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# Social Dynamics, Transnational Flows and Public Incidence of Religion in the Frontier in Latin America

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**Abstract:** In Latin America, the region known as the Triple Frontier is known for its qualitative religious diversification. Different expressions of believing and feeling abound in the neighborhoods and streets of the border towns *Ciudad del Este* (Paraguay), *Puerto Iguaçu* (Argentina) and *Foz do Iguaçu* (Brazil). The Christian hegemony, important in Latin America, shares space with African religions and with a notable presence of Islam. This dynamic makes the Triple Frontier a privileged geographic region to think about the religious dynamics in Latin America. There is, in this part of the continent, strong socio-cultural interrelations that are fed by the intense flow of material and symbolic religious goods circulating on the frontier. In this sense, the article we propose for this special issue of the journal seeks to discuss how these religious practices have been organized and maintained in the social, dynamic and multiform context of the frontier region. We are interested, based on empirical research carried out in the region, in characterizing the specificities of these distinct manifestations of belief/devotion/practices in the Triple Frontier and in configuring the socio-historical context of the emergence of these religious groups, to relate them to migratory and political issues, their transnational flows and the relations established among themselves in the public space. Finally, in treating the public sphere as a relational and discursive form, this approach will allow us to make visible the relationships between subjects of religious discourse and abstractly construct a model of the circulation network of categories to understand the dynamics of the production processes of legitimacy in the frontier region.

**Keywords:** Latin American Religions; Triple Frontier; Brazilian religious dynamics

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, international frontiers have received special attention in academic research. More and more researchers in the humanities have been studying this subject. Consequently, the diversification of interests appears. Some specialized research areas already have a lot of bibliographical material—especially in themes related to frontier mobility and identities or security/securitization. Other subjects, such as socio-political-religious dynamics in frontier regions, have been less studied. However, the social sciences must not refrain from these discussions.

Here, from the field experience at the Latin American Triple Frontier, we state some of the initial discussions and research orientations in the field of frontier socio-anthropology. Our perspective has, as starting point, the ethnographic method, looking to characterize the specificities of the religious experiences of/in the region. After that we will state the socio-historical context of the emergence of religious groups, their frontier flows and the relationship established with current social practices to create an overview of the public incidence of religion in what is considered the most important frontier region of the south.

Throughout the 19th century, the reflection on national frontiers was conducted primarily by diplomats, jurists, geographers, historians and the military. Such efforts were centered on

discussions about frontier conflicts, frontier agreements, expansionist movements of national states, and (re)definitions of frontiers. The main guiding reference, as [de Albuquerque \(2009\)](#) stated, were the agents of the States and their movements of conquering, expansion, demarcation and guarantee of national territory. In this scenario, the word “frontier” was strongly connected to the military, territorial and state dimension ([Mattos 1990](#); [Soares 1972](#)).

Years later, in the second half of the 20th century, the interest of anthropology and sociology grew by observing the micro-relations of local populations in frontier regions. This possibility of thinking of nations by their territorial boundaries has contributed to reflections on the connection between the local, regional, national and transnational sphere in frontier spaces and to perceive the dynamics of identifications and representations about the “other”. Researches are concerned with ways of exercising civil, political and social rights within national state limits, while at the same time questions other borders (such as social, cultural, symbolic) that constitute, overlap and complement each other and complete the idea of political or state frontier ([Abínzano 2004](#); [García 2003](#); [Grimson 2000, 2003](#)).

The concept of frontier, and especially the limit, from the point of view of the historiography of science, are concepts known and worked on, even before considering the relevance of specific disciplinary areas that would be dedicated exclusively to them. Authors considered as classic have shown some concern about the epistemological ramifications of research in frontier areas.

In this way, it is possible to mention the classic work of [Edmund Leach \(1960\)](#), in the middle of the 20th century. From the frontiers of Burma, he questioned the conventional and hegemonic notion of the geopolitical frontier—understood as the boundary, barrier and closure—offering the analytical alternative of thinking them as a region in which cultures permeated dynamically through the energetic action of different political entities: ecological, economic and kinship organizations. Primarily, the British anthropologist emphasized that, despite the concepts of frontier, state and nation being considered interdependent, they should not be taken in the same way in all social and political contexts. It is worth mentioning that this work of Leach was against a hegemonic view, at the time, of treating culture from a nuclear perspective, which should be studied at the center and not at the limits, i.e., on the borders.

Some years have passed since this classic publication and the frontier has become the object of very diverse observations and with a broad spectrum of attributions of meaning. The different approaches to the frontier have been constructed from at least two interpretative paths, which are based on notions of familiarity and strangeness that the frontier arouses in those who cross it daily, and who live close to it, or those who, because they live further from the frontier, feel the effect of the geopolitical limit imposed on national trade or security policies ([Amante 2010](#)).

Despite the efforts of the social sciences, a significant part of the consolidated interpretations regarding the Triple Frontier come from international journalistic content, mainly North American and European ([Pozzo 2017](#)), which promotes the perspective of the frontier engendered as a space in which drug-, arms-, and people-trafficking are present, therefore a place of all kinds of illegal practices; a place that is incapable of being controlled by the national states. The academic efforts undertaken so far have been aimed at building alternative models to the existing ones, based on empirical research ([Donnan and Wilson 2010](#)).

## 2. Knowing the Latin American Triple Frontier

Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay share their territories, having as parameters two rivers that mark the territory of South America, the Paraná River and the Iguazú River. Around these two affluxes, three big cities organize themselves territorially and make, in this geographic space, the most populous frontier region in Latin America.

The municipality of Puerto Iguazú, the city on the Argentine side, is part of the department of Iguazú and according to data from the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos de la República Argentina*, in the 2010 survey, had a population of 82,227. This region, in the extreme northeast of Argentina, belongs to the province of Misiones, in which the capital city is Posadas, 306 km from the municipality

mentioned. The charming city is as known for its gastronomy as for its famous natural beauties, since it is where the *Cataratas del Iguazu*—one of the seven wonders of nature in the world—is located<sup>1</sup>. In addition, for this reason, tourist activity is its main economic source.

The famous Iguassu Falls extend beyond the virtual lines that demarcate the national territories and is also part of the landscape of the municipality of Foz do Iguacu, the city on the Brazilian border, which has a population of 264,044 according to estimates from *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística*. This city is in the extreme west of the state of Paraná, in which the capital city is Curitiba, 643 km from the frontier city. In Brazil, the fame of the beauty of the city is articulated by commercial strength resulting from the possibility of shopping in Paraguay—connected by Ponte de Amizade, which was inaugurated in March from 1965. These aspects make this Brazilian region the third more popular destination for foreign tourists in the country and the first in the South region.

On the Paraguayan side of the frontier, there is the second most important city in the country, Ciudad del Este. The capital of the department of Alto Paraná is located 327 km from the national capital city, Asunción. According to the data provided by the *Dirección General de Estadística, Encuestas y Censos*<sup>2</sup>, there were 296,597 inhabitants in 2015. The city is known for being one of the largest free-trade zones in the world, big enough to establish itself and gain fame for shopping tourism, the most significant in the country and region.

Although there are, in Brazil, from the strictly geographical point of view, nine frontier regions sharing territory with two other countries, the convergence zone of the three cities referred to herein is known as the Triple Frontier. Several factors were responsible for a greater awareness of this region, besides the average size of the frontier cities, which we have already stated. One to be considered is the huge flow of people due to the tourist and commercial attractions of the region.

In this scenario, there is a population amount whose social story is marked historically by inter-cultural relationships that allow us to think about the mechanisms of social interaction and inter-ethnic relations. A significant part of the inhabitants from this frontier region are the result of migratory flows, whether they originate from economic, ethnic, religious and/or political subjects (cf. [da Silva 2015](#)).

Until the last decade of 1980, this region was known only as “zone, region or area of the three frontiers”, and a historical event will favor the media diffusion and geopolitical interest in this place:

The transformation in the proper noun “Triple Border” appears from the suspicion of the presence of Islamic terrorists in the region after the bombings in the Israeli Embassy in 1992 and mainly after the attacks to the Asociación de Mutuales Israelitas Argentinas [AMIA] in 1994. In 1996, this denomination will be officially incorporated by the governments of the related countries in the “meeting of the Countryside Ministers of the Argentine Republic, the Republic of Paraguay and the Justice of the Federative Republic of Brazil” signed in the city of Buenos Aires. ([Rabossi 2004](#), p. 24)

The arrival of population groups of Arab origin in the region of the Triple Frontier has a direct relation to Syrian-Lebanese history and the constitution of its migratory flows. This subject was studied with greater accuracy by the anthropologist [Silvia Montenegro \(2013\)](#) and revisited by me in other perspectives and in several articles.

These socio-cultural interrelations are mutually reinforced by the intense flow not only of people, but also of material goods and symbolic permanent marks of this region. In this context, religious practices occupy a special place in the daily life of the inhabitants of the Triple Frontier, producing ways of thinking and understanding the world around them.

<sup>1</sup> International competition held by New Open World Corporation (NOWC). The result was disclosed on 11 November 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Paraguayan institution responsible for generating, systematizing, analyzing and disseminating statistical and cartographic information of the country. Data available at: <http://www.dgeec.gov.py>.

When thinking about the frontier regions, we should consider this region as a stagnated division. It is an interconnected region, a fluid frontier, specified by remarkable cultural diversity resulting from the presence of people from different nationalities, connected in transnational ways and, above all, driven by a commercial economy sustained by the flows of products, symbolic goods and people, which often are outside the legal system (cf. Rabossi 2004; Ortiz 2006).

### 3. Transnational Flows, Circulation of Religious Beliefs and Practices in Frontier Region

The socio-religious dynamics in the Triple Frontier region of Argentina-Brazil-Paraguay, in quantitative terms, can be understood as a microcosm of the religious mutations in Latin America, which occur in a multifaceted way, with several forms. Regarding Christianity, Catholicism in Brazil has faced a significant percentage decline in its number of adherents for the evangelical denominations. These declines increase with every collection of data regarding the religious adherence of the population,<sup>3</sup> especially in the biggest urban centers of Brazil, a phenomenon that is replicated in other urban agglomerations of Latin America.

Regarding the Brazilian case, according to the data, there has been a big reduction in the percentage of Catholics in Brazilian population since the previous census, and for the first time this reduction is also present in absolute terms. In the census conducted in 2000, 73.6% of the population defined themselves as Catholics, but this percentage fell to 64.6% in 2010;<sup>4</sup> in absolute amounts, the number of Catholics fell from 125 million in 2000 to 123 million in 2010.

In the opposite direction, there was a clear increase in the number of evangelicals, especially of Pentecostals. These went from 15.4% in 2000 to 22.2% in 2010; in terms of absolute numbers, the number of followers changed from 26.2 million in the first survey mentioned to 42.3 million in the next census. It is worth remembering that in 1991 the percentage of this religious group was 9.0%, and in the previous decade, it was only 6.6%.

Generally speaking, we can reinforce the argument that Brazil remains deeply religious and, in the majority, Christian. What the quantitative data from the last official census confirms is what the qualitative research has pointed out over the last few years. Namely, there is a growing fragmentation and a process of reorganization of Christianity in the country in this historical moment, mainly in favor of Pentecostal churches.

Specifically, in the region analyzed herein, in Foz do Iguaçu—a city in the extreme west of the state of Paraná—Christian hegemony prevails at national level. The census data (2010) indicate that 58.56% of the population are Catholic and 35% evangelical.

The qualitative research in this scenario suggests another way of understanding the problem of religions in public spaces, since it is in a context of recomposition of religious awareness and sensitivity that we will reorient the way in which the Catholic and evangelical Christianities present themselves publicly. Together with these denominations are expressions that Social Science groups as “other religions”, settled in some regions of the cities or dispersed along these regions from several elements that characterize them. These “other religions” that we refer to here are Islam, Buddhism and Spiritism (Martinez 1994).<sup>5</sup>

#### 3.1. Islam on the Triple Frontier, Its Impact on the Public Space and the Christian Answer

The Muslim presence in the region of the triple frontier is easily perceived when walking through the streets of any of the frontier cities and seeing several Arab commercial establishments, mostly restaurants. In the daily life of the region it has become common to live with people dressed in

<sup>3</sup> Here we refer, in a special way, to the data of the last Census of the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE) held in 2010.

<sup>4</sup> In previous surveys, in the first census, in 1872, they were 99.7% and in 1970, for example, Catholics still were 91.8%.

<sup>5</sup> The census data of IBGE (2010) and its subsequent publication of the Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios (PNAD) put under this general term a set of specificities specific to Foz do Iguaçu and region.

the clothing characteristic of this religious practice, especially women, who are quickly recognized by the way they dress, using the Hijab<sup>6</sup>.

It is worth mentioning the multifaceted composition of Islam in the frontier religious field, among them, Sunni and Shiite Muslims, and Christians of Maronite, Orthodox, Coptic, and other groups present on the three frontiers. In this context, migratory flows play a fundamental role in consolidating and diversifying these religious practices in the region.<sup>7</sup>

In Ciudad del Este, the first families of Arabs arrived in the 1960s, from other Paraguayan cities, and were responsible for establishing the first trades and stores in the city. This process was followed by a second major wave of Lebanese migrants in the 1980s, mostly from outside the country.

Sunnis and Shiites, unlike the first movement in which they established ethnic institutions, began to establish several institutions of religious denominational character in the region in the 1980s, and now have three mosques, the most recent the Alkhaulafa Al-Rashdeen, inaugurated at the end of 2015 in Ciudad del Este. In Foz do Iguacu, the Omar Ibn Al-Khatab mosque has recently been incorporated into several tourist routes, such as the Citytour Foz do Iguacu.<sup>8</sup> According to the above-mentioned IBGE 2010 figures, the Muslim community of Foz do Iguacu is the second in absolute numbers and the largest in Brazil in proportional terms to the population.

Estimates from a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in October 2009 point Muslims as 22.9% of the global population; this same survey estimated that in Brazil the Muslim population was 191,000, a drastically different number from the 2010 IBGE data. Both data differ to a large extent from the reported by Muslim<sup>9</sup> Internet communication channels, which claim to have 1 million worshipers in Brazil (Pew Research Center 2009).

To think about Christianity on the frontier and its relationship with public space, we cannot reduce the impact that the Muslim community has in the local context of Foz do Iguacu, directly affecting local religious dynamics. It is understood as one of several dynamics that integrate and aim at settling in the region. If other religious practices still conduct their actions, circumscribed in their several institutions, Islam marks its existence in the cartography of the city, verified by the existence of 14 Arab institutions in the region of the triple frontier that are religious, ethical, commercial, etc., and only 10 in Foz do Iguacu: Associação Árabe Palestina Brazil de Foz do Iguacu, Associação Beneficente Árabe Brazil, Associação Cultural Sírio Libanesa, Centro Cultural Beneficente Islâmico de Foz do Iguacu, Centro de Atividades Educacionais Árabe Brasileiro, Clube União Árabe, Escola Libanesa Brasileira de Foz do Iguacu, Igreja Evangélica Árabe de Foz do Iguacu, Lar dos Drusos Brasileiros, and Sociedade Beneficente Islâmica.

This is the reason Foz do Iguacu was the first Brazilian city to allow the use of the veil in photographs on official documents. The decision of the Instituto de Identificação do Paraná was announced in 2013,<sup>10</sup> the day after a public hearing held in the City Hall, which discussed its legal prohibition and its implication for the religious life of migrants. The media announced the litigation as an achievement by the female religious community and emphasized that the action also benefits religious nuns. The State Attorney General's Office understands that Muslim women and religious women can take pictures with the veil, with the habit or any religious clothing, since all parts of their face are visible.

<sup>6</sup> Handkerchief worn on the head of Muslim women, which covers the hair in sign of modesty and obedience to Allāh.

<sup>7</sup> Related to this subject, check the article *Práticas religiosas em contexto migratório: o caso da tríplice fronteira latino-americana* (da Silva 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Tourist itinerary available at [http://www.loumarturismo.com.br/passeios-em-foz-do-iguacu/17/mesquita-muculmana?gclid=CjwKEAjw26C9BRCOorKeYgJH17kcSjACb-HNA2l1g2umq3ds3Hhmu6NQxLKTAXotxeYswxAXGFB7SnhcCxdPw\\_wcB](http://www.loumarturismo.com.br/passeios-em-foz-do-iguacu/17/mesquita-muculmana?gclid=CjwKEAjw26C9BRCOorKeYgJH17kcSjACb-HNA2l1g2umq3ds3Hhmu6NQxLKTAXotxeYswxAXGFB7SnhcCxdPw_wcB) (accessed on 17 June 2017).

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.islam.org.br/centro\\_islamicos\\_no\\_brasil.htm](http://www.islam.org.br/centro_islamicos_no_brasil.htm) Center for Studies and Dissemination of Islam, (accessed on 24 November 2016).

<sup>10</sup> More specifically, on 9 May 2013.

Because of these factors, which mark the public presence of Islam on the frontier, Christian parachurch institutions such as JOCUM, carry out specific training for religious proselytism among Muslim groups. ETED is the entrance to JOCUM that has one of its headquarters in Foz do Iguaçu. It is a period of formation which, as described on its website, exists “with the aim of encouraging Christians to live a life of commitment and relationship with God and His Word through the basic principles of Christian life, such as: meditation, intercession, fear of the Lord, missions, evangelism, fulfilling the motto of our Mission: Knowing God and Making Him Known”.<sup>11</sup> It is a full-time course with a total duration of five months and is divided into two periods: the first three months internally studying biblical texts important to Christianity, and the other two months of “internship”, that is, practicing models of evangelism in non-Christian contexts. Thus, the Triple Frontier has become a privileged place for training missionaries who intend to travel to countries with a strong Muslim presence.

These training programs include attendance at events, such as the *Seminário de Introdução ao Mundo Muçulmano* (SIMM). This one offers bilingual classes—taught simultaneously in Portuguese and Spanish. SIMM has a comprehensive content of classes with topics such as “*history of Islam*”, and “*the role of women in Islam*”, and themes related to missions among Muslims (in the world, in Brazil and in Foz do Iguaçu), among other subjects of interest in Christian missiology.

The on-demand evangelism model became popular and there are specific evangelical churches in the region for the Arab community or programs of evangelism in conventional churches exclusively for Muslims. In this sense, it is important to mention the Arab Christian Ministry, which according to its leaders has as its mission, “to offer an evangelical-Christian and evangelistic structure for Arabs living in Brazil who have left their countries of origin and are living here”.<sup>12</sup>

In a cooperative mapping of spaces and spatializations of evangelical religious practice conducted throughout 2016<sup>13</sup>, we have witnessed the presence of 323 churches in the city of Foz do Iguaçu. Due to different forms of the evangelical segments managing their spaces, this number is even greater. This is because some denominations do not consider small congregations or places of worship that can happen in homes (as in the case of churches that function in the “cell” model).

This draws attention to the great capillarity of this religious group. When it is mapped, we notice that there are evangelical churches in all the districts of the city, with a greater concentration in peripheral and poor regions. An important detail is that great denominations, such as the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, do not have, in Foz do Iguaçu, the same numerical force present in other Brazilian cities. The aforementioned number includes a significant number of small churches, originating from internal divisions and functioning in the model of religious communities, and here we have another characteristic of frontier evangelicalism: the big fragmentation.

The capillarity of evangelical growth does not consider national or frontier limits as impeding religious transit. The Christian congregation of Brazil, for example, has five temples in Ciudad del Este and three temples in Puerto Iguazu. Churches created in Brazil also thrive in neighboring cities, the Assembléia de Deus has 72 temples on the Brazilian side and about 30 on the Paraguayan side.

In the tri-national region, evangelicals have at least 8 radio channels that enable satisfactory abstraction in the three frontier cities, two widely circulated printed newspapers and TV programs. Three faith-based schools and several NGOs for care practices or therapeutic communities should also be considered.

In everyday life, there is an intense transnational transit of religious leaders. There are several events that have the presence of evangelical communities from two other neighboring cities, in any of the river borders. In addition to the transit of people, there is a flow of religious ideas and sacred objects.

<sup>11</sup> Available at <http://simm2011.blogspot.com.br> (accessed on 25 June 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Official website of the Christian Arab ministry. Item “Our Mission”. Available at: <http://macbsb.blogspot.com.br> (accessed on 24 June 2017).

<sup>13</sup> This mapping was part of the *Evangélicos na tríplice-fronteira: diversidade, fluxos e transnacionalização religiosa*, a coordinated research within the Federal University of Latin American Integration.

We also must consider all the questions that underlie the mechanisms of pluralism and allow the combination of religious beliefs, to understand the motivation of the people that circulate through the several alternatives and how these codes enable a permanent process of reinvention and re-articulation of beliefs, rituals and structures from each of these universes, especially when the complexity of this scenario includes cross-frontier transit.

### 3.2. Catholics and Evangelizing

The Catholic religious offering in this region has developed over the last four decades much of the impact of the social, economic, political and cultural transformations in the region, which demanded, at least for the Christian denominations, a visible reshaping of its evangelizing.

From a historical point of view, the occupation of land with agricultural purposes, the creation of a low-cost commercial warehouse, the construction of a large binational hydroelectric plant and the establishment of roadways connecting the land frontiers, national and international migration that intensified the variety of people circulating in this part of South America, created a region marked by the mobility and fluidity of the occupation of space, as we have already discussed here. Several people migrate to the frontier region seeking land and/or employment, while many others are evicted from their property due to land speculation, land-grabbing or removal due to flooding for a large dam. The intermittent interpersonal and territorial relations, the displacements that undermine the possibilities of rigid identity demarcation, the accelerated growth of the urban nucleus and the modifications in the lifestyle, have been part of the scenario on which Christianity has developed many of its practices and their civilizational projects.

Carlos Procopio (Procopio 2017), when studying Catholicism in the region, says that before this scenario of change and mobility, the Catholic Church in Foz do Iguaçu will “develop a pastoral action marked by a wandering performance and the encouragement of a Christian life through grassroots communities” (cf. Procopio 2017). The first line will find in its pastoral visits and in the intrusion on political and economic issues its main characteristics. In the second line, it will be in the base, through the communities of the faithful, stimulated from the reflections of Vatican II and Medellín, gathered around a Christian spirituality, but moderated by priests, that actions should occur. The action of the Bishop, if he will not unilaterally model Catholicism in Foz, will give the possibility of forging at least its fundamental features.

In this way, any errant presence will be of little importance for the search for a church centered in terms of function and performance, since the most important was to account for the demands of people arriving in the region. The desire to strengthen the base, using the model of liberation Christianity, did not limit other communities from arising and developing, such as the *Renovação Carismática*, *Cursilhos de Cristandade*, *Apostolados de Oração*, *Congregações Marianas*, and *Couples Groups*, among others, since it worked in the same logic of laity leading role.

However, amid this basic face, parishes as an ecclesiastical institution were gradually being shaped, either by valuing the existing congregations of faithful, or by creating new spaces in response to the demands of the neighborhoods that were consolidating in the city. Gradually the community dynamics are supplanted by a more parochial Catholicism, at the cost of a subsumed base of parish administration and a more homogeneous religious identity for the benefit of lower-class practices and values. Dom Olívio not only worked for the restructuring of existing parishes but created a total of 8 parishes throughout 1980 and 1990, increasing the number of these ecclesiastical territories in the diocese by about 50%. However, this scenario did not suppress the communities that remained active in the errant brand of the diocese (Procopio 2017).

The communities began to work together with the parishes as spaces of congregation and encouragement of Catholics. The Bishop continued to engage in the articulation of Catholicism, stimulating with his presence the meeting of people around community and parish life. However, the basic face remodels and passes also contour the parish.

It is under the aegis of this parochialism in modeling that the demand for a centrality marked by the visibility and search of identity references can achieve more effective contours. Once the population has settled into the urban space of Foz and its limits have been hanging over a constant presence, a Catholicism that has sought to reformulate itself from the bases, which did not immunize it from suffering the refluxes before the expansion of the evangelical churches, begins to bet more on its for its presence in the region. Appealing for the involvement of the parishes and the mobilization of their ecclesiastical actors, the Diocese invests in the construction of a great Cathedral, which tries to give a geographical and symbolic centrality to the Catholic Church and to create an identity in which all Catholics can share.

It is not only that a new church is monumental and picturesque, but also that the chair of Guadalupe, also marked in the symbolism of architecture, may be introducing new worship and devotion, because it brings with it pilgrimages and festivities that may eventually gain space among Catholics in the city.

### 3.3. Plurality and Afro-Brazilian Religions

The emergence of the Afro-Brazilian religions and Umbanda and Candomblé terreiros in the border region is closely related to an internal migratory flow, associated with the construction of a large hydroelectric power plant in the Brazilian city of Foz do Iguaçu. At first, the displacement is based on the interest of migrants who enter as workers in big constructions, and then they continued their history of religious life by making the reconstitution to the families of the saint in the city and seeking to clarify religious familiarities as a way of strengthening of bond. Thus, the formation of Candomblé in the Triple Frontier began between 1970 and 1980. However, the trajectory of the formation of this “holy people”, as the practitioners of the Afro-Brazilian religions are named, does not occur in a tacit or peaceful way. From the moment that their places of worship became known, there was a significant resistance of Christians to the presence of this religious practice seen as a diabolical manifestation. What followed was a series of fights in public that went through the legitimacy of belief based on religious plurality and the use of legal discursive devices to repress the meetings of Candomblé and Umbanda, especially in the festivals and celebrations that should—according to the belief repertoire of these religious groups—be held on city streets and on frontier landmarks.

For the holy people of Argentina, even though there are terreiros in other parts of the country, most religious people prefer to visit the terreiros in Brazil. I got indications that the terreiro in Argentina nearer to Puerto Iguaçu is in Posadas, 300 km away; a friend told me that it is Terreiro de Umbanda from Mother Guilhermina de Iansã, who is an Argentine *filha de santo* from Vó Benedita, who was the first *mãe de santo* of Foz do Iguaçu.

The Triple Frontier region has geopolitical facilitators of human and non-human circulation, but there is also a symbolic scope that reaches two points among the African-born religious: first, the Argentine religious consider that the Brazilian terreiros rely on more religious substance than the terreiros of their country, because they attribute Brazil as the source of the African religious. Secondly, they also attribute the presence of black people in the terreiros as a legitimizing factor of this religious practice.

In general, Afro-Brazilian religions in the frontier region must deal with the same issues occurring in other places in Latin America. To the extent that scholars question the relationships between religions, secularism and politics tend to consider the existence of only two major types of religion: religions that are apt to play a positive role in the public sphere—basically Christian religions—and the religions that are incapable of doing so, i.e., those which are more local, imbued with magic or organized into sects, and which consequently should be excluded from the circle of acceptability in any society, in this case the religions of African origins.

In this scenario, it is necessary to understand that the notion of religious pluralism carries an important political implication and, therefore, a need for epistemological vigilance on the part of the scholars of the question. One must reject the trappings of essentialism and consider that there are

several ways in which religions can gain the opportunity to be present and to make themselves heard and to present their demands in the public sphere.

Specifically, in the region of the Triple Frontier, the African religious cults, in particular the Candomblé terreiros, occupy a more marginal position in the public sphere. We, like other researchers on the subject, consider that this is because the dynamics of legitimacy produce traditional religious leaderships that are organized in terms of another type of interest: in fact, their social capital depends, to a large extent, on the preservation of a monopoly of knowledge and secrecy in the hands of the mothers of saints.

In any case, it is fundamental from what has been mentioned that these characteristics are described as an analytical resource to be better understood, and therefore should not be taken as essential and inherent qualities in each religious practice. We believe that to avoid essentialist typologies it is necessary to understand the actions within their contexts since they can perform functions in the public sphere not foreseen by the model, when practical circumstances so require.

#### 4. Conclusions

The great benefit of the contemporary Social Science approach remains, undoubtedly, its close examination of reality. This is the cause and consequence of ethnographic research, and epistemic coverage of any theoretical construct adopted. Important aspects in the field of study are international frontiers and the action of religion in these spaces. The meaning that people attribute to their social environment from their religious motivations remains relevant, either to the frontier as an ingredient of identity construction, or as a substance that can provide feelings of security in people. Research that goes in this direction must consider the cultural and symbolic dimension of frontiers, which will allow access to people's discourses and religious narratives on frontiers.

Before ending, it is necessary to insist on the fact that the flows and religious changes announced here are not limited to processes of conversion. These are especially present within several religious affiliations, for example in the transformation of daily religious practice and in the meaning that the faithful attribute to this practice. In other words, although in the Brazilian case, during recent decades, religious changes have been concretely expressed in the loss of Catholics, while evangelical growth has been perceived, there are still a few elements that allow us to see a biased religious diversity, since there is a maintenance of symbolic references even in the face of traffic between different religious groups.

The intention with this research was to show, initially, from the statistical data available, some general characteristics regarding the religious experiences in the border region most densely populated in South America. We then discussed the relevance of cross-border relationships and migration for understanding the socio-cultural processes of the region and, finally, we discuss the impact of these factors on the public incidence of the most prominent religious groups in the region.

The religion practices stated here show us that religious senses are always produced in relation to the perceptions and strategies that develop at the local level, and at the border level. In this sense, we understand that the public sphere must be understood as a stream of discursive interactions that carry the uncertainties, aspirations, fears and hopes of speakers and listeners. Thus, we share the perspective that to better interpret the dynamics of a religious field, it is essential to highlight its strategies of producing visibility. Religious agents, acting in public, generate, from each specific situation, the grammar and semantics related to the mode of organization of each religious culture that will become public. In other words, the public action takes place in the exercise of the practice itself.

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