Umbanda spirituality: recreating spaces for inclusion

Espiritualidade umbandista: recriando espaços de inclusão

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Abstract

The article intends to introduce some elements of Umbanda worldview so that we can understand the way how it legitimizes and reframes the spaces for social inclusion of a portion of the Brazilian population. This worldview recreates and provides a meaning to people's lives and identities and, at the same time, it highlights the exclusion suffered over the decades. The text seeks an understanding of these anthropological and sociological dynamics based on some theories that have addressed Umbanda. Since their early years, Afro-descendants move between different symbolic universes and resort to their spirituality to redesign their traditions, creating possibilities to play different roles and take different identities. Umbanda, constitutively plural, is often regarded as devoid of an identity of its own. Thus, some elements making up the arrangement of Umbanda worldview were obtained with the expectation of introducing a comprehensive axis of this religious identity. However, there is a need to point out striking features of Umbanda precisely to avoid that its identity features are left behind other Afro-Brazilian religious denominations.

Keywords: Umbanda; spirituality; inclusion.

Resumo

O artigo se propõe a apresentar alguns elementos da cosmovisão umbandista para que possamos entender de que maneira esta legitima e ressignifica os espaços de inclusão social de parte da população brasileira. Essa cosmovisão recria e dá sentido às vidas e identidades das pessoas e, ao mesmo tempo, evidencia a exclusão sofrida ao longo das décadas. O texto busca uma compreensão dessas dinâmicas antropológicas e sociológicas baseado em algumas teorias que se debruçaram sobre a umbanda. Desde cedo, afrodescendentes transitam entre universos simbólicos distintos e lançam mão de sua espiritualidade para reelaborar suas tradições criando possibilidades de jogar com papéis e identidades diversas. A umbanda, por ser constitutivamente plural, é, muitas vezes, considerada destituída de uma identidade própria. Por isso, alguns elementos que compõem o arranjo da cosmovisão umbandista foram levantados com a expectativa de apresentar um eixo abrangente dessa identidade religiosa. Entretanto, faz-se necessário apontar traços marcantes da umbanda justamente para que seu caráter identitário não fique à margem de outras denominações religiosas afro-brasileiras.

Palavras-chave: Umbanda; espiritualidade; inclusão.

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Introduction

Maybe some people read with a bit of perplexity the title of this article. Perhaps some of them wonder if there is an Umbanda spirituality, an Afro-Brazilian spirituality, or even if Umbanda has the status of religion. To answer to these perplexities we wish, at first, to clarify what we mean, here, by spirituality and, then, to speak of Umbanda spirituality.

There is, nowadays, a rediscovery of religious values and a certain respect and recognition of differences. Although this is true, we notice that there is still much resistance when these values are related to religions whose language and symbols are not familiar or close to us. The tendency is making them invisible, devoid of credentials. In the literate West, which reduces wisdom to scientific knowledge, controllable and observable, it seems that spirituality is understood only as Christian spirituality and, therefore, valid and recognized through theological reflections that legitimate and justify it. However, spirituality understood here as an experience of the sacred establishes a web of meanings that provides the world and reality with sense (BERGER, 1985; GEERTZ, 1989).

Although born in a specific context, with a specific language and symbols, spirituality is part of an experience that is universal and at the origin of religions. If the experience that human beings have of the sacred is universal, the way how it is communicated becomes particular, it is mediated: it goes through signs, symbols, various mediations that are alive and within religions and they are found in each people's culture (TERRIN, 2003, p. 79). Spirituality, understood like this, is the way how a person affirms her/himself through her/his culture, the world, and the sacred.

According to Terrin (2003), in the West, Christian and dominated by science, the lack of spirituality has marked our culture and worldview, leading the West towards what is measurable, ponderable, and controllable, something which

results in a great loss to the inner world. Faced with this, other ways of conceiving the world and "narrating" the Sacred are not accepted, appreciated, and recognized. Thus, the experiences of the Sacred narrated, understood, and lived by the peoples of oral traditions, such as the case of Afro-Brazilian and Indian religions, among others, are not always recognized, accepted, and appreciated. Although these spiritualities bring the record of history and life conception, besides being loaded with humanity and sacredness, they are still poorly known. These people, with their vast and complex unofficial and non-institutionalized knowledge, represent the collective consciousness of entire groups and societies experiencing the Sacred and narrating it by means of their bodies, their songs, and their memories.

Spirituality is inherent to the human being and it goes beyond cultures. But it is through the relation between experiencing the Sacred and the way how it is conveyed that the difference and the cultural and symbolic specificities are established. Then, the religious worlds become diversified. It is understood in various religious and philosophical traditions as the key dimension of the human being and this represents a life project, a pathway towards the deepest reality of the human being. Spirituality extracts its deepest resources from the core of the universe and it enables the person to find a sense and solution to her/his specific problems. Understood this way, spirituality forges and establishes a system of symbols acting to establish powerful, pervasive, and enduring dispositions and motivations among people (GEERTZ, 1989).

According to Terrin (2003), experiencing the Sacred is neither born of a speculation or of a philosophy, but of a feeling, an emotion in face of the greatness of the world and the mystery surrounding it, thus it is among the oldest and most universal expressions of the human soul and enables the meeting with the numinous, in addition to play a strategic role in constructing the world regardless of culture or philosophical tradition. Spirituality is "intelligence", i.e. it is the way how to capture, to "embrace" the Sacred in reality as a whole and in daily life

events. To men and women who live this experience, it becomes an almost unbearable bliss when knowledge arises; it is the joy due to something new; it is the deep satisfaction and peace when discovering that we are part of everything and something that unites us; it is to be discovered as included into something that establishes meaning, belonging, and identity. Since this is our conception of spirituality, we understand, therefore, that the religions of an African matrix and, as a consequence, Umbanda are pregnant with spirituality. To understand how Umbanda spirituality provides their followers with strength, endurance, and inclusion, we are going to cover a bit of its history, its worldview, and its internal dynamics.

1 Umbanda: origin and versatility

Umbanda is one of the many Afro-Brazilian religions. It was constituted through the interface and meeting of religious having an African, Amerindian, and Indo-European matrices. It joined elements from the Jeje, Nagô, Bantu, and Angola nations, among many others; it was influenced by Indian shamanism and also by Catholicism and Spiritualism. According to Verger (1999, p. 193), "Umbanda is a typically Brazilian popular religion, which has a universalist character that mainly encompasses five influences in its doctrinal body: African, Catholic, Spiritualist, Indian, and Orientalist".

Etymologically, there is much controversy about the meaning of the word Umbanda. Some people say it is a term from Bantu, which may mean "priest", "sorcerer", "worshiping place" (FREITAS; PINTO, 1970). There is also a current claiming that the term has Sanskrit origin (SAIDENBERG, 1978) or that it is derived from some combinations of the Adamic or Vattan alphabet, nowadays found in the Aryan alphabet and Vedic signs, and, originally, it could be written as *Aumbhandhan*, meaning "law" and "divine principles in action" (MATTA E SILVA, 1983).

Regarding the historical elements of Umbanda constitution, the controversy is even greater. Also according to the approach by Jorge and Rivas (2012), it is possible to find three main currents addressing the issue. The first of them thinks that Umbanda was founded in 1908 by the medium Zélio Fernandino de Moraes, by incorporating Caboclo das Sete Encruzilhadas[1]. The second sees Umbanda as a process greater than a specific personal attitude. It might not have come up with a single person, but this is a collective movement, spread over many states in Brazil and concentrated on the Southeast region, by means of the rituals named *macumbas*. The third and last current derives from Social Science, which claims that Umbanda emerges between the 1920s and 1930s as a religion adapted to the patterns of urbanization and industrialization of a society coming out of an agricultural past and seeking to find its place in modernity, even by proposing a religion adapted to the Brazilian identity, mestizo *par excellence*.

Jorge and Rivas (2012) think that Umbanda is a mixture of the second and third currents. The existence of healing rituals with other elements found today in Umbanda already point out its emergence long before 1900. However, thinking of macrostructures, the turnaround in the Brazilian economic model, which was formerly based on agriculture and started relying on industry, has significantly changed all dimensions of social life: family, labor, and religions. Thus, we agree with Roger Bastide (1971) and Florestan Fernandes (2008) when they claim that, in addition to being disaggregated (due to urban life) and far from their homeland (Africa), the black people had to find ways to record the collective memory of their traditions in the rituals named *rural macumbas*[2]. There was, therefore, a dual dissolution from Bastide's perspective: the first deriving from the distance of the African collective memory, leading black people to adjust their practices to the reality found in Brazil; and the second that left black people at the margins of the

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[1] Being an Umbanda practitioner means conceiving a beneficial multiplication of the self by means of the "manifestation of different spiritual personalities" (J. R. PRANDI, 1991). These spiritual beings are also called entities and they step into the psychic-physical world of mediums to convey their messages. So, incorporating means providing spiritual entities with a "body", "speaking through the other" (medium). The entity uses the medium to be manifested/incorporated. Incorporating is allowing the entity to manifest (CUNHA, 2012).
[2] Most of the times, *macumba* is understood in a pejorative and biased way. However, in fact, this is a syncretic ritual with an African matrix (Bantu).

social integration process. So, in order to stay in the city, they had to take on labor commitments, losing their bond with the land, nature, and the entire physical arsenal providing conditions to hold their religious practices. Umbanda, therefore, "born" long before 1900, has updated and adapted to the 21st century, mainly through the rituals named *Rio macumbas*, which reflected "the first moment of urbanization action on racial communities, the passage from closed groups, *Candomblés, Cabulas, Catimbós*, to the atomization of interpersonal relations" (BASTIDE, 1971, p. 467).

Arthur Ramos (2001), founder of Escola Nina Rodrigues[3], named as *macumba* the syncretic rituals of the Amerindian, Catholic, and Spiritualists fetishist festivals that, by extension, eventually meant the places themselves or centers where the ceremonies took place. Roger Bastide (1971) regarded the inclusion of certain Orishas and certain Yoruba rites in *cabula*[4] as the most appropriate definition of *macumba*, whose new theology was inspired by the fusion of black, Indian, and Spiritualistic practices. This fusion fostered the minimum cultural unity required by a group that saw itself within a context that brought insecurity and disorder. The collective representations of deities set in rituals named *macumbas* provided the black and poor white people with unity and identity, and the latter would be increasingly added to the first ones. However, Roger Bastide (1971, p. 414) does not have a mild look with regard to the rituals of macumba, he claims that they express a particular moment of loss in traditional values, something like a religious degeneration: "Macumba results in social parasitism, in shameless exploitation of the lower classes' belief, or in loosened immoral tendencies, from rape until, often, murder". R. Prandi (1991, p. 45) also addresses this issue:

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[3] The term Escola Nina Rodrigues was used as a way of standardizing the thought of intellectuals connected to the anthropological education that led to the emergence of forensic medicine. The school was regarded as an attempt to keep on studying the Brazilian racial issue.

[4] *Cabula* was a cult strongly influenced by the practices of Bantu negroes and it was widely practiced in the region of Espírito Santo. Today, this cult barely exists and it seems to have turned into other Afro-Brazilian religious denominations.

> *Macumba*, therefore, may have been the local designation of worshiping Orishas that had the name of Candomblé in Bahia, Shango in the region from Pernambuco to Sergipe, *tambor* in Maranhão, and batuque in Rio Grande do Sul. It is difficult to know what it was and how this ancient Rio *macumba* emerged, where Bastide, preceded and followed by others, saw degraded forms (in the sense of cultural disorganization and disintegration) of the old black religions.

Roger Bastide became known for being among the disseminators of nagoization of Candomblés in Brazil, favoring the Yoruba/Nagô nation to the detriment of others existing in the country. When considering that *macumba* represented the loss of traditional values, Roger Bastide referred to the practices brought from Africa that, for him, represented the "true" and "pure" tradition, precisely because many elements of *macumba* came from the Bantu/Angola nations, which were regarded as inferior since Nina Rodrigues. Although the French sociologist has contributed a lot to the study of religions with an African origin and, also, by addressing Umbanda, researchers such as Stefania Capone (2009) and Beatriz Goes Dantas (1988) have demonstrated the elitist nature reflected on Bastide's thought. Lísias Negrão (1997, p. 80) also heats the criticism to the French sociologist by saying that

> [...] his methodological position before the reality observed, strongly anchored in Durkheim's distinction magic/religion and in his personal affinities with Candomblé, has caused him to be taken [...] as a paradigm of authentic religion against the other forms magically (*macumba*) or ideologically (Umbanda) mischaracterized.

Roger Bastide was, therefore, among the thinkers who extended the study of African religions in Brazil, discussed the expansion of Umbanda in the metropolises, but his analysis was permeated with a very refractory look towards the new religious reconfigurations within the city.

2 The Umbanda worldview

Umbanda has a very didactic scheme about its theogony and hierarchy of deities[5]. This organization was registered by Rivas Neto (2000), who follows the second current with regard to the formation of Umbanda. The author explains that in Umbanda there is a belief in a supreme divine being: God. Below this deity there are the Orishas and below them there are the Ancestors.

Umbanda has some elements that define its worldview. The first and crucial one is the relation between the supernatural and the natural worlds. Umbanda practitioners believe that there are existence levels in the same spiritual reality, i.e. there is the level where orishas and ancestors live and the level where human beings live. Orishas were the deities worshiped by black people from the Yoruba nation and they continued being praised in Brazil during and after slavery. In Africa, however, each region worshiped only one orisha, something which did not occur in Brazil when slaves from various origins were forced to live together and share beliefs as a way of resisting to the slavery process. Currently, an only yard praises many orishas (LEPINE, 2010).

Ancestors are the disembodied spirits with mythical origins that arise in the service of afflicted human beings. They are incorporated by mediums and convey their messages.

> Guides are incorporated in order to solve the various problems (mainly involving health, but also money, work, family and love mismatches) afflicting the poor clientele. By practicing charity, customers are not the only favored individuals, but also the mediums and guides themselves, who rise in the spiritual hierarchy, ensuring, in the first case, a more favorable reincarnation and, in the second case, rising in the world of spirits (NEGRÃO, 1993, p. 116).

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[5] Rivas Neto (2000) has defined the concept of the Sacred United Current, in which he introduces the hierarchy of deities in Umbanda and it may be applied to other Afro-Brazilian segments. Francisco Rivas Neto is a cardiologist and an Umbanda priest who also presents on his blog and in published works the history of his lineage from the priests who preceded him until now, since he is the current responsible for the yard.

Umbanda, therefore, is a mediumistic religion, as its practitioners serve as a vehicle for the manifestation of entities, so, that is why the word medium is used: means, something which mediates. The practitioners of this religion who take a religious commitment are prepared to act as mediums through various initiation rituals. They are those that allow, by incorporating spiritual entities, words from the "spiritual world" to be conveyed. An important characteristic is that in Umbanda the orishas do not incorporate the mediums, only the ancestors – unlike other Afro-Brazilian religious currents, such as Candomblé.

In Umbanda, the ancestors are mythical characters (spirits or entities): children, *caboclos*, *pretos velhos*, gypsies, and Eshus, among others. The mythical characters in Umbanda are various and complex. Umbanda seeks in the Brazilian reality its source of inspiration and turns figures of popular everyday life into symbols (CONCONE, 2004). These mythical figures generally correspond to various segments of the Brazilian society: they may be founding symbols of Brazilianness (*caboclos*, Indians, and *pretos velhos*) or symbols of freedom, *malandragem* (sailors, gypsies, *baianos*) or symbols of irreverence (Eshus, *Pombajiras*) or also the representatives of lower, subordinate, excluded social classes (Zé Pelintra, Eshu, and *Pombajira*). Thus, by means of its mythical characters, Umbanda constructs a stage where Brazilian society plays its dramatization. This stage is constructed in everyday life by the presence of characters representing Brazilianness (Indian, white, black), but that, due to all their contradictions, become a reflection of Brazilian society: "From the familiar and kind *preto velho* to the trickster and disorderly Eshu, many guides are presented and they are recognized as 'dads' and 'godfather'. There is a widespread identification with many characters from the country's everyday life" (SOUZA, 2004, p. 305). At this stage, constructed this way and having its contradictions, Umbanda, by means of its symbols and rites, in a process of continuing reinvention, constructs and reconstructs (self-dramatization) the identity of Brazilianness. The world of "live individuals" enables the world of "dead

individuals", the ancestors (*pretos velhos*, *caboclos*, *baianos*, *cangaceiros*), to have a representative meaning, at different levels for Umbanda practitioners (VICTORIANO, 2005). There is a collective representation in the religious and social space of Umbanda: "A theatrical setting is created, where people seek to ritualize the actions by their players, in order to update help and hierarchical discourse of religious entities" (VICTORIANO, 2005, p. 66). Thus, Umbanda absorbs and resets the various religious traits and takes advantage from the elements observed in religious consumption habits to adapt and show up as updated and fit into different social contexts (SOUZA, 2004).

To better take the commitment that was drawn to them, offer a wide range of symbolic goods to their supporters, mediums must go through an initiation process, which implies holding various rituals. Through this spiritual improvement (initiation), obtained at various levels, mediums incorporate entities and take a commitment of closeness to the sacred, opening the possibility of communication to the spiritual sphere. When compared to other members, initiation provides them with the status of a distinct and separate presence in the cult and an identification with the cult, as initiates feel prepared to conduct the ceremonies, providing practitioners with satisfaction of their wishes. The expectation deriving from these rituals takes place by means of an economic, political, and religious discourse that provides the practitioner with a good response regarding her/his everyday life (VICTORIANO, 2005). These rituals aim to balance the subject, leading her/him to keep a good dynamics with her/his individual *axé*, the priest's *axé*, and the community's *axé*, in order to meet the spiritual and material demands of their members. *Axé* is a key concept in African culture. It is the vital force that maintains the cosmic order. Due to its importance in Umbanda, we are going to talk a bit more below.

2.1 *Axé* in Umbanda

Axé is a well-known word, indeed. It is already part of the Brazilian citizen's language and culture. *Axé* has several meanings for *povo de santo*:

> *Axé* is life force, energy, life principle, sacred forces from the orishas. *Axé* is the name given to the parts of animals containing these forces from the living nature, which are also in the sacred leaves, seeds, and fruits. *Axé* is blessing, greeting, wishes for good luck, and synonymous with amen. *Axé* is power. *Axé* is the set of material objects representing the gods when they are seated, safe in their private altars to be worshiped. They are the stones (the *otás*) and the irons of orishas, their material representations. *Axé* is charisma; it is wisdom in *coisas do santo*, it is seniority. *Axé* is possessed, used, worn, reset, accumulated. *Axé* is origin, it is the root coming from ancestors (J. R. PRANDI, 1991, p. 103).

Although the word is more reverberated in Candomblé rituals, its concept is also present in Umbanda. In Umbanda rituals, everything contains and conveys *axé*: herbs, flowers, stones, cigars, pipes, the priest's words, the entities' words, the chants, the precepts and offerings made, anyway, the whole ritual is a complex energizing and boosting *axé*. Mediums, as they go through the many rituals, will be more suited to the *axé* of the priest who runs the house and also to the community; and, accordingly, *axé* is an element of internal homeostasis of Umbanda as a religious system. In order to better fit her/his own *axé*, the subject gets to know her/his parenthood, i.e. she/he knows which orisha rules her/his "head". Every medium is, therefore, son of a specific orisha[6] and has certain ancestors who are responsible for guiding her/him over life:

> These entities "come down to earth" almost always in public ceremonies, held several times a week both in the yards and in locations chosen due to their symbolic characteristics, cemeteries, beaches, forests, etc. ... They do this following a strict body, gestural, and verbal coding, often by means of characteristic clothing, objects, food, beverages, tobacco, etc. (BRUMANA; MARTINEZ, 1991, p. 63).

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[6] It is possible that the medium also knows which is the second orisha accompanying her/him. There are usually a male and a female orishas, but this complementarity is not required. In Umbanda, mediums know "their" orishas by means of priest's clairvoyance or by the speech of some entity or, also, by the cowrie shell divination.

The choice of places for worship is due to the type of work to be done and the entities that will be evoked on occasion. For instance, if the work is to resume health, it may be in the forest, in the middle of the woods, with the presence of *caboclos*, especially those of Oxóssi regarded as hunters[7]. There is, therefore, a link between the entity, its function, the *axé* and the manipulated elements (such as leaves and herbs). Each yard conducts its practices specifically, taking into account the religious tradition received from its predecessors (priests) and the way how to put it into practice in many rituals. Although there is great diversity of cults, they are all grouped together in the denomination Umbanda, something which corresponds to say that Umbanda identity covers an immense variety of religious manifestations.

2.2 Diversity of ritual practices under the same name: Umbanda

The diversity of ritual practices is proved in the way how each yard interprets the notion of sacred. Umbanda is a religion that has no holy book (such as the Bible, for instance) with standards of conduct to be followed. There is not, also, a college of priests and priestesses such as priests' ministries or seminars. The methodology of oral tradition provides a certain flexibility, allowing each yard to establish its liturgical practices and, finally, because Umbanda identity consists of the contribution of many religious and social matrices. All these features are in line with the concept of Umbanda schools, coined by the priest and scholar of Afro-Brazilian religions Francisco Rivas Neto (2012, p. 105-107):

> In Afro-Brazilian or Afro-American religions, due to the diversity of their believers, there is also a diversity of rites and forms of knowledge transmission. These various ways of understanding and experiences of Afro-Brazilian religions are called Schools. [...] Schools are the different languages to think, or practice, characterized by greater or lesser influence of the forming matrices: American, African, and Indo-European. [...] In the case of Umbanda, although there is no consensus as for the ritualism

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[7] The word *hunter* has a double meaning. On one hand, it represents the figure of the Indian and, on the other hand, it may be understood as a metaphor, as the individual who chases all negativities and diseases, restoring the health of those who seek him. This is an explanation frequently found in the speech of *filhos de santo* in Umbanda.

(method), which are the various ways to express and interpret the doctrine, the principle of all these views is the same. All Umbanda schools are based on oral tradition.

Some characteristics are observed in many Umbanda yards: i) mediumistic trance, ii) cult to orishas and ancestors, iii) sacred music and dances, iv) religious leadership that guides the values of *comunidade de santo*, v) use of white clothing for most rituals, vi) use of black and red clothes for rituals aimed at Eshus and *Pombajiras*, vii) use of ritual herbs, viii) sacrificial rituals and use of beverages (characteristics not observed in all yards).

Some moments in the history of Umbanda were marked by the attempt to codify the liturgical acts of religion, in order to legitimize it and achieve greater national visibility, particularly after the period of Estado Novo (1937-45), when there was a strong police repression of Afro-Brazilian cults. Then, there was a concern on the part of leaderships to unify the religious practices throughout Brazil. According to this group, all rituals should start with the same prayer, hymn, play or do not play the ritualistic instruments at certain times. Anyway, there was an attempt to impose a single model on the multitude of many others. Thus, some Umbanda yards began to organize into a bureaucratic framework (federations), in order to achieve greater recognition. The federations would be in charge of registering those already existing and new yards, preparing a liturgical calendar, providing protection if some yard suffered some kind of violence, among others. The ideology of "registration and protection" echoed in many religious leaders who thought registration should be mandatory so that they could keep their yards open. This is so because "very few *pais de santo* have any secular interest (political, cultural) in addition to the professional interest" (NEGRÃO, 1993, p. 115). However, some Umbanda leaders linked to the federations wanted another visibility and not only the religious one, such as asking for political positions, for instance, with the justification of representing Umbanda in the national scene.

When the first federations[8] were created, there were many units-yards, but very few keeping close relations to each other, so, this alleged disunity eventually weakened religion:

> If in Candomblé the cult, formed through fragments from various African religions, it had in *família de santo* a way of reconstructing (via mythical kinship) the ethnic contributions of disaggregated black people by the conditions of social subordination, Umbanda was inspired by civil associations (notary) to establish its socio-religious organization. Then, the yard began to operate under a statute establishing the positions (such as president, secretary, treasurer), the functions of members, the hours of operation and customer service, entry forms, and the rights and duties of each "member" (such as the payment of fees for maintaining the association). The religious hierarchy sat on this bureaucratic organization in a less complex manner than in Candomblé. The spiritual leader (*pai* or *mãe de santo*) is assisted by advisors (*pai* or *mãe-pequena*, *cambonos*, and *atabaque* players) and by the "mediums' body", *filhos de santo* or *filhos de fé* (SILVA, 2005, p. 114-115).

However, Negrão (1993) reinforces, although the Umbanda federations or associations claim codification and ask the State for the monopoly of legitimate representation of Umbanda, there are many other yards that continue their practices without joining any bureaucratic entity. These groups, led by their *pais* and *mães de santo*, argue that "the yards are instances of creative worship, locus of mythic and ritual construction, where Umbanda is experienced in its enchanted everyday life with beliefs and magical practices, aimed at the needs of its internal public" (NEGRÃO, 1993, p. 114) and, therefore, the federations would constitute instances of rationalization and moralization of worship, imposing unique rules, models, and patterns going against the diversity rationale within Umbanda practices. The big question which arises is that, unlike other Afro-Brazilian religions, which are grounded in *família de santo*, Umbanda seems to be constituted by a thousand units-yards that spread across the country without a strong connection. Umbanda practitioners unite by means of yard bonds, but they

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[8] "In 1939, Zélio and other Umbanda leaders founded in Rio de Janeiro the first Umbanda federation, the Spiritualist Union of Umbanda in Brazil, the main organizer of the 1st Congress of Umbanda Spiritualism, held in 1941, in Rio de Janeiro, when the main guidelines of religion were sketched" (SILVA, 2005, p. 115). The first federations used the name "Spiritualist", this usually associated with white-table Kardecism, so that they were accepted, as Umbanda was associated with black people and, therefore, with religious impurity and marginalization.

are all the time moving to other yards or also to other religious segments. One hypothesis we have identified for this weak bond of belonging argues that this dynamics is due to the constitution of the Umbanda segment itself, which was already born under the condition of encompassing a plurality of people, unlike Candomblé, which first emerged from ties between the many African ethnicities.

Initiation into Umbanda is made through the transmission of knowledge and experiences via orality from the bond established between a *pai* or *mãe de santo* and her/his *filhos*. However, Umbanda, with rare exceptions, has great examples of lineages that facilitate knowing the origin of a particular line of religious thought, its priests, disciples, or *filhos de santo*, worshiping place and period when people started practicing Umbanda. This is quite different from Candomblé, a religion where "the issue of origin seems to be the favorite subject of *povo de santo*" (PRANDI, 1991, p. 107). Many Umbanda yards, on the contrary, emerge from the will of individuals who have gone through some sort of religious experience (Catholic and Kardecist in most cases) and those who believe being Umbanda mediums due to particular experiences with mediumship, trance, dreams, or clairvoyance. Thenceforth, they seek places to understand and deal with mediumship or even open yards of their own, without going through an initiation process. The latter case is not regarded in a positive way, because, according to the assumptions of religion, to achieve the status of a *pai* or *mãe de santo*, first, the individual must receive the fundamentals from someone and, especially, experience them. This current, which goes through initiation according to the patterns of "course", is regarded by many practitioners as the marketing sector of religion, as it seeks to provide a priestly title by means of a course without an appreciation of religious experience.

As previously mentioned, although it is not possible to observe so clearly traces of lineages between the yards and the succession process[9] in Umbanda, once

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[9] The succession process takes place when a priest dies leaving his substitute prepared or conducts the succession of his yard while still alive.

formed a *comunidade de santo*, it starts playing an important role in the life of its members. The community model follows the patriarchal family standard, where *pai* or *mãe de santo* has the authority and everyone else depends on her/him and is her/his sister/brother. There are, as mentioned above, strong kinship ties between Umbanda yards, but, within their own community, members establish strong emotional bonds enabled by their shared belief:

> We witness an exacerbation of ties with individuals belonging to the religious group, because, within that center or yard, relationships of familiarity are formed and they are influenced by the very hierarchical organization of Umbanda, which follows a family model, where everyone has a position, function, such as father, mother, *mãe-pequena*, sister, children (MALANDRINO, 2006, p. 67).

3 Umbanda worldview: establishing inclusion networks

Umbanda brings in its worldview characters already known in Brazilian history and transport them to a different status (SILVA, 1995). Umbanda interpretation takes, for instance, the Indian and slave out of the condition of inferiority and marginalization and elevates them to the status of spiritual beings with the power of guidance and assistance. Thus, Umbanda absorbs the syncretism of contributions from many matrices (CONCONE, 1987) and creates a multiple field of beliefs, but aiming to produce a synthesis that reflects, at the religious level, the contradictions and exclusions of groups that contributed to form the Brazilian people:

> Gypsies, cowboys, *pretos velhos*, *caboclos*, Eshus, all these characters whose historical life supports were exploited, marginalized, occupying the system's interstices, the whole legion of liminal beings, are eventually turned, in popular yards, by means of an inversion process, into heroes endowed with spiritual strength, able to save those who, today, perhaps subject to the same vicissitudes, invoke them (MAGNANI, 1986, p. 48).

Ancestors, who are regarded as less developed than orishas, also refer to the forming segments of Brazilian society:

> *Caboclos* represent the Indian praised in romantic literature and popularized in shamanism, in *catimbó*, and in *caboclo* Candomblé. However, they show up in Umbanda as civilized spirits, indoctrinated or baptized, as Umbanda practitioners say. [...] *Preto velho*, when incorporated by mediums, shows up as the spirit of a very old black slave [...]. This stereotype represents an idealization of the Brazilian slave who, despite having been subjected to mistreatment in slavery, was able to go back to Earth to help everyone, including white individuals, giving an example of humility and resignation to the fate imposed to him in life (SILVA, 2005, p. 121-123).

This is one of the reasons why Umbanda is called a genuinely national religion. It resumes characters from Brazilian social history and reinterprets them by adapting to the religious perspective, always having as primary the relationship between supernatural beings and natural beings, higher beings and lower beings. It is, therefore, a religion that aims to reduce the relationship of difference, either in the social or spiritual level, as already pointed out by Magnani (1986) and Concone (1987).

Although we have listed many types of ancestors, there are, in the vast majority of yards, four genera of spirits making up the Umbanda pantheon and they may be grouped into two categories: the spirits of light – *caboclos*, *pretos velhos*, and children – and the spirits of darkness – Eshus. According to Ortiz (1999), this division corresponds to a Christian conception establishing a dichotomy between "good versus evil". We must point out, however, that Eshus have not always been associated with demonic aspects. Originally, they were worshiped in Africa and absent from the dualism good versus evil. There, they were not classified as ancestors, but as one of the orishas (ALVARENGA, 2006). Eshus were seen as divine messengers, those who intermediated between the world of gods and that of men. This may be proved in the several *itanifás* (little tales related

to the divination game Ifá), where Eshus appear as official interpreters of gods and connected to fate, so, the cult of Ifá. "Eshu then appears as a translator of divine words, thus he introduces randomness in the world order; as interpreter of divine messages, he has the power to assess, which allows him to change the destiny of men" (ORTIZ, 1999, p. 127).

Another currently underrated aspect in Umbanda is the phallic nature of Eshus. African arts portray Eshus with a prominent phallus and often the tribal dances were also held with a wooden phallus, which was repeatedly raised, representing fertility, since the rural societies depended on the land for their livelihood.

As the African traditions got closer to Catholicism, the myths and rituals associated with Eshu suffered reconfigurations obeying an intense social process. The African diaspora not only represented the change of location from Africa to Brazil, but the transfer of social systems and symbolic structures that needed to be adjusted by contacting other faiths already practiced here.

In more traditional Candomblés, the figure of Eshu has not changed. In turn, in Umbanda, mostly, Eshu is a spirit attached to sub-levels of existence and it deals with the erotic issues. Therefore, it loses the status of orisha and becomes an ancestor. The influence of the Catholic discourse was so strong that believers themselves have come to represent and worship Eshu as a "negative" figure. This is so because they seem to be regarded as tainted, immersed in matter, and dangerous.

The concept of danger associated with Eshu was kept both in Africa and in Brazil because this orisha has the characteristic of moving between "worlds", changing the order of things (hence its relation to fate), joining chaos, and being antisocial. Eshu does not like rules, it breaks them. Webster (1932) already claimed that behaving in an antisocial way is the very expression of a marginal condition.

Mary Douglas (2010, p. 120) corroborates Webster (1932) by stating that "to have been at the margins means to have been in contact with danger, to have gone to the source of power". The fact that Eshu is able to talk to the other deities (orishas) and bring its messages provides it with power. However, this dangerous side of Eshu in Umbanda universe was associated with sorcery, witchcraft, malefaction, just due to the Christian-Catholic dualistic belief that has greatly influenced Umbanda. Therefore, in Umbanda, Eshu loses i) its status: it is no longer an orisha and becomes an ancestor (less developed), ii) its characteristics: it is no longer the messenger and becomes marginal, the crook[10].

Pombajira, another entity known and worshiped in Umbanda, is the female version of Eshu. It is usually associated with the stereotype of prostitutes, expert in pleasures of the body and sexuality. It is heard in cases of affective or sexual problems. Although this version is the most widespread, there are yards that respect Eshus and *Pombajiras*. These are not considered lower spirits that need to be indoctrinated, on the contrary, they are seen as spirits working to relieve anguishes and solve people's affective, financial, and health problems.

Umbanda spirituality reframes people's identity through reconstruction and retransmission of concepts destroyed by the process of blackness denial. The syncretic feature, we believe, was a mechanism to assert the universe of poor, marginalized, and excluded people in a community that denied them as persons. Umbanda is an original solution by weaving a continuity between the practices aimed at black communities, reinterpreting them according to new codes provided by the urban and industrial white society (ORTIZ, 1999). On the other hand, Ortiz (1999) thinks that Umbanda represents the process of whitening Afro-Brazilian traditions, since "to individually climb the social structure, a black person has no

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[10] Another well-known entity in Umbanda is Zé Pelintra, represented by the figure of a Rio trickster, who subverts the order of things. He has fun, drinks, laughs, and also makes some magic spells. According to Olga Cacciatore (1977), Zé Pelintra is a kind of Eshu. Monique Augras (2009, p. 43) states that "talking about Zé Pelintra is speaking of getting closer and farther away, of hits and dodges, of transgressions and dangers. It is surrendering to the eloquence of the unspoken, traveling along the margins of the urban outskirts, facing challenges. Submitting to implicit rules, renouncing clarification, letting oneself be guided by the meanderings of the research object, in order to learn with it the swing, playing, duplicity".

choice, she/he must accept the values imposed by the white world" (ORTIZ, 1999, p. 33).

Conclusion

Umbanda worldview constructs a religious model through actual social actors. Since its arrival in the Brazilian territory, along with the slavery process, African men and women move between different symbolic universes and resort to these resources to reframe their traditions by means of their spirituality, thus creating opportunities to negotiate their multiple roles and identities. As a symbolic system, Umbanda tries to legitimize, embrace, and reframe differences, appreciate and provide those who are at the margins of society with space, enabling means not only for survival, but helping to deal with the problems of hunger, disease, labor, and daily afflictions, besides providing mechanisms to fight for a more inclusive coexistence. When possessing socially legitimate values, such as the scientific discourse observed in Spiritism, Umbanda uses science as the foundation of its religious world. The knowledge of herbs, the use of baths and herbal teas has its legitimate recognition over the history of many peoples and cultures and, today, its use is proved by medicine itself. Science becomes an argument to legitimize the sacred so that Umbanda is imposed as a religion, in a society that has been hostile to it since it was born. Umbanda takes possession of these values to justify and legitimize its religious practices and rituals. Insofar as Umbanda gets closer to Spiritualism, it intends to break with those elements that, in the white, Christian, and Western culture, were considered magic and witchcraft, to get closer to the white and Western roots. Umbanda wants to be Brazilian and it is aware of this choice. According to Ortiz (1999, p. 17), "we are not in face of an Afro-Brazilian syncretism anymore, but in face of a Brazilian synthesis". Integration was one of the ways that Umbanda found to internalize and overcome criticisms made by the legitimate instances of society (ORTIZ, 1999, p. 195).

This way, Umbanda spirituality enables a combination of differences. But this possibility is flexible and always open to new arrangements, new experiences. The cultural, social, and political integration is possible because Umbanda is continually remodeling itself, something which ensures its flexible and diversified nature. However, if on the one hand there is this flexibility and diversity, on the other, the very worldview ensures the structuring and identity-based principle of Umbanda. Orishas and ancestors are structuring principles of the tradition and identity of yard peoples. They died, but they are not absent. They are and remain close to their families, invisible, protecting and guiding them. Ancestry is what guarantees the authenticity and keeps the strength of tradition. Tradition is continually reframed and updated. Legitimacy takes place precisely because it is not a fossilized memory of the past, but an experience updated due to the strength, faith, and struggles of yard peoples, among them, Umbanda practitioners.

In this article, we pointed out some reflections advocating for a historical landmark for the foundation of Umbanda in Brazil and analyzed the way how Umbanda spirituality constitutes a symbolic system that reframes and legitimizes integration spaces for people who live at the margins of society by providing them with meaning and status of social belonging. Thus, some elements making up the arrangement of Umbanda worldview were surveyed with the expectation of introducing a comprehensive axis of this spirituality. Within the universe of Afro-Brazilian religions, it is known that there are several characteristics that move and overlap, such as the practitioner's tie to *comunidade de santo*, contact to supernatural entities, among others. However, there is a need to point out marked traces of Umbanda spirituality so that it is not put aside in relation to other Afro-Brazilian religious denominations.

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