

Ciganos de Alma (Gypsies of the Soul) in Brazil's Syncretic Religions: Mediumship as a Pathway to Ethnicity and Romani Representation

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Abstract: Over the last two decades, the number of individuals self-identifying as Ciganos ('Gypsies'/Roma) in Brazil has increased. Among them are practitioners of Brazilian syncretic religions who incorporate Cigano Spirits (Espíritos Ciganos) as mediums. For some practitioners, the incorporation of Cigano spirits becomes a pathway for (re)claiming Cigano identities through embodied encounters with these entities, ancestral narratives, and inherited rituals. These "Gypsies of the Soul" (Ciganos de alma) have gained visibility within activist networks and state institutions, raising questions about who can legitimately represent Romani culture and access spaces and resources intended for Romani peoples. Drawing on multisited ethnographic fieldwork in Brasília, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro, digital ethnography, and semi-structured interviews with mediums and Romani activists, this presentation examines how self-Ciganized individuals come to be tolerated, contested, or strategically mobilized as representatives of Cigano culture. It asks how their growing visibility reshapes politics of representation and recognition, particularly in a context marked by multicultural policies, affirmative action, and broader ancestry-based claims to minority status in Brazil. This process constitutes a form of ethnic shifting in which mediumship can operate as a catalyst for incorporated ethnicity. I argue that although some Romani leaders contest the legitimacy of such claims, others strategically draw on ethnic shifters' greater familiarity with mainstream institutions.

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