

Umbanda and quimbanda: black alternative to white morality

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Abstract: Quimbanda is an African-Brazilian religious modality generally presented as a mere ethical and moral inversion of Umbanda that has been preserved through rituals made with spiritual entities that supposedly contest or reverse the prevailing morality. In this study, we followed rituals and collected interviews with priests in African-Brazilian religious communities, aiming to verify if there really is influence of an ethical standard from the surrounding society that could have moderated or modified subjacent African conceptions. Contrary to analyses that implicitly assume African-Brazilian cults as subjected to a single conception of morality, we found that the sacred experience involving Quimbanda and Umbanda is not attached to the prevailing morality, and that none of its manifestations can be properly described as amoral.

Keywords: African-Brazilian cults, ethnopsychology, psychology and religion.

Introduction¹

This article is the product of a research study carried out between 2011 and 2016 during a master's degree in Ethnopsychology, investigating social memory in an Afro-Brazilian context². We considered it impossible to understand human beings without knowing their specific psychological constructions, establishing bridges and contrasts between different ways of thinking, feeling and socializing (Lutz, 1983). In this field of knowledge and in its current state of development in Brazil, African religiousness plays an important role (Bairrão & Coelho, 2016). As an example, some studies have focused on an African conception of being that encompasses life force (Leite, 1995/1996); that seeks for prosperity, happiness and physical and spiritual fulfillment (Frias, 2016; Ribeiro, 1996; Sálami & Ribeiro, 2015), and is constituted by cultural elements that should be considered in health care practices (Ilori, Adebayo, & Ogunleye, 2014). The religious traditions derived from this origin offer an interesting contribution to the development of Psychology of Religion in Brazil (Bairrão, 2017; Paiva, 2002; Ribeiro, 2005).

What is proposed here is the revision of the assumption that the sacred experience involving Umbanda and Quimbanda would fit into antagonistic categories such as “good” and “evil”. These religions are described, even by their adepts, as having spirits that would generally fit into two large groups, the “right” and the “left”. Lying on the “right” line would be celestial entities related to light, while the “left” would encompass mundane entities, closer to humans. The essential division of cults and rituals has been interpreted by authors who study them as indicative of submission of “original” African religiosity to power and dominant moral rules (Lapassade & Luz, 1972). This interpretation is engendered in the tradition of analyses strongly impacted by the argument of a classic author like Roger Bastide (1973) concerning the strong influence of the western way of thinking in “macumbas”. According to these studies, the adaptation of this religiosity to the transformations in Brazilian society, especially in urban contexts, is understood as a way of disintegrating its roots. It is also noteworthy to mention the notion that Candomblé would have preserved itself culturally due to its isolation, whereas in the so-called “white” Umbanda there would be a de-characterization of the black model as well as Christian moral vigils.

To the same extent, it was interpreted that magical practices in the “black” Umbanda or Quimbanda would have been “whitened”, progressively moralized and replaced by the “Christian virtues” of the ruling class, according to Renato Ortiz (1991), something that was portrayed in title of the study as *A morte branca do feiticeiro negro* (*The White Death of the Black Wizard*).

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- 1 This article is dedicated to Agnaldo Moraes (*in memoriam*) and Emydgio dos Santos Netto (*in memoriam*), who left a great legacy to the African religious community of Ribeirão Preto.
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Although these authors value the elements proper to the religions of African origin, they seem to expect a sort of “purity” associated to the western way of thinking. Another author, Reginaldo Prandi (1996, 2001), who also affirms these ideas, describes Umbanda as attached to Catholic ethics, charity and altruism, contrary to its African origin. Candomblé, his main object of study, is described as a non-ethical religion, likely with grounds on a conception of ethics still tied to the Christian model.

Nevertheless, the nature of Umbanda would be less connected to rules and formalisms, closer to the field of orality and poetic spontaneity, as its myths and knowledge are narrated and constructed collectively. This characteristic is powerful in listening and transmitting memories (Zumthor, 1997) found in the Brazilian social imaginary. Through the meanings related to the body, enunciated by metaphors and metonymy in the form of colors, gestures, songs, dances and rituals, this religion reconfigures entanglements of historical experiences in the spiritual plane as a synthesis of Amerindian-African symbolic values, often ill-treated by culture dominant (Bairrão, 2005). In the Umbandist spiritual pantheon, no rigid boundaries or precise divisions are established, but instead a combinatorial network between Orixás, guides and catholic saints that compose an elaborate set, widely described in other academic studies³. A great number of its adepts would be constituted by peripheral populations (Brumana & Martinez, 1991), who, nevertheless, gained strength in the construction of rising social classes, affirming themselves socially and ethnically (Brown, 1985), which ended up leading to their growth in the last few decades (Negrão, 2009). Spirituality embodies popular values and re-signifies characteristics considered “lowly”, insofar as they appear in the “upper echelon” from Umbanda (Bairrão, 2005). This ability, that is to say, is due to Umbanda’s own inclusive ethics (Barros, 2013), which is built in the present and everyday life, psychically affirming itself as a collective language. The encounter between memory and social reflection seems to be an ability for encrypting unbearable pain in sublime reparations (Bairrão, 2004).

The demonization of the cult, especially in relation to entities like the Exus and their feminine version, the Pombagiras, seen by hegemonic society as a challenge to morality and catholic ethics, reproduces a history of systematic persecutions of terreiros, related to racial discrimination and considered antagonisms to modern life (Negrão, 1996a; Silva, 2012). The approach of Umbanda as Kardecist spiritualism is described by Camargo (1961) as a medium continuum, having at

its other extreme the Quimbanda, seen as closer to Candomblé. It is to be noted that the “white” pole and the “black” pole vary according to the position of its practitioners (Negrão, 1996a).

Its syncretism with other spiritualities is pointed out by Silva (2012) as protection for this discriminatory process, in which the spiritual entities would have developed a “double face”, sometimes displaying a more Catholic side by means of charity and identification with the saints, other times exposing an indigenous and African side, with sacred plants, occasionally referred to as demonic. Thus, this study sought to revisit the conception concerning the universe itself in Quimbanda based on a collection of empirical data, that is, discussing the previously presented arguments concerning the interplay between the Christian ethico-moral referential and elements more rooted in its African “pagan” origins.

Method

By means of a collective case study, data collection was conducted in two religious communities, with the approval of the Committee of Ethics in Research⁴, using ethnographic techniques, such as participant observation; records in field diary; and photographic, audio and video techniques. By participating in rituals, feasts and spiritual consultations, it was possible to circulate and engage in conversations with participants in informal situations, as well as with the entities incorporated during the cults. This kind of procedure indicates a deep insertion in the world perceptions and the forms of interaction of the communities, since it would not make sense nor would it be reliable to participate in the cult and not attend to a service. Coupled with the ethnographic model of research, “participatory listening” was adopted (Bairrão, 2005), as it is useful for listening to narratives said during the act, often prevented from being communicated directly through social repression, which is followed by “self-censorship” of the collaborators. Their aesthetic and sensorial manifestations were also listened to as narratives of the sacred. Thus, it was possible to comprehend the community as a whole, observing everything that made sense internally to its whole, such as the disposition of objects, gestures, thoughts, dreams, ways of life and events, paying attention to the complexity of religious experiences and their collective elaboration. The method lends itself to unveiling statements that are not necessarily reducible to words (Bairrão, 2011). In this way, inferences could be made about a sinuous knowledge that somehow “hides” from the general public, but shows itself in the eyes of tradition.

The position of letting oneself be interpreted and cared for by religious communities for five years has allowed the development of deep bonds and mutual

3 With respect to recent studies addressing the ethnopsychological meaning of Umbanda entities, consult Bairrão, 2005; Barros, 2013; Barros & Bairrão, 2015; Dias & Bairrão, 2011, 2014; Graminha & Bairrão, 2009; Macedo & Bairrão, 2011; Martins & Bairrão, 2009; Rotta & Bairrão, 2007; 2012.

4 Opinion number: CAAE 30472314.3.0000.5407.

trust. Certain characteristics from the researcher were relevant as an instrument for this interaction with the field, training her sensitive perception by knowing the specific forms of communication of the given context. The conviviality and free interviews with two eminent Umbandist leaders were of note: “Seu” Agnaldo, founder of the terreiro Pai Joaquim do Congo e Ogum Guerreiro, and “Seu” Emygdio. Both worked at the Mogiana railway company in Ribeirão Preto and shared valuable memories of their biographies for attending one of the first terreiros for Umbanda founded in the region. After their work, they held spiritual meetings around the train tracks, which contributed to the rescue of former elements of Afro-Brazilian communities. In the analyses conducted, we sought to focus on broader aspects than those related only to individuals, highlighting the data that were repeated in the communities and related to collective memory. In order to do so, the terms that appeared in the context were also used here, in order not to displace the knowledge status of the tradition protagonists themselves due to academic purposes.

Results and discussion

The name Quimbanda, often used as an accusation against Umbanda practices, is not limited to it, as there are groups calling themselves Quimbanda, the case of one of the groups analyzed in this article. However, in the context of Umbanda it is usual to refer to Quimbanda as the other par excellence (when referred to, it is defined as closer to Candomblé, or compared with another terreiro that would supposedly practice under the “false” denomination of Umbanda, or with regard to a problem understood as an entity attack of Quimbanda, or a ritual done with some purpose in a terreiro for Umabanda and disapproved by the other etc.).

Those who call themselves connoisseurs or practitioners of the Quimbanda describe that it requires a lot of “firmness”, that is, to be firm and thorough, which requires experience and knowledge. In Quimbanda, the spiritual entities of the left line—which in Umbanda usually occupy a very important position, although a subaltern and peripheral one that does not define the cult—take precedence. This line is described as “dangerous” and as such in Umbanda it is usually under the tutelage of the “right”, which informs the interlocutor about possible risks that need to be well known. It should be noted that some entities of this line present themselves as “street folk”, spirits of residents and street children, wanderers, prostitutes, rogues. . . . In this line there are also Exus, living entities of the realm of darkness, who in turn reveal the true aspects of people so that they can reconsider themselves and their own potential, representing the unknown in oneself, and being hostile against the discourse of the other and to domination attempts (Bairrão, 2002). Connected with pleasure, sex and material goods, it is understood that

their works have a “price” and behave as allies of those who seek them (Trindade, 1985), even if one would use raw and direct means and words for such, which would correspond to their commitment to their interlocutor, in one’s defense, but not necessarily to their liking. Instead of protectors, guardians and messengers, they deal well with human ills, with what is dark. It presents tortuous features (signaled as twisted body members) that do not subjugate themselves to the standards of civility that colonize and subalternize others, possibly being irreverently expressed (Macedo & Bairrão, 2011), which nevertheless requires seriousness and care during the ritual due to what they represent. Exu is also an Orixá in the traditional Yoruba religion (Sálami & Ribeiro, 2015), considered the lord of primordial force, dynamism, transformation and vitality, neither good nor bad, reigning over earthly designs and exchanges with the sacred when carrying orders and responses between humans and deities (Oliva, 2005).

In Umbanda, Exus are understood as spirits of disincarnated people with some qualities that make them closer to this deity. Pombagiras are also part of the left line, being entities described as representatives of the subversive and the feminine, that offer a symbolic place for carnal experiences, and ultimately for desire (Barros, 2013; Barros & Bairrão, 2015).

But not only Exus and Pombagiras make up the “left”, as this is a possible orientation present in the cult that can be shared by different entities of the pantheon. Other entities are also present in this line, such as Exus mirins, spirits of “terrible” or “infernal” children, in which evil is narrated as experienced horror and street experience. Their spiritual function is an inversion of those who have been victims of social exclusion and, after death, become “experienced” protectors of those who communicate with them (Bairrão, 2004).

In addition to the children, this line also includes some pretos-velhos. Dias and Bairrão (2014) explored the spiritual category of pretos-velhos da mata, supposedly spirits from ancient quilombolas, sorcerers (quimbandeiros), healers and rebels. Considered dangerous because of their magical knowledge, they call attention to subjective experiences of enslaved people, such as rebellion and insurgency, most often omitted or abbreviated in the most common description of the pretos-velhos (attributed to the right line and reported as humble, loving and patient). The pretos-velhos da mata represent the experiences of slavery at a time when “far from being defenseless and homogeneously obedient and submissive to servile labor and the disintegrating condition of slavery, many black people rebelled, fled their masters, and fought for freedom and autonomy” (Dias & Bairrão, 2014, p. 169).

This line can be constituted by practically all other classes of entities, including caboclos, making it clear in this religiosity that being part of the “left” is not a property of certain types of this spirituality,

but a mode of manifestation and action of any spiritual subjects. Thus, Quimbanda, although “obfuscated” and marginalized, often being practiced under the shadow of Umbanda, disguised by prejudice and social pressure, is enunciated in narratives and ritual acts, which will be described next.

“Seu” Emygdio

Many people sought Emygdio dos Santos Netto, “Seu” Emygdio, for spiritual care, 78 years old man (1939-2016) known in this religious environment as “quimbandeiro”. He attended one of the earliest terreiros for Umbanda in the region, for many years closely following the pai-de-santo known as Pai José, until he himself was qualified as a spiritual leader, dedicating much of his life to his own religious community, in appointments that occurred daily within a room in his own residence. The people who looked for him waited on the living room couch or in the yard before being called to the consultation. It is pointed out that in the terreiros, as well illustrated in this case, the carnal family is not seen as separate from the spiritual family. His filhos-de-santo and other relatives also followed him on the “giras”, which are spiritual ceremonies held in places like forests, waterfalls, crossroads, beaches, chapels or cemeteries.

The services were performed with the help of two entities: Exu Quimbandeiro and Exu Gato Preto, which give us clues for further reflection on the argument of assimilation of the Christian model. According to Ribas (1989), Umbanda means “art of healing” in Angolan etymology (Bantu languages), and in the same grammar, the prefix “ki” designates the agent, the one who ministrates, whereas “Kimbanda” is the person doing the “art of healing”.

The name of the Exu Quimbandeiro would be an adaptation of the African meaning “Quimbanda” to the Portuguese “o quimbanda”, or “quimbandeiro”, that keeps the same meaning and sound of “healer” (curandeiro). According to Temples (1959), in Bantu cosmology, the knowledge of the “*nganga*”, a spiritual authority or a fortune teller (p. 57), accompanies the use of sacred plants, the same thing Ribas (1989) described as being the agent that can cure diseases of the body or soul by rituals involving the living and the dead, offerings and “cleansing” used in all circumstances, serving to protect, bring benefits, and also “harms who is hostile” (19).

The name Exu Gato Preto would be related to the imagery of “witchcraft”, often referred to in police and criminal reports with regard to practitioners of Afro-Brazilian cults (Negrão, 1996a). One of its characteristics is “liking blood,” which concerns the flesh, the mundane, and can be understood as a taste for war, for confrontation. The signifier “blood” is associated with the red color and “fire” proper to Exus, and is also an element of connection between the carnal and the spiritual world (Slenes, 2011).

At the same time, this Exu states that anything can be asked for, as if it could address any needs. Its spiritual function would be to offer support and protection to its followers, in the face of challenges and fight against injustices, massacres, persecutions, and abuses of power. It must be noted that the spiritual conception of Umbanda is that every action brings consequences to the author, and this ritual responsibility requires that the subject who performs it be responsible for it.

For those people who did not know the routine of “Seu” Emygdio, when passing the closed gate of his house it would not be possible to notice that there occurred spiritual consultations. This subtle characteristic of his resembles the Omulu/Obaluaíê, an entity from whom “Seu” Emygdio is a spiritual son. In Nigeria, these two deities are different, and in Umbanda they usually merge and are recognized as related to medical practice, healing, and graveyard inhabitants.

As terreiros are generally open to the public, and a very peculiar religious conception can be observed in this form of “privacy” with regard to its surroundings, or even its opposite, a complete opening of the intimacy of rooms in a house to receive the consultants. As pointed out by Brumana and Martinez (1991), there is no separation between house and terreiro. The terreiros are called “centers”, with a Kardecian connotation, but they are also called “houses”, indicating in the own denomination of parents, mothers and children-de-santo the dimension of a spiritual family, in which not only carnal relatives are important within the framework of relations of closeness and trust. In this sense, another common characteristic in Afro-Brazilian spirituality is the secrecy dimension in relation to some ritual elements, determining the degree of initiation and commitment to the religion. In addition, discrimination against Umbanda, and particularly against Quimbanda, would have left its disguise or concealment as a mark, which is reflected in the conduct of some practitioners who opt for a kind of social invisibility, often being known in the neighborhood as “benzedeiros”.

One of the ritual practices we could participate was held in a forest (Figures 1, 2 and 3). “Seu” Emygdio incorporated Caboclo Pena Branca, a reference to Oxalá pertaining to the color white, and which also sounds like white “pemba”, a powder used in Umbanda and in Africa during Bantu rituals (Thompson, 1983). He is the one who crosses out pontos-riscados, which for Thompson (1983), similarly to pontos-cantados, are messages encrypted in visual and sound metaphors for “calling” spiritual entities. Despite this entity, the caboclo, being characteristic to the Umbandist spiritual repertoire, it is also manifested in Quimbanda, though in a distinct ritual arrangement, in the open woods.

Another ritual was held in the chapel of Cruz do Pedro, on a Friday night full moon, hour and day recommended for services of the left line. In this chapel (Figure 4) a rite without drums began, in harmony with

the characteristic of not drawing too much attention, trying to be the less noticeable as possible. This chapel is located in the rural area of Ribeirão Preto, above the tomb of the boy Pedro, a son of slaves who was brutally murdered for having stolen food. In memory of the miracles that occurred after this event, according to Molina (2012), this chapel is very important in the history of the region, although almost forgotten. Built on a large coffee farm, its bells were played in the morning as part of the routine of the coffee houses that supplied the Mogiana Railway. Away and difficult to reach, it currently congregates believers from various cities in the region, likely family members of the colonies, and it is where a pilgrimage takes place annually and a June festival is celebrated.



Figure 1. Place of the ritual in the woods

Source: Authors.



Figure 2. Place of the ritual in the woods

Source: Authors.



Figure 3. Pedro's Cross

Source: Authors.

At the opening, “Seu” Emygdio and his helpers lit many candles, illuminating the place. Asking for “strength” and “protection” to Orixás, a ponto-cantado was sung “calling” for the caboclos. A medium incorporated this entity, who “gave the healing touch” in the consultants with the use of a branch full of leaves. After this moment, a ponto-cantado was sung for the baianos. The pai-de-santo incorporated this entity, who also “gave the healing touch”, approaching happily each person, holding his hands and saying “I am Joaquim Baiano”. Another medium incorporated Virgulino Cangaceiro. The pai-de-santo then “received” Martinho Marinheiro, being delivered a bottle of pinga that he put under his arm and, afterwards, greeted everyone present, showing a drunken walk. Soon afterwards an “arrived” a preto-velho, and at the time the researcher was allowed to take a photograph of the entity (Figure 5), who went “away” after that.

Before the ritual ends, “Seu” Emygdio says: “now it will be what was not to be done here, but it will be right here regardless”. What “can not be done, but will be done regardless” in the chapel is the incorporation of the Exus. People were asked to stand outside waiting for the individual attendance that would be performed with the Exu Quimbandeiro, followed by the Exu Gato Preto.

In Umbanda, the cemetery and the street are places of worship for the left line, and a chapel is a typical place of the “right”. Here there was a reversal: the “left” was inside the chapel. The consultants waited for the moment of service in the open, under the light of the moon that

cleared the forest around. The cambone (ritual helper) explained that it was the “Exus, the indigenous folk of the forest” who protected them, therefore, caboclos quimbandeiros. That is, in this variant of the cult, the typical Exu gives the consultations (in a chapel!) and caboclos protect the outside (in this case, a forest, territory of caboclos).



Figure 4. Ritual inside the chapel

Source: Authors.



Figure 5. Preto-velho and consultants during the ritual

Source: Authors.

The forest, according to these spokesmen of the tradition, brings “more strength” to the ritual. Depicted in the indianism as a synonym of fertility and beauty, and as a historical stage of the massacres of colonization, the forest exalts indigenous people and with it a specific ideology of nation and freedom (Zilberman, 1994).

In addition to the forest as a ritual element, there’s also the importance of the chapel, which here is at the same time a tomb, over which there is a large cross stretched out on the ground. The cross is described in Bantu cosmology as the junction between the world of the living and the dead (Souza, 2002, Thompson, 1983). The two lines making up a cross form a crossroads, the meeting of paths, which in these cults is Exus’ territory, the ones who fulfill the role of “opening ways”, addressing the interlocutor with responsibility for walking. Under the “Pedro’s cross” lies a dead person, a small cemetery, where it is common for the so-called “soul cruises”, which in turn in cults like Umbanda are places associated with pretos-velhos. The symbolism of the cemetery is related to the sea, to “kalunga”, as well as to the ancestors (Slenes, 1992). The cross represents a complex set of memories and its connections with both Christian cosmology and African cosmologies, resulting in an active negotiation of Afro-Brazilian traditions between the “old” and the “new” world (Souza, 2002).

“Seu” Guina

Sitting next to Agnaldo Moraes, “Seu” Agnaldo (Guina), seemed to have a conversation with a preto-velho, but not in spirit, in “flesh and blood”. Grandson of an African man and a Brazilian woman, he attended during his childhood the “white table”⁵ with his grandmother, and in his youth he went to work at the Mogiana railway company. With the patience provided by his 85 years (1930-2015), he affirmed that “we always learn”, and he then told stories, always in the position of a master talking to an apprentice. When asked about his experience in religion, he narrated characteristics of different spiritual entities. When asked about Quimbanda, his answer was indirect, interrupted, non-linear, and with long digressions, reporting parts of his biography. By examining this form of acting in his community and its role in the tradition of transmission of knowledge, full of prohibitions, reveals the not well-defined separation between spirits and people.

The spiritual head of the terreiro founded by “Seu” Agnaldo, today directed by his daughter Rosemary (Meire) (Figure 6), is the preto-velho Pai Joaquim do Congo, entity of his wife and old mãe-de-santo, “Dona” Antonia (Tonica) (1928-2007). The pretos-velhos are conceived as spirits of former enslaved Africans, whose performance in Umbanda occurs through patience and humility. They represent the reversion of the one who suffered from abandonment and who, after being dead, became a caretaker. When associated with the quilombolas, they are residents and have deep knowledge of the secrets of the forest (Dias & Bairrão, 2014). Another spiritual leader of this terreiro is Ogum Guerreiro, deity related to iron, and consequently to railroads, in which

5 Spiritism session in Umbanda are known as “white table”.

both our collaborators worked. During the spiritual experiences of Quimbanda that “Seu” Guina performed with a group of friends, among them “Seu” Emygdio, after services he would do night meetings around the tracks of the train, euphemistically called “high magic”, wherein he requested for clairvoyance from spiritual entities⁶, and to get to know ritual and plant secrets. He mentioned that it is necessary to “please” the “left” of the person to whom one wants to fight or defend, stating that “you get your enemy in accordance with what he thinks is an advantage”. He and “Seu” Emygdio frequently visited the terreiro of Pai José. In his trajectory, “Seu” Agnaldo, spiritual son of Xangô, Orixá of justice, gave the blessing to those who sought him and was called by the community as grandfather.



Figure 6. Rosemary Rodrigues de Moraes, current mãe-de-santo
Source: Authors.

In his teachings he used to repeat: “Try to take care of yourself. Try not to harm anyone.” “Caring” is a daily practice and “evil” appears as an option for his listener. In his words, to do evil would be very easy, the “hard part” is to be “firm”, “keeping your head in place”.

6 “Seu” Agnaldo was not a possession-enabled medium, but stated being able to see and perceive entities. During his service, he sat in his wheelchair next to the congá (altar), most of the time with his eyes closed and his head lowered. He had spectacular vision and hearing. There were times when he would raise his head at the same time someone spoke or acted inappropriately, even though the person was at the other end of the room.



Figure 7. Agnaldo de Moraes
Source: Authors.

Umbandoquim

He emphasizes the trajectory of “Seu” Agnaldo, supervisor of spiritual justice, and of “Seu” Emygdio, defender of the most reserved cases, a history of two leaders (who in their age go back almost a century) with important experiences in one of the first terreiros in the region. The narratives in these traditional terreiros reveal a synthesis between the two poles of this spirituality. This knowledge imposes itself as responsibility and coherence in their own acts, and the steps of these leaders are the foundation for transferring their principles. There seems to exist an Umbanda specifically directed towards charity on the one side, wherein Quimbanda would be its demonic side; just as there is another possible manifestation of the same religiosity, a version through its interior, named by the words of “Seu” Agnaldo as being two sides of the same coin: “there is the Umbanda that is the right, the Quimbanda that is the left, and Umbandoquim that is two in one”.

In this way, we find in his words not only what is in practice a single conception of worship, but the term that denominates it. It is a long designation carefully protected from curious looks, perhaps because of the risk of fanciful derivations that the use of words and the trivialization of knowledge can bring to Afro-Brazilian cults.

According to “Seu” Guina, not only those who teach, but also those who learn have responsibilities. A ritual is a way of conveying this knowledge, the gesture and religious practice have meanings that pass through the sense organs and do not need to be explained, or perhaps there are often no words to translate them. He said that if “one has to be aware of the cause” one must “know what one is doing”. “Knowing how to do” means to have wisdom, knowledge, as well as being involved in action, to take responsibility.

In many oral traditions, doing is not distinct from thinking (Leite, 1992). As a sensitive and welcoming spirituality sustained in collective memory, these cults reveal a moral conception that cannot be understood in

linear manner, being more attentive to each case and to individuals than doctrinal rules. In Afro-Brazilian religions, the ritual is used for spiritual initiation, as well as with the purpose of solving the questions of life as a whole, which is defined by Negrão (1996b) as a “pragmatic moral” (p. 88) in function of the full satisfaction of human needs, which integrates the person and all their aspects of the past, present and future as re-signified and having a symbolic nature, including health-disease relations. These religions turn to the solution of problems for the benefit of their practitioners, especially as protection against the injustice committed towards marginalized populations.

The spiritual lines in Umbanda loop between “right and front, left and back” (Negrão, 1996b, p. 82), and although divided they may reflect a judgment of value that separates entities called “left”, often described in the level of discourse and of explanations based on prejudices as being lacking in character, this may not coincide with practice, in which they occupy a place in the ritual wherein an importance and deep respect is directed towards them, at a first moment being honored and effectively being in “front” of the most difficult problems and at the same time taking care of the “back”. When those entities are the ones to occupy a leadership position, in the case of Quimbanda, the religious structure, however, can remain anchored in the same apprehension of nature as well as the bodily, aesthetic, and symbolic senses.

The data found demonstrate the importance of this information. In a simple ritual regarding a resistant Quimbanda (commonly unnoticed or ignored by recording strategies incapable of apprehending its silent forms of expression), a certain contribution stands out that can shed light and allow to infer the ethical specificity inherent to this spirituality, through elements that are not captured by speech or doctrine, but are revealed through action. In this way, their rituals and practices can preserve socially repressed meanings that are transmitted through the body and enunciate implied historical and spiritual narratives (Connerton, 1989).

It should also be emphasized the fluid transit and the coexistence between Umbanda and Quimbanda, something not foreseen by analyses of ethnocentric nature, based on matrices of thought and morality unrelated to their reasons. The fact that they refer to another cultural model, of communicating through non-verbal resources, and to be less accessible to linear and excluding categories of thought, does not mean that they have disappeared. Today, in the middle of the 21st century, it is possible to observe through a historical perspective the misconception of the part of some authors, led by an analysis attached to the surface of what these cults show through a hurried look. According to this view, the Umbanda would not only be “whitened,” as it would be an opposition to the Quimbanda, apparently ostracized, that is, submissive to the assimilation of values of the dominant culture and increasingly distanced from its

African referents. Although the studies developed by this key are of great importance and constitute valuable contributions, considering their historical constraints and methodological limitations, they do not exhaust the subject. If we accept their presuppositions, we are condemned to think of Umbanda (and Quimbanda) using as parameter Christian morality, risking ignorance of their own ethics, reducing it to mere amorality. In contrast, if we take into account the difference resulting from traces of African culture inherent to this religious expression, it is possible to find in them an elaboration on the ethical question distinct from the terms in which it has traditionally been approached.

When analyzing the Quimbanda category, which is far from disappearing and is even practiced today in Ribeirão Preto, it is possible to observe that what was pointed out as disintegration of tradition was in fact a form of protection. The distinction between right and left, which appear as two variants of this spiritual practice, are not actually opposite. The line of “right”, the light, behavior tending towards righteousness, consciousness, and entities of the “left”, the darkness, behavior tending towards cunning, seem to be, in the eyes of the community, references to this same spirituality.

Quimbanda and Umbanda, which usually present themselves as distinct or as antagonistic practices, share symbolism and ritual paraphernalia representing two stages of the same religious conception. Although this division undoubtedly inhabits the conscious representations not only of that social portion that insists on demonizing Afro-Brazilian cults, but also sometimes of its own practitioners (and of some of its scholars), it does not correspond to the deep conception of this religious universe, usually silenced in its proper way of being, full of symbols and little being said in words and explanations about its own definition (perhaps because they are useless to those who have not yet understood their subtleties, as well as unnecessary for those who think and act within them). Quimbanda, on the other hand, reinforces the senses of contesting against the one who colonizes, struggling and resisting in face of power relations. It disregards social and moral laws from “above”, where unless some explanation on the use of the term as well as the comparison conditions are made, it is impossible to qualify it (neither it nor any other Afro-Brazilian religious practice) as amoral.

This solidarity between Umbanda and Quimbanda enables a spiritual experience that does not deprive or exclude humans from their integral characteristics, including the intolerable or the most fearsome ones, making each one responsible for their walk. The association between Quimbanda and the blackest pole, or witchcraft and even satanism, can be understood more properly as a function of the practitioner’s position in the system rather than with a fundamental distinction with regard to Umbanda. These spiritualities unfold in an

ethics of personal implication, adverse to the dichotomy between “good” and “evil”.

Final considerations

In addition to the doctrine and visible religious rites, there is a dimension of spiritual experience that is impossible to reduce to words and explanations, but which is transmitted through practice and silence. In this context, there seems to be no real opposition between Quimbanda and Umbanda, which unite in a unique experience reflecting the wide range of human intent and motivations, none of which is left out. These spiritual masters exemplify that it is preferable not to give it a name, but if necessary, it must gather in itself Umbanda and Quimbanda, according to the condensation proposed after many years of discussion, addressed only once by “Seu” Agnaldo: “Umbandoquim, two in one”. This continuum does not occur in the first place, especially in the form of an external rite. The passage from one and the other occurs at the heart of the experience and has a nature of choice. In Umbanda, there would exist a conception of nature seen as an aesthetic and a “correct” action, similar to a stone that is hard, firm and just; the herb that heals, that is medicinal; the water that cleans; the forest that protects and provides, etc. . . . In this interplay with Quimbanda, humans are the ones who act, an action wherein the same herb can be used to kill, the stone can be used to hurt, the water can be used to stain, the forest can be used to hide. This is not to say that Umbanda is good and Quimbanda is bad. When the person adheres to Umbanda, there is an adherence to its ethical and symbolic meanings, such as those of the caboclo, that is, rectitude, while in Quimbanda, the

person is not subordinated to that, but does not necessarily dissociate from it, nor even does the person oppose it.

Hence, it can be understood that there are cults with a certain kind of Quimbanda, while retaining similarity with Umbanda, which has unparalleled transparency and kindness, supported by a determination of the hearts of men, wherein righteous, faithful Exus and Pombagiras as good conjugal counselors manifest themselves, etc. They decide not good or evil, but rather the articulation between the system and the singularities of each individual involved in it. This would explain why there are groups in which the aesthetics is fully related to Umbanda, including the colors, meanings, the order of the ritual, and the religious entities, but is still considered as Quimbanda by third parties and by the practitioners themselves, since the focus is the intent of the practitioner and not so much an external form of the cult.

It can be said that, in all cases, there is no bottomless figure, and therefore the two are always one. There is freedom and independence in a heart “obedient” (firm) towards the rich nature, underlying the looping linearity of individual and personalist motivations. In this way, and perhaps for this very reason, right and wrong, good and evil, when determined in the absence of human sensibility and motivation, as well as their subjective truth, would be inadequate and unscrupulous categories and qualifiers, not due to a denial of their validity, but due to its inapplicability and impertinence in this context. The concept of a rhetorical subjection to dichotomies like good and evil, presumably excluding other conceptions of morality, is not valid in this case, and as such the attribution of amorality is not applicable, as it is derived from projections and fantasies of external observers who could not grasp its internal logic.

Umbanda e quimbanda: alternativa negra à moral branca

Resumo: A quimbanda, modalidade de culto afro-brasileiro habitualmente apresentada como mera inversão ético-moral da umbanda, preservou-se em rituais com entidades espirituais que supostamente contestam ou invertem a ordem moral vigente. Neste estudo acompanharam-se esses rituais e coletaram-se depoimentos de sacerdotes em comunidades religiosas afro-brasileiras, com o objetivo de revisar se de fato há uma pressão exercida por padrões ético-religiosos da sociedade envolvente que poderiam ter moderado ou modificado concepções africanas subjacentes. Na contramão de análises que implicitamente pressupõem a subordinação dos cultos afro-brasileiros a uma única concepção de moralidade, constatou-se que a vivência do sagrado implicada na quimbanda e na umbanda não atrela-se a essa moralidade vigente, e que nenhuma das suas manifestações pode ser corretamente descrita como amoral.

Palavras-chave: cultos afro-brasileiros, etnopsicologia, psicologia e religião.

Umbanda et Quimbanda: une alternative noir à la moralité blanche

Résumé: Le Quimbanda, une modalité de secte afro-brésilienne généralement présenté comme une simple inversion éthique et morale d’Umbanda, conservé dans les rituels avec des entités spirituelles qui sont supposés contester ou inverser l’ordre moral

actuelle. Dans cette étude, ces rituels ont été suivis et les témoignages de prêtres ont été recueillis dans des communautés religieuses afro-brésiliennes, afin de vérifier si, en effet, il y a une pression exercée par les normes éthiques et religieuses de la société environnante qui pouvait modérer ou modifier les conceptions africaines sous-jacentes. Contrairement aux analyses qui supposent implicitement la subordination des sectes afro-brésiliennes à une seule conception de la moralité, on a été constaté que l'expérience du sacré impliquée dans le Quimbanda et l'Umbanda n'est pas liée à cette moralité actuelle, et qu'aucune de ses manifestations peut être correctement décrit comme immorale.

Mots-clés: sectes afro-brésiliennes, ethnopsychologie, psychologie et religion.

Umbanda y Quimbanda: una alternativa negra a la moral branca

Resumen: La Quimbanda, modalidad de culto afrobrasileño y que generalmente se presenta como una mera inversión ético-moral de la Umbanda, conservó sus rituales con entidades espirituales que supuestamente invierten el orden moral vigente o lo contestan. En este estudio se acompañaron estos rituales y se recogieron declaraciones de sacerdotes en comunidades religiosas afrobrasileñas, con el objetivo de revisar si y en qué medida las presiones ejercidas por patrones ético-religiosos de la sociedad circundante podrían haber moderado o modificado las concepciones africanas subyacentes. Al contrario de los análisis que implícitamente presuponen la subordinación de los cultos afrobrasileños a una única concepción de moralidad, se encontró que la experiencia de lo sagrado involucrada en la Quimbanda y en la Umbanda no se vincula a esta moralidad vigente, y que ninguna de sus manifestaciones puede ser correctamente descrita como amoral.

Palabras clave: cultos afrobrasileños, etnopsicología, psicología y religión.

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