, for instance, describes eloquently the natural setting where the experience took place:

As I sat on a low wall opposite a beautiful tree covered with pink blossom, thrown into relief by the high hill behind it, I was suddenly made aware of my surroundings in a manner difficult to describe in words. The tree became vibrant, 'real' (in the sense that the 'burning bush' did to Moses in the O.T.) and I was transported into what I can only term 'reality', and was filled with a great surge of joy (i.e. like C.S. Lewis's 'Surprised by Joy'). This was fundamental and I was 'caught up into it' and was a part of it. I felt a great sense of awe and reverence, permeated by the presence of a power which was completely real and in which I

had my part to play. I knew that all was well and that all things were working together for good. (RERC #000011)

Based on the prevalence of the natural world as the setting for an experience in the initial accounts he collected, Hardy identified in his book *The Spiritual Nature of Man* (1979), 'natural beauty' as one of the triggers of religious experience (1979, p. 81) – and was even more common in this regard than religious worship. Paul Marshall (2005) in his study on mystical experiences and the natural world echoes Hardy's characterisation which points to the second feature regarding experience and nature that I mentioned earlier, that nature can initiate a spiritual connection to nature. Marshall applies the label 'extrovertive' to mystical experiences to distinguish them 'from other mystical experiences by their orientation towards the natural world. In extrovertive experiences, the mystical features – unity, knowledge, reality, love, luminosity, and so forth – characterise experience of the natural world, not experience of something completely beyond the natural world, such as a transcendent god, self, soul, or realm' (2005, p. 3). Interestingly, the mystical experience of becoming one with the world can also take place in urban settings as this narrative shows:

I was out walking one night in busy streets of Glasgow when, with slow majesty, at a corner where the pedestrians were hurrying by and the city traffic was hurtling on its way, the air was filled with heavenly music; and an all-encompassing light, that moved in waves of luminous colour, outshone the brightness of the lighted streets. I stood still, filled with a strange peace and joy, the music beat on in its majesty and the traffic and the pedestrians moved through the light. They passed on their way, but the music and light remained, pulsating, harmonious, more real than the traffic of the streets. I too moved on...till I found myself in the everyday world again with a strange access of gladness and of love. [RERC #000208]

Similar to the experience cited above, this mystical or, in Stace's term, 'extrovertive experience' was triggered by the location. Unfortunately, the relationship to the natural world is often overlooked by early scholars who focused on understanding the relationship between humans and the divine. But this is changing, as the interest in eco-spirituality and its impact on wellbeing shows. As we know today, 'a relationship with the natural world directly affects people's physical, mental, and overall wellbeing due to benefits gained by increased exposure to nature and positive experiences in the natural world' (Restall and Conrad 2015, p. 1). The increased awareness of the beneficial

impact of nature has inspired new research on the way people experience nature and / or have experiences in nature. For instance, Thurfjell and Remmel recently highlighted in an article called 'The Forest Is My Church' that this trope captures the widespread notion among secular urban middle-class population in Northern Europe and illustrate that 'that they today experience in nature what people previously experienced in the church. In other words, that it is in nature – and not in traditional religion – that they find a sense of sacredness, authenticity, purpose, and stillness, – qualities that they imagine that religious people get out of their religion' (2023, p. 1). This shift to nature is not therefore new, although it is getting more attention recently. Beringer who already discussed ecospirituality over twenty years ago, gives her definition of 'true ecospirituality' as an extension to ecospirituality used simply as 'connection to nature'. Instead, she characterises 'true ecospirituality' using four ideas: nature (in the sense of the natural world) is seen as a source of meaning in one's life; 'God' is in nature with an 'otherworldly' dimension; commitment to the Earth reflected in moral conduct; and finally, that the universe is believed to be or experienced as a living cosmos and planet Earth a living sentient being 'Gaia' or 'Mother Earth' (Beringer, 1999/2000, p. 17). She argues that in 'authentic ecospirituality', land is 'considered to be a vessel of the sacred [...] possible source of spiritual inspiration' (1999/2020, p. 17). Similarly, Valerie Lincoln defines ecospirituality as 'manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment' (2000, p. 228). Beringer's 'spiritual inspiration' echoes the experiences of James, Hardy and others described above. However, there is a problem with the concept of ecospirituality and how it is discussed in the literature. The debate around ecospirituality usually focuses on Western movements and reflects on ideas of middle-class urban population in Western societies, despite acknowledging – often in passing – its roots in indigenous beliefs. It expresses warnings against environmental destruction in our postmodern world and even links, as Jane Bennett writes, 'environmental pollution to moral decline, or the desouling of ourselves, and seeks to recover a sense of the sacred' (2001, p. 91).

However, there is a shift as for instance in the article 'An 'Ecospiritual' Perspective: Finally, a Place for Indigenous Approaches' by John Coates, Mel Gray and Tiani Hetherington (2006). The authors highlight that the emergence of literature on spirituality and the environment has created 'a space where indigenous voices are being heard. [...] Spirituality and ecology emphasise, respectively, a search for meaning and sustainability, and acknowledge the need to accept and value alternative perspectives' (2006, p. 389). For the authors, ecospirituality counters ethnocentric tendencies and points towards the knowledge of non-Western cultures from which we can learn, not just about the spiritual sense of interconnectedness but also

about the need to integrate ecological harmony and social responsibility (2006, p. 392). There are also, of course, voices that show the Western roots of ecospirituality. Bennett, for instance, points out that Henry Thoreau could be read as an ecospiritualist who treats 'nature as a kind of spiritual tonic' (2001, p. 92). She cites for instance the following lines from 'Walking': 'I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil, – to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one' (Thoreau, 1851, cited by Bennett, 2001, p. 93). This love of nature is also reflected in Thurfjell and Rimmel's research data from Sweden and Estonia. Citing from their interviews they point out that their participants – all of them urban, secular, middle-class – perceive the forest as authentic; they cherish its peace, silence and solitude; and regard the forest 'like a different world', connected to an experience of allure and enchantment (2023, pp. 4–5). Some even expressed a kind of 'animistic view of trees, speaking of them as persons with caring and energetic qualities' (2023, p. 5). They argue that their data transcends the dualistic religion-secular divide. Their participants' love of nature 'is neither religious nor secular and we hence conclude that it would be more fruitful to interpret their nature experiences in "both/and" rather than "either/or" terms' (2023, p. 15). Building on Lois Lee (2015) and her notion of 'existential cultures' that avoids the dichotomy of religion and secularity, they put forward the notion of 'existential field' and describe it as a category to:

identify the domain in which our participants' love of nature takes place. Within this field, nature experiences co-exist with religious, spiritual, and secular matters. It contains (or cluster together) a variety of seemingly disparate phenomena, including frequenting the forest, sharing time with friends, doing yoga, visiting a psychotherapist, listening to classical music, attending a church service and so on – all framed within the context of caring for one's physical and spiritual (or, more widely, existential) health, pointing to the fact that the pervasive orientation of the existential field is that of wellbeing. (Thurfjell/Rimmel 2023, p. 16)

Lincoln also highlights the link to wellbeing when she writes about 'a reciprocal relationship between the health and wholeness of humanity and the health and wholeness of the environment' (2000, p. 228). In this sense, the concept of ecospirituality when applied to healthcare practice contributes to the healing of self, other and planet (2000, p. 242).

However, as already mentioned at the start of this section, experiences that take place in natural settings have a spiritual dimension. Stace in his classification of them as extrovertive mystical experiences points out that people experiencing them associated what they experience with a sense of unity and oneness in nature, something that the participants in Thurfjell and Rimmel's study echoed, and my research also confirmed. It is important therefore to acknowledge the plurality of ways in which people connect to nature as Irine Becci and Alexandre Grandjean (2022) point out:

If the category of nature is a cultural construct, it is also an experiential and relational approach to biotopes, which humans learn to pay attention to and integrate into their local cosmologies. [...] these cosmologies are made of secular and religious cultures that interlace. Therefore, there is not one eco-spirituality but a multitude of ways to understand and practice the link between what is considered spirituality and what is considered ecology. (2022, p. 4)

The environmental dimension of wellbeing

Despite many attempts to define wellbeing as a universal term, wellbeing is a cultural defined concept. In English, 'well' relates etymologically to 'wealth', which according to Richard Woods meant 'happiness' (2008). This link to wealth is absent in Latin America where wellbeing has a less materialistic and more spiritual dimension. In the two dominant languages of Latin America, wellbeing is translated as *bem estar* (Portuguese) or *buen vivir* (Spanish), which means literally being or living well but implies the meaning of 'living well together'. In this sense, it is 'a holistic concept rooted on principles and values such as harmony, equilibrium and complementarity, which from an indigenous perspective must guide the relationship of human beings with each other and with nature (or Mother Earth) and the cosmos' (Rodríguez, 2016, p. 279, endnote 1). Wellbeing becomes perceived consequently as relational, 'as socially and culturally constructed, rooted in a particular time and place' (White, 2016b, p. 29).

However, Rodríguez's definition points to a wider concept; wellbeing does not depend only on living well together with other human beings but also with nature and other than human beings. The reply of one of the participants of my study on spirituality and wellbeing echoes this perspective when he describes wellbeing as 'the feeling of belonging to the whole and that everything is connected. When we understand and practice it, we feel that we are part of something bigger. By knowing this, daily problems become

small' (#75, Brazil, 54 years old, male). This interconnectedness is at the core of the perception of wellbeing in Brazil, even today, in a neoliberal era in which wellbeing is increasingly seen as leading a good life (Schmidt, 2022).

However, in the academic debate, the environmental aspect within the notion of wellbeing was long neglected, despite the notion of One Health promoted by the WHO. This initiative is an improvement from its original definition of global health promoted by the WHO in 1948 that simply stated that 'health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' (WHO, 1948, p. 2). Influenced by this definition, wellbeing was long linked to measurable aspects of quality of life, hence ignoring immaterial aspects such as the spiritual dimension and the relationship with other than human agencies. This approach has been slightly adjusted in the One Health concept that the WHO currently advocates. The WHO characterises One health as 'an integrated, unifying approach that aims to sustainably balance and optimise the health of people, animals, and ecosystems. It uses the close, interdependent links among these fields to create new surveillance and disease control methods' (WHO, 2022).

The term One Health, first adopted in 2003 but further promoted in the wake of the global spread of viruses such as SARS and in particular the Covid 19 pandemic (Braverman, 2023, p. 1). It represents a political agenda to increase global collaborations and sharing knowledge in the light of the threat of transmission of infections from animal to human (Wood, 2023, p. 27). Irus Braverman in the edited volume *More-Than-One Health: Humans, Animals, and the Environment Post-COVID* critically discusses the ideology behind the One Health agenda that limits our engagement with diverse worldviews. While she acknowledges that One Health reflects the widely accepted idea that diseases cannot be controlled in relation to human health alone and that all living organisms are at stake, it is still based on an anthropocentric, Western and even neoliberal ideology, 'illuminating the structural biases and power dynamics that are still at play in this context' (2023, p. 2). Instead, she urges us to decolonise One Health. Her edited volume includes in consequence various local examples, from the Arctic, Israel and South Africa to Taiwan and India, to name just a few. In this way it echoes what Keller and Kearns highlight in their introduction of *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth* – the need for a new ecodifference that reflects biodiversity and transnational pluralism (2007, p. 11).

However, though Braverman acknowledges the need to acknowledge differences, her critique is still mainly a critique against the anthropocentric focus 'on zoonotic and vector-borne diseases and on health services that integrate only human and animal health, without considering their environment' (2023, p. 7). I miss the reflection of the spiritual dimension of environment

that can impact on health and wellbeing. Nevertheless, her critique that indigenous voices are neglected in the debate on One Health is important. Without understanding how people engage with their natural environment, we can't challenge the power hierarchy still embedded in One Health. And as I pointed out above, people relate to nature in a spiritual way, even if they are secular and even anti-religious. Ignoring spirituality in any discussion of health and wellbeing is therefore negligent of emic viewpoints. Tim Ingold refers to it as 'sentient ecology' (2000, p. 24). Referring to David Anderson's study of reindeer herders and hunters in Siberia, Ingold writes that the term 'captures the kind of knowledge people have of their environments [...]. It is knowledge not of a formal, authorised kind, transmissible in contexts outside those of its practical application. On the contrary, it is based in feeling, consisting in the skills, sensitivities and orientations that have developed through long experience of conducting one's life in a particular environment' (2000, p. 25).

Another point that is important to make before I return to my research in Brazil is experiences in the realm of nature are not 'necessarily self-centred', as Becci points out, but include 'a strong emphasis on community. Indeed, a certain official ecological discourse has long referred to spirituality when pointing to values encountered in distant, non-western, indigenous, or native people, e.g., societies that attribute a spiritual value to all species in nature' (2021, p. 107). Based on her study in Switzerland, she and her collaborators put forward the notion of 'Subtle Green Spirituality' that 'comprises cultural ideas, beliefs, rituals, and practices that make reference to nature pragmatically and in relation to everyday life, as opposed to making reference to nature in a manner related to mysticism or transcendence' (Becci and Grandjean, 2022, pp. 18–19). In this way they regard 'Subtle Green Spirituality' as oriented towards solidarity and political commitment, a notion that echoes one of my interviews with a Candomblé priest in Brazil.

Before I was able to interview him, I had met him in various situations in which he always campaigned for the acceptance of African-derived culture and religions in Brazil. He was indeed a strong advocate of Black Brazil, which caused his African heritage to become noted. However, in a time when Candomblé communities pushed towards cleansing their practices of all non-African features, he continued to celebrate annually a ceremony in honour of the *caboclo* [spirit] White Feather (Pena Branca) which is seen as a representation of the indigenous heritage. His position was in clear opposition to some of the leading priests of Candomblé. Take Mãe Stella, for instance, a celebrated national figure in Brazil who dismissed the inclusion of non-African elements as 'a disguise, a false construction, a façade under which real, authentic African cultural and religious traditions were

preserved' (Sansi, 2007: 20). She fought against all non-African elements such as Catholic iconography or indigenous spirits such as the caboclo as part of her wider anti-racist campaign (Gebara, 1999: 410). While the position is not uncontested, it spread through the Candomblé communities across Brazil so widely that Gonçalves da Silva considered Candomblé as the 'reinvention of Africa in Brazil' (1994, p. 43). Why did this Candomblé priest differ so openly despite his strong political activism to promote his African heritage? The answer lies in the connection between the caboclo with the environment.

Although I have been initiated into an African cult, I am Brazilian, and I have a Brazilian spirit, that is, White Feather.... He is an Indian who was born in the interior of *Goiás*, inside the bush. According to him [=the spirit], he belonged to another father of the saint [=initiated priest of Candomblé] who did not take care of him correctly. In the end, he [the spirit] gave up and caught me, still a young man. Really, before I made [=became initiated into the cult of] *Oxum* [=name of his *orixá*], this *caboclo* revealed himself in me. (interview on 21 May 2010)

Later in the interview, he went even further and demanded that everyone should pass a *caboclo* ceremony before becoming initiated into Candomblé because *caboclos* represent the indigenous identity of Brazil, they are 'men of the interior who had been abandoned, had been in the bush without civilization, without culture;...[however, they]... had contact with *Oxalá* because of its pureness, its stubbornness of living inside there without talking with the civilization.' For him the caboclos are his Brazilian motherland, his home, as he sees himself as 'a native Brazilian, with African heritage, but I am not a native African' (see Schmidt, 2013b for more information). While in some Candomblé communities the *caboclos* have been replaced by the *orixá* Oxóssi who is part of the (African) pantheon of *orixás* and linked to hunting, caboclos are often described as *Dono da Terra*, the master of the land, representing therefore the first owners of Brazilian land (Ferretti, 1998, p. 39). The inclusion of the *caboclos* in the Candomblé pantheon was seen as a way to celebrate the indigenous people as 'Brazilian hero and national symbol post-Independence' (Ferretti, 1998, p. 39).

But the inclusion of caboclos is not only a political statement, it also highlights the importance of the environment for wellbeing with its spiritual dimension. While I didn't discuss wellbeing with this priest, I realised much later that it was about wellbeing – or well-becoming as the two editors of this volume write – all along. He showed the importance of the place for his spirituality, and consequently for his wellbeing that is centred around his

spirituality. As the editors point out in the introduction of this volume, the term 'well-becoming' includes a notion of past and present, that embraces a subjective and emotional mode of awareness. Fernando sees himself as Brazilian, linked by his Brazilian place of birth, and as African, linked by his ancestors, and both, present and past, are connected through Candomblé.

Wellbeing in Brazil and its environmental dimension

At this point I will return to my research on spirituality and wellbeing. During the initial stage of this project, I asked participants to describe wellbeing. While the replies are not representative for the Brazilian public, they illustrate some interesting features such as that physical health is not enough to achieve a sense of wellbeing. The participants mentioned mental features but also spiritual ones such as the divine. Living in harmony was also a common feature as well as the need for connectedness, whether to other human people or in a wider, all-inclusive sense (see Schmidt, 2022). While only a few referred to the word for nature in their replies, several pointed at the connection to the surroundings, to the feeling of being not alone, to being connected to a whole. However, the participants of the study lived all in an urban setting, most but not all in São Paulo, one of the global mega cities. Despite having some public gardens and being relatively close to the Atlantic coastline (relative for Brazilians at least), access to the natural environment is limited. It is therefore interesting to see that even in a study that did not focus on the environment, several replies point to the importance of their surroundings for wellbeing as the following sample shows.

1. Wellbeing is something that gets us in Peace with ourselves...with nature...with others and with God, at last it is happiness and joy different from the one we usually feel because it lasts. (#7, Brazil, 50 years old, female)
2. It means to feel well with oneself, tuned with world and nature, with no stress. (#16, Brazil, 19 years old, female)
3. To feel well with oneself and with the world surrounding you. (#19, Brazil. 18 years old, female)
4. Wellbeing is to feel well with oneself and at the same time to know that one is not alone. It is to feel supported although we don't see those who take care of us. (#31, Brazil, 45 years old, female)
5. To feel well with myself, with other and with the whole (#36, Brazil, 51 years old, female)

6. It is to feel good about yourself and with the one's surroundings. Which is very difficult nowadays with so many interests and bad influences around. (#49, Brazil, 63 years old, female)
7. Wellbeing is to feel well in the whole, to be sure of and how to be humble, seeking to be better everyday. (#51, Brazil, 27 years old, female)
8. Wellbeing is the feeling of belonging to the whole and that everything is connected. When we understand and practice it, we feel that we are part of something bigger. By knowing this, daily problems become small. (#75, Brazil, 54 years old, male)

Interestingly all but one of the participants of the survey that mention nature in various ways were female. While women were indeed the majority, there were 33 male participants out of the 97 in total.

In some follow-up interviews I discussed in more detail their understanding of spirituality and what it means to achieve a sense of wellbeing. Several interviewees told me detailed life stories how they overcame illnesses, addiction, psychological problems and more by exploring spirituality. Ultimately spirituality helped them to connect to people (family, friends or people in general), to other than human beings such as spirits, deities or ancestors, and to the world at large. This connection is at the core of wellbeing. In African-derived traditions, this spiritual connection is enabled via a spiritual energy called *axé* (see Schmidt, 2009, 2012). *Axé* is the spiritual force that links all living being with the divine. It is needed to live and exists in every living being, humans, animals and plants. Consequently, it is in the natural world, the forests, oceans and air that are all filled with living beings. According to Candomblé teaching, *axé* is given by Oludumaré, the supreme deity whose breath gives life to the physical form. During our lifetime, we lose *axé* which causes illnesses and other problems. If we live in an unbalanced way, *axé* can diminish dangerously and even lead to death. Central to this understanding is the definition of health as living in balance with *axé* (Gomberg, 2011, p. 144). The physical body can be treated by biomedicine and following nutritional rules. However, these rules do not cure the cause of illness, the spiritual imbalance. Without restoring this imbalance, people cannot achieve a sense of wellbeing which is, however, not the same as health. As one of the participants highlighted, one can have a sense of wellbeing even when critically ill (see Schmidt, 2020 for further discussion).

We can gain *axé* by observing rituals, performing sacrifices and following obligations towards the *orixás* (Schmidt, 2021). Among the participants were several members of a centre in São Paulo that offers training courses in various spiritual healing therapies in addition to healing sessions. The healing

sessions and ceremonies are based mainly on Candomblé ideas. But it also offers workshops to explore different aspects of healing and therapy as a way of self-improvement which is becoming increasingly popular, not just in this centre (see Schmidt, 2023). The core thinking behind them is that healing starts in you. the first step towards healing is understanding why one is sick. As soon as people understand the cause for the disease or the addiction, and work on improving oneself, for instance change their habits, healing begins. In this way the overarching philosophy of the centre differs from other spiritual healers as the co-director outlined in an interview.

We do not say that it was a spirit that brought you and healed you. Instead it was you who became aware of yourself, who transformed you. [...] we also have people that seek advice, we have the mediums in trance who receive guidance from above and give advice, certain teas, energy etc. [...] healing is in you. [...] healing is in oneself, and that is my understanding of spirituality. (interview on 20 August 2016)

In addition to my visits to the centre in São Paulo and my conversations and interviews with some of the members, I was also able to attend a core healing ceremony that takes place outside São Paulo, closer to the natural environment. It focuses on Olubajé, the *orixá* of healing, and is performed in a specific place, bought and developed by the centre. Like the other healing sessions that are regularly conducted in São Paulo, the ceremony is led by various mediums who can be consulted by members of the public. However, participation at the ceremony itself is important as it helps to restore the energy within. Gomberg describes it as a complex ritual whose central objective is to restore the health of everyone present, members as well as guests (Gomberg, 2011, p. 170).

This ceremony and its natural setting highlight an aspect of *axé* that is often overlooked in the literature – the connection to nature. *Axé* is not only in human beings and animals, but is in every tree, every flower and even every weed. The natural world shares *axé* with us because we are part of it. Feeling connected does not refer only to being connected to other humans and the *orixás*, but also to the trees, to the mountains and to nature in its glory. We see here therefore a perfect example of the connection between spirituality, nature and wellbeing. All is seen as interrelated by *axé*, the divine energy that keeps us and the world alive.

It complements Stewart's aspect of spiritual grounding which I mentioned in passing in the introduction. Working in Trinidad on the Yoruba Orisa tradition, Stewart explains that Yoruba-Orisa mothers 'have a long tradition of *grounding*, of claiming spots of ground for spiritual fixation' (2022, p.

219). For Stewart these practices of grounding and honouring Mother Earth in Trinidad reflect the preoccupation with land that she sees as legacy from slavery. Black landlessness, which she describes as ‘a haunted *place* of non-belonging’, is ‘the most fertile province of African religious imagination and invention in the Caribbean and the Americas’ (2022, p. 219). Stewart points here in particular to women and their leadership roles in Yoruba-Orisa tradition, which is also relevant for Brazil, at least to some degree (Matory, 2005).

As I already have pointed out in the introduction, by emphasising the place of the *poteau-mitan* in a Haitian Vodou temple with its base in the earth, the ground has importance as it enables the connection to ancestors, spirits and deities. The need to belong is also an important feature for all diasporic communities. However, when we consider wellbeing, the concept of grounding needs to be extended. Instead of perceiving it (literally) as ground, I suggest using it in a wider sense as connection to nature. Hence it is not only the ground below but also the sky, the sun and the air above and around. *Axé* connects everything and everyone, what is below and above the ground and in the air. It embraces fire, water, air and the earth, and in this way, we are grounded in more than one way, not just to the ground below but also the atmosphere above. It even links us with the past and the future, with our ancestors and our descendants. It supersedes a lineal, two-dimensional concept of living and wellbeing with spiritual connection at its core.

Conclusion

Sharon Betcher points to an interesting link between ideas of health and environmental activism because health ‘serves to personalise the concern’: ‘Given the loosing of cesium from nuclear malfunctions, like endocrine disrupters escaping from plastics, each leading to genetic, even epigenetic mutations, there appears every good reason to conjoin environmental discourse with our culture’s health obsession’ (2015, p. 10). However, she warns that in the name of health, we are too easily manipulated, and give over to a neoliberal agenda related to the narcissistic optimisation of self. While I agree with her concern, my chapter has shown a different link between health and environment. Looking initially at nature as the location of spiritual and religious experiences and afterwards at the environmental dimension of wellbeing, I presented my research insights from Candomblé as a way both can be seen as interrelated.

I will conclude the chapter as I started, with my visit to the *Sanctuario Nacional de Umbanda*. As I outlined in the introduction, the Sanctuary offers a place for ceremonies close to nature. It has places that trigger experiences

and can even initiate the embodying of a spirit in a human body during trance. But it is more than a place to explore spiritual experience. It is also a place to be close to the divine. As the sign at the entrance announces, nature is seen as the cathedral, not made by humans but by the divine.

Biographical note

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