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Between Exodus and the Final Judgment: “Sertaneja” Worldview and the Trajectory of Antonio Conselheiro’s Belo Monte (Brazil, 1893–1897)

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Abstract: The present paper presupposes (developed under the scope of Semiotics and Cultural Studies) that texts in culture are endowed not only with their capacity to produce images but mainly to create new messages. As texts are transmitted to receivers in different times, places and repertoires, they undergo processes of recodification and become new texts by inserting dynamism in cultural processes. Furthermore, it must be taken into account that texts do not exist isolated, without relation with other texts. On the contrary, the possible combinations among them are potentially the most unexpected. Those references allow us to think about the creative role of the reception of biblical elements in the articulation of identities and narratives in history. And a special challenge is imposed: considering the Bible’s popular reception. It is necessary to take into consideration specific scenarios and, simultaneously, the dynamic scenarios of the same reception. It is important to overcome prejudice regarding the sources that lead us to that reception. At the Belo Monte of Antonio Conselheiro, stage of one of the most significant social and religious experiences, and, at the end, one of the bloodiest experiences of Brazilian history, the Bible’s new readings link many of its themes to references coming from other mythological worlds of African origin and (mainly) of indigenous matrix. The myth of the flight into Egypt and the conquest of the Promised Land were linked to others connected with abundance and freedom. The biblical concept of the Antichrist played a significant role in the sertanejo’s understanding about the social and the political environment: Belo Monte was the place where salvation could be perceived and the body could be fed and healed. And the perspective of the imminent end of the world became more intense when military operations, through a brutal war, acted in order to destroy the holy village: biblical references supported ideas that encouraged

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resistance movement and prepared the “death in the Lord,” martyrdom, under Judgment Day expectation.

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1 Introduction: A Prophecy

The text that follows had one of the most profound repercussions on the Brazilian imaginary on account of its reproduction within one of our literary masterpieces, *Os Sertões* [“Rebellion in the Backlands,” although a literal translation would be “The Backlands”] by Euclides da Cunha.¹ Actually, the book reproduces only a fragment of the text that then began to show up in such diverse areas as cinema, *samba* and other literary productions. We will quote it in its fullness, given the fact that the aforementioned Euclides recorded the said text in one of his journals; we will entitle it “Prophecy.” The writing is obviously by someone only “half-literate,” and pains were taken to preserve it as such:

The prophecy of Jerusalem sets. How many men were false to the Crown in 1822 the mistaken were “*unmistakened*.” In 1830 they were *unmistakened* when the stars in the sky ran. In 1854 there shall be a great cholera that in all medicine no physician will know how to treat. In 1862 stone and rifle [illegible] and thousands of causes – blood will run up to the boot heels. In 1867 that was the first signs of this age. For 1868 many railroads will have when a mile of fire will overrun those, which will be a disgrace for the Brazilian country. In 1878 there shall be just a single religious man doing the sermon from door to door. In 1880 fervor will be lacking in men, whom will only know money which will itself not be – In 1888 a great revolution shall be, from May 3rd not once not afterwards. In 1889 the *persuit* [pursuit] will be stronger, to tread long roads, [illegible] come upon large flocks of people falling upon one another; if not the skin and the corpse, that will not find a single rider, the age will be such as a spring chock full of pestilence, death, famine and shortage; much pasture, few tracks. In the *backlends* [backlands] many cowherds will give their prods to their masters. In 1889 the Emperor of the Court will be sacked by the wretched men of Brazil. In 1891, war; nation against nation. In 1892 a great multitude of sinners, some converted and others amended that neither rich nor poor will be known. In 1893, no silver, gold or copper will be had; some red notes made by hands of men will circulate, bursting forth from the treasury. In 1894 thousand of herds will come running from the beaches to the *backlends* and so the *backlends* will become the beach and the beach will become *backlends*. In 1895 men from their *bawconies* [balconies] will open their doors and sit upon their *bawconies* and not five dimes of farmland will be sold. In 1896 there shall be a war of nation against the same nation, and

¹ The translation of this book into English (and other languages) has brought it, as well as the historical event to which it refers, significant renown, *Rebellion in the Backlands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

blood will run through the earth. In 1897 there will be much pasture and few tracks and a single shepherd and a single flock. In 1898 there will be m[any] hats and few heads. In 1899 waters will turn into blood the planet will appear in the nascent with the Sun Ray that the branch will confront the Earth and Earth somewhere will confront the Sky, astronomers from the earth will gather and will merge with the seas; planets from the Sky will fight the earth astronomers. A great rain of stars will rain; many meteors will fall upon the earth that then will be the end of the world. In 1901 the *ligts* [lights] will be turned off. God said in the Gospel – I have a flock not of this pen and it is needed that they gather, bec. [because] there is one shepherd and one flock. Says the prophet Jeremiah that for 1901 exists just one shepherd for all and one flock. End. On this village of Belo Monte on January 24, 1890.²

The piece of paper containing this text was found amidst the ruins of a village [*arraial*] that, despite being called Belo Monte (“Beautiful Mount”) by its inhabitants, would pass on to posterity under the name of Canudos. Its agitated and ultimately terrible trajectory is one of the milestones of Brazilian history: established in 1893 in the backlands [*sertão*,” singular; *sertões*,” plural] of the state of Bahia by a charismatic leader, Antonio Vicente Mendes Maciel (known as Antonio Conselheiro, “Anthony the Counselor”), the village endured 4 years of conflict against religious and civil authorities, after which it was completely razed by the Brazilian army’s troops in October, 1897, after a war that lasted for almost a year.³ Euclides da Cunha went to the conflict zone as a journalist to report on the final phase of this war, and his stay there ended up generating the masterpiece we have mentioned.

It was because he recovered texts such as the one we quoted above that Euclides dubbed the movement from whence they came as being messianic and, specifically, millenarian. This is a misinterpretation on his part, albeit one that we shall not argue here; we are interested in considering the chosen text as an expression of a certain particular worldview, one that is typical of Brazilian traditional popular culture, where the biblical text has a prominent place in meandering and surprising ways.

2 Theoretical and Hermeneutical Framework

In order to analyze the reception of the Bible by Brazilian popular culture, and specifically by this tradition, we will use the theoretical framework of a semiotics

² Euclides da Cunha, *Caderneta de Campo* (São Paulo: Cultrix/Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1975), 74–75.

³ For a panoramic survey of Belo Monte’s rise and fall, one can read Alexandre Otten, “*Só Deus é Grande*”: *A Mensagem Religiosa de Antonio Conselheiro* (São Paulo: Loyola, 1990); Pedro Lima Vasconcellos, *Do Belo Monte das Promessas à Canudos Destruída: O Drama Bíblico da Jerusalém do Sertão* (Maceió: Catavento, 2010).

of culture as elaborated by Iuri Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics. According to Lotman, texts in culture are characterized not just by their power to reproduce messages, but primarily by the *power to create new messages*.⁴ All texts – considered here as sets of information – as they are transmitted to their recipients, readers or religious communities, having passed through processes of re-encoding that are part of human communication, become new texts. These new texts insert dynamism into cultural processes, making culture a great cluster of texts in movement, tension and constant re-creation. This dynamic of cultural texts is due to their structural complexity. This structural complexity, when we consider religious texts, is due to their poetical and mythical character as well as their power to *condense memory*.⁵ A religious text is polysemic both in its synchrony (its structure) and its diachrony (its memory).

But no text exists in isolation, with no relationship whatsoever to other texts. And by no means can its relationship to other texts be considered as being stable and in equilibrium. When observed as a whole, a culture's texts configure what Lotman has called a *semiosphere*: a cluster of texts in tension and movement from the periphery towards the center of this system.⁶ According to this concept, all texts are in relationship to one another within a circumscribed space in a given society and culture. Within the semiosphere texts are related asymmetrically. Texts that lie at a culture's center are more prone to immobility and self-preservation, while texts from the peripheries, at a system's boundaries, are the ones that produce the translation of external elements into internal elements, being, because of that, endowed with dynamism and vast powers for the creation of textuality. Another important characteristic possessed by texts within the semiosphere is their heterogeneity. That is, they are constituted by texts coded in many different forms: oral texts, writings, written in different natural languages, imagistic, gestural, and also hybrid forms. That means that in order for texts to dialog and become new texts a translation process is needed. The translation of hybrid texts into the semiosphere only enhances the power to generate new messages. Cultural texts' hybrid forms only endow these texts with even more dynamics and power of recreation. All this process of transforming undergone by texts in culture, associated with reading and recreation by readers in different historical moments, allows the infinite recreation of texts in all different historical moments.

⁴ Lotman, Yuri. *Universe of the Mind*. A Semiotic Theory of Culture. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000, 11–19 e Nogueira, Paulo Augusto S. “Religião como texto: contribuições da semiótica da cultura,” in Paulo Augusto S. Nogueira (ed.) *Linguagens da religião: Desafios, Métodos e Conceitos Centrais* (São Paulo: Paulinas, 2011), 13–30.

⁵ Lotman, Yuri, *Universe of the Mind*, 18.

⁶ Lotman, Yuri, “On the Semiosphere,” *Sign Systems Studies* 33, no. 1 (2005), 205–229.

These theoretical and methodological observations allow us to understand the creative role the reception of biblical elements has in the articulation of identities and narratives in history. If from an exegetical perspective texts should maintain the integrity of their themes, characters, literary genres, and so forth, in the tensions and negotiations occurring within the semiosphere, biblical texts are subject to transformation and translation of their elements in the historical processes. It is as if the Bible provided a great collection of themes and plots that can be recombined with freedom and creativity, always with the goal to create new meanings within new historical contexts. This approach allows us greater flexibility in the consideration of texts that have no exegetical or theological character, such as popular traditions, that, despite their rebellion against ecclesiastical and theological patterns, have played a key role for the insertion of the Bible within cultures. This is also the case with the biblical re-readings within Brazilian *sertaneja* [from the backlands] culture during the nineteenth century in the texts that we will mention here. The official, literate and scholarly sources understood them with only mockery and derision. Theologians and exegetes did not acknowledge them as biblical re-readings. Also historians and sociologists alike refer to them with a mixture of surprise and no small amount of incomprehension. We have only literary fragments to give us access to the *sertanejo*'s religious practices. Visual and gestural organization traces were lost. We have not got access even to the whole of their biblical re-readings. And when we can see a glimpse of it in some fragments, it presents itself as being profoundly hybrid and dynamic: as a popular culture in movement, that articulates itself in orality, where biblical themes fuse and reconfigure themselves.

These theoretical considerations require from the interpreter of the impact the Bible had in Latin American folklore – and in Brazilian folklore in particular – a shift in the theoretical and methodological framework in relation to traditional exegesis' interpretative procedures. First of all, it is necessary to suspend any segmentation between biblical reception in folklore as being distinct from proper religious reception. Actually, it is precisely in the quality of popular reception that they are both nurtured, and establish themselves, as determinant re-readings within culture. The reception of biblical themes by religiousness sets the base for models of interpretation and of practice that can be found in different reaches of society – even outside what is traditionally considered as being “religious.” Folklore and religious narrative are thus deeply intertwined. However, there are other conventional exegetical interpretation practices that should be suspended in our consideration of the role of the Bible in Brazilian culture. We refer to the search for echoes and re-readings of themes or biblical texts in culture, as if for a specific biblical text we would have a re-reading somewhere in popular culture. In this interpretative model, the biblical text holds control

over reception, and reception, in turn, would react to the original text, offering answers, reactions, adaptations, and so forth. That is not what can be verified in popular culture. It does not behave towards biblical texts as just a reaction, but rather presents itself as another text in dialog with the first. The popular reception of the Bible is itself a *new text*. This is not a lesser aspect of Biblical re-reading in folklore. It allows the interpreter to acknowledge that popular culture approaches the Bible with a high degree of autonomy and creativity. Popular culture deals with the biblical text by reorganizing it from vital questions and socio-historical horizons of their own. From this perspective, is it not fitting that we should look for correlations, parallels, or just updates between biblical texts and folkloric texts? We emphasize, this is a new kind of textuality. As a consequence, we could rightly ask that, if this is a different kind of textuality, how are we going to identify its biblical character, or the reception of the Bible? How do we know that there are reception processes at play? After all, popular culture needs no biblical elements whatsoever to legitimize itself. We begin with the assumption that the Bible is re-read in popular cultures in Latin America not just because of the historical circumstances that brought it to our continent (colonization), but also because the Latin American original cultures and the *mestizo* cultures that established themselves here found space in its polysemy for the creation of their own cultural texts. This is why, from this perspective, it is wrong to say that popular biblical re-readings are no more than the fruits of a context of colonization, Christianization and domination of the peoples living here. If re-reading constitutes another textuality, having at its base the polysemy of a previous text – considering that all cultural texts are preceded by others – then we can talk about popular biblical re-readings as formative elements of Latin American religious identities. The fact that these re-readings of the biblical texts brought by the Iberian colonizers constitute themselves as autochthonous texts can be verified by the violence by which popular religious movements inspired by biblical readings were fought against and eliminated from Latin American history – as we will see in this chapter.

In order to recognize the popular textual creation system in biblical texts, re-readings and appropriations, we have to abandon traditional exegetical practices. Biblical texts are not read as distant, autonomous and isolated entities. There are neither relationships of submission nor any obligation to conform to them. They are deformed and remodeled when historical situation and popular imagination and creativity calls for it. Since it is a new text, there are no errors or bad re-readings. Finding errors in biblical representations in popular culture is symptomatic of not acknowledging the fact that it does not consider the biblical text as a source, as a normative and original text. Popular biblical reception can more adequately be defined by the following procedures:

- a) Text re-creation through association: A text is associated to another in reception via structural, imagistic and thematic similarities, according to the reader's interests and its cultural and historical constraints;
- b) The imagistic has precedence over the conceptual: The biblical text provides a great trove of fundamental images and metaphors that are reorganized by readers. Theological or conceptual elements play little if no role at all in popular reception;
- c) Resumption of base plots: The Bible offers popular culture a limited set of base plots in its narratives. These plots are organized in time, space and agents. Biblical plots can be recombined and adapted by readers with relative freedom.

These aspects allow us to understand why texts are not presented as re-readings of isolated texts. From the viewpoint of an interpretation that privileges images and base plots, two or more texts can be effortlessly fused into a new text in popular culture. As we will see below, images and plots from the Exodus, the Passion and Apocalypse are perceived as analogous and are reorganized in a whole that constitutes a single text. It befalls us exegetes to reconstruct the itineraries of textual creation in order to notice popular re-readings' central themes in biblical fusions and associations. But for a popular interpreter this construction has no normative value. In this sense, the history of reception is a privileged space for the study of popular culture and its religious articulation of the world.⁷ However, in order to do that – we emphasize – we must abandon tradition criticism's exegetical methods; we have to perceive biblical text as a powerful and endless trove of images and plots through which popular culture creates its own text, its new Exodus, its new Apocalypse. We believe that this is the case in the *sertaneja* reception of the Bible throughout Brazilian history – a notable example being the “Prophecy” quoted above.

3 The Scenario

It is not possible to discuss in detail here the trajectory of the movement led by Antonio Conselheiro, even less the conflicts which this movement was involved in, culminating in a brutal war where, after 1 year, it was completely decimated, at the end of 1897. However, we should set some references that place the peculiar reading of the Bible that we have to deal with.

⁷ Paulo Augusto S Nogueira, “Hermenêutica da Recepção: Textos Bíblicos nas Fronteiras da Cultura e no Longo Tempo,” *Estudos de Religião* 26, no. 42 (2012), 15–31.

As indicated above, Belo Monte has earned its place in Brazilian history especially because of the report given by Euclides da Cunha: in his book, he considered Belo Monte to be a millenarian expression in Brazilian lands. This understanding came to be unquestioned over the past century and, only gradually is it being demolished by analyzing other sources, beginning with the writings of Antonio Conselheiro themselves. The millenarism attributed by Euclides to Belo Monte allowed him to distort the meaning of the place in order to affirm the infeasibility of a millenarian dream in those days, when Brazil changed its political system from a monarchy to a republic, and it was believed, by those who conceived of the nation and led it, that religion, deeply rooted in the popular soul, was more of an obstacle than an engine of progress.

The Catholic Church, meanwhile, lived through other stresses and changes: rituals that necessarily demanded the figure of the priest now replaced devotions kept for centuries, and lay leaders, such as the Conselheiro, now seemed more a threat to the clerical order than a support to the work of evangelization. On the other hand, the proclamation of the new political regime in 1889, condemned by the ecclesiastical authorities as impious, as denier of the place of God in the order of things and of the Church in the articulation of power, eventually won tacit support for a new clericalism. In any case, the conselheirista village, established in 1893, became a space in which, under the reinforced leadership of Antonio Maciel, it was possible to articulate a form of daily life with relative autonomy when confronted with the dominant secular powers in the region. A new order of salvation was experienced, inspired by the life and words of the Conselheiro: strong appeals for practices thought to contribute to communal solidarity, such as giving attention to the sick and miserable, and framed by an eschatological perspective. From the viewpoint of its leader, Belo Monte was configured as a space that enables the salvation of the souls of those who commit to it. It was thought to be a project in which observance of what was called a “Pilgrim’s rule,” based on the Commandments of Sinai, an arrangement of works and days, would be exercised as tribute to God for so many kindnesses.

4 In view of the Judgment

If the anonymous “Prophecy” quoted at the beginning of this essay is by no account even a close summary of the preaching of Belo Monte’s leader, Antonio Conselheiro, it is certainly the result of elaboration by people that lived with him there, dramatically interpreting the fear of the war that would ultimately decimate the village. Referring to an almost mythical 1890 (a time when Belo Monte

simply did not exist at all), the text's author fictionally posits himself soon after the proclamation of the Republic of Brazil. He "announces" events that had already occurred when the text was written, and anticipates other events for which one must be prepared. It is highlighted that the end is forecast as 1901, a moment when the existence of "a single flock and a single shepherd" (an expression attributed to the prophet Jeremiah, but whose most immediate biblical reference is John 10:16). The flock, when it faces war (which commenced in 1896) and famine (1897), awaits the end, a scenery of death (1898) and cosmic upheavals (1889), described through images that evoke apocalyptic scenarios. If some of the elements are hard to identify, the underlying expectation is quite clear, and significant: "until the Judgment Day," the same phrase said by some people in the final days of the siege and ensuing massacre.⁸

The way in which Conselheiro's followers coped with war was probably fed by the hope given by the imminence of the end of the world. They explain the herculean resistance offered up against the republican heretics, and the almost zero desertion rate; they conferred meaning to the last stand in the defense of the holy city. The Antichrist did not allow that, although he failed to seduce Conselheiro's followers. Another world awaited them, so they were assured by the backlands' biblical-Catholic universe that was constructed and lived through centuries.⁹

5 Exodus – Promised Land

It is rather curious, however, to observe how these references articulate themselves admirably within the *sertanejo* religious universe with another strand of biblical tradition – that of the Exodus and the conquest of the promised land. This was a decisive narrative ever since the journeys undertaken by Conselheiro and his people after the battle that took place in Masseté – mid-May, 1893, arriving at Canudos mid-June in order to settle there.¹⁰ For "the Conselheiro" ("The Coun-

⁸ Barros, Luitgarde O. Cavalcanti. "Crença e Parentesco na Guerra de Canudos," in *Canudos: as falas e os olhares*, eds. Eduardo Diatáhy B. de Menezes and João Arruda (Fortaleza: UFC, 1995), 80, 81.

⁹ "Canudos' inhabitants were sure they did not die, but only changed. They strongly believed in the resurrection of flesh and bone." Abelardo Montenegro, *Fanáticos e Cangaceiros* (Fortaleza: Henriqueta Lisboa, 1973), 131.

¹⁰ Masseté is the name of a village near where police agents from the state of Bahia fought against Antonio Conselheiro and his followers. As a result of this conflict, the leader that until then was an itinerant preacher, decided to settle down in a village, Canudos, which he renamed as Belo Monte.

selor”), this was the end of his itinerant life; for the people that followed him, it meant betting on a promising future, although this did not suppress the fear of reprisals. It was time to reminisce: the journey towards the river bank of the Vaza-Barris River (the village lay on its bank), “was akin to the people of Israel accompanying Moses on their flight to [sic] Egypt, eager to cross the Red Sea in order to rid themselves of Pharaoh.”¹¹

Flight to Egypt? What we read in Exodus is a flight *from* Egypt. But are not we here looking at an original result of the many paths memory and orality tread when they fuse together Moses’ Exodus from Egypt with Jesus’ – while still an infant – towards Egypt, eluding King Herod (Matt 2;13–23)? It is hard to say with certainty anything about the possible *bricolage* between these two well-known biblical narratives. But there is more.

In the sayings of Conselheiro that have survived the ravages of war, references from the stories of Exodus and the conquest of the promised land are even more abundant. In the hermeneutics of life as lived in the village, they had special resonance. This first witness proposes an interesting appropriation of biblical myth for the renaming of the geography surrounding Belo Monte:

During those times [some years after the war], I already knew something about the Old Testament from what I heard, and I recalled the fanatics’ comparisons: “Conselheiro was Mouses (sic), the Vazabarris River (sic) would be the Nile or the Red Sea and the summit of Cocorobó was the mount Sinai.”¹²

Here too it is of little help to try to find an idealized “exactness” of data, or find it strange that the River Vaza-Barris has oscillating associations with two biblical landmarks. We could say, on the contrary, that it is precisely this freedom of association that brings us back to the density of its meanings. Conselheiro was referred to Moses, the leader at the front of Israel’s liberation from the power of the Egyptian Pharaoh. We can perceive quite a lot about the understanding the *sertanejo* people from Belo Monte had about their leader from this association, as well as from other identifications – for instance, with “bom Jesus” (Good Jesus). Because of his preaching and advice, the Conselheiro is associated with Moses – the one that communicates God’s laws to the people.

Belo Monte can only exist as a gift from the Vaza-Barris River, as Herodotus already said about the dependence Egypt had regarding the Nile. But, if the Vaza-Barris River is associated with the Red Sea, the meaning will be different, but

¹¹ José Aras, *Sangue de Irmãos* (Salvador: Museu do Bendegó, 1953), 26. Aras was the son of people that knew Conselheiro and that had survived the razing of Belo Monte.

¹² José Aras, *Sangue de Irmãos* (Salvador: Museu do Bendegó, 1953), 149.

nonetheless relevant: the crossing of Vaza-Barris was Israel's crossing towards freedom. Yet again we have an important opportunity to understand how the *sertanejo* people experienced life in Belo Monte – with autonomy in the face of those they identified as the contemporary Pharaohs. There is still the identification of Cocorobó's summit with Mount Sinai, the place where the tablets of the Law were given, specifically the Decalogue. We know how important this was for Antonio Maciel: the two writings of his we have extant present a long commentary to each of the Ten Commandments. Thus for the *sertanejo* people, Sinai-Cocorobó will point towards a new organization, willed and revealed by God, enacted in Belo Monte. If for the freed Hebrews the promise and conquest of the land are strictly connected to the observance of the Commandments, Conselheiro's people recreates an universe in which Belo Monte's life is made possible by that which Honorio Vilanova – a survivor – called observance to “the rule taught by the Pilgrim.”¹³ Conselheiro, seen as Moses, has his own specific demeanor.

Other accounts further support the Belo Montean perception of the promised land's actuality. We now turn to friar João Evangelista de Monte Marciano¹⁴ who, intent on mischaracterizing what he saw at Belo Monte, ironically ended up preserving the trait that probably justified both living in and dying for the village the most:

The sect's recruiters occupy themselves with persuading the people that those that want to save themselves must come to Canudos, because in all other places everything has been contaminated and is lost because of the Republic; there, however, no work is needed; it is *the land of promise, where a river of milk runs and the ravines are made of corn couscous*.¹⁵

It is evident how the expression in Exodus 3:7–8 (and following verses) serves as a matrix for the expression on the *Report*. Particularly “land of promise” leaves no room for doubts. The fact that “a river of milk” runs there is greatly expressive: it refers, of course, to the Vaza-Barris River on whose banks Belo Monte was

¹³ Nertan Macedo, *Memorial de Vilanova*, 2nd ed. (Rio de Janeiro/Brasília: Renes/Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1983), 67.

¹⁴ A missionary who, in the name of the government of the State of Bahia and of the archdiocesan seat of Salvador, attempted to dissolve Belo Monte through moderate ways. This occurred in mid-May 1895. He did not succeed and 1 month later published a report in which he described the mission days and requested armed intervention. One-and-a-half years later, he would lead the village to destruction.

¹⁵ João Evangelista de Monte Marciano, *Relatório Apresentado, em 1895, Pelo Reverendo frei João Evangelista de Monte Marciano, ao Arcebispado da Bahia, sobre Antonio Conselheiro e seu séqüito no Arraial dos Canudos*. Salvador: Tipografia do Correio da Bahia, 1895 (reprint: Centro de Estudos Baianos, 1987), 5 (emphasis mine).

erected, but also brings the biblical passage to mind. And the mention of “ravines made of corn couscous” indicates a clear recreation of the biblical image from the new circumstances in which it is recovered. If for the Hebrews the components of the “land of promise” were milk and honey, in Belo Monte those elements may vary. With them one is trying to convey the reality of abundance and fertility experienced in Conselheiro’s village. The biblical myth of abundance and prosperity is rewritten with images of indigenous cooking, variations of the biblical “milk and honey.” The following witnesses express the dynamics taking place within the world of orality between an expression’s matrix and its possibilities for re-creation, whether in the form of transmission or because of new circumstances and environments.

The first one is found in a poem dating from 1898, written by a participant in the fourth military expedition against Belo Monte:

Some said: He [the Councilor] is a Saint
 In Canudos there is Manna to be eaten
 A river of milk runs, and honey
 Friends, let us all go there!¹⁶

Once again, the witness is from an enemy that fought for the destruction of Belo Monte; notwithstanding the fact, he is probably an inhabitant of the *sertão* [backlands], and probably heard what was being said around about it; his quill would have recorded voices from here and there. But the memories of indigenous groups from the region are even more important. Memory’s fragmentation does not preclude the perception of fundamental elements. According to the descendants of the Kiriri that lived in Belo Monte:

Antonio Conselheiro has spoken about his “mission” that would be for the good of everyone, and has summoned the indigenous people (...) the news were spread, “we goes, we goes” [sic] a river of milk was there and the mounts, the ravines and the cliffs were couscous to fill the belly. In the land of the river of milk and the couscous ravine they began the construction of the church.¹⁷

¹⁶ Manuel Pedro das Dores Bombinho, *Canudos, História em Versos* (São Paulo: Hedra/Imprensa Oficial do Estado/Edufscar, 2002), 32.

¹⁷ Maria Lucia Felício Mascarenhas, *Rio de Sangue e Ribanceira de Corpos* (Bachelors degree dissertation in Anthropology) (Salvador: The Federal University of Bahia [UFBA], 1995), 28. The Kaimbé did not say otherwise: “Many people, ‘a great amount’ of people, went to Canudos. The rumors about the river of milk and of the couscous ravine circulated about. Stones were turned into bread and the river turned into milk. There was no shortage of food, they carried sacks of flour made in the fields themselves and went to Canudos carrying them upon their heads, by ass or donkey. They went there to eat.” (*ibid.*, 50).

The very tragedy of war is expressed by a recreation of the motto: “In the end, ‘the river was the blood of the people and the couscous ravine were the people piled up one above the other, that’s what happened.’”¹⁸

In order to better understand this set of witnesses, we must recall an intuition Roger Bastide had, one that gives us access to a surprising cultural universe, and is able to allow for the density and the specificity conferred by Conselheiro’s people’s reception to the myth of the promised land as written in the biblical narratives about Moses and the Hebrews leaving Egypt:

The cowboy, cornered by misery in face of a sun-scorched land, riddled with animal bones and the corpses death has sown, by plants that have transformed themselves into crowns of thorns or spikes, gashing his feet and hands, renewing in his flesh the torment of the cross, dreams with a land abundantly crossed by streams, adorned by an eternal vegetation, offering sweet fruit. Resumes on his own, and mixes, the myth of the “Land without Evil” from his indigenous ancestors and the history of the people of Israel leaving Egypt in search of the “Land of Promise,” that is a myth from his Portuguese ancestors. From this a series of mystical and fanatical movements arose, that are just the reflex of all this anguish when facing starvation (...) movements that manifest, in their continuity, the degradation of indigenous elements, that were preponderant in the oldest forms such as *pajelança* [indigenous practice associated with the *pajés* – a “witch doctor” of sorts], and their increasingly clear substitution with western and Christian forms.¹⁹

Unfortunately Bastide inserts his considerations on *sertaneja* religiosity in the scope of what he calls “religious fanaticism,” which is evident in the last part of the quote above. And by relying far too much on the narrative by Euclides da Cunha, he ends up unable to perceive how Belo Monte materialized the articulation between the two lands, the biblical one and the indigenous one, that so well synthesizes the worldview of the people that settled the banks of the Vaza-Barris River along Conselheiro and also explains admirably the meaning the village had for them.²⁰

Bastide’s insight associates rather well with Hilário Franco Júnior’s observation regarding the presence and permanence, on the backlands of northeastern

18 Maria Lucia Felicio Mascarenhas. *Rio de Sangue e Ribanceira de Corpos* (Bachelors degree dissertation in Anthropology) (Salvador: The Federal University of Bahia [UFBA], 1995), 57.

19 Roger Bastide, *Terra de Contrastes* (São Paulo: Difusão Européia do Livro, 1959), 87–88.

20 See Roger Bastide, *Terra de Contrastes* (São Paulo: Difusão Européia do Livro, 1959), 92–94. It must be said, on the other hand, that Bastide is closest to the mark in what he suggests than he is in the detail, since it does not seem to be convenient to generalize the “land without evil” of the Apocóvíva-Guarani indigenous people: Curt Nimuendaju Kimel, *As Lendas da Criação e Destruição do Mundo como Fundamento da Religião dos Apocóvíva-Guarani* (São Paulo: Hucitec/Edusp, 1987 [1914]). Anyway, Bastide’s suggestion remains, to accentuate the exchange between biblical and autochthonous traditions.

Brazil, of the medieval myth of *Cocanha*.²¹ The northeastern Brazil's *Cocanha* and the perception Belomontean had of Belo Monte are similar in that both recreate the biblical promised land. Let us see how the *cordel* writer Manoel Camilo dos Santos describes the mythical land of São Saruê [*Saint Saruê*]:

Over there everything that is beautiful exists
 Everything that is good, comely and beautiful
 It seems to be a holy and blessed place
 Or a garden from Divine Nature:
 Because of its greatness it emulates very well
 The land of promise of old
 To where Moses and Aaron
 Led the people of Israel
 Where it is said milk and honey freely flowed
 And heavenly food fell on the ground.²²

The *cordel* literature allows us to further acknowledge the special place corn had – as couscous, it was even able to stuff the ravines of Belo Monte. In the mythical land of São Saruê, “maize, ear of corn is pamonha [tamales]/and the banner is popcorn.”²³ Likewise, milk, which flowed along with honey from the promised land in the biblical myth, becomes a river of milk, both in Belo Monte's backlands as well as in the *cordel* writer's imagination:

There [São Saruê] I saw rivers of milk
 Barriers made of roasted meat
 Lagoons of bee honey
 Quagmires of milk curd

21 Cocanha was the name of an “imaginary land, wonderful, an inversion of experienced reality, a dream projected unto the future” (Hilário Franco Junior. “Apresentação,” in *Cocanha: As Várias Faces de um País Imaginário*, ed. Hilário Franco Junior (São Paulo: Ateliê, 1998), 10. It is a myth that was first recorded in written form in thirteenth-century France. It was often re-elaborated, and eventually made its way to the Brazilian northeast, fed by the region's socio-cultural conditions, and also by Dutch influence, indigenous traditions and by the French medieval substratum: Hilário Franco Junior, ed. *Cocanha: As Várias Faces de um País Imaginário* (São Paulo: Ateliê, 1998), 220–226. Unfortunately Hilário minimizes the presence of biblical traditions, that, even during the Middle Ages, founded the “anti-Christian ideal” of Cocanha. Jacques le Goff, “Prefácio” a *Cocanha: A História de um País Imaginário* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998), 7–13.

22 Manoel Camilo dos Santos, “Viagem a São Saruê,” in *Cocanha: As Várias Faces de um País Imaginário*, ed. Hilário Franco Junior (São Paulo: Ateliê, 1998), 175–176. This *cordel* dates from 1947.

23 Manoel Camilo dos Santos, “Viagem a São Saruê,” in *Cocanha: As Várias Faces de um País Imaginário*, ed. Hilário Franco Junior (São Paulo: Ateliê, 1998), 172.

Weirs of *quinado* wine
Mounts of stewed meat.²⁴

6 Antichrist

Thus it is understood that Belo Monte – while it existed – was lived as a “river of milk and a wall of couscous.”²⁵ But there is the inverse of that; an aspect of the greatest importance that arises from this characterization of the village is the radical opposition it establishes with its surroundings. Once again, Friar João explicitly depicts the following: what was being announced was that “those that want to save themselves must come to Canudos, because in all other places everything has been contaminated and is lost because of the Republic.”²⁶ This was an important element of Belo Monte’s inhabitants understanding of its significance, and can be further identified in various accounts that have survived the war that decimated the village. The Republic, besides all the negative evaluation being

²⁴ Manoel Camilo dos Santos, “Viagem a São Saruê,” in *Cocanha: As Várias Faces de um País Imaginário*, ed. Hilário Franco Junior (São Paulo: Ateliê, 1998), 170. We have many texts about Cocanha that speak about the “river of milk:” in the Italian version, it “comes from a grotto/and runs through the country” [quoted by Carlo Ginzburg, *O Queijo e os Vermes. O Cotidiano e as Ideias de um Moleiro Perseguido pela Inquisição* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998), 165]. Another rather suggestive similarity between what was said about Belo Monte and the stories about Cocanha is the fact that in both places “it wasn’t needed to work” (João Evangelista de Monte Marciano. *Relatório Apresentado, em 1895, Pelo Reverendo frei João Evangelista de Monte Marciano, ao Arcebispado da Bahia, sobre Antonio Conselheiro e seu séqüito no Arraial dos Canudos* (Salvador: Tipografia do Correio da Bahia, 1895 [reprint: Centro de Estudos Baianos, 1987]), 5). Indeed, in the re-elaborations of the myth of Cocanha, and in close witnesses, a life “without weariness” was mentioned: Carlo Ginzburg, *O Queijo e os Vermes. O Cotidiano e as Ideias de um Moleiro Perseguido pela Inquisição* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998), 157. If all this “exaltation of the *far niente*” found in the medieval stories about Cocanha expressed the denial of the “capitalist” directions that things were taking (Jacques le Goff. “Prefácio” a *Cocanha: A História de um País Imaginário*, 10), could not we consider the *sertanejo far niente* as a protest against the prevailing land order and semi-slave labor that were present for centuries, and that the Republic worsened?

²⁵ According to José Nicósio and Ana Josefa – father and daughter – followers of Antonio Conselheiro, in an account recorded by José Sabino da Costa (Nelson de Araújo, *Pequenos Mundos. Um Panorama da Cultura Popular na Bahia* [Salvador: Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA)/ Fundação Casa de Jorge Amado, 1988) v.2, 46].

²⁶ João Evangelista de Monte Marciano. *Relatório Apresentado, em 1895, Pelo Reverendo frei João Evangelista de Monte Marciano, ao Arcebispado da Bahia, sobre Antonio Conselheiro e seu séqüito no Arraial dos Canudos* (Salvador: Tipografia do Correio da Bahia, 1895 [reprint: Centro de Estudos Baianos, 1987]), 5.

preached by the clergy, had come to the *sertão* as new taxes and as reinforcement of local authoritarian practices. Within the popular religious universe, it could mean nothing but a disgrace, a work of the devil.²⁷

This realization of the radical perversion of the world around Belo Monte was gathered and articulated by the *sertanejo* people from what has been called “popular apocalypticism.”²⁸ A growing dissociation between human and divine law inserted social transformation within a radical dualist picture. The polarization becomes more serious in the *trovas* [popular verses, quatrains] gathered by Euclides da Cunha in his *Field Journal* [Caderneta de Campo]. The conflict exists between the “Law of God” and the “Law of the *Cão*” [Cão=Dog being a popular name for the devil]:

Well protected by Law
Those wicked ones already are
Some follow God’s law
Others the law of the Dog.²⁹

The elections in particular are evaluated. Certainly there is a judgment placed on this very practice, but we must also consider the particular conditions they took place in, with all sorts of abuse and corruption; the polarization in the following *trova* makes perfect sense:

Very wicked, them
Making ae-lection
Casting down God’s Law
While Dog’s Law will soar on.³⁰

The very war is understood as an attack by the evil of the world, against which Jesus alone could deliver the people:

Jaysus alone is great
Wich from all evil delivers us

²⁷ Eduardo Hoornaert, *Os Anjos de Canudos: Uma Revisão Histórica* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1997), 67–68.

²⁸ Alexandre Otten, “*Só Deus é Grande*”: *A Mensagem Religiosa de Antonio Conselheiro* (São Paulo: Loyola, 1990), 287–299.

²⁹ Euclides da Cunha, *Caderneta de Campo* [São Paulo: Cultrix/Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1975], 58. As it is known, “among Brazilian people [Cão] is always uttered as a synonym for the demonic.”: Luis da Câmara Cascudo. *Dicionário do Folclore Brasileiro*, 10th ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Ediouro, 1998), 238]. Our translation tries to reflect the peculiarity of the original popular dialect.

³⁰ Euclides da Cunha, *Caderneta de Campo* (São Paulo: Cultrix/Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1975), 58.

Just as we have rid ourselves
 From 'tis punishment so pernicious
Fram [from] that presumptuous godless
 Man coming to end us.³¹

The figure of the Antichrist in particular will configure the fears of Conselheiro's people, whence came the understanding of the moment they were supposed to live. This character has a distinguished role within the universe of "popular apocalypticism" in various contexts and scenarios: "by constituting itself in collective imagination" it was "progressively associated with 'Babylon, the great, habitation of demons' and to the 'scarlet beast'" of the biblical Apocalypse, as well as with the "wicked one" from Second Thessalonians.³² In Belo Monte, mentions of this figure that held such an important place in the *sertão*³³ are not made on account of a second coming of Christ that is about to happen. For, if the recognition of the second coming was usually associated with a millennium yet to come or with an impending final judgment, within Conselheiro's village it seems to have arisen, at least at first, between the perceived present and the future to which some form of rupture or detachment would correspond. Thus that terrible supernatural figure was perceived against not so much a spectacular future, in which the antichrist would be eliminated, but against the present right now, determining action in the surroundings, undermining principles and certainties.³⁴ Some *trovas* manifest the fear imposed by the moment being lived, as well as some expectations:

The Antechrist was born [The Antichrist was born]
 Fo' the world to govern [For the world to govern]
 Thirin be the concilour [Therein is the Counselor]
 Fo' us from him deliver.³⁵ [For us from him deliver]

³¹ Euclides da Cunha, *Cademeta de Campo* (São Paulo: Cultrix/Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1975), 60. It seems he is referring to Moreira César, the military leader of the ill-fated 1897 expedition against Belo Monte.

³² Jean Delumeau. *História do Medo no Ocidente: 1300–1800 – Uma Cidade Sitiada* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1996), 215.

³³ The *cangaceiros* are "religious men, believing both in the misteries of the Church and the coming of the Antichrist into this world" (Manoel Benício. *O Rei dos Jagunços. Crônica Histórica e de Costumes Sertanejos Sobre os Acontecimentos de Canudos*, 2nd ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1997), 6.

³⁴ Moreover, in both of John's letters the figure of the Antichrist appears in order to qualify adversaries within the community the writings were addressed to. This character's "yet to come" aspect is not prevalent, unless associated with the figures mentioned in the second letter to the Thessalonians and especially in the case of the Apocalypse of John.

³⁵ Euclides da Cunha, *Cademeta de Campo* (São Paulo: Cultrix/Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1975), 58.

A recent appearance of the Antichrist is assumed here. And if in history there is an oscillation between considering human characters as instruments of his actions or his direct manifestation, the following *trova* will confirm this for Belo Monte:

Liodoro [name] as he wanted
 This people to enthral
 Fo' the world to care for
 Fo' him to rule all.³⁶

Whether it is the Antichrist or one of his representatives, the *trovas* seem to try to persuade with respect to his actions. Within Belo Monte it is noticed that he already came, and this is the reason for the conflict between two orders. What is being experienced in Brazil is thus the casting down of God's law and the triumph of the devil's ploys. Since the Republic was proclaimed, the conflict for now is being won by the Dog and his agents, who have established elections and civil marriage and have stripped Catholicism of its condition of being the official religion.³⁷ War was being waged, then, even before 1896, and even beyond the events that led to the conflict in Masseté (1893).

There is another aspect to be highlighted. In all of the accounts quoted the mention of the Land of Promise, along with its river of milk and couscous ravines, arises when the motivations that brought so many people to Conselheiro's village are being talked about. In this regard then, the testimony given by Friar João is explicit in mentioning that the "sect's recruiters" are the ones responsible for the proclamation of Belo Monte's peculiar characteristics in order to attract more people to the village. That is, Belo Monte's image as the Land of Promise inserts itself within proselytism developed throughout the backlands, and was further reinforced when war began – and so responsible for the emptying of so many villages in the region. They "spread a thousand rumors/throughout all those backlands" regarding this blessed land and its qualities. One of the witnesses says that his mother, young at that time, "wanted to see the beauty that was in Canudos (...). She thought that was beautiful which said there was a river of milk and a ravine of couscous."³⁸ In effect, the representation of Conselheiro's village

36 Euclides da Cunha, *Caderneta de Campo* (São Paulo: Cultrix/Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1975), 58. Liodoro is Deodoro da Fonseca, the one responsible for the proclamation of the Republic.

37 Of course, in some of these identifications of the Antichrist, there is an important influx of preaching by the catholic clergy. Although, these references are autonomously and creatively appropriated.

38 Edwin Reesink. "A Tomada do Coração da Aldeia: A Participação dos Índios de Massacará na Guerra de Canudos," in *Cadernos do CEAS* (Salvador, 1997), 86.

as being a reenactment of the biblical land of promise probably had a fundamental importance in the process that led to farms and villages being abandoned and the desertion of semi-slave labor, and thus to a significant increase in the holy village's population. Those that came with their meager possessions shared them – betting everything on the good Councilor's words.

We can associate Belo Monte's presentation as a Land of Promise with that which was said about Antonio Conselheiro during the calls for more people to go there.³⁹ This aspect was clearly important, as the following *trova* will attest:

Whoever wants blessed medicine
Soothing balm for everything
Let him go to the Counselor
That in Canudos resides.⁴⁰

Belo Monte is such a privileged place because one can find the saint who has remedies for everything there. Antonio Conselheiro thus joins the extensive chain of miracle workers [*milagreiros*] that existed in popular Catholicism, whose lives exhibited exemplary generosity towards one's neighbor and which led them to be considered as saints.⁴¹ Conselheiro is highlighted as the one that's able to feed

³⁹ Even in 1874, popular poetry already mentioned Antonio Maciel, soon to be called the Counselor, as with: "From heaven came a light/Sent by Christ Jesus/Santo Antônio Aparecido [Saint Antonio the Appeared]/From punishment delivered us": Sílvio Romero, *Estudos Sobre a Poesia Popular no Brasil* 2nd ed. (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1977), 41. Another stanza further accentuates Conselheiro's privileged place as a mediator between Jesus and the people: "[t]he sun now rises/full of its *splendo* [splendor] Antônio substitutes Jesus/that from punishment delivered us" (recovered by José Calasans in "A guerra de Canudos na Poesia Popular," in *Canudos: Palavra de Deus, Sonho da Terra*, eds. Abdala Jr., Benjamin and Isabel Alexandre (São Paulo: Senac /Boitempo, 1997), 150.

⁴⁰ José Calasans. *O Ciclo Folclórico do Bom Jesus Conselheiro: Contribuição ao Estudo da Campanha de Canudos* (Salvador: Edufba, 2002 [1950]), 32. Manoel Benício, a journalist that covered a good deal of the war and was knowledgeable in the *sertaneja* culture, assures: "Wherever his minions [Conselheiro's] went they brought with them the apotheosis of his fame and prodigies, counseling the sick to seek medicine for their illnesses in the holy village, and exhorting their friends and relatives to emigrate to Canudos": Manoel Benício, *O Rei dos Jagunços. Crônica Histórica e de Costumes Sertanejos Sobre os Acontecimentos de Canudos*, 2th ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1997), 96.

⁴¹ Alba Zaluar, *Os Homens de Deus: Um Estudo dos Santos e das Festas no Catolicismo Popular* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1983). On the relevance the concept of "saint" had in the Kiriri's (one of the groups involved with Belo Monte) religious universe one should read Edwin Reesink "Til the End of Time: The Differential Attraction of the 'Regime of Salvation' and the 'Entheotopia' of Canudos," accessed February 10, 2003. <http://www.mille.org/publications/winter2000/reesink.PDF> (10/02/03).

everyone gathered at Belo Monte: the village's bounty is thus associated with the sanctity of its leader. The Kaimbé offer this eyewitness account: "[t]he food was provided by Conselheiro, the people were astonished – this man is God, doing works like these, feeding so many people!"⁴²

From all of this, it is possible to discern a particular consistency in these testimonies that links Belo Monte with the biblical city of Jerusalem. Although there are only a few indications, they are rather suggestive. It seems that Belo Monte was seen by its inhabitants as having the form of the holy city of the Jews. This account comes from a military man, a sergeant, who took part in the last two expeditions against the village:

[The village's inhabitants] also attributed to the Conselheiro the power to, through his prayers, attain immortality for everyone. Thus, as one can readily see, Canudos would be the New Jerusalem from the Apocalypse. All of this was told me by an old uncle of mine that, while he was traveling through Pernambuco's *sertão*, had the opportunity to be with the Conselheiro and has witnessed many of his practices.⁴³

The witness' ill will is not troublesome in the case of this account; does the identification of Belo Monte with Jerusalem come from the military man or from its inhabitants? It is hard to ascertain. All in all, the words sound significant: in the worst case, they reveal that contact with the people from the *sertão* has suggested to the sergeant the image of the Jerusalem of the Apocalypse. However, for the Belomontean, it was already present, and not yet to come, as we read in the last book of the Bible. And if we believe the military man's account, the promise of immortality is adapted by the witnesses we quoted previously who attributed miraculous powers to the Conselheiro, and even eternal salvation, with which the Conselheiro concerned himself.

So, we have many events and biblical quotations articulated peculiarly and so profoundly impacted the lives of peasants that had settled on the banks of the Vaza-Barris River. Both Moses and the Antichrist coexist in the same setting. The Hebrews' exodus is recalled just like the cosmic horrors as war drew near – as well as the faithful one's fabulous salvation. This imaginary articulation – one that is absolutely non-linear – has eluded and was obscured by Euclides da Cunha's construction of Conselheiro's people's religiosity. Anyway, Belo Monte seems entirely plausible, seen through the eyes of its people, seen from the perspective of religious traditions that had shaped the

⁴² Maria Lucia Felicio Mascarenhas, *Rio de Sangue e Ribanceira de Corpos*. (Bachelors degree dissertation in Anthropology) (Salvador: The Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), 1995), 50.

⁴³ Marcos Evangelista C. Villela Jr. *Canudos: Memórias de um Combatente*, 2nd ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Eduerj, 1997), 107–108.

sertão for so many centuries. A brief respite amidst the endless story of pain and suffering, the village took upon itself a special shape. And it is important to consider this shape even beyond the dramatic movements of war. This war, according to Belo Monte's inhabitants, was not inevitable, as it was, for instance, to Euclides da Cunha.

Friar João Evangelista says that the "sect's recruiters" led people to Belo Monte by appealing to their desire to be saved. This is the fundamental issue. Was the village the place for salvation? Or was it mediation for it? How are history and salvation articulated? It is interesting to note that in all the witness accounts listed, and even in others, there is no mention – before the war – whatsoever of the imminent ending of this world, although the Antichrist was already at work through the agency of its minions. In this context, by virtue of Conselheiro's presence and action, Belo Monte makes salvation possible, precisely that which the church, along with its corrupt priests in league with the accursed republic became unable to offer. This is the meaning of the claim that so startled Friar João Evangelista and spelled the mission's doom: "the people began to gather (...) shouting that they needed no priests in order to be saved, because they had their Conselheiro."⁴⁴ Through this a possibility for salvation opened up both here (the land of promise) and beyond (heaven).⁴⁵ In Belo Monte, "prophetic reappropriation of God resulted in optimism about history."⁴⁶ At least this prevailed until war broke out, which changed feelings and perceptions rather dramatically. The river of milk turned into a stream of blood. But, even to the very end, history was in God's hands: He would not forsake his faithful. Even with death looming nearer and nearer.

⁴⁴ João Evangelista Monte Marciano, *Relatório Apresentado, em 1895, Pelo Reverendo frei João Evangelista de Monte Marciano, ao Arcebispado da Bahia, sobre Antonio Conselheiro e seu séquito no Arraial dos Canudos* (Salvador: Tipografia do Correio da Bahia, 1895 [reprint: Centro de Estudos Baianos, 1987]), 6.

⁴⁵ Accounts by the descendants of the Kaimbé from Massacará indicate that those from this tribe that had bet on Belo Monte understood Conselheiro's movement "above all else as a *movement of salvation*, and its settling in a place is the landing of this movement in space-time where the correct way of living in order to attain salvation is dominant; this implies a *salvation regime*": Edwin Reesink. "Til the End of Time: The Differential Attraction of 'Regime of Salvation' and the 'Entheotopia' of Canudos," accessed 10 February 2003, <http://www.mille.org/publications/winter2000/reesink.PDF>. This can be confirmed, Reesink adds, by Friar João Evangelista's record, according to which death is understood in Belo Monte by the following affirmation: "It is the Good Jesus that sends them [the dead] to heaven". (*Relatório*, 6).

⁴⁶ Alexandre Otten. "A Influência do Ideário Religioso na Construção da Comunidade de Belo Monte." *Luso-Brazilian Review* 30, no. 2 (1993), 93.

7 Conclusion

Thus, if we are very distant from that supposed “Christianity of penitence and Apocalypse” which Bastide has written about – relying on Euclides – and which he has attributed to Belo Monte as its basic mark,⁴⁷ this does not mean that eschatological (apocalyptically-flavored) dimensions are not always present. But the apocalyptic only comes to the fore in the context of the war, and by no account does it cover the whole meaning the village had for its inhabitants. Part of the centuries-old *sertanejo* worldview is what has appropriately been called a “culture of the end of the world,”⁴⁸ in which one notes:

a new historical dynamics, in which, on the one hand, the cosmological-apocalyptic myths (the end of the world, the great flood, the final judgment) are parameters for understanding the world and history, and, on the other hand, the rituals and agents of the holy are instruments for intervention and the changing of reality.⁴⁹

Texts coming from various places and times substantiate the relevance this eschatological perspective had in the *sertão* – associated with droughts, war and calamities, and a preferred subject in the missions and preaching of the clergy. Beyond claims about the end of the world, we have to consider that this eschatological perspective is decisive for understanding the surrounding world, including the condemnation it holds in store for those who, for their part, perceive themselves as people elected by God for salvation. Conflict and war only would have sharpened this understanding:

Maybe the historical motivation for this absolutisation, or radicalization, of the liminal experience would be in the consciousness of condemnation by the surrounding society (...) and, after that, in open hostilities (...) They are the first attacks by the police or, in any event, the rumors about its imminence (...) the moment of the “loss of the world” and the total overturning given by the dimension of the rescue, with the annulation of history and the triumph of meta-history.⁵⁰

47 Roger Bastide, *Brasil, Terra de Contrastes* (São Paulo: Difusão Européia do Livro, 1959), 92.

48 Maria Cristina Pompa, *Memórias do Fim do Mundo: Para uma Leitura do Movimento Sócio-religioso de Pau de Colher* (Masters dissertation) (Campinas: Unicamp, 1995), 164.

49 Maria Cristina Pompa, *Memórias do Fim do Mundo: Para uma Leitura do Movimento Sócio-religioso de Pau de Colher* (Masters dissertation) (Campinas: Unicamp, 1995), 159. This claim by Pompa (and other of her claims as well) about the movement she studies are valid for Belo Monte and the *sertão* in general.

50 Maria Cristina Pompa. *Memórias do Fim do Mundo: Para uma Leitura do Movimento Sócio-religioso de Pau de Colher* (Masters dissertation.) (Campinas: Unicamp, 1995), 161.

In this context, the *sertanejo* resistance until the very end inserts itself within the framework of “radical rupture, with no return possible, from the old order. It assumes the apocalyptic contours of the Final Judgment: death as an opportunity of ‘making good use of the soul.’”⁵¹

We also see, in the details, the people of Belo Monte sharing with other communities from the *sertão* their reception of specific biblical themes, appropriated as they were by an apocalyptic key. From what is known, the account of the great flood was told particularly as a caution against immorality and dishonesty.⁵² In this environment, it would not strike us as odd to find Belo Monte being qualified as “Noah’s little boat,” free from all republican corruption.⁵³ Thus, if the expectation of the end of the world does not suffice to explain Belo Monte’s *raison d’être*, it certainly makes quite a lot of sense amidst the combat – so as to stimulate the admirable resistance waged against Antichrist’s troops. Fed by an apocalyptic expectation that is far more than the announcement of the end of the world, the hope of making the land of promise anew and rid it of its enemies has lasted until the very end of conflicts and death. Apart from that, nothing was to be expected but heaven’s definitive vengeance.

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51 Maria Cristina Pompa. *Memórias do Fim do Mundo: Para uma Leitura do Movimento Sócio-religioso de Pau de Colher* (Masters dissertation.) (Campinas: Unicamp, 1995), 161.

52 Alexandre Otten. “A Influência do Ideário Religioso na Construção da Comunidade de Belo Monte.” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 30, no. 2 (1993), 289; veja Maria da Conceição Lopes Campina. *Voz do padre Cícero e outras memórias*, ed. Eduardo Hoornaert (São Paulo: Paulinas, 1985), 89.

53 Moreover, it is worth noticing the similarities between what Ezequiel says in the letter quoted above and the memories regarding Father Cícero, including those regarding God and his patience, at the same time both hastening the end and wanting the conversion of all people. See Maria da Conceição Lopes Campina, *Voz do padre Cícero*, 65, 73–74; 103, 147–148, etc.

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