

Umbanda

Umbanda is a Brazilian spirit-incorporation tradition that most likely emerged in the 1920s as a mixture of →Kardecist Spiritism (already brazilianised, with a greater emphasis on healing than in France) and Afro-Brazilian traditions (Candomblé and the more diffuse Afro-Spiritism labelled Macumba) (Bastide 1995 [1960]; Brown 1994 [1986]). In Umbandist rituals, various types of spirits—highly evolved over many incarnations—incorporate in mediums in order to provide consultations and spiritual therapies to “clients”, those whose expiating incarnations in this world result from their less-evolved spiritual state. This Kardecist view of incorporating entities dominates Umbanda’s rituals and spiritual services, though the *orixás* of Candomblé are reconfigured as spirits that have never incarnated and that do not incorporate.

Umbanda provides services to millions of non-*umbandista* clients, who greatly outnumber mediums at most sessions (Camargo 1961, 99-110; Montero 1985). The number of Brazilians who self-identify as members on the census has been dropping: from 541 518 in 1991 (0.37% of the national population) to 407 331 in 2010 (0.21%); Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian religions—smaller even when taken together—have grown during this same period (Prandi 2013, 209). Umbanda is prominent in Uruguay and Argentina and is spreading via Brazilian emigration to Europe, North America and elsewhere (Frigerio 2013; Meintel and Hernandez 2013; Saraiva 2016; Anon. n.d.).

Umbanda is very diverse, with three main axes of variation: (1) from Candomblé-like *terreiros* (grounds) to Kardecism-like *centros* (centres), the latter called *Umbanda branca* (where “white” refers primarily to the table coverings traditionally used in Kardecist rituals); (2) from “traditional” to “esoteric” variants (with *Umbanda esotérica* groups appropriating New Age therapies and situating themselves in the lineage of western esoteric traditions); and (3) from one region to another within the country. Umbanda has hybridised with various other religious traditions: it has influenced Afro-Brazilian religions, like Jurema and Tambor de Mina, as well as the ayahuasca religion Santo Daime

(leading to a new hybrid tradition, Umbandaime); and it has informed other new religions, like Vale do Amanhecer (Engler and Brito 2016; Dawson 2012; Pierini 2016). To give one example, the Lua Branca (White Moon) *terreiro* in Rio de Janeiro merged Umbanda and Santo Daime in the late 1980s, and the concept of "energy" helped to unify the two religions, especially in the group's use of crystal therapy (Guimarães 1996).

Umbanda's mediums work with different spirits during different ritual sessions. The two most important are *caboclos* (powerful indigenous or mixed-race spirits) and *pretos velhos* (wise Afro-descendent former slaves) (Hale 2009, 77-111). Others include *boiadeiros* (mixed-race "cowboys"), *crianças* (innocent, playful "children"), *marinheiros* (hard-drinking "sailors" who bring messages of love and faith), *malandros* (rogues, led by the infamous *Zé Pilintra* spirit-type), *ciganos* (happy, disorderly "gypsies," known for their work with crystals in esoteric *centros*) and *sereias* (mermaids) (Barros 2011). Most types of spirits can be either male or female, sometimes homosexual; spirits usually have the same gender orientation as the mediums in whom they incorporate. In the last two decades, "Neo-Umbanda" has emerged, most notably in the *Umbanda Sagrada* movement led by São Paulo medium Rubens Saraceni (1951-2015). It is "exploring more ideologically fluid possibilities," including the view that spirits "choose their 'guises' or 'fluidic clothes'" (the racially and socially situated identities of *caboclos*, *pretos velhos* etc.) for strategic reasons, in order to communicate with specific audiences (Espírito Santo 2017, 189–190).

Two transgressive spirits in Umbanda are especially prominent in Quimbanda, a closely related "black magic" or "left-hand" tradition (Ortiz 1979). *Exus* are an ambivalent spirit-type that "culturally frames psychologically censurable characteristics and that, as a 'trickster' hero, represents the possibility of achieving desired goals" (Trindade 1985, 204). *Pombas giras* are female counterparts to the *exus*, with a sexualised moral ambivalence (Hayes 2011). Umbanda/Quimbanda's ability to dynamically reflect and refigure Brazilian cultural norms is especially clear in the *pombas giras*, as they change from *terreiro* to *terreiro* and over time, presenting "a reconfiguration of the qualities associated with 'being a woman'" (Barros and Bairrão 2015, 126; see Birman 1985). Quimbanda's paid ritual services (Umbanda's are usually unpaid) range from consultation with the spirits to "works", involving animal sacrifice, that resolve romantic problems or cast powerful curses.

Because Umbanda has both French esoteric and West/Central African elements, the issue of race is unavoidable. (Race in Brazil is more nuanced and less binary than in, for example, the USA [Telles 2004].) The proportion of members of Umbanda who self-identify as "white" is 114% that of the national population; for Candomblé the figure is 64% and for Kardecism 145% (Engler 2016, 214-217). Race was a crucial factor in Umbanda's emergence (Camargo 1961, 34-35; Brown 1994 [1986], 37-48; Ortiz 1999[1978], 4-45). (1) A key moment appears to have been when Kardecist mediums began to receive *caboclos*, but their tradition rejected these indigenous spirits as impure/unevolved. Umbanda became the most important place for work with *caboclos*, though they also incorporate in Candomblé (Engler and Brito 2016). These spirits remain almost universally absent in Kardecism.

Esoteric variants of Umbanda are at the opposite end of the spectrum from more African-influenced variants. Because most studies have looked at the latter, and because *Umbanda branca* and *esotérica* groups are less numerous, Umbanda is misleadingly classified as one of the Afro-Brazilian religions (Engler 2012;2020). This fails to recognise the centrality of Kardecist doctrine and the distinctiveness of *Umbanda branca*, which is un- (if not anti-) African: in "White Umbanda ... the orixás, ... have not only been divested of their identity as African deities but, as with all things that evoke Africa, pushed to the margins, silenced, washed white" (Hale 2009, 125). In more Candomblé-like *terreiros*, the main ritual begins with drumming, and the incorporation of spirits is marked by loud yells and dramatic contortions of the mediums' bodies; in some *centros* of *Umbanda esotérica*, the calm, almost silent, incorporation of "the same" spirits is accompanied by recorded New Age music (Engler 2016, 210-211).

Umbanda has never been highly institutionalised. The first federation was established in 1939, and the first national congress was held in 1941. Writing in 1961, Camargo concluded that the results of institutional attempts to unify Umbanda were "weak, if not negative" (1961, 53). There are currently a few dozen federations and associations in Brazil (often "Afro-Brazilian"), as well as an accredited institution of higher education, the Faculdade de Teologia Umbandista (FTU), founded in 2003 ("Federações" 2016; FTU n.d.). Each promotes a particular variant of more formalised doctrine and ritual. But the vast majority of *umbandistas* attends the far greater number of widely disparate independent

groups. The leaders of *terreiros/centros* are generally called *pais-* or *mães-de-santo* (saint fathers/mothers, as in Candomblé) and other senior mediums take on lesser leadership roles. Schisms and splinter groups are common, in part reflecting tensions between different modes of authority (Maggie 2001 [1977]).

Early twentieth-century Umbanda went beyond its Kardecist elements in appealing to esotericism. (Esoteric elements are present to a lesser extent in Candomblé [Walker 1990].) Participants in early Umbanda conferences presented Umbanda as an ancient tradition with not just African and Kardecist but indigenous (Guarani), Vedic, Egyptian, Lemurian and/or extraterrestrial roots; Umbanda has been "on Earth for more than one-hundred centuries, with roots lost in the unfathomable past of the most ancient philosophies"; it is rooted in the teachings of "Lao Tzu, Confucius, Buddha ... Vedanta, Patanjali ... Krishna, Pythagoras, Socrates, Jesus ... Moses... China, Tibet and India ... Orpheus" (Bastide 1995 [1960], 445-447; Oliveira 2008, 114-119; Cumino 2010, 204-210). These appeals to esoteric traditions were in part a strategy of legitimisation during the Estado Novo (the "New State," 1937-1945, of dictator Getúlio Vargas): Afro-Brazilian religions were persecuted but Kardecism was relatively unaffected; and some *umbandistas* appealed to esotericism in order to de-Africanise their religion (Oliveira 2007, 133-143).

An example of contemporary esoteric Umbanda is the Fraternidade Filhos da Estrela Guia (F.F.E.G., "Children of the Guiding Star Fraternity"), an independent *centro* in a small city in the interior of the state of São Paulo. In addition to consultations with *caboclos* and *pretos velhos*, the *centro* conducts Kardecist activities: studies of the texts of Allan Kardec and sessions where messages from spirits are received through automatic writing. Off the main ritual space is a set of rooms set up like a hospital where various types of "spiritual treatment" are performed, as recommend by the spirits, e.g., *passe* (Mesmeric/Kardecist manipulation of "magnetic fluids"), non-contact psychic surgery, crystal therapy and aromatherapy. These treatments are under the command of a "phalanx" of healing spirits led by Joseph of Arimathea ("an occult disciple of Master Jesus") including experts (Paracelsus among them) in homeopathy, herbal medicine, acupuncture, kabbalah, alchemy, etc. (Pelizzari n.d.). A guiding text of the F.F.E.G. is a book dictated to one of the mediums by a highly evolved spirit, in order to help prepare for the "Unified Consciousness" of the coming "Fourth Revelation": "True Umbanda will have its degree of

responsibility and contribution in the times to come, marking the beginning of the New Age" (Scarabelo 2009, 10, 120).

Steven ENGLER

Bibliography

- Anon. n.d. "Umbanda na Austrália." <https://www.facebook.com/UmbandaNaAustralia>. (Accessed 08-Apr-2017).
- Barros, Mariana Leal de, and José Francisco Miguel Henriques Bairrão. 2015. "Performances de gênero na Umbanda: a pombagira como interpretação afro-brasileira de 'mulher'?" *Revista do Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros* 62: 126-145. DOI: 10.11606/issn.2316-901X.v0i62p126-145.
- Barros, Sullivan Charles. 2011. "As entidades 'brasileiras' da Umbanda". In A. C. Isaia and I. A. Manoel (eds.), *Epiritismo e religiões afro-brasileiras: história e ciências sociais*, pp. 291-317. São Paulo: Editora UNESP.
- Bastide, Roger. 1995 [1960]. "Naissance d'une religion". In *Religions africains au Brésil: contribution à une sociologie des interpénétrations de civilisation*, pp. 422-475. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Birman, Patrícia. 1995. *Fazer estilo criando gêneros. possessão e diferenças de gênero em terreiros de Umbanda e Candomblé no Rio de Janeiro*. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. UERJ/Relume Dumará.
- Brown, Diana. 1994 [1986]. *Umbanda: Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Camargo, Cândido Procópio Ferreira de. 1961. *Kardecismo e Umbanda: uma interpretação sociológica*. São Paulo: Livraria Pioneira.
- Cumino, Alexandre. 2010. *História da Umbanda: uma religião brasileira*. São Paulo: Madras.
- Dawson, Andrew. 2012. "Spirit Possession in a New Religious Context: The Umbandization of Santo Daime". *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 15.4: 60-84.
- Engler, Steven. 2012. "Umbanda and Africa". *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 15.4: 13-35.
- Engler, Steven. 2016. "Umbanda". In B. E. Schmidt and S. Engler (eds.), *Handbook of Contemporary Religions in Brazil*, pp. 204-224. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Engler, Steven. 2020. "Umbanda: Africana or Esoteric?" *Open Library of Humanities* 6.1: 1-35. <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.469> (Accessed 03-Jul-2020).
- Engler, Steven, and Ênio Brito. 2016. "Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous-Influenced Religions". In B. E. Schmidt and S. Engler (eds.), *Handbook of Contemporary Religions in Brazil*, pp. 142-169. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Espírito Santo, Diana. 2017. "Possession Consciousness, Religious Individualism, and Subjectivity in Brazilian Umbanda". *Religion* 47.2: 179-202.
- "Federações e associações de Umbanda e Candomblé". 2016. <https://is.gd/RyVZxj>. (Accessed 08-Apr-2017).
- Frigerio, Alejandro. 2013. "Umbanda and Batuque in the Southern Cone: Transnationalization as Cross-Border Religious Flow and as Social Field". In C. Rocha and M. A. Vásquez (eds.), *The Diaspora of Brazilian Religions*, pp. 165-195. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- FTU—Faculdade de Teologia Umbandista. n.d. <https://is.gd/1TdqGN>. (Accessed 08-Apr-2017).
- Guimarães, Maria Beatriz Lisboa. 1996. "Umbanda e Santo Daime na 'Lua Branca' de Lumiar: estudo de caso de um terreiro de Umbanda". *Religião e Sociedade* 17.1-2: 125-139. <https://is.gd/yKI2gn>. (Accessed 08-Apr-2017).
- Maggie, Yvonne. 2001 [1977]. *Guerra de orixá: um estudo de ritual e conflito*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar.
- Hale, Lindsay L. 2009. *Hearing the Mermaid's Song: The Umbanda Religion in Rio de Janeiro*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico.
- Hayes, Kelly E. 2011. *Holy Harlots: Femininity, Sexuality, and Black Magic in Brazil*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Meintel, Deirdre, and Annick Hernandez. 2013. "Transnational Authenticity: An Umbanda Temple in Montreal". In C. Rocha and M. A. Vásquez (eds.), *The Diaspora of Brazilian Religions*, pp. 223-247. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Montero, Paula. 1985. *Da doença à desordem: a magia na Umbanda*. Rio de Janeiro: Graal.

- Oliveira, José Henrique Motta de. 2007. "As estratégias de legitimação da Umbanda durante o Estado Novo: institucionalização e evolucionismo". *Horizontes* 4: 133-143.
- Oliveira, José Henrique Motta de. 2008. *Das macumbas à Umbanda: uma análise histórica da construção de uma religião brasileira*. Limeira: Editora do Conhecimento.
- Ortiz, Renato. 1979. "Umbanda, magie blanche. Quimbanda, magie noire." *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 47.1: 135-146.
- Ortiz, Renato. 1999 [1978]. *A morte branca do feiticeiro negro: Umbanda e sociedade brasileira*. 2nd ed. Petrópolis: Vozes.
- Pelizzari, Edmundo. n.d. "A Falange dos Médicos do Astral". <https://is.gd/dwlrtj>. (Accessed 08-Apr-2017).
- Pierini, Emily. 2016. "Becoming a Jaguar: Spiritual Routes in the Vale do Amanhecer". In B. E. Schmidt and S. Engler (eds.), *Handbook of Contemporary Religions in Brazil*, pp. 225-232. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Prandi, Reginaldo. 2013. "As religiões afro-brasileiros em ascensão e declínio". In F. Teixeira and R. Menezes (eds.), *Religiões em movimento: o censo de 2010*, pp. 203-218. Petrópolis: Editora Vozes.
- Saraiva, Clara. 2016. "Orixás across the Atlantic: The Diaspora of Afro-Brazilian Religions in Europe". In B. E. Schmidt and S. Engler (eds.), *Handbook of Contemporary Religions in Brazil*, pp. 320-332. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Scarabelo, Pedro Gabriel. 2009. *O guardião dos templos*. São João da Boa Vista: All Print Editora.
- Telles, Edward E. 2004. *Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Trindade, Liana. 1985. *Exu: símbolo e função*. São Paulo: CER-USP/Edusp.
- Walker, Sheila S. 1990. "Everyday and Esoteric Reality in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé". *History of Religions* 30.2: 103-128.