

**SPREADING AN ARCANES RELIGION ON THE WORLD  
WIDE WEB: PARADOXES OF TRANSMISSION  
OF THE CONTEMPORARY MYSTERIES' CULT  
OF UMBANDA**

*Introduction*

Umbanda is an Afro-Brazilian religion of esoteric and Bantu African shamanistic traits, which has come to exist by this name for about 100 years, after its emergence in the esoteric setting of a Kardecist circle in Rio de Janeiro, but whose essential structures are those of Bantu African shamanism superseded by the Yoruba (Nigerian) cultic structure and priestly form of organisation [Mattes 2004: 78 ff.]. It has preserved the African divine beings, its spirit entities, its modes of communication with them, its spiritual and religious functions, its hymns and rituals, its cosmology and anthropology are firmly those of African Traditional Religion. This applies especially on the structural level, whereas among the spiritual entities some Amerindian and European ones have been adopted.

It is both an African Traditional Religion, in most of its substance in doctrine, epistemic and ritual, and a religion of Esotericism, having been

adopted and validated as “esoteric revelation” as such since its emergence at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the emancipation of slaves in Brazil, and most markedly, in 1908, when Umbanda came to be acknowledged as revelation by a spiritual entity in a Kardecist circle in a suburb of Rio de Janeiro [Trindade 1991: 53 f.].

The result of this “esoteric reception” was that Umbanda - in substance a soundly African Traditional Religion – came to be reconceptualised as esoteric revelation by soundly de-Africanised spiritual entities. This paradox move probably helped Umbanda to gain acceptance in esoteric – mostly non-Afro-Brazilian – milieus. An imaginary transcendent genealogy of Amerindian and Portuguese transcendent masters, with lineages of historical incarnations in notable figures of Brazilian cultural history, was created, as is represented even in a more recent “History of Umbanda” written from an Umbanda perspective, by D. F. Trindade [Ibid.: 46 ff].

This move of Umbanda’s emergence as the adopted religion of esoteric milieus may be accepted as a sociological argument for Umbanda as an “Esoteric Religion”, regardless of the question to which degree its doctrinal and ritual substance agrees with established doctrines of European Esotericism.

### *On arcane discipline in the transmission of Umbanda*

Umbanda’s practises and doctrines have been transmitted orally. In spite of the literature in print and on the World Wide Web this is still upheld in principle. This has implications which we will look at.

Its professed membership comprises about half a million adherents, organised in some ten thousand ritual communities, its “terreiros”, each with a differentiated ecclesiastical structure, roles, rituals and participants.

Umbanda is a contemporary “mystery cult”, comparable and close to the mystery cults of antiquity, with arcane discipline of silence about its secrets. This quite opposed to a divulgation on the World Wide Web.

Umbanda is exceedingly complex as to its rituals and set of spiritual and divine entities as well as to the assumed correlations between different realms of reality, including rhythms and music. It has an enormous volume of ritual hymns. Its influence extends far into Brazilian society: about 15–20% of Brazilians participate in Umbanda rituals in customary

“double faith” practised in Brazil. Umbanda has a lively presence in music and the arts. Yet its inner core, the training and knowledge of those who fulfil active roles in Umbanda is guarded by secrecy.

It is based on the experience of divine “energies” and beings (“entities”) manifesting themselves physically and intellectually in trance through specific forms of dance movement, postures, and by mediumistic trance. Its initiates and initiated mediums are supposed to encounter the higher beings not by information, cognitively, but by experiencing them when they begin to manifest themselves in them during trance. Ideally “information” comes after “experience”.

Those who enter Umbanda can observe the forms of mediumistic trance and dance, and learn to discern divine beings and different classes of spirits by their specific manifestations. Learning by observation is possible. However there are stages in the process of initiation where this is minimised. Here the mentors discern the specific manifestations in trance and inform the initiates about their significance – reinforcing them.

The ideal is that all learning in Umbanda should take place in the context of ritual and mediumistic experience. The idea of Umbanda as a “belief system” detachable from ritual practise is utterly strange.

*On the significance of mediumism in Umbanda with regard  
to approaches in Science of Religion*

The issue of what the spiritual entities are understood to be influences the evaluation of the transformation of Umbanda by the internet. In particular different approaches to the interpretation of religion influence the perception and understanding of the process of transformation of Umbanda through its documentation and spread of its doctrines and in particular of its practises through the internet.

Basically an approach which understands religion essentially as a “belief system” more or less maladaptively developed to cope with “reality” (in a narrow materialistic sense of “reality”) will hardly grasp the implications of these processes. Any approach however which concedes a degree of “reality” to the mediumistic experiences and perceptions will pay attention to the effects of such processes on what Umbanda’s adherents hold to be the essence of this religion. In this respect Umbanda is of special

interest since the experience and mediation of “presence” of “transcendental entities” or “powers” is at the core of the religion.

In approaches to Umbanda informed by “Cognitive Science of Religion” any notions of “extra-personal agents” is disputed, as by E. Cohen [Cohen 2007] or by F. G. Brumana and E. G. Martinez [Brumana, Martinez 1989]. In their view “spirits” are nothing but culturally determined images of a symbolic self-representation and of social assertion.

A position which respects the claims of experiencing “transcendent” entities and their associated phenomena which indicate the presence of “transpersonal “fields” is reflected in the works of A. Jacquemot [Jacquemot 2002] and of L. Hale [Hale 2009] which carefully document them with attention to the full phenomenological and experiential aspects which are not omitted even where they elude (generally accepted) analytical tools. Here the scientific ethos of giving the phenomena precedence over the limitations of analytical means informs the documentations considerably.

The aspect of ritually induced “transcendence of the self” or more pointedly, of “Initiation and the Unmaking of Self” [Seligmann 2014: 142 ff.] is ignored in the perspectives of CSR and basically escapes them or is systematically suppressed. This tends to deprive studies of Umbanda based on “Cognitive Science” or on narrowly materialistic of Umbanda of essential elements of the phenomena. The epistemological issues and their impact on the documentation and understanding of the phenomena have been discussed by V. Turner [Turner 1968] with regard to similar phenomena in Bantu religion.

*On the concept of “self” and of spiritual entities  
in relation in Umbanda*

In this context one may remember the conceptual distinction of the German Late Idealist philosophy’s distinction, such as by J. G. Fichte and by Novalis, between the “empirical ego” and the “absolute Ego”, the latter perceived as divine, which created the conceptual space for the concept of the “Unconscious” of S. Freud and extended, by C. G. Jung [Ellenberger 1994: 199 ff.]. It is in this space that modern “transpersonal” concepts of self and of perceptions are situated. In this view the mediumistic initiation of Umbanda is an introduction into this space of a wider consciousness

and perception. Its designation varies – we may also recall W. James’ concept of the “higher self” here.

The practices directed to gain or to provide access to this realm are perceptibly shaped by cultural imagination.

Apart from Systemic and Psycho-analytic views newer theories about collective and transpersonal “fields” of consciousness might tentatively also be recalled [Kleinknecht 2011, *passim*]. D. Espírito Santo employs the concept of “extended Self” [Espírito Santo 2015: 267–285]. Her distinction between the “core self” and a “wider self” to which personal and alien spiritual entities belong, is a semantic designation which echoes the concept of “self” of C. G. Jung. The attribution of the spiritual entities to the “self” does not imply a limited concept of “self” as in materialistic psychological approaches.

*On the “apophatic” spiritual experience in Umbanda  
and the Orthodoxy: comparisons and consequences for interpretation*

To emphasise the significance of spiritual experience a comparison to Orthodoxy can be made. Orthodoxy insists on the “apophaticism” of the experience of the divine. This has been described by St. Gregor of Nyssa in “The Life of Moses”: “What does it mean that Moses entered the darkness and then saw God in it? <...> But as the mind progresses and, through an ever greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality ... it sees more clearly what of the divine nature is un contemplated” [Gregory of Nyssa 2007: ch. 162].

This notion of an experientially intense divine darkness is fruitful. It helps to move beyond those aspects of Umbanda which are culturally, psychologically and sociologically determined, relevant as they may be.

Accordingly direct observation, “contemplation” is necessary. In Umbanda ritual one can observe quite clearly when the mode of consciousness and the “locus of control” shifts from the conscious individual person to a perceivable “transcendent entity” in trance. The point of shift is clearly observable as well as its form of expression. To the observer it appears as if a different “person” is manifesting itself. This phenomenon can be researched methodically through rating by different, independent observers, as in psychology.

## *The significance of the ritual context in Umbanda*

These phenomena occur in the context of a “field”, which is constituted by:

- the ritual space in which the rite takes place, either in a consecrated temple or temple grounds, or within sites of nature – related to the specific deities;
- the musical “field”: of specific hymns and rhythms relating to the occasion and to the particular sequence of ritual, having perceptible “psycho-somatic” and spiritual effects;
- the field of ritual objects and proceedings;
- the ritual community;
- the “transcendent beings” manifesting themselves through their initiated mediums in particular;
- the time, the sequence, the sacramental means etc.

All of this induces the observable and perceptible “spiritual manifestations” central to Umbanda. It is a further indication that the understanding of spiritual entities cannot be detached from the ritual context.

### *On working towards trance: an illustration*

This is observable in a video recording of a sequence of a public ritual in the honor of Iemanjá at the sea-side in Brazil: “Pra Ver a Umbanda Passar” [Pra ver a Umbanda passar 2007].

In a structured process the mediums to work their way towards trance, enhanced by quite specific music and hymns, related to the festival of the “Lady of the Sea”, Iemanjá, whose colours, site and symbolism, as well as forms of dance rule the event.

### *On the interpersonal role of “transcendent agents” in Umbanda ritual*

A “gira”, a divine liturgy begins with an invocation of the supreme divinity, Olorun, to be present followed by a rite of incensing the altar, the temple and the participants. Then individual deities are invoked through hymns and special forms of dance.

Subsequently “mediums” enter trance, possessed by their mentor spirits. Then visitors can come to them for personal counselling and healing, spiritual and physical, by diagnosis and prescription of curative means, as depicted below. Here the spirits are believed to interact with the person and possibly a spiritual being of the consultant. This is the interpersonal aspect of mediumism.

This may be illustrated with the following images from a handbook of Umbanda practise (figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. A medium who has incorporated a spirit treats and counsels a visitor [De Campos Vieira, Saraceni 2009: 49]

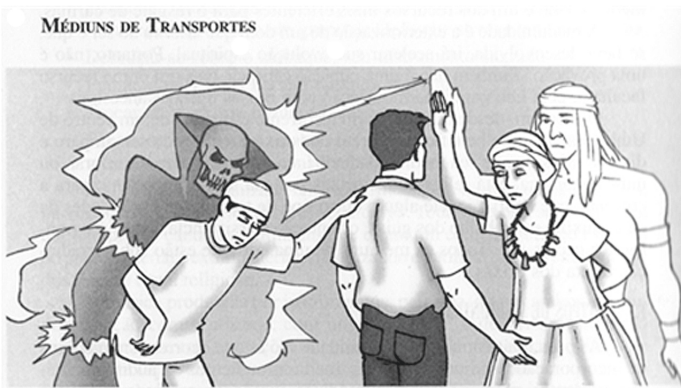


Figure 2. A “burdened“ visitor is aided with an assistant medium discharging an evil possession [Ibid.: 66]

These images illustrate the conviction of a double-layered reality where the “spiritual”, disincarnate and the incarnate beings interact in ritual. These images however do not only depict beliefs about what is happening. They have to be experienced – which is also accessible to the non-initiate in Umbanda to acquire existential meaning, so that these images might be drawn quite differently and yet convey the same meaning.

### *Transmitting Umbanda on the internet*

What may have become clear so far is that Umbanda can only be learnt to a limited degree through a study of its belief systems or of the motifs of those who seek spiritual counsel here.

Umbanda is learnt through practise, initiation and experience in the framework of a chiefly oral tradition and of ritual communities under the guidance of the leader of the ritual community.

How then does the internet influence this field?

### *The codification and “literarisation” of Umbanda in the World Wide Web impacts on the very structure and mode of initiation in Umbanda*

Due to Umbanda’s form of organisation in independent ritual communities (“terreiro”, “templo”), each is under the leadership of a fully initiated cult leader, the “Father” or the “Mother of the Holy”, the “Pai” or “Mae de Santo”, respective Babalorixa or Yalorixa, with no canonical scripture nor authoritative encompassing structure [Ibid.: 46 ff.]. Umbanda can be literally reinvented by every community leader. Theologically speaking, in terms of Umbanda, the “mentor spirits” of each terreiro teach and inspire the leader and the mediums and validate the tradition or reveal new inspirations. In view of this principle, the relative uniformity of this quite complex religion is astonishing. However it also frays out at the margins.

Formerly the ritual and doctrinal uniformity which had been safeguarded by culturally closed communities. After Umbanda’s emigration from these contexts, the internet has observably taken some functions:

1) It has supplanted the lost cultural community. A community of learned adherents has established itself on the WWW with discussions



many blogs, but of uneven quality. This is a new structural element, which counterbalances the strictly hierarchical organisation of the terreiros with their in principle absolute doctrinal and ritual authority of the Mae or Pae de Santo.

2) A rich literature and of many instructional videos has been created, sometimes produced by authoritative terreiros as of Norberto Peixoto<sup>1</sup>. In them essential topics of ritual, of mediumism, of theology, of philosophy and of self-interpretation are presented. In most of these videos the necessity of mediumistic ritual experience is emphasised. What some videos present however, are models of the natural sciences and of psychotherapeutic and psychological approaches to explicate the effects and beliefs of Umbanda. This might be called a “scientification” of Umbanda inscribing it into current anthropological discourses.

3) This is also observable in online journals of Umbanda, such as the “Revista UMBANDA – A Revista da Escola Iniciática do Caboclo Mata Verde” edited by Pai Manoel Lopes<sup>2</sup>. In both of these the Pae de Santo is no longer the only source of doctrine and knowledge but members participate in the teaching and interpretation of Umbanda too – with the endorsement by the respective ritual communities. Another example is the videos published as online-course [EAD: Doutrina e Cultura Umbandista 2015]. Out of these videos, blogs and online journals compendia and textbooks are created which contribute to a literarisation and canonisation of Umbanda doctrine and practise [Lopes 2014: 5].

4) This goes hand in hand with an academisation of Umbanda. The foundation of the first academic institution of Umbanda theology, the Faculdade da Teologia Umbandista, whose rector likewise publishes instructional videos<sup>3</sup>, as online-courses of instruction in Umbanda.

5) Factually a body of semi-canonical literature has been created in the course of just two decades which surpasses the literary production of

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<sup>1</sup> See Norberto Peixoto’s website “Grupo de Umbanda. Triângulo da Fraternidade”: <http://www.triangulodafraternidade.com/2016/05/o-sagrado-em-pombagira-o-aspecto.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See his website: Núcleo Mata Verde. Umbanda é coisa séria para gente séria: <http://mataverde.org/index.php?id=11>.

<sup>3</sup> See his youtube.com’s channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/pairivas/videos>.

the 20th century. The oral tradition passed on through the lineages of initiation within the terreiros has been augmented considerably. It is library of reference and also of critical judgement.

6) In this process, Umbanda is being re-traditionalised by scholarly reference to African traditions and their retrieval and inscribed into current scientific and esoteric discourses.

7) The creation of encompassing super-structures: They enable the creation of central networks, of associations and of common organisations. This is a structurally new element, whose long-term effects will have to be observed.

8) A dissociation of Umbanda knowledge from ritual experience. Ideally all learning about Umbanda was bound to communal and ritual as well as mediumistic experience and observation. This link is potentially severed in the internet community. It may create a development of Umbanda towards a religious community defined primarily through common beliefs, detached from initiatory learning and experience. This problem is reflected in some videos.

9) The character of initiation changes, if dissociated knowledge precedes experience. The constitutive element of the common “field” is altered. There is a shift from experience to the cognitive. An “immunisation by rationalisation” may happen as a defence against the unsettling mediumistic experience.

10) The rigors of a step-by-step learning in the initiation in Umbanda are bypassed to some extent through the internet. In some videos sequences of ritual are presented to make up for this dissociation.

### *Conclusion*

Umbanda is undergoing a significant transformation through its presence on the internet:

It has emerged from its contexts in traditional rural and urban communities, often of “marginal” communities, and from Afro-Brazilian traditions.

By this “emigration” it has lost its cultural contexts in which it was transmitted in continuity, together with the anthropological, social, cosmological and ritual web of practises and beliefs. At this point Umbanda could

be dying out, together with its traditional milieus; however, a fascinating process can be observed that its decidedly “non-modern” discourses, beliefs and practises are being transferred to esoterically inspired “dominant” milieus and are studied there, with introduction of new elements. Through the internet Umbanda extends its debates beyond its ritual communities and facilitates conversions.

It remains to be seen if Umbanda dissolves or recovers itself in this process. If this would work towards a transformation of Umbanda to a “belief system” something essential would have gone lost. Some debates on the internet show an awareness of this crucial point. This prevalence of spiritual experience is emphasised in a recent blog entry by N. Peixoto, head of the terreiro “Triângulo da Fraternidade” who is strongly engaged in the spread of Umbanda, declaring emphatically – leaving aside the inherent self-contradiction – that Umbanda cannot be codified because it is based in the experience of the divine which is open to individual interpretation: “A Umbanda, pelo fato dos milhares de terreiros existentes que a compõem, serem independentes entre si, se comportando como unidades religiosas autônomas e livres, não é doutrinariamente padronizada na Terra e cremos que nunca o será por vontade do Pai. Respeitamos incondicionalmente a mediunidade e as diferenças de interpretações do Sagrado emitidas por todas as lideranças umbandistas da atualidad”<sup>1</sup> [Peixoto 2016].

## VIDEOGRAPHY

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<sup>1</sup> “Umbanda, by the fact of the thousands of ritual communities of which it consists, who are independent among themselves, behaving like autonomous and free religious entities, is not patronized in a doctrinal way on earth and we believe that it never shall be, by the will of the Father. We unconditionally respect the mediumism and the differences in the interpretation of the Sacred, which is emitted by all of the present Umbandist leaders”.

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