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Spirits beyond Meaning: Transference of historical experience in Umbanda in German-speaking Europe

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4025/rbhranpuh.v14i41.60952>

Abstract: In this paper, we introduce the two German speaking Umbanda communities of the *Casa St. Michael*, *House of Pure Water* under the spiritual leadership of *Mãe Gabriele* and the *Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô*, *Terra Sagrada* under the spiritual guidance of *Mãe Habiba* and their placement in the European therapeutic scene as a way to explore the argument that beyond cultural adaptations and the correctness of symbolic content, a particularly Brazilian social experience is being transmitted to Europe through Umbanda rituals that lies beyond meaning. Its meaning is rather anchored in the very core of the ritual practice in its emphasis on marginalized figures and trance, reminding the European practitioners of the repressions of the colonial era and urge them to decolonize their thinking through Umbandist religious practice of the spirits of the *Pretas Velhas* and *Pretos Velhos* as spiritual personifications of old slaves and the *Caboclas* and *Caboclos* as indigenous spirits that evoke the collective trauma of violence against Africans and indigenous people in Brazil. As Umbanda triggers particular social experiences, we refer our insights on McLuhan's argument that "the medium is the message".

Keywords: Transnational Umbanda, Migration, Global Religion, Ethnology of Religion, Sacral Globalization, Ritual and Society, Trance.

Espíritos alem do Significado: A transferência de experiências históricas através da umbanda na Europa alemã

Resumo: Neste artigo apresentamos duas comunidades Umbanda de língua alemã, a Casa St. Michael e o Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô, ambas pesquisadas através de observação participante há vários anos pelos dois autores. O texto se desenvolve ao longo de descrições independentes dos percursos das duas comunidades e de seus líderes, crescendo de um contexto inicial de envolvimento com terapias alternativas e esotéricas para culminar na integração da Umbanda à este repertório, e inclusão de elementos esotéricos em suas práticas de Umbanda. Complementando estudos contemporâneos sobre a Umbanda na Europa muitas vezes focados em transformações e adaptações

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perpetradas no processo de migração da Umbanda, neste trabalho exploramos possíveis continuidades e o que parece persistir da Umbanda apesar de tudo o que tem sido transformado. Para tanto recuperamos o argumento de McLuhman de que "a mídia é a mensagem", e argumentamos que apesar da transformação do conteúdo simbólico acontecendo no processo de transnacionalização da Umbanda, uma forma tipicamente afro-brasileira de construção da pessoa através da mediunidade espiritual é colocada em movimento pela performance ritual.

Palavras-chave: Umbanda Transnacional, Religião Global, Etnologia da Religião, Ritual.

Espíritus más allá del sentido: La transferencia de la experiencia histórica en Umbanda en la Europa de habla alemana

Resumen: El presente artículo introduce las dos comunidades Umbanda de habla alemana de la Casa San Miguel, una es la Casa del Agua Pura, bajo la dirección espiritual de Mãe Gabriele y la otra es Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô, Terra Sagrada, bajo la dirección espiritual de Mãe Habiba, así como su posición en la escena terapéutica europea, como una forma de explorar el argumento de que, más allá de las adaptaciones culturales y de la corrección del contenido simbólico, se está transmitiendo a Europa una experiencia social particularmente brasileña en los rituales Umbanda que va más allá del significado. Su significado está más bien anclado en el propio núcleo de la práctica ritual en su énfasis en las figuras marginales y el trance, recordando a los practicantes europeos las represiones de la época colonial e instándoles a descolonizar su pensamiento a través de la práctica religiosa umbandista de los espíritus de las Pretas Velhas y los Pretos Velhos como personificaciones espirituales de los antiguos esclavos y de las Caboclas y los Caboclos como espíritus indígenas que evocan el trauma colectivo de la violencia contra los africanos y los indígenas en Brasil. Como la Umbanda desencadena experiencias sociales particulares, remitimos nuestras reflexiones al argumento de McLuhman de que "el medio es el mensaje".

Palabras-clave: Umbanda transnacional, Migración, Religión global, Etnología de la religión, Globalización sacra, Ritual y sociedad, Trance.

Recebido em 10/07/2021 - Aprovado em 18/08/2021

Introduction

Friday night, African *Orixás*³ and the Brazilian Seven Lines of Umbanda⁴ are venerated by individuals of unexpected ethnicities in the Cologne based Umbanda community of the *Casa Saint Michael - Haus des Reinen Wassers*. Xangô, the *Orixá* of storm and justice, now has a 60-year-old German former policeman as his son, who is also the house's first *Cambono*⁵, an intermediary entrusted with the responsibility for guaranteeing the order and appropriate evolution of the ritual dynamic. On the same night, a Russian woman will incorporate her *Exú*, which is one of the most disciplined and active of the many *Exús* working in the house. At another moment, triggered by one of the *Pombagira's* invitation songs, a computer engineer originally from France but long since settled in Germany will take over the center of the *gira*⁶, while performing the sensual dance that characterizes his female *guia*⁷; he – or rather his *Pombagira* – will be dressed up with long red skirts and scarfs for her public presentation.

At the same time, the diverse spirits of the Umbanda universe will be called by drums, singing and dancing and manifest themselves in the bodies of the mostly European mediums and a few Brazilian Umbandists in the *Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô* (also called *›Terra Sagrada‹*). The ritual takes place in a large manor house surrounded with abundant nature - the so-called “*Rosenhof*” (farmyard of roses) - in the Appenzeller mountains in fairytale-like tidy Switzerland - or in one of the five branches of this house in Berlin, Vienna, Graz, Bern and Zurich. Right at the start of a night *gira* in Berlin, a *Caboclo*⁸ shouts into the park of the *›Gutsbaus Lichterfelde‹*, a former manor house in the outskirts of the city “that currently hosts a “Stadtteilzentrum”, a state-run cultural center that houses a café that serves neighborhood residents during the day as well as the Umbanda *giras* two nights a month. As the *Caboclo* greets the more distant local trees and forest, he is embodied by women⁹ who - like many others from other parts of Germany such as Lower Saxony, Thuringia or from Italy - have permanently settled in Berlin. They

³ Orixás (derived from the Yorùbá word „Ori“: head) are feminine and masculine deities of the Yorùbá people from West-Africa.

⁴ The Seven Lines refer to the different categories of spirits in the Umbanda such as the *Caboclas / Caboclos*, the *Pretas Velhas / Pretos Velhos*, the *Crianças*, the *Marinheiros*, the *Boiadeiros*, the *Ciganas / Ciganos* (also known as *Povo de Oriente*, folk of the Orient) and the *Pombagiras / Exús*.

⁵ *Cambonas e Cambonos* are assistants and translators of the Umbanda spirits and intermediators between the spirits and the visitors of an Umbanda ritual ceremony.

⁶ *Gira*, name often used in Umbanda to refer to their main religious rituals and festivities.

⁷ *Guias* (“guides”) describe the spiritual entities or spirits (in Brazilian Portuguese: “espíritos” or “entidades espirituais”) of the Umbanda universe.

⁸ *Caboclas* and *Caboclos* are traditionally conceived as spirits of native Americans.

⁹ 82% percent of the members of *›Terra Sagrada‹* are female and 18% are masculine (cf. Scharf da Silva 2020).

do not send the *gira* visitors to a Catholic church (as I once witnessed in Brazil, cf. Scharf da Silva 2017 [2004]:164), but rather travel to a river or the forest outside the city to light a candle for the resident deity there (as is also common in Brazil); Oxum of the river or Oxóssi of the forest. These assignments usually also include a longer stay in nature with the instruction to drum or sing there. The motivation and reason for these walks is that the deities and spirits themselves are exclusively considered natural forces in this community and not as spirits (cf. Scharf da Silva 2021).

As an emic category in the *Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô* (“The house of vitality of the goddess Oxum of fresh water of the waterfall at the moment of its impact after falling down”), the spiritual entities (in opposition to the Orixás) are understood in an ontologically different and new way. In their understanding, the Christian perception of reduced personal and individual “souls” or “spirits” is rejected, and these divine forces are conceived in an apparently ahistorical and depersonalized way. In the imagination of *»Terra Sagrada*, they are delimited to universal “soul layers”, which are characterized by a connection with each other through time. The Umbanda spirits are no longer seen as the spirits of deceased people, as is common in the Brazilian imagination, but rather as a kind of “ancestral field” of a distant religious dimension, as they have no direct kinship with the religious actors from German-speaking Europe.

These European Umbandists first encountered the Afro-Brazilian syncretic religion in Germany, and some became indelibly fascinated by it during visits to Brazil. In order to better fit the widespread German vegetarian taste¹⁰, the *Orixás* are no longer fed with their traditional meat-filled dishes, and their public presentation face the Limits imposed by linguistic competence and by the German bodie’s struggle to follow Afro-Brazilian rhythms. The traditional (female) *Caboclas* and (masculine) *Caboclos* at *»Casa St. Michael* are addressed with poor pronunciation as “Cabocolos” and sometimes they do not embody the spirits of native Americans, but rather Celtic druids. Their private consultations with visitors are mostly held in German, even when the manifested *guia* had a previous life in Brazil, and they are often unfamiliar with the many tales of mediums speaking unknown languages when under the influence of foreign spirits. Nonetheless, Brazilian and German religious are always impressed by what they describe as an impressive similarity between spirit manifestation across geo-cultural contexts.

In the scope of a general effort to understand the dynamics of Afro-Brazilian religious expansion (Candomblé and Umbanda) in Europe, alongside with an eye for related Afro-Brazilian cultural expressions like music, dance and capoeira, one of the first

¹⁰ On the cultural roots of German vegetarianism see KRABBE, Wolfgang R. “Lebensreform / Selbstreform”. In: Kerbs, Diethart; Reulecke, Jürgen (org.). *Handbuch der deutschen Reformbewegungen 1880/1933*. Wuppertal, 1998.

question usually being raised is related to the adaptations (or “distortions”, “perversions”, and so on) to which these religions are being forced to conform, in this new historical moment that could be described as a rather classic example of cultural appropriation. Outside of academic discussions, people ask Umbanda specialists if the incorporations in Europe are “real”, and many are curious about what kinds of spirits are arriving here. A quick look in the specialized literature reveals titles such as - “Dieux en exil: “adaptations” et apprentissage rituel dans un candomblé de caboclo en Belgique” - (Halloy 2000); - “Imaginary and Pretos-velhos – adaptations of a Brazilian symbol in European context” - (Monteiro 2018), and - “Religiosidad afro brasileña en Berlin: adaptaciones en la transnacionalización del candomblé” - (Bahia 2015).

In this paper, we want to explore the opposite path and look for continuities. Although it is clear that adaptations are being made, particularly when guias and Orixás culturally specific characteristics are abstracted in less localized archetype-like spiritual entities, another use of herbs or another form of approximation to magical thinking), in this paper we want to explore what might persist of Afro-Brazilian religions in the context of their transnationalization, despite everything that is being changed. This is for, if on one hand it is definitely important to keep track of innovation, both for academic purposes as well as for religious politics, on the other hand to understand what is stable despite adaptations might lead us to the most basic and stronger elements of the religion in question. If on one side it is unquestionable that Umbanda is being transformed to better suit its new European audience, nonetheless, for this new audience, it seems to make more sense to practice this very specific Afro-Brazilian trance religion than any other form of non-European spiritual practice.

In our argumentation, we will mobilize data produced in two independent fieldwork studies in Umbanda communities undertaken separately by the authors, one of which was conducted at the »Casa St. Michael - Haus des Reinen Wassers«, built around the figure of Gabriele Hilgers who is also known as *Mãe*¹¹ Gabriele, and the other of which took place in the »Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô« / »Terra Sagrada« (“Holy Earth”) under the leadership of Astrid Kreszmeier, now also known as *Mãe* Habiba. Both of these communities were founded in 2006. After a separate presentation of these two groups, the experiences will be synthesized in the conclusion as a way to illuminate the underlying dynamics connecting the different Umbanda groups in Germany and in Brazil.

What is it about the Brazilian Umbanda that seems to have given new breath to these recently spirited European audiences rather than another general exotic spirit from

¹¹ Mãe is an abbreviation of *Mãe de Santo* (Mother in the Holy, the holy is the religion), feminine spiritual leader of an Afro-Brazilian religion.

any arbitrary chosen foreign country? What is inscribed and transmitted with Umbanda that lies beyond the correctness (if it is even possible to speak in such terms) of its symbolic content? In this sense, we will argue that sometimes, or for some purposes, form is more important than content, and even if the content of this religion (the significance of the symbolic meaning of its spirits) is being transformed by its new mediums, the medium itself might be the message (cf. McLuhman 1964).

Two German Umbandas

In each of the following sections, the description of the respective Umbanda house is inextricably connected with the life history of its founder. The narrative approach of beginning the history of a religion with the life story of a single individual ties in with the idea of so-called “global curriculum”¹², which perceives people as actors in world history, rather than assigning agency solely to the social structures that shape, restrict and define them (cf. charf da Silva 2021).

Casa Saint Michael - Haus des Reinen Wassers

›*Casa Saint Michael - Haus des Reinen Wassers*‹ is the name of one of the German Umbanda communities that ground the arguments presented herein. The history of this community began about thirteen years ago (if we ignore eventual previous life’s histories and spiritual paths), when the German multi-method therapist Gabriele Hilgers first envisioned herself learning Portuguese and going to Brazil, which was then a completely unknown country to her. As she describes it, after mastering various therapeutic methods such as family constellation, gestalt and systemic therapy, the current *Mãe de Santo* began to direct her work towards more spiritualized and non-western therapeutic traditions. She was engaged in a meditation session at a spiritual retreatment in India, when she first foresaw herself going to Brazil, which she interpreted as a sort of spiritual calling to that land. Back in Germany she began attending Portuguese classes, and in one of those coincidences that strengthen religious conviction, her teacher *Pai Alexandre Mereiles* led her directly to the ›*Centro de Irradiações Espirituais São Lazaro - CIELS*‹, a place that has ever since served as her reference for the Umbanda she is now practicing in Germany.

As is usually the case, religious conversion to Umbanda almost never entails a clear severance from one’s previous life but rather is a slow and progressive learning path that starts with no religious commitment and is deepened along the remainder of one’s life. After her first visit to CIELS, Gabriele was fascinated by the beauty of this typically Brazilian religion and, even without being able to grasp much meaning out of what was

¹² „Globaler Lebenslauf“

being done in the ritual, she was immediately convinced that Umbanda would be part of her future and should be brought to Europe. During the following years, she undertook several visits to Brazil as a way to deepen her knowledge and perform the many initiatory rituals that made her a member of the religious family. At the same time, when in Germany and before being allowed by her *Pai-de-Santo*¹³ Alexandre to open her own Umbanda temple in Europe, she began integrating Umbandist elements and rituals into the already wide array of therapeutic services that she offers in the form of workshops. In an approximation movement that is also currently underway in Brazil, she began by stressing the similarities and possible bridges between systemic therapy and family constellation as ways of addressing intergenerational and family conflicts to Umbanda theology and its ritual procedures to manage people's inner and outer sociality (cf. Sjørslev 2015).

After a few years of informal and loosely disciplined Umbanda practice and learning, Gabriele was made *Mãe de Santo* at CIELS and allowed to open her own *Terreiro*¹⁴ in Germany, under the supervision of *Pai* Alexandre from CIELS. When Marcello Múscari first visited there in 2017, their mediumistic chain had no more than fifteen participants in their eventual *giras*, which were never opened to visitors due to the lack of space in their temple at that time. Currently, the community is based on a considerably larger space in Cologne's industrial quarter of Bickendorf, and its mediumistic chain has grown to include more than thirty regular mediums and about ten others minor *Pais* and *Mães de Santo* supporting *Mãe* Gabriele in the conduction of the rituals. Their weekly *giras* nowadays count with between 25 and 40 mediums per session, who attend to the ritual needs of ten to twenty visitors in search of spiritual help.

Surrounded by small companies and light industries, the Umbanda ritual salon occupies the ground level of a two-floor warehouse shared with the *Sansorio* - personal development, an umbrella institution located on the floor above, where *Mãe* Gabriele and other community members offer their services as multi-method therapists. The building is located in the periphery of Cologne, an area chosen due to the better house prices and occupation conditions, as well as the relative protection offered by the industrial surroundings, as there are no residents around to complain about the music and strange activities held weekly in the *Terreiro*. Noise regulations in Germany can be very strict, thereby increasing the potential difficulties of practicing an Afro-Brazilian religion that has music as one of its core elements. As reported by *Mãe* Gabriele, more than once in

¹³ *Pai de Santo* (Father in the Holy, holy is the religion), spiritual leader in an Afro-Brazilian religion.

¹⁴ *Terreiro* ("yard") is the house or space of a religious community of an Afro-Brazilian religion.

the past, they had to look for new houses in which to ground their *Axé*¹⁵ due to problems with neighbors. Moreover, at least twice, due to anonymous denouncements, the police were called and forced them either to clean or to explain the abandonment of ritual leftovers in public spaces in the traditional Afro-Brazilian practice known as *despacho*¹⁶.

Besides for the traditional Umbanda *gira* held every Friday night, when the components of the mediumistic chain offer their bodies for the Umbanda *guias* to once again come to earth and do counseling and healing, other activities that can as well be described as rituals take place in the building occupied by the Umbanda community. On Tuesdays, held as part of the Sansorio's activities but partaken mostly by the Umbandists, they hold shamanic sessions during which they undertake shamanic journeys and work with power animals. Two Mondays a month, they hold evening workshops for mediumistic training, during which they practice energetic work under the Umbanda principles beyond the public context of the *giras*. On Wednesdays, they hold the "Heilabend" (healing evening), another public Umbanda *gira* that is focused on the right (enlightened) side of Umbanda pantheon. On Friday nights, before the Umbanda *gira*, those also involved in the Sansorio activities take two hours for performing systemic and family constellations. Finally, in what is also announced as a Sansorio activity, they hold weekend workshops on different topics at least twice a month, mostly articulating various therapeutic techniques to Umbanda theology and references.

At first glance, these activities could seem like an excessive translation of Umbanda into a clinical therapeutic framework; however, *Pai Alexandre* teaches that everything that brings beauty and the good is welcome to be integrated to his Umbanda religious family; thus, *Mãe Gabriele* and her religious family experience a relatively large degree of freedom in innovating and adding new elements to their Umbanda repertoire. When narrating the Umbanda foundational myth to his religious family during a weekend workshop, *Pai Alexandre* once claimed that Umbanda was created in order to offer a space for those entities considered not sufficiently evolved enough to undergo a Kardecist session to be welcomed back to the earth and continue in their evolutionary path. As he asserted, "nobody has so much that they have nothing to learn, and nobody has so little that they have nothing to give"; and the Umbanda *gira* is a place for every evolving spirit to pursue this goal.

¹⁵ *Axé* (yorùbá: Àṣẹ) is the holy strenght of the Orixás, a vital principle that permeates and animates everything that exist.

¹⁶ *Despacho* ("donation") is a gift for an Orixá or Umbanda spirit in the form of food, flowers, candles etc.

Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô – Terra Sagrada

Whereas Afro-Brazilian religions commonly were brought to Europe by Brazilian migrants¹⁷, the *Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô* was founded by an Austrian woman named Astrid Kreszmeier (her civil name), also known as *Mãe Habiba de Oxum Abalô* (her ritual name). Portugal is an exception in terms of the distribution of Umbanda in Europe and in that Portuguese found their way to Brazil to bring the Umbanda to their country of origin, which can be attributed to the common language shared between the two countries. Accordingly, *Mãe Habiba*, a native German speaker, has overcome this language barrier by learning Brazilian Portuguese (cf. Scharf da Silva 2021).

Astrid Kreszmeier had her first contact with Umbanda in 1992 as one of the over 200 attendees at a scientific conference in the Moroccan city of Marrakech on the subject of the phenomenon of ritual trance in traditional cultures and whether and how this extraordinary state of consciousness is used in psychotherapeutic practice. Almost all of the speakers were recognized scientists (e.g., Jacques Donnars and Feliticas Goodman) or experts in emic knowledge (e.g., Ifayemi of Yorùbá origin and Gnawa people from Morocco) who had been invited to Marrakech by the Moroccan social psychologist Jabrane Sebnat (cf. Lenser 2009:60). At this international conference, Astrid Kreszmeier met Carlos Buby, the Brazilian *Pai de Santo* from the *Templo Guaracy*, and decided to be initiated in his Umbanda temple in the town of Cotia in the state of São Paulo in Southeast Brazil. She did not live in Brazil in the classic sense, but rather traveled there over the course of 13 years for periods ranging from one week up to three months to learn the Umbanda tradition under *Pai Buby* in the *Templo Guaracy*. In the process, she went through the initiatory "primary school" (as she calls it), was a so-called "working medium" from 1996 (*Medium com ordem de trabalho*) and received her inauguration (*feitura*) in Oxum Abalô in 2002 (cf. Scharf da Silva 2021).

Astrid Kreszmeier started her professional career as a psychotherapist in her hometown Graz in Austria in parallel to her spiritual initiation into an Afro-American religion. When she met her life partner Hans-Peter Hufenus, she moved to the canton of Appenzell in Switzerland. Her partner is the most important drummer (*Ogã Alabê*) in the *Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô* and is called Alabê Cito by all religious actors. In 2010, the couple founded *Nature & Healing*, a systemic natural therapy company that provides advice and healing in and with nature (cf. Kreszmeier / Hufenus 2019), which functions in the same house as the religious *Terreiro*. Astrid Kreszmeier's therapeutic work and the religious network complemented each other in the different offshores of her Umbanda

¹⁷ In Berlin, for example, the candomblé-house *Ilê Axé Obá Sileké* under the spiritual leadership of the *Pai de Santo* Muralesimbe has settled since 2003.

house and include the local landscape and natural areas such as forests, seas, rivers and mountains in a vision “which see[s] humans as part of nature and nature as an expression of divine powers.” (Raunischka 2019). In addition, in 2008, Kreszmeier published a book entitled *Systemic Nature Therapy*, in which she explains the basics of her understanding of human beings under the aspects of body, psyche and soul and discusses work in natural spaces with diverse natural forces, which she describes ontologically (cf. Kreszmeier 2008). In this book, she refers, albeit not in an ostensible and explicit manner, to her knowledge of the cosmology of the *Orixás*. With the official permission (*Ordem de Terreiro*) of her *Pai de Santo* Carlos Buby, she founded her own Umbanda house in the Appenzeller Land in Switzerland in May 2006 (cf. Scharf da Silva 2021).

Consequently, Habiba helped to build the *‘Terra Sagrada’* community into a supra-regional and transnational network between Switzerland, Austria and Germany. In parallel to her own initiation steps as a *Filha de Santo*¹⁸ of the *Templo Guaracy* she established three groups in Graz, St. Gallen and Landsberg (near Munich) in her function of a coordinator. When she opened her *Terreiro* in 2006, approximately 27 people were active in these three *giras*, 17 of whom followed *Mãe Habiba*, whereas the other 10 stayed with *‘Templo Guaracy da Austria’*, which is also still active up until today. She built up groups in Graz, Stein (later Herisau, St. Gallen and again Stein since 2019) and Zurich in 2008, Berlin in 2009, Vienna in 2010, and Bern in 2016, all of which were object of ethnological study by Inga Scharf da Silva in 2014-19 through a multi-sited research (cf. Marcus 1995). These individual groups from *Terra Sagrada* are in constant contact and exchange with the *Mãe de Santo* and Alabé Cito. In everyday religious life, the *Kekerês*¹⁹ regularly perform Umbanda ceremonies in the different places, often without the physical presence of *Mãe Habiba*. Despite this flexible organization, everyone sees themselves as a related network and recognizes *Mãe Habiba* as their spiritual leader (ibid.).

The experience of a marginalized peripheral phenomenon in German-speaking Europe in the face of a Christian-colored secularity in public space is evident for the Umbandists of the *‘Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô’*. This is due to the religious actors’ aversion to defining themselves as religious as a legacy of the previous generation of the contra-culture of the 1968 (mostly the parents of the religious actors), who had liberated themselves from a traumatic past and no longer felt in need of a religion. The generation of the “Kriegsenkel” (the so-called “grandchildren of the war”, cf. Bode 2014; Meyer-Legrand 2016) in Germany feel a spiritual and emotional gap and emptiness which can be

¹⁸ *Filhas* or *Filhos de Santo* (feminine/masculine) are initiated members in the Afro-Brazilian religions.

¹⁹ *Kekerê* (yorubá) / *Mãe pequena* (Brazilian Portuguese: “little mother”) are hierarchically important persons, helping and substituting the *Mãe* or *Pai de Santo*.

interpreted as a result of the historical experience of a break in civilization (“Zivilisationsbruch” cf. Diner 1988) triggered by their parents’ rebellion against the mass murders and atrocities committed during the Shoah²⁰ by the Nazi-regime (1933-1945) (cf. Scharf da Silva 2021).

The generation of the so-called »Kriegsenkel who grew up in peace, prosperity and economic growth, were shaped by their parents, who were “physically and psychologically marked as children of bomb nights, rape, flight and displacement” (Meyer-Legrand 2016, p 15). Despite their access to more freedoms and opportunities than any other generation before them, they have embraced a psychic heritage of the previous generation. Jürgen Habermas called the post-war period one of “Unübersichtlichkeit” (confusion) (cf. Habermas 1985), which in the 1970s and 1980s generated a change in social values (environmental protection, cohabitation without marriage certificate, women's rights, etc.) or a “reformulation of the grammar of life forms” (ibid.) (cf. Meyer-Legrand 2016, p. 110-114). In order to withstand their feelings of ambiguity and avoid conflict or remain in solidarity by their parents in being humanistic and anti-fascist while also seeking a spiritual connection, Umbanda offers them an anti-racist and postcolonial spiritual system in the sense that it is not burdened with the old power constellations of nation and religion, but rather manifests “from below”. Defining their turn to a religious life as a “path of learning” (“Lernweg”) – that as such is in constant motion without any hierarchical or demagogic definitions – evades the fear of the »Kriegsenkel being dominated and seduced by power structures while also engendering a (previously taboo) sense of belonging to a group. Thus, they have undergone a process of an “inner globalization” (cf. Römhild 2009), whereby historical and current narratives are connoted only from their own cultural group but are also shaped by knowledge acquired from Brazilian culture. This observation coincides with Scharf da Silva’s statistical survey of the religious actors of the »Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô, as 73% of the participants belong to the generation of the »Kriegsenkel (46% are between 41-50 years old and 27% between 51-70 years old). This affiliation is emphasized all the more by the lack of any representation (0%) in the survey by the younger generation between 22-30 years old. Only the children of the main represented age group, who are under 15 years old, are gradually being initiated into Umbanda in the German-speaking region of Europe (cf. Scharf da Silva 2021).

²⁰ Shoah (hebrew: the catastrophe): Holocaust, genocide of the European Jews in II World War. Between 1941-45 Nazi-Germany and its collaborators systematically murdered six million Jews.

What is transmitted if not everything?

Contrary to its previous reduction to an autochthonous or nationally limited religion due to the Brazilian personifications of the spirits in its cosmological system (cf. Vilas Boas Concone 1987), the intercontinental expansion of Umbanda can be viewed in the context of current patterns of religious or sacral globalization (cf. Rocha / Vasquez 2013). Until the 1990s, African-American religions were limited to certain countries and were classified as "marginal"; however, in the past three decades, they have spread from the primary to the secondary diaspora (cf. Csordas 2009, Rocha / Vásquez 2013), including various European countries, particularly Portugal. The global spread of Umbanda is therefore a cultural practice that has developed as a grassroots movement "from below" (cf. Akaraki 2013, p. 255; Appadurai 2009[2006], Scharf da Silva 2021).

When the growth of Umbanda (and other Brazilian religions) in Europe is mentioned in Brazil²¹, certain questions are usually heard: Do Europeans experience real Umbanda incorporation? What are the *guias* arriving in Europe? Do they sing in Portuguese? In response to the first question, anthropologists like us feel forced to say: "Yes, we have no reasons to believe that spirit trance phenomena are constrained by national identity, particularly when it is well-known among Umbanda practitioners that spirits have never respected human borders in their never-ending spiritual growth path". In response to the second question, we respond that "the spirits arriving in Europe still adjust themselves to the traditional Seven Lines of Umbanda; although we have *guias* introducing themselves as Northern German sailors coming to *giras* in the line of *Marinheiros*²², French Gypsies killed by Nazis coming in the line of *Ciganas* and *Ciganos*²³, and Celtic Druids appearing as *Caboclas* and *Caboclos*. But this should be of no surprise for people studying Umbanda, both as professional academics or religious practitioners, since it is also well-known that a *guia* presents itself in the way that is most suitable for its message to be transmitted to a particular audience" (cf. Espírito Santo 2016). Finally, we respond "Yes. They do sing in Portuguese, although Portuguese is used as a ritual language, and only very few European Umbandists can extract meaning from what they sing or use it for communication as a natural language". When these questions and answers are considered in the context of current anthropological debate, the discussion almost inevitably goes in the direction of cultural transformation, adaptations, and, in its

²¹ According to the statistical survey of Inga Scharf da Silva, the community of Terra Sagrada consists of 85% religious practitioners with origin in Central Europe (29% Swiss, 39% Austrian and 27% German actors) and 5% Brazilian and 2% Portuguese believers, sometimes with dual citizenship (cf. Scharf da Silva 2021).

²² *Marinheiros* ("sailors") are the spirits of sailors in the Umbanda religion.

more politically engaged formulation, cultural appropriation. Isn't the growth of Umbanda in Europe just another example of European thievery and perversion of whatever they put their hands on? Isn't the filling of the archetype of a *Cabocla* or *Caboclo* with the image of a Celtic Druid a clear example of whitewashing this inherently *Cabocla* or *Caboclo* figure with an overly white content, thereby erasing the Blackness and Amerindianness that have defined these spiritual beings' existence for centuries?

Again, the immediate answer would be "yes"; however, other interpretative lines should be explored. As we have been well-informed for decades, every translation is culturally informed and the eye that sees is the eye of culture. We seek to explore a less intuitive perspective on the recent growth of Umbanda in Europe, emphasizing not the transformations and adaptations, but rather possible similarities and continuities, despite the evident changes. In this sense, if the efficacy of Umbanda spiritual trance is approached with reference to the traditionally hierarchical and racialized Brazilian social context, then how can its rituals and "hardly tangible" entities produce effects in the absence of this context in such a way that allows us to continue talking about "Umbanda" when so much has been changed, and what would be the precise nature of these effects? What is carried with Umbanda rituals to Europe, if not the totality of its symbolic content?

This idea of hardly tangible entities is conceived with reference to the proposal of framing spirits as intangible entities that have a social life, as discussed on in 'The Social Life of Spirits' (cf. Espírito Santo 2014). We apply the idea in this slightly different forma as a way to emphasize that these spirits are not always intangible, as Umbanda as we understand is all about giving tangibility to these spirits through ritual action. Therefore, they are only intangible for those who do not know how to materialize or grasp their particular type of existence.

Openly syncretic since its earliest beginnings, Umbanda merges elements and references from African rituals and mythologies still preserved in the more traditional religions loosely labeled as Candomblé with Brazilian Popular Catholicism and Kardec's French Spiritism, as well as references of South-American indigenous cultures and Brazilian popular imaginaries. Due to this particular mix in religious form, it is openly accepted in academic discussion that Umbanda reflects Brazilian social relations. Supporting this argumentative line, in 1978 Peter Fry described Umbanda as "a ritual dramatization of the principles that govern life in the large cities in Brazil" and "a 'subaltern Cult' that 'elaborates symbolically the social condition of the client'" (cited in

²³ Feminine *Ciganas* and masculine *Ciganos* ("gipsys") are the spirits of Sinti and Roma in the Umbanda religion.

Angler 2009, p. 465-466). Similarly, Patrícia Birman claimed that “Umbandist possession [...] is worthy of credit to the extent that it contextually invokes its relation with the world as experienced by its audience” (Birman 1995, p. 44-45, apud Angler 2009, p. 466). In accordance with these interpretations exemplified by excerpts extracted from classic anthropological research, Umbanda has always been understood as expressing Brazilian social, political and economic relations between black, white and indigenous people in a religious form (cf. Gonçalves da Silva 2000, p. 15), as well as providing tools for the people in that country to deal with the daily life struggles resulting from their immersion in a particularly racialized and discriminatory context.

In order to be made meaningful to its new European audience, Umbanda symbolic contents are being translated and adapted, whitened even, in a manner that could be seen as an unavoidable characteristic of this religion. Nonetheless, some elements seem to impose themselves and accrue from the very core of Umbanda ritual dynamic and theology. After all, who is possessing whom? Are the living Europeans stealing and misusing gods from third world countries, or are the African *Orixás* and Afro-Brazilian *guias* taking ownership of the European former Christians and atheists²⁴ who have now shifted their loyalties to foreign gods?

Built out of the particularly discriminatory Brazilian social context, Umbanda first emerged as a response to this context, a space where the poor and marginalized could have a ritual place and importance. Amidst of all the adaptations, Umbanda new European audience has learned that even the most dispossessed slave or prostitute (in reference to the *Pretas Velbas* / *Pretos Velhos*²⁵ and *Pombagiras*) have their knowledge and a message to be taught, and nowadays, every week, in different parts of German-speaking Europe, former Christians and atheists are offering their bodies to and learning from the messages of marginalized people that have otherwise never succeeded in affirming the importance of their particular perspectives in Europe.

It is striking that with the integration of Umbanda rituals in a western therapeutic clinical framework, due to the old establishment of white Christianity in Europe, much like the early practitioners, the new Umbandists are experiencing various restrictions on their religious practice. More than simple adaptation to a context, the refusal to talk about Umbanda to relatives and friends or its presentation as shamanism

²⁴ In Berlin, for instance, 70% of the residents describe themselves as atheists (cf. Hinrichs 2018) and 55% of the participants in Scharf da Silvas statistical survey of the Berlin actors of the Berlinian group of the *Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô* were socialized in a humanistic or atheist tradition (cf. Scharf da Silva 2020).

²⁵ (Feminine) *Pretas Velbas* and (masculine) *Pretos Velhos* (“black elders”) are the spirits of ancestors of old and enslaved African people from the Brazil colonial period.

resembles the first moments of Brazilian syncretism, when African-rooted religious practices had to be obscured under more acceptable names. Playing drums at night, depositing *despachos* on public spaces and engaging in trance rituals (even in private spaces) are once again socially unacceptable.

By becoming part of an Umbanda religious community in Europe, even with all the adaptations and eventual misunderstandings related to the specificity of its symbolic content, the new white Umbandists are forced into a situation in which perhaps for the first time in their lives they are experiencing a restriction on their freedom of practice and faith that closely approximate those endured by their Brazilian predecessors. Thus, there is a historical experience being transmitted with Umbanda practice that lies beyond meaning, but rather is anchored in the very core of the ritual practice in its emphasis on marginalized figures and trance. Just as the spirits of the *Pretas Velhas* and *Pretos Velhos* as spiritual personifications of old slaves and the *Caboclas* and *Caboclos* as indigenous spirits evoke the collective trauma of violence against Africans and indigenous people in Brazil, they remind the Europeans practitioners of the repressions of the colonial era and urge them to decolonize their thinking through Umbandist religious practice (cf. Scharf da Silva 2021). Ultimately, if Umbanda was first and foremost understood as a reflex of the Brazilian social context, in this new moment of its history we can see its power to trigger particular social experiences and thereby build context. Thus, besides all the adaptations to Umbanda content, we might once again consider McLuhman's argument that "the medium is the message" (McLuhman 1964) and explore religion beyond meaning.

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