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Umbanda: Resistance and Negotiation of Afro Brazilian Identities,

Origins and Syncretism in Los Angeles

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in African American Studies

by

Mariangela Nobre

2018

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Umbanda: Resistance and Reinvention of Afro Brazilian Identities,
Spirituality and Syncretism in Los Angeles

by

Mariangela Nobre

Master of Arts in African American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Robin Davis Gibran Kelley, Chair

In the last few decades scholars of the African diaspora have examined syncretic religions like Candomblé or Santería and their relevance to cultural and social processes of identity formation, but have paid very little attention to Umbanda, a more recent Afro Brazilian variant of religious syncretism. My thesis not only makes a case for Umbanda's significance but argues that it constitutes a form of Afro Brazilian resistance. Founded at the turn of the 20th century and initially ostracized by the Brazilian elite along with other African derived practices

(e.g. Candomble, Macumba, Capoeira and samba), Umbanda was declared an official religion in the 1960's and a decade later achieved status as a national symbol.

The primary objective of this ethnographic work is to examine how Umbanda re-negotiates its Afro Brazilian origins and still affirms the ethnic pride of the oppressed populations of Brazil. Such negotiations occur within the theological core of Umbanda that enforces a message of equality by creating a place of transcendence where everyone is welcome both in Brazil and within the Umbanda community of Los Angeles. In particular, this thesis analyzes the origins, rituals, social impact, historical transformations, and relevance of Umbanda as a syncretic expression of Afro-Brazilian, Indigenous and European spirituality.

Mainly through field work conducted in Los Angeles, I compare the contextual and ritualistic rules of the two main centers established within the Los Angeles county: The Guaracy Temple in Los Angeles, and the Portal de Aruanda temple in Torrance, California.

My target community is the general population of practitioners of Umbanda in Los Angeles and my field research method consists of field notes, participant observation and, after obtaining permission from my subjects, audio recordings and transcriptions of their interviews.

The thesis of Mariangela Nobre is approved.

Kyle Travis-Carrington Mays

Jemima Pierre

Robin Davis Gibran Kelley. Committee Chair

University of California Los Angeles

2018

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INTRODUCTION

Many scholars have written about Brazilian Candomblé', however, very few researchers have focused on Umbanda. The focus on Candomblé' is understandable given the fact that it precedes Umbanda by centuries. Elements of Candomblé' were imported by the African slaves into the New World as early as the 1500's, and the city of Bahia became the center of this practice that preserves its Africanism by hiding behind elements of Catholicism. Such syncretism allows it to survive the cultural genocide of the European colonizers, to become a signifier of the Afro Brazilian culture, and ultimately a national symbol of "Brasilidade." The Umbanda movement is a more modern phenomenon which originates in the early 1900's, and is only considered an official religion of Brazil after 1960's. Furthermore, the philosophical and ceremonial similarities between Candomblé' and Umbanda, create a blurry distinction between the two faiths, which may explain why scholars neglect to credit Umbanda as a practice in its own right within African diaspora studies.

As I argue below Umbanda is a parallel but distinct religion from Candomblé', that has rapidly become popular among marginalized communities as well as the middle class, and represents the multi-ethnicity of Brazil. This faith is a modern signifier of conscious and subconscious Afro Brazilian resistance. The conscious resistance resides in the rehabilitation of the spirits of the Pretos Velhos (the old black slaves) that are previously dismissed by the French Spiritism of Kardec and by the preservation of the African Orixas in the ceremonies and on the Umbanda altar. The subconscious resistance comes from the individual experience of another dimension where humanity is not divided by race, ethnicity or class, but it is unified by shared energy, strength and common tribulation.

My work builds on and departs from Diana DeG. Brown's book *Umbanda: Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil (1994)* in which she analyzes the origins of Umbanda and its political implications in Brazil. She argues that Umbanda is appropriated by the middle class and undergoes a whitening process that reflects the politics of whitening that the Brazilian government encouraged since the first decades of the 1900's. The de-Africanization of Umbanda makes this practice widely popular in Brazil, while complicating but not dismantling a discourse of Afro Brazilian resistance. By contrast practitioners of Candomblé have recently begun to reject its original syncretism with Catholicism, and search for the "authentic" African element central to the faith. Whereas Brown identifies a de-Africanization of the religion, I argue that Umbanda is not only centered on Afro Brazilian elements but that it is still a valid affirmation of Afro Brazilian identity that continues to develop parallel with Candomblé because of its shared celebration of the Orixás.

At the same time, Umbanda transcends ethnicity and encourages through the contact with the spirits, tolerance, and the understanding of humanity as one. Division becomes unity in the spirit world. The spirits of the Pretos Velhos¹ and the Caboclos², which the French spiritism of Allan Kardec had previously considered lower spirits, constitute the main voice of the people who practices Umbanda³. Those spirits allow them to practice a different form of resistance by creating agency for the marginalized and a safe space for intercultural exchange. Afro Brazilian resistance against the dominant culture becomes therefore an important aspect of the practice, which partly explains why Umbanda becomes widely popular in the 1970's, roughly 60 years

¹ Spirits of old African slaves.

² Spirits of Amerindians.

³ Diana DeG. Brown, *Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil*. (New York: Columbia University Press 1994), 54

after its creation. The increasing marginalization of Blacks and Indigenous people in Brazil and the echo of the Civil Rights Movement in United States heightens the consciousness of the oppressed groups and their responsiveness towards discourses of Pan-Africanism and Black Power. Brown claims that Umbanda “...despite its whitened image, has also retained its capacity to provide an Afro-Brazilian identity.” Thus, although the population of Umbanda attendees is racially mixed, the practice still affirms Afro-Brazilian identity and many Afro Brazilians prefer Umbanda to other churches because it presents a “...counter discourse to racism.”⁴ Moreover, Umbanda also transcends class differences and becomes accessible to anyone regardless of their socio-economic status.

This work is based primarily on my ethnographic research of several months in the Guaracy Temple in Los Angeles, and the Aruanda temple in Torrance, California. I further expand the analyses of scholars like Diana DeG. Brown by observing the development of Umbanda from the local in Brazil to the global within the immigrant community of Brazilians, as well as the non-Brazilian practitioners, in the Los Angeles area. My research touches new grounds by analyzing how Umbanda also retains its Africanism or may renegotiate certain aspects of its practice once it is established abroad. How does the faith preserve a counter discourse to racial and class inequality outside of the context of Brazil?

In the first chapter I explore the philosophical and theoretical grounds of Umbanda and in particular its origins in Candomblé and Allan Kardec’s spiritism. In fact, in order to fully understand the development and impact of Umbanda in the modern world one must first analyze the several religious philosophies upon which Umbanda was created. Some followers believe

⁴ *ibid* xxxiii

that Umbanda is the only true Brazilian church as it represents the complexity of the Brazilian population, including elements of Candomblé', which is the Afro Brazilian religion of the slaves from Bahia, French Spiritism, Catholicism, Native Brazilian spirits worship, as well as some aspects of Hinduism, Buddhism, and in some rare cases even Jewish Kabbalah. In this chapter I analyze the importance of the Orixas the ancestral spirits or energies of nature that assume anthropomorphic characteristics, and are venerated through the music and, in particular, the drum beats of Candomblé'. Harding claims that after the dehumanization process of slavery Candomblé' is able to reconnect Afro Brazilians to their African heritage. Moreover, the failure of Brazilian politics of whitening encourages a mestiço and Afro Brazilian identity as the Brazilian national identity, opening the path for greater acceptance and social promotion of practices like Candomblé', samba, and capoeira. In fact, while these Afro Brazilian practices were initially persecuted by the white elite and their law enforcement, they gradually expanded from the rural areas of Bahia into the urban areas of Brazil, and became symbols of Brasilidade (all things Brazilian). Umbanda is created in the early 1900's and retains many important elements of Candomblé'. The achievement of a trance state and the evocation of the spirits are common to both doctrines as well as the celebration of the Orixas. However, the Afro Brazilian identity of Umbanda coexists with a new European element consisting in the French spiritism of Allan Kardec. The European practice, however, creates a dichotomy of both acceptance and rejection in the narrative of Umbanda. In fact, a group of Kardecists seems to have created the first Umbanda group in Brazil but their intention is to abolish certain aspect of Kardec's practice that they envision as exclusionary of the lower classes. While in the spiritual dimension the seven lines of spirits dictate a certain hierarchy of spiritual relevance Umbanda opens a space for the spirits that Kardecists consider lower spirits like the Pretos Velhos, and the Caboclos. This

fundamental difference opens the doors for cultural acceptance of diversity and creates closeness between the spirits and the experience and sufferings of the lower class of Brazilians, and in particular the racially oppressed groups.

In chapter 2 the Caboclos assume a central role in the institution of Umbanda. The spirit of a Caboclo first appears to a fervent Kardecist to dictate the guidelines of the Umbanda faith, and the incorporation of the Caboclos is fundamental to all mediums of Umbanda. I investigate the origins of the term according to the Umbanda center in Brazil-Reino da Nana Buruque, and delineate the historical significance of the actual Caboclo population in Brazil. Some Umbanda practitioners that I interviewed interpret the Caboclo not as spirits of Indigenous people but as an archetype of purity and courage connected to Mother Earth. This interpretation, I argue, is problematic in that it echoes the concept of the “Noble Savage” promoted by Rousseau and Voltaire in their representation of the New World.

In my third chapter I analyze the aspect of Afro Brazilian resistance in Umbanda which is the central argument of this work. Resistance assumes many forms. Nicklas regards Umbanda as a victim of religious discrimination, first by the Catholic Church and then the new Christian churches which oppose its very existence. Hanchard contends that, as a consequence of the politics of whitening in Brazil in the 1930’s and 1940’s, the middle class rejected the practices of Umbanda, Macumba or Candomble⁵. He also compares Umbanda and Candomble to the function of the Black churches in United States and criticizes the Afro Brazilian institutions for failing to fulfill the same function. He contends that because those churches have recently attracted many white Brazilians their function and content has become focused on a national

⁵ Michael Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994) 105.

discourse rather than racially specific.⁶ Among the working classes, however, I argue for the importance of the Afro Brazilian churches as practices of diasporic memory and modern resistance against white hegemonic powers. It is not a coincidence that Umbanda became very popular with about 80,000 centers in Brazil while the Civil Right Movement in United States was promoting expressions of black pride and fight for equality. Although Umbanda has been victim of politics of whitening it has retained its Afro Brazilian elements and together with Candomble' terreiros has a very effective social function as a communal space for Afro Brazilians. I support my argument with E. Franklin Frazier research who contends that unlike Black Americans, Afro Brazilian are able to maintain a greater element of African culture in their everyday life, and that such Africanism survives in practices like Candomble⁷.

In chapter 4, I report my findings during my several months of ethnographic research at the Umbanda centers of Guaracy in Los Angeles and Portal de Aruanda in Torrance. The two centers are situated only 15 miles from each other, and although they share common theoretical and philosophical grounds they also display many differences in the practice of Umbanda proving that within the movement there is a great space for heterodoxy. I conduct interviews with the leaders of both centers, the musicians involved in the ceremonies, other mediums and general practitioners. I analyze the meaning of Umbanda in Los Angeles not only as a form of resistance for the Afro Brazilian community but also as a form of cultural preservation and renegotiation of identity for the whole Brazilian community of immigrants. I also explore how the inclusive and syncretic nature of Umbanda allows the creation of a safe space of transcendence, where non- Brazilians also find a new way to express their spirituality. As an

⁶ Ibid., 83.

⁷ E. Franklin Frazier, "The Negro Family in Bahia, Brazil," *American Sociology Review*, Vol , No.4 (1942) 466.

ethnomusicologist I feel compelled to offer a synthetic account of the function of music in the two centers by interviewing an Umbanda percussionist, who explains in detail the application and quality of certain rhythm patterns, and creating a brief overview of the common features in the Umbanda ceremonial songs also known as “pontos”.

Finally, I describe my own experience with Umbanda, my participant observation and my experience as an apprentice medium. Even if Umbanda multicultural theoretical core is not politically per se’ it automatically opposes the fallacious terrain of Brazil racial democracy, by both transcending identity claims and affirming them with the celebration of Afro Brazilian culture around the world. In a certain way Umbanda counteracts the dominant culture by elevating the plan of action from the earthly human affairs to a totally different spiritual world, where spirits are not recognized by their previous human appearance or place of origin but by their essence and character. At the same time the rituals send a compelling message of enrichment that comes from cultural diversity. The African cults assimilate the language of European spiritism without altering the African cosmogony, in this manner “Umbanda gained a body of doctrine, more or less defined but extremely eclectic, based both on African traditions and other traditional "schools.”⁸ However, in no way this work pretends to satisfy every requirement or aspect of such practice, and even less to create general assumptions about it. My intention is to leave space to the individual experience of Umbanda, and to the communal value of its practice as a powerful leveler of social and racial inequality.

⁸ Michael A. Nicklas, “Mythology Knowledge, and Power: An Examination of Social Forces in Brazil and the Emergence of Umbanda” (Indiana University Folklore Forum 23:1/2 1990) 87.

Chapter 1: Candomblé and French Spiritism

One of the most popular African traditions that influence Umbanda is Candomblé, which is a religious practice that was imported by the Yoruba people of West Africa to Brazil during the slave trade, and initially developed in the state of Bahia. Bahia is located in the northeast of Brazil and its capital is Salvador da Bahia de Todos os Santos, commonly known as Salvador. It is often called the capital of black Brazil because of its demographic and cultural context, and historically it was the Brazilian colonial capital and main depot for slave ships.

The state of Bahia is known in the world for being the cradle of Afro Brazilian cultural expressions such as samba, Candomblé and capoeira. However, more recently Bahia has been criticized because blacks' engagement with civil rights is very limited, and any racially conscious movement is considered divisive by the white elite. In Salvador about 80% of the population is black or of mixed race, and none of the 35 city council members is black. In the past few decades the white elite population has maintained control over the most important positions in society, and reinforced a discourse of low self-esteem within the population of African ancestry. The denial of racism in the state of Bahia is a reflection of racial democracy, and the necessity of creating more racial consciousness is imperative.⁹

Dixon and Burdick argue that the production of knowledge is a crucial element in the process of empowerment of oppressed groups. Nationalism and essentialism hinder the struggle for recognition of those groups and often discrimination is present even within the same black

⁹ James Brooke, "Bahia Journal; If It's 'Black Brazil,' Why Is the Elite so White? (New York Times 1991). <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/09/24/world/bahia-journal-if-it-s-black-brazil-why-is-the-elite-so-white.html>

community. For instance, because of evolutionists' theories often the Yoruba culture has been considered superior to the Bantu culture. Sociologist Freyre associates Yoruba with a greater capacity of political organization and resistance against the whites, while the Bantu are considered more submissive.¹⁰ In the last decades more emphasis has been placed on the Bantu cultural organizations, including Candomble' terreiros.¹¹ An example of the preservation movement of the Bantu culture is the project ACBANTU which aims to recover the Bantu languages spoken in Brazil.¹²

Candomble' terreiros have historically functioned as sites of resistance, mobilization, and mutual aid practices for enslaved and their descendants. The term African nations was at first used to indicate specific ethnic origins of certain Candomble' groups, however, it is used nowadays "...to claim a social identity constructed within the terreiros."¹³

In Brazil such Afro-Brazilian rites and music practices, together with the secular equivalent of samba, were first persecuted by the slave owners, and later by the white elite, in the attempt to erase any trace of Africanism from the Brazilian society. After manumission the fascination of Brazil with European culture increased, however, the same elite that rejected Candomble' and samba eventually legitimized them, appropriated them and then elevated them to national symbols. In the early 1900' early politics of whitening failed to succeed in Brazil where the highest percentage of the population is of African or Indigenous origins. Thus, the

¹⁰ Kwame Dixon and John Burdick, *Comparative Perspectives on Afro-Latin America*.(Gainesville: University Press of Florida 2012) 24.

¹¹ Ibid, 25.

¹² Ibid, 26.

¹³ Ibid, 23.

white and mestizo elite elevated the traditions of the oppressed groups to a national symbol, and practices like Candomblé were included in a discourse of *Brasilidade*.¹⁴ At the same time, the music and African practices of capoeira, Candomblé and samba also allowed the oppressed groups to find an alternative space for social utopia, an escape from reality where they could find pride and freedom to express their heritage, and the ritual of remembering through music and prayers persisted as an expression of resistance against the white dominant society.

Therefore, in Brazil the memory of a diasporic identity lays between the sacred and the secular activities, and the creation of a Candomblé community becomes a response to the dehumanization of blacks, where people find alternative meanings to their existence.

The music and dance of Candomblé offers a direct connection to Africa by recreating a syncretic identity that include not only the Yoruba, but also the traditions of many groups of slaves who arrive in Brazil from different regions of Africa, including the Bantu as I mentioned earlier. Candomblé is also a reinvention of Africa in a new context, similar to the establishment of New Orleans Haitian Vodoo, and Cuban Santería. Eventually such heritage of diasporic memory becomes part of the Brazilian cultural space, and with the increasing popularity of the religion many non-blacks also found interest in the practice, and got initiated as members of the *terreiros*¹⁵. Brazilians of any color and religious beliefs commonly refer to the fundamental concept of *axe*, the vital energy that is present in any living thing, and that derives from the Yoruba culture of West Africa. Among the Yoruba the combination of music and religion is present in every aspect of life, and humans are part of the universal system of nature and creative energy. Harding argues that while black families have been separated and torn apart by the slave

¹⁴ All things Brazilian.

¹⁵ Candomblé centers.

trade Candomble’ “...reestablishes connections of kin by reviving the ethnic alliance and shared devotion to the African gods.”¹⁶ Moreover, the syncretic world of Candomble’ provides an alternative identity of a Pan-American blackness where the past and the present fuse together in what Harding calls the “mutual embrace of humanity and the sharing of joys and sorrow”¹⁷.

Thus, the drums become a symbol of such community who treats them with special care, constructs them and cherishes them as living beings, and often even gives them human names. The instruments evoke the power of axe’ and have therefore spiritual qualities¹⁸. Similar to the concept of the talking drums in Africa, Candomble’ drums are used as a way to communicate and to give a voice to the Orixas¹⁹, therefore, drummers are also regarded as divine intercessors of axe’. Moreover, the songs and the combination of multiple forms of performance such as dance, clapping, stumping and the use of Yoruba words are also used to create axe’. The practitioners dance, sing and make offers to the pantheon of Orixas, the ancestral spirits that the Creator Olodumare’ governs. Because Olodumare’ is a more remote and less approachable entity than the other Orixas, he can be contacted only through lesser deities or Orixas who have their own specific personalities and human characteristics. The concept of lower rank spirits interceding between men and the Creator is also found in Umbanda, as well as the concept that music and dance must reflect the personalities of the spirits. In fact, both in Umbanda and Candomble’ the music channels axe’, the energy that keeps the connection between the visible

¹⁶ E. Rachel Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder Candomble’ and Alternative Spaces of Blackness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2003) 5.

¹⁷ Ibid, 6.

¹⁸ Bernard Clarence Henry, *Let’s Make Some Noise-Axe’ and the African Roots of Brazilian Popular Music*.(Jackson: University Press of Mississippi 2008) 29-30.

¹⁹ The anthropomorphic representations of the spirits of nature.

and the invisible²⁰. Moreover, the veneration of the Orixas often overlapped with the faith in the Catholic saints because syncretism was a survivor's tool, in fact, the slaves recreated a syncretic religion which allowed the Afro Brazilian tradition to survive the persecution of the white society. Therefore, Candomblé' was established within a new syncretic framework that reconnected Afro Brazilians to Africa, and integrated the Western religious expressions of Brazil. Nowadays Candomblé' is so part of the common narrative of each Brazilian that even non- believers often appeal to the energy of axe' in order to have prosperity and to realize their goals.

After manumission when the black Brazilians migrate from Bahia to the urban areas of cities like Rio de Janeiro their Candomblé' became Macumba, a controversial faith that was associated to black magic, which is a stigma often attributed to African religious practices. Bastide claims that Macumba is the: "...disintegrative phase of African culture at the hands of modern capitalism"²¹. This practice was highly persecuted by the law in the beginning of the twentieth century, during the period of the aforementioned politics of whitening which attempted to hide and destroy any trace of Africanism from the Brazilian society. Because it was often associated to the worship of the evil, there are very few sources that contain information about Macumba however, Brown claims that its contribution to Umbanda is undeniable.

On the other end Umbanda draws on Kardecism, also known as Espiritismo²², a religion migrated from France to Brazil. While Candomblé' is eventually accepted as one of the symbols of Brazil national culture and folklore, Umbanda is not protected by such a romantic image, and

²⁰ Bernard Clarence Henry, *Let's Make Some Noise-Axe' and the African Roots of Brazilian Popular Music*. 26.

²¹ Diana Deg. Brown, *Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil* 26

²² Spiritism.

as an example of religious innovation is initially considered a threat to Brazil identity. Umbanda constitutes a change in class relations, portrayed as a spontaneous expression of the lower class to create more equality and solidarity, and represents: “the capacity to express change.”²³

Its roots in Kardecism allow people to find comfort that comes from another dimension, in fact Kardecism has as a central point of its practice the invocation of the spirits. In 1855 a schoolteacher and spiritualist from Paris began to receive messages from the spirit of a Druid that identified himself as Allan Kardec. The Druid eventually suggested the contents of several books ordering the writer to use exclusively Kardec’s name as a pseudonym²⁴. The intent of the work is to educate people about the spiritual world and the three elements that constitute a human being: the soul that is an incarnated spirit, the material body that is only its material envelope, and the perispirit which is a spiritual envelope²⁵. More specifically the body of humans is the material being that is animated by the same vital principles that one finds in animals; the soul is the spirit incarnated in the body; the perispirit is the link which unites the soul and the body, an intermediary between matter and spirit, sort of a semi-material envelope. According to Kardec death is only the destruction of the material body, and the spirit preserves his other envelope, the perispirit, which constitutes an ethereal body. The perispirit is invisible to humans in a normal state, but occasionally may become visible, and even tangible in the case in apparitions²⁶. Another important concept that Umbanda assimilates from Kardec is the belief that there is a hierarchy of spirits:

²³ Ibid,8

²⁴ Allan Kardec, *The Spirits Book* (Brasilia: Federação Espirita Brasileira Departamento Editorial 1996) 9-12

²⁵ Ibid, 32

²⁶ Ibid, 32

“Spirits belong to different classes, and are not equal to one another either in power, in intelligence, in knowledge, or in morality. Those of the highest order are distinguished from those below them by their superior purity and knowledge, their closeness to God, and their love of goodness; they are "angels" or "pure spirits."²⁷

The lower rank spirits are instead more distant from perfection, inclined to more human-like passions like hatred, envy, jealousy, and pride for instance, and some of them take pleasure in evil. Between the two extremes, the good and the bad, there are other spirits who are not evil but are considered giddy and foolish spirits because they can be malicious and may trouble men.

However, unlike the Christian conception of Heaven and Hell, spirits do not belong perpetually to the same order: “All are destined to attain perfection by passing through the different degrees of the spirit-hierarchy”²⁸. The way that a spirit improves its status is by incarnation, which can either be an expiation, or a mission. In fact, material life is considered both a trial and a filter, and the spirits have to undergo such experience many times until they have reached closeness to God and the absolute perfection. However, this type of incarnation, unlike the concept of incarnation in Oriental faiths, always occurs within the human race, never in the body of an animal. Also a spirit is always evolving in a progressive manner and never retrogrades as Kardec inform us that: “...the rapidity of our progress depends on the efforts we make to arrive at perfection.”²⁹ The spirits who are not incarnated are all around us, they constitute an invisible population and they are everywhere. Spirits are also constantly in relation with men. The good ones try to lead us into the right direction, help us and support us through

²⁷ Ibid, 32

²⁸ Ibid, 33

²⁹ Ibid, 33

the pain and sufferance of life, while the bad spirits tempt them to act in evil ways : “... it is a pleasure for them to see us fall, and to make us like themselves.”³⁰ A very important point is that, unlike Catholicism where illness may be attributed to outside or supernatural causes, Kardecists believe that such pains are a result of the person’s past lives, or the actions of lower rank spirits who are suffering and disturbing human beings. If a human conducts an immoral life or is ignorant about the spirit world he may become ill. According to Kardec there is a way to distinguish bad and good spirits, as he argues that the language of spirits of superior elevation is always noble, moral, free from every human passion:

“... their counsels breathe the purest wisdom, and always have our improvement and the good of mankind for their aim. The communications of spirits of lower degree, on the contrary, are full of discrepancies, and their language is often commonplace, and even coarse.”³¹

As a consequence, Kardec’s followers only evoke elevated spirits of scientists, famous historical figures, artists, doctors, politicians, and anyone whom they consider of higher rank and enlighten. Inevitably such hierarchy is influenced by: “...the nineteenth century evolutionists’ concepts of levels of cultural development. Chinese, Egyptian, Aztec, Inca are considered highly evolved, while spirits of Africans and of Indigenous Brazilians are often categorically considered to be ignorant and inferior on the basis of the imputed inferiority of their cultures.”³²

Such hierarchy will be fundamental in order to understand the different messages and social impact of Umbanda. In fact, its origins are most likely connected to a group Kardecists

³⁰ Ibid, 34

³¹ Ibid, 35

³² Diana DeG Brown, *Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil 20*

who were tired of such spiritual and cultural discrimination, and wished to create an inclusive faith that would blend Kardecism and Afro Brazilian religions. As a consequence, the practitioners welcomed the spirits of the African slaves that they identified as Pretos Velhos, as well as the West African belief in the Orixas which requires very African derived rituals that sometimes differ, and sometimes overlap the ones of Santeria or Candomble’.

The narrative of a spirit’s guidance and revelation to humans is fundamental in Kardec’s guidelines of spiritism. In a similar way the myth of the origins of Umbanda is engraved in the communication between the human and the spiritual world, whereas a spirit becomes the theoretical founder of the practice, but also a guide to Zelio de Moraes, the practical founder of the religion. According to the narrative Zelio lived in the city of Niteroi and practiced Kardec religion within his community. One day he became very sick, and no medicine or doctor was able to improve his condition. Therefore, his father, who was also a fervent Kardecist, brought him to a Spiritism center to receive a consultation. In that instance Zelio was visited by the spirit of a Jesuit priest who informed him that his illness was not physical but spiritual. He also told him that he was destined to begin a new spiritual mission under the directions of his spirit guide, who will appear to him in the near future. The fact that the first spirit to appear to Zelio is a Jesuit priest is indicative of the importance of the Catholic Church and its approval for Umbanda members. However, Zelio’s spirit guide was a Caboclo,³³ and therefore one of those spirits who would have been rejected by traditional Kardecists. Zelio was cured and received many visits from the Caboclo das Sete Encruzilhadas (the Caboclo of the Seven Crossroads) who became his mentor and instructed him about the new religion. He suggested that the name of the spiritual practice should be Umbanda, then he contended that the faith will restore the value of the Pretos

³³ Spirit of a Native Brazilian.

Velhos and Caboclos, and will represent the diversity that constitutes the Brazilian culture. Eventually the Caboclo announced that he will be the spirit guide of the founding church, the Alma Mater, and taught rituals and ceremonies to his followers.³⁴

Therefore, the devotees of Umbanda abandoned the spirits of the Kardec practice and above all:” ...their long lectures in doctrine and the limited range of their spiritual curing and advice.”³⁵ Many Kardecists preferred to follow the spirits and the new ceremonies of Umbanda, that are similar to the ones found in Macumba³⁶, because they considered them more exciting, and more capable to treat a wide range of illnesses. However, the concepts of Christian humility and charity are also fundamental to the new spiritual group as a mean to achieve spiritual evolution³⁷. The Earth is a temporary residence for lower rank spirits that are going through their incarnations and spiritual journey, and the Caboclos and Pretos Velhos are able to return to visit this planet evoked by the Umbanda ceremonies. The spirits who are excluded from those ceremonies are the evil ones who live in the underworld, and often come to the Earth just to disrupt human beings’ lives. Often the Caboclos and the Pretos Velhos have the mission to undo their mischiefs. The underworld is also the reign of Exu’, syncretized into the devil, and the forces of Quimbanda³⁸, which is considered African sorcery. Quimbanda and its black magic is the opposite of Umbanda which is only oriented towards healing human beings. God is

³⁴ Diana DeG Brown, *Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil* 38-39

³⁵ Ibid, 40

³⁶ The term Macumba has an “...acquired meaning as a generic reference to diverse practices...the persisting confusion concerning “Macumba” is partly a result of the folkloric bias against eclectic Afro-Brazilian religions” Ibid, 25

³⁷ Ibid, 21

³⁸ Ibid, 44

considered a distant creator who overlooks the spiritual world. Right under Him all the spirits are organized in a hierarchy based upon the number seven. In fact, there are seven lines of Umbanda lead by powerful characters. The first line is occupied by Jesus and Oxala' who, according to Candomble', is the father of the sky and the creator of human bodies. On the second line Xango', the African Orixá of fire and justice and his Catholic equivalent St. Jerome; Ogum the god of metal and his equivalent St. George on the third; the Orixá of the forest Oxossi and Saint Sebastian on the fourth; Yemanjá' the Orixá of salty water syncretized in the Virgin Mary on the fifth; Oxum the Orixá of fresh water and Santa Barbara on the sixth; Yansa' the African deity of storms is often on the seventh line, but in some instances this line has no African divinities and it is occupied by St. Michael. Sometimes the presence of spirits within the level lines may vary according to the Umbanda center, and in the more Kardecist oriented groups some African entities may be substituted for more Oriental characters called the "Oriental Line" or a "Children Line". Caboclos and Pretos Velhos are among the lower ranks of these seven lines, and the latter often constitute the "Linea Africana" or African Line, not referred to as Orixás but as spirits of the slaves. Pretos Velhos are considered less elevated than Caboclos simply because they have died more recently. Furthermore, the Orixás and the Catholic Saints are regarded as the highest level of entities, however, because they are so evolved, and already so close to God that they will never return to Earth. Therefore, lower rank spirits like the Caboclos and the Pretos Velhos are the most important intermediaries between human beings and higher spiritual entities. Their mission is to identify the cause of human problems and to prescribe cures for them.³⁹

³⁹ Ibid, 54-63

Chapter 2: *The Caboclos in Umbanda*



Umbanda members believe that the spirit of a Caboclo suggested the rules and values of Umbanda, and that the Caboclos also represent the other face of non-European Brazil, and the independence of those who never experienced slavery, therefore they are considered more free, proud, vigorous and warrior spirits.

During my interview with Rodney De Assis, an active member and musician of the Umbanda center in Torrance, he contends that the Caboclos are archetypes of justice and strength who are connected to the forest, however, they do not live on Earth but in the spiritual world, and come to Earth to help us:

“The Indigenous spirits do not have malice, they may do something bad but not with the same intentions that we have. In the Indigenous culture there is no envy, there is purity, they naturally evolve like a tree that grows. They are not corrupted by the way of living of the city people.”⁴⁰

This description inevitably echoes the Enlightenment idea of the Noble Savage, that is rooted in the work of French philosophers like Rousseau and Voltaire as a critique to the French society. This concept branches out into the English intellectuals as a mean to motivate social change, and contributes to the sentiment of the French and American Revolutions. Rousseau contends that the natural man is free and lives in a state of elevated purity because he has not been touched by civilization:

“Natural freedom is the only object of the polity of the savages; with this freedom do nature and climate rule alone amongst them. . . . They maintain their freedom and find abundant nourishment . . . people who live without laws, ‘without policy, without religion.’⁴¹

Such idea reinforces the admiration for Native American communities that contributes to shape the principles of the American democracy, however, it does not impede the physical and cultural genocide of those same communities. Ironically, Americans appropriated Native Americans’ culture to shape their policies and identity but never really credited them for it because they believed in their racial superiority.

⁴⁰ Rodney D’Assis, (Personal Interview Culver City 2017).

⁴¹Jean Jacques Rousseau, cited in J.H. Kennedy, *Jesuit and Savage in New France*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press 1950) 187.

Ultimately, Forbes contends that many European Americans in the 1700's detached themselves from their European heritage and "... adopted democratic and environmentalist tendencies."⁴² Of course the Noble Savage is a product of stereotypes and imagination, however, the thought process behind it is real and indicative of the principles and sentiment upon which the society of the New World was molded.

In Latin America the situation appeared similar for the Indigenous people. Samson and Gigoux confirm that "... the colonial control of Indigenous people did not end with the proclamations of independence"⁴³. Eventually the creole elites that was excluded from important positions within the colonies became the main leader of the revolution, and struggled for independence from the European colonizers. During this effort the appeal of a mythical Indigenous societies such as the Azteca, the Incas, and the Araucanos became the symbol of resistance against the Spanish and the Portuguese oppressors, and represented an idea of freedom and dignity. However, such idealized past only vaguely relates to Umbanda because, although this religion partially reflects an Enlightenment idea of Indigenous knowledge, freedom, and harmony with the natural world, it also transcends it because those spirits are only archetypes of purity, justice, and moral conduct, and do not necessarily come from an Indigenous community in their past life. The Caboclos may be considered a national signifier of the Brazilian multiethnic culture, however, the way that Umbanda identifies the spirits as Caboclos does not necessarily relate to the ethnicity of their last incarnation, rather to their characteristics of strength and purity. Moreover, those spirits represent the vigor of the adult phase of life and

⁴² Jack D. Forbes, "Americanism is the Answer" (Akwasasne Notes, Vol.VI, No.1 1974) 37

⁴³ Colin Samson, Carlos Gigoux, *Indigenous Peoples and Colonialism: Global Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2017) 60.

motivate humans to be warriors in life, and activists who fight for justice in our society.

Depending on the Umbanda center the practice of the Caboclos may differ, and they may be associated to several Orixas. Often they are connected to Oxossi, who is the Orixá of the forest. In some Afro Brazilian religious centers the Caboclos are considered magic, and they have such a direct relationship to nature that they receive names of plants or animals. This perception finds its roots in the Indigenous legends describing how in a remote past animals and humans could talk to each other, lived in the same community, and they were even able to transform in each other living forms.

The term Caboclo derive from the Tupi word *kariuoka*, which means the one with copper skin.⁴⁴ In a second moment Brazilians began to use such word to indicate mixed blood Indians, also known as *mestiços*. Modern Caboclos as an ethnic group in Brazil have their own historical past and their specific identity. Eugene Parker contends that "...the cabloco is an outcome of the colonization of the Amazon by the Portuguese invaders."⁴⁵ Such colonization acted in different ways to control and annihilate the Indigenous people among which intermarriage. In fact, in 1755 the Portuguese law was greatly encouraging white European men and women to marry Amerindians. The Portuguese King promised the children of those unions not only to be worthy of the "Royal attention", but also to have prime access to the most important positions within the government of the colonies. Interestingly the decree never referred to its beneficiaries as "Caboclos", since the term was considered offensive, and therefore never used in the official vocabulary of the government. The Caboclos were considered the assimilated indigenous people,

⁴⁴ C.E.U. Reino de Nana' Buruque, "Linha de Caboclos Na Umbanda"2014.<http://ceureinodenanaburuque.blogspot.com/2014/06/linha-de-caboclosnaumbanda.html>

⁴⁵ Cristina Adams, Rui Murrieta, Walter Neves, Mark Harris editors, *Amazon Peasant Societies in a Changing Environment*. (Sao Paulo. Springer Science+Business Media 2009) 70.

and therefore the opposite of the Noble Savage ideal, because they were the “tamed” by the whites. Furthermore, they were also labeled as ignorant and poor coming from the rural Indigenous community of the Rio Negro.

Thus, the Portuguese government institutionalized the invisibility of the Caboclo community by eliminating such term from its documents, making it harder for historians to trace their political and social presence in the country. White Brazilians perpetrated a cultural genocide so common in the history of Native nations, and white colonizers considered them simply Brazilians of mixed blood. In reality those communities share a common culture, a common attachment to their land, as well as their ability to use natural resources without depleting it. Parker argues that in the 1970’s and 1980’s there is a second conquest of the Caboclos by the Brazilian military regime that pushes this rural population towards the urban areas, and creates a cultural detachment from their own ways of life. In the work Amazon Paesant Societies in a Changing Environment the author argues that term caboclo is used as a demeaning term, as noted by Wagley and Galvao in the 1950s. However, the caboclos of the Transamazon Highway are “...gifted resource managers.”⁴⁶ They know how to cultivate the land, hunt and use technology better than the non-Indigenous farmers in the area. Similar to the American people a few centuries earlier who failed to recognize the contribution of Native Americans in their democratic policies and society, Brazilian farmers also refuse to learn from them because they consider the Caboclos racially inferior. In fact, white Brazilians label them as poor and uneducated folk, therefore they rarely recognize their merit and skills. Furthermore,

⁴⁶ Ibid, viii.

they often exclude them from the benefits of the global markets interest in the resources of their land, like the cultivation of acai or the beef export, for instance.

Ironically enough Brazil holds national festivities celebrating the Caboclo identity such as the Dia Do Caboclo (The Day of the Caboclo) on June 24th that is a public holiday in the State of Amazonas⁴⁷; and Dia do Indio (Indian Day) on April 19th that celebrates all Indigenous people. President Getulio Vargas created this festivity during which Brazil holds many activities that commemorate Indigenous identities. For instance, many students research Indigenous culture in their schools, museums organize related exhibitions and many cities organize commemorative feasts.⁴⁸ Another celebration is Dia do Mestiço (Mixed Race Day) on June 27th which celebrates all people of mixed ethnicities, including the Caboclos.⁴⁹

Umbanda is creating visibility for the Indigenous people of Brazil by including them and their ancestors in its discourse of spiritual practice. However, the presence of a statue of a Native American in a headdress on an Umbanda altar reveals a certain degree of cultural appropriation, therefore I investigate further how and if the presence of the Caboclos in Umbanda contradicts the ideas of indigeneity asserted by the Indigenous peoples of Brazil. My research in that direction has been quite difficult since there are no specific articles or books about such topic. The invisibility of the Indigenous people of Brazil in the country is possibly even greater than for the Indigenous people of North America. I am therefore assuming that the limited voice that the dominant society allows them to have is used for topics that affect their society on a more practical level, like for instance the recent resistance against the construction of the Belo Monte

⁴⁷ Nação Mestiça “24 de Junho: Dia do Caboclo” 2012 <http://nacaomestica.org/blog4/?p=5887>

⁴⁸ SuaPesquisa.com “Dia do Indio” n.d. https://www.suapesquisa.com/datascomemorativas/dia_do_indio.htm

⁴⁹ Nação Mestiça “Voce Sabia que 27 de Junho e’ o Dia do Mestiço?” 2016 <http://nacaomestica.org/blog4/?p=19226>

hydroelectric dam that would create environmental destruction in the State of Para' depleting the fishing supply for the Indigenous population, and cause the forced relocation of thousands of Native groups. Therefore, I almost lost any hope of gathering information about the idea that Native Brazilians may have about the archetype of the Caboclo spirits in Umbanda, when, after several attempts, I finally had the chance to interview a very important person among the Satere Mawe' people from the state of Amazonas. Although one person may not necessarily be enough to express the opinion of several Indigenous groups, I felt very lucky of being able to receive information from a direct source. The name of my interviewee is Luar Satere' Mawe', and he is one of the most important representatives of his tribe. He told me that his name is "Luar"⁵⁰ because he was born in a night with a full moon. His father was from another tribe called the Murah who were eternal enemies of the Satere' Mawe'. Therefore, since his father had run away with his mom they were expecting to have a war, however, his father brought his mom back to give birth to him in the Satere Mawe' village, and his birth created peace between the two tribes. I asked him if he is a chief but he claimed that only women can be chief among his people.

"Women have received from Sahú-Watô⁵¹ the mission to help humans to evolve. The men fish and prepare meals for their women but he claims" If they do not like what we prepared we have to cook it again!"

He claims that his grandmother was a chief who already passed in the Noçokén,⁵² but since she was a powerful leader he is also a very respected member of his tribe. I then asked his opinion

⁵⁰ "Moonlight"

⁵¹ "God"

⁵² "Spiritual World"

about the Caboclos in Umbanda, and I had to explain to him what Umbanda the incarnation of the Caboclos meant in Umbanda because he was not aware of it. He told me at first:

“We do not participate in the cult of the Caboclos, as Indigenous people we have our own set of spiritual beliefs that have nothing to do with any church”

However, after a few more questions I realized that his idea of the spiritual world is incredibly similar to the concept of the body as an envelope of the spirit that Kardec presents. In fact, he contends:

“ The relation with the spirits is a constant aspect of our life. In my opinion when one talks about religion or religious ideology humanity gets always lost. In our culture the relation with the spirits is so common like the one with any living human being. The only difference is if the spirits are with or without their clothes, which is the body”

As the interview continued I also realized that my first connection to the idea of the “Noble Savage” was not totally arbitrary:

Me: “When Umbanda members incarnate the spirits of Caboclos they consider them an archetype of Brazilian Indigenous culture, they inspired them because of their courage and resistance against the colonizers, and because they symbolize the contact and harmony with nature”

Luar: “ An archetype of the Brazilian Indigenous culture ? What a crazy concept! They can’t generalize, there are more than 400 Indigenous nations in Brazil. When one talks about Indigenous culture must know to which nation he is referring to, instead of including everybody under one idea. We do not communicate with the spirits because we think that they symbolize the contact with nature, we always communicate with them just

like I am communicating with you. Everyone we talk to is a spirit, I am a spirit, you are a spirit”

In his following statement I noticed that the Umbanda idea of spirits who are guides for humans is similar among the Satere Mawe’.

Luar:

“There are spirits who follow you, why don’t you talk to them?”⁵³

Although cultural appropriation, and a stereotypical idea of indigeneity taint the Umbanda theoretical contents, the final goal of the religion is not to appropriate somebody else’s tradition but to honor it and to create a multicultural space, as a religion of acceptance where different cultural symbolism can coexist in peace. The message of Umbanda in a certain way may even rehabilitate the term Caboclo that is no longer a stigma of inferiority, but a word that indicates the highest spirituality, a word and a culture to venerate and celebrate. Umbanda represents a connection to the other dimension and includes diverse symbols because religious syncretism is a very prominent feature of Brazilian culture as a whole. The role of the Caboclos and other spirits in Umbanda may also be understood through music and specific ceremonies. It is fundamental to understand that the identity of the spirits corresponds to the nature of their essence, rather than their former human identity. For instance, some spirits identify as Caboclos may have never been Indigenous people, but they share common characteristics with Indigenous people like their close relationship with nature, together with the romanticized characteristics that whites attribute to them.

⁵³ Luar Satere Mawe’ “Personal Interview Online” 2018.

Rodney D'Assis explains in detail how the music of the Caboclo spirits matches those characteristics. First he claims that his role as a musician and as a medium in Umbanda is very specific. In fact, he never incorporates spirits in a traditional way. Therefore, the Umbanda center of Portal de Aruanda considers him a medium of stability because he balances the energy of the ceremony with his music, while all the other mediums incorporate. He claims that he is almost like a guardian together with other three or four people in the center who have the same role. They reach a conscious trance state: "I feel the vibrations of the energy in my body but I do not lose consciousness."⁵⁴ He claims that in Umbanda the rhythm for the Orixas are much more specific than the ones used for entities like the Caboclos. Rodney also confirms that the Caboclos are archetypes of justice and strength who are connected to the forest, however, they do not live on Earth but in the spiritual world and come to Earth to help us. Since during my visits the Umbanda community in Torrance appears mostly composed of white Brazilians I am curious to know from him if there are Indigenous Brazilians frequenting his center, and how many Afro Brazilians usually attend the ceremonies. Rodney explains that for Afro Brazilians is more difficult to move to the US because they come from the poorer portion of the population, therefore it is much harder for them to obtain a visa and the money to travel. I am assuming that although the Caboclos represent the percentage of Indigenous in the Brazilian population, because Indigenous people have their own beliefs, and Native Brazilians of mixed blood tend not to identify themselves as Indigenous people, it is difficult to have an account of it. The statue of the Caboclo on the altar does not represent directly the Indigenous people as a community, the image refers to a spiritual Caboclo, it symbolizes the energy of the forest. Moreover, spirits like the Caboclos have access to human beings and communicate with them, while the Orixas do not

⁵⁴ Rodney D'Assis, "Personal Interview" (Culver City 2017).

directly communicate with them because they are not spirits, they are the energy related to different points on Earth.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Ibid, 2017

Chapter 3: *Umbanda: Afro Brazilian resistance and hermeneutics of the practice*



The challenge of multicultural societies like Brazil is the coexistence of diverse groups all claiming the right to be different within the same geopolitical space, and the need to be recognized creates friction. The shortcoming of Brazilian racial democracy in solving racial issues is so evident that race discrimination is present in the consciousness of both whites and blacks, regardless of their class status. In the mid sixteenth century Indigenous people were providing a slave labor system to Brazil early colonists, however, most of them resisted and were exterminated by the Portuguese, while others escaped into the heart of the Amazonia. Therefore, the Portuguese needed more slaves to support their economy, and they imported to Brazil the largest number of African slaves in the Americas. Their free labor created a competitive economy in the production and trade of sugar and coffee for much longer than any other nation in the Americas, in fact, Brazil was the last country to abolish slavery in 1888.

After manumission Brazil, and more widely Latin America, indulged in politics of whitening echoing scientific racism and social Darwinism in Europe, Jim Crow segregation in United States South, and the beginning of Apartheid in Africa. Those politics were implemented in many ways, including offering incentives to European immigrants who moved to Brazil. The tensions between European immigrants and Afro Brazilians often resorted to violence because the first ones had better jobs opportunities and better salaries, while blacks were systematically excluded and discriminated against. In the 1930's the Great Depression affected the economy of Brazil and in particular the export of goods, and the national societies abandoned the European model and found inspiration in their multiracial political and cultural movements.

What Andrews describes as the "war on blackness" was also carried against all things Afro Brazilian such as capoeira, samba, and African derived religions. Capoeira was outlawed by a federal statute in 1890, and in Rio de Janeiro the police arrested more than 600 suspected

capoeiristas, and sent them to a penal colony. Most of capoeira groups were eliminated from all cities except from Salvador where such persecution continued until the 1930's. This war targeted also the Afro Brazilian religions like Candomblé and Macumba, whose leaders were of African descents but they had started to attract a large number of white practitioners. Therefore, the persecution was not motivated by the alleged aggressions against whites, which they were falsely publicized in the newspapers, but by the appeal that those religions had on whites.⁵⁶

The politics of whitening also affected middle class blacks who became concerned with politics of respectability. African based practices were associated with the poor of the favelas, as a consequence those Afro Brazilians eager to be accepted by the dominant society internalized those derogatory labels, rejected those practices, and embraced the European culture.⁵⁷

In first decades of 1900's post manumission Brazil became interested in defusing racial tensions by promoting the idea of racial democracy. Sociologist Gilberto Freyre is considered the most important contributor to the concept of racial democracy, in fact, he concluded that Brazil should embrace miscegenation as a maker of a stronger race, and that race mixing was enriching the country rather than slowing its progress down. Racial democracy contributed to politics of browning in the creation of a new national identity. Moreover, the Afro Brazilian population grew more rapidly than the white population.⁵⁸ A research shows that Afro Brazilians started to reclassify themselves as "brown" instead of blacks, and in 1980's a percentage of people who had classified themselves as white also identified as brown.⁵⁹ Racial democracy was possible

⁵⁶ George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America 1800-2000*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004) 122.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 124.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 154.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 157.

because of the extension of civil and legal equality for free blacks and mulattoes. However, Brazil continues to function upon a system of patronage and clientelism which maintains barriers of discriminations and impedes the advancement of blacks.⁶⁰ The idea of racial democracy was associated with the rise of labor-based populism which allowed the African derived practices of capoeira, samba, and Candomble' to be rehabilitated as new national symbols, as well as the most authentic expressions of national uniqueness.⁶¹ The leaders of Afro Brazilian artistic and religious forms perceived that the acceptance of their practices was an improvement compared to the earlier persecution, therefore they accepted the label of nationalism. However, as Andrews contends often nationalizing a resource also means that the group who created it no longer controls it.⁶²

Umbanda originated in the 1920's in Brazil and became even more popular than Candomble' in the 1980's with about 20 million followers.⁶³ During this period the inability of populist movements to deliver their promises to black and whites became evident, however, the re-Africanization of Brazil was occurring all over the country, and in particular in Salvador where during the Carnaval new African groups, known as Afro-Blocos, appeared and adopted African names, outfits, percussions and thematic.

Regardless of some efforts from groups of Afro Brazilian activists, Afro- Brazilians are still placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and as political scientist Mark Sawyer contends they are forced to embrace the idea of a national identity, rather than a racial identity, in order for

⁶⁰ Ibid,110.

⁶¹ Ibid, 165-166.

⁶² Ibid, 171.

⁶³ Ibid, 169-171.

their claims to be recognized.⁶⁴ In fact, it is only in more recent years that Afro- Brazilians are cultivating a greater racial consciousness and are realizing the necessity to implement laws aimed specifically to a racial discourse of equality.

After manumission many Afro Brazilians had to struggle to acquire equality and ultimately citizenship in a country where white hegemony still operates systematically. Nicklas claims that “This process was part of a long battle for civil rights and for racial and social equality in Brazil. During this time Afro-Brazilian communities gradually came to be seen as alternative rather than oppositional by the secular state; however, the other component of the dominant culture, the Roman Catholic Church, has continued to view the regional Afro-Brazilian groups, as well as Umbanda, in clearly oppositional terms.”⁶⁵

Umbanda acquired followers in mostly urban areas in Brazil at the beginning of 1900’s, and, as I disclosed earlier, its popularity increased in the 1970’s/1980’ in particular due to the socio-economic struggles of Black Brazilians who were inspired by the Civil Rights discourse in North America. In fact, until 1960’s the Catholic Church remained so influential within the Brazilian society that Umbanda was not even considered a religion, but rather as a cult. Prior to 1970 Umbandistas, as well as Candomble’ followers, were forced to register with the state and the government through the police department. The reason of such requirement relies on Section 7, article 141 of the Brazilian constitution which protects freedom of religion practice but with a specific clause: "There will exist freedom of religious practice except for those groups which

⁶⁴ Mark Sawyer, “Black Experience in Latin America” (Lecture for the Department of African American Studies UCLA 2017).

⁶⁵Michael A. Nicklas, “Mythology Knowledge, and Power: An Examination of Social Forces in Brazil and the Emergence of Umbanda” (Indiana University Folklore Forum 23:1/2 1990) 90.

behave in a manner contrary to public order or good custom." ⁶⁶ The Catholic, and in more recent times the expanding Christian Church, moved several accusations against the practitioners of Umbanda and Candomblé that ranged from ritual crimes to illegal practice of medicine. Sometimes those claims were carried into a courtroom like in the case of Roman Catholic Church v. Umbanda Federation of the state of Scio Paulo in 1946, where the Catholic Church denounced the use of Catholic images during an Umbanda procession. In this case "Section 7 Article 141 is invoked: The borrowing of religious imagery with intent to deceive is considered injurious to the rights of other groups and an improper appropriation of knowledge." ⁶⁷ However, in most cases the historical use of Catholic images in syncretic religions has been mostly ignored. In 1968 a fundamental change of attitude in the Vatican towards local religions occurred, as it is expressed by the words of Latin American Bishops Synod "Faith always reaches man clothed in a cultural language."⁶⁸ However, fundamental differences persisted between the two religions. In fact while the belief in the Holy Trinity, and the presence of exorcist priests confirms the existence of a spiritual world in Catholicism, it does not correspond to a system that supports knowledge and communication from the spiritual world. Instead the Afro Brazilian and Amerindian theological framework that is reflected in Umbanda and Candomblé constantly allows the possibility of new sources of knowledge and power from the spirits. Diana Espirito Santo claims that by 1970 there were about 80,000 temples in Brazil, 20 000 in Rio alone, and in the 1980s, hundreds of thousands.⁶⁹ However, more recently she also

⁶⁶ Ibid, 87.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 92.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 93.

⁶⁹ Diana Espirito Santo, "Naming the fluid: Afro-Brazilian Umbanda and the turning-points of the infinite"(Academia.Edu n.d.) https://www.academia.edu/13295252/Naming_the_Fluid

documents a decline in the popularity of Umbanda and her argument seems to be supported by other scholars like Prandi who contends that Umbanda is less than a 100 years old and fails to adapt to a more ‘modern’ religious marketplace. The market that he refers to has changed from the local communities to a system of mass indoctrination by the Evangelical Churches. Those churches use modern marketing techniques, they offer specific trainings for their pastors aimed to attract more members, they are present on the radio and on TV stations and have aggressive representation at a legislative level. Both Candomblé and Umbanda are not organized as a global entity but they are fragmented in smaller entities and they operate on a local level, moreover, some ceremonies are secret, not open to all members, and even less to a TV audience. Furthermore, Umbanda is the target of racial and class discrimination and the aggressive indoctrination of the Christian Pentecostal Churches tends to constantly discredit Umbanda practices. However, the possible decline of Umbanda and Candomblé popularity does not hinder the importance of the cultural meaning for Brazil and for the Afro Brazilian population.⁷⁰

The African roots of Umbanda represents a threat to the white hegemonic power in Brazil, and create new forms of racial consciousness. The interest in Umbanda and its popularity are connected to the search for power. In fact, the interaction between spirits and people empowers the actors of this practice and leaves open spaces for new possibilities. With the syncretism of the Amerindian, African (Yoruba and Bantu) and French Spiritism element the search for knowledge and power is rooted in the faith that the events in a man’s life and his actions are conditioned by the spiritual realm. Since the mediums are individuals who can connect the human and the spiritual world they become very powerful individuals, furthermore,

⁷⁰ Reginaldo Prandi, “O Brasil com Axé: Candomblé e Umbanda no Mercado Religioso.” (Estudos Avançados 18 (52): 51–66231, 2004)230-231

the individuals who receives a spiritual consultation, follows advices for certain rituals, or the use of herbal medicine also secures their own power.⁷¹

Umbanda had the intent since its origins to include everybody in that power by holding the ceremonies in Portuguese rather than French, and by evoking spirits of Pretos Velhos and Caboclos. Those spirits are the focus of the ceremonies because they are a symbol of resistance and resilience, and they can relate their suffering to the lives of common people. Although Zelio's story is not the only account about the origins of Umbanda, it seems that the white middle class validates this practice, and includes its Africanism into a national discourse.

However, such process was not immediate in fact, Harchard contends that, while politics of whitening were pervading Brazil in the 1930's and 1940's, the middle class was embarrassed by the practices of Umbanda, Macumba or Candomble'.⁷² Some of the founders of Umbanda made further efforts to de-Africanize the church by theorizing that animal sacrifices, so common in Candomble' and Macumba, should be avoided, and denying the Bantu origins of the name Umbanda. As a consequence, nowadays some centers preserve their African roots, while others are more Kardec oriented. It is relevant to the argument of this paper that the Umbanda practice was finally legally and socially legitimized during the military dictatorship after 1964 by the presence of important military officers among its followers. Their participation indicated "...political conservatism"⁷³ and therefore dismissed any fear of racially charged dissent that can constitute a threat to the state. Although the appropriation of Umbanda by the military regime

⁷¹ Michael A. Nicklas, "Mythology Knowledge, and Power: An Examination of Social Forces in Brazil and the Emergence of Umbanda" 88.

⁷² Michael George Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994) 105

⁷³ Ibid, 110.

compromised its moral and social integrity, it is also important to consider that the purpose of the Umbanda practice is also to create a spiritual space that transcends matters of politics and racial activism, and at the same time validates them. The ambiguity of Umbanda consists in its inclusive message of equality that may encourage racial consciousness and a political stance, but at the same time operates on a different level of perception that aims towards spiritual matters more than human ones.

Hanchard analyzes Afro Brazilian identities by comparing the presence of Blacks within the Brazilian Catholic Church to the scenario of black churches in the US. In United States those black churches are the product of dichotomous race relations, and derive from the need to create independent and self-sufficient institutions. He criticizes the lack of black churches in Brazil as a symptom of the negative effects of racial democracy. He contends that Black churches are the locations for alternative political activities and help the oppressed groups to make a leap “...from racial awareness to racial consciousness.”⁷⁴ Although his work has the merit to criticize and destroy the myth of racial democracy it also opens controversy regarding the function of the terreiros. Hanchard’s focus is on the Brazilian Catholic churches and overlooks the value of Candomble’ and Umbanda temples. I disagree with his notion that Afro Brazilians have no Black churches, because the equivalent of the North American black churches are the Candomble’ terreiros, and the Umbanda centers in Brazil. My critique is not aimed against his valuable research about the lack of Afro Brazilian activism, rather is directed towards the very Western interpretation that he is applying to the term church, and to the apparent exclusion of Candomble’ terreiros as places of communal racial consciousness. In his defense he eventually redirects his argument by rehabilitating such Afro-Brazilian practices as creators of some forms

⁷⁴ Ibid, 83.

of racial consciousness. However, he still does not recognize their value as churches and activism centers the same way that he recognizes black churches in the US, and often reduces them to the function of creating a faint resemblance. In his research he applies Michael J. Fischer's conception of "resemblance" (originally used to describe ethnic relations) to the analysis of the ways racialized people in Rio and São Paulo conceive of others as strangers or kin.⁷⁵ In the context of Brazil, he determines it is necessary to break Fischer's "family of resemblances" down further:

1. Faint resemblances: it is apolitical/micropolitical; "a matter of disposition, attitude,"⁷⁶ an "allegiance," but not of overarching implications where other identifications compete for importance.
2. Strong resemblances: It is deeply political and binding implications for unification; it takes precedence over other affiliations. Differences in "ideology, gender, region, or strategy" are always there but subordinated.
3. A mixture of faint and strong: Activists employ a mixture of the two. For instance, the social exchange between blacks is a faint resemblance, however, when political affiliations are formed strong resemblances take over weaker ones.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 79.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 80.

I argue that the Umbanda and Candomble' terreiros have the potential for a mixture of faint and strong resemblance and that their local focus may contribute to build global coalitions.

E. Franklyn Frazier also analyzes Afro-Brazilian consciousness and contends that unlike North American Blacks, Afro Brazilians have been able to maintain more elements of the African culture, and that such Africanism survives in practices like Candomble'. He analyzes a limited number of families from Bahia contending that, "... the Candomble' is not only a center for religious festivals and worship; it is also the center of the social life of the neighborhood."⁷⁷ In a similar way black churches in United States are the focal center of the black communities. In both cases they are grounds for political activism which develops by first focusing on the spiritual, and then the material needs of the its followers. In some cases, this local activities may then operate on a national level to deploy racial consciousness and activism. Frazier in fact argues that the priestess of the terreiro assumes the role of the spiritual leader of the community, and that the forty families that he studies are deeply connected through Candomble'. He also claims that the families that he studied were unaware of their ancestors and their African traditions, and that the only knowledge of such customs came from Candomble'.

However, he also contends that "...African family patterns have disintegrated even when they had the support of a religious cult in which African practices have been perpetuated."⁷⁸

Besides the fact that his analysis and field work is based upon a very limited number of subjects, he also does not consider how Candomble' reproduces those patterns by preserving the African

⁷⁷ Franklin E. Frazier, "The Negro Family in Bahia, Brazil (American Sociology Review, Vol , No.4 1942) 472.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 475.

family. If the values of the African family have been disrupted by slavery, the Candomblé terreiros, as well as the Umbanda centers, may re-establish them, and transform them into a diasporic communal experience.

Frazier's position also does not properly consider that culture is not frozen in time, therefore even the concept of family changes with new circumstances. In fact, the model of the African family cannot be sustained in Brazil, because the country offers a very different socio-economic and cultural context. In addition, I contend that Afro Brazilian identities are validated and negotiated by institutions like Umbanda and Candomblé, because Afro Brazilian racial consciousness is inevitably expressed through syncretic cultural practices. As a consequence, Afro-Brazilian consciousness is shaped in a different way that Blackness is expressed in the United States, or among the Yoruba people of Africa.

Moreover, if Umbanda does not create racial awareness and political activism then why it became extremely popular in the same period of the Civil Rights Movement in United States?

The African elements of Umbanda are undeniable and for such reason Umbanda was targeted by the politics of whitening that have been affecting Brazil since manumission. The rapid expansion of the faith with the opening of hundreds of centers in Brazil was then theorized and organized during the first Umbanda congress, known as the Primeiro Congresso do Espiritismo de Umbanda. The event was held in Rio in 1941 and the publication of its contents revealed many of the preoccupations of its first leaders. According to Brown the two central themes of the event were: "the de-Africanization of Umbanda's origins, and the purification and whitening of the practices."⁷⁹ The first effort in such direction was made by denying the fact that

⁷⁹ Diana DeG. Brown, *Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil* 42.

the term Umbanda was of Bantu origins, and to attribute its origins to the Sanskrit words Aum +Bhanda, which means “the limit of the unlimited”. A further step was adopted to create distance from the African element in its practices as well. Thus, the leaders of the Congress claimed that the core of the religion is charity and white magic, while other practices of more African origins, like for instance animal sacrifices, remained marginalized as part of Quimbanda. Quimbanda was considered black magic and the opposite of Umbanda. In fact, Quimbanda is identified as the devotion of Exu’, the Yoruba messenger god . Originally Exu’ is considered a trickster among the Orixas, capable of good and evil, however, through syncretism with the Catholic Church in Brazil he was eventually transformed into the equivalent of the devil. In fact, he is often represented painted in red, with horns and a trident. When associated to Quimbanda the worship of Exu’ is therefore considered as the practice of the evil which includes the exploitation of the people asking for his advice. In some cases he may cross with a Preto Velho, a benevolent slave spirit, who may become an immoral and evil slave known as the “feitiçero”⁸⁰. The feitiçero and Quimbanda assume a very important meaning within the framework of resistance, as black sorcerers were important figures as symbols of resistance and were feared by the white slave owners in the 1800’s.⁸¹ Quimbanda derived from the Afro Brazilian religious practices, and in particular Macumba. Therefore, the Congress established that Macumba could be divided into two sections, Quimbanda as a negative element, and Umbanda as a positive one. I argue, however, that the fact that Umbanda still originates from Macumba, and that so much effort has to be made to detach it from the rest of the Afro Brazilian practices, simply confirms its undeniable African origins. Additionally, in the 1950s the lower class reclaimed Umbanda as an

⁸⁰ African sorcerer.

⁸¹ Diana DeG. Brown, *Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil* 75.

African religion, as a consequence nowadays both Umbanda Pura⁸² and the Afro Brazilian Umbanda coexist in a peaceful manner contributing to an evident heterodoxy. The figures of the Pretos Velhos signify the presence of a black identity and consciousness within the religion. Those spirits have names that often combine Catholic first names followed by a tribal name, or nation affiliation like Maria Congo for instance. Sometimes they are also addressed collectively as Povo da Bahia (People from Bahia) or Povo do Congo (People of Congo).⁸³ Although both Candomble' and Umbanda centers have never openly become venues of political activism, current research suggests that they may have an important role in awakening racial and political consciousness. Brown contends that recent studies have proven that some people from the suburbs working class of Rio de Janeiro prefer Umbanda over other religions because provides a "counter discourse to racism."⁸⁴ Such aspect is very relevant in the light of more recent episodes of intolerance registered in Brazil against both Umbanda and Macumba. In fact, the rising number of Christian churches increased hate crimes. For example, in Bahia the Court ordered the Pentecostal church to pay about \$555,000 to Mother Gilda, a local Afro-Brazilian religious leader, for defamation. In fact, in 1999 the Christian church's paper published a photo of her on its front page with the caption "Charlatan Macumbeiros damage the wallets and the lives of their clients."⁸⁵ In the vicinity another Afro Brazilian spiritual center was burned down, and acts of intolerance continue to affect Candomble and Umbanda centers. Unfortunately, even the law

⁸² Pure Umbanda.

⁸³ Diana DeG. Brown, *Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil* 68.

⁸⁴ Ibid, xxiii

⁸⁵ Zoe Sullivan and Lydia Barros "Followers of Afro-Brazilian Religions Feel Under Attack" (Aljazeera America 2014) <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/9/13/prejudice-againstcandombleworshippersincreasesinbrazil.html>

may become an accomplice of such discriminatory behaviors, an example of it is a judge in Rio who ruled that Candomblé and Umbanda were not to be considered religions. Eventually the uproar of local Umbanda and Candomble members forced him to change his judgement, but the sentence is a proof that hostility towards Afro-Brazilian religions is present at all levels of the Brazilian society.

The main difference between Umbanda and Candomblé' consists in the type of rituals which in the latter focus on the Orixas as the main object of worship. In Candomblé' the readings or consultations are mostly performed with the use of special shells, and they are usually held in a private venue with the exchange of money between the clients and the Candomblé' priest. Both religions evoke the spirits through a trance state and specific ceremonies, however, in the most Kardec oriented type of Umbanda communities, called Umbanda Pura, the Orixas are instead reduced to pure symbols. Overall Umbanda centers hold public rituals and the congregations sing to honor each of the leaders of the seven lines of Umbanda. In some centers Orixas are honored with more complex ceremonies "outside of public rituals in social days dedicated to the Catholic Saints the Orishas are associated with."⁸⁶ They usually involve only the mediums and close collaborators of the center, and they are held close to the natural elements to evoke as much as possible the natural forces that the Orixá is representing. For instance, in the month of February a great celebration is held to honor Yemanjá as one of the seven Orixás. She is honored on the beach because she is the Queen of the Ocean, the patron spirit of the fishermen and the survivors of shipwrecks. She is also the feminine principle of creation, and the spirit of moonlight syncretized with Nossa Senhora dos Navegantes (Our Lady of the Seafaring). The Caboclos also

⁸⁶ Diana DeG. Brown, *Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil* 73.

share common qualities with the Orixas. Their power in fact comes from the element of nature, both are proud and brave, sometimes arrogant and demanding, and celebrate a natural sense of morality untouched by the forces of modern life. Concone contends that Umbanda is the result of a simultaneous process of ‘...whitification of the black religions and blackification of the white ones (Spiritism).’⁸⁷ Moreover, Umbanda also became a signifier of class because it became popular among middle and low-class Brazilians who found a compromise between the European-derived Spiritism of Kardec, imported to Brazil in the middle of the 1800’s century “...and practiced primarily by white, blue-collar elites,” and the black religions, in particular Candomblé Keto and Angola⁸⁸

Chapter 4: Ethnography of Umbanda

The Torrance Center

⁸⁷Diana Espirito Santo “Naming the fluid: Afro-Brazilian Umbanda and the turning-points of the infinite”n.d. https://www.academia.edu/13295252/Naming_the_Fluid

⁸⁸ Ibid, n.d.



The Umbanda center in Torrance is located in small building that is part of an office type of complex. The sign outside is the only indication that the space is a religious establishment. Brown has a similar experience when she describes the center that she visited in Rio as “...a one-story building...only an insignia, the ponto riscado (cared sign) of the centro, placed inconspicuously on an outside front wall, identifies its function.”⁸⁹

As I entered I was welcomed by a lady sitting at a front desk who invited me to sit and offered me a number that I may need in case I need a consultation. Numbers are necessary because this center is much bigger and crowded than the Guaracy Center, the other Umbanda

⁸⁹ Diana DeG. Brown, *Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil* 80.

church that I analyzed, where instead the maximum attendance that I have witnessed was about 15 people. Furthermore, the ritual in the Guaracy Center was strictly managed within about two hours, while in the Portal de Aruanda center the ceremony often took the entire night, also because of the huge line of people waiting for a consultation. In both Brazil and United States the schedule of the visits to the centers appears similar, in fact most of the ceremonies occur at night, and once or maximum twice per week. While the Guaracy center of Los Angeles limits the focus of the spirit incarnation to the Caboclos and the Pretos Velhos, this center is more open to evoke other spirits like the children's spirits, and even the spirits of Exu' and Pompa Gira, which are sometimes associated with the worship of the devil and Quimbanda. Additional rituals also take place on alternate weeks such as crystal healing, and additional reading sessions about spiritism which take place almost every week. During my first visit for instance, they held a ceremony that evoked the spirits of the gypsies which is very rare in other centers, and occurs only once per year in the Portal de Aruanda temple. A few mediums, mostly Brazilians, began entering dressed like gypsies. At the entrance I noticed a painting of St. Francis of Assisi, while on the opposite side a colorful African drawing of the Orixas. Umbanda has no issues with such syncretism, and I found very amusing that standing between the two images, almost as a symbol of Brazilian multiculturalism, a woman was selling Brazilian finger food. The ceremony took place in a larger room, the leader Marcelo de Oxóssi came to greet me and ensured me that he would explain before the ritual begins its significance and the purpose of Umbanda. He was wearing a white outfit with a long beaded collar, and open sandals. He is a white Brazilian who teaches biology at the University of Irvine, and he specifically asked me to use his Umbanda name rather than his legal name for the purpose of this research. In fact, he claims that he does not like to use his

professional name and to “mix things up.”⁹⁰ His wife, who is Afro Brazilian, is also involved in the center as a collaborator and a medium. Their eight years old daughter was also present that night and dressed up like a gypsy. She seemed to be very aware of the process and behaved in a very appropriate manner. For instance, when her mom incorporated a spirit she did not address her any longer as her mom but spoke directly to the spirit who occupied her body. The observers were sitting down on two lines of chairs, while the initiated and the mediums were standing up in circle. The main room where the ceremonies are usually performed is dominated by a large altar with a statue of Jesus on top, the Virgin Mary and Saint Jorge on the side. On a lower level there are statues of Pretos Velhos, two statues of Caboclos, and on that particular night little statues of gypsies on the bottom. In the middle of the room I observed a container full of shells. After a few minutes a woman came to purify the room with fragrant incense while the drummers, including Rodney, started to play. The members sang for Oxossi, the African god of the forest who has a bow and an arrow in his hand. While singing and dancing the mediums were mimicking the gesture of striking a bow, and the rest of the crowd of attendees was accompanying the music with hand clapping.

When the music stopped Marcelo explained in brief the origins and purpose of Umbanda. He contended that Umbanda was born only a few decades after manumission and that its intent has been since the beginning to include people from every ethnicity and class within its practice. The spiritism of Kardec was an important element of it, however, since Spiritism was first taught in French language it also automatically excluded poor people who could not even write or read in Portuguese. Therefore, he rhetorically asked: “How could these people obtain

⁹⁰ Marcelo de Oxóssi. “Personal Interview”(Torrance, Portal de Aruanda Temple. August 26, 2017).

access to spirituality?” Umbanda has been the answer because he claimed “The spirits who are excluded from Kardec religion are included in the worship, and they are giving a voice to the people in society who have no voice.”⁹¹ Furthermore, he contends that the spirits of the black slaves (Pretos Velhos) console those who suffer because they suffered themselves in slavery, but now they are living in the other dimension in freedom. Brown’s work confirms that these entities: “...symbolize the transcendence of various forms of suffering, slavery, oppression, and illness.”⁹²

As I mentioned earlier during my first visit the center was holding a special ceremony with the spirits of the gypsies, which for instance is not performed in the Guaracy temple. The gypsies represent an oppressed group because they are often outcast from society, and they also have specific characteristics that may help human beings to overcome certain problems. For instance, although gypsies may wear flamboyant accessories they are not attached to their belongings, therefore the gypsy spirits teach humans about endurance, freedom of expression and detachment from the material world⁹³. Umbanda connects humans to the spiritual world in order for people to achieve balance, to receive healing, to give them a purpose, and to connect them to a higher self. Marcelo claims that some followers may still suffer from physical illnesses but they will endure them and overcome them better because physical challenge is considered only an occasion to learn a lesson.

After his brief explanation the ceremony began and the tempo of the music increased.

⁹¹ Ibid 2017

⁹² Diana DeG. Brown, *Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil* 72.

⁹³ Marcelo de Oxóssi “Personal Interview” 2017.

Marcelo was covered with a black cape that had a hood and requested first permission from the spirits to have a peaceful session and to allow for change to happen. The assembly was singing a song for Ogun, the Orixá of metal who carries swords, Marcelo was also holding a small sword that he used to touch each corner of the room and the drums. He finally received the spirit of Capa Negra⁹⁴ who controlled the ceremony as the Pai do Santo.⁹⁵ His assistants lighted up all the candles on the altar, and three people brought offerings for the spirits to the room, which was decorated like a gypsy tent. Exu, the main Orixá of Quimbanda was also honored, not as an evil entity, but as the messenger between humans and the cosmic dimension. At the beginning of the Umbanda ceremony Exu must be placated in order to keep evil spirits away from the terreiro (center). However, sometimes those spirits may appear randomly as entities who are tormenting the clients. In this case they are exorcised. In some instances, Umbanda members, like in a Candomblé terreiro, offer ritual homages to them, who are left at crossroads in the form of candles, rum, or candies, and in Brazil the more African oriented Umbanda followers sacrifice black chickens. However, these types of behaviors were never observed in any of the temples where I conducted my field work. The rejection of evil spirits from Umbanda signifies that the church is pure, moral and practices only white magic. During my visits a powerful energy was always in the air above all while I was observing the mediums incarnating their spirits. My first time at the Portal de Aruanda temple nobody introduced me to the mediums, however, it was not necessary because they could be easily identified during such process of incorporation. I observed their facial expression changing while they were receiving their spirits. Their muscles tensed, some of them deeply inhaled and closed their eyes, others shook their bodies, and they

⁹⁴ “Black Cape”

⁹⁵ Holy Father, literal translation “Father of the Saint”.

appeared dizzy and disoriented. They consider receiving the spirits a gift from God and they welcome them as precious guides. My first time witnessing an incorporation was during the gypsy ceremony, and although I tried to maintain a certain composure I felt an intense heat, and while standing up I also lost my balance for a moment. The music stopped and they assumed their positions in the room to begin their consultations. The numbers were called and little by little people stood in front of the seven mediums to receive healing and advice. As soon as I understood the process I was so glad that I had accepted the number that they offered me at the entrance, because I was really curious about what the spirits would tell me. I observed a medium in particular whose transformation was more evident to the observer than the others. She was a reserved middle age woman when she entered the room, however, after the incorporation her body language completely changed and she turned into a very flamboyant gypsy woman. I observed her laughing, talking loudly, and waiving her long skirt with fast and large movements. She often embraced the people coming for a consultation in her shawl, read their palms, and appeared to be a totally different person from whom I met her only an hour earlier. An older lady who was receiving a consultation caught my attention because she was very ill. Marcelo's wife, who was also hosting the spirit of a gypsy, was healing her and talking to her for a long time. She placed her feet in a container full of water and she poured a good quantity of champagne in it. She then burned a great number of candles that melt very quickly. A Brazilian woman sitting close to me explained to me that if candles melt quickly and dripped dispersing wax everywhere it meant that the illness was serious. Only after their consultation people were allowed to eat from the table prepared behind us with fruits and nuts, and often the mediums ordered them to eat specific food from it.

In a smaller room around the corner there were shelves with a huge quantity of ceramic jars that had names on it. Each jar corresponded to an initiated member of the church. On the floor there were three statues of Capa Negra with a rice offering. As I explained earlier Capa Negra is Marcelo's spirit guide and the spirit coordinator of the assembly. Having a consultation with him is an honor and I had such privilege thanks to the intercession of Rodney. I noticed that the speech of some mediums, including the ones whom I spoke with before appeared slurry, instead Capa Negra maintained Marcelo in a very alert status. Another Umbanda follower explained me that every medium receives his spirit in a different manner, some are semi-conscious, others totally black out, and some others only hear the spirit as being alongside to them, and they will talk with a more normal tone of voice. The consultation with the spirits is a form of caridade (charity) which is the central concept of the Umbanda practice. In fact, the church aims to find the solution of personal issues, rather than focusing on the communal emphasis typical of other religious faiths. There is a common saying "People come to Umbanda through the gates of suffering."⁹⁶

Brown estimates at least 30 millions people coming through that gate for consultations per year in Rio de Janeiro alone. Besides attracting participants, the consultations also become a way to recruit clients into more active roles in the center as members and mediums. However, most of the people who ask for a consultation remain occasional participants who attend the ceremonies only in case of need. Towards the end of the consultation, which took at least three hours, the mediums hugged Capa Negra who hugged them back wrapping them in his long black mantle. That was the sign that the spirits had to leave them. The middle age lady who had

⁹⁶ Diana DeG. Brown, *Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil* 94.

received the spirit of the flamboyant gypsy woman seemed to have a tougher time to come back. She seemed fine at first, but then she started sweating and lost her balance. Capa Negra hugged her again and she started coughing very hard. She bent down and I thought that she might throw up, instead she finished coughing and seemed well after that. More music was played in circle with Marcelo dismissing Capa Negra, as the last drum beats closed the ceremony. Rodney explained to me that in reality more rituals would be performed for several hours after the main ceremony to “close” the sacred space, and that sometimes this could take the entire night.

The Guaracy Center

The second Umbanda group that I visited a few days later is a much smaller community of only ten people, and to my knowledge this temple and the one in Torrance are the only existing Umbanda practices in the Los Angeles area. In this case the group is simply renting a space in a Brazilian cultural center where they set up a temporary altar on a foldable table. On my first visit the ceremony was for the spirits of the Pretos Velhos. On the altar there was a statue of a Caboclo, three burning candles, a glass of water, a piece of chalk and flowers. They identified themselves as Umbanda of Temple Guaracy, which is an organization that, unlike the Portal de Aruanda temple that runs independently from one location only, has been created in San Paulo Brazil but has several venues in South America, Europe and United States, almost like a franchise. To my surprise the leader, known to the adepts as the “coordinator” rather than Pae do Santo, is not even Brazilian. His name is Buzzy Coen, an American Jewish guy who has been practicing Umbanda for ten years both in Brazil and in the States. In his everyday life he works as a music supervisor, and he claimed that he encountered this religion while practicing

Buddhism in Brazil. In fact, his Buddhist teacher in San Paulo was also a follower of the Temple Guaracy in Geneva, Switzerland and invited him to a ceremony in San Paulo. Buzzy was eventually initiated and became a medium.

During my first visit he incorporated the spirit of a Preto Velho named Sebastian, or in Portuguese Sebastião. As the coordinator Buzzy always wears four long necklaces made of beads, one of which is white and the other ones are bright green. He explains that every necklace corresponds to a different initiation, and that two of them are dedicated to the Orixas of Oxossi and Xango'. He also tells me that unlike the Portal de Aruanda temple they do not extend the ceremony for many hours, they keep a discipline among the spirits, and the work of the cambonos (assistants) is to remind the spirit of the passing of time. My friend Douglass, who is an Afro-Brazilian musician from Mina Gerais Brazil, is the only drummer of this center. Before each ceremony they usually sing several songs in honor of Oxossi, the Caboclos, Obatala' and finally Oludum, which is the name of an Afro Brazilian bloco in Bahia. Oludum is also a word that originated from the Yorubá language, and in the religious ritual of Candomblé means "God of Gods" or "Greatest God", who is referring to the Orixá'Olodumaré. This Orixá' is a Universe-creating God that governs the other Orixás."⁹⁷

Buzzy's transformation during the incarnation was also very radical, I observed his body language which was very striking. From being a tall young white guy with a thin voice his back curved like the one of an old man, and his voice became deeper. They gave him a cane for assistance and they helped him to sit down. Before he started the consultation, he asked for a cigar that he never lighted but he kept between his lips. The cambono, was a young American

⁹⁷ Ruy Jose' Braga Duarte, 2011. "Olodum da Bahia, a History of Cultural Inclusion" (2017) <https://factsreports.revues.org/1352>

girl who precariously translated what the Preto Velho said from Portuguese to English. He first marked the floor with a chalk drawing a circle that he divided in four slices where he wrote symbols. The only symbols that I could identify were three crosses and a fish shape. In every ceremony the cambono laid flat on the floor in front of him to receive his blessing. He usually made some gestures, and snapped his finger along the perimeter of her body. During my first visit there were only four clients and the consultation took only about an hour and a half. Some clients had their heads washed with rose petals, other received different instructions about lighting candles in their house or other remedies. The other apprentice mediums also incorporated, however, they were not allowed to give consultations yet as they were in training. Eventually their body language also transformed: one of them, who was an American man, received the spirit of a Preto Velho, and his body started to shake and lacked equilibrium, like the body of a very old man. A female cambono also received the spirit of an old man and her mouth was pulled on the side like somebody who had a stroke. Their incorporations were usually much shorter than the ones of the mediums in Portal de Aruanda, and after a few minutes the spirits left their bodies.

When I interviewed Buzzy after receiving my first consultation with the Preto Velho he did not remember anything about it, he claimed that he had to learn how to control the entering and the exiting of the spirit, however, he is never totally conscious while he receives them. He actually contended “It is like I am in another room and I hear the spirit talking from there”⁹⁸The cambono felt that every time she incorporated she always felt like the spirits were cleaning her of impurity and negativity. Unlike Buzzy she maintained a conscious state but she told me that

⁹⁸ Buzzy Coen, “Personal Interview” Guaracy Temple 2017.

possibly when the incorporations become more intense people may lose consciousness. My curiosity moved me to attend the ceremonies of this center for several months. Between critical observation, and desire to experience what they experienced, I asked the coordinator to help me becoming a medium and incorporate. Any person could be a medium, however, some people are more open than others, and he thought that I was one of them. As an observer I slowly transitioned into being a practitioner, however, I maintained some skepticism until the day of my incorporation. According to the coordinator, music is an important element in order for anyone to achieve a trance status. Ceremonies had taken place at times without a percussionist, whereas people only sang and clapped their hands, however, we never attempted my incorporation in such instances.

The Music of Umbanda

Rodney D'Assis has been a percussionist for many years at the Portal de Aruanda center in Torrance and has been previously assuming the same role in Candomblé's terreiros in Brazil. Therefore he became my music expert, and the outcome of my interview with him was quite surprising. In fact, when I asked him: "Do you think that it would be easier for a newcomer to understand the Caboclos through the music and the lyrics of the songs dedicated to them?" He responded: "Not really, music is more of a cultural thing and is not necessary to evoke the spirits. In fact, I was once by myself in the center on New Year Day and I created a gira⁹⁹ without any music."¹⁰⁰ It is important to notice that, as I mentioned earlier, while I was attempting my

⁹⁹ Umbanda ceremony.

¹⁰⁰ Rodney D'Assis, "Personal Interview" 2017.

incorporation in the Guaracy Center the lack of a drummer prevented any attempt from the coordinator to help me incorporate. Rodney's answer surprised me above all because music, is so important in Candomblé' as well as many others Umbanda centers. When I asked Buzzy, the coordinator of the Guaracy center, he claimed that the Torrance center is a more Kardec oriented center, while his center is more based on the African tradition. Such statement influenced my first comparative analyses of the two centers. Such assumption was partially reinforced by the fact that in Torrance temple the Umbanda members study Kardec's books every Friday, placing a strong emphasis on the European element. Marcelo de Oxóssi claimed that it is important to them to learn on an intellectual level how the spiritual world works, rather than just experience it. The experience in his opinion must be placed into awareness that also comes from knowledge. This becomes very important in order to recognize bad spirits and to be more in control of the process of incorporation.¹⁰¹

The lack of intellectual preparation in the Guaracy center was instead evident, and often many details regarding the ceremonies and the activities of the center were omitted. As a professional singer my desire to learn the songs performed at the ceremonies was a constant request in both centers.

Usually the Guaracy Center always invited before each ceremony to learn the pontos¹⁰², via email. The text of the invitation often looks like this, followed by the Portuguese version of the same message :

“Dear friends,

¹⁰¹ Marcelo Cury, “Personal Interview” 2017.

¹⁰² Umbanda sacred songs.

We would like to invite you to our next Gira of Caboclos this Sunday, April 22nd, at 7pm . We will be teaching some pontos (sacred songs) just before the gira begins.”¹⁰³

However, among more than ten visits, only once I actually had the chance to sit down with the other mediums and the leader to learn some songs on the spot. Buzzy sang a section of a ponto and we had to repeat it. Every other time that I requested lyrics or recordings to sing along I was brushed off. During a specific ceremony a young medium born and raised in the Umbanda faith came to visit us from New York. She was a young girl who knew how to play the percussions, and perfectly sang all the songs. In the hope to get access to the full music repertoire I also asked her for help, however, she told me that only the initiated people could have access to them. I realized that even after my first incorporation as a medium I was still not considered “initiated,” and that the fact that I was excluded from accessing the songs had very little to do with the African oral tradition, and more with my status as a novice within the community. This center appeared very secretive in its practices, and certain information was always the exclusive right of its closest members. For instance, I just found out that some of the members were invited to go to Brazil to attend some special ceremonies. Nobody mentioned such trip to me, and no details of the experience were offered via email or in person after the event.

I was convinced that my initiation started when I prepared my first sacred collar. I had to make it one bead at the time, and then it was blessed by the spirit that the coordinator incorporated. The green and yellow beads that close the long string of white beads symbolize the two powerful Orixas Oxossi¹⁰⁴ and Oxum.¹⁰⁵ However, now I am not sure anymore if that was

¹⁰³ Guaracy Center, Los Angeles 2017.

¹⁰⁴ The Orixá that hunts and protects all living being and the forest.

¹⁰⁵ The Orixá goddess of the rivers and beauty.

the first step of my initiation or just a sign of protection that I had requested during one consultation. In any case, the initiation is a very important and usually gradual step for each member, and although Umbanda has similar rituals everywhere, there is no central power like it exists for instance within the Catholic church and the Vatican. Moreover, the new members must decide which specific temple they want to attend. Marcelo de Oxóssi, the leader of the Portal da Aruanda Center, confirmed that if I would get initiated I will have to choose either one or the other temple:

“You can come to visit us as a guest any time, however, you will have to choose whether you want to join our community or the Guaracy temple. You can’t join both because it would not be respectful.”¹⁰⁶

Thus, while I was working on this project and on my spirituality within Umbanda I was confused about my own role as an apprentice medium, who at times was only considered a guest by the Guaracy Temple.

I was able to partially analyze the songs that I was learning while attending the ceremonies, and I used the internet where some of the most famous pontos are available. Most of the pontos are in a duple rhythm at a medium tempo, they are mostly performed with percussions and voice and have a call and response structure that recalls their African roots. The word “sarava,” which means healing, is very used usually after each ponto is sung. There are pontos for various entities: the Orixa’, the children spirits, The Pretos Velhos, the caboclos, and Saints like Cosimo and Damian. There are also songs for each specific moment within the ceremony, like the opening or the conclusion for instance. There are so many pontos that for the purpose of this

¹⁰⁶ Marcelo Cury, “Personal Interview” 2017.

work it would be impossible to analyze them all, however, I will take as an example the ponto dedicated to Yemanjá, who is the Orixá of the sea and our great mother, also syncretized with the Holy Virgin. The ponto is “Um Presente Dos Orixas” and it is usually performed with hand percussions, shakers and voice. Like most of the pontos this is sung in the format of call and response which strongly connects to the African music tradition. It has a duple rhythm in 2/4 that is very similar to a samba rhythm. The lyrics in Portuguese are:

“ Hoje , hoje eu vou cantar vou louvar na areia , em lua cheia minha mãe Yemanjá iêiê (2x) Rosa do mar , minha estrela do céu azul Não é história de um pescador , que meu amor eu vou lhe entregar iêiê (2x) Deixa , deixa as ondas do mar passar Ouça o canto da bela Odoya Oxalá que mandou, um grande amor do fundo do mar iêiê”

Which in English means “Today, today I am going to sing, I am going to praise the sand in the full moon my mother Yemanjá’. Rose of the sea, my star of the blue sky. It is not the story of a fisherman, I am going to give you my love. Let the sea waves pass. Listen to the chant of the beautiful Odoya Oxalá’ who sent, a great love from the bottom of the sea.”¹⁰⁷

Usually the pontos for the Pretos Velhos make references to African and Afro-Brazilian traditions, the contents of those songs often deal with African sorcery or the suffering of slavery. They include words in Portuguese and terms of African origins often constructed in sentences that are grammatically incorrect “...to reflect the Pretos Velhos’ lack of familiarity with the Portuguese language and their lower class origins.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Sete Flechas “Um Presente dos Orixas”(2014) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rDqfD3ZgPk>

¹⁰⁸ Diana DeG. Brown, *Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil* 68.

My music expert from the Torrance center Rodney de Assis has been precious to this music analyses. In fact, the other Umbanda percussionist at the Guaracy temple confessed that he was too new to the practice, and therefore not able to explain in details what the drumming means, or how is articulated. Rodney De Assis instead has been a percussionist for all his life, and has practiced in the Umbanda center in Torrance for the past nine years. During my interview with him he contended that he started to attend the Umbanda ceremonies after the leader Marcelo de Oxóssi had asked him to give percussion lessons to some of the members. He told me that until a few years ago there were no percussion classes or instructors of his type, and that he had to acquire his skills by oral tradition, by practicing in Candomble centers. Everybody is mostly self-taught and learns by experience, in his case both Candomble, and the Brazilian martial art of capoeira, gave him access to learning. By going to those centers not only he could practice typical Brazilian instruments like the pandeiro and berimbau, but he also learned the very specific rhythms/patterns (toques) of Candomble. He explained that in Candomble there are more rhythmic patterns related to the Orixas, while in Umbanda they are reduced. There are five or six main rhythms among which congo, ijexa, samba de roda, samba de caboclo, guaruja, barra vento, that are common to both practices, the only difference is the kabula rhythm that is a bit different because it is specific to Umbanda (in Candomble there is a similar pattern, but not quite the same). The drums are always three, and the Umbanda followers consider them as living beings and give them names.

He contends that the rhythms of Caboclos are interchangeable with the patterns used for other entities, like the Pretos Velhos for instance. The rhythms are not only duple but also 6/8, or 3/8. The Caboclo rhythm is called Samba de Caboclo which requires a stronger touch, and cannot be performed at a slow tempo. He explains that similarly one

cannot play slow rhythms for entities or Orixas that have a lot of energy like Xango' for instance, the god of justice and war.¹⁰⁹

Incorporations

My personal experience of participant observation at first, and later on as an Umbanda apprentice medium, has been a gradual yet powerful discovery of balance, as well as helping me to acquire a new vision of life. In particular it is the self-realization that life does not end with death, and that the spiritual world is as populated, if not more populated, than our physical world.

Unlike Candomble' or Santeria Umbanda claims to only evoke positive spirits within the controlled space of the ceremonial circle. The Guaracy community limits the gira¹¹⁰ to the incarnation of the Pretos Velhos and Caboclos and the celebration of the Orixas. Instead, the Torrance center often has other ceremonies, like the one that evokes the spirits of children, or Orixas that are erroneously associated with the devil like Exu' or Pomba Gira.¹¹¹ The worship of African derived spirits, often banned by the controlling white elite, is a true revelation that contradicts my first assumption that the Portal Da Aruanda center is more Kardec oriented and less Afro-centered. The temple honors Exu' as the messenger between humans and the gods, and even evokes his wife, Pomba Gira, a magic sorceress who is often stigmatized because she expresses sensuality, promiscuity and intersectional identities. The etymology of "Pomba Gira" is connected to the Bantu spirit of the crossroads, Bombojila who is also known as Pambu Jila. The masculine figure of Bombojila became Pomba Gira, a female spirit, who contains both sexes

¹⁰⁹ Rodney D'Assis, "Personal Interview" 2017.

¹¹⁰ Ceremonies where the mediums incarnate the spirits.

¹¹¹ The mistress of witchcraft.

and protects women and transsexuals. She represents sex, and challenges humans to see beyond the restrictions of society.¹¹²

Pomba Gira can be deceiving and dangerous, however, in Umbanda the ceremonies and her evocation is only used to benefit people, never to harm them.

During my interview to Rodney D'Assis he agreed with Marcelo that being intellectually aware of the process as a medium is very important. In fact, this prevents the encounter of negative spirits who are lost, and who can cause people to act out of control. Those entities often come from individuals who died in a violent way or committed suicide for instance. Those spirits are out of balance and visit people who are open to incorporate them but cannot control such process, and may accidentally welcome out of control behaviors. He claimed that alcoholics, as well as people who are emotionally or mentally unbalanced, may be more exposed to such risk. Alcohol in particular is considered a conductor of energy, however, it also makes the subject susceptible to incarnate those lost spirits. He claimed that the previous Pai do Santo of the center Portal De Aruanda allowed alcohol during the ceremony, however, for the aforementioned reasons Marcelo abolished such use. Involuntary incorporations may also occur and may result in dangerous behaviors that the subject is not aware of. D'Assis is not the only person who claimed that incorporations may occur outside of the Umbanda terrain in cases when the medium is not well trained. In fact, a Brazilian woman in the Torrance center also revealed that her sister accidentally incorporated a spirit while driving, and she had a car accident as a consequence. The leaders of Umbanda in Los Angeles ensured me that these episodes do not occur to people who follow the rules of Umbanda, and the necessary discipline required by the practice. Hence the

¹¹² House of Quimbanda "Pomba Gira" n.d. <http://houseofquimbanda.org/pomba-gira/>

suggestion to read Kardec's books in the Portal de Aruanda temple can be understood as a prevention of dangerous situations more than a detachment from the African tradition.

According to the Umbanda community everyone can potentially be a medium but some people are uneducated, and simply do not control those capabilities, while others may voluntarily choose to worship negative energies. In the Guaracy center one of the mediums in training also warned me about the consequences of evoking negative spirits. She is a Cuban girl and a former follower of Santeria. She told me that she came from a family of santeros, and that she was practicing Santeria with both good and bad intentions. This conversation had stemmed from her confession that she has to receive chemotherapy every six weeks. As a former cancer patient now in remission I was well aware of the devastating effect of chemotherapy, and therefore I investigated further with the intention to give her moral support. She claimed that she was diagnosed in recent years with Kron disease, however, she was convinced that such condition was caused by a bad choice that she made while still practicing Santeria. She confided that harming someone by evoking bad spirits always has a price, and she was paying her own. She also reassured me that Umbanda only benefits people, and that since she has been practicing Umbanda her medical conditions had improved greatly. I also asked her about the practice of mesa branca¹¹³ which is the evocation of the spirits, including spirits of loved ones, conducted at a table through a medium. This practice is tolerated within the Portal de Aruanda Temple, however, seems to be very prohibited at the Guaracy temple. When I inquired about it she seemed almost panicking about my question and invited me not to bring it up with Buzzy. However, she confessed that she personally would love to do it, but she did not feel ready for it. I asked her what she means with "being ready" and she claimed that she was referring to her

¹¹³ "white table"

spiritual preparation as a medium. In fact, she contended that often the wrong spirits know that you are anxious to communicate with your loved ones and may pretend to be them just to play a trick on the person. The only way to be ready is to be a strong medium, and practice for many years so that one can recognize the difference. In any case she reiterated that Guaracy organization does not allow the practice of mesa branca.

Human beings are more lenient to believe what they can touch and feel than rhetorical statements, and I am by no means an exception to this rule, therefore my experience with the incarnation of a spirit was a turning point. At the beginning of my fieldwork I have maintained a skeptical eye on the process of incarnation, and all the scenarios that I was witnessing in the centers. I could always feel the energy floating in the room while a ceremony took place, and I diligently took notes of every detail as an outsider. The process of incarnation of the spirits has always been a powerful display, however, as a scholar I always maintained a certain detachment. Sometimes I even wondered in my mind “Are the mediums really allowing the spirits to occupy their bodies or are they great actors?” Until one day I have decided to find out how it worked on my own and I asked Sebastiao, the Preto Velho that Buzzy incorporates at the Guaracy Temple, how to become a medium. The preparation took a few weeks in my case, but it may also take years depending on the subject. During my preparation period they ordered me to take special baths before coming to the center. I followed a bath recipe received from the spirits which I am not allowed to disclose, and I lighted up a white candle on the little altar that I set up in my bedroom. When I went to the center I received my consultation, and then occasionally the coordinator facilitated my attempts to incorporate. We tried a few times with no success, until one day I came to the ceremony dressed in white as they had suggested me, and something different occurred. The spirit of Preto Velho ordered me to close my eyes, and he sprinkled a

special perfume used in this ceremony all around me. I started dancing slowly to the sound of the drums. This time I followed all the advices received from the coordinator and the cambonos during my previous failing attempts. I did not worry about dancing “pretty”, I simply let the drums leading me. I remembered that one of the mediums had suggested me to dance “low”, almost hunching down, because the first energy of every incorporation comes from the ground. I had the impression that the drums were turning around me but in reality, I was the one turning. All of a sudden, the strongest and most inexplicable energy that I ever felt came inside me. I was not in control anymore, and it was so inebriating. I was ecstatic but my fear prevailed, and the energy suddenly left me. I opened my eyes and I had tears running down my cheeks. In those few seconds that lasted so long in my memory I had a powerful revelation. The term humanity made more sense in a space where nothing had a color, a religion, a language but simply translated into energy. My friend Mandalit, who is a famous radio journalist, was there to assist me. I remember telling her “Everybody should feel this, if everybody would experience this the world would be a much better place”. By receiving the spirit of a Caboclo or a Preto Velho, the medium has the strong physical sensation of another world, such energy comes first from the ground because Mother earth is a conductive element and expands in various directions. Such awareness implies a wide range of emotions, the shifting of personal values and social values, as well as a greater consideration for other people’s spiritual aspect. The voice of the spirits in Umbanda therefore transcend ethnicity and contribute to the spiritual growth of a community of tolerance and inclusion that find its balance within the forces of nature, and beyond.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

As a syncretic faith that includes Afro-Brazilian beliefs, French spiritism and elements of Indigenous culture Umbanda allows space for various interpretations. Moreover, this religion has not been immune to racism and political manipulation. In fact, it was accepted as an official religion many decades after its creation only because the Brazilian middle class legitimized its existence by introducing it to the Brazilian officials in both the government and the military force. Both class and race overlap in establishing relationships within the church, and the middle class often attempts to centralize it upon the model of the Catholic Church. These attempts have been quite unsuccessful so far since most of the Umbanda centers continue to operate autonomously, and within the scope of its heterodoxy. Those small independent centers function in a similar way of the black churches in North America because they address the needs of their local communities, and often encourage racial consciousness. The more African oriented centers also counteract the Umbanda Pura terreiros that are more oriented towards Kardec's philosophy, however, they all co-exist peacefully. In many cases the middle class assumes a patronizing role towards the lower class, striving to control the poorer and less educated strata of the Umbanda population, and reflecting the hegemonic mechanisms of the Brazilian society as a whole. A vivid example of it is the Primeiro Congresso do Espiritismo, the first congress of the church, where the middle class recreated a formula for the contents of Umbanda that excluded many of the African elements. In such instance the Orixas were only considered a remote symbol of African culture while the center of the faith became the Spiritism principles of Allan Kardec, with the establishment of a hierarchy even among the spirits. Furthermore, the rejection of Macumba and Quimbanda, labeled as evil and immoral practices, whitened Umbanda even further. In that particular congress the middle class evoked the ghost of what Hanchard refers to

as culturalism in its effort to sort which elements of Africanism are acceptable “while acting to perpetuate and legitimize selected elements of Afro Brazilian religious traditions , it also discredit and eliminates many others ¹¹⁴. In fact, the animal sacrifices, offerings to the Orishas and other African rituals were often labeled as immoral. However, the lower class eventually reclaimed all the Africanism of Umbanda of its rituals and contents. In those centers the Orixas are honored with songs that express their character, specific rituals are held in their honor, and words in Yoruba and other African languages are often used to evoke the spirits.

My ethnographic work is very important in determining these different approaches once Umbanda is transferred abroad. How are identities in Umbanda negotiated once it develops on foreign territory? My comparative analyses between the Guaracy and the Portal de Aruanda Temples confirms what Brown describes as the ambiguities of Umbanda ¹¹⁵ which continue to complicate my research. For instance, initially I was influenced by Buzzy’s opinion that the Guaracy temple in Los Angeles is more African oriented than the Portal Da Aruanda temple in Torrance. I also initially thought that since the latter engages in weekly readings of Kardec’s books it would unequivocally privileged more of a European version of the practice. Moreover, I connected the fact that the Guaracy temple would only allow me to learn the songs by listening to the ceremony rather than recordings or music sheets to the African oral tradition, However, I discovered in a second moment that the initiated members were provided with recordings and manuals to learn the songs. Therefore, I realized that my exclusion from the music material was only contingent to my status within the community, rather than echoing a connection to an African heritage. Furthermore, I contended that the white middle class strives to unify the

¹¹⁴ Diana DeG. Brown, *Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil* 197.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 197.

Umbanda church upon the Christian or Catholic model, while the lower class maintains the fragmentation of the local centers upon the Candomblé' terreiros model. As a consequence, the Guaracy temple as an organization reflects the middle class model. In fact, they have many temples around the world that are supervised by a main center in Brazil.

Additionally, the statement of intents on the Guaracy main website creates even more of a clear class separation and detachment from Africanism. In fact, the organization declares about the Orixás and the contribution of Candomblé' in Umbanda:

We owe a profound respect to these masters for the cultural, spiritual, and ethnological importance of the works they perform. Candomblé is a part of the cultural symbols of Brazil. Brazil as a nation of international prestige, cannot continue to neglect the issue of the destruction of its symbols.”¹¹⁶

Therefore, the Guaracy organization considers Candomblé' as part of the cultural symbols of Brazil rather than the legacy of the African tradition in Brazil, and the use of the term “cultural symbols” intended as symbols that belong to the nation, inevitably brings the Guaracy temple into the shadow of culturalism and nationalism.

Furthermore, unlike the Guaracy center, the Portal de Aruanda temple worships Exu' and Pomba Gira so closely associated to Quimbanda and similar African practices, which is a determinant factor in my final conclusion. Among the Brazilian white society Pomba Gira's intersectionality of genders and race turns her into a real threat to the social order. She is a female spirit who is free to express her sexual desires and prefers sex for pleasure, rather than

¹¹⁶ Carlos Buby, “XIRÊ OF THE ORIXÁS” (Templo Guaracy n.d.)
<http://www.temploguaracy.org.br/en/html/cosmogonia/xire4.html>

procreation. Her characteristics create controversy, and often people label her as a promiscuous and malefic witch. The stigma of promiscuity is not a foreign concept to a patriarchal society that belittles female symbols of resistance and sexuality. Moreover, in a colonial country like Brazil the association of Pomba Gira to how black women have been depicted since slavery as hypersexual and dangerous beings is inevitable. Pomba Gira is celebrated in the more Afro Brazilian centers, and for such reasons often disappears from the rituals of the Umbanda Pura centers.

. The Pretos Velhos are also central to the faith, and yet not immune to the contradictions of Umbanda. In fact, their presence is sometimes misunderstood and associated to the stereotype of the humble and subservient slave. However, they are more often honored as symbols of Afro Brazilian wisdom and resistance against white hegemony. Furthermore, the Pretos Velhos reverse the hegemonic process in the moment that the spirit of an old slave is inspiring, teaching and elevating the spirituality of his oppressors. The ambiguity of so many interpretations within Umbanda allows an idea of equality, which may also obscure the hierarchical race and class dynamics of the Brazilian society. However, Brown agrees with my argument that such ambiguity does not eliminate the conscious class and racial conflicts within Umbanda. Resistance against white hegemony is present in conflicts over leadership, rituals and over Umbanda's African identity.¹¹⁷

I found Hanchard's initial comparison about the terreiros and the Black churches in North America superficial, and I argue that Candomblé and Umbanda are instead places of racial consciousness. His argument about the lack of racial movements in Brazil compared to the Civil

¹¹⁷ Diana DeG. Brown, *Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil* 197

Rights Movement is valid, however, in recent years Afro-Brazilians are finding new ways to express their racial consciousness even through what Hanchard may consider as forms of culturalism. For instance, samba and the Brazilian Carnival have been appropriated and exploited by the white elite who transitioned samba, from an expression of Africanism to a national symbol and a tourists' event. However, the popularity of samba often allowed Afro Brazilians to use the samba parades as a platform to create racial consciousness by offering representations of black pride and history and denouncing the myth of racial democracy. Even in the Los Angeles area, in the Brazilian cultural center where the Umbanda ceremonies of the Guaracy temple take place, racial consciousness seems to be a primary focus of all activities. The center owned by Mestre Amen, an Afro Brazilian capoeira master from Bahia, as well as a Candomblé' practitioner, offers all classes inspired by the Afro Brazilian traditions, and often celebrate Afro-Brazilian consciousness by involving the local community in the celebration of famous Afro Brazilian activists, and historical figures like Zumbi for instance, a slave who resisted against white hegemony. This only proves even further that Candomblé' and Umbanda terreiros even abroad have the goal to help the individual, but also to create a community under specific signifiers that may lead to more powerful political organizations.

On a spiritual level my ethnography has demonstrated how Umbanda engages with a discourse of equality and Afro Brazilian consciousness, but also opens a personal and communal space for the whole humanity. Umbanda is offering an alternative possibility to our existence and its final goal is to heal the human soul, and to help us find an inner balance. I did not hesitate to share my personal experience as an apprentice medium because, regardless of any judgement or skepticism, I wanted to offer an account of my most empowering experience within the Umbanda community. I will therefore conclude my analyses with the words that I heard from the

spirit of the Preto Velho Sebastião: “We may have doubts in the spirits but they have no doubt in us.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Buzzy Coen, “Personal Interview” 2018.

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