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The Brazilians
NY: Addison-Wesley
1995

Chapter 14

The *Orixás*

Technically, it was not her first appearance on television. Cacilda de Assis had once taken part in a musical program on a Rio de Janeiro channel. But on this occasion, an August evening in 1971, as the forty-eight-year-old faith healer stepped before the camera, she was not quite herself. Wrapped in a black and red cape bearing the design of a lyre, a cane at her side, a cigar dangling from her lips, a bottle of *cachaça* (Brazilian rum) within reach, she was but a corporeal form through which an *exu* (pronounced ei-*shu'*) called "Seu Sete da Lira" reached out to the mass audience.

Most Brazilians know what *exus* are. A heritage of the nation's African descendants, the original Exu was a divinity who served as a guardian of temples, homes, and individuals, as well as an intermediary between the other *orixás*, or "deities," and mankind. Cunning, vain, and virile, he represented energy or life force. As Afro-Brazilian religious beliefs evolved over the centuries, Exu assumed multiple forms and came to embody mischievousness, trickery, and evil, which brought his persona close to that of the Devil of the Christian tradition.

Seu Sete da Lira undoubtedly had a good deal of mischief in him this particular night, when he took possession of Cacilda de Assis as she appeared on popular, back-to-back, live programs in front of a large studio audience and an untold number of viewers. The body of the forty-eight-year-old woman began to shake, as Seu Sete made her strut about the stage. The host of the TV program began to cry like a baby. A collective hysteria gripped the specta-

tors gathered in the studio of TV Tupi in Urca (once the site of a casino where Carmen Miranda performed) and spread to homes throughout the city. Soon hundreds of delirious, shouting people had gathered outside the studio and were besieging the auditorium, while a delighted Seu Sete da Lira sang Carnival songs.

These scenes might have leapt off the pages of a Jorge Amado novel, but they actually happened and had real-life consequences. Two viewers engaged in a violent argument over whether Seu Sete was male or female, and one ended up killing the other. Another viewer shot himself in the head with a pistol. Catholic officials protested that allowing Seu Sete to appear on television threatened the psychological well-being of the public and damaged Brazil's reputation abroad. Two state deputies who belonged to an Afro-Brazilian religion criticized the Church's criticism of Seu Sete. The military regime responded by taking steps to tighten its censorship of TV.

African religions have left a deep and permanent mark on Brazil's culture and consciousness. References to the *orixás* abound in literature, art, film, music, and the *telenovela*. Floats in carnival processions in Rio de Janeiro and other cities routinely include allusions to cult beliefs and practices. In her study of judicial records of the government repression of Afro-Brazilian religions during the 1930s, anthropologist Yvonne Maggie found that the judges were very familiar with the terminology associated with the cults, because they never had to ask what the words meant when they were used during legal proceedings.

Religious beliefs originating in Africa have penetrated every corner of Brazilian society. They have even attracted the descendants of non-Portuguese immigrants. In the deep south, some cults primarily draw members of German or Italian ancestry. In São Paulo there are cult groups composed almost exclusively of Brazilians of Japanese descent. Afro-Brazilian religions have even spread to Uruguay and Argentina.*

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* Indeed, José López Rega, the notorious "warlock" who was the power behind the government of Argentine President Isabel Perón in the mid-1970s, participated actively in one of the Afro-Brazilian sects.

People from all social classes belong to Afro-Brazilian cults. Businessmen follow cult rituals before making important deals. The poor find comfort and hope in places of cult worship. Engineers, lawyers, and other professionals often take part in cult ceremonies. Many government officials are quite candid about their ties to cults. Politicians in search of votes regularly court cult leaders. Celebrities such as Jorge Amado and singer Caetano Veloso are devoted cult members.

Every New Year's Eve millions dressed in white stream to the beaches of Copacabana and elsewhere along Brazil's long coast to leave offerings for Iemanjá, the goddess of the sea. In 1986 when the ninety-two-year-old Mãe (Mother) Menininha died in Salvador, two cabinet ministers, the state governor, and the mayor appeared at the wake to pay their respects to Afro-Brazil's most famous and revered high priestess.

Shops catering to worshipers are ubiquitous. In a book about the cults, Fran O'Gorman describes an informal survey she took in Rio de Janeiro: "Walking from Copacabana to Botafogo I once started counting the stores that sell Afro-Brazilian religious articles. I ended up with an average of one store per block." The signs of Afro-Brazilian worship are also ubiquitous. Offerings of food, drink, cigars, and makeup are left at crossroads, often in such profusion as to create trash-removal problems for city authorities. Oblational candles cast flickering shadows against certain walls, curbstones, and tree trunks.

In a country where 90 percent of the people list themselves as Roman Catholic, as many as one in three may participate actively at one time or another in some form of Afro-Brazilian worship. It is perhaps safe to say that all but a small percentage of Brazilians have at least a tolerant attitude toward the cults. Indeed, recent attacks by fundamentalist Protestants on cult members in Rio de Janeiro seem profoundly un-Brazilian.

The dynamic process by which African religious traditions have taken root and prospered in Brazil is a remarkable if exceedingly complex story. The *orixás* have survived the cultural genocide implicit in slavery as well as official campaigns to suppress them. They have found a congenial environment amidst the peculiar religios-

ity of the Roman Catholicism brought to the New World by the Portuguese and amidst the animist beliefs of the Brazilian Indians. The *orixás* are central figures in *candomblé*, the cult that has remained closest to its African origins, in *umbanda*, wherein the deities blend with elements of primitive Catholicism and French spiritism to form what some call the first uniquely Brazilian religion, and in a bewildering welter of variations.

Indeed, the African deities contribute heavily to, and in turn draw heavily on, an essential element of Brazilianness, a proclivity toward magic and mysticism. This trait has nourished such diverse contemporary unorthodoxies as the postmodernist cult of Santo Daime, whose members drink a trance- (and vomit-) inducing substance derived from a jungle plant (the properties of which were first discovered by Indians), and the colorfully costumed spiritualist sect that seeks cosmic energy in the Vale do Amanhecer (Dawn Valley) just outside the city of Brasília.

The Africa from which Brazil's slaves were uprooted was far from uniform in its levels of social, economic, and political development from tribe to tribe and from region to region; likewise religious beliefs and practices varied. The three main civilizations to which the slaves belonged were the Sudanese, whose territory extended from the southern part of the Sahara down the east coast of Africa (with concentrations in what is now Liberia, Nigeria, Dahomey, and the Gold Coast); the Bantu, which permeated the southern and south-central regions (mainly what is now Angola, Mozambique, and Zaire); and the Islamic, which had spread from the Niger Valley.

The Sudanese group, within which the Yorubans, the Dahomans, and the Fanti-Ashantis exercised predominant influence, practiced various forms of polytheistic religions in which the *orixás* assumed critical roles. Some of these divinities had been in life remarkable individuals—kings, warriors, wizards—and like all humankind they possessed certain powers, virtues, and foibles. When their first worshipers endowed them with supernatural powers, the deities assumed the capability to relieve mankind's feelings of panic and despondency.

These gods and goddesses inspired awe, reverence, confidence, affection, and fear. Their mysterious forces could work on nature to cure infertility, improve harvests, defeat the enemy, and solve

baffling crises. The deities were summoned when the irrational, the unbearable, or the unknown seemed to call for celestial intervention, and also when the cycles of life demanded it. The priests and their followers would pray, dance, and perform all the required rituals, and the ceremony would culminate with a chosen medium entering into a mystic trance. In this way a god would answer the worshipers' calls and possess one of the faithful as a way of addressing the congregation. The *orixá* would comfort the faithful, give advice, and predict what the future held in store.

The Bantu, a peaceful people, worshiped their ancestors and nature spirits. Their beliefs and rituals were closely bound to their immediate surroundings. Thus geographic dislocation severely weakened the foundations on which their religion rested.

The African Moslems were animists who had converted to Islam without completely abandoning their prior beliefs. They adhered strictly to the precepts of Islam—including circumcision, fasting, abstinence from alcoholic beverages, and the reading of the Koran—but they also used amulets and talismans possessing magical properties.

The blacks brought to Brazil came from each of these civilizations, because the slave merchants first raided coastal tribes and later ventured into the heart of the continent in search of their human quarry. Both on the slave ships and after their arrival in the New World, Africans were thrown together indiscriminately, a practice that generated friction, rivalries, and even bloody conflicts. Indeed, it is a wonder that the various religious groups did not self-destruct in the process.

What happened instead was that the peculiar features of slavery in Brazil facilitated not only the survival but also the evolution of African religious beliefs. The process has been remarkably dynamic. For the past four hundred years the African religions interacted with the Roman Catholicism of the Portuguese and the animist beliefs of the native Indians. They eventually assumed different forms in different regions of Brazil, and they have become a rich mosaic of ritual and creed. Although the Yoruban cult originating with slaves from the Sudan may have left the deepest mark on Afro-Brazilian religion, the influences of other sects from other regions, except for that of Islam, have remained vigorous.

One of the factors that helped African religions to survive was the sheer magnitude of the institution of slavery in Brazil. On the large sugar plantations of Northeast Brazil, Africans were so numerous that they could regroup, select their own "kings," fight or befriend slaves from other regions of Africa, and practice their own cults. The white masters were generally indifferent to anything other than the way their field slaves worked and reproduced themselves. Their attitudes toward the Africans ranged from racist condescension to thinly disguised fear, the latter a consequence of the numerical advantage the slaves had over the white population and the awe in which the Portuguese held the "black magic" associated with the slave quarters.

The slave owners actually encouraged certain African religious celebrations because they believed that their slaves worked better when they were permitted to play their drums and amuse themselves in their own peculiar ways. In addition, the slaves' dances appeared to provoke sexual arousal, which in turn would lead to the procreation of new generations of slaves.

The slave trade, for as long as it continued, also served to help perpetuate African cultural traditions. The traders often unwittingly included in their shipments of new slaves African priests and nobles whose presence in Brazil rejuvenated the religious and political hierarchies of the groups of slaves struggling to keep their identities alive in hostile, alien surroundings.

Plantation life revolved around the owner's family, which lived in virtual sequestration in the mansion or "big house," as it was called. The social structure was firmly and unabashedly patriarchal. The master exercised total control over every member of the household, as well as over the slaves and other laborers who worked in his fields.

The spiritual glue holding this vast conglomerate together was the Catholic religion. Every big house had its own chapel, and many had their own resident chaplains. The slaves, who were forced to undergo the Roman Catholic rite of baptism both when they were loaded into vessels in African ports and again on their disembarkation in Brazil, were never really instructed in the particulars of the faith. They were required to participate in Catholic rituals, although they remained outside the walls of the chapel and

merely watched. For them the magic of the white man's god had to be much more powerful than theirs, because the whites were absolute rulers in Brazil. Therefore, the slaves prayed to the god of the whites for deliverance, and they did so using their African ways and languages.

In the process the slaves juxtaposed Catholic and African religious symbols and adapted both religions to their own necessities. On African altars, likenesses of the *orixás* disappeared behind the statues of the Catholic saints. Divinities, saints, and guardian angels could be worshiped together because they had certain similarities. Africans could easily adopt patron saints and accept the notion of a guardian angel who looked over them, because they related to their *orixás* in much the same way that Portuguese Catholics related to their favorite saints and guardian angels—in a personal, heavily superstitious way.

There were parallels in the ways that Catholic saints acted as mediators between humans and God Almighty and the ways in which the *orixás* acted as the links between men and Olorum, the highest divinity in the African pantheon. There were also specific correspondences (some rather tenuous, others more obvious) between the functions or characteristics of certain saints and those of some of the *orixás*. For example, Ogum, the god of iron and war, could easily be identified with St. George. Iemanjá, the goddess of the sea and of fertility, was associated with the Virgin Mary. This process of syncretization turned out to be exceedingly complex because of the decentralized evolution of Afro-Brazilian religions. Thus, various cults matched different saints with different *orixás*.

Syncretization worked both ways. The Africans tinted Portuguese Catholicism black, just as whites incorporated African religious elements into their own religious beliefs and practices. The slaves copied from Portuguese Catholicism the tradition of petitioning the saints for favors in exchange for promises, but they attributed fulfillment of their appeals to the supernatural powers exercised by their own *orixás*. The colonists, meanwhile, absorbed some of the African traditions they learned from their storytelling nannies, and they often used magic potions or charms obtained from a local sorcerer.

Because masters had little interest in saving the souls of their slaves and there were not enough Catholic priests in the colony to enforce religious orthodoxy, the Africans remained free to view Catholic teaching through the lens of their own customary beliefs.

The syncretization of African religion and Roman Catholicism was not the only spiritual merger taking place in Brazil. Those blacks who ended up in the backlands of Northeast Brazil and in the Amazon region (mostly Bantus) encountered rituals practiced by people of mixed Portuguese and Indian blood *(caboclos)*. The latter had combined elements of Catholicism with traditional Indian beliefs. The cults that evolved from that mix tended to be messianic and permeated with the resentment the oppressed felt toward their oppressors. They used an initiation rite similar to baptism, carried crosses, and staged processions, but they also included Indian elements such as the practice of polygamy, the performing of songs and dances, the smoking of tobacco and the ingestion of sacred herbs, animist beliefs, mystic trances, and the consumption of a mind-altering drink.

The blacks who came into contact with these cults soon added their own ingredients to the religious observances. They brought with them their own spirits, who tended to be more playful than the proud, wild spirits of the Indians, a knowledge of narcotics (the Africans brought marijuana to Brazil), and the gift of divination.

In urban areas several factors enhanced the survival of Afro-Brazilian cults. Free blacks were able to live together in communities and combine their resources to help purchase freedom for their enslaved brothers and sisters. As the number of ex-slaves grew, it became easier for African religious beliefs to permeate the new enclaves.

Some free blacks saw in the religion of the whites a road to success in the mixed-race society that was developing in the cities. The Catholic Church welcomed them, but it imposed a type of de facto segregation on its flock. Special brotherhoods were created for blacks and mulattoes. They had their own chapels and their own rites, and they provided separate burial services for members.

By sponsoring these brotherhoods, the Catholic Church inadvertently nourished the continued growth of Afro-Brazilian religion. Blacks were permitted to speak their ancestral languages,

dance, play their own music, and worship dark Virgins and saints. The same people who attended brotherhood meetings by day participated in cult rituals late at night.

The cults deriving from each of the three major African civilizations represented among Brazil's black population had to overcome serious obstacles in the New World. The sophisticated polytheism of the Sudanese was based on lineage. Each believer had a private *orixá,* who was passed down through his or her father. In the sexual anarchy of the slave quarters, where women might have several partners in a single night, it was often difficult for mothers to know whose child she had borne. If the father was unknown, the child's *orixá* could not be identified. Therefore, other ways had to be devised for determining which individuals belonged to which divinities. In time it was decided that each person had one major and several minor *orixás.* The head of a cult was believed to possess the power to detect the particular *orixás* who protected a believer.

In Africa each major *orixá* had exclusive priests and exclusive temples. In Brazil this proved impossible because of the lack of resources. Hence a single temple had to do the tasks of many temples and provide the means for worshiping many *orixás.*

Moreover, a process of weeding out *orixás* had to take place. In Africa certain divinities protected crops. In Brazil there was no reason to pray to them, since abundant harvests enriched only the white masters. A shift in emphasis was inevitable, and greater attention was paid to *orixás* who might safeguard the faithful from the horrors of slavery.

The Bantus had problems transplanting their traditional cult of the dead. The breakup of family groups and the dispersal of family members to far-flung parts of the huge colony made it difficult to maintain a style of worship intimately associated with domestic life and the family. Some Bantus opted to believe that after death souls returned to their old "nation," where they either were reincarnated as free human beings or became divine ancestors—a conviction that encouraged suicide.

The animism and ancestor worship of the Bantus did not transfer well to a foreign environment (except in the Northeast and north, where the Bantus found kindred souls among the *caboclos*).

But their sensual dances did find a prominent place in the Afro-Brazilian culture.

The Islam some slaves brought with them from Africa eventually disappeared leaving nary a trace. Proud and puritanical, Brazil's black Moslem slaves resisted the encroachments of Christianity, remained apart from their African brothers and sisters, and refused even to proselytize them. They steadfastly resisted slavery, and many were either slaughtered or deported to Africa after an unsuccessful revolt in 1813.

Over time a variety of Afro-Brazilian religions gradually and ultimately took shape. In Bahia, where slaves of Sudanese origin predominated, blacks practiced what came to be known as *candomblé*. A version of *candomblé* that rooted itself in Recife was called *xangô*. Cults that emerged from a marriage of African religions with *caboclo* religions were given names such as *candomblés do caboclo*. *Macumba*, which combined *candomblé* with elements of black magic and Indian animism, became popular in Rio de Janeiro.

This is but a rough and highly oversimplified sketch of a number of religious developments the complexity of which has absorbed scores of anthropologists and scholars from other disciplines for nearly a century. It would take several volumes to describe and analyze all of them in depth. Two, however, merit a closer look: *candomblé*, the popular Afro-Brazilian religion that has remained close to its African origins; and *umbanda*, a more recent phenomenon that qualifies as the most Brazilian of the cults.

Kept alive in the collective hearts and minds of peoples unwilling to abandon their cultural heritage and values, what came to be known as *candomblé* survived and adapted despite having been torn from its life-giving sources, having to exist in a social environment that forced it into clandestinity, and having to compete with other creeds.

A critical stage in its development was the founding of the first known place of formal *candomblé* worship in downtown Salvador in 1830. The location was a small house behind the Church of the Barroquinha. Members of a black brotherhood associated with the church administered the cult. It operated in daylight as well as at night, followed a calendar of specific ceremonies, worshiped in ac-

cordance with a prescribed liturgy, and was controlled by a defined hierarchy.

The abolition of slavery in 1888 stimulated the proliferation of overt *candomblé* temples. They became centers of solidarity for blacks struggling to overcome social and economic barriers and the sense of atomization they felt as they had to make their way in society at large. Freedom meant losing the structured life slaves were used to, as well as the slave master who served as a father figure. *Candomblé* provided a refuge, a source of mutual assistance, and a substitute protector, in the form of the cult leader.

Over the years *candomblé* has continued to serve as a vital support in the lives of black Brazilians, even as increasing numbers of nonblacks have joined *terreiros* (*candomblé* temples). Indeed, the sight of middle- and upper-class whites prostrating themselves before a black cult leader has served to enhance the self-image of Afro-Brazilians.

Although *terreiros* may be found in the crowded residential districts of Salvador and other cities (the cult has spread to both the north and south of Brazil), some of the older temple complexes closely replicate African villages in form as well as in spirit, and for this reason they tend to be situated in wooded areas on the outskirts of town. The design is simple and functional: a large main hall where the principal ceremonies take place; lodgings for the high priest or priestess and others who live on the premises; various shrines dedicated to the *orixás* (a small house with a padlocked red door belongs to Exu; the house of Oxum, the queen of rivers, must be near a fountain, if possible). The shrines of Iemanjá and Oxalá, two of the most important of the *orixás*, by tradition are installed in the main building.

The initial phase of most ceremonies requires the actual sacrifice of animals (principally goats, chickens, and pigeons), a ritual to which, for obvious reasons, only initiates are admitted. Both the blood and some of the cooked meat of the victims are offered to the *orixás*. The rest of the meat is consumed in a communal meal. The beating of drums then heralds the beginning of the main service, at which visitors are welcome.

The congregation gathers on benches around an open area. On one side are the drummers and a throne for the high priest or

priestess, called the *pai* or *mãe do santo* (father or mother of the saint). There are special chairs for the *ogãs,* special friends and protectors of the *candomblé* (often prestigious whites, whose presence in ceremonies dates back to the period when *candomblé* was persecuted by the authorities and needed protection). Against one wall is an altar with likenesses of Catholic saints.

The opening ritual involves placating (and getting rid of) the troublesome Exu. A glass of water and an offering of food placed in the center of the floor accomplishes this end. Then the initiates, known as *filhos* or *filhas do santo* (sons or daughters of the saint), enter in procession and perform certain prescribed rituals, which include dancing and chanting in Yoruban or a related African tongue. They dress in costumes (some evoking the colonial period) whose colors and accessories match the divinity to whom the *filha* or *filho* is dedicated.

The focal event is the appearance of *orixás* who take possession of participants. At the essence of *candomblé* is the very personal relationship between the initiate and his or her *orixá.* During ceremonies, the *orixás* will "mount" various *filhos* or *filhas do santo,* who thereupon become the *orixá*'s "horse" and enter into a trance. These are dramatic episodes. The person possessed will shake convulsively, scream, gyrate wildly about the room, and flop to the floor like a rag doll. The voice and movements of the medium will become those of the *orixá.* The subsequent departure of the divinity also follows certain ritualized steps.

The trance, according to some observers, has always provided a way for worshipers to resolve the tensions besetting the slave, and later the free Afro-Brazilian. It permits believers to identify with their gods and thereby shed, at least for the moment, the sense of inferiority imposed by slavery and racism. The trance also represents an affirmation of faith in the power of the *orixás,* and in ancient traditions passed down from generation to generation.

For whites *candomblé* creates a similar sense of relief from tension, a welcome state not only for those struggling with poverty but also for middle-class Brazilians beset by financial difficulties and other strains of urban life. In addition, the absence of notions of sin and guilt within the Afro-Brazilian religious context has appealed to many. An affinity for the supernatural has such deep roots in Brazilianness that Brazilians have been able to easily reconcile

the contradiction between rationality and spiritism. Jorge Amado, for example, had no problem belonging to both the Communist party and a *candomblé* temple. (He ultimately left the party.)

To become a *filho* or *filha do santo* and to qualify to receive an *orixá* takes months of training. Aspirants must live at the *terreiro* for a fixed period of time and learn the various chants, dances, myths, and taboos. This religious training will prepare them to behave in accordance with the personality of the *orixás* who will one day take possession of them. They must also find some way, either on their own or with the help of friends, neighbors, or ad hoc "godparents," to defray the cost of the prescribed costumes and animals to be sacrificed during their final initiation rites.

The *filhos* or *filhas do santo* occupy the bottom rungs of a complex hierarchy. The high priest or priestess of each *terreiro* is the *pai* or *mãe do santo,* who serves as a kind of ambassador to the land of the *orixás* and a keeper of ancient secrets. The *pais* or *mães do santo* exercise total control over their domains. The faithful consult them about everything. The high priests foresee the future and dispense all kinds of advice. Officials in charge of particular ceremonies occupy intermediate positions within the *terreiro.*

The early efforts of the Catholic Church to encourage those elements of Afro-Brazilian religion conceivably consistent with Catholic doctrine and to purge the irreconcilable elements were not particularly successful. Over the course of time *candomblé* has taken advantage of Catholicism more than Catholicism has used *candomblé.* Members of the cult are encouraged to belong to the Church. Indeed, Mãe Menininha insisted throughout her lifetime that she was a Catholic in good standing.

One of *candomblé*'s major feast days brings a huge multitude every January to the front of the Church of Nosso Senhor do Bonfim (Our Lord of the Good End) in Salvador. A group of white-clad *filhas do santo* perform a ritualized washing of the steps, in homage to Oxalá, the *orixá* identified with the Lord of the Good End.* Periodically Catholic Church officials have announced that they would no longer tolerate what they viewed as a sacrilegious

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* There is a vivid description of the event in Jorge Amado's recent novel, *O Sumiço da Santa* (published in English under the title *The War of the Saints*).

use of Church property. Each time they have found it prudent to back off from their threats.

Cut off from their source, the African religions transplanted in Brazil evolved quite differently from those that remained on the other side of the Atlantic. They incorporated elements of Catholicism and Indian animism, yet at the same time they maintained traditions deeply imbedded in the collective memory of Brazilians of African descent. According to Pierre Verger, a white-haired Frenchman who has lived for three decades in a humble neighborhood of Salvador and has closely followed Afro-Brazilian religion, the rituals are better kept in Brazil than in Africa. Indeed, he insists that "Brazil is now the Mecca."

Yet there are signs of a movement to re-Africanize the Brazilian cults. Travel between Brazil and Africa is on the increase, and individual Brazilians are making the trip and bringing back with them a wide range of religious articles. Moreover, some of the *terreiros* have become wealthy because they have acquired a middle-class congregation willing and able to pay for certain religious (and magical) rituals, so *pais* and *mães do santo* have been able to afford to cross the Atlantic. In addition, there is a burgeoning interest in learning contemporary African languages. (The Yoruban used in *candomblé* rituals has become archaic, like the English spoken in certain remote parts of Appalachia.)

The most significant aspect of the re-Africanization trend is the movement to extirpate from *candomblé* all traces of Catholicism. But the decentralization long characteristic of *candomblé,* whereby the head of each *terreiro* has wide discretion in all matters except for hierarchical structure, ritual, and language, provides a buffer against these efforts, which would change the very essence of the religion by eliminating its Brazilian elements.

Umbanda, in contrast, glories in its Brazilianness. This twentieth-century sect was born in Brazil and incorporates quintessentially Brazilian myths and symbols. Yet it also draws sufficiently on the country's African religious traditions to qualify as an Afro-Brazilian religion.

Umbanda has traveled a tortuous path. Its immediate roots date back to the 1850s, when a Frenchman who claimed to have been

possessed by a Druid spirit adopted the name Alain Kardec and wrote a number of books that launched a new spiritist cult. Kardecism was the highly rationalized belief in the existence of incorporeal beings in interplanetary space, and in the possibility of communicating with them. Because of its emphasis on Christian virtues such as charity and universal brotherhood, followers were required to engage in philanthropic enterprises. The cult also imposed strict moral standards on believers. The gospel according to Kardec attracted intellectuals inclined toward parapsychology as well as individuals eager to make contact with departed relatives.

Kardecism found fertile ground in Brazil, where it gained numerous converts during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Kardecists kept their distance from the Afro-Brazilian religions, which they considered a "low" form of spiritism. The white middle-class Brazilians who joined the cult, however, gave it a new wrinkle. They shifted its focus to curing, so that spirits were summoned to alleviate members' physical as well as spiritual ills.

In the 1920s novel offshoots of Kardecism came into being in Rio de Janeiro, Niterói, and São Paulo. Scholars dispute which of these cities may rightfully claim credit for having been the birthplace of what amounted to a new cult, but this seems of little real import. What matters is that Kardecist mediums began to claim that they were summoning different kinds of spirits representing deeply rooted elements of Brazilian culture. From this trend emerged *umbanda,* an intriguing projection of both Brazilianness and the nationalism that was gripping the country in the 1930s.

Although *umbanda* disavowed any link to the Afro-Brazilian religious tradition, in fact it was greatly influenced by *macumba,* the variant of *candomblé* that had achieved considerable popularity in Rio de Janeiro. *Macumba* emerged among the increasing concentration of blacks in and around Brazil's capital. It was less faithful to its African roots and more susceptible to syncretization with folk Catholicism, Indian animism, and even Kardecism itself. The spirits of long-dead Africans and Indians as well as *orixás* made appearances in *macumba* ceremonies.

Umbanda applied the rationality of Kardecism to elements of *macumba.* The animal sacrifices and wildly ecstatic trances of

macumba were eliminated. The *orixás* were recognized and venerated, most spectacularly in the December 31 rituals honoring Iemanjá. But African gods did not put in appearances at cult sessions. Instead mythical figures from Brazilian culture occupied *umbanda*'s pantheon.

The most important of these came by way of *macumba.* These mythical figures are known generically as *caboclos* (in this context, the word means "Indians") and *pretos velhos* (old blacks). Within each category may be found a number of individual spirits, each with a particular name and history.

Caboclos represent both a romanticized notion of nature and the myth of the Brazilian Indian as a noble savage. The *caboclo* is proud and hyperactive, always on his feet, always puffing on a cigar. He likes to shout and beat his chest and gesture as though he is shooting an arrow. In the words of *umbanda* scholar Patrícia Birman, he is a "veritable lord of the jungle." Often he wears a headdress that has nothing to do with Brazilian Indians, but instead comes right out of Hollywood westerns—a curious contemporary spin on syncretization. The *caboclo*'s name will generally relate to the place from which he comes, or his tribe.

The *preto velho* depicts another Brazilian stereotype. He smokes a pipe, walks slowly with a cane, often wears a straw hat, and speaks bad Portuguese. Bent with age, he is a fatherly or grandfatherly figure, kind, humble, generous, and submissive. He represents the ex-slave who loyally ministered to his master and his master's family in the big house. There are female versions, too, embodying black women who became surrogate mothers, aunts, or grandmothers for the whites they served.

If the *preto velho* embodies notions of home, civilization, and the "good Negro," on the reverse side of the coin one finds perhaps the most intriguing of the *umbanda* spirits, the *exu.* In the African religious tradition, Exu was an *orixá* representing life force. *Candomblé* turned him into a trickster who sows disorder, more demigod than divinity. *Umbanda* viewed Exu in the Christian context, and he became a type, rather than an individual deity, identified with the Devil or the fallen angel. His image became unabashedly Mephistophelean, complete with black cloak, horns, turned-up moustache, and satanic grin.

As *umbanda* spread to the lower classes, the *exu* figure underwent yet another reinterpretation, and it came to represent the quintessentially Brazilian antihero called the *malandro.* This figure originated in the slum-covered hills of Rio de Janeiro. A hustler who invents his own rules, the *malandro* often dresses in a white suit with a striped shirt and spats or white shoes. He is ambiguous, in the sense that he operates on society's margin, somewhere between living by his wits and outright criminality.

Some of the *exus* in *umbanda* cults frequented by the poor appear as *malandros.* They wear the typical *malandro* garb and help people escape from difficult situations. They will listen to all kinds of appeals (even requests to have negative things happen to the petitioner's enemies). From time to time, efforts have been made to rid *umbanda* of the *exu-malandro* character, but without avail. As Liana Trindade, a scholar who has written on the subject, has observed, "People say: 'How can I throw him out? He's a part of me.'" The popularity of Seu Sete da Lira attests to the staying power of the *exus.*

Not wanting to neglect the distaff side of society's fringe, *umbanda* features a female *exu,* called the *pomba gira.* She represents sensuality and rebelliousness and takes the form of another familiar figure from Brazilian culture— the prostitute. The *pomba gira* wears red and black. In some of her incarnations she likes to make obscene gestures and use dirty words. But there is also a *pomba gira* called Maria Padilha, a seventeenth-century Spanish courtesan of noble birth. People ask the female *exus* for advice relating to love.

Umbanda has continued to demonstrate its flexibility by incorporating other spirits drawn from folklore. One can find gypsies, sailors, cattle-drivers from the south, and backlanders from the Northeast in some of the lower-class cult centers. There seems to be room for everyone.

Each temple has a high priest or priestess (also known as the *pai* or *mãe do santo*) who exercises the same kind of absolute authority as the counterpart figure in *candomblé* does. However, it is easier to attain this leadership status in *umbanda* than in *candomblé,* where it usually takes about seven years. As Lisias Nogueiro Negrão, another student of the cults, has observed, regarding *umbanda,* "When people believe in you, you become a *pai do santo.*"

Umbanda sects also have their equivalent of the *filho* and *filha do santo*. They dress normally in white costumes with turbans and beaded necklaces, and they serve as mediums, along with the *pai* or *mãe do santo*, receiving the various spirits that possess them during ceremonies.

Umbanda temples are known as *centros espíritas* (spirit centers) or *tendas* (tents) as well as *terreiros*. The interior layout of the main hall is longitudinal, more like a Catholic church than a place of *candomblé* worship. At one end is a main altar, decorated by statues, paintings, flowers, palm leaves, candles, and other religious objects. In front of the altar is a space where the ceremonies are conducted. A barrier separates the ceremonial space from the rows of benches for spectators, who are often segregated by sex.

The rituals of *umbanda* vary depending on the tendency of the particular branch of the cult. They may be closer to what is practiced in Kardecism, or to *macumba*, or somewhere between the two. The services open with rites designed to protect the temple from evil. The burning of aromatic herbs purifies the premises. The *pai* or *mãe do santo* may pray or preach. The mediums sing songs to the spirits associated with the group. If the temple is located in a highly populated area, the beating of drums may be forbidden, and the rhythm may have to be kept by the clapping of hands.

The main part of each session unfolds when the various spirits descend. The *pai* or *mãe do santo* is the first to be possessed, and the other mediums then receive their "saints." The possession of the medium is not nearly so dramatic in *umbanda* as in *candomblé* ceremonies. The worshiper in a trance will do some spinning and adopt the characteristics of the "saint." Thus, when a *caboclo* is received, the medium (whether male or female) will generally light up a cigar.*

At this point, members of the congregation go forward and consult with one of the mediums. They generally seek very practical advice about problems relating to work, marriage, health, or any other type of personal matter. The spirit will suggest offerings to be made and courses of action. The responses are down-to-earth

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* Seventy percent of Brazil's internal market for domestically produced cigars goes to *umbanda* centers.

rather than moralistic. Some spirit centers will charge nonmembers for consultations.

Although the *umbanda* sects insisted that they were a national rather than an Afro-Brazilian religion, they suffered persecution during the 1930s when the government decided to repress manifestations of black culture. The sects survived, and when the situation eased, they sought a rapprochement with the authorities. Since cult leaders were perceived as controlling the votes of their followers, politicians began to woo them once democracy was restored in 1946.

After the 1964 military coup, when the Catholic Church became the main source of opposition to the military dictatorship, *umbanda*'s brand of nationalism, and Brazilianness, found favor with those in power. Some *pais do santo* received decorations from the regime. State governments included *umbanda* feast days on their calendars and invited *umbanda* representatives to official functions. Suddenly the cult had gained legitimacy.

Although *umbanda* believers have traditionally defined themselves as Roman Catholic, they now have a growing tendency to see their sect as a bona fide religion in its own right, on a par with the other established creeds in Brazil. One manifestation of this trend is the performance of marriage ceremonies in *umbanda* temples, a relatively recent occurrence.

Afro-Brazilian religions share as common traits diversity, decentralization, and a lack of clearly defined dogma. In these respects *umbanda* is no different from the rest. There may be as many as ten *umbanda* federations in the state of Rio de Janeiro alone, and not all of the estimated forty thousand spirit centers in the state belong to a federation.

This diversification has facilitated the emergence of phenomena such as Cacilda de Assis, who in her heydey operated an enormous "Spiritist Tent" in the Fluminense Lowlands, where tens of thousands of believers would gather to welcome Seu Sete, as he entered Cacilda and sang popular songs, sprinkled *cachaça* on the faithful, and cured the sick and the disabled.* How much money

* Even Assis Chateaubriand, after suffering a severe stroke, visited Cacilda's tent and had Seu Sete blow cigar smoke on him, in an effort to achieve a cure.

Cacilda herself made from all this is uncertain, but weekend sessions generated a tremendous demand for food and drink, which were sold on the premises, and someone had the savvy to produce *cachaça* and glasses bearing the mark of Seu Sete. The *umbanda* establishment eventually frowned on Cacilda, and Seu Sete eventually lost his appeal, but the extent to which official disapproval contributed to his decline is uncertain.

The dividing line between *candomblé* and *umbanda* can be difficult to draw. As Patrícia Birman noted in a 1992 interview: "I have been to rituals I would have sworn were *candomblé*, and the people there said it was *umbanda*." Obviously there appears to be a certain amount of leeway for improvisation at the intersection of the two cults.

Yet at the same time the two sects seem to be on the verge of heading in opposite directions. *Candomblé* is evidencing a trend toward returning to its African origins and removing all traces of Roman Catholicism and Indian animism. *Umbanda* continues to display remarkable flexibility and pragmatism in its ability to incorporate the concerns and aspirations of Brazilians. In so doing, it has become a projection of Brazil's urban society.

Beginning in the postwar era, *umbanda* made substantial gains at the expense of *candomblé*. But with the emergence of black consciousness in the late 1970s, the tide shifted in favor of *candomblé*, and a number of *pais* and *mães do santo* from spiritist centers switched to *candomblé* and took their flocks with them.

More recently a new dynamic is underway, as *candomblé* and *umbanda* worshipers from the lower classes have been abandoning their Afro-Brazilian faith to join Christian evangelical churches. Alma Guillermoprieto, in a perceptive *New Yorker* piece, has pointed out that the appeal of Afro-Brazilian religion has been "to imagine an alternative reality better than the present dreary one," but that "to a large extent the evangelical sects' genius is to have helped their followers *change* reality." How this has come to pass merits a closer look.