# Reviewing the past to stigmatize an uncomfortable present: Montano and other "heresiarchs" of the 2nd century from the Euclides da Cunha's perspective About Antonio Conselheiro*

## Revisitar el passado para estigmatizar un presente molesto: Montano y otros herejes del siglo II en la mirada de Euclides da Cunha sobre Antonio Conselheiro

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**Abstract:** This article addresses how Euclides da Cunha, in *Os sertões*, approaches Christian leaders of the 2nd century, viewed as heretics, in order to stigmatize the figure of Antonio Conselheiro. Particularly, the millenarian tenor of Montano's announcement, applied without further ado as an interpretative key to the Conselheiro's preaching, serves to affirm the historical infeasibility of what Belo Monte (better known as Canudos) represented for the backlands' men and women who bet their lives on it. It is highlighted how the author's mistake is also due to prejudice with religion and with the central place it occupied in the Conselheiro's project.

**Key words:** Antonio Conselheiro, Euclides da Cunha, Montano, heresy, millenarianism, Belo Monte.

**Resumen**: El artículo trata de como Euclides da Cunha, en *Los sertones*, aborda liderazgos cristianos del siglo II, tomados como heréticos, en vistas a estigmatizar la figura de Antonio

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Conselheiro (Consejero). En especial el contenido milenarista del anuncio de Montano, aplicado sin más como clave interpretativa de la predicación del Conselheiro sirve para afirmar la inviabilidad histórica de lo que el Belo Monte (más conocido como Canudos) representaba para los hombres y mujeres del sertón que en él han apostado sus vidas. Se destaca como el equívoco del autor tiene que ver también con su prejuicio con la religión y el lugar central que ella ocupaba en el proyecto "conselheirista".

**Palabras-clave:** Antonio Conselheiro, Euclides da Cunha, Montano, herejía, milenarismo, Belo Monte.

## Introduction

It will not have gone unnoticed to those who scroll through the pages in which Euclides da Cunha outlines the profile of Antônio Conselheiro, to find the latter characterized as "a 2nd century heresiarch in the midst of the Modern Age" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 278). No one disputes the rhetorical force of this expression, which, incidentally, is added to so many others that make *Os sertões* a work of admirable eloquence. But surely little attention was paid to the reasons that led the writer from Rio de Janeiro to go back to the beginnings of Christianity and locate Conselheiro there, regretting that a character with this configuration appeared so long later. Would it be the criticism's lack of interest or suspicion that, as the author is agnostic, his statements about it would be irrelevant? If the reason were the latter, the many observations that account for a Euclid "superstitious and concerned with the religious problem, although classified as a 'free thinker'" (ANDRADE, 2002, p. 184) would be disregarded. The first alternative remains, and it justifies the proposition that I will try to develop in this article.

It is necessary to look at Euclides' intentions in stigmatizing Antonio Conselheiro as a heretic (as well as crazy), in order to understand the strategies used in the configuration of *Os sertões*, in which he intends to defend the people of Belo Monte at the same time as which affirms the infeasibility of the Conselheiro's camp. Ernest Renan's work, particularly the volume *Marc-Aurèle et la fin du monde antique*, which closes his impressive *Histoire des origines du christianisme* (published between 1863 and 1882), played a central role there, as it revealed a suggestive universe to Euclid. His reading forms, with the theories of the Italian anthropology schools and the psychology of crowds, the theoretical framework of the analysis on the religiosity

of Conselheiro and his people that is proposed in *Os sertões* (OTTEN, 1990, p. 51).

It is to this very specific question that I shall dedicate. The suspicion is that the engineer-writer of *Os sertões* had overestimated some documents he found among the wreckages of the practically destroyed camp and had inserted them, not without risks, inside the picture that Renan had drawn him about the Christian beginnings, in the end giving their interpretation more than questionable, although widely accepted in the later critical fortune. I will collect the data that Euclides himself borrows from the French thinker, paying particular attention to the way in which Montano and the movement that bears his name appear there, given the proximity he would have with Conselheiro and his people. With this, I intend to identify reasons that led Euclides to immerse into such a distant universe in the quest to understand another world hitherto unknown: the backland.

**A legion of anonymous and extravagant unknowns**

In the fateful and central chapter IV of "O homem", when Euclides finally makes the presentation of Antonio Vicente Mendes Maciel, "the false apostle", does not take long and we are sent back "to the early days of the Church, when universal Gnosticism was erected as a mandatory transition between paganism and Christianity" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 254). This displacement to a distant moment in history is justified: "an anthropologist would find him [the Conselheiro] normal, logically marking a certain level of human mentality, going back in time, fixing a remote phase of evolution" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 254). Thus, it is through the evolutionary perspective, which, incidentally, marks the entire book, that the readers are led to the origins of Christianity. But we will see that this is not all.

One by one, Euclides cites movements that emerged in Christianity in the first centuries, with which he came into contact precisely through reading the aforementioned volume by Renan. Among them, Antônio Conselheiro and his people would fit in very well. As for the "infamous adamites" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 255), they were disciples of a certain Prodicus and, in the french words,

> they intended to renew the days of the earthly paradise through practices very far away from primitive innocence. The Church was called Paradise; they warm it and stay naked... [They] denied the value of established laws, which they qualified as arbitrary rules (RENAN, 1929, p. 125-126).

Ophiolaters were "serpent-worshipping pagans, to whom it behooved one day to call themselves Christians" (RENAN, 1929, p. 132). The Manicheans, on the other hand, "bifronts between the emerging Christian ideal and ancient Buddhism" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 255), were doomed to failure in their attempt to reconcile the pantheistic eastern cosmovision with "the framework of a Semitic religion". (RENAN, 1929, p. 136). In turn, "Markos' disciples" followed someone, coming from the school of the famous Gnostic master Basilides, who proposed "formulas on the tetrad, which he claimed had been revealed to him by a celestial woman". He practiced magic, "invented particular sacraments, rites, anointings" and developed "reprehensible arts to seduce women" (RENAN, 1929, p. 127). Finally, the "abstinent Encratites" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 255) repudiated marriage (and, consequently, sexual relations), wine and meat, and used only water in rituals (RENAN, 1929, p. 166-167).

The list is quite extensive, and would have no reason to be included in Euclid's exposition were it not for the final synthesis, which dissipate any doubts: "By reading the memorable pages in which Renan brings to life the madcap leaders of the first centuries, through the galvanism of his beautiful style, we can note [in Antônio Conselheiro] the full revival of their extinct aberrations" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 275). The atavism of the Blessed of Belo Monte would be explained precisely when one considers the action and teachings of these unknown, but crazy and marginal leaders of Christianity in the second century.

But there is one more current. Montanism, which Euclid cites before those presented above, is not just an example of insanity. The author discovers specific characteristics in it that make the approach to the movement led by the Conselheiro enlightening. For Renan, Montanism would have arisen due to the delay in the coming of Christ on the final day and the relaxation experienced by the Church due to this delay:

> the contrast between the Church and the world was less and less. It was inevitable that the rigorists would think that they were falling into the quagmire of the most dangerous worldliness and that a group of Pietists would arise to combat general boredom, to continue the supernatural gifts of the apostolic Church, and to prepare humanity, by redoubling austerities, for the trials of the last days (RENAN, 1929, p. 207-208).

This would be the place occupied, at some point in the reign of Marcus Aurelius, Roman Emperor (161-180), by Montanism:

> Simple and exalted spirits imagined being called to renew the wonders of individual inspiration, outside the already heavy chains of the Church and the episcopate. A doctrine long spread in Asia Minor, that of a Paraclete who should come to complete the work of Jesus, or rather, to take up the teaching of Jesus, to restore it to its truth, to cleanse it from the adulterations that the apostles and bishops they had introduced this doctrine, I say, opened the door to all innovations (RENAN, 1929, p. 210).

The specific form of these novelties was given by a certain Montano, from the village of Ardabav, in Mysia, in the confines of Phrygia (inland region of what is now Turkey): "undoubtedly the imitation of the Jewish prophets and of those that the new law had produced, at the beginning of the apostolic age, was the main element of this rebirth of prophetism" (RENAN, 1929, p. 211). And that aside from episcopal decisions: "it was a totally popular prophetism that appeared without the permission of the clergy, and wanted to govern the Church outside the hierarchy" (RENAN, 1929, p. 213). Developed also by Priscila and Maximila, this movement had enormous repercussions, winning over to its ranks the famous apologist Tertuliano. The rigor demanded of its members, the eagerness to recover the ardor of early Christian times, and the insistent exhortation to martyrdom made Montanism a proclamation of enormous appeal in the late second and early third centuries.

Euclides has no doubts about seeing Conselheiro as a new Montano. The Belo Monte leader "is a dissident in Themison's exact mold. He rebelled against the Roman Church, and vibrated objurgatory to it, staging the same argument as that one: th Church has lost it glory and obeys Satan" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 275). Indeed, according to Renan, this obscure character, one of the leaders of the Phrygian sect, "declared that the Catholic Church had lost all its glory and obeyed Satan" (RENAN, 1929, p. 222). Here and there the reprimands to the "hair demon": if in Montanist writings, Renan assures us, "prohibitions of feminine luxury and, above all, against the artifice of hairstyles" (RENAN, 1929, p. 243-244) constantly appear. , in Belo Monte do Conselheiro, "the vain women were punished with tearing thorn combs" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 276). That beauty was "the seductive face of Satan" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 276) Renan (1929, p. 553) already claimed to be a Montanist conviction. As a matter of fact, the asceticism supposedly lived in Belo Monte would denounce the recreation of Montanism in backlands: "that the faithful abandon all possessions, everything that tarnished them with a slight trace of vanity" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 276).

Further on, Euclides makes the link he establishes between Montano and Conselheiro even clearer: the Phrygian, more than an individual, is a paradigm:

> Furthermore, this return to the golden age of the apostles and sibilists, reviving ancient illusions, is not new. It is the permanent reflux of Christianity to its Jewish cradle. Montano reproduces himself throughout history, more or less altered according to the character of the peoples, but denouncing, in the same rebellion against the ecclesiastical hierarchy, in the same exploration of the supernatural, and in the same yearning for the heavens, the primitively dreamy feature of the old religion, before the canonized sophists of the councils deformed it. Like his cronies in the past, Antônio Conselheiro was a Pietist yearning for the Kingdom of God, promised, always delayed and completely forgotten by the Orthodox Church of the 2nd century (CUNHA, 2001, p. 278-279).[1]

Not only are traits found in the Conselheiro previously seen in Montano; Euclides considers it possible to assume in the former heresiarch what he was certain about the backcountry leader: "The Phrygian preached it [morality, 'chastity exaggerated to the utmost horror by the woman', perhaps like the Ceará native, due to the lingering aftertaste of marital misfortunes" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 276).

**Euclides' invention**

But these points of contact are accessory in the Euclides' analysis. More important are the background conceptions, which definitely allow us to think of the backcountry from the Phrygian perspective:

> This identity [between Montano and Conselheiro] stands out, even more striking, when the absurd conceptions of the ecstatic backcountry apostle are compared with those of the past. Like the Montanists, he appeared in the epilogue of Earth... The same extravagant millenarianism, the same dread of the Antichrist emerging in the universal downfall of life. The end of the world is near... (CUNHA, 2001, p. 276)

[1] The discussion on what would be, for Euclid, this permanent "reflux" (on the part of the aforementioned Christian heretics, to the "Jewish cradle" of Christianity) would take us too far. Just note that Antonio Conselheiro would also manifest "a superior form of Judaism" (CUNHA, 2001, p.279), precisely because of millenarianism. – which we are about to discuss – which, according to the author, would characterize the backcountry leader's preaching. In addition, if you are left with the following observation, formulated in a clumsy way, but which clearly points out the issue: "Christians call 'Judaizing' and 'Judaism' the belief, which the Church calls 'carnal', that the Kingdom of God belongs to this world and not to another" (CHAUÍ, 2000, p. 78). What in Judaism would show as a "higher form", would only sound like an approximation to "*misunderstood* Catholicism" (CUNHA, 2001, p.279).

The asceticism required of adherents of either movement had the same justification: "all fortunes were on the verge of imminent catastrophe and it was useless temerity to preserve them" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 276).

Here comes the key point: Euclides sees in Belo Monte the same eschatological expectations cultivated within Montanism, the "last recrudescence of millenarianism and prophetism" (RENAN, 1929, p. 207). This identification allows Euclid to once again turn to the French historian, now in a servile manner. If the Montano's prophetism which, "like all the prophets of the new covenant, overflowed with curses against the century and against the Roman empire", was nothing other than "the coming judgment, the punishment of the persecutors, the destruction of the profane world, the thousand-year kingdom and its delights", the thousand-year kingdom and its delights" (RENAN, 1929, p. 215), Conselheiro's proclamation did not escape the model: it had "the same tone with which it emerged in Phrygia, advancing towards the West. It announced, identically, the judgment of God, the disgrace of the powerful, the crushing of the profane world, the reign of a thousand years and its delights" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 278). The identification between one movement and another is reinforced by the transcription. With an aggravating factor: the backcountry demonstration is centuries behind. Euclides was most likely authorized to seek revivals of these Christianitys – for him bizarre – in the backland of Belo Monte led by Conselheiro based on indications from Renan himself, which he would have considered suggestive. For the French, the paths adopted by ecclesiastical orthodoxy did not lead to the disappearance of those ancient expressions to which it was opposed: "The Koran and Islam are nothing but an extension of this old form of Christianity. [...] On the other hand, in the 19th century, *the communist and apocalyptic sects of America make millenarianism and the proximate doomsday the basis of their belief, as in the early days of the first Christian generation"* (RENAN, 1929, p. 508; the highlight is mine). Belo Monte will fit, from the Euclidean invention, into this perspective.

The term "millennialism" comes from a passage in the Book of Revelation (20,1-6), and refers to "belief in a coming earthly kingdom of Christ and its elect - a kingdom that is to last a thousand years, understood literally, be symbolically"; it is about "awaiting a kingdom of this world, a kingdom that would be a kind of rediscovered terrestrial paradise" (DELUMEAU, 1997, p. 17; see also VASCONCELLOS, 1999, p. 79-92). Also called chiliasm, it refers to "the search for a total, imminent, ultimate, earthly and collective salvation" by "social movements that seek radical and massive change according to a predetermined divine plan. Its members generally reject the prevailing social order and distance themselves from it" (LEVINE, 1995, p. 29), because

> even now the world was approaching, through ceaseless conflict, a state of no

> conflict. There would come a time when, in a prodigious final battle, the supreme god and his allies would defeat the forces of chaos and their human allies, annihilating them once and for all. From then on, the divinely established order would be absolutely present; physical needs and miseries would be unknown... the order of the world would never again be disturbed or threatened (COHN, 1996, p. 296).

Thus, millenarianism indicates the "waiting for a kingdom of this world, a kingdom that would be a kind of earthly paradise rediscovered". In the context of the Christian tradition, it concerns the "belief in a coming earthly kingdom of Christ and his elect – a kingdom that should last a thousand years, understood either literally or symbolically" (DELUMEAU, 1997, p. 18). The divine action will transform the cosmos and recreate it in order to overcome the present dramas, which changes the posture in the face of the oppressive current hour. The new time integrates a divine plan previously established and whose revelation and knowledge millenarians live, as it will represent their salvation and the destruction of sinners, those responsible for the current state of things (LANTERNARI, 1994, p. 303-324).

To be understood in this way, Belo Monte would be a community of people looking forward to the coming of the millennium, of a new era, like so many other "pre-Jerusalems, waiting rooms where the triumphal entry was awaited 'into the most fertile of lands', into the miraculous realm full of blessings for body and soul" (LEVINE, 1995, p. 331-332; the quoted expression is from Cohn). What was lived there was just a prefiguration of what was to come, from which only the elect, the inhabitants of the camp, would benefit. Hence the separation from the world, the refusal to observe the established laws, the revolt against the established political order.

The profile of Conselheiro's camp, as drawn in *Os sertões*, is the result of this perspective. But it is necessary to be incisive: Euclides founds this interpretative strand regarding Belo Monte, which would have so much repercussion later on. And he is not afraid to draw the consequences of his invention: it is understood, from there, that the inhabitants of Belo Monte "wanted nothing from this life", living that they were "under the unhealthy preoccupation of the other life" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 299), wrapped in the religious delirium that all the time their leader was nourished by fiery sermons and with the testimony of their penitent life. Thus, the diagnosis is accurate: the Conselheiro is a heretic. If in ancient Phrygia "an unbridled credulity, an unremitting faith in spiritual charisms, made Montanism one of the most exaggerated types of fanaticism in human history" (RENAN, 1929, p. 233), in the Bahian hinterland what became watched did not deserve a less exhaustive classification: in the "ferocious and extravagant mysticism" of the leader

of that agitation, "all the naive beliefs, from barbaric fetishism to Catholic aberrations, all the impulsive tendencies of the inferior races, freely exercised in the indiscipline of country life" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 252).

**Looking for what is missing here**

As we have seen, the use of Renan, particularly his exposition on Montanism, plays a significant role in the hermeneutical task that Euclides sets himself: to discover the meaning of that senseless and atavistic manifestation that was the village led by Antônio Conselheiro. I pointed out that the recovery of heretical manifestations of the principle of Christianity also aimed to show the backwardness of what was seen in the backland Bahian: "all the sects into which the nascent religion was divided, with their hysterical doctors and hyperbolic exegesis, would today provide disgusting cases of insanity. And they were normal" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 255). Antônio Conselheiro and his entourage would have a guaranteed place and would make sense if they had appeared seventeen, eighteen centuries earlier.

But we have seen that the recovery of Montanism occupies a special place. And there is another reason for atavism here: Conselheiro's philosophy fed on similar eschatological hopes, of a millenarian nature, to those on which the Christian communities of Phrygia and other regions lived in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

However, what Euclides did was not put two millenarian movements in parallel, but transform Antônio Conselheiro's preaching, through his association with Montano's, into something of a millenarian nature. Renan's exposition provided Euclides with the general framework in which the few data collected in Belo Monte could characterize a certainty: he was facing a chiliast camp.

But this profile drawn by Euclides does not find sufficient support in the known documents, even those transcribed in his *Caderneta de campo* (1975), much less in the records of other journalists, military and religious who visited the village and left their impressions in writing. The famous "prophecy", of which Euclides transcribed a small fragment in *Os sertões* (CUNHA, 2001, p. 277), and on which he based his assessment, does not allow him to conclude it. The main part of the text is as follows:

> ... In 1889, the Emperor of the Court was dismissed by the unfortunate men of Brazil. In 1891 war; Nation against Nation. In 1892 a great multitude of sinners, some converted and others amended, that neither rich nor poor will be known. In 1893, there will be no silver, gold, copper, there will be red tickets made by the

> hands of men, bursting from the Treasury. In 1894, a thousand herds will come running from the center of Praia to the backland, then it will become a beach and the beach will become a backland. In 1895 the men of their ships will open the doors and will settle on top of their ships and they will not sell five réis of farm. In 1896 there will be war Nation with the same Nation, blood will run on earth. In 1897 there will be much and little pasture and one shepherd and one flock. In 1898 there will be m hats and few heads. In 1899, when the waters turn into blood, the planet will appear at the source with the ray of the Sun, the branch will face the earth and the earth somewhere will face the sky, the astronomy of the earth will be joined with the seas; planets in Heaven will fight with astronomers on Earth. There will be a great shower of stars; many meteors will fall on the earth which will then be the end of the world. In 1901 the lights were extinguished. God said in the Gospel - I have a flock that I love outside this fold and it is necessary that come together, because there is one Shepherd in one flock. Says the Prophet Jeremiah for 1901 there is only one shepherd general and one flock. End In this Belo Monte camp on January 24, 1890 (CUNHA, 1975, 74-75).

The problems of this text are many: Euclid's *Caderneta* shows that it is anonymous, without any indication that it was written by Conselheiro; on the other hand, it has similarities with many others that circulated throughout the Northeast (HOORNAERT, 1997, p. 119-120). In addition, it appears as having emerged in Belo Monte in 1890, when it is known that the village of Canudos received its new name in June 1893, when Conselheiro settled there with his people.

However, whatever the date, we are certainly facing one of the best examples, and the most eloquent testimony, of the presence in Belo Monte of what has been appropriately called the "end of the world culture" (POMPA, 1995, p. 164), associated with situations of drought, war and calamity. Furthermore, it is known that these fears about the end were fed in the missions and preaching of the clergy.

The prophecy in question presents predictions for several years since 1822. From 1892 onwards they refer to consecutive years until 1899. The end is declared for the year 1901, when the existence of a single flock and a single shepherd will be confirmed. An expression attributed there to the prophet Jeremiah, but whose most immediate biblical reference is found in the *Gospel according to John* (10:16). In any case, the flock guided by the only shepherd, having faced the war (started in 1896) and the famine (1897), can wait for the end, in a scenario of deaths (1898) and cosmic cataclysms (1899), described with images that clearly evoke the Apocalypse. If any

element may be difficult to identify, the background expectation is clear: "Until Judgment Day!" (BARROS, 1995, p. 80).

Furthermore, if the text of the "Prophecy" seems to adequately express the fears and hopes of at least a portion of the people who inhabited Belo Monte in the context of the war, it certainly does not allow us to glimpse the motivations that made the camp to be constituted in 1893. Frei João Evangelista de Monte Marciano (1895, p. 5), when visiting the camp in mid-May 1895, heard that the reason people sold their goods and went to live next to the Conselheiro was that on the banks of the Vaza-barris was "the land of promise, where a river of milk flows, and the ravines are made of corn couscous". Other testimonies point in a similar direction. And the missionary's report does not point to any aspect that point to apocalyptic or millenarian hopes, which is admirable when dealing with a document by someone with at least basic knowledge in terms of Catholic doctrine and theology. The war scenario is what will bring up expectations of this content within the camp.

Thus, Euclides' interpretation of the material found in Belo Monte is questionable, as it does not consider a basic distinction between millenarian expectations and waiting for a final, reckless and imminent judgment; those suppose this one, but not all eschatological judgment is thought in the perspective of a coming millennium.[2]2 There are few situations, such as this one, in which the date of birth of an interpretive model and tradition can be clearly identified, in this case, the Euclidean invention of a millenarian Belo Monte, which would prove to be so effective in the following decades, until today.

This millenarian character, as can be seen, Euclides found in Montano. In the documents there were indications of the expectation of a final judgment, to occur, according to the aforementioned prophecy, at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century. Nothing more. The expectation for the aforementioned "total, imminent, ultimate, earthly and collective salvation" cannot be deduced from the materials collected and recorded in *Caderneta de campo* of Euclides.

Ignorance about Conselheiro's convictions, especially those of an eschatological nature, may explain the reasons that led the author, in an effort to understand them, to turn to Montano. But it was not necessary to go that far. It was enough to transcribe in his major work an enlightening dialogue that he had with a 14-year-old "jaguncinho", on August 19, 1897, recorded in one of his reports sent to the State of São Paulo. Imprisoned and brought to the capital Salvador, Agostinho is subjected to interrogation that seems more like a space for the satisfaction of curiosities. But Euclides is aware of the importance of the moment. After having learned about the

[2] It is not uncommon for this confusion to occur among analysts and interpreters of socio-religious phenomena, notes Delumeau (1996, p. 207-215).

people of the camp and their leaders, about the daily life of the camp, he raised, along with other soldiers, questions "about more serious issues": weapons, and religious convictions. As for the latter, Euclides' surprise is manifested in the answer to the question about the promise made by Conselheiro to anyone who died in the fight: "Save the soul" (CUNHA, 2000, p. 111).

Why did the answer "sound unexpected" to Euclides, if "saving the soul" was all the average Christian, minimally familiar with conventional Catholic doctrine, aspired to? The astonishment comes precisely from the agreement between the promises of the fanatical and ignorant heretic and what the priests taught according to the Tridentine catechism, certainly known to Euclides! For the questioner, who at this moment was summarizing the nation's sentiments and asking what the nation actually thought it already knew, it was important to make a difference, to root out the aberration, to prove the absurd. The agreement then amazes, disturbs, and begins to question the polarization between palatable doctrines and fanaticism, between viable religiosity and manifestations derived from ignorance. Euclides will not have noticed, or at least not registered (will he have understood it later?) that the differentiation between the religious experience in Belo Monte and that institutionalized in the Catholic Christianity of his time is found in other latitudes. In any case, he could not count on such agreement on a subject on which he thought he was certain and that justified all the adjectives with which the rude backcountries were classified: what they believed. He couldn't believe they didn't believe in miracles or resounding resurrections. The fact that this part of the interrogation and the surprises it provoked were not included in *Os sertões*, certainly because they were not in line with the Belo Monte model that the author insists on feeding, clarifies, on the other hand, why it was necessary to resort to the Montanism and Renan: to configure a clearly distinct model, in which the difference is definitely marked, the atavism highlighted, the aberration established. In this sense, it is also true that Euclides, in the making of *Os sertões*, "*needs to interpret* the Canudos movement as a millenarian movement" (DECCA, 2002, p. 164; my emphasis is mine): if the presence *in loco* convinced him, at cost, that the model taken from Victor Hugo, that of the French Vendee, was not viable to interpret the saga of Belo Monte,[3] another will be needed, which confirms the folly of the Conselheiro's project.

One last remark. Euclides' hurried reading of Renan and the links he clumsily established between the religious movements of early Christianity and the religious experience of the

[3] As is well known, Vendeia is a region of western France in which a reaction to the directions experienced by the country from the revolutionary process of 1789 was articulated, under the aegis of the recovery of values and practices associated with the *Ancien Régime*. Euclides, before heading to the stage of the war against Belo Monte, had written two articles for the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*, in which he described the Conselheiro's camp as "our Vendeia". And even after having verified, *in loco*, that the rumors that took the camp as the focus of a conspiracy to restore the Brazilian empire were not valid, he intended to give the book he would write on the subject the same title as his previous articles (ABREU, 1998, p. 165; MOREIRA, 2009, p.173-174).

Conselheiro and his people were responsible for at least one more misunderstanding, disguised under the usual impeccable rhetoric. This is the well-known expression "Brown Gnostic" applied to Conselheiro, after his inclusion in the list of Christian leaders heretics of the second century (CUNHA, 2001, p. 255). Montanism, with its apocalyptic hopes and certainties, characterized a religious tendency that went against Gnosticism, centered on a spirituality with an intimate and speculative bias and little (or none) eschatological concern, in the most common sense that this term usually assumes. If "Gnosticism played a considerable role in the work of Christian propaganda", as it was "often the transition from paganism to Christianity" (RENAN, 1929, p. 139), and Euclides recognized it (2001, p. 254), adding that this transition was mandatory (NASCIMENTO, 1997, p. 17-18), it is not appropriate to attribute to the French author the responsibility for the insertion of Montanism in the list of Gnostic expressions of the second century. It is not possible to link Antônio Conselheiro to both Montanism and Gnosticism at the same time. This contradiction would not have been noticed due to the little attention given to details brought by the sources used by Euclides, particularly the one that shaped the religious panorama of the Christian beginnings, and which was so useful to him.

**Implications**

"Who does not see the enormous danger of a belief like this?", this is Renan's question to expose and justify the reaction of the ecclesiastical hierarchy to the Montanism that spread threateningly everywhere (1929, p. 212-213). Euclides, when presenting Antônio Conselheiro and his supposed preaching, wonders at all times about the danger, but also about the insanity of the conceptions that made life and the illusions of the people of Belo Monte. For both the solution was one: "If Marcus Aurelius... had used primary school and rationalist state education, he would have more effectively prevented the world's seduction by the Christian supernatural" (RENAN, 1929, p. 345-346). Certainly, "it is impossible not to think here of the schoolmaster claimed [by Euclides] for the northeastern backlands" (SILVA and SILVA, 1986). Here and there education, a means to eliminate atavisms, to make religious and phantasmagorical beliefs abandon themselves.

And let us not ask ourselves for what reasons, in *Os sertões* Euclides, on this occasion too, he omits information that he had previously collected and recorded, giving an account of the existence of schools in Belo Monte (CUNHA, 1975, p. 23)... In any case, this detail shows the writer's discomfort in the face of "an uprising whose aggregating fulcrum is religion, something that, frankly, for him reeked of the worst of superstitions" (GALVÃO, 1981, p. 94).

But the journey taken here will have shown that the problems of Euclidean reading go further, and shows that Antônio Conselheiro and his people "did not give the key to their decipherment to the methods used by the writer" (GALVÃO, 1981, p. 95). If the interpretation of the religious experience lived in Belo Monte was at least unfortunate based on Renan's writings and, in particular, the Montanism that appeared there, one cannot fail to perceive its convenience for the writer's purposes: "the comparison [between Montano and Antônio Conselheiro] is hasty and distorts the historical facts, but it is in line with the result that came from [his] theory of miscegenation and abnormal collectivity" (OTTEN, 1990, p. 27). The link between the Phrygian and the Bronco plays an important role in the Euclidean effort to, at the same time, take the side of the Conselheiro's people against the massacre perpetrated against them and manifest the total infeasibility of the backland camp. There was no reason to be a community that lived according to such absurd and meaningless expectations.

Furthermore, and despite the scientific tone of the Euclidean argument, it is worth noting the harmony between it and the concerns of the ecclesiastical elites who, over the centuries, took great pains to disqualify autonomous religious manifestations, of indigenous and black communities, and more recently the popular expressions of Catholicism. Only in this perspective, long lasting in Brazilian history, can expressions be understood, strange in the pen of an agnostic, such as the one according to which Belo Monte embodied the case of a "strange sect – a case of moral symbiosis in which the beautiful Christian ideal appeared monstrous" among fetishistic aberrations" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 302). How could the writer, otherwise, claim that the Conselheiro "had only approached poorly understood Catholicism" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 279)? Why qualify the "kiss of images" as "transmutation of misunderstood Christianity" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 314)?

## Conclusion

Euclides da Cunha did not know Antônio Conselheiro's sermons. His statement that "a barbaric and chilling oratory" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 274) would be expressed in them is gratuitous, and forms part of the framework whose basic characteristics I have tried to expose here. It is known that one of the notebooks attributed to the Conselheiro passed through his hands, but years after the *Os sertões* release, days before his tragic death (NOGUEIRA, 1997, p. 35-36). If he had had the opportunity to leaf through the pages of the notebook, he would certainly have been amazed at the distance between the picture he drew and what he now became aware of: a coherently articulated religious thought. And the book would have to be rewritten...

As such it did not happen, and the notebook had to wait until 1974 to be published and

known, the Euclidean model became a school. Even if Montano was not mentioned again, the thesis of a millenarian Belo Monte seduced different scholars (QUEIROZ, 1997, p. 215-241; LEVINE, 1995) and configured the references commonly attributed to the camp. If so many aspects of the Euclidean interpretation of Antônio Conselheiro's Belo Monte were already perceived as the result much more of the titles he had (and of how he read them, obviously) than of the data he was able to collect from the backland, also that of a Belo Monte millenarian seems to deserve the same diagnosis. Which, while not preventing Euclides' passionate defense of the country people and the eloquent denunciation of the brutal massacre perpetrated against them, limits their reach, since, in the end, the Conselheiro's enterprise, with such fragile and outdated bases , was unfeasible. And, insofar as it is from the Conselheiro that the chiliast discourse of such agglutinative capacity arises, it will not be surprising that it is on him, in the end, that the practically sole responsibility for the tragedy that occurred in the backlands falls on him. This is the meaning of chapter IV of "O homem" in *Os sertões*, the book's core chapter, guarantee of its structural coherence, beyond and below the tensions that some critics wanted to see in the work, oscillating between explanation and denunciation of the massacre.

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