

The atheist anthropologist: Believers and non-believers in anthropological fieldwork¹

The making of this text began with a question put to me by a *cigano*² Pentecostal pastor, one of my key informants from my ongoing fieldwork since 2002 within gypsy Pentecostal churches in Lisbon, where I live. We stood on the boardwalk, at the door of a basement where moments later a daily cult of the *Igreja Evangélica de Filadélfia* (*Filadélfia* Evangelical Church)³ of Damaia⁴ would take place, conducted by this same

- 1 This text is part of ongoing PhD research on music, religion and identity among Portuguese and Spanish gypsies conducted at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon, under the supervision of Dr João Pina-Cabral. Presented at the Younger Scholars Forum ('When communication ends...') at the Eighth Biennial Conference of the EASA held in Vienna in September 2004, it incorporates further reflections promoted by the comments and suggestions received at that event, and also by further ethnographic fieldwork developed in Madrid since October 2004. Hoping I don't forget anyone, I would like to thank my colleagues and teachers for their diverse contributions along the way: my fellow 'younger scholars', Rane Willerslev, Gillian Evans and Barak Kalir; convenors Penny Harvey and Thomas Fillitz, who did not cease their support at the end of the forum, but kept reviewing and discussing the text over the months that followed; Ramón Sarró; José Mapril; Catarina Fróis; Rita Jorge; Vlad Naumescu; Andrés Barrera; Ubaldo Martínez Veiga; Peter Pels; and, of course, João de Pina-Cabral. I would also like to thank the Marie Curie Foundation for granting financial assistance for me to attend the conference.
- 2 The Portuguese term *cigano* refers to Portuguese Rom or gypsies, but it is also used in this language to describe gypsies in general, regardless of group or nationality. A similar usage occurs with the Spanish term *gitano*.
- 3 The *Igreja Evangélica de Filadélfia* or *Filadélfia* Evangelical Church (in Spanish, *Iglesia Evangélica de Filadelfia*) is the main denomination of the Pentecostal movement that developed within Portuguese *cigano* communities from the 1970s. The movement was born in France in the 1950s when a former Assembly of God pastor, Clément Le Cossec, created a specific Pentecostal denomination aimed at gypsy communities throughout the world, the Mission Évangélique Tsigane Mondiale (Baubérot 1993; Williams 1984; 1987; 1993; Cantón Delgado 2001; 2003; 2004; Le Cossec 2003). The movement expanded internationally over the following decades, arriving in Spain in the 1960s. There, the *Filadélfia* denomination (named after one of the seven churches of Christ cited in Apocalypse [I:11; III:7–13]) was adopted and exported to Portugal, where it was officially recognised as a religious association in 1979 (Rodrigues and Santos 2004). The *Igreja Evangélica de Filadélfia* maintains close connections with the Spanish *Iglesia Filadélfia* and associates with other Pentecostal churches established in Portugal through the *Aliança Evangélica Portuguesa* (Portuguese Evangelical Alliance) (Blanes 2003; 2004a; 2004b). Its charismatic Pentecostalism closely resembles that of the Assemblies of God, professing the use of glossolalia, charismatic gifts and the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Christian media have from the start described it as the 'gypsy church' because of its evident ethnic background.
- 4 A working-class and migrant-composed suburb north of Lisbon.

pastor. The question was: 'Are all you anthropologists atheists?' Taken by surprise, I answered something like, 'Well, not all of us, I imagine . . .'

Of course, his question didn't just come out of the blue. First, it was the outcome of a conversation we maintained about the 'anthropological project' in general and about my intentions concerning that religious organisation in particular. Second, it was a result of my continuing presence among the local *cigano* community and their religious cults, and of the negotiation of my status as a social scientist and non-believer with the religious leaders. Third, it was a result of previous interactions between him, as a religious and community leader, and other researchers. In this sense, it had an implicit question preceding it: 'What are you – as so called anthropologists rather than journalists, as you insist on pointing out – *really* studying among us?' Another implicit question followed it: 'How do you expect to describe our church with truthfulness if you don't believe in God?' This dialogue was interrupted by the beginning of the religious cult inside the basement, but over the next few hours I couldn't help thinking, at a more abstract level, about what seemed to be at stake in that one (ironic or just plain naive) initial question: the involvement of personal beliefs⁵ and attitudes in anthropological theory and practice, and their consequences not only for the production and publicisation of scientific knowledge but also for the construction of personal relationships and social interaction during ethnographic practice.

This, of course, is not a new problem in the anthropology of religion. Evans-Pritchard wrote that his not believing in Azande witchcraft didn't stop him from consulting the oracles before his hunting trips with the locals (Evans-Pritchard 1976:244); he also never felt the need to reject his own religious faith in order to do so (1976:Appendix IV; cf. Pina-Cabral 1992:7). A few years later, Meyer Fortes, in his reflection on the anthropological approaches to African religions, remembered a recrimination addressed by the same Evans-Pritchard toward his Africanist colleagues, accusing them of being incapable of understanding any 'non-western' religion due to their atheistic conceptions (1987:288). Yet these reflections were only lateral appendices to their ethnographic project, and were not present in their central body of work.

This debate was recently revisited by two other Africanists, Peter Pels and Rijk van Dijk, who, restaging the problem within issues of political authority and inequality in social relationships during fieldwork (van Dijk and Pels 1996), helped us realise that incorporating personal belief into the anthropological project is not so much an ethical or deontological dilemma as a matter of ethnographic politics. So my surprise at the pastor's question had more to do with, first, the impossibility of building any sort of answer that would correspond to his expectations; and, second, my sudden realisation of the methodological questions it raised, not only concerning my own fieldwork, but also throughout the history of the anthropological discipline.

In this sense, what I want to discuss in this text is not so much the recognition that 'belief' is an ethnographic problem, but how, within ethnographic fieldwork, beliefs (or the lack of them) are negotiated through a communicational process that is built on tensions, distances and proximities, and how anthropological production depends on those tensions in order to fulfil its strategies and expectations. In the following pages, I discuss these issues in a reflexive manner, making use of my personal experience in doing fieldwork in one religious movement in two different national contexts and in

5 By 'belief' I mean 'religious belief' throughout the whole text, except where explained otherwise.

a two-fold negotiation of my position and project with my different interlocutors. I will finally argue that ‘personal belief’, as contemporary authors have progressively shown in recent years, can be restaged from a peripheral to a central position within anthropological and ethnographic projects concerning religious phenomena.

Dilemmas, doubts and theoretical groundings

During the first steps of my research, when the definition of a context for analysis (a Pentecostal movement) took shape and I began exploratory contacts for the fieldwork that was to follow, I fell more or less naively into a methodological dilemma, which had to do with the way I would present myself to my future informants when confronted with the question ‘Are you a believer?’ On the one hand, I thought, if I presented myself as an atheist, I could provoke attitudes of rejection and lack of interest on their behalf towards my scientific project. On the other hand, if I presented myself as a believer or someone willing to become one, I anticipated an aggressive proselytism and the prospect of maintaining an uncomfortable and ultimately unsustainable façade. Finally, I also feared what I initially considered as stereotypical discourses or clichés on behalf of the believers, concerning their own biographical routes and identity configurations: miracles, salvation theories, and so on (Chesnut 1997; Stromberg 1993).

Working in an ethnically differentiated context such as this ‘Gypsy church’, although not presenting itself as an ethical dilemma of any sort, did lead me to reflect at this early stage upon the possibilities of engagement with its believers. In other words, the gypsy field was often considered to be a difficult one, given the alleged native reluctance to cooperate with researchers of any kind. I wondered, therefore, if the religious setting would contribute positively or negatively to the problem of fieldwork access, because I did not know if I would be welcome as a *paio* (or non-*cigano*). Anxious to achieve what I considered to be the necessary degree of involvement for ethnographic fieldwork, I wondered if the recognition of ethnic difference would actually free me from excessive proselytism or, on the other hand, disallow any chance of ethnographic fieldwork.

These doubts had a lot to do with the specificity of the religious context that I was looking at. I was apprehensive of, and uncomfortable with, some of the public discourses emanating from within many Pentecostal and Evangelical⁶ movements, particularly those that forcefully express persecutory and stigmatising logics such as the ‘persecution dialectics’ referred to by the Brazilian anthropologist Clara Mafra (2002). These sentiments associated within the Pentecostal movement with other doctrinal and discursive categories such as the perdition/salvation dichotomy (Chesnut 1997; Stromberg 1993), certainly aroused apprehension and discomfort in this young scholar. The possibilities endorsed by other anthropologists working in analogous belief-based situations proved too diverse to promote any methodological comfort for someone who was unwilling either to ‘go native’ or, on the other hand, conceal his atheism. The history of the anthropology of religion has shown us that, more often than not, researchers

6 The believers of the *Igreja Filadélfia* as well as many other Pentecostal believers, regard themselves as Evangelical, seldom using the word ‘Pentecostal’. I use both terms interchangeably throughout this text.

are tied up with their ethnographic subjects in many and diverse ways, from previous personal and familial religious backgrounds to posterior conversion processes (Stoller and Olkes 1987; Turner 1992; Chesnut 1997; Mafra 2002, Bowie 2003). In this context, a recurring example frequently came to my mind: Bennetta Jules-Rosette's description of her fieldwork experiences through the prism of participation, objectivity and neutrality within the Zambian Church of John Maranke (*Bapostolo*), to which she became a convert, fully immersing herself in the movement that was also her object of study (Jules-Rosette 1975). Yet this, as is acknowledged, did not prevent her from producing a wonderful body of anthropological knowledge concerning that same object.

This recognition helped me restage the issue of 'belief' from the ethical and deontological realm to a methodological axis in the production of knowledge within scientific research (Fortes 1987; Verde 2003; Bowie 2003; Nunes 2004; Toren 2004). What was also at play was therefore the issue concerning the historical and disciplinary processes that contextualise the study of belief in academia (Just 1995; Pina-Cabral 2001; Stewart 2001), particularly within what is considered a secular theoretical tradition. In this text I focus primarily on the communicational and interactional processes involved in ethnographic work in belief contexts, giving an account of what happened in my case, conceived in terms of a continuous production of distances and proximities.

A situated negotiation of attitudes of belief

After some internal and external debate, and after seeking advice from more experienced colleagues, I decided to tell the 'truth' and describe myself as an atheist. What happened after this decision not only demystified my fears, but also revealed them to be unfounded. As I started visiting different churches within the Lisbon district, I had to engage in different kinds of conversations regarding not only my purposes but also, of course, my personal beliefs concerning religious faith. The first face-to-face contacts with the several churches I visited and attended were normally preceded by some previous engagement by phone or through networks of friends with one of its believers, usually the pastor or a musician who opened the doors of the church for me. Once inside, amidst the obvious curiosity aroused by the presence of a stranger, I experienced different responses and approaches, reactions that varied according to the individual interests of each believer. During this process, I must have explained my scientific and personal purpose hundreds of times; and while the question of personal belief often surfaced, there were many other occasions when my interlocutors weren't at all interested in my personal beliefs. Pastors and people more involved in the local doctrine tended to show concern about my religious condition and spent time and effort explaining their own points of view, trying to convince me of their 'truth', but other believers and church attendants did not necessarily pursue this form of engagement. For some, perhaps, my presence represented good publicity for the institution and the community or even the personal satisfaction of having a photo appear in a book written about them. For others, my presence offered possibilities for cultural and material exchange, since during my research I built up a collection of materials on the *Igreja Filadélfia* cults from my own photo, video and audio recordings, as well as from the materials I purchased. This collection raised a lot of interest among some of my interlocutors, who often asked me to attend religious events in order to record them

and create DVDs. At some points it even turned out to be my main reason for showing up at people's homes and workplaces, and attempting to arrange meetings. For others my presence was a matter of indifference, perhaps even rejection. In this sense, if my approach to the gypsy Pentecostals was motivated by scientific purposes, the reception given to me by them was also motivated by criteria of their own. My scientific project, even if not completely understood as such by all the gypsy Pentecostal believers was, from my point of view, pacific. No brainwashing, no public hanging. I was able to pursue it, although not without spontaneous debate on the subject, such as that which motivated the making of this text.

Over time, as I narrowed my focus to two or three churches⁷ where I maintained a regular presence and established progressive bonding and exchanges with some of the believers, the debate about my person started to fade away, only to surface sporadically. Even in other churches or events that I attended on special occasions such as musical festivals or local and regional meetings and special cults, since I had developed a network of connections and acquaintances, nobody approached me with a proselytising attitude any longer. Yet this did not mean that I had finally become a brother of the community; although some pastors greeted me publicly in the pulpit as a brother, and even expressed their desire that I convert, they did so in a half-joking manner, as a result of the degree of intimacy that had developed among us. So, rather than a progressive incorporation of my self as a member of a community, what developed throughout the construction of my 'field' were certain relationships of a more intense character that built on a sense of familiarity but not belonging. Different degrees of proximity and distance were negotiated along the way, but always with a line drawn between my personal religious beliefs and their own. As we will see in the next section, this was noticeable in the way I participated in the church's ritual practice.

In addition, the fact that in Lisbon I was engaged in fieldwork 'at home' implied voluntary and involuntary distancing at some times: my own recent parenthood, family ties, academic events and other obligations sometimes kept me away from the field. On occasion I welcomed this because of the intense emotional stress involved in the religious activities I was participating in. The progressive familiarity constructed with my interlocutors in the field did not necessarily eliminate those original feelings of discomfort. This discomfort did not have to do with any sort of personal doubts, which were never at stake, but with the discomfort of being observed, pretty much in the same way as I was observing them.

In this sense, my first steps in the field taught me that any predetermined 'notes and queries' would only have a limited use, and that what mattered more was the consciousness of the necessity for continuous and situated negotiation in terms of both professional objectives and inter-personal respect. 'Access' evolved as an on-going challenge throughout fieldwork.

Yet the story does not end there. In October 2004, I started a new period of fieldwork, this time in Madrid. Using the same techniques as in Lisbon, I managed to make some interesting contacts who led me to the churches I was looking for, namely a *Filadelfia* church in the centre of the city known as the 'Artists' Church' because it was attended by professional *gitano* flamenco musicians who had converted

7 This narrowing was motivated by a methodological choice on my behalf, since I was interested in understanding musical, ritual and social patterns in both a localised and a processual manner.

to Pentecostalism. It was time to begin a new ‘presentational process’, this time with Spanish interlocutors. Perhaps owing to the fact that I was no longer doing anthropology ‘at home’, and therefore engaged in a more intensive kind of fieldwork and more extensive debate about my position that made me apprehensive about the possibility of alienating my interlocutors and ruining my project, I felt the need to change my strategy and evolve my atheism into an ‘unfinished agnosticism’.

Doctrine, conversion and ritual participation

During an earlier visit to Madrid, prior to my fieldwork in the city, I managed to find a *Filadelfia* church and with the intention of finding contacts for future fieldwork, I decided to show up spontaneously and attend the service. When I arrived with an hour to spare and found a small group of elders talking outside the door, I approached them and inquired about the church and its pastor. After some pleasant talk, one of the men from the group asked me what church I belonged to. When I answered that I wasn’t a believer, he bluntly turned his back on me and spoke no more. Standing in the middle of the street, looking at the man’s back with a silly frown on my face, I decided to leave. The next day I returned, and decided to enter the church directly and head towards the pastor. When I identified myself as a student, he welcomed me, so I stayed. The elder from the previous day said nothing.

Reflecting on these events, I decided to adopt a more defensive approach, not only because I was concerned about the success of my fieldwork, but because I began to understand the doctrinal issues at stake in a manner that had never become clear during my fieldwork in Lisbon.

The first stage of my fieldwork had allowed me to gain a progressive knowledge of the movement’s main doctrinal elements, enhanced by the translation (from Spanish to Portuguese) of some biblical studies I had offered to undertake for the local pastors, who commented on the difficulty they were experiencing with some seminars held by a pastor of the Spanish *Iglesia Filadelfia*. This provided a good opportunity, not only to increase possibilities of engagement and my knowledge of local doctrine from its foundations (as opposed to more dispersed discourse), but also to acquire an approximate ‘insider’s view’ of the processes of biblical and doctrinal transmission while promoting further opportunities for exchange and debate and generally strengthening my relationships. In this sense, recollecting those first moments of my fieldwork described above, I came to understand the doctrinal background of the apparently dogmatic or propagandist discourses on Pentecostal belief: arguments like ‘God makes no distinction between peoples’, ‘God is waiting for you’, ‘God has a plan for you’, ‘When you least expect it, God will touch you’, ‘God helps those who are willing to be helped’ and ‘Let God open your door’. These ideas, which I initially mistook simply for proselytising clichés, drew on the core of Pentecostal theology and charismatic faith that is adopted by the *Igreja Filadélfia*. In this sense, preaching the gospel to everyone possible is not just a matter of choice, but in biblical exegesis a moral obligation of the believer and demonstration of commitment to the church (see, for example, Matthew 28:19–20). It also reflects the Pentecostal interpretation of ontology, or the nature of being and believing, and ontogeny, or the process of becoming a person ‘living in Christ’.

So, when faced with the usual question (which, as a matter of fact, occurred far more often in Madrid than in Lisbon), I used this knowledge to formulate a revised yet still honest approach which left the issue more open and negotiable than previously. I argued that having been raised a Catholic (my first school was an Irish Catholic school), I had rejected the Catholic worldview and remained without a specific creed, so had no specific answer to give them on faith issues. I communicated to my different interlocutors that, throughout my fieldwork with the church over the years, I had grown to respect their faith, and knew that in order to 'live in Christ' I had to be 'touched by God' – something that is felt in a bodily manner and not rationalised – but that I had felt nothing so far. I hadn't been anointed by God's grace. I used the inexplicable to explain my position, defining different parameters in terms of proximity and distance, more than I had in Lisbon. In Madrid I tried to gain people's confidence through an ethical commitment to the community, in terms of expressing an honest commitment to dialogue. Negotiating my presence and participation in the church's activities – the 'come and see for yourself' argument, as Fiona Bowie (2003:50) puts it – evolved into a 'come and see, and perhaps you may feel'. In this sense, over time I was able to notice surprise, even incomprehension, on the faces of some of my interlocutors, who could not understand how I was able to attend their churches for years and not have converted.

Using believers' stated principles to articulate my own distinctive position created a common ground of understanding and respect, but it did not imply the end of debate. As I was told several times, who knows if my coming to the church is part of God's will, and sooner or later I will end up becoming a convert myself.

This negotiation produced consequences in terms of the way I participated in the ritual praxis of the churches. Initially, as a visitor, I would be invited to sit in specific places, but eventually I started to find my own position in spaces where I felt comfortable and knew I would not disturb others. I had to respect gender-related divisions,⁸ areas informally reserved for visiting *obreiros* or church servants, and the seats that local custom assigned to different believers (believers have their own seats, which are secured by their continuing presence). Basically, I tried not to disturb religious practices but sought to secure good sound conditions for my recordings. My motto was discretion.

As many researchers (for example, Lange 2003; Smith 2004) have stressed, Pentecostal cults are characterised by a high degree of involvement and participation in ritual. Singing, clapping, praying, declamation, call and response, and movement are fundamental to the *Filadelfia* movement's religious practice, and my interpersonal negotiation process could not ignore this. The initial dilemma and discomfort I described at the beginning of this article had a lot to do with this issue of participation in ritual praxis. Knowing that I would be closely observed, my dilemma was to act so as not to disturb or insult the believers?

In these terms, I was initially concerned to act according to previous verbal discussions, such as the ones described above, but over time I adopted a more 'go with the flow' attitude that incorporated my perception of the ritual praxis and my

8 Although dependent on the physical constraints of the spaces where the churches are installed, there is a separation between men and women whose seats are normally divided by a central corridor that leads directly to the pulpit. In this context, I must note that my fieldwork has a marked gender bias as I spoke almost exclusively to men. I shall not discuss this issue here.

personal thoughts concerning the degree to which I could participate in an honest, non-insulting manner. You would see me clapping, tapping my feet according to the rhythms, and standing up and sitting down when summoned, but you wouldn't see me respond with 'hallelujahs' or 'amens' to the pastors' summons, speak in tongues nor kneel down to pray. (You also wouldn't have found me smoking, drinking alcohol, dancing or making impertinent remarks.) I gradually came to terms with a behaviour that was coherent with my personal beliefs and simultaneously non-disruptive. This strategy was made possible as soon as I understood that, although one can point to a certain kind of behaviour in ritual cults that can be labelled as normative, it is also common for each participant to experience the service differently, and not be judged for their individual response.

This understanding did not, however, save me from uncomfortable or embarrassing situations in which I felt I was being asked for more than I felt comfortable with. Situations such as being dragged into the pulpit for a collective healing prayer always created a strong dilemma about how best to respond.

Ethnicity, public discourse and belief

During this process, another issue that concerned me was the fact that I was dealing with an ethnically inflected context. I mentioned earlier my doubts about the effects of this dynamic on my engagement within the community. In Portugal, as in many other countries, gypsies are traditionally described (externally and from within) as a marginalised, socially excluded group, and therefore close-knit and secluded (Cantón Delgado 2002; Mayall 2004; Okely 1983). In this sense, it is often observed how difficult it is to work with gypsies ethnographically, especially due to their lack of interest in collaboration and cultural 'mixing' (Gmelch 1986). The social structure of the church seemed to reproduce this stance, since it was almost exclusively composed of gypsy believers and 'servants', and had developed historically through transnational gypsy connections.

It is interesting for the discussion that during the initial stages of my fieldwork, I was not worried about being pressured to 'become gypsy'. In other words, as I hinted at the beginning of this article, I was less concerned with hypothetical ethnic-based distance or conflict production than with the development of faith-based dissent. My major 'ethnic' concern was rejection and/or indifference. However, I was very interested in understanding how religious belief and praxis interacted with ethnic discourse and collective identity, so that this process of inter-ethnic engagement that developed within my fieldwork also served as an object of analysis and reflection.

It is true that the Portuguese and Spanish *Filadélfia* churches can be described, in terms of frequency, attendance and leadership as 'gypsy churches'. In fact, Pentecostal media refer to the movement in precisely those terms. Some gypsy pastors and believers also reproduce this bias in doctrinal discourse, when explaining the success of the movement within their community: historically persecuted and shunned, they believe that these circumstances must be endured because it is the will of God. Those who have been able to undergo this trial and accept God have a special place reserved for them in heaven. But this ethnic approach is balanced by a completely universalistic discourse in terms of salvation through 'the Church of Christ'; anyone, of whatever race or culture, can enter God's realm, as long as they are willing to be saved.

Authors like Paloma Gay y Blasco (2002) have noted how the ways in which identities are configured within *gitano* groups in Spain through adherence to the Pentecostal movement contrast with traditional race discourses and more recent ethnic politics (2002). Through the adoption of alternative ideologies⁹ and socio-cultural practices, *gitano* Pentecostal believers have reconfigured their own past and present condition, seeing themselves as part of a wider (and non-ethnic) faith-based community while developing a specific approach within the Christian worldview that responds to their particular issues and problems. As I described elsewhere, their religious doctrine and ritual practice incorporates that situatedness, but also promotes wider connections through the development of inter-denominational networking, mainly through joint events and associative procedures (Blanes 2004; 2004c). It therefore reflects on the mechanisms through which public discourse is constructed. The dialogue with the Portuguese pastor I described earlier is, in this sense, illustrative, taking the Bible (and Pentecostal biblical study) as a guide to understanding and interpreting the world. As *cigano* and believer, he was concerned about the ‘truthfulness’ of my scientific approach towards a faith-based rather than an ethnically based community.

This rationale is precisely what motivated my interlocutors when they assumed a proselytising attitude towards me. Throughout my fieldwork, my *paio* condition was never the subject of debate and discussion, nor did I ever feel that it was implicitly or explicitly an issue (although my often unshaved beard sometimes led believers to ask if I was Jewish or something). Yet this process is far from easy. I heard many accounts of the difficulty gypsies have in mixing with other groups: some sporadic attempts were made in Madrid to create ethnically-mixed churches, but all were unsuccessful. On the other hand, I often saw non-gypsies at *Filadélfia* services, although they were always a minority. This hints at the difficulties involved in translating public, doctrinal discourse into social practice. Yet it does not mean that the universalistic ‘open church door’ ideal does not prevail. My personal experience is testimony to its lived importance.

Conclusion

Throughout the preceding pages, I have reflected upon the difficulties and dilemmas involved in anthropological research in contexts of strong and overt religious belief. This paper has discussed the place of personal belief and attitudes in my anthropological practice, and the consequences not only for producing and publicising anthropological knowledge but also for personal relationships and social interaction during fieldwork. As the reader may have noticed, I offer no general conclusion as to how to manage such dilemmas. The potential conflict or hypothetical confrontation between my belief and the belief of others was not so much a concern of the Gypsy Pentecostals, but rather one that I brought to the field, which was drawn out by a question from a local pastor in a spontaneous conversation. In other words, the reflexive process that inspired the writing of this text derived from personal categories of belief, intertwined with theoretical, ‘disciplined’ conceptualisations relating to how fieldwork should be conducted. My conclusions point to the importance of an ongoing reflexive and introspective process that should be central to all research activity, and not just in the initial stages. In

9 The term ‘ideology’ is here conceived in a wider, non-political sense.

such cases, truth and honesty not only remain within one's own conscience, but arise from the dialogue between the anthropologist as participant and the anthropologist as observer.

Nor is this reflexive process exclusive to anthropology. It can be shared with interlocutors in a progressive manner as the research develops. The building of self-referenced discourses, modes of self-presentation, and interpretive schemes is bi-directional and dynamic. I was concerned about how to present myself to believers, and they were concerned about how to react to my appearance and continuous presence among them. Access is negotiated by both sides throughout the life of the fieldwork project, and often long after it is over. Negotiating shifts from personal 'atheism' to 'agnosticism' in different fieldwork contexts is therefore best understood less as a personal concession than as an ethnographic strategy within the politics of perception (van Dijk and Pels 1996).

In this sense, what I initially and naively interpreted as an ethical or deontological dilemma turned out to be part of what Clifford Geertz (1978:23) defined as the very core of ethnographic research: the interplay between scientific enterprise and personal experience. The questions concerning the building of proximities and distances within the ethnographic project were, after all, immersed in the dialogue between 'systematising scrutiny' and 'living experience' (Alfred Schutz, quoted in Pina Cabral 1992:6), so implying issues of mutual perception, representation and authority (van Dijk and Pels 1996). In this sense, as Christina Toren claims, the anthropologist should keep in mind the fact that ethnographic investigation can concern ourselves just as much as 'others' (Toren 2004: 226).

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