

The MST's mystique and the aporia of collective action

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ABSTRACT

Of unequivocally religious origin, Mystique is a key category to the political practices and conceptions of Movement of Landless Rural Workers/MST. Considered “the soul of the Movement”, it can be found in the multiple and diverse activities conducted by the Movement. In this article, I propose to investigate both the unfolding and implications of the use of this religious category as an organizational and a political action tool. For this purpose, I shall take into account some ethnographic fragments, which are discontinuous in time, about landless collective ceremonies that are also called mystique. Those fragments seem to allow the consideration of different facets of a kaleidoscope of meanings, practices and social phenomena that are triggered by mystique itself and are continuously recreated by its rituals. The herein analytical discussion is based on a broader historical-ethnographic interpretation that regards the MST as a political phenomenon, and about the role that the creation of events, understood as rituals, plays in it.

KEYWORDS

Mystique, politics, MST, rituals, collective action

INTRODUCTION¹

Displaying flimsy citadels carved out of black tarpaulin, or in demonstrations clad in the ever-present bright red caps and holding dazzling banners, the landless laborers (henceforth Sem-terra) have captured the Brazilian political imagination since the mid-eighties. How did they become so relevant in a thoroughly urbanized country? They launched the Movement of Landless Rural

Workers (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra*, MST) on the fringes of Brazilian society; they apply collective transgression techniques, such as occupying land and public offices. Nonetheless, a question remains and grows: how can they succeed when clashing against the deep-rooted alliance between state and landholders?

One of the MST assets is its capacity to forge a collective subject and a social identity with a unique symbolic content that is capable of galvanizing distinct categories of rural workers and the urban unemployed. Another of its strengths is the ability to create new modes of political organization and action by means of ritual. The Sem-terra themselves would say that the secret is in the MST mystique, “the soul of the Movement.” Both a category of thought and political practice, the mystique underlies the MST multiple spheres of action and different activities.

The fact that MST is a movement that empowers “the weak” with its collective mobilization and direct action raises an inevitable question: How to organize people and keep them together in adverse and uncertain conditions, sometimes for years, engaged in political disputes, often turned violent, with a repressive state and landowners’ paralegal forces? How to do this in such a way as to maintain “the support of society”? Mystique intensifies the success of their model based on a hierarchical structure, collective mobilizations, and continuous political instruction.

Sprung up during the social ferment in the late 1970s and early 1980, despite recent changes (MST 2005: 88-103), the MST has maintained a vertical structure that encompasses its social base, militants, and leaders with distinct roles and responsibilities under specific rules of discipline and rank (MST 2016). Its various organizing and political segments, spatially articulated, form a collective managing body that follows the national rules, while keeping a relative autonomy at state and local levels. Rejected by more recent social movements, such as the Movimento Passe Livre (Free Pass Movement), MST’s centralized and hierarchical structure is necessary, say its managers, to keep its unity and political effectiveness, its “organicity,” to expedite concerted action, though it focuses on internal political dynamics, on collective actions, and on mystique in its central organizing role, as we shall see.

Elsewhere (Chaves 2021), I have traced the connections of the Sem-terra mystique to the Theology of Liberation’s Christian mystique, outlined their contours and pointed out the blurred frontiers between politics and religion. Here, I shall investigate the curious use of mystique as a religious category to organize political action. Given

¹ | This article has grown out of the discussion carried out at the Symposium *Power, Politics, and Religion in Brazil. Ruptures, Continuities, and Crisis*, University of Edinburgh, 2018 (Chaves 2021). I thank Maya Mayblin for her kind invitation that moved me to write this long-overdue text. I also thank the Symposium participants for their stimulating debate.

the complexity of this phenomenon, which for the Sem-terra is the “reality we live rather than talk about” (Peloso 1994:3), I ground my analysis on ethnographic fragments of collective ceremonies named *mystique*. Although separate in time, these ceremonies display meanings and practices that are brought together by this mystique which is constantly reenacted in rituals. It highlights certain features of the Sem-terra dynamic political organization, and discloses impasses in their collective action.

THE SEM-TERRA MYSTIQUE

To the Sem-terra mystique is inaccessible. It connotes trust, courage, and firmness to face both favorable and adverse situations in the struggle for land. Mystique is also the name of ceremonies with ritual features designed to spark motivation, although they reach out well beyond the encouragement of militants. They have important political and organizing functions. They are relevant because they are prescriptive and because they are exposed to regulation and specialized thinking. They are performed by rotating crews, but competence lies with experienced militants, particularly those in charge of political training. Hence, MST mystique is a quality or value firmly nurtured by ritual practice. It is an “organizing principle” and a “grassroots method.”² As we shall see, in its many dimensions, mystique conveys and expresses MST cosmology. It plays a crucial political role in the articulation of the Movement's organizing sections and in furthering Sem-terra collective action.

Somewhat redundantly and with no intention to exhaust the list, we can include among the mystique political tasks the following features: forge a Sem-terra social identity to produce a collective subject; reinforce MST “organicity”³ through the integration of their sectors and collectives; ensure the Organization's unity, especially between social base and militancy; contribute to the Movement's political training and ideological cohesion; transmit contextual political goals; fill its political platform with emotional content; convey the Movement's values and meaning both inward and outward; and act to “dispute ideas” and values, thus constituting a *politics of meaning* (Chaves 2021).

² | For a detailed discussion of the aforementioned features, see Chaves 2021.

³ | To MST “organicity” means the methods – as in the case of mystique – that ensure its ends will be met (MST 2005). It refers to the interchange and integration of the Organization's divisions and to the militants' commitment to the alignment, agility, and effectiveness of actions toward the attainment of predefined tactic and strategic goals.

Picture 1.

Sixth MST National Congress.
Source: Photo by Leonardo
Melgarejo (2014).



Largely a *mystique of fighting*, the Sem-terra mystique and its rituals seek to encourage confidence in collective actions. Being reiterative, these rituals generate redundancy as they compose characters, actions, relations, and sequential acts. Each performance, in turn, tries to compensate for this redundancy via devices like compression, expansion, different emphases, additions, and suppression of specific contents. Depending on the context, these performances can be dramatic, epic or festive, showing merriment or revolt and indignation, and often all together. The esthetic repertoire and narrative structure of these rituals display a deep connection to popular festive traditions. Conveyors of social memory, these traditions contribute to build up experiences and memories of fighting, a creative and revitalizing offshoot of their convergence with Liberation Theology. Nevertheless, the same symbols project distinct dreams and ideals about creative futures and guide collective actions, transforming them into paths to social transformation (Chaves 2021). No wonder the Sem-terra regard mystique as the MST strength and soul.

MYSTIQUE AS A CELEBRATION OF FIGHTING

Let us return to February 2014, a festive day for the Sem-terra gathered in Brasilia for the Forth MST National Congress. The numbers are impressive: fifteen thousand delegates from twenty-three states, about 250 members of eighty foreign delegations,

and representatives of other popular movements. The Nilson Nelson Gymnasium that accommodates sixteen thousand people, bedecked to celebrate the Movement's thirtieth anniversary, was decorated with banners and panels showing colorful images and slogans, grandstands painted in the red color of Sem-terra caps, T-shirts, and flags. In no time, the entire space filled up with delegations from nearby places and faraway countries. On stage, musicians rehearsed their tunes.

Above the stage, a huge screen displays various scenes collectively painted by MST artists. The evocative images of an Indian man, a White woman, and a Black man dominate the center of the composition as they shrewdly stare at the beholder. The trio evokes the Brazilian origin myth of the three races; with lively gestures, they point at the socially marginalized, exposing the common condition of the leading characters in the surrounding scenes. Painted on a red background, the scenes spin around the symbolic center, which defines them. On the upper left-hand corner of the screen, to the right of the observer, shadows of flags appear: the MST's beside the Brazilian, Cuban, and Wiphala banners, suggesting a community of Latin American peoples. From the pavilions, human silhouettes emerge in the form of two crowds, one above, the other to the left of the central trio. Both feature workers wearing hats, caps, helmets, and tools, highlighting the notion of popular standing. Details link the dynamism of the crowds to the surrounding scenes.

Picture 2.

Opening mystique, Sixth MST National Congress. Source: Photo by Pilar Oliva (2014).



The amorphous figures in the cluster on the upper edge of the painting get further away from the sea of flags as they morph into men and women who strive to get hold of the pendulum of Justice. The stylized figure of Justice, below the crowd and to the right of the central trio, sits on the lap of a fat man with a hat. He covers Justice's blindfolded eyes with one hand, while the other grasps a chainsaw and cuts through the book containing the Brazilian Constitution; crushed trees are underfoot. Written on his shirt are the names of some agribusiness corporations. The image condenses symbols of what is anathema to the MST. Justice complies with the Movement's opponents, namely, the landholder's uncouth demeanor mingles with the brands of big international corporations. This male figure associates the landholder – a historic opponent to agrarian reform – with anonymous owners and shareholders of agribusiness enterprises, today regarded as the MST real enemies. The destruction of the Constitution, which represents a summary of rights and the social pact, goes in tandem with the destruction of nature. A military squad protects the couple with their guns pointed at the central trio and the marching crowd on the screen's left-hand side, also emerging out of the sea of flags.

Whereas these scenes seem to depict the present-day pattern of class struggle, according to MST ideas, those that follow suggest the workers' ways of organizing concerted action as well as their achievements. Apparently arriving out of the clear blue sky, human silhouettes draw the outlines of another march or manifestation, which slowly come into focus. Ahead of the crowd clearly of workers, women, children, and men march, some holding machetes, like on the MST flag, in a dramatic scene evocative of Delacroix's famous painting *Liberty Leading the People*. The two marching crowds near the central trio are painted in bright red, alluding to the dynamism of collective action. In contrast, the subsequent scenes in cold hues and relative stability hint at conquests and achievements.

Picture 3.

Opening mystique, Sixth MST National Congress. Source: Photo by Leonardo Melgarejo.



Standing out ahead of the march, a woman sows. Her body mediates between the crowd scene and the others on the lower part of the screen. The entire human mass seems to move toward the sowing field, outlined as greenery, orchard, garden, and trees; further away, the MST banner near a camp of black tarpaulins. A spring light shines on the bodies facing the crowd and the sowing field, accentuating the colors of dress, foliage, and huts, resulting in an aesthetic picture of Paradise as depicted in certain religious booklets.

The timelessness evoked in the image of the marching crowd changes when it flows into the pastoral scene and expands into a Sem-terra camp, that is, it transmutes into a political organization that bears fruit in cultivated fields, in reference to the MST rural settlements. Lying down in splendid bliss among the crops, a newly-born baby seems to sprout from the seedlings. Out of the child's body a plant shoots forth toward the lower right-hand corner of the screen, where it entangles a huge guitar that reaches out to the garden. Above the instrument two scenes overlap; in the first, a couple bends over a book or notepad, studying; in the second, a group of people attends a meeting. Thus, further aspects of the workers' political organization cherished by MST – knowledge and debate, the gaiety of the mystique celebrated in songs – seem to herald the advent of new men and women, represented by the baby sprouted up from the sowed fighting fields, which the entire panel portrays.

Sequential scenes with interwoven contents and space-time contraction display on the screen the synthetic quality of MST mural art. Its artists projected on that piece of cloth ideas and values that are continually reaffirmed at meetings, assemblies, classrooms, mobilizations, and in the mystique that pedagogically underlines each of these activities. The collective workers' organization and their *fight*⁴ are evoked to alter the experience of exploitation, oppression, and violence, thus, opening the way for a new social context, as displayed in the idyllic light of the camp/settlement. This new condition would represent the concrete fulfillment of the fight, reachable as land is conquered; it is also projected into the future as a renewed society. Both quests are pictured in the same synthetic image. On a different level, collective organization and the fight yield the transformation/rebirth of the person, because they remodel the social subject according to sociocultural and socio-psychic criteria. The fight encompasses all peoples: rural and urban workers, men and women, Blacks, Whites, and Indians. The fight is immemorial and unites male and female workers against capitalists who control power, material and symbolic resources, undermine the law, bend down Justice, and seize the repressive state apparatus. Such is the gist of ideas guiding the Sem-terra fight.

4 | The category of *fight*, a core catalyst of diverse meanings, frames the project of social transformation as daily routines, brings together people with different outlooks – “militants” and “the masses” – and unifies a range of MST concrete actions (Chaves 2000; Comerford 1999).

Picture 4.

Opening mystique, Sixth MST National Congress. Source: Photo by Leonardo Prado (2014).



Framing the main both public and internal activities at the Sixth Congress, the mural is both an integral part and a concise manifestation of the mystique, featured throughout the event as the celebration of the Sem-Terra Movement. During the four days of the event, it was the permanent backdrop against which a cluster of images, values, and ideas synthetically unfolded the MST cosmology, as well as the principles of its mystique, which, although primarily designed to nourish each Sem-terra's determination, it mainly expresses and conveys the fight as a cooperative and collective achievement. The panel disclosed an *action mystique* or a *fight mystique* (Chaves 2021) stamped on facial expressions, attitudes, gestures, and allegories; these, in turn, were nested in action clusters and different kinds of activity as the fight writ small.

Meanwhile, on that February day, the wider scenario in the gym fills with the movement, colors, and noise of the people who have just taken up the grandstands. A frenzy in the air rings of expectation and emotion. To attract attention to the center of the gym, musicians strum their chords as the master of ceremonies utters words of welcome. He then begins a dialogue in tune with the Sem-terra bodies and voices. Grouped by place of origin on the grandstands, guided by him, members of state delegations arise and shout Movement slogans, ostensibly exhibiting their collective presence in the Congress. The master of ceremonies proceeds to unite the public with the motto "Free Nation!" (*Pátria livre*), to which they respond "We shall win!" The dialogue is repeated until the master of ceremonies alternates with shouts of "MST" to which the crowd in unison responds: "Fighting till the end!" After a transition marked with instrumental music, the dramatic part of the mystique begins.

Without warning, a procession both solemn and joyful comes into the gym at the sound of a viola, as though the scene of the crowd marching stepped out of the screen and materialized on the arena. Ornaments and trimmings distinguished between Indians, Maroons, rural from urban workers, soldiers, and even members of religious congregations. The parade crosses the sports court in silence, at the sound of strumming. The multitude walks away; time seems suspended. But, feverish, the crowd, will come back several times for a number of dramatic skits playing acts of occupation, camp building, confrontations with repressive forces, victory marches, land conquests, and sowing fields. Time goes by and the human mass returns. Change and repetition blend into forms of collective action.

Instrumental music gives way to the Sem-terra song whose lyrics proclaims "you make a new history, a new man a new woman ...", while extras dressed in the colors of the Movement flag perform various choreographies and artistic gymnastics; wearing the Movement colors, they announce a new world.

Both in form and in content, as in the set of symbolic traits on that scene, the celebration was a condensed display of the recurrent features of the Sem-terra mystique. Once again, insignias and acronyms reappeared in choreographic variations.

Symbolic ornaments, such as flags, tools, black tarpaulins, straw hats, fruits and cereals were rearranged, and cores of activities, remodeled, returned on the scene. Extras dramatized the historic fight for land in Brazil and the creation of MST. They marched; they built camps; they confronted state and parastate repressive forces, had casualties, witnessed deaths and enacted rebirths. They effected several aspects of the fight as dramatic performances, dance and mimicry, at the sound of tunes, songs, poetry, and prose. Mystique was the metaphor for “History.” Beside the stage, a “book” symbolizing history had its pages turned by the dancers at each new act. In less than two hours, fifteen hundred Sem-terra performed the mystique of the fight and of the Congress opening, as prescribed for every MST collective activity.

Picture 5.

Opening mystique, Sixth MST National Congress. Source: Photo by Leonardo Prado (2014).



To the Sem-terra, the entire ceremony was a mystique. As she was leaving the gym, Terezinha, a settlement dweller for ten years, summarized its impact. “The mystique is very touching, it is moving, it is life itself!” It was defined as “the secret force that animates the militant,” and “a reality that is lived rather than talked about” (Peloso 1994: 3). Its many qualities include enthusiasm, conviction, passion, optimism, inspiration, competence, spirit, motivation, and ethical indignation. Described as emotion, sentiment, belief, and experience, the mystique is a driving force to fight and to act. Supple, it can take the form of hope, cheerfulness, and confidence, as much as sadness, indignation, and revolt. Although “hard to define,” it makes the Sem-terra feel

strong and skilled, because it “makes dreams come true.” Mystique empowers - here we enter a Durkheimian zone. As Mauss said of *mana*, mystique allegedly puts together thoughts, emotions, and actions; it is both means and ends (Peloso 1994).

Over and above these intangible attributes, also included as mystique are ceremonies whose ritual features resemble the opening of the Sixth National Congress. The early recognition that these celebrations work to uphold the will to fight, even in adverse situations like the first occupations under the military regime, stimulated the Movement's first publications, either as a specific practice (MST 1986) or as part of its “method of popular work” (MST 1997). Rather than a product of guidebook programming, the mystique is subjected to rules and specialized thinking (Stédile and Mançano 1999; Bogo 2002, 2003), and is part of the Sem-terra daily life. Whether or not it encompasses all collective activities of the Movement, it is there at the beginning and sometimes at the end. Its symbolic redundancy and flow of patterned action do not preclude values, beliefs, symbols, principles and ideals from being elicited and reaffirmed. As we have seen, this constitutes a veritable cosmology. Nevertheless, as in any ritual, mystiques are prone to routinization; the Sem-terra are aware and try to avoid it.

Also classified as “organizing principles,” mystiques are explicitly used as tools for political organization. As such, they play a number of roles, the most relevant of which is renovating and reaffirming Sem-terra identity, a crucial step to construct a “we,” a feeling of belonging to a collective. Moreover, mystique galvanizes the immediate goal to conquer land, which keeps the Sem-terra together, and embeds them in the wider call for social change, a goal that guides the militant sector. This is essentially what the mystique does when conveyed in a shared idiom to produce a symbolic universe common to people with different experiences and social expectations. On the other hand, contextual and circumstantial aspects in the choice of symbols or narrative variations may help transmit specific political goals. When put together, these goals orient and enable collective actions defined on the spot by the MST political managers. Mystique, then, ensures that meanings, goals, “strategic” and “tactic” purposes are communicated, therefore, contributing to MST “organicity,” that is, a good relationship between its distinct sectors and organizing levels, or the blending of its parts. Shared language refers to cosmology and grounds it as emotional commitment to the group, conducive to the militants' cohesion of purposes at various levels of political training, as well as to MST moral and political unity.

Mystique, then, serves various purposes. Simultaneously, it is affect and value, category of thought, ritual moment, and organizing principle, all deployed in the ritual time and space of the ceremonies. Thus, the mystique reaffirms collective power and popular protagonism, and reinforced the commitment to MST and to the fight for agrarian reform. The Sem-terra voice it out in slogans like this: “Fight! Bring up popular agrarian reform!” Made by and to the Sem-terra, mystiques stress identification between public and actors. In these celebrations, common experiences of oppression

and violence acquire an epic dimension; as triumphant narratives of the fight, they become the MST collective strength. Their consistency derives from the verisimilitude between lived moments of fight for land and the performed acts; dramatized, the watched, heard, sung, and sometimes, lived through scenes are mingled and mutually strengthened. The mimeses that unite actors and public, scene and experience, give plausibility to the dramatized narratives and boost people's assurance. Together, the Sem-terra partipate in mystique rituals as both actors and witnesses. In a swelling repetition of themes – as in a musical fugue – they convey their strength as a group.

Picture 6.
MST militants at the grandstands during the Sixth MST National Congress. Source: Photo by Myke Sena (2014).



Although brief and fragmented, this description of the opening ceremony of the Sixth National Congress points at some assumptions and clues about the eclectic nature of what inspired the Sem-terra mystique. In the scenic metaphors one perceives the repetition of the Marxist mytheme of the emancipatory role of the working class in consciously shaping history, a reinvention of the Enlightenment premise that “man can and must create his destiny freely, build his own future” (Cassirer 1994: 288). Furthermore, in a mixture of socialist and Christian ideas, ideals, and teleologies, these metaphors allude to the rise of combined utopian and messianic notions announcing the dawn of a new world. Besides the Marxist concept of class struggle, there are traces of romanticism and of the conceptual and ethical framework defended by Liberation

Theology. These are conveyed in symbolic formulas and rituals inherited from the mystique of the Pastoral Land Commission (Comissão Pastoral da Terra), which, along with popular festivals, constitutes the genealogy of the Sem-terra mystique (Chaves 2021).

This is a mystique for action grounded on the popular Bible culture permanently revised (Velho 1995). Its use of symbols, practices, biblical analogies, and discursive resources taken initially from Liberation Theology and, more recently, from the “Evangelical” repertoire, culminates in the sacralization of the “fight.” Passed down from the Second Vatican Council's Liberation Theology, the concept of “God's People” acquired the meaning of history's collective subject struggling against unjust social structures, regarded as sins. The Book of Exodus is both inspiration and model. In it, the people of God participate in their liberation and keep the divine promise of a new land. The saga of those who suffer and fight became a mytheme, an omnipresent symbolic structure in the mystical ceremonies of the Church's social pastorals, biblical circles, Christian Base Communities (Comunidades Eclesiais de Base, CEBs), Pastoral Land Commission (Comissão Pastoral da Terra, CPT), and later, the MST. Whereas Liberation Theology takes the Jewish saga as a revelation of God's presence in history and as the archetype of their freedom from captivity, oppression, and poverty according to the divine will, the Sem-terra mystique relies on the strength of human collective will-power oriented toward a purpose, the greater for being common. Adding contents and transposing meanings to this time-honored narrative structure have produced semantic slippages that not only sustain the structure, but also enhance its symbolic power. From God's “promised land” to the promise of land brought about by the fight – through the persistence of hope and sacrifice, and the value of faith and discipline – people move through religious and political symbols which easily slip into, overlap with, and add to each other to sacralize the fight.

In its early stages of autonomy vis-à-vis the Catholic Church and the CPT, the MST had to modulate and minimize the religious symbols and practices of the CPT “land mystique,” in order to create a new synthesis of the Sem-terra mystique (Chaves 2021). Thus, the introduction of a certain Protestant ethic recently brought in by the increasing number of believers from various Protestant denominations in MST ranks has not affected the articulation between symbolic structure, political content, and the sacralizing character of the Sem-terra's own mystique. We might actually say that this new element renovates the former Liberation Theology matrix, while showing its own capacity to fructify and absorb. Driven by local female leaders (whose influence deserves greater attention), the present-day evangelical current stands out for the way it uses symbols and attitudes specific to their denominations. They have reintroduced prayers and chants at meetings and local gatherings, the use of “Amen” to ratify collective decisions, and the choice of biblical references to name camps and settlements, such as “El Shadai,” “Promised Land,” and “New Jerusalem.”

Besides the more or less religious symbolic framework, the Sem-terra mystique includes the sacralized memory of social fights and the heroic figures past and present. Events such as the Contestado War⁵, Cabanagem, Balaiada⁶, Indendence, outstanding dates, such as April 17, day of the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre⁷, and fighting phrases such as “Peasant Resistance” are honored as names of MST camps and settlements. This kind of celebration is also conferred to historic characters and popular fighters, such as Zumbi dos Palmares⁸, Ho Chi Minh, and Fidel Castro. They are evoked in ritual, poetry, songs, and slogans like “Che, Zumbi, Antônio Conselheiro⁹, we are comrades in the fight for justice.” Outstanding figures in the fight for land, or in social activities; recent victims of rural fights; and obscure people are forever remembered, as their names spread across the territories conquered and occupied by MST. Role models of devotion to the collectivity, they cast a human face on the fight, like the saints and martyrs of religious pantheons. Unlike the National Liberation Army (Pérez 2012), MST does not see death and martyrdom as meaningful. However, the Sem-terra are expected to honor the dead and revive them through the fight. These fighters gain transcendence in the memory of the living:

*But the enemy was shook up by the boy's dignity
Not quite a teenager, dark-skinned, frail
Kicked by boot, carbine and raffle
Shouted his love for Brazil, cheered his Movement,
And died!
Died in the eye of those who didn't see
So many buds sprouting
Under black tarpaulings, in training classes
Or settled down,
When one sings a song,
Or in a silent moment
Oziel is there
'Cause we can even feel
The beat of his heart*

This passage¹⁰ is part of a recitative repeatedly sung and performed in honor of Oziel Alves Pereira, “a mystical being silenced by state and latifundium repression,”¹¹ at the Youth Camp, in celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre. Ceremonies such as this praise commitment, discipline, and both big and small daily sacrifices by these fighters turned role models. Since “personalism” is a “vice,” as opposed to the acclamation of living leaders, the human face of the collective fight is projected onto the latter.

5 | An armed conflict of settlers and smallholders in the southern states of Paraná and Santa Catarina against state and federal authorities, which took place between 1912 and 1916, over land expropriation for the construction of a railroad between São Paulo and Rio Grande do Sul. The rebellious peasants regarded it as a holy war, which left eight thousand casualties.

6 | Two among several popular uprisings during the Regency period (1831-1840)

7 | In 1996, the military police from the state of Pará, following orders by the governor at the time, Almir Gabriel, attacked the Sem-terra who were camped along the PA-150 highway, during their protest march to Belém, the capital city of Pará. Twenty-one workers were killed and seventy-nine wounded in the municipality of Eldorado de Carajás. The operation involved 155 unidentified military policemen armed with rifles. That date became the “international day of the peasant fight.”

9 | Antônio Vicente Mendes Maciel, known as Antônio Conselheiro, the charismatic religious leader of Canudos, a village in the state of Bahia, attracted thousands of backwoods, indigenous people, and recently freed slaves around the construction of an egalitarian community with access to land and work. After three failed incursions by the Brazilian army, in 1897, Conselheiro's socio-religious experiment came to an end, when most of its twenty-five thousand dwellers were decimated.

10 | <https://mstmaratonando.wordpress.com/2016/04/25/oziel-esta-presente-porque-a-gente-ate-sente-pulsar-o-seu-coracao/> (access January 19 2020).

11 | <https://mst.org.br/2020/04/17/0-jovem-que-ousou-doar-a-vida-por-uma-causa-coletiva-oziel-alves-pereira/> (access February 15 2021)

Therefore, mystiques constantly stage the various ways in which MST assumes the fight nowadays, while eulogizing those in the past, but not limited to them. Symbolically, these mystiques anticipate the pleasure of bringing about a “utopia” by prefiguring it as a real possibility. Such anticipation, as in the scenes on the large screen, comes forward as a mixture of an idealized “new society” and “new men and women,” but also as a dream come true in the form of MST settlements. Hence, among the main nuclei of MST mystiques are the liberating meaning and value of collective fighting; faith in the explicit construction of history; epic celebration of past and present fights; the utopian foreshadowing of a new society; and value placed on solidarity, discipline, and sacrifice, words often heard and read in ceremonies. More elaborate mystiques bring together these central meanings and attain a sort of time compression, as they validate both past and future through the present. Besides the emotional intoxication these rituals produce, they owe most of their symbolic success to the dramatic recalling of fights and the vision of the “dream.”

Picture 7.

A mystique during the Sixth MST National Congress. Source: Photo by Marcelo Ferreira/Instituto Cultural Padre Josimo (2014).



Mystiques celebrate the “fight” as a joyful event. They convey the driving force of popular feasts and collective events, such as marches, military parades, processions, and religious festivities with their capacity to generate multitudes. On these collective occasions bursting with the stimulus of the dense bodily presence of each participant,

a plethora of emotions, affects, and symbols are widely shared. Like most of these festivities, the MST mystiques replay narratives recast from a repertoire filled with symbols and actions. Compression of symbols and emotional density mingle through a *telos* that confers meaning to action. As rituals, they combine different resources that gain weight when in group, activate cognition and emotion, and add imagination to the practical reason that articulates political actions. Thus, the mystiques awaken dormant collective energies, give them a face and a purpose, thus rendering them a *politics of meaning*.

Besides the “secret force” animating the fight, the mystique also safeguards against its hazards. Whether the results are good or bad, they must be celebrated to keep up motivation, as we will see below.

THE MYSTIQUE AND MISFORTUNE

The Sem-terra exalt their mystique ceremonies, but despite their clear organizing qualities, they are prone to ritual felicities and infelicities (Austin 1990), they can be successful or fail to produce “mystic vigor.” Moreover, its use as a political tool tends to affront the subtleness of its vitality¹². Mandatory and reiterative as they may be, they must, after all, have “spirit” and freshness. In addition, the mystique ceremonies, Janus-faced, entail both the sacred and the malign, communion and penance. Versatile, they also mobilize an intense and varied emotional spectrum, be it joyfulness and enthusiasm, or grief, indignation, and fury, which can seamlessly intermingle and morph into each other.

It is impossible and would be wrong to treat separately these multiple, sometimes gloomy, flickers of the mystique chromatic spectrum. Hence, I shall focus on the kaleidoscope of their formal manifestations to show their complexity. To the ethnographic excerpt at the opening of the Sixth National Congress, a happy festivity and successful ritual, I will briefly refer to three other rituals with the opposite effect: a dismal celebration, an unfortunate ceremony, and an expiatory ritual, all related to the National March (Chaves 2000). The reader should keep in mind that the ethnographic inserts are part of a much larger social and ritual process, too vast to tackle here; their long duration and wealth of detail remains an inspiration. I mention them to highlight the complexity and contradictions embedded in the mystique, after showing its importance in the Sem-terra political organization.

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¹² | The CPT, the MST original Pastoral, has witnessed a slacking of the mystique since the mid-1990s (Almeida 2005).

Picture 8.

National March for Agrarian Reform, Jobs, and Justice. Source: The author's archives (1996)



In 1997, the National March for Agrarian Reform, Employment and Justice walked over one thousand kilometers in two months, along which many mystiques were performed. Some more elaborate than others, they occurred at the outset of the daily journey, during public acts, or at assemblies (in some cases, the latter were *the* mystique). The assemblies were sporadic prompted by serious situations, one during the first week, two others on the last days of the march. The latter were truly critical events that exposed the contradictions of the social process and of ritual collective action; it was triggered by the failure to bring together two opposing principles dear to the social universe of those workers, namely, participation and equality on the one hand, and order and hierarchy, on the other (Chaves 2000).

ASSEMBLY, AN EXPIATION RITUAL

Despite the criminalization of MST actions and the adverse political context, which motivated the ostensibly peaceful National March, the Sem-terra continued to promote land occupations along the way. The violent outcome of one of these – with eight people wounded in Sandovalina, in the state of São Paulo – echoed through the deeply moved assembly called at the last minute during the first day's rest (Chaves 2000: 128-139). In the evening, crowded in under a borrowed roof, the marchers heard a poignant report of that Sunday's misfortune. The leader's speech caused commotion that seemed to resound in their own bodies. Scenes so many times enacted in mystique

songs and performances, came full circle. Although the victims were unknown, they were comrades who suffered attacks and violence, representing a shared risk to all Sem-terra. The confusion and shock that ensued subsided at last when a priest took the floor to repudiate violence, reaffirm the fairness of the fight, avert fear, summon up the Sem-terra firmness, and then invite them to say aloud, holding hands, a deeply felt Pater Noster. After this, rallying cries resounded, and the leader closed the assembly, waiting for further news.

That Sunday program, which had begun on a festive mood, continued with a barbecue offered by the mayor of Hortolândia, and a musical performance by the town's band. Then, at the sound of "A Peasant's Funeral,"¹³ the children and mime artist Duda repeated the public performance put up at different towns during the week. The mime dramatized the exploited life of a certain rural worker, added to the congregation of comrades. With wide gestures, they deliberated. Then, they presented a land occupation and a collective sowing, followed by confrontations with gunmen. The confrontation ended with the killing of the worker. At the end of the mime, they played the Movement's hymn and the dead man arose holding up the MST flag that covered him. The town band heightened the performance. When the play was over, the actors presented comic skits, as the marchers dispersed to do other things and get together to talk and drink mate.

All seemed well, when another assembly was instantly called to report the death of one of the victims. A wave of consternation engulfed the crowd. This time, the leader's summons interrupted the agitation: "let's sing the hymn of the Movement which is with us for better, for worse." On his command, the Sem-terra sang the hymn, shoulder to shoulder, forming a tight human chain. Then, they were urged to exchange hugs as they uttered the words "fighting to the end!" Their embraces broke the compact human mass by separating their bodies as they spoke to each other, uttering different words that echoed the same motto. As the play's mimesis

, MST symbols helped the marchers recover from that misfortune. Performance and life intermingled in that improvised mystique. Ultimately, the narrative sequences of the Sem-terra mystiques, compressed in the mime, reproduced a pattern that epitomized the historic experience of the fight for land in Brazil.

Improvisation highlighted the essential features of the Sem-terra mystique; the synchronic rhythmic movement of bodies underlined by the cadence of words and symbolic gestures evoked Durkheim's conception of effervescence. During that dreary celebration, the mystique conjure up gloomy features of the fight, its diffuse burden of fear and uncertainty, arousing the participants' awareness. Using distinct symbolic resources, it converted them into strength and unity of purpose. Fear, sadness, and anger for the violence against other Sem-terra were elevated to solidarity and transformed by physical proximity and gestures in concert, as well as the rhythm of the words uttered in unison. In prayer, in song, and in cried out mottos, the synchronized words uttered

13 | A song composed by Chico Buarque de Hollanda (1968).

in various rhythms were like commonly felt pulses. Both the chorus and the emphasis put on the lyrics highlighted words to underscore the implicit invocation of the prayer in the hymn and in the slogans. Each of these oral rituals lent public expression to the latent feelings of the Sem-terra; jointly displayed, these feelings, for a moment, rendered them a group, part of a community with the same meaning and destiny.

The potentially stunning bewilderment caused by the news of the death was averted with gestures that accompanied the prayer, the song, and the clamor. The Sem-terra formed a single symbolic body, holding hands as they prayed, sang the hymn in a tight embrace, uttered slogans, and listened to the motto repeated with each new embrace. In a shared language filled with multiple references, the Sem-terra reaffirmed the moral value of the fight of the small and weak against the powerful and their violent acts.

Thus, a whole universe of meaning came into their conscience and became an act by means of simple gestures and conventional words, which, nevertheless, had the symbolic and ritual strength of supplication and the protective evocation of praying, and of the last hymn and slogan. From then on, a cross took the march's front row, followed by the national and the Movement flags. When faced with the sacrificial challenge of the fight, the Sem-terra always count on the force of their union. "It is the mystique that unites us," I once heard from one of them.

NEW ASSEMBLIES: AN UNHAPPY RITUAL AND A SACRIFICIAL RITUAL.

According to the agonistic dynamic of the fight for land, the world is divided into "friends," "allies," and "enemies." During the aforementioned Hortolândia assembly, the enemy was clearly the "landowner" and his militias. At the march the following day, this term encompassed the federal government and its neoliberal policy. In one case, the enemy was unknown to the marchers; in the other, it comprised abstract beings clearly outside the MST. The same arrangement was portrayed on the panel at the Sixth Congress. The assemblies described below reveal an increasing slippage of the enemy into the March, presuming the presence of a known and close face.

The marching days brought a number of hassles involving infrastructure, insubordination, grumbles leading to stress, and dissatisfaction with the organizers. On the one hand, problems and conflicts surfaced, but, on the other, public and media attention grew, as the march got closer to Brasília, its destination, which required an urgent solution. Quarrels and disobedience threatened determination to pressure the government and successfully express the motto which named the march, "agrarian reform, employment, and justice."

Discontent culminated on Easter Sunday, when rotten food was served to the marchers. Hurried meetings called by the leaders eager to appease the tension over that blunder had the opposite effect and aggravated the reigning hostility.¹⁴

¹⁴ | For a photographic essay and summary honoring the event, see Chaves 2017.

Ostensibly, the Sem-terra demanded the egalitarian ideal of the March that sustained their daily walks, as shown in the poem a marcher had written on that very week.

*Each step, a beginning/ Each step, a wish/ Each step, a hope/
Each step, the mark of a deprived people/ Each step, a worker/
Each step, people claim their rights/ Each step, another meal on the
table/ Each step, one more job/ Each step, more justice in the country/
Each step, more dignity/ Each step, more education/ Each step, agrarian reform/ Each step, the jails/
Each step, death in the field/
Each step, injustices/ Each step, our dream/ Each step, a hope/ Each step, a desired division/ Each step,
our history/ Each step, it's me/ Each step, it's you, brother (Chaves 2000: 234).*

The directors, discredited for those ill-timed assemblies, appealed to “organicity” to invoke the hierarchical principle of the supremacy of the collective over the individual, which sustained their long march. Failing to respond to the criticisms, they simply resorted to the public acclaim the National March had already achieved; in addition, they considered that “our internal unity is our weak point,” a possible hurdle to the march's final success. The problems the marchers so strongly voiced remained unsolved, as did the leaders' authority crisis. On the following days, this general malaise deepened and became evident when the marching files broke up, sealing the political failure of the assemblies. In sum, they were the underside of the mystique, or rather, they were the anti-mystique.

About twenty days later, the National March made a grand entry in Brasília, cheered by local people and demonstrators who arrived from various parts of the country. The crowd declared it the “March of the Hundred Thousand,” exalted the Sem-terra feat and expanded that slogan proclaiming that “Brazil for all the Brazilians.”

¹⁵ International correspondents and Brazilian journalists constantly harassed the Sem-terra, thus flaring the march's scope and success. “The whole country is watching us,” a marcher jotted in his diary. Days before that apotheosis, public attention was visibly growing, but the March's success was still uncertain. The combination of media attention and internal unsolved troubles fed the MST National Directors' worst fears. The most apparent counterpoint to the criticisms and problems reported by the marchers on the Easter crisis was to delegate the position of “Coordinator of Discipline” a um membro da direção Nacional. Since the Easter burst of discontent, however, the split between “the masses” and “the leaders” augmented, thus making room for the venting of dissatisfaction, invariably judged by the March's directors as lack of discipline.

Meanwhile, each Sem-terra was committed to bringing the National March to an end and to achieving its political goals so often proclaimed during the past two months. Their arrival in Brasília had an increasingly warm reception by local citizens at

15 | For a photographic essay and summary honoring the event, see Chaves 2017.

the towns they went through. The enthusiastic reception and the obvious importance of the March, rather than the mostly unheeded tightening of disciplinary rules, were decisive for its conclusion, although its success was still unclear in the final stretch. As a Sem-terra noticed, mounting troubles threatened to reveal internal strife to the March's observers. Such weaknesses could be easily explored and stain the MST cause and positive image, so hardly achieved. The marchers' demands put forth at the Easter assembly remained unanswered, and the threat of dissolution continued, as expressed by someone: "some comrades would rather leave the March and go on to Brasília on their own."

Ultimately, dissatisfactions and sharp criticisms were silenced.¹⁶ It was, however, a silence dotted with suspicion and fear, raised by the directors since the Easter crisis, for the probable presence of "infiltrated" people.

It was hazardous to voice criticism, because suspicion amplified control. A Sem-terra or an "MST friend" might have their loyalty put to test. Naturally, some were more suspect than others, but everyone was mistrusted. As they approached Brasília, a series of incidents led to some sensitive semantic slippages: external enemies became "strangers," or "the lost ones" who joined the march allegedly were spreading dissent;¹⁷ strangers were immediately converted into suspects, or rather, P2, undercover policemen intent in inciting trouble and dissension.

Two days before the triumphant arrival at the capital city, a second March general assembly was summoned.¹⁸ In a quick succession of acts and speeches, for everyone to see, the suspects were denounced as "infiltrated" and expelled, all the more hateful for having posed as friends.¹⁹ A note found among the belongings of one of them was the alleged proof that led to the accusation; the person was condemned without right of defense. Extremely compressed, acts and speeches ensued at the gym central arena, followed by an intensely indignant public. "The assembly was brief. No music, no performance, no mystique. *The mystique was the assembly itself.* Only shouted slogans signaled its outset. Only insults and reproaches marked its end" (Chaves 2000: 238; emphasis in the original). Aroused by the authority crisis, the clamor of the previous days was channeled to the new target. Through a well-known mechanism, the ceremony sacrificially moved the tension from within the group to the victims (Girard, 1990). This operation purified the group by purging the alleged dissenting enemy. The marchers then felt the just wrath for the treason of their cause, which threatened to ruin their daily sacrifices during the extenuating journey.

When confronted, the March leaders evoked the principle of collective decision as an alibi. In so doing, they legitimated violence by appealing to the transcendence of collective unity, which ritual had actually restored. With acts and speeches, after the fact, the victims too would evade the violence they had suffered by silently transforming it into gift-sacrifice (Chaves 2006). After all, everybody was eager for the happy end of that great sacrificial rite, the National March. Step by step, for two straight months,

16 | For an anthropological interpretation of that silence and the ethical challenges of its revelation, see Chaves 2006.

17 | At the beginning of the march, some, like myself, and others along the way, joined the March as "friends" and Sem-terra sympathizers. All the "infiltrated" were part of that category.

18 | As mentioned above, the March first general assembly took place at Hortolândia, São Paulo; the others added Sem-terra by state of origin.

19 | For a more detailed account of that decisive sequence, see Chaves 2000: 320-333.

they had desacralized the powers-that-be and the legal order that sustains and legitimates the division of material and immaterial goods and wealth of Brazilian society, by denouncing its injustice and, ultimately, its violence. For a brief moment, the force of the mystique the marching crowd generated revealed the violence entailed in transcending the law. After all, they submitted themselves to that sacrifice precisely to expose the violence of that unchallenged sacredness.

MYSTIQUE, RELIGION, AND POLITICS

The fragments presented above show the MST mystique as producing “unity” rather than the search for the One. It is a production made by a social body with its own identity, guided by prefigured goals, and capable of performing tutored action. Therefore, it both resembles and differs from its Christian Medieval counterpart studied by Michel de Certeau to whom mystique reveals the loss and search for the One as featured in successive symbolic slippages of an absent body (2015: 2). At the same time, mystique is urged to produce a *corpus mysticum* (2015: 120). As the Word Made Flesh vanished, the Spirit became the envoy that could revive the mystic body, first understood as a sacramental body, then as the Church's body.

It is not by chance that the Catholic Church's theological doctrine of the *corpus mysticum* served Medieval jurists as the basis for the doctrine of the king's two bodies, a “royalty theology,” which embodied the State and legitimated royal authority in the process of national unification and fight against feudal aristocracy (Kantorowicz 1998). In a culture increasingly nominalistic, this doctrine represented a social and political whole, replacing Christianity, then in ruins. Whereas the French Revolution eliminated royal incarnation, today, Modernity addresses the concept of State and the idealization of the *res publica* it incarnates, as well as the very notion of social whole embedded in the concept of society. Both are discarded as fantasies as archaic as the previous *corpus mysticum*.

Heir to the romantic tradition and to Catholicism, MST endorses mystique in the construction of its body politic; its liturgy constantly recreates a collective body, viz, the social movement. Here, mystique represents the experience of fighting. Like the Sem-terra daily sacrifices, the mystique gives the movement a heroic and transpersonal sense. It also provides meaning, value, and credibility to a common world projected in utopian hues, while anticipating the dream of a better life at MST settlements in the near future. In this sort of mundane transcendence, the mystique confers meaning to collective actions past and present, successful or not, and prefigures desired conquests. Hence, it plays its pragmatic role as a motto for new collective actions.

MST mystique, therefore, is a *politics of meaning*, which gains consistency as it shapes a cosmology in dialogue with values and ideals originally religious, but with political features, such as equality, dignity, hope, as well as discipline, sacrifice, and

hierarchy. Again, there are consonances and dissonances vis-à-vis Medieval mystique, as expression of and conduit to the relation between the visible and the invisible, opening the way for a conceived truth and providing the spirit with a body (Chaves 2021). At any rate, the contemporary kaleidoscopic arrangement called mystique continues to be oriented by the centrality of this body permanently recreated.

Picture 9.
The flag mystique at the Sixth MST National Congress. Source: MST website



At the consecration of the mystique during the MST Sixth National Congress described above, the Sem-terra extras on the gym arena drew the MST flag with their bodies. A group of dancers composed its background in red, while another group fashioned the map of the country in green. A couple occupied center stage, the man wielding a machete, the woman holding a child. In its bodily formation, the flag represented symbolically the MST as a human collective, including each Sem-terra. With the emblem drawn, the musicians played the first notes of the Movement's anthem. Immediately as a body, those present rose from the gym's grandstands and all began to sing. As always in singing their hymn, when they got to the refrain, the Sem-terra raised their left fists together in a gesture of strength and fight. The hymn seemed transformed into a collective oath to the MST flag, also represented as a human collective.

*Come on, fists up, let's fight
Our strength makes us build*

*Our homeland free and strong
 Built by popular power (...)
 Our strength retrieved by the flare
 Of home in the triumph to come
 We will forge it from this fight, for sure
 Homeland, free, laborer and peasant
 Our star will shine, at last!*

The flag scenography replicated in image what the anthem lyrics said in words; with gestures and voice, actors and public sealed their commitment to the fight, the “free homeland,” and the Movement's unity.²⁰

²⁰ | We should emphasize that mystiques can also trigger inner clashes. One of them at the Sixth Congress, made an acrimonious evaluation of the neoliberal commitments of the Labor Party, with which the MST has historical affinities, which resulted in its tacit support and feeble criticism when the party occupied the country's presidency.

Picture 10.

Singing the hymn at the Sixth MST National Congress. Source: Photo by Marcelo Ferreira. Instituto Cultural Padre Josimo (2014).



It is the MST mystique that creates this unified social body around the collective identity forged by and for the fight for land and social change; it is simultaneously a religious and political operation, as it fashions a common horizon around a communion of ideals. It keeps the Christian eschatological marks and leans forward to a redeemed future built by “popular power.” Therefore, the MST mystique is part of a long Utopian tradition that contemplates many possible futures, which are virtual in the present; it also points at potential realities embedded in human, particularly collective action.

However, as a mystical body, a social movement and its collective identity, as we have seen, must be constantly recreated via liturgies, chants, performances, festive and mournful celebrations, communion and expiatory rituals. Strictly speaking, it is an eclesia, an assembly of citizens, simultaneously religious congregation, social body, and political device. Role switching in mystique rituals dilute the separation between stage and public. Hence, the vital affinity with the crowd, the public body par excellence; this body gives expression to what is undifferentiated, which means all and anyone.

A recent mystique that took place, not during an important national event, but at a plain camp in Brasilia, shows its framework of coherence and repetition.

Mystique

[Names of eleven participants]

Animation

[Names for voice and guitar]

“Floriô”

“Agrarian reform, forever”

“No fear of being a woman”

[Titles of Sem-terra songs]

Silence

A couple comes in with tools to work the ground [they carry a flag].

In come [the couples' names] with a child.

They call out to people at the plenary session, the mystique is carried out in the middle of the circle.

They gather the couples, already prepared: four couples and four children.

They lean and make [raise] the flag and flag pole.

They recite and urge the people at each line [to for] [a circle

Till the entire plenary circles together

Singing

Then, at the center, someone climbs up on somebody's back and recites Bertold Brecht's poem “In

Praise of Learning” [the poem follows].

Then the mystique comes to an end, everyone assumes the posture of a worker and they all sing the hymn.

Then there are comradeship prayers

Our Father

Spontaneous prayers.²¹

21 | Description gently provided by Rafael Bastos.

Apart from the prayers, recently introduced to honor MST's evangelical base, symbolic features and meanings which recurred in the ritual. As at the Sixth Congress, the flag mystique carried out in assembly at any camp intends to connote a meaning of moral integration with emotional content. Added meanings from body movements, songs, poetry, and prayer heighten MST symbols via gestures and words. All assembly participants join the circle that moves around the MST flag, in an axis made of bodies forming the pole. Similarly, the Sem-terra get together via words accompanied by the symbolic gesture of force, while singing the hymn. Just a few elements are enough to make the mystique: bodies, music, silence, movement, words. With these the mystique makes a social body, provides it with meaning and value, frames it and guides it as a collective subject holding a purpose and able to act collectively, that is, to fight.

FINAL WORDS

As a political and social mass movement (Stédile e Sérgio 1993), the MST faces a crucial problem, namely, how to recruit the “masses” – multitude, from the directors’ point of view – and make them a relevant political agent. Since one of its founding events in 1981, during the occupation of Encruzilhada Natalino, the social experience of the camps has been reinforced with the incorporation of some Church organizing features, the legitimacy of Christian values and ideas – such as the universal destination of earthly goods, foremost land – as well as the centrality of mystical liturgy. Transformed in political tool and organizing practice with defined rules and goals, the MST mystique converted the masses into a social and political body with a clear identity. With rites and symbols, it updates the MST organizing principles, “animates the militants,” provides them with contextual political interpretations and guidance to collective actions, and mobilizes and redefines socially rooted moral meanings which delineate rights and duties, legitimacy or not of legal norms and limits of violence. The mystique achieves all this satisfactorily, while preserving the MST system of rank and authority.

How to explain its effectiveness? As we have seen, the force of the mystique is its ritual. Following Marcel Mauss’ interpretation of magic efficacy, Stanley Tambiah (1985) connected structural principles and ethnographic notions to the grand scheme of cosmologies. Cosmology would correspond to unquestioned, sacrosanct social conceptions that underline attitudes to preserve social order. As the rites incorporate cosmology, they refresh the power of conventions, necessary for magic and ritual to be effective. In his study on magic, Tambiah takes the Maussian project further, as he expands the notion of the sacred beyond religion (Tarot 2008). Just as with MST mystique, Tambiah’s expanded definition of the sacred erases the division between religion and politics, thus blurring both in the same cosmology and the same acts. However, through their mystique, the Sem-terra reveal how cosmology can be

deployed to promote change, bringing up the contradictions between ideals and social order, to produce new horizons in terms of ideas and practices. They demonstrate how cosmology can be renewed and transformed in such a way as to let the imagination conceive new social worlds and make them credible.

Just as the resources Tambiah borrowed from linguistics to design his theory of ritual are useful to face the eternal issue of the efficacy of ideas and beliefs, so too Mauss' notions of magic continue, a century later, to inspire our understanding of mystique. Mauss' semantic approaches to the concept of *mana* as "a force par excellence, a true efficacy of things," and the Sem-terra ethnographic definition of mystique as a "secret force" suggest just that.²² Not only does Mauss take the category *mana* as explanation for the efficacy of magic and the force of ritual, but he also states that "it is of the same nature as ritual." Just as in MST mystique, what defines *mana* efficacy is its setting in ritual. Just as in *mana*, the MST mystique occurs within ritualized social dynamics infused with ideas and ideals laden with emotion, triggered by shared images, gestures, and rhythms. Hence, the analytical power of Mauss' theory of ritual force comes from its capacity to link symbolism and value to action, ritually united to syntheses that are contextually situated.

Having these approximations in mind, perhaps it might be useful to follow Mauss' steps a little further and set up a dialogue with the proponents of Liberation Theology, the source of MST mystique (Chaves 2021). The sensitive issue of the relation between *mana* and the sacred, led Mauss to distance himself from Durkheim, as he sums up: "the notion of *mana* is of the same order as the notion of the sacred." In dealing with mystique from another angle, namely, spirit, theologians Casaldáliga and Vigil (1993) state that, unlike Greek dualism, in a biblical context, spirit is not opposed to matter, body, destruction or evil, but to flesh, death, and law as synonym of oppression. Spirit "dwells in matter, body, reality that confers life to them (...), strengthens, moves, and drives them" (: 22). In this conception, mystique has a double quality; like the sacred, it is both auspicious and inauspicious, encompasses negativity and is not immune to destructive use. Its festive and dreadful faces seem to corroborate these qualities. But beyond its sacral, stabilizing face, like *mana*, it can take on dynamic features; it is force, action, vigor, motivation.

In light of the Sem-terra mystique, rather than associated to violence, as Girard (1990) proposes, the sacred is the force toward transcendence—as with "law" and "organicity." The sacred renders the foundations of the social order occult and unthought-of. However, in harmony with the "passion for what it is," typical of Medieval mystics, plus the Liberation theologians' "honor the real," the Sem-terra mystique can also unveil these symbolic foundations to the gaze of those placed at the margins, such as the idiot and the madman of mystical stories (Certeau 2015). However, in a social movement, it is almost impossible to hold the kind of existential relationship the mystics had with the Real as Mystery and the Unknown, impervious to any conceptual expression. I insist on the *almost*, because we should remember the connection between mystique and life

22 | Despite the ethnographic criticisms regarding the substantiation of the notion of *mana* by Codrington, Mauss' source, Keesing's research (1984) corroborates the meaningful association of term with ideas of efficacy, potency, and force.

that Terezinha made a few pages above, or, similar to priesthood, the way a militant justified their capacity to endure all hardships, “I married the fight.” In its demystifying mode, the MST mystique tries to shape and guide the force of the masses, which, against Mauss and a considerable part of anthropology that followed him, retrieves Durkheim's effervescence. Such demystification results from the ritual exposure of the failed promises the democratic political pact casts at election time, itself the heart of the liberal social system and political authority based on the notion of representability.

Like a bridge between the visible and the invisible, unfolding in the ritual play of images, ideas, and emotions, the mystique phenomenon thrusts forward the transforming power inherent in action, when it exposes the arbitrariness and, ultimately, the violence of the social order; a violence that sacralization conceals and naturalizes. Thus, it refers to the limits of the symbolic system as it problematizes the connection between fact and meaning, between the visible and the hidden, as simultaneously it points at and exorcises what is indistinct or undifferentiated. From this comes its tense affinity with the vagueness of the crowd, an “abyss where differences are erased,” with its potential to dissolve order, the source of the strength and danger that haunts all authority systems. Yet, the power of the indistinguishable multitude is exorcized in the rituals that are so seriously controlled and performed by MST. As a public body, a place for everyone and anyone, the crowd refers to what is undifferentiated and equal; ultimately, it represents the dynamism of the sacred, as mystique or *mana*, the power of disorder and the ceaselessly indistinct, beyond the symbol, but equally the source and possibility to renovate its symbolic force.

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