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CHAPTER 5

Serving the Spirits, Healing the Person: Women in Afro-Brazilian Religions

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Women have played a central role in the historical development and diffusion of Afro-Brazilian religions, and they continue to comprise the majority of participants today. These religions provide a space in which women's experiences and concerns are central, and activities that traditionally have been assigned to women, such as food preparation, caregiving, and healing, have religious significance. Because most Afro-Brazilian religions are structured as alternative families, they provide a model of the world in which motherhood serves as an important route to and metaphor of religious leadership. While men are not absent—indeed, in many communities, certain ritual activities are restricted to men—on the whole, Afro-Brazilian religions are examples of what Susan Starr Sered termed "female-dominated religions."[1] These are religions that: (a) include women at the highest levels of leadership; (b) focus on women as ritual actors; and, (c) find sacred meaning in women's traditional social roles as mothers, domestic workers, nurturers, and caregivers. After outlining the general features of Afro-Brazilian religions, I discuss Candomblé and Umbanda, the two most well-known forms. For each I give a brief history, followed by an overview of the organizational structure and ritual life. Finally, I consider one woman's journey from affliction to healing within the Afro-Brazilian context, drawing on my own ethnographic fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro.

This example illustrates the interrelationships of mind, body, and spirit in Afro-Brazilian religions and suggests some of the reasons why women constitute the majority of practitioners.

The term "Afro-Brazilian religions" refers to a broad spectrum of beliefs and practices that developed in Brazil in the context and aftermath of Atlantic slavery. Brazil received more African slaves than any other New World colony, at least 3.65 million before the institution was finally abolished in 1888, more than nine times the number imported to the United States.[2] Afro-Brazilian religions were born out of the trauma of slavery, as Africans brought to Brazil attempted to understand and survive the harsh realities of their new lives. Drawing on the memories of their ancestral traditions as well as other spiritual systems (Catholicism, indigenous healing practices, European Spiritualism), slaves and their Brazilian-born descendents adapted, modified, and incorporated whatever elements facilitated their physical and psychic survival. From this *bricolage* emerged regionally distinct modes of religious expression centered on service to ancestral or spiritual entities, emotional worship, percussive music, song, movement, and healing. Called Pajelança or Catimbó in Amazônia, Candomblé in Bahia, Tambor-de-mina in Maranhão, Xangô in Alagoas and Pernambuco, Umbanda or Macumba in Rio de Janeiro, and Batuque in Rio Grande do Sul, these African-derived religions flourished and spread, despite the efforts of Brazilian authorities and the Catholic Church to suppress them as illegitimate forms of black magic. Today they attract Brazilians from across the socioeconomic spectrum, although poor and working class followers tend to predominate.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of Afro-Brazilian religions is their eclecticism. These are religions that resist systematization, either by scholars or census takers. Like Vodou, Santeria, and other traditions that developed in the slave societies of the New World, Afro-Brazilian religions are organized around independent "houses" or communities, each with its own heritage and pantheon of supernatural powers. There is no universally recognized institution that determines doctrine, trains clerics, or enforces standards of ritual practice. Neither is there a formal creed or standardized set of beliefs that must be espoused by participants. This makes it difficult to point to a certain set of beliefs or rituals as defining criteria. Nevertheless, Afro-Brazilian religions do share a religious sensibility, or orientation to the Universe, derived from their West and Central African roots:

a. the notion that the human and spiritual worlds are mutually interdependent and in constant interaction;
b. the importance of the human body as a privileged means through which the spiritual world is made manifest;

c. the special role of rhythm, movement, music, song, dance, material offerings and objects;
d. an emphasis on healing and the resolution of pragmatic problems;
e. the use of diverse therapeutic techniques for purification and spiritual protection, including herbal treatments, offerings, prayers, censing with smoke, incantations, amulets, and so forth;
f. the importance of oral tradition and ritual, rather than sacred text, as the mode of transmitting religious knowledge.

At the heart of all Afro-Brazilian religions is a concern with alleviating suffering and realizing well-being by fortifying the links between the human and the spiritual worlds. While practitioners recognize the Christian God, they believe that this God interacts with human beings through spiritual intermediaries. Afro-Brazilian religions recognize a variety of such supernatural beings, including Catholic saints (*santos*), African deities associated with natural phenomena and familial lineages (*orixás* or *voduns*), ancestral figures (*inquices*), archetypal folk characters such as the spirits of elderly black slaves (*pretos velhos*), indigenous Indians (*caboclos*), and street smart tricksters (*exus* and *pomba giras*), as well as the spirits of the deceased (*eguns*). Through an elaborate body of myths, rituals, songs, symbols, offerings, movements, and gestures, participants seek to understand and organize their lives in relationship to these supernatural entities. There is no developed notion of sin or a need for salvation.

In the Afro-Brazilian world view, human beings are embedded within complex webs of rights and responsibilities that situate them in relation to the natural world of family, community, and the environment, and to the supernatural world of spiritual beings. Well-being is the product of a dynamic state of equilibrium between these worlds and results when ties of commitment and reciprocity are acknowledged through ritual means, facilitating the continuous flow of spiritual energy through the Universe. This concept of dynamic equilibrium through ritual work is expressed in the notion of service, a central value in Afro-Brazilian religions. Through their offerings, ceremonies, feasts, and other devotional activities, practitioners "serve" the spirits, enjoying in return the active presence of the spirits in their lives. When properly served, spirits offer guidance, protection, and practical assistance to their human devotees. When neglected, they can provoke persistent physiological, psychological, economic, or personal problems including bad luck, adversity, and interpersonal difficulties, as well as chronic illnesses such as headache, fatigue, loss of appetite, dizziness, and blackouts.

Most participants join Afro-Brazilian religious groups in search of a resolution for these types of problems. Healing involves addressing the physiological, emotional, social and, most importantly, the spiritual dimensions of

the individual's particular affliction. For example, an individual suffering from persistent headaches may be treated with a mix of herbal remedies, talk therapy, and highly symbolic ritual processes designed to externalize the problem, fortify the individual's relationship with patron spirits, and incorporate them into the larger religious community. Within the framework of Afro-Brazilian religions, the root cause of most human suffering lies in an imbalance in the individual's relationship to the spirit world and may be resolved by strengthening her or his relationship with that world. This is not to say that Afro-Brazilian healers ignore the physiological causes of illness, but that they understand human well-being as encompassing body, mind, and spirit.

Sometimes an individual's problem is determined to be a spirit who is demanding recognition by causing blackouts or other types of behavioral disturbances. In these cases, healing involves a protracted process of training under the guidance of a religious specialist in which the afflicted learns how to serve the spirit by ritually receiving it in possession trance. When regularly incorporated in the context of ceremonial rituals, spirits are believed to cease their disruptions and to actively assist followers in achieving their goals.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the intimate relationship between the human and supernatural worlds, spirit possession is a central feature of all Afro-Brazilian religions. In this form of embodied spirituality, supernatural beings are made present within the human community in the bodies of their devotees, who claim to remember little or nothing of the experience. Although not all are capable of serving the spirits in this way, those who do are highly valued within Afro-Brazilian religious groups as direct channels to the supernatural world.

Because of its spectacular aspects, spirit possession has received a great deal of attention from scholars and outsiders. For followers, however, it is an ordinary feature of religious life, one of many forms of service to the spirits. Spirit possession generally occurs in special ceremonies held on regular occasions. Ritually summoned from their otherworldly abode through rhythm, music, song, and dance, the spirits are invited to "mount" their devotees. Once incorporated, the spirits dance, sing, or confer with the faithful who have assembled to receive them, blessing the community with their presence. The atmosphere on these occasions is one of festive celebration, and ceremonies typically attract large audiences of onlookers who come for entertainment or to petition a particular spirit entity for help in resolving a problem.

CANDOMBLÉ

The most self-consciously African of the Afro-Brazilian religions, Candomblé centers on the relationships between humans and West African-derived

deities called *orixás*. Signifying simultaneously the historical link to Africa and African ancestral traditions, the *orixás* are also incarnations of natural forces: wind, rain, thunder, forest, ocean, river, etc., as well as important cultural activities such as ironworking and hunting. Some, like the thunder god Xangô, are royal figures that recall the ancient kings who ruled over the Yoruba city-states from which many slaves originated. Others, like the *orixá* of disease Obaluaié (also known as Omolu, Zagpata, Xapanã) are compound figures merging deities originally belonging to different ethnic groups. Each *orixá* has a specific personality, set of likes, dislikes, and ritual preferences, as well as associated colors, days of the week, minerals, and plants. These attributes are communicated orally through a vast corpus of stories and songs, bodily through expressive dance, visually through complex altars and ritual vestments, and sensually through special foods, herbs, and offerings particular to each *orixá*.

Because of its obvious African roots, some scholars and practitioners describe Candomblé as a purely African tradition brought to Brazil by slaves and preserved by their descendents. However, it is better understood as a New World creation that combines the ancestral traditions of peoples of West and Central Africa, who comprised the majority of the slaves sent to Brazil, with Amerindian and folk Catholic elements characteristic of the colonial milieu in which it developed. As occurred in other slave colonies of the New World, enslaved Africans in Brazil associated their own deities with specific Catholic saints, seeing the warrior Saint George, for example, as an incarnation of the West African warrior god Ogum. Such identifications were facilitated by the legends and iconographic images of the saints that were a prominent feature of Portuguese folk Catholicism. To this day, Catholic statues and images are prominently displayed in many Candomblé centers, and public ceremonies for the *orixás* typically occur on or near the feast day of their corresponding saint.

The historical record, although sketchy, suggests that Candomblé initially developed within organized networks of slaves and freed blacks in the northeastern city of Salvador, Bahia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Brought together by their shared experience of oppression, these blacks founded ritual communities (*terreiros*) that preserved an alternative heritage and system of values rooted in the memory of Africa. Despite a history of persecution, this memory has been kept alive in a corpus of myths, dances, and songs, a sophisticated culinary and healing tradition, and a complex system of symbols through which Candomblé practitioners honor their links to a cherished homeland. As privileged repositories of these traditions, women have played important roles in the incarnation and transmission of this ancestral past to future generations.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Our knowledge of Candomblé's early development is complicated by the lack of unbiased historical sources. While whites wrote about the religious traditions of slaves and freed blacks, they saw them as primitive superstition at best. More commonly, white authorities described these African-derived practices as dangerous black magic that threatened the social order and required the combined resources of the Portuguese government and the Catholic Church to combat. As a result, the only descriptions of Afro-Brazilian religions before the end of the nineteenth century were recorded in inquisitional proceedings, police reports, and lurid newspaper accounts that purported to expose the demonic activities of black sorcerers.

Despite their obvious bias, these sources show that communal worship, rhythm and music, material offerings, protective amulets, and herbal preparations were central features of black spirituality. They suggest that throughout the period of slavery and afterwards, Africans and their Brazilian descendents met clandestinely in domestic spaces and remote areas of difficult access to conduct ceremonies in which they remembered their past and called upon their ancestors for support. These collective ceremonies included ecstatic forms of devotion, drumming, dancing, and rituals of healing and propitiation. Judging by the outrage of Church officials, they also incorporated elements of folk Catholic practice including representations of the saints and other liturgical objects—even on occasion pilfered holy water and Eucharist wafers.

These clandestine drum and dance ceremonies, referred to by authorities as *calundus* or *batuques*, eventually developed into organized Candomblé *terreiros* (ritual communities) in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. According to Candomblé historian Rachel Harding, the earliest of these *terreiros* were founded by Africans and devoted to the ancestral deities of specific African ethnic groups or "nations," but by the middle of the nineteenth century a pan-Africanizing process had begun to take place as Africans and their Brazilian-born descendents forged new collective identities linked less to a specific ethnicity than to their shared experience of oppression.[3]

In terms of its organizational structure and ritual life, Candomblé both reflected and facilitated the formation of this pan-African identity. Where slavery had ruptured the bonds of family and lineage, Candomblé *terreiros* established ties of ritual kinship linked to shared devotion rather than biology or culture of origin. *Terreiros* brought together deities that in Africa were worshipped by specific family lineages or ethnic groups, further blurring differences of ethnicity. By the end of the nineteenth century, the various Candomblé nations differed from one another in terms of their adherence to a particular spiritual tradition, rather than the ethnic ancestry of their members.

From early on, women played important roles in the process of remembering and recreating the community's connection to the ancestors as *ialorixás*, or mothers of the *orixás*. Called *mãe-de-santo* in Portuguese, the *ialorixá* is the chief female authority within a *terreiro*, whose ritual knowledge enables the *orixás* to be summoned by their children in the New World. Several of the most prominent *terreiros* established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were founded by women, a fact that led the American anthropologist Ruth Landes to describe Candomblé as a matriarchy.[4] Working in the racially stratified and male-dominated Brazil of the late 1930s, Landes was especially impressed by the power and independence of black women in Candomblé. She was one of the first scholars to explicitly acknowledge the centrality of women in Candomblé, a phenomenon she linked to the religion's development within the female-centered households of black Bahia. At the time, Landes's work was harshly criticized by her more prominent male colleagues, but subsequent scholarship has verified many of her observations.

Since then, a number of scholars and practitioners have explained the predominance of women in Candomblé in terms of "natural mothering qualities" that make women especially suited to care for the *orixás* and the human community called to their service. Like a mother, the *mãe-de-santo* is responsible for ensuring the health and welfare of all who are under her care. As one adherent put it, the mother figure is "the person who is most sought after .... People are needy and women are more compassionate than men."[5] Others have argued that because the work of serving the *orixás* involves many of the domestic tasks of cleaning, food preparation, and caregiving traditionally performed by women, it is the structure of Candomblé that accounts for the predominance of women rather than any innately female qualities. The importance placed on cheerful obedience and submission to authority, behaviors that traditionally are associated with femininity, may also play a role. Through her obedience and submission, a woman can rise through Candomblé's hierarchical ranks and achieve a level of prestige, authority, power, and self-esteem that otherwise may be unavailable to her. Despite the prominence of women, however, men are not absent. Both men and women are fundamental to the ritual life of Candomblé, for each has a special role to play within the community.

Organizational Structure and Ritual Life

Candomblé *terreiros* are organized as alternative families (*família-de-santo*) whose members are related through the *orixá* (often called saint or *santo*) via bonds established by ritual rather than blood. Initiation is the gateway into the community, creating "children of saint"(*filhos-de-santo*),

who owe obeisance to the "mother of saint" (*mãe-de-santo*) or "father of saint" (*pai-de-santo*) who initiated them and to the *orixá* to whom they were consecrated. The process of initiation consists of an elaborate series of rituals whose purpose is to deepen the initiate's relationship with the *orixá* determined to be his or her primary spiritual guide, as well as to forge ritual bonds with other members of the community. As one analyst described it, initiation "allows one to identify with certainty one's spiritual guide as well as to become familiar with one's own deep nature and truest impulses. By strengthening the link with this guardian *orixá*, the individual becomes receptive to and behaves in harmony with him or her and benefits from the spiritual force that the *orixá* represents."[6] It is not until the individual is initiated that she is considered a full member of the community and can take her place within the fixed hierarchy that structures life within a *terreiro*.

Ritual responsibilities in Candomblé are divided according to each individual's age "in the saint," their gender, and the gender of the *orixá* who "rules their head." At the top of the hierarchy is the *mãe-de-santo* (*ialorixá*) or *pai-de-santo* (*babalorixá*), whose authority is absolute and acquired in the course of a series of successive initiations and the fulfillment of various obligations (*obrigações*) to the *orixás*. Second in command is the *iyakekere* or *mãe pequena*, "small mother," a senior woman who serves as assistant to the leader and is responsible for the care of new initiates during the period of their seclusion, among other duties. She is recruited from the class of *ebomin* or "elder siblings," senior male and female initiates who have completed seven or more years of consecration to the *orixás*. An *ebomin*'s experience allows her to establish her own *terreiro* if the *orixás* call upon her to do so. *Iaôs* or "wives" of the *orixás* are initiates, either male or female, who have been ritually prepared to incarnate the *orixás* in possession trance but who have not yet reached the stage of *ebomin*. Finally, the most junior members of a *terreiro* are the *abiãs* who have undergone preliminary rituals of spiritual fortification but have not been fully initiated. Like the *iaôs*, *abiãs* can be male or female, although women tend to outnumber men in Candomblé communities. These differences in status are communicated through dress, style of greeting, ritual duties, and privileges that are specific to each class, within an overarching hierarchy that regulates all relationships within the community.

Ritual positions within the *terreiro* are also gender-specific. One of the most important roles in any *terreiro* is the *iabassé* or "mother who cooks," the woman responsible for preparing the ceremonial foods of the *orixás*. Each *orixá* has special dishes that must be scrupulously prepared and consecrated before being ritually presented at ceremonial feasts to the *orixás* and the community. Like the Christian rite of communion, these sacred meals bring followers into contact with divine power through the ingestion of consecrated foods. With its associations to nourishment, sustenance, and

fellowship, the symbolism of shared food is an important way in which the interdependence of the natural, human, and spirit worlds is made manifest in Candomblé.[7] The *iabassé*'s culinary skills and ritual knowledge connect the community with the *orixás* and preserve a rich gastronomic tradition that continually reminds members of their African heritage.

Equedes are initiated women who serve as ritual assistants. Because they do not incorporate the *orixás*, *equedes* are responsible for making sure that entranced *iaôs* are not injured from the force of the *orixá* entering or leaving their bodies, among other duties. Men serve the *orixás* and the community as *ogãs*, initiated assistants who advise and protect the community; *alabês* or ritual drummers whose rhythms beckon the *orixás* to join their human devotees; and *axôguns* responsible for the ritual slaughter of sacrificial animals.

Initiated members of a Candomblé *terreiro* are further distinguished by the gender of their primary *orixá*. Within the community's ceremonial life, male and female *orixás* are differentiated through subtleties of gesture and adornment such as the placement of the *colar*, or ritual beads worn by initiates, and the type of ritual prostration performed as a gesture of respect. A complex system defines each member's position within the Candomblé community and specifies their obligations to one another and to the spirits. The gender of the initiate and that of his or her patron *orixá* are important elements of this system, the guiding principles of which are conveyed in the process of initiation.

The scrupulous observance of these *fundamentos*, or esoteric codes of ritual practice, ensures the constant flow of axé, the spiritual force without which life would cease. At the most basic level, maximizing the axé of the *terreiro* and its members is the *raison d'être* of Candomblé, and a leader's authority derives from her ritual knowledge and ability to channel axé. Sometimes translated as energy or vital force, axé is believed to be present in different forms in everything that exists, including inert objects like rocks and minerals. It is most abundant in the blood and organs of animals and the leaves and roots of plants, which, as concentrated forms of axé, are central in Candomblé rituals. Through their offerings, feasts, and the observation of *fundamentos* and *obrigações* (ritual obligations), practitioners activate the cycles of exchange between the human and spirit worlds increasing the axé of the community.

The most spectacular of these *obrigações* is the annual cycle of devotional *festas* or feasts in which each of the major *orixás* is honored in an elaborate ceremony open to the public. These feasts involve the entire community and require a great deal of time and effort as the members prepare to host not only the *orixás* but the crowds of spectators and well-wishers who regularly attend. Depending on the *terreiro*, they may be held anywhere from six to twelve times a year or more.

Most follow the same general pattern. After a series of opening rituals, the community summons the *orixás* one by one, enticing them into their midst through rhythm, music, and song. As the drummers play the sacred rhythms, the *iaôs*, dressed in white and draped with the colorful beads dedicated to their patron *orixás* enter the room in single file, forming the characteristic *roda* or circle in which they will dance for the *orixás*. Each *orixá* is saluted in a determined order with three to seven songs, during the course of which they may descend to possess their devotees.

Accompanying the drums with the emblematic dance steps unique to each *orixá*, the *iaôs* offer themselves to the manifestation of their patron *orixá*. They are attended by the *equedes*, who, once the *orixá* arrives, will remove any jewelry and readjust the *iaô*'s headscarf, often knocked askew from the force of the possession. After dancing around the room several times before the animated crowd, the entranced *iaôs* are led to a back room where they will be dressed in the elaborate ritual vestments of their possessing *orixá*.

After a short time, the *iaôs* return, now clad in the colorful regalia that identifies their particular *orixá*. Their appearance, as one observer wrote, "is like a burst of light, dazzling and multifaceted. The polished crowns and instruments, and bright silks and satins of the garments, augmented by the rhythmic propulsions of the drums startle the senses to appreciate the epiphany of the orixás among the congregation."[8] Each *orixá* has a unique dance that illustrates some aspect of personality: the wind goddess Iansã swirls vigorously as if caught in the tempestuous winds of a storm, the sea goddess Yemanjá moves her arms in a stately, rolling motion that recalls the ebb and flow of ocean waves, Omolu sweeps away disease with his *xaxará*, a small, whisk-like broom. These dances are a central part of Candomblé for they are the means through which the *orixás* are made manifest in the human world, and their individual stories are communicated to their followers.

After several hours in which the *orixás* dance and are admired by the congregation, the drums begin to beat the rhythms that will send them back to their spiritual abode. Each circles the congregation for a final time and then is led away to a back room. There the *orixás* will be ritually dispatched from the bodies of the *iaôs*. The formal ceremony ends at this point, and the gathered congregation will enjoy the feast that has been prepared, each morsel infused with the spiritual energy of the *orixás*. With the successful completion of this *obrigação*, the axé of the *terreiro* and all its members has been renewed and their links to the ancestral traditions of their forebears publicly reaffirmed.

Festas such as these are a visible and dramatic form of service to the spirits, but *terreiros* also serve a larger community by providing counseling,

healing, and other forms of therapy. A significant portion of any leader's time is spent in consultations with clients suffering from a range of problems. Using the divination technique called *jogo-de-búzios*, or the throwing of the shells, the mãe- or *pai-de-santo* will determine the origin of the client's problem and the appropriate course of its resolution. Often this involves herbal treatments, spiritual "cleansings," or more complex ritual services intended to strengthen the individual's relationship with her or his patron *orixá*. More serious problems may require initiation, a multistage process that eventually transforms the client into a full *filho-de-santo*.

Consultations are an important way that clients and potential members enter the Candomblé community and advance through the ranks, first as *abiãs*, then as *iaôs*, and later as *ebomins* and eventually *ialorixás* or *babalorixás*. The progression from novice to junior wife to elder sibling to mother- or father-of-the-saints is a process of spiritual development that occurs as the individual deepens her knowledge of Candomblé through participation in the ritual life of a *terreiro* and the completion of *obrigações*, becoming exposed to ever more esoteric levels of the religion. Only at the level of *ialorixá* does the individual possess the spiritual knowledge and ritual competency to help others along the path that she has trod, beginning the cycle anew.

Umbanda

While Candomblé focuses on the *orixás* and the preservation of ancestral traditions associated with Africa, Umbanda embraces an eclectic repertoire of spirit entities drawn from various traditions. Because of its synthesis of African, European, and Amerindian elements, the legendary three races that coalesced to form the Brazilian people, practitioners sometimes characterize Umbanda as the country's first truly original religion. Like all Afro-Brazilian religions, Umbanda is a diverse movement composed of independent ritual communities, each with its own devotional life, pantheon of spirit entities, and organizational structure. What unites these communities is a concern with addressing the spiritual dimensions of human affliction through the practice of mediumship, and a shared understanding of the Universe derived from the theories of the nineteenth-century French philosopher Allen Kardec.

Although they had little influence in his native land, Kardec's theories found a receptive audience among educated Brazilian elites. Based on his "scientific" analysis of paranormal phenomena, Kardec claimed that he had derived the principles of a new philosophy he called Spiritism. Central to Spiritism was the claim that after death the human soul lived on in disembodied, spirit form before being reincarnated on earth in either a more evolved or less evolved human form. By performing good deeds and studying

Kardecist doctrine, a human soul could evolve along a spiritual hierarchy, eventually becoming a "spirit of light," or guide (*guia*), no longer subject to reincarnation. Through a trained medium, these evolved spirit guides transmitted moral instruction and spiritual healing to those in need. Conversely, negative or immoral conduct resulted in regression to a lower level on the spirit hierarchy, and eventual rebirth in a less-evolved human form. Lower-level "spirits of the shadows" could attach themselves to people and provoke problems such as alcoholism, drug abuse, accidents, and other misfortunes. Mediums were those individuals specially trained to communicate with spirits and to diagnose and treat spirit ailments.

From Spiritism, Umbanda inherited the notion of a hierarchical universe made up of a series of spirit entities arrayed on an evolutionary continuum. These range from the most developed entities who rarely descend to the terrestrial realm: Jesus Christ, the spirits of great European philosophers, and the African *orixás*; to a series of lesser-developed entities: the spirits of African slaves (*pretos velhos*) and indigenous Indians (*caboclos*); and finally to the least-developed entities: the spirits of children (*erês*), street savvy hustlers (*exus*), prostitutes (*pomba giras*), and the dead (*eguns*). Some Umbanda centers recognize in addition the spirits of gypsies (*ciganas*), sailors (*marinheiros*), cowboys (*boiadeiros*), and other marginal social types.

Practitioners often describe these lesser-developed "spirits of the shadows" as lacking "light" (*sem luz*), a characteristic that results from their more primitive rank on the evolutionary continuum. Within Umbanda, spirits may evolve and eventually reach the upper echelons through the performance of charity (*cariedade*), occasioned by the help they render to humans who come to consult them in Umbanda rituals (*toques*). This process sometimes is referred to as "indoctrination" or "baptism." Through an intermediary (*medium*), who either incarnates them or translates their messages, indoctrinated spirits are thought to work on behalf of their human supplicants, recipients of the charity that will lead to the spirits' own evolutions.

While Umbanda practitioners may acknowledge the *orixás* with offerings of food, drink, flowers, and candles, most focus their ritual attention on lower-level spirits, particularly *caboclos*, *pretos velhos*, *exus* and *pomba giras*, who because of their own difficult experiences while on Earth are thought to understand the sufferings of their human devotees and to possess the spiritual resources to help them. Incorporated in the body of a medium, these spirits return to Earth to "consult" with petitioners and to execute a variety of spiritual cures.

Both men and women serve as mediums in Umbanda, although women tend to outnumber men. While some attribute this to women's greater sensitivity, there is little developed sense that innate female traits predispose women to serve the spirits, as is sometimes asserted in Candomblé. Rather all humans

are believed to possess the ability to become mediums and to work for the spiritual evolution of all beings.

Historical Overview

Historians concur that Umbanda emerged sometime in the first three decades of the twentieth century in the southeastern cities of Rio de Janeiro and Porto Alegre. Although there is probably no one original center from which Umbanda sprang, scholars and practitioners often invoke the story of Zélio de Moraes. Like most origin narratives, Zélio's is replete with highly symbolic and mythological aspects, and exists in various versions. Nevertheless, it indicates some of the formative issues in the development of Umbanda.

While attending a service at a Spiritist center in Rio de Janeiro sometime in the 1920s, Zélio de Moraes witnessed mediums being possessed by the spirits of black slaves (*pretos velhos*) and Indians (*caboclos*). Within Kardec's hierarchical framework these spirits were considered unevolved due to the cultural level of their previous lives, and were promptly dispatched. Zélio then felt himself taken over by one of these entities, who announced that he would begin his own religion dedicated to the humble spirits of Brazil's black slaves and original inhabitants. In the mid-1920s, Zélio founded the Spiritist Center of Our Lady of Piety on the outskirts of the city of Rio de Janeiro and dedicated it to the *caboclo* spirit that had first possessed him.[9]

Whether or not this represents the "true" historical origins of Umbanda, Zélio's story suggests the centrality of class and race in the formation of Umbanda and in its relationship with Spiritism, which was practiced mostly by middle- and upper-class whites. With its pantheon of *caboclos*, *pretos velhos*, and other marginalized social types, Umbanda presents a populist vision of Brazilian social life. At the same time, the tension between this vision and the dominant elite's antipathy towards its nation's African and indigenous heritage runs throughout the history of Umbanda. So while Umbanda in many ways represents a synthesis of Kardecist principles and popular Afro-Brazilian practices, from early on prominent practitioners were concerned about distancing Umbanda from the "black barbarism" of Brazil's African-derived traditions.

In 1941, Zélio and his male associates, nearly all of whom were white and middle class, organized the first Umbanda conference in order to define a uniform code of doctrine and practice, and to establish the religion as a distinctive movement separate from Kardecist Spiritism on the one hand and Afro-Brazilian religions on the other. According to Umbanda scholar Diana Brown, the proceedings of the conference indicated the founders' concern to "purify" Umbanda by purging from it any associations with black Africa,

claiming instead the religion's mystical origins in either time immemorial or an ancient civilization (usually Egypt or India). Conference organizers repeatedly compared Umbanda with Macumba (the popular name for Afro-Brazilian traditions in the southeast), which they disparaged as black magic. In contrast to Macumba's practice of animal sacrifice and drumming, and its leaders' (alleged) exploitation of their simple-minded followers, they claimed that Umbanda was dedicated solely to the cultivation of benevolent spirits and the charitable provision of spiritual healing to those in need.[10] The prominence of *exu* and *pomba gira* spirits in Macumba seems to have been a focus of special ire among conference goers. Lacking the light necessary for good deeds, these "spirits of the left" were to be exorcised, not revered. One of the main differences between Umbanda and Macumba, according to conference organizers, was the role of these dangerous spirits.

Thus began a long process of bureaucratization, rationalization, doctrinal formation, and moralization in which predominately male, middle class Umbanda practitioners worked to systematize Umbanda beliefs and practices through various federations, conferences, and publications, as well as radio and television programs. At the same time, rank and file practitioners on the margins of these efforts embraced the African elements of their religion and welcomed *exu* and *pomba gira* spirits into their midst. As one argued "an Umbanda *terreiro* which does not use drums or other ritual instruments, which does not sing [ritual hymns] in the African style, which does not offer sacrifices or food to the deities can be anything, but it is not a *terreiro* of Umbanda."[11] However, because they lacked the means to disseminate their perspectives more widely, alternative voices like this one remained peripheral within the institutionalization of Umbanda.

Thanks largely to the sustained efforts of Umbanda's codifiers, in the 1960s the religion was officially recognized in the national census and Umbanda festivals began to be included on official calendars. By the 1970s, Umbanda was the fastest growing religion in Brazil with an estimated 20 million followers nationwide. Today the religion has expanded beyond the nation's borders, and Umbanda centers can be found in Argentina and Uruguay.

As is the case for most "official" versions of history, men have dominated the history of Umbanda, at least as it has been preserved in the records of the religion's more institutionalized forms. In practice, however, women participate in equal or greater numbers than men. As mediums, they embody humble black slaves and proud Indian warriors, hustlers and prostitutes—archetypal folk characters whose stories are largely absent from the dominant narrative of Brazilian history. As leaders of the small and usually ephemeral centers that serve the vast majority of Umbanda's followers, women attend to the physical and spiritual needs of their communities. For many of these women, Umbanda's emphasis on healing and the authority of spirit guides

permits them to exercise a form of power otherwise denied them and the resources to establish an independent identity as spiritual professionals. I explore these aspects of Umbanda more fully in the penultimate section of this chapter.

Organizational Structure and Ritual Life

Despite the continued efforts of Umbanda federations to codify belief and impose standards of ritual practice, Umbanda centers tend to reflect the personalities and proclivities of their leaders rather than any institutional affiliation. They range from more African-oriented *terreiros* whose practices overlap significantly with Candomblé, to groups that adhere more closely to Kardecist tenets—and everything in between. Unlike the devotees of Candomblé who claim fidelity to an ancestral heritage, Umbanda practitioners tend to embrace innovation, resulting in a remarkably fluid pantheon of spirit entities, rituals, and organizational forms.

Many Umbanda centers are structured like a business or civil organization with an administrative hierarchy composed of the offices of president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer, and a corpus of ritual functionaries (mediums) who attend the public at specific times. Just as in the highly bureaucratic institutions on which they are patterned, men predominate at the upper levels of the hierarchy while women are more numerous at the lower levels. Such centers typically employ a standardized weekly calendar of ritual sessions or *giras* with certain days devoted to the spiritual development of mediums (*desinvolvimento*), and others devoted to charity (*caridade*) sessions during which the spirits are summoned in order to consult directly with those who seek their assistance. The former are private sessions in which mediums learn how to "give way to the spirits" so that these can fulfill their mission on Earth by attending those who come to consult them in charity sessions. For the most part, Umbanda centers do not practice extensive rites of initiation such as those found in Candomblé.

Charity sessions are open to the public and generally begin with an opening hymn and prayers, followed by the ritual of *defumação* in which essential herbs are burned in order to purify the "energetic field" of the ritual space and its participants in preparation for the arrival of the spirits. After a ritualized exchange of greetings, the assembled congregation begins to summon the spirits with *pontos cantados*, or ritual songs, accompanied by drums or handclaps. Soon afterwards the mediums receive their spirit guides, who greet one another, sing, dance, and begin to give consultations (*consultas*). Umbanda spirits, unlike the *orixás* in Candomblé, interact extensively with their devotees, dispensing advice, performing *passes* (laying on of hands), and dictating recipes for herbal preparations and propitiatory offerings.

Some spirits drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes or cigars, which are provided for them by the center's assistants. After all who wish to consult the spirits have been attended, the congregation begins the cycle of farewell songs that will send the spirits away, followed by songs and prayers which draw the session to a close.

Most people who consult Umbanda spirits do so for problems that include domestic and interpersonal issues, troubles finding or keeping a job, chronic illnesses not amenable to medical treatment, repeated misfortune, anxiety, behavioral disturbances, or other psychosomatic disorders. Umbanda, like all Afro-Brazilian religions, offers a pragmatic, problem-solving orientation to suffering. It gives concrete form to events that are experienced as bewildering or out of one's control, and supplies an array of ritual techniques for addressing them. For example, illness or anxiety may be due to an *encosto* or perturbing spirit who must be ritually removed. Behavioral disturbances might be diagnosed as the work of unevolved spirits who are demanding "light." In these cases, the afflicted must develop their skills of mediumship in order to "work" with the spirits. Interpersonal issues may be the result of a *demanda* or mystical work petitioned by an enemy for this nefarious purpose. Healing in this case requires a defensive strategy, for example, fortifying one's own "spiritual protection" in order to fend off such mystic attack, and/or an offensive strategy, such as petitioning a counter-offensive mystic attack.

Demandas and counter-demandas are the special purview of *exu* and *pomba gira* spirits, sometimes referred to as entities "of the left" for exactly this reason. Because they are associated with practices that many condemn as black magic, *exu* and *pomba gira* spirits are a contentious topic within Umbanda circles. Outsiders and critics vilify these entities as immoral or evil, and some Umbanda devotees refuse to work with them. But for those who do, *exu* and *pomba gira* spirits are seen as powerful, and demanding, allies.

Said to be the spirits of "people of the street" (*povo da rua*): prostitutes, conmen, and others forced by circumstance to live by their wits, *exu* and *pomba gira* spirits represent marginalized social types. Unfettered by dominant norms of polite society, they are bawdy and fun-loving, qualities that make them especially beloved among their devotees. Ceremonies in which they are ritually summoned to possess the faithful are events of great revelry for it is said that *pomba gira* and *exu* spirits return to the human world to have fun (*se divertir*): to dance, sing, drink, smoke, and be adored. These ceremonies are also occasions for those seeking assistance to consult them directly, via the body of the entranced.

Unlike the *orixás* and other more "evolved" spirits, *exus* and *pomba giras* are believed to perform any request as long as they receive material recompense in the form of their favorite vices: alcohol, cigarettes, perfume, or other luxury

items. As a result, they are thought to be particularly effective in resolving questions of money, power, and romance: those problematic areas of life where deeply held desires may clash with normative moral codes. Devotees sometimes describe these entities as the "slaves" of the *orixás*, charged to do the work that the *orixás*, as representatives of ancestral tradition, will not.

In particular, male-female relations fall under the domain of *pomba gira* spirits, who are said to specialize in love magic. In the next section I examine the case of a female leader of a small community dedicated to a variety of Afro-Brazilian spirits. Nazaré's path from affliction to healing is typical among participants in Afro-Brazilian religions, as is the intensity of her relationship with her primary spirit guide, the *pomba gira* Maria Molambo (Raggedy Maria), who she believes has protected her since she was a young child. Nazaré's story illustrates some of the ways that women's daily lives and experiences intersect with religion in urban Brazil. It also suggests that the repertoire of narrative and symbolic forms provided by Afro-Brazilian religions enables participants to manage problematic relationships, express acute but inchoate frustrations, understand otherwise inexplicable events, and to act in the world in ways that would otherwise be difficult or impossible.

Women, Spirit Possession, and Healing

I first met Nazaré in 2000 while conducting ethnographic fieldwork on Afro-Brazilian religions, and the data on which this section is based was derived from an extensive series of life history interviews and participant-observation. A middle-aged housewife and mother, Nazaré lives with her extended family in a lower-class neighborhood on Rio de Janeiro's northern periphery. The term that she uses most often to describe her relationship with the spirit world is *zelador*. *Zelador* means caretaker or guardian, and the word is often used to refer to the male or female caretaker of a commercial building or residence. Like the practitioners of other African-derived religions like Vodou or Santeria, Nazaré is not concerned with affirming the reality of the spirits through abstract statements of belief, but with correctly fulfilling the caretaking duties that will ensure the spirits' beneficence in her life and the lives of those under her spiritual care.

Nazaré presides over what is sometimes called a crossed house (*casa traçada*); that is, a community that combines ritual practices and entities typically associated with Candomblé with those typically associated with Umbanda. Such crossed houses are not unusual and are an important reminder that the realities of religious practice continually confound our efforts to categorize them. In addition to the activities involved in caring for her own tutelary spirits and the spirits of those under her spiritual care, Nazaré conducts periodic ritual gatherings in which she and her followers

summon the *orixás* and other spirit entities with drum and song. She also offers an array of *trabalhos* (ritual works) including divination readings, herbal treatments, purifications, and spiritual fortifications to clients who seek her spiritual assistance.

While she claims to receive a number of spirit entities, it is the *pomba gira* Maria Molambo whom Nazaré recognizes as her chief spiritual protector and credits with her success in attracting the small (and ever-shifting) stable of clients who provide the economic and social support that sustains her religious community. Her relationship with this spirit was not always so beneficial. Like most Afro-Brazilian religious leaders, Nazaré attained her present-day position only by overcoming a series of afflictions that she believes were provoked by the troublesome Maria Molambo. In its general outlines, Nazaré's story is typical of women who work with the spirits. It is deeply intertwined with the unsatisfactory relationships that she has had with the men in her life, most particularly her husband Nilmar, with whom she has lived on and off for the past 35 years.

Nazaré claims that the spirits first called her to their service when she was a very young child, provoking episodic behavioral disturbances in which she said and did things of which she had no memory. Family members later reported that these episodes were characterized by aggressive behavior and verbal outbursts of which Nazaré denied any knowledge. They seem to have occurred initially in the context of Nazaré's fraught relationship with her father, an autocratic, abusive figure who frequently beat his wife and daughter. After a precipitous marriage at the age of 15, Nazaré's behavioral disturbances began to be directed at her husband.

Like most women of her generation and social class, Nazaré aspired to become a housewife and mother. Married life, however, turned out to be a source of considerable anguish for her. From the beginning, her relationship with Nilmar was troubled by a climate of mutual distrust and conflict. The births of their first three children were interspersed with a series of separations and reconciliations. Convinced that Nilmar was seeing other women, Nazaré feared that he would abandon her and the children. His philandering was a constant source of humiliation for her, further exacerbating her domestic distress.

Nilmar reported that Nazaré began to behave strangely after the birth of their third child. On more than one occasion he awoke in the middle of the night to find Nazaré in the street clad only in her nightclothes, with no knowledge of how she had gotten there. He described rages in which she would destroy household items or threaten him, and then later deny that she had done so. For her part, Nazaré maintained that she was unaware of her actions during these episodes. As she put it: "I would do these absurd things without realizing it and without having any memory of it. I wasn't conscious of it, but I also didn't want to believe it."

On the advice of a colleague, Nilmar eventually brought Nazaré to an Umbanda center, where her behavioral problems were diagnosed as the work of a well-known *pomba gira* named Maria Molambo (Raggedy Maria), said to be the disembodied spirit of a young woman who ran away from an arranged marriage, was disinherited by her wealthy father, and forced to prostitute herself on the streets to survive. Nazaré, despite initial resistance, underwent a series of rituals and began to frequent Umbanda, gradually learning how to control what she and Nilmar had come to understand as episodes of spirit possession. As she gained ritual mastery over the spirit, the behavioral disturbances that had plagued the couple's home life became less frequent. Within the framework of Umbanda, by ritually recognizing Maria Molambo and providing the appropriate offerings, Nazaré redirected the spirit's energy towards beneficial rather than disruptive ends. In time, Nazaré began to cultivate relationships with other spirit entities, and later was initiated into Candomblé.

As Nazaré deepened her relationship with the Afro-Brazilian spirit world, she began to organize regular drum and dance ceremonies in the basement of her residence and to attend neighbors and friends seeking spiritual assistance. This effectively marked the establishment of Nazaré's own religious community and her position as *zelador*. Characteristically, Nazaré attributed this endeavor not to her own agency but to that of Maria Molambo, whose reputation as a powerful entity had spread throughout the neighborhood. Today Nazaré administers a small cadre of initiates attached to her *terreiro* and offers ritual-therapeutic services to clients. In addition to holding bimonthly drum and dance ceremonies, she organizes periodic feasts for the spirits that attract anywhere from 20 to 100 people.

In serving the spirits, Nazaré has dramatically expanded her social network and her place in the world. The small income that she derives from this work has made her less dependent on her husband's financial support and less fearful of the future. As a *zelador*, Nazaré enjoys a degree of independence rare among the women of her neighborhood, whose lives revolve around home and children. Thanks to Maria Molambo, Nazaré has been able to establish an identity independent from her role as Nilmar's wife, a relationship that was a constant source of insecurity, frustration, and humiliation for her.

Although she still resides with Nilmar, Nazaré described their current living arrangement as one of "brother and sister," rather than husband and wife, a transformation that she attributes to her work as a zelador. Her use of the expression "brother and sister" signals a lack of sexual activity in her relationship with Nilmar, a subtle reference to the celibacy the spirits demand before any ritual activity. But it also suggests that a more profound shift has occurred in her marriage, one in which the traditional hierarchy of

husband and wife has been supplanted by a more egalitarian, sibling-like relationship.

In her study of Afro-Brazilian religions, the anthropologist Stefania Capone observed that *pomba gira* spirits are most often invoked in the context of a woman's intimate relationships with men, whether father, husband, or lover.[12] She theorized that the affiliation with a *pomba gira* enables a woman to claim, through the guise of the spirit, a measure of autonomy or respect from the men in her life, or to impose her will on them. As is the case with other examples of female-dominated spirit possession traditions like the Zar of eastern Africa, working with the spirits can be seen as a creative response to restrictive gender roles or inadequate love relationships, as well as an economic strategy for women who have few options beyond the traditional wifely role. But it can also be understood as a way to externalize profound or unconscious frustrations for which there is no other acceptable outlet.

In Nazaré's case, it was only after she had entered Umbanda that she began to develop a framework for dealing with the events in her life that seemed out of her control, most immediately, the strange behavior that seems to have been provoked by her volatile relationship with Nilmar. This framework slowly developed through the process of "socializing" these behavioral episodes, giving them a name and a purpose within the broader religious schema that Afro-Brazilian religions provide. It was this framework, and more particularly the mythology of *pomba gira*, that enabled Nazaré to make sense of some of the frustrations of her married life. Not only that, but she discovered that the kinds of behavioral idiosyncrasies of which she had been accused were not unusual: that, in fact, they were indications of a spiritual calling that enabled her to claim a power beyond that of wife and mother.

CONCLUSION

Like Nazaré, most participants join an Afro-Brazilian religious community as a result of illness or affliction. By establishing and maintaining contact with the spirit world and appeasing the spirit determined to be the author of the ailment in question, these religions provide an etiology and a therapeutic regimen for suffering, reestablishing order to a world that is experienced as out of order.

Because of their emphasis on healing a wide variety of afflictions, some researchers have argued that Afro-Brazilian religions attract more women than men. In her cross-cultural study of women and religion, anthropologist Susan Sered observed that women suffer disproportionately from persistent and recurring conditions such as headaches, dizziness, and fatigue—the most common ailments treated by Afro-Brazilian healers.[13] Moreover, illness is one of the few socially acceptable ways that women can express their

frustrations, or claim attention and sympathy. In Afro-Brazilian religions, ill women find a supportive community in which their suffering is understood as religiously significant.

Others argue that the centrality of spirit possession in Afro-Brazilian religions accounts for the predominance of women. As a means of direct contact with the sacred, spirit possession enables poor and working-class women greater access to status, power, autonomy, and authority than elsewhere in Brazil. Still others point out that serving the spirits entails activities usually performed by women: preparing and serving food offerings, organizing communal celebrations, caring for altars, assisting others in need. In contrast to the outside world, within Afro-Brazilian traditions women's work as mothers and caretakers is valued as a form of sacred service, and behavioral traits that society cultivates particularly in women, like obedience and submission, offer a route to increased authority. By recognizing in women's domestic lives the skills necessary to mediate the interface between human and spirit worlds, Afro-Brazilian religions permit ordinary women to experience themselves as powerful and sacred.

As Sered noted, while a person's gender does not determine religiosity, it does influence the kinds of religions, rituals, communities, and experiences that one is drawn to or which one finds meaningful.[14] Within Candomblé and Umbanda, traditionally female concerns like illness, relationships, and food preparation are central, and female traits of nurturing and compassion are seen as important qualities for religious leadership. Through the experience of spirit possession, women enjoy direct access to power and authority and the prestige that accompanies it. In a social environment in which women are expected to become wives and mothers, Afro-Brazilian religions allow women to integrate their domestic and religious responsibilities, expand their social networks, establish alternative identities, and exercise a degree of freedom that may otherwise be unavailable to them.

Notes

1. Susan Starr Sered, *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

2. The transatlantic traffic formally ended in 1850, although slaves were clandestinely shipped to Brazil until slavery was abolished in 1888. Thomas Skidmore, *Brazil: Five Centuries of Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17, 53.

3. Rachel Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

4. Ruth Landes, *The City of Women*, 1st New Mexico Press ed. (Albuquerque: New Mexico University Press, 1994).

5. Maria Salete Joaquim, *O papel da liderança religiosa feminina na construção da identidade negra* (Rio de Janeiro, Pallas, 2001), 106.

6. Sheila Walker, "Everyday and Esoteric Reality in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé," *History of Religions* 30, No. 2 (1990): 118.

7. Robert Voeks, *Sacred Leaves of Candomblé: African Magic, Medicine and Religion in Brazil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997).

8. Joseph Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 73.

9. Diana Brown, *Umbanda: Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

10. Brown, *Umbanda*, 41–46.

11. Brown, *Umbanda*, 47.

12. Stefania Capone, *La quête de l'Afrique dans le Candomblé: Pouvoir et tradition au Brésil* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1999), 182.

13. Sered, *Priestess*.

14. Sered, *Priestess*.

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