

On Earth
as It Is in Heaven
Religion in Modern Latin America

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Pretos Velhos in Brazil: The Old Black Slaves of the Umbanda Religion

Lindsay Hale

Like those of indigenous America, the beliefs of Africa have also permeated popular religion in Latin America—particularly in that long crescent stretching south from Louisiana through the Caribbean and down the Atlantic coast, reaching deep into Brazil, where slavery once brought millions of Africans to the New World. The circumstances of their journey meant that Africans carried none of the material substance of their religion to America, but they were nonetheless able to bring the metaphysics of African cosmology to the New World in their bodies and souls. While Spanish and Portuguese masters demanded that their slaves conform to the external rites of Catholicism, they generally did not put the kind of effort into converting or educating Africans that they did for Indians, on whom the religious rationale of the Conquest rested. Considered by Christendom to be the heretical Children of Cain, for Africans a superficial conversion was enough. As a result, Africans were able to effectively shroud their beliefs within Catholicism. African gods and goddesses assumed the names and some of the attributes of Catholic saints, for example, while the sacred directional cycle of life came to be rendered in something that resembled the Celtic cross; and African cosmograms appeared as Christian symbols on walls and tombstones.

Slaves came to Latin America from all over sub-Saharan Africa, but the religion of the Yoruban people of West Africa bears the greatest influence in the Americas, although a fair amount of Congolese belief is also apparent. This influence persisted not only because West Africans were the largest group sent to the Americas in the waning days of slavery in the nineteenth century, but also because Yoruban beliefs had just begun to

From "Embodied Ethnicity: Old Slaves and Indian Mermaids in Brazilian Spirit-Possession Religion" (unpublished paper, University of Texas at Austin, 1991). Reprinted by permission of Lindsay Hale.

spread across West and Central Africa to non-Yoruban peoples during the same period. As a result, paradoxically, one finds in African religion in the New World a cohesion and continuity that is not found in Africa itself. Many of the basic identities, characteristics, and iconography of deities are relatively standard throughout the Latin American regions of the African Diaspora, as are many of the ritual practices. Thus, Shango (Santa Barbara), the god (goddess) of iron, is evoked in much the same way in Cuba as in Brazil; and the essential rituals of animal sacrifice, drumming, and trance are found as readily in Haiti as in Bahia—or in Miami and New York.

Because African religion has such strong cultural resonance, it is enjoying a revival in parts of Latin America today—particularly in Brazil, where the faiths known as Candomblé and Umbanda derive in some measure from a fusion of African, Christian, and sometimes other—such as Indian or Spiritist—beliefs and practices. Candomblé is considered by its practitioners to be the “most African,” Umbanda the “most Brazilian.” As Lindsay Hale, an anthropologist and umbandista initiate, suggests here, Umbanda consciously fuses African references to folkloric figures and to archetypes that are distinct to Brazil, thus creating a corpus of belief that is uniquely Brazilian. In this text, the interview subjects are the archetype/spirits themselves who “mount” (or possess) the bodies of the Umbandista faithful, spirit possession being an essential element of West African ritual and belief.

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On my last night in Rio de Janeiro, Pai Joaquim gave me his pipe. I had come to say goodbye for awhile to this rugged old sorcerer from Angola, to drink a little sweet red wine and cinnamon from his battered old black bowl before I received his blessing. It was nearly midnight and I had been at the *terreiro*¹ since seven o'clock. I had already taken leave of several of my best spirit-friends. I had said goodbye to Maria Redonda and Maria Congo, the two old slave women who understood everyone's problems and made their own rustic wisdom and maternal love and painful memories understood despite the fact that their speech was peppered with Bantu words and confusing sound substitutions. Pai Benedito, as always, talked to me about my research and told me that as I entered the next phase, the writing, my path might sometimes be steep and rocky but it would always be open. I went to see Rei Congo, and he prayed over me and cleansed me, reciting an extemporaneous poem full of images of waterfalls and seashores and moonlight falling on the forest, the forces of nature that would protect me and make me wise. We said together the

prayer that he had taught me almost a year earlier, when I had first come to sit with him in these slave quarters.

I was relieved that I would be leaving on a Tuesday and not a Thursday; that way, on my last night I could say goodbye to the old Black slave spirits and not to the cowboys and Indians, who work Wednesday nights. That would be better for everyone. Saying goodbye is a sentimental passage, and it would be better to negotiate those emotional moments with the talkative and gentle old slaves than with the taciturn and tough cowboys and Indians. The Cowboy of Time once told me that “this cowboy is not one for talking much; my herd is moving on and I need to be raising dust.” And not one for mush and tears, either. Better not to see White Feather or Golden Mountain or the Cowboy of the Slave House or the Cowboy of Time or Seven Feathers with tears in their eyes, or for them to see me that way. No, better to think of them as they imagine themselves: strong and proud and forever young, roaming the moonlit forest and the blue sky where one star shines.

But it went easier than I expected. I kept my composure; I felt myself go misty no more than a half dozen times. One time was with the lady who ekes out a living selling coffee and snacks at the *terreiro*. She used to be a medium, but Seu Moura gave her permission to stop when her health deteriorated to the point that exertion became dangerous. She has diabetes and a weak heart, and sometimes her feet swell enormously because of her failing circulation. I would always buy a few cups of coffee from her and we would chat before the session started. Sometimes I would sit by her during the ritual because she sang the hymns, or *pontos cantados*, very clearly so that I could transcribe them. She always called me “O Senhor” (Sir). I gave up on trying to get her to address me less formally when I realized that it was important to her that the American friend who always asked her opinion and her explanation to be a *senhor*, and not *João Ninguém*, or “John Nobody,” as they say in Brazil. We were talking about the fact that her home is three hours away by bus and train from the *terreiro*, and that she always spends the night there because it is impossible to return at all after nine at night. I tried to pay her for my coffee, but she informed me that my money was no longer any good. We sat on the rickety bench in silence for awhile. There was nothing more to be said.

And then there were a few moments with Maria Congo, when she was telling me how much her *cavalo* (horse; that is, the medium who receives Maria Congo) and her *cavalo*'s husband love me. I thought back to evenings we had spent sitting in their apartment, drinking beer and chatting; they reminded me so much of my parents, and I knew how much I would miss them. But that passed, and Maria Congo asked me something that had been on her mind for awhile. From what I had observed, did

it seem that when spirits incorporate in persons of "this color"—holding her forearm to mine and pinching her dark skin—that they come with more force, with more grace, than when they work through mediums of "that color," pointing to my skin? I had to agree that of the mediums who impressed me the most, only one was white. And I knew more white mediums than Black, or mulatto. She giggled and told me that Umbanda is African; white people can be children of faith, bless their hearts, but their blood and their bodies do not remember African ways.

And then it was nearly midnight, and Pai Joaquim would soon be leaving Seu Moura's body. Most of the audience had left. Pai Joaquim had already gotten to his feet and was leaning on his cane when I reached him. He was on his way to the *fundamento* (foundation), the slab in the dirt floor under which are buried certain sacred objects. Pai Joaquim would kiss the *fundamento* before departing to Aruanda, the home of the Umbanda spirits. Pai Joaquim refers to this *fundamento* as the *raiz*, or root, meaning not only that structure beneath the floor but also the knowledge upon which everything at the *terreiro* is based. Many times I heard Seu Moura, or one of his spirits, address the audience and the personnel of the *terreiro* and explain that this root was planted by Pai Joaquim from Angola, and it is from this planting that the faith and truth of Pai Joaquim have taken root right here, in this holy house and in this slave quarters and in this dust where we walk. The *preto velho* (old Black) came from far away indeed, to save children of faith. Pai Joaquim repeated the story one more time, for everyone and no one in particular. He had his *ekedi* (ritual assistant) pour me some wine, and, stooped over his cane, sometimes with his free hand on my shoulder or on my neck, he described me to everyone as someone who came from far away, a man of learning and manners and intelligence, who had the humility to sit in the cold dirt at the feet of an old Black slave and learn the truth that Pai Joaquim had brought from Angola. To be humble, to pass in front of no one else, to not be grand because he who is grand is our father Oxalá, those are the virtues. He told the *ekedi* to bring him the case with his only pipe, and he gave it to me and blessed me and told me to follow my path. . . .



In Umbanda, a Brazilian spirit-possession religion, participants known as *mediuns* (mediums) incorporate spirits of various kinds. These include African deities, known as *Orixás*; colorful, more or less decadent, sometimes demonic spirits known as *Exus*; the spirits of Indians, called *caboclos*; and the category discussed here: the spirits of old Black slaves, known as *pretos velhos*. This article focuses on Umbanda as expression,

as an active process in which participants utilize resources such as Orixás and spirits, myths, secrets, songs, gestures, and places to create spiritual meanings that speak to their circumstances and their selves. I focus on Umbanda not so much as an object or system of beliefs and practices, but rather as idioms, and poetic ones at that, used by people to mediate life and make it meaningful. These Umbanda idioms are means of engagement—engagement with self, situation, feelings, and the possibilities of being within the context of Brazilian culture.

A major concern of this meaning-making is ethnicity. This is not surprising. Perhaps in no other country are the issues of race, color, national identity, and self as thoroughly ambiguous as they are in Brazil. Historically, the issue has been framed in terms of the three "original" racial components of the Brazilian population: the European, the African, and the Indian. In contrast to the United States, where practice and discourse have constructed a problematic of separate and unequal ethnic groups, with national identity defined almost exclusively in terms of white culture—with "the other" safely distant, on the other side of the tracks or on a reservation on the other side of nowhere—in Brazil the key theme in racial discourse has been miscegenation, both cultural and biological. There is a sense in which "the other" is within; the standard belief is that even the "whitest" Brazilian has at least a drop of African blood as well as a drop of Indian blood, and in most Brazilians, far more. This belief has led to a recurrent occupation with one question: What does it mean to be a "mixture" of European, African, and Indian blood and culture? . . .

This question is especially poignant for two reasons. First, because it is a question with a rather unpleasant history. For many intellectuals of previous generations, the question has been posed as the answer to another question: Why does Brazil lag behind the civilized, that is, Euro-North American, world? To be part African and Indian, in race and culture, is to be inferior, the theories went; these writers saw the enemy, and it was their grandparents and lovers—and their own Brazilian culture, with its nonwhite traits, its African sensuality and fetishism, its indigenous acquiescence in the face of a deified natural world. On the other side of the coin, there were romantic novelists and poets who created counterimages of the noble savage and the wise, good African. But they were novelists, appealing to the heart and the senses. It was not until Gilberto Freyre, writing in the 1930s, that the non-European contributions were positively valued, at least by a social theorist who captured the interest of a large Brazilian audience. Despite the overwhelming acceptance of Freyre's position, ambivalence about, even opposition to, the African and the Indian remains a corrosive presence.²

The development of Umbanda from the 1920s has in large measure been a story of ambivalence concerning African blood and culture. One may argue that Umbanda is the product of a concerted effort at “whitening” African Brazilian religion by suppressing those aspects of ritual that referred to the “barbaric” African tradition. This argument is weakened by the fact that it ignores the strong presence and valorization of African elements by many *Umbandistas* (practitioners of Umbanda), such as those at Pai Joaquim’s *terreiro*, but the basic tension that they identify is undeniable. This tension surfaces in Umbanda discourse, especially in the speech of, and about, the old slave spirits. What is said in regard to this varies greatly depending on the *terreiro*, the person, and his positioning vis-à-vis class structure and life experience.

Second, the question concerns the person at the level of self. Everyman’s question, “Who am I?” always implies a certain play with alterity, with alternative models and versions of the self. In Brazil, the national myth of miscegenation and the fusion of three cultures provide a language for talking about the self in terms of ethnic others, both ancestral and within. In Umbanda, these issues are a constant presence. Roger Bastide and Diana Brown, in particular, have discussed Umbanda in terms of national identity.³ They have argued that the old slaves and Indian spirits can be understood as rather thin metaphors of Brazilian identity. For them, the old slaves and Indian spirits are signs of Brazil, flat reproductions of racial stereotypes. I do not disagree with them entirely, but here I hope to build on their suggestion by demonstrating that these thin metaphors—ethnic spirits—are actually versatile sign vehicles that *Umbandistas* employ to link deep sentiments, the ineffable, personal history, and culture. These Indians and old slaves may indeed be based on stereotypes, but what emerges as *Umbandistas* develop these ethnic figures is at times an eloquent poetics of alterity.

This study takes a somewhat poetic look at old Black slaves and seeks to grasp the images and resonances that their speech and action evoke while focusing on what that speech and action do. While for some readers “poetics” may imply a loose and vague attempt at “interpretation,” let me point out that the empirical data of ethnography are, for the most part, no more than what we see and hear people saying and doing. A poetic perspective is one that addresses this saying and doing in terms of its emotive effects and devices. My poetics, such as it is, looks at what *Umbandistas* say and do in terms of evocation and linkage: What do these spirits make present? What moods do they set? Where do they take the ritual moment? And what are their linkages to other realms of discourse, such as folktale, myth, literature, popular religion, and popular culture, that spirits refer to and resonate with?



Umbanda is largely concerned with constructing and managing different ways of being, both in the world and in the cosmos. What is most interesting about Umbanda, from a sociological perspective, is the way that this construction of otherness is utilized, by individuals and groups, to establish—and to comment upon—differences in terms of location and identity in social space. What old Black slaves say and do, and how they say and do it, and what people say about their saying and doing all express real differences among *Umbandistas* as to how the world is and was, and how it ought to be.

Before proceeding, a brief description of my sample is in order. I observed a number of *terreiros*, but I focused my investigation on four groups. I cannot say that the sample is exhaustively representative, but it does constitute an interesting range of variation, both in terms of positioning of participants, and the stylistic differences present in Umbanda.

1) Dona Zélia’s. A seventy-six-year-old widow, Dona Zélia has been practicing Umbanda for nearly thirty years. She used to be the *mãe de santo* (literally mother of the saint, or religious leader) of a medium-sized Umbanda *terreiro*. Dona Zélia told me that the commitment of time and energy became too much for her. She now practices Umbanda in the bedroom of her apartment in Copacabana. Sessions are held weekly. Her nephew Arnaldo, who works for the navy, practices with her along with another medium, Dilza, a forty-five-year-old postal employee who is taking law courses at night, and Elis, a *cambône* (ritual assistant) in her twenties who works with Dilza. Dona Zélia comes from a traditional family that has seen its income diminish over the years. Her standard of living is comfortable, but by no means wealthy. The clients who consult spirits at Dona Zélia’s are about equally divided between longtime friends and members of the family, and persons who have heard about her through mutual friends.

2) The Spiritual Center of Pai Joaquim from Angola. Pai Joaquim’s *terreiro* is larger than the other three. Twenty mediums practice there on a fairly regular basis. The leader of the group, Seu Moura, comes from Pernambuco, in northeastern Brazil. He became seriously involved in Umbanda about thirty years ago, when he was an airline employee and Rio was his home base. He went through a period in which he would find himself, in the middle of the night, barefoot and shirtless, at the beach or in a cemetery, with no idea of how he got there. It turned out that his Exu spirit, Tranca Rua, was taking him on these excursions. Pai Joaquim then sought help from a *pai de santo* (father of the saint).

Pai Joaquim's attracts clients and mediums from all social classes, but the majority are not well off. In contrast to Dona Zélia's, the style of ritual at Pai Joaquim's is very "African." Many of the songs are in Nagô (Yoruban); the African deities known as Orixás are a major focus of ritual; animals are sacrificed to Exu and the Orixás; and the traditional African drums, the *atabaques*, are played.

3) The Tent of Tupinambá. This *terreiro* is directed by Dona Cesa, who also works with Seu Moura at Pai Joaquim's. It is located in Rocinha, the enormous slum on the other side of the hill from the wealthy Gávea district of Rio de Janeiro. The ritual at Tupinambá's is in many ways similar to that at Pai Joaquim's, but Dona Cesa distinguishes her practice as *Umbanda pura*, while characterizing Pai Joaquim's as *nação* (nation), which means more traditionally African.

Dona Cesa is presently training several young women and a young man to be mediums. She holds training sessions on Sundays, which I was privileged to attend, and public sessions on Thursday evenings. Her *terreiro* is a small room, indeed too small for the dozens of poor clients who come to Tupinambá's. Recently, the community council granted Dona Cesa a plot on the edge of Rocinha on which to construct a proper *terreiro*.

4) Casa São Benedito. Dona Linda, Casa São Benedito's leader, considers the ritual at her *terreiro* to be the epitome of *umbanda pura*. There are no drums, the African Orixás are interpreted as being "vibratory frequencies," and the *terreiro* itself is a monument to squeaky-clean middle-class aesthetics. Participants strongly contrast their Umbanda with African or African-Brazilian religion. Casa São Benedito is the oldest of the four *terreiros*; the present building was completed shortly after World War II but has seen several remodelings. Plans were first laid out in 1937, when Dona Linda, then twenty-three, was visited in the forest one day by an old Black slave by the name of Pai Joaquim.

In its heyday, Casa São Benedito was larger than Pai Joaquim's. There were as many as forty mediums on the membership list, and "charity"—that is, public sessions—were held three nights per week. That was in the days when Dona Linda's husband, an entrepreneur in the shoe industry, was the father of the saint. He died ten years ago. Now Dona Linda, who does not have the strength to carry on her husband's level of activity, works with five mediums, three of whom are in training. One of the mediums in training is married to a general. One of the full mediums is Dona Linda's daughter, who is married to a retired colonel; this daughter's son, an engineering student planning a military career, leads the singing in the *terreiro*. Some say that someday he will assume his grandfather's role as leader.

Pretos Velhos

The Pretos Velhos present a striking contrast to the Caboclos. These "Old Blacks" are the spirits of Africans enslaved in Brazil, generally slaves from Bahia. All are elderly, and they are named and addressed familiarly and affectionately in kin terms: *Vovó* (Grandmother) or *Vovô* (Grandfather), *Tia* (Aunt) and *Tio* (Uncle), *Mãe* (Mother) and, less often, *Pai*. They are characterized as humble, patient, long suffering, and good. Umbanda leaders repeatedly stressed to me their *humildade* (humility), *bondade* (friendship), and *caridade* (charity) and tended to characterize them as subservient . . . more precisely, Uncle Tom.⁴

I must admit that I was feeling a little frustration in talking to the *preto velho* Rei Congo (Congo King). I just could not get the kind of life history data, or the trenchant comments about race and slavery and ideology, that I was after. During my previous fieldwork, in 1986, I had the good fortune of working with Dona Zélia, a remarkable medium whose spirits were very articulate and full of detailed stories of their experiences here on Earth. But Rei Congo was simply impossible. His autobiography was a closed book. All I could get out of him was that he was a tribal king from the Congo (I gathered as much from his name) and that he was a slave somewhere in Brazil. He told me that he knew very little, not as much as the other *preto velhos*, but he would teach me what he could. He told me about herbal remedies and different kinds of baths to cleanse myself of the pollution of this world and of the envious, bitter thoughts of others. He also told me about charity and not wanting anything in return for helping others. Indeed, he became indignant at the thought of taking money from clients, telling me that it was wrong to sell what God gives freely, that is, mediumship. But that it warmed the heart of this *preto velho* when a client would give him a twist of tobacco or a bottle of sweet red wine to enjoy as he worked down in the old *senzala* (slave quarters; the *pretos velhos* referred in this manner to the *terreiro*). In short, Rei Congo was a wealth of information about everything but what it meant to be a *preto velho*.

On top of that, Rei Congo was very difficult to understand. Like other *preto velho* spirits, his vocabulary included a number of terms that are not part of standard colloquial Portuguese. To drink, *beber*, became *plim plim*, onomatopoeic perhaps for the sound of dripping water or the bobbing of the Adam's apple when swallowing; pipe, *cachimbo*, was *pito*, the standard word for whistle, to give but two examples. It seemed as though every other noun became either a "this," a "that," or a "that there." *Voce* (you) was *sunce*; *eu* and *mim* (I and me) were both *eshe*, and so forth. The sounds of standard Portuguese were regularly changed as well: *for*

became *fro*, *s* tended to lateralize out to *sh*, and final *rs* were dropped along with final syllables and definite articles. And he stuttered, although his medium, Seu Mané, spoke fluently. His language, his speech, his crippled body, his incessant spitting on the floor—Rei Congo was broken in body, humble in spirit, and rustic in manner. I stayed with Rei Congo and talked with him every week for three reasons: the other *pretos velhos* usually had so many clients that I felt uncomfortable about taking up too much of their time; I was learning a lot from him, most important the language of the *pretos velhos*, which would come in handy should I find a *preto velho* who was a better interview; and I liked Rei Congo a lot and he liked me. I just wished that he would talk more about himself.

I often talked to Rei Congo about my work and the difficulties it presented. We would sit on little low white benches (the same furniture that they used in the *senzala*, I was told) facing each other, legs apart, bending forward to better hear and maybe understand, Rei Congo smoking his pipe and sometimes looking into a little glass of water where he would “see” people and places. One afternoon I came to the *terreiro* with a specific problem. I would be giving a talk the next day about my research to an audience of professors and graduate students at the National Museum. I was nervous. I would have to speak in Portuguese for an hour to strangers, about a topic that I no longer felt like much of an authority on at all—Umbanda. I did not feel very confident or competent. In fact, I felt a little sick.

Rei Congo dealt with part of my problem in a rather perfunctory way. He reminded me that I already knew what steps to take. No sex until after the talk—I should go in *corpo limpo*, with a clean body; beforehand, in the morning, a regular shower followed by a purifying shower using *sabão de cosia*, an oily black soap imported from West Africa that takes away impurity and negative energy. I should then dress in clean clothes and light a candle to my guardian angel while requesting protection and tranquility, seven times. During the talk I should visualize the *senzala* where we were sitting that afternoon, and everything would be fine. He was actually much more concerned about giving me some advice on what to say. I pricked up my ears when he said that if I really wanted my listeners to understand about the *pretos velhos* (ah! finally Rei Congo is going to address my Big Question!), I should tell them the story of the slave woman, Anastácia. He said he didn't tell stories very well, but he could relate the basic plot and I could buy a copy of the book about it to get it right for my audience.

I did not tell the story of Anastácia at the National Museum but kept to my original theme. However, I did buy a copy of the book. It was not hard to find: practically every bookstore in Rio devotes a shelf or two or

more to books written by Spiritualists and followers of Umbanda and the other Afro-Brazilian religions. And Anastácia has become a popular legend. I remember seeing a full-color poster of Anastácia in a store near a metro station downtown that sells Umbanda materials—candles, cigars for the Indian spirits, beads, books, and professionally produced cassette tapes of Umbanda hymns. The poster depicted a young Black woman with close-cropped hair, very dark skin, and light blue eyes. She was wearing a muzzle that looked somewhat like a surgical mask, except that it was made of iron.

I confess that I did not read the book until months later, but I did not need to. One evening, while enjoying beer and conversation at the home of a couple of my informants, the subjects of Umbanda and the *pretos velhos* and African religion came up. My hosts—Maria Congo's *cavalo*, Deolinda, and her husband, Jorge—told me that I could learn a lot by watching some of his videotapes. Jorge turned on the VCR and we watched two episodes of a miniseries entitled “A Escrava Anastácia.” They loaned me those episodes and the rest so I could make copies. The story goes like this:

In a village somewhere in some unspoiled part of Africa a blue-eyed baby girl is born of noble parents. Various identified as a princess and as an emissary, she is chosen by the deities to bring the spiritual force of African religion to the New World. Africa, in the legend, is represented as a kind of utopia where there is plenty of food, time for dancing and sociability, and devotion to the deities. Anastácia's life as a child and then as a young woman is idyllic. But then, while dancing with her fellow villagers one night, Anastácia is ambushed by slave raiders. She is captured and sold to a plantation owner in Brazil. Extraordinarily beautiful—in some versions she is the daughter of Oxum, the seductive goddess of fertility and fresh water—she becomes the object of her master's lust. He brings her into domestic service, the better to seduce her. She steadfastly refuses his advances and is banished to the *senzala*. In one version, the rejected owner allows her to be raped repeatedly by his white visitors and sons, thus producing numerous blue-eyed offspring, symbolic, perhaps, of the miscegenized Brazilian people; in another, she somehow remains chaste. In both cases, her refusal to submit, combined with the jealous intrigues against her by the master's wife, leads the overseer to place an iron muzzle over the lips that refused to kiss those of her tormentors. She lives out her years in the *senzala*, constructing the moral community of the slave quarters and

using the powers vested in her by the deities to cure illness. She contracts gangrene from the muzzle. As she lies dying, the master's child takes ill and, as a last resort, is brought to Anastácia. The parents beg her forgiveness. With her last strength, Anastácia cures the child. She gives up the ghost, and the master and his wife repent of their cruelty and seek redemption for their sins.

While there is no need to indulge in a thorough textual analysis for either version, it is important to note that my informants referred me to this legend as a way of making me understand about Umbanda in a way that they could not convey through words and explanations or questions and answers. They wanted me to feel as they feel in regard to *pretos velhos*, to share something of the emotional meaning of these spirits that they incorporate, these others that they embody. While the plot is itself moving and even emblematic—that is, if we drop our “sophisticated” and distanced stance, our discomfort in the face of a “naive,” romantic, and perhaps hegemonic tearjerker, and enter into the story with the spirit that my informants exhibit—let me suggest that the significance of this legend lies more in the fact that it is densely packed with certain themes, images, and dispositions that occur over and over again in the construction of old Black slaves and that suffuse those constructions with feelings that are lived in the Umbanda experience. These images and themes and dispositions include torture, sexual violation, old age, crippling injury and disease, kindness, tragic love, Africa, Brazil, plantation houses, slave quarters, guilt, and forgiveness. These concerns emerge as *pretos velhos* reminisce about the way things were.

Beginnings

Umbandista writers and many of my informants stress that Umbanda is a Brazilian religion; for instance, a *preto velho* once told me that Brazil is the New Israel because it was in Brazil that Umbanda, the religion of the next millennium, was rediscovered and resynthesized. Nonetheless, Umbandistas inevitably locate the origins of their religion in some remote idealized past, usually on the other side of the Atlantic. The vision of this past is always of a place where culture, social justice, morality, and spirituality achieved superior levels. Before the Fall, Umbanda; and now it is Umbanda that will restore utopia.

The book that Rei Congo had me read and the miniseries that I copied from Jorge and Deolinda's video collection place this utopia in Africa. That setting is not a unanimous point of view. Pai Benedito, a *preto*

velho at the Casa São Benedito, told a very different story. One evening, as I sat at his feet on the polished linoleum floor in the unearthly blue glow that lit his *terreiro*, he told me that the word “Umbanda” comes from two words originating thousands of miles apart. *Um* is actually the root of the Sanskrit *om*, but infinitely older, while *banda* is a Bantu word. *Om*, according to Pai Benedito, is sacred to the Hindus because it signifies the totality of all vibrations; and indeed, he said, if I were to sit cross-legged on the floor in front of a candle in a darkened room and clear my mind and hum *om* I would feel, though weakly, the resonance of the infinite. The Hindus, he continued, learned this word and this technique from extraterrestrials. These visitors were from a planet whose inhabitants had evolved so far beyond us that they no longer had material bodies. They were pure spirit. But over the millennia, the density of the spirit population became so great that it overwhelmed the gravitational force of the planet, and untold numbers of spirits were flung away by the centrifugal forces generated by the planet's rotation. They wandered in space until they encountered other planets, including Earth. What they found on Earth were, for the most part, terribly backward people, lacking technology and culture, living in caves, and using crude stone tools and communicating by grunts and gestures. The most advanced earthlings, living in India and Mesopotamia and along the Nile, had agriculture and the rudiments of writing and culture, but even they were little more than tribesmen.

The new arrivals set about promoting the cultural and spiritual evolution of humanity. They did so because they recognized that they and the Earth people were fundamentally the same, because they too had spirits. (At this point, Pai Benedito asked me a question: “Do you know about this Charles Darwin? What do you think of his ideas?” I replied that his theory seemed to me to be fairly plausible. Pai Benedito told me that Darwin was precisely right about Evolution, except for one crucial detail: monkeys evolved into animals that look just like human beings, but those animals were not human beings. They became human beings only when God gave them something no animal has. “Do you know what that something is?” “A soul?” I ventured. “No! Monkeys have souls, dogs have souls, all the animals have souls! They suffer and feel happiness just like us. The thing that only humans have is a spirit, and that is why no other animal ever evolved into a human being.”) The visitors took material form and set out to teach the most advanced tribes. They taught them architecture and mathematics and writing (as evidenced by the Pyramids and other monumental structures, hieroglyphics, etc.) and, most important, religion. The civilizations that they planted thrived. Law, science, medicine, the arts, philosophy, all the cultural pursuits flourished—in fact, our accomplishments in those areas are child's play in comparison. Pai

Benedito's eyes shone as he recounted the glories of the past. Thinking that their work was done, the travelers left to find new worlds.

Pai Benedito paused in his narrative. If he were like most other *pretos velhos*, at this moment he might have relit his pipe and taken a long, nostalgic draw, looking far off into the past before continuing with his story. But Pai Benedito, according to his medium, is so spiritually evolved that he no longer craves tobacco and wine and other material things. He limits his sensual indulgences to the fragrance of rose water and lavender, and to the touch of leaves and flowers on his fingertips. His eyes became wistful and sad, as *preto velho* eyes so often do when their thoughts linger over the end of the Golden Age.

The travelers, he continued, left too early. Earth people were not ready to govern themselves without their guidance. They had learned much, but spiritually they were not ready to use their new knowledge. Babylon, seduced by luxury and sensuality, fell into wickedness. The Egyptians used their knowledge of government to enslave the Israelites, and their engineers and architects built monuments to Pharaoh and ignored the welfare of the people. Incompetent scientists, experimenting with nuclear power, blew up Atlantis. And religion was almost forgotten. Only a small number of Israelites—the Lost Tribe—kept the faith. Fleeing the chaos, they wandered into Africa, teaching what they could to the primitive peoples. But so much was lost, so much was distorted and degraded; the sublime truths were mixed with the grossest forms of materiality, with the blood sacrifice, fetishism, and orgiastic celebration of savages. Only a few rudiments survived of the Umbanda that once was, mangled almost beyond recognition. The forces of history brought the bits and pieces (including the other half of the name, the *banda*) to Brazil on slave ships, where the philosophers of Umbanda, using the Kabala, the techniques of Allen Kardec (the founder of the Spiritism movement), the principles of charity, and with the help of the enlightened spirits from Aruanda, are now resynthesizing the religion that will set the world right.

Pai Benedito's story may seem fantastic and fanciful; and, indeed, the idea of an old plantation slave holding forth on extraterrestrials, Charles Darwin, nuclear power, and the Lost Tribe of Israel must seem astonishing to anyone unacquainted with Umbanda. Pai Benedito exhibits none of the overt ethnic markers that would identify him as a plantation slave. But, at least from the point of view of one major current in Umbanda, Pai Benedito is no less a *preto velho* than Rei Congo. That point of view holds that *preto velho*-ness is not an ethnic definition, but rather a functional category that includes spirits that have achieved a certain level of evolution (not the lowest, but not the highest; in fact, some Umbandistas claim that they are "inferior" to the Indians). They are referred to as "work-

ers" and are generally humble, simple, and kind. In one important respect, Pai Benedito is more typical because Rei Congo is neither loquacious nor a good storyteller. *Preto velho* sessions always run late because, as everyone says, "*Pretos velhos* love to talk!" Oh, how they love to talk!

What Pai Benedito's story represents is an ideological current that strongly shaped the development of Umbanda and continues to flow in much Umbanda discourse. Several researchers have traced the origins of Umbanda as a distinct religion back to the first decades of this century. They maintain that Umbanda began as an attempt to purge the existing Afro-Brazilian religion known as Macumba of its African flavor. Diana Brown and Renato Ortiz, in particular, attribute this "whitening" to middle-class white practitioners who wished to bring spirit possession in line with their ethnic and class ethos, but it would not be too much to say that at the time, Africa was a symbol of backwardness, savagery, and superstition for much of the Black community as well. Certainly that prejudice is well documented by the research of Florestan Fernandes and Roger Bastide on the Black press during the first half of the century. So, we find numerous Umbandistas tracing the religion to the "civilized" utopias of ancient Egypt and Atlantis while denying or attenuating connections to "savage" Africa.⁵

This rejection of Africa never achieved complete hegemony, and the entire current of which it is a part has weakened considerably in recent years. Black awareness, Black pride, an increasingly critical perspective on Eurocentric versions of the Diaspora and the colonial enterprise have strengthened voices, already there, that proclaim Umbanda as the fruit of African roots. For most of my informants, Africa is a sign of authenticity. Recall Maria Conga's question—it was really an assertion—about mediums with African blood. Pai Joaquim's *terreiro* is a powerful place, participants assert, because its foundation, its root, was planted by an African from Angola. Seu Moura attributes his abilities, in part, to having an African great-grandmother. Even at Casa São Benedito, where the mediums concur with the story about space travelers and the Lost Tribe, most all of the *pretos velhos* remember their Africa with nostalgia. At Pai Joaquim's and Tupinambá's, certainly, the paradise lost was along the Congo or the Niger and not the Nile.

Casa Grande

Between the auction block and the whipping post where so many died in legend and fact, most *pretos velhos* passed their time of earthly purgatory on sugar plantations. The plantation was not a homogeneous social space. Gilberto Freyre, the anthropologist *cum* social historian whose works have

most strongly influenced popular conceptions of Brazilian slavery, wrote a book whose title, *Casa Grande e Senzala*, neatly divides the plantation into two domains: Big House and slave quarters. Both figure in the Anastácia myth, and both are prominent in the construction of *pretos velhos*. The *senzala* was the place where the slaves lived, where African rituals were secretly performed, where slaves tended to their sick and dying, and where the human community affirmed itself in the shared suffering of the oppressed. The *senzala* is the space that is re-created in Umbanda when the *pretos velhos* incorporate . . . The history as told by the *pretos velhos*, however, seems to deal as much or more with the Big House as with the *senzala*. The Big House was the plantation manor, center of white power and culture and the focus of a bundle of conflicting emotions. It could be a way out of the *senzala* for the slave who found entry into the capricious domestic world of the master's family; but, in the end, the Big House was the arbitrary source of all suffering and death. *Preto velho* biographies very often turn around the consequences of being caught between these two domains. These stories are laden with themes of guilt, sex, privilege, and betrayal. The Anastácia legend is a case in point, but there are other biographies, other tragic tales, that illuminate this structural asymmetry and bring forth different constellations of sentiment and scene.

One such tale was told to me by Pai Gerônimo, the *preto velho* of Dona Zélia, the old *mãe de santo* whose *terreiro* is the bedroom of her tiny apartment in Copacabana. Pai Gerônimo is one of a number of *pretos velhos* I know who do not fit the stereotype of the broken-down, humble, slightly scatterbrained old slave, the "Uncle Tom" of Diana Brown's unfortunate characterization. Pai Gerônimo is a big, strong man in his forties. He is kind, but his voice is firm, his mind is very quick and focused, and he is not overly patient. He has a younger brother, Pai Joaquim, a cowboy who lived on another plantation, who walks with a limp because a bull gored his knee. I know this because one night, Pai Gerônimo told me that someday soon he would incorporate in me, and then the brothers would be together again, working in the *senzala*, I with my right pant leg cut off to accommodate Pai Joaquim's swollen knee, clutching three of the large, smooth brown seeds known as *olho de boi* (bull's eye) that are the sign and the tools of Pai Gerônimo's brother. Pai Gerônimo could see Pai Joaquim leaning on me, and he told me that I was feeling Pai Joaquim as a stiffness in my knee, as the pressure of his muscles under my skin, a restlessness in a body that yearned to ride and work cattle. . . .

Pai Gerônimo was not old because he died during the prime of his life, on the whipping post. Pai Gerônimo told me the following story. He lived on a big plantation in Bahia, the northeastern state whose principal

city and port, Salvador, was once the colonial capital, and a focal point for the slave-driven sugar economy. Pai Gerônimo lived in the *senzala* along with the other slaves, but he did not have to labor in the fields and he was well fed. He lived a relatively privileged life because, due to his remarkable size, physical strength, and good appearance, the plantation master—who had always liked Gerônimo, the faithful boy who took care of the young master's horse and accompanied him on his childhood expeditions—had chosen him to serve as a breeding slave, a *reprodutor*. He fathered many children. (How many? Pai Gerônimo could not say because he could not count, but he warmly assured me that it was "many, many." He was always sad when a child was sold off to another plantation, but that was the way it was.) All in all, life was good and his master denied him only one thing. And what was that? Pai Gerônimo sighed, and his laughing eyes turned sweet and sad. There was a beautiful servant woman, a creole slave, who worked in the Big House. Her name was Catarina. Her body was firm and graceful, her skin dark brown and smooth, her eyes a shade lighter. She had been brought up in the Big House and knew how to read, play music, converse, and behave as a white lady would, but with infinitely more charm, of course. It was the master's plan to win her love, willingly, and enjoy his waning years in her company. Pai Gerônimo, therefore, was not to have Catarina. But Catarina loved Gerônimo and Gerônimo loved Catarina. Although they were discreet, they were caught. The master, who until then had always shown deep affection for his *reprodutor*, had his rival whipped to death on the *tronco*. Pai Gerônimo does not know what happened to Catarina, and he longs for the day when he can sit in the *senzala* with Joaquim, who perhaps can tell him what happened to his love.

I met a Catarina at Dona Zélia's *terreiro*, but this one was not Gerônimo's fatal lover. *Vovó* Catarina was not actually a grandmother at all, because she had no children. *Vovó* Catarina was born in the *senzala*, but at an early age her good appearance and charm brought her a place in the Big House as the maidservant and companion of the *sinha moça*, that is, the young lady of the house, the daughter of the master. Like Gerônimo's Catarina, she learned all the social skills. However, she was not protected by her master's sexual jealousy, and from adolescence onward she was the target of the lascivious pursuits of the men of the household as well as of the visiting and local gentry. Her feelings about this situation were ambivalent. On the one hand, the young *Vovó* Catarina was vain; she enjoyed luxury, and it pleased her to know that her beauty and manners were affording her a comfortable and amusing lifestyle. On the other hand, her deepest wish was to be the mother of children begotten from virtuous and true love with one man. The moral education given to the *sinha moça*

had rubbed off on the servant, for whom such scruples were never intended. Tortured by desire and guilt, Vovó Catarina increasingly smothered her feelings in licentiousness and the ease it brought. One day, the years and use wore on her too heavily, and she was sent back to the *senzala* to live out her days. It seemed at first a fate worse than death to live without her parties and presents and aristocratic young suitors. But she adjusted. She learned to live among the poor, suffering people from whom she came. The selfish Catarina learned to give of herself; she doctored, she taught, she intervened with the Big House on behalf of her fellow slaves. They became the children she never had. She found grace and lived two years in the *senzala* doing her charity work for every year that she had spent in luxurious dissipation.

Senzala

Rei Congo referred to the place where we would sit and chat as the *senzala*, the slave quarters. They tell me at Pai Joaquim's that their *terreiro* is actually constructed on the site of an old *senzala*. They have found artifacts—tools and nails and bottles, mostly. There is a grotto that they built as a shrine for Iemanjá, the goddess of the sea, and Oxum, the mother of fresh water; it contains a little spring that used to fill a tank where the slaves drew their water and did their washing. Seu Moura says that Pai Joaquim is buried in the cold, red clay that used to be the floor of the *senzala* and is now the floor of the *terreiro*.

Not all *terreiros* are built on the site of a *senzala*, but every Umbanda *terreiro* becomes a *senzala* from time to time. The *senzala* is the place where the broken in body and humble of spirit perform acts of charity and where mediums embody the Black grandfathers and grandmothers and great-uncles and great-aunts and mothers and fathers of Umbanda. The *senzala* is constructed within the ritual space of the *terreiro* by virtue of signs generated in performance. Special songs, accoutrements, furnishings, ways of speaking, and modes of moving the body re-create the *terreiro* and its members as elsewhere and as other, as scene and actors in a play of imagined reliving. But it is more than a site for nostalgia. The *senzala* is a space fraught with certain kinds of meanings and peculiar tones of feelings, where the contemporary world—in the form of problems brought by clients to the *pretos velhos* in consultation—is recast and re-viewed from the moral perspective of humility, charity, love, and patience. Those are the spiritual qualities embodied by the *pretos velhos*.

Preto velho sessions are regularly scheduled events. Dona Zélia and the Casa São Benedito, which meet once per week, both receive the old

Black slaves on the second Monday of the month. At Pai Joaquim's, where Rei Congo works, these sessions are every Monday night, except for the last Monday of the month, which is devoted to Exu. During the daytime sessions at Pai Joaquim's (twice per week, on Mondays and Wednesdays), which have a much lower attendance of mediums because most of the younger ones work during the day, the *pretos velhos* share their *senzala* with two, sometimes three Exu spirits. Several Umbandistas from other centers have questioned the wisdom of having Exus and *pretos velhos* in the *terreiro* at the same time—the Exus are carnal, clever, aggressive, sometimes malicious representatives of a different constellation of values. As Dona Zélia put it, the two together create the potential for a *choque*, a shock or collision, and she would not bring the two together under any circumstances. How could one subject those good-hearted but simple old characters to the tricks and schemes and mockery of the Exus? Of course, her Pai Gerônimo could hold his own; but, generally speaking, it would be like putting wolves in among the lambs. But somehow, the mediums at Pai Joaquim are able to mitigate the inherent moral contradiction between the people of the *senzala* and the people of the street, as the Exus are often called. Perhaps it is because at Pai Joaquim's (and at Tupinambá's) the *pretos velhos* are strong and do not need protection. And so during the afternoons, the *pretos velhos* sit along the walls of the *senzala* while the Gypsies and *malandros* (scoundrels) drink and cackle and work their magic at the threshold of the ritual space.

A *terreiro* is not a *senzala* simply because the clock and the calendar say that it is time for the *pretos velhos* to come visiting from Aruanda. The *senzala* is brought into existence; it is a temporary state of being, a phase in a cycle of the ritual transformation of Umbanda space. A *preto velho* session never begins in the *senzala*; rather, the *terreiro* becomes a *senzala* for awhile through the performances that take place during a *preto velho* session.

The construction of this space begins in earnest as hymns are sung to the African deities known as Orixás. At evening sessions for *pretos velhos* at Pai Joaquim's, the homage to the Orixás is usually marked by a special emphasis on Omolu, the old but physically powerful god of sickness and curing. There are affinities and resemblances linking Omolu and the old Blacks since both carry in their bodies the marks of age and physical suffering. When Omolu descends, his mediums often adopt the crippled, shuffling gait common to *pretos velhos*. Omolu is ravaged by smallpox and running sores; while the *pretos velhos* tell of the beatings, brandings, and accidents inscribed upon their flesh and in their bones. As is the case with many of the *pretos velhos*, Omolu's body is ruined and wracked, but somehow it retains a great, vital force. Omolu and the *pretos velhos* are

wanderers: in the myths, Omolu travels from village to village in Africa, spreading death and smallpox.

A recurrent theme in the imagery of *pretos velhos* is perambulation, a slow meandering along the twilight paths. At Pai Joaquim's, Omolu sets the stage, with the deity foreshadowing the arrival of the human spirits who most closely embody his character. Sometimes the connection between Omolu and the *pretos velhos* approaches identity. Several times, I observed mediums who received *pretos velhos* during hymns to Omolu. On those occasions, the *pretos velhos* formed a line and hobble-danced out to the Omolu shrine, in time with the lyric *O to to ba lu a ei, o to to ba ba*, their canes tapping the ground hard on the *to*. Participants referred to those in the procession as Omolu, *pretos velhos*, and *almas*, or souls.

Not all Umbandistas emphasize Omolu, nor do all bring him into close ritual proximity to the *pretos velhos*. Omolu is an Orixá, and the Orixás are African; therefore, Omolu's presence in ritual varies in proportion to the *terreiro*'s orientation toward Africa. For both Dona Zélia and the Casa São Benedito, the celebration of Africa by way of the Orixás is strongly muted. At Casa São Benedito, on most occasions the Orixás are saluted by hymns and do not appear. Only once did I see mediums incorporate Orixás there. Dona Zélia gives a thorough homage to the Orixás on special occasions, singing for each one seven verses of a song, but for most sessions they are merely mentioned in an opening prayer. I asked Dona Zélia about the role of Omolu in Umbanda. She told me that the old one is not a major Orixá, like Iemanjá or Oxossi or Ogum, mainly because Omolu is a very material deity—indeed, he is often referred to as the Orixá of the Earth—and in her style of Umbanda (like that of Casa São Benedito), materiality is a highly negative value. She said that Omolu is very important in the Candomblé, which she described as African. For her style of Umbanda, Omolu is marginal. But at Pai Joaquim's and Tupinambá's, Omolu is as central as he is in Candomblé, and the *pretos velhos* there are imbued with a certain intensity and depth that comes from association with this virile and threatening symbol of Africa.

But Omolu is an Orixá, magnificent, a force of nature, and the *senzala* is a space for the spirits of the most humble of men and women, not gods. The transformation begins with songs that call the *pretos velhos*. These are typically vignettes that capture the *preto velho*'s qualities and experiences of simplicity, faith, patience, and suffering.

*eu andava perambulando
sem ter nada pra comer
foi pedi as santas almas
para vir me me socorrer
(bis)*

I was going around perambulating
without a thing to eat,
went and asked the holy souls
to come and help me out.
(repeat)

*foi as almas me ajudou
foi as almas me ajudou
meu divino espirito santo
viva deus, nosso senhor
(bis)*

It was the souls [that] helped me,
it was the souls [that] helped me,
my divine Holy Ghost.
Long live God, Our Lord.
(repeat)

I heard this ballad in every *terreiro* I visited. People truly enjoy singing this song; it is a pleasure to draw out and overnasalize the penultimate syllable of *perambulando* before attacking the next three lines of clipped syllables, mapped onto a joyful, easy-to-sing melody of rising and descending scales, and then turning to the final four lines where syllables again reaggregate into words and not primarily sounds. Dona Zélia, who as a child in private school studied Latin and voice, pointed out to me that the lyrics are one grammatical error after another. "It should be *fui pedir* or, better yet, *eu pedi*; and *foram as almas que me ajudaram* would be correct; *foi as almas me ajudou*, my God!" But, as she said, the *pretos velhos* might not have mastered grammar, but they learned a lot of wisdom in the school of life, and to her the song is beautiful just as it is.

The theme of wandering hungry in the world, forsaken but for the good souls (another way of referring to *pretos velhos*) and the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, speaks for itself. It speaks to the faith of the *preto velho*. But there is something about this song that puts the singer into the shoes of the perambulator, and vice versa. The song is a double narrative. The *eu*, the "I," here has a double reference. At one level, the "I" is a *preto velho* telling his or her story of receiving help from the spirits along the road; at another level, the "I" can be the singer, acknowledging the help that he or she has received from the *pretos velhos* in the *terreiro*. The two narratives run parallel, bleeding into each other, shifting signifiers in a play of identity: "I," the real I, and "I," the *preto velho* in the song; *preto velho*, good souls, me, nothing to eat, a metaphor of the lack in my life, the good souls helped me (which me?), the *pretos velhos* helped the me who is really me, the wandering *preto velho*, me finding my way: *meu divino espirito santo/ viva deus, nosso senhor!* The song is a kind of rehearsal and diagram for the deeper play of self/other that occurs with spirit possession.

It is surprising that the musical construction of the *senzala*, the slave quarters, includes relatively few songs that speak of captivity. There is a song for Pai Benedito that recalls that were it not for the old sorcerer, the singer would have ended up captured by slave hunters—but that is a song of relief, which contributes to the ambiance of gratitude by referring to what did *not* happen, the fate that was avoided. One of the few songs that does recall captivity in a direct way suggests that the memory may be too painful:

vovó não quer cáscara de
coco no terreiro
(bis)
porque faz lembrar
o tempo no cativo

Grandmother doesn't like
coconut shells in the *terreiro*
(repeat)
because it reminds her
of the time in captivity.

It would seem that neither coconut shells nor narrative song should bring back the painful memories. And indeed, the purpose of these songs is to invite the *pretos velhos* to sit in a *senzala* that is as it should be: happy, without fear, a place of caring and refuge from the cruel world outside. A song from the Casa São Benedito suggests another motive: that *pretos velhos* are persons averse to confrontation and anger, to which they might be moved were they to dwell on injustice:

Lá, no cruzeiro divino
é onde as almas vão passear
eles estão felizes
quando as pessoas combinam
e choram quando eles discordam

There, in the divine *cruzeiro*
is where the souls go passing by.
They are happy
when people get along
and cry when they disagree.

But this image of the *preto velho* comes from a stereotype that is not universally shared in Umbanda. There are strong *pretos velhos* who do not cry and shy away from controversy. Generally speaking, my informants at Pai Joaquim's and Tupinambá's, many of whom identify themselves as Black and/or victims of Brazil's extreme social inequality historically exemplified by slavery, see different qualities embodied in their *pretos velhos*.

There was a time, for example, at Pai Joaquim's when personality clashes among certain members had reached the boiling point. The tension was unbearable when, one Monday night, the *preto velho* session began with Seu Moura receiving the spirit of Pai Sebastião. Instead of crying over the discord in his *terreiro*, he stomped and pounded with his cane and spat out the following warning to anyone who would challenge the order in his *senzala*:

Olha bem: comigo ninguém pode! Se você não respeita a lei desse nego velho vai embora, vai a rua; ou ficar para eu quebrar! Brigar com este negão não é brincadeira não; sou machão da senzala, estou no caminho, estou na poeira da estrada. (Look here: No one messes with me! If you don't respect the law of this old *nego* [a colloquial term for Black, with no acceptable English gloss], leave, hit the road, or stay so I can break you. To fight with this *negão* [a big *nego*] is no joke; I am real *macho*, I am in the path, I am in the dust of the road.)

Pai Sebastião exemplifies that type of *preto velho* whom Renato Ortiz lamented as a vanished species in "O Morte Branco do Feiticeiro Negro."

Pai Sebastião is a sorcerer, or *feiticeiro*, a potentially dangerous character whose magical abilities and capacity for fighting and vengeance pose a threat. He appears when Pai Joaquim's kindness and patience are abused. Pai Sebastião may be the epitome, but there is at least a little of him in many, if not all, *pretos velhos*. Many a *preto velho* has that other side, as we hear in a song from Tupinambá's, which hearkens back to a time when sorcery was a weapon of the enslaved:

O Bahiana, O Bahiana,
ela é velha feiticeira
(bis)
com sua toalha de lã,
dela sorriam;
com sua pomba na mão
ela lhes desafiou

Oh! Bahian woman, Oh! Bahian woman,
she is an old sorceress
(repeat)
with her wool towel,
they made fun of her;
[but] with her chalk in her hand
she defied them.

The towel, according to one informant, is the old woman's woolly white hair; the chalk is an instrument of *preto velho* magic.

The presence of the *feiticeiro* in the *senzala*, or of the *feiticeiro* in the *preto velho*, shifts the tone far away from the kind of warm, sentimental, nonthreatening constellation of feelings that we might expect in encounters with Diana Brown's Brazilian Uncle Toms. Chill drafts of fear and consequence filter in through the night. Sometimes those sad twinkling eyes see too much; in another song from Tupinambá's, a client admits to a *vovó* that she is afraid that the smoke from the sorceress's pipe will uncover her secrets. And sometimes the *preto velho* will play hardball. A woman came to Dona Zélia's Pai Gerônimo several times because of her brother, an alcoholic whose all-night carousing and brawling had become unbearable. Pai Gerônimo's initial approaches—advising her on how to deal with her brother, making offerings, saying prayers—were not working. The woman was beginning to have doubts about Pai Gerônimo. Finally, one night Pai Gerônimo asked her what she really wanted done. She replied that she just wanted her brother to stay at home so she would not have to worry about what might be happening to him at all hours of the night; she wanted him off the street before something really awful happened. Pai Gerônimo promised her that he would arrange things. The next week, the woman told Dona Zélia's Indian spirit, Jurema, that her brother had gone out drinking and, staggering around in the street, met with some kind of accident. His leg was smashed, and he now would have to recuperate in bed, at home, for several months. Jurema remarked that the *feiticeiro* Pai Gerônimo was no joke.

While the *pretos velhos* may resonate with Omolu, with undertones of sorcery and black magic, they always strike a Christian chord. They suffer at the hands of those who know not (or worse, *do* know) what they

do. Jesus is their Savior, they revere the Virgin, and they place their faith in the saints. They are imbedded in folk Catholicism.

<i>Cajoeiro bento onde nasceu Jesus (bis)</i>	Blessed cashew tree where Jesus was born. (repeat)
<i>O! Virgem imaculada reza no pé da cruz (bis)</i>	Oh! Immaculate Virgin prays at the foot of the cross. (repeat)
<i>Abre a porta do céu São Pedro deixe almas trabalhar (bis)</i>	Open Heaven's door, Saint Peter, Let the souls work. (repeat)
<i>O! Virgem imaculada reza no pé da cruz</i>	Oh! Immaculate Virgin prays at the foot of the cross.

With this song, another ode to joy sung with the spirit of "Eu Andava Perambulando," participants at Tupinambá call down the *pretos velhos*. Saint Peter releases them from an Aruanda that is Heaven, to return to an Earth where Jesus is born under a cashew tree (a symbol of Brazil) and agonizes on the cross, where Mary prays.

The decisive moment in the construction of the *senzala* is when the *pretos velhos* arrive. They come one by one, the first arrival being the *preto velho* of the leader of the *terreiro*. In a small *terreiro*, where only a few *pretos velhos* appear, it is usually the case that each will be welcomed by his or her own song. That is not possible in a large *terreiro*, but, at the very least, the *preto velho* of the leader will be honored in this way. The songs are often simple greetings that tell a little about the spirit in question—for example, Pai Joaquim is greeted with a ditty that merely gives his name and tells us that he is from Angola—but others are more complex. The song for the Bahiana (given above) is a tense sketch of duality and conflict, while the following hymn to Pai Gerônimo summarizes both the ritual moment and the supplicatory relationship of person to spirit:

<i>está iluminada nossa banda está cheia de flor nossa gongá (bis)</i>	Our "line" is illuminated, our altar is full of flowers. (repeat)
<i>o pai Geronimo é tudo que o peço meu pai Geronimo amena caminhos por onde que passo (bis)</i>	Oh, Father Geromino, this is all I ask you! My Father Geronimo, smooth the roads over which I pass. (repeat)

The *preto velho* comes with suffering inscribed on his body. As Pai Joaquim arrives, Seu Moura's powerful body doubles; he is given his cane and hobbles over to the spot where he planted the root of the *terreiro*. His back is stiff and his knee is ruined, but somehow he bends his forehead down to the spot. He struggles to his feet, salutes the drums, and sits down on his stump to smoke his pipe and sip wine from his bowl and rest awhile before he starts his work. When Vovô Catarina comes to Dona Zélia's, she arrives in a heap on the floor; I help her to her feet and sit her down on her little white bench along the wall of the *senzala*. *Pretos Velhos* are in almost every case broken in body, or otherwise marked by pain or abuse. Most have difficulty in walking; the cane joins the pipe, the bowl of sweet red wine, and the little white bench as metonymical signs of the *preto velho*. Some can barely see; others suffer from tremors. We know that Rei Congo stutters (his medium does not), while another Rei Congo at the same *terreiro* suffers brief seizures and convulsions as he prays with his clients. Occasionally, Dona Zélia receives a *preta velha* by the name of Gertrude, an old woman from India, not Black. Gertrude's limbs are twisted and she cannot walk at all. Her arthritis is so bad that Dona Zélia is stiff and sore for days after her fortunately infrequent visits.

As they arrive, the *pretos velhos* are helped to the little white benches. Ritual assistants, such as I was at Dona Zélia's, bring them their equipment. They need a glass of water (some of them look into the water to see things—persons who have something to do with their clients' problems, places and diseases and subtle signs that guide them as they do their work). They need a candle; nothing can be done without a candle. They need chalk. There are other items: a rosary; a bag of the round, dried seeds known as Our Lady's Tears; a few old coins; some little cowry shells; perhaps an *olho de boi* like those that Pai Gerônimo tells me that my Pai Joaquim will work with. The *preto velho* takes the chalk and draws his identifying emblem. Then he places his candle by the glass of water and lights it, lights a pipe, and indicates to the assistant that it is time to begin. The *senzala* is ready.

Notes

1. *Terreiro*: literally, earth, although in this context it refers to the sanctified places where Umbanda rituals occur. Umbanda meeting places take their name from the fact that slave religion in Brazil was usually practiced outside and at night out of concern for secrecy. Today, an Umbanda *terreiro* may recall that history by having an earthen floor that is open on three sides, with the back wall against a mountain.

2. Gilberto Freyre, the noted Brazilian historian and author of *Casa Grande e Senzala*, was the first to reinterpret the role that Africans have played in his country's history and national culture.

3. Roger Bastide, *The African Religions of Brazil* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Diana Brown, *Umbanda: Religion and Politics in Brazil* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986).

4. Brown, *Umbanda*, 67-68.

5. Renato Ortiz, *O moderna tradição brasileira* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1988).