

The power of submission? Personal growth and the issue of power among Umbanda practitioners in Paris

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Recent sociological writings on the changes of the Western religious landscape emphasize the decline of institutionalized religion and the rise of subjective religious attitudes subsumed under the label of “spirituality”. These attitudes are most often described as the individual’s liberation from the burdens of obedience and his or her submission to the duties imposed by mainstream religions in favor of the freedom of personal, subjective experiences of the sacred, centered on the self and based on an openness to emotions, sensations, dreams, creativity, expressivity and so forth in order to achieve self-realization. Deference to the higher and external authority of “old”, institutionalized religion gives way to the nurturing of an intimate inner authority; relationships with divinity become a strictly personal affair¹. The emic stance according to which the inner self is the ultimate authority that must free itself from social constraints in order to achieve the individual’s own potentialities instead of conforming to others’ has thus become a central feature in the definition of spirituality. Heelas² points to freedom as one of the cardinal values of the New Age: not only from oppressive religious institutions, but also from tradition in general, as well as from the past and from the “ego”, whose shaping by education and “patterns of belief” may limit the blossoming of the true self. In this light, the individualism and craving for freedom proper to alternative religiosity should lead spiritual seekers to turn away from institutionalized religions and favor mobility within the framework of loosely knit networks with no central authority. These networks would allow individuals to follow a kaleidoscopic quest through experiences in a variety of existing (exotic) traditions and to create new ones in accordance with their private spiritual needs. Thus, one of the hallmarks of spirituality would be the rejection of any form of external authority in favor of the (independent) cultivation of one’s inner divinity.

However, in sociological accounts, “spiritual” attitudes are most often described from the perspective of general social theory regarding the place and fate of religion in modernity or post-modernity. Little attention is given to what people who engage in alternative religious activities actually do to develop their “inner divinity” and how they relate to authority in the course of their practice. Drawing on written sources and quantitative data, these studies tend to set aside the fact that individual’s spiritual quests are determined by a series of particular face-to-face situations and, most often, by group practices which imply power relations with senior practitioners and/or super-natural beings³. While those participating in (one of) the (two) French Umbanda shrine houses where I conducted my PhD research⁴ defined

¹ Paul Heelas et al., *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

² Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 26.

³ For a thorough criticism of discourse-based approaches and the use of written sources in this field, see Matthew Wood, *Possession, Power and the New Age: Ambiguities of Authority in Neoliberal Societies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

⁴ The materials presented here were collected during research conducted in Paris between 2004 and 2009, comprising three periods of field work in Sao Paulo, Brazil (in 2005, 2006 and 2007). Methods included

themselves as “spiritual seekers” and shared a critical attitude towards mainstream religions, they were nonetheless involved in relationships in which differences of power play a major role. Umbanda, as it is practiced in Paris, is held to liberate practitioners from external constraints that may limit their self-fulfillment and to allow for the creation of a spiritual brotherhood, but it also leads devotees to subject themselves to a rigorous ritual practice and a hierarchical organization controlled by a charismatic leader. On the one hand, the shrine house’s ritual activities confer a sense of empowerment on practitioners; on the other, they compel them to assume attitudes of submission and coercion. Inspired by studies on the specificities of New Age and Neopagan ceremonial⁵, I will try to shed light on this apparent contradiction by looking at how these divergent orientations are realized within the framework of the shrine house’s organization and in its ritual activities.

A New Age version of Umbanda

Umbanda, a synthesis of African religions, Christianity, European Spiritualism and elements drawn from Amerindian religious practices, was introduced into France about fifteen years ago by individuals looking for unique spiritual experiences. In spite of its foreign cultural references, many features of the Afro-Brazilian religious system attract French people interested in religious alternatives. On the one hand, Umbanda is appealing because of its African and Amerindian origins, which allows adepts and sympathizers to see it as a “traditional”, “pure”, “authentic”, early pre-Christian tradition. On the other hand, the divinities worshiped in Afro-Brazilian religions (*orixás*)⁶ explicitly relate not only to social and psychological processes, but also to natural phenomena such as the forest, the wind, the sea, etc. This allows practitioners to renew what they perceive to be their lost tie with nature by means of initiation in which an alliance is established with these deities. For this reason, Umbanda affords practitioners a strong spiritual experience they feel to be missing from mainstream religions. In addition, Afro-Brazilian religions have become universalistic, not linked to any particular race or social standing, with an increasing number of non-Brazilian worshippers outside Brazil⁷. It is significant that in their new settings these religions attract local people, rather than Brazilian migrants. While authors note that in Argentina and in Portugal Afro-Brazilian religions are grafted upon preexisting popular beliefs and practices⁸, in Paris most devotees of Umbanda belong to the local “alternative circuit”⁹ and share a

participant observation in public and private rituals as well as semi-structured interviews. In Brazil I took part in ten-day ritual activities dedicated to French devotees as well as two retreats independently.

⁵ Michael Houseman “Menstrual Slaps and First Blood Celebrations,” in *Learning religion: anthropological approaches*, ed. David Berliner et al. (New York and Oxford: Brehahn Books, 2007); “Des rituels contemporains de première menstruation,” *Ethnologie française*, XL(1) (2010); Tanya M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft. Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁶ In Brazilian Portuguese *x* is pronounced *sh*.

⁷ See e.g. Alejandro Frigerio, “La expansión de religiones afrobrasileñas en Argentina: representaciones conflictivas de cultura, raza y nación en un contexto de integración regional.” *Archives des Sciences Sociales des Religions* 117 (2002); Arnaud Halloy, “Um candomblé na Bélgica. Traços etnográficos de uma tentativa de instalação e suas dificuldades.” *Revista de Antropologia* 7(2) (2004); Maïa Guillot, “Du mythe de l’unité luso-afro-brésilienne. Le candomblé et l’umbanda au Portugal”. *Lusotopie* 16(2) (2009); Ismael Pordeus Jr., *Uma casa luso-afro-brasileira com certeza* (São Paulo: Terceira Margem, 2000); Clara Saraiva, “Afro-Brazilian religions in Portugal.” *Etnográfica* 14(2) (2010).

⁸ See e.g. Maria Julia Carozzi et al., “Mamãe Oxum y la Madre Maria: santos, curanderos y religiones afro-brasileñas en Argentina,” *Afro-Ásia* 15 (1992); Saraiva, “Afro-Brazilian religions”.

⁹ Maria Julia Carozzi, “Ready to move along: The Sacralization of Disembedding in the New Age Movement and the Alternative Circuit in Buenos Aires.” *Civilisations* LI(1-2) (2003).

fascination for ancient and/or “exotic” rituals. The spread of Umbanda and Afro-Brazilian religion in general may thus be understood as a form of “folklore reclamation” as defined by Magliocco, i.e. the “rediscovery and reevaluation of traditions previously abandoned because they were considered markers of backwardness or low status, especially by a colonizing culture”.¹⁰

Umbanda, as it is practiced in the Templo Guaracy in Paris, as in the Brazilian shrine house from which it derived,¹¹ is a truly novel version of the Umbanda described in the specialized literature.¹² In contrast with most other Brazilian Umbanda groups, the Temple manifests many of the characteristics of Neopaganism and New Age thinking¹³ and is aimed towards upper- and middle-class Brazilians and Westerners interested in religious alternatives. In this respect, comparison is more fruitful with the practices such as those of English magicians studied by Luhrmann¹⁴, than with what is described in the writings on “traditional” Afro-Brazilian religions¹⁵.

In the Templo Guaracy, as theorized by its founder, Umbanda is an ancient, natural synthesis of various religious traditions that has “re-emerged” as a result of a present-day “shift of consciousness”. This idea echoes what Hanegraaff calls the “pathos of change” in the New Age, “a vague enthusiasm about the breaking down of the traditional patterns and the opening up of new horizons”¹⁶. Devotees are taught that Umbanda brings forth the “spiritual light of all masters”: Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed and others. Thus, the Temple shares two central New Age tenets: on the one hand, all religions and spiritual practices have the same

¹⁰ Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture. Folklore and Neopaganism in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 8. There is, however, a major difference between the Argentinean and the Portuguese contexts on the one hand, and the French case on the other. In the former, high dignitaries of Afro-Brazilian religions mobilize historical and political arguments in the legitimization of their practice, while such discourses are non-existent in Paris, see e.g. Frigerio, “La expansión”; Guillot, “Du mythe”.

¹¹ The Temple has “branches” in North America, Portugal, Switzerland, Austria and Belgium, as well as in France. All of them are managed by local coordinators named by the Temple’s leader; they follow the same principles of organization and keep close ties with the Brazilian shrine house located in Sao Paulo. The Temple counts about four hundred mediums in Brazil and more than a hundred abroad.

¹² See e.g. Maria Helena Villas Boas Concone, *Umbanda, Uma Religião Brasileira*. (São Paulo: CER/USP, EDUSP 1987); Vagner Gonçalves da Silva, *Candomblé e umbanda: caminhos da devoção brasileira* (São Paulo: Editora Ática, 2000); Yvonne Alves Maggie Velho, *Guerra de Orixá : um estudo de ritual e conflito* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2001) ; Paula Montero, *Da doença à desordem: a magia na umbanda* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições Graal, 1985); Lísias Negrão, *Entre a cruz e a encruzilhada: formação do campo umbandista em São Paulo* (São Paulo: EDUSP, 1996); Renato Ortiz, *A morte branca do feiticeiro negro : umbanda e sociedade brasileira* (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1988).

¹³ I adopt a loose definition of the New Age, as “a broad cultural ideology” which includes Neopaganism (Luhrmann, *Persuasions*, 30; see also Hanegraaff, *New Age*, 77-79), although many Neopagans are critical towards such an understanding, see e.g. Magliocco, *Witching culture*, 85-86; Sarah Pike, *Earthly bodies, magical selves: contemporary pagans and the search for community* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 2001), 145. As both orientations show overlaps, especially regarding cultural borrowing, I consider Neopaganism as an “ethnic branch” of the so called New Age. It is important to emphasize that the Temple’s devotees do not define themselves as (Neo)pagans, but rather as “spiritual seekers”, yet they are about as critical towards the “New Age” label as Neopagans. For a discussion of the problems raised by the effort of finding adequate descriptors for contemporary religious attitudes, see Wood, *Possession*.

¹⁴ Luhrmann, *Persuasions*.

¹⁵ The Templo Guaracy is comparable to a relatively new tendency in the recent evolution of Umbanda in Brazil called “esoteric” and “initiatory” Umbanda, see Rivas Neto *Umbanda: a protosíntese cósmica. Epistemologia, ética e método da Escola de Síntese* (São Paulo: Editora Pensamento-CULTRIX, 2002). These new modalities of Umbanda have not yet drawn the attention of scholars; an exception is Marcelo Camurça, “Espaços de hibridização, desubstancialização da identidade religiosa e ‘idéias fora do lugar’,” *Ciencias Sociales y Religión*, 5(2003).

¹⁶ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 336.

essence and, on the other, spirituality cannot be limited to a particular religious practice, but it stands above religions that are so many “fragmentations”¹⁷ of spirituality. Accordingly, devotees do not reject institutionalized religions all together - many of them had a Catholic upbringing -, yet they consider them bounded and disapprove of their exclusiveness.

The Temple proposes what we may call a “generic” or “universal” variant of Afro-Brazilian worship in which the cultural markers that characterize Umbanda as the “genuine Brazilian religion”¹⁸ are significantly diminished. In particular, Catholic iconography is suppressed - which makes adherence easier for people weary of Catholicism - in favor of a sober setting attesting to its African and Amerindian influences: plants, natural elements such as water, stones and honey, as well as an effigy of the Temple’s spiritual mentor, an Amerindian spirit named Pai Guaracy. Also present are other symbols drawn from various traditions: the yin-yang symbol, the astrological sign of Gemini, a statue of Buddha, the Wheat symbol created by the Temple’s leader to represent its philosophical tenets. In the same vein, supernatural beings that are worshipped are not represented as potentially dangerous spirits linked with marginalized social categories¹⁹: Amerindians (*caboclos*), African slaves (*pretos-velhos*), crooks (*exus*), prostitutes (*pomba-giras*), etc. Rather, they are said to be “spiritual consciences” that “represent the dynamics of Human Conscience on Earth”, “depositories of the highest Conscience of Love”, “consciencies which protect our states of Loneliness”, etc.²⁰ The *orixás*, divinities worshipped in the course of some ceremonies, are part of a complex, intellectualized and “psychologized” systematization called the *xirê* or the “wheel of the *orixás*”, in which they are associated with the “four cardinal elements” (fire, earth, water and air). This wheel, that recalls the zodiac or a Native American medicine wheel, is for the Temple’s devotees, a powerful, synthetic key to its cosmogony. Depicting the evolutionary stages of the universe and of human life, it is, in the words of the shrine house’s leader, as quoted on his website²¹, “the ‘golden key’ that opens all the doors of understanding of all the phenomena of creation, be they physical, psychological, intellectual or spiritual”.

Finally, another important feature that distinguishes the Templo Guaracy from the shrine houses described in the specialized literature is that it does not propose magical services typical to “traditional” Umbanda. The motives that lead clients to consult mediums during the public ceremonies, such as illness, relational, emotional or financial problems, are never attributed to the intervention of external agents through black magic (*trabalho feito*), envy (*olho grande*), “closed paths” (*caminhos fechados*), or the like. When persons claim things such as “my aunt has bewitched our family”, they are dissuaded from this idea. Rather, they are told that they need protection and that their “interior light” must be cleansed and nurtured; it may also be necessary that they “connect” with their spiritual guides. The notion that sensations of instability, helplessness, powerlessness and the like may be caused by black magic are held to result from “an excess of mysticism”, as the Temple’s leader explained during a lecture in 2005. Experiences of misfortune are not held to be caused by outside agents, but are seen as correlates of cycles of “expansion” and “contraction” that punctuate human life and the universe as a whole and/or as symptomatic of the “excess” or “scarcity” of one of the four cardinal elements in one’s life.

¹⁷ Fragmentation is a relatively common theme in the New Age literature, see Hanegraaff, New Age, 143-45.

¹⁸ Concone, *Umbanda*.

¹⁹ Fernando Giobellina Brumana and Elda Gonzales Martinez, *Marginália sagrada* (Campinas: Editora da Unicamp, 1991).

²⁰ A similar process occurs in the revitalization of Amerindian rituals, Jacques Galinier and Antoinette Molinié, *Les néo-Indiens. Une religion du IIIe millénaire* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2006), 249.

²¹ www.templogaracy.org.

The “spiritual work” of the Templo Guaracy aims to allow the individual to handle these ups and downs without fear or despair, keeping his or her balance and sensation of well-being. Developing an individual, autonomous relationship with one’s spiritual entities is also deemed important as a way of avoiding a blind acceptance of religious dogma and becoming over-dependent on a spiritual leader. In the leader’s words, one must “become one’s own master”. He is indeed an advocate of personal freedom and individual self-fulfillment so characteristic of New Age spirituality. Thus, in the Templo Guaracy, features of “traditional” Afro-Brazilian religious practice and the contemporary “spirituality” are closely combined in an innovative “New Age version” of Umbanda²².

Empowerment

Knowledge of the existence of the Temple is spread by word of mouth traveling through the local networks of alternative practices most French devotees of Umbanda were involved in before joining the shrine house. For many, this practice thus represents a further step on their “spiritual path”. In some cases, devotees continue to practice Reiki, yoga, meditation, South American shamanism, Zen, Sufi dancing, etc. even after joining the group, as long as these do not affect their regular attendance to the shrine house²³. Many devotees of the Templo Guaracy - Brazilian, French or North-American - enjoy a good level of education and had little or no previous knowledge about or experience in Afro-Brazilian religions. Most practitioners are interested in readings on Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Buddhism, Jungian psychology, etc. and have, accordingly, deeper knowledge in these areas than about mainstream Afro-Brazilian religions. Indeed, New Age ideas play a more important role in this shrine house’s functioning than knowledge about Umbanda and Afro-Brazilian religions in general.

Devotees are thus free to practice and study other religious expressions outside Umbanda in their efforts to attain spiritual development and enjoy significant liberty in their “spiritual path”, even after enrolling in the shrine house. In practice, in the Temple, devotion to Umbanda is rarely exclusive, but rather cumulative and complementary to other practices. For instance, some mediums who practice yoga claim that the development of mediumistic experiences is like the “wake of the Kundalini” (“enlightenment” or “spiritual awakening”). A medium who practices Buddhist meditation states that meditation makes her incorporation more profound; a couple of mediums run a center where they offer their own methods of spiritual care. Conversely, the few mediums that started their “spiritual path” in the Temple may develop an interest for other practices as they share experiences with other members of the group.

The goal of “spiritual work” carried out in the frame of public and private rituals is “the preservation and full development of Life”, as the Temple’s website advocates and is taught to persons who become interested in the Temple’s activities. This means, as a Brazilian dignitary explained, the liberation of the individual from conditioning that may restrain the expression of one’s full potential and the discovery, through initiation, of one’s true inner nature or “essence”. Such limitations are “negativities” described by practitioners as anger

²² For different examples on connections between more traditional religious expressions and contemporary spiritual attitudes, see chapters by Roussou and Werczeberger in this volume.

²³ There are about twenty-five steady mediums in the group; there is only one Brazilian among them. About twenty consultants attend the public ceremonies on a regular basis; very few of them are Brazilian. Participants are aged between sixty and eighteen; most are middle-class Caucasians. They belong to varied socio-professional categories: psychotherapists, teacher, accountant, jurist, yoga teacher, office worker, civil servant, veterinarian, etc. Women and men are represented in equal proportions.

towards persons or situations in the past, fear of affronting difficulties, guilt, self-judgment and so forth. “Spiritual/mediumistic development” brings a new perspective and transformation in one’s life, liberating the individual from limitations and bringing forgiveness, compassion, courage, strength, etc., which are held to allow individuals to live their life “fully”. Hence, the ritual activities bring about a sense of empowerment to the practitioners, pushing them to go beyond their limitations and revealing that they are more than what they seem to be. The term empowerment will thus be used here as a synonym of self-enhancement. Gender issues, however, seem secondary in this process. Practitioners may indeed deal with gender-related questions in the course of their spiritual development, yet these are not conspicuous in their narratives. Living life “fully” implies making peace with such issues by accepting oneself and others.

In the frame of public ceremonies, visitors are invited to consult the spiritual entities senior mediums embody. At the first consultation, the newcomer is often told “you have a lot of power in your hands”, “you have lots of [spiritual] light”, “you are a queen”, “you have a *caboclo* [spiritual entity that, according to the Temple, manifests as an Amerindian] on your head”, “this house [the Temple] is open to you”, etc. These utterances represent the first step in the creation of a non-ordinary, ritual identity²⁴ suggesting that individuals are endowed with powers that they ignore or extraordinary capacities that need recognition and development. The first ritual manipulations the visitor undergoes aim to cleanse and nurture what is called “interior light” (*lumière intérieure* or *eledá*), a divine substance held to be found in all humans. The “cleanliness” and “firmness” of the “interior light” allows mediums to develop their “verticality” - i.e. contact with the spiritual realm - and to “connect” subsequently to spiritual entities of “higher planes” through incorporation. As participants evolve in the Temple, they are led to discover and embody new qualities of extra-human entities which provide self-knowledge, wisdom, well-being and balance. The entities are said to guide mediums - at later stages of their spiritual development - to “meet” their *orixá* or tutelary divinity through initiation. This experience is often described by French worshipers as the discovery of their “essence” or an internal nature that brings about a particular feeling of wholeness and integrity. Indeed, these entities are held to link the individual to the divine realm by spreading spiritual light, elevating one’s consciousness, bringing appeasement, love and balance, as well as by triggering the self-transformation, self-knowledge and self-actualization devotees look for. This conception of the *orixá* and the role attributed to one’s spiritual guides is indeed very similar to that of the idea of the Higher Self, as the “real”, natural or sacred identity, well-known from the New Age literature²⁵.

The conceptions the Temple shares with other New Age practices certainly make Umbanda attractive for potential practitioners; however, it is above all ritual experience that makes this practice appealing²⁶. Devotees often avoid giving precise explanations about the nature of the spiritual work provided by the Temple when they invite someone to a ceremony in order not to influence the newcomer’s personal impressions and experiences. Most mediums recall being persuaded by the “structured” character of the Temple’s rituals, their “beauty” and the “strong” feelings they experienced during their first visits rather than metaphysical teachings. Although the vocabulary used in the Temple may be familiar to visitors (terms such as “interior light”, “verticality”, “energetic cleansing”, etc.), they only learn about the complexity of the “wheel of the *orixás*” and the elaborateness of the Temple’s philosophical system after a certain period of regular attendance. Thus, what may seem familiar to newcomers are not so much the philosophical tenets and the intricate cosmogony,

²⁴ Luhrmann, *Persuasions*, 229.

²⁵ Hanegraaff, *New Age*, 211-215.

²⁶ For another example, in this volume, on the predominance of experience over teachings, see Trulsson.

but the aim of the spiritual work developed here and the extraordinary experiences rituals may bring about. Indeed, in the Temple, as in the case of the Neopagan practice of magic, belief is guided by action²⁷.

The Temple offers a complex ritual system of public, private and individual rituals, as well as retreats and outdoor ceremonies. The main goal of these ceremonies is to learn to incorporate spiritual entities of different categories and to observe the correct ritual conduct necessary to have a “good quality” of incorporation. Accordingly, the favored technique of spiritual work in the Temple’s weekly public rituals is to induce the consultants to undergo incorporation. This experience may further be trained and “deepened” in the frame of private rituals if one wishes to engage in the Temple’s activities. The shrine house follows a very accommodating policy: it is held that everyone is endowed with mediumistic capacities and may learn to incorporate spiritual entities²⁸. Clients are thus invited to establish a mimetic relation with senior mediums from the beginning of their attendance at the Temple. The spiritual entities ask consultants to dance with eyes shut and they are encouraged to “let go” (*lâcher prise*), i.e. to abandon possible intellectual constraints (*le mental*) that may restrict the approximation of the client’s spiritual guide and to dance freely to the sound of the drums and sacred chants. As the ceremony progresses, more and more participants dance in the “sacred space” (*espace sacré, gongá*), carefully supervised by the entities.

The weekly public rituals called *gira* follow a fixed pattern of sequences dedicated to “spiritual work” with the public and to mediumistic training. Neophytes, as well as initiates who pertain to different hierarchical degrees and fulfill different ritual functions, get to incorporate at different moments of the ritual according to repetitive sequences. Outdoor rituals organized at the seaside or near a waterfall, follow the same sequences of the public *gira*, but are held to be more powerful than the weekly ceremonies because of the proximity of natural elements. If the organization of public ceremonies depends on the Temple’s hierarchy, in the private rituals dedicated explicitly to mediumistic training (*camarinha*)²⁹ hierarchical positions often tend to be blurred. At these events all participants perform in general roughly the same activities independently of their place in the hierarchy³⁰. The ritual activities that compose these private ceremonies differ significantly from those of the public *gira*, as they do not always follow a fixed pattern and remain largely undetermined and unpredictable. In addition, while the public *giras* are led by the French shrine house’s “coordinator”, *camarinhas* held in Paris are orchestrated by the biological sister of the Temple’s leader - a high dignitary responsible for the development of the Temples abroad. In Brazil retreats are conducted by the Temple’s leader himself during the French group’s biannual visits. Private rituals are thus considered “stronger” than ordinary *giras*, as the dignitaries who conduct them are held to guarantee a perfect quality of “vibration” which is likely to make incorporation more profound.

²⁷ Luhmann, *Persuasions*, 310.

²⁸ The Temple’s leader describes this particularity with the following amusing phrase: “Even the mailman leaves the Temple spinning [with the ability of going into trance] (*Até o carteiro sai do Templo girando.*)”. To my knowledge, there is only one European medium that cannot incorporate.

²⁹ In the “standard” vocabulary of Umbanda, *camarinha* designates the place where neophytes are secluded during initiation, Olga Guidolle Cacciatore, *Dicionário de cultos afro-brasileiros* (Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária, 1977). In more “traditional” variants of Umbanda, initiation does not necessarily imply reclusion. Mediums may undergo “baptism” (*batismo*) in a waterfall, at the seaside or in the shrine house, with spiritual baths and offerings. In the Temple, *camarinha* designates ritual events dedicated to initiation, the transmission of theological knowledge and/or ritual competences.

³⁰ This changed during the final stage of my field work, in 2008. Henceforth, in Brazil, *camarinhas* are held separately according to hierarchical degrees.

Camarinhas are often referred to by French practitioners as “initiations”, although these rituals do not systematically bring about change in the participants’ status. In any case, private rituals are deemed to be the most powerful rituals in the Temple, especially those that take place at the Brazilian shrine house. Mediums’ entities may, for instance, adopt a more idiosyncratic behavior during private ceremonies: their incorporation often becomes more confident and their entities may start to speak and/or to manipulate ritual objects. Affording participants strong experiences of incorporation, private rituals therefore represent turning points in spiritual development, as they enhance both mediums and their spiritual entities, even if not all of them imply initiation.

The different stages of mediumistic development are associated with clearly defined hierarchical degrees and ritual functions determined by initiation. Consultants who may have already experienced a certain degree of incorporation and are willing to engage in this spiritual work may become “mediums in development in the public” (*Médium en Développement dans l’Assistance*, MDA). MDAs are led to assume some independence in their spiritual work, as they incorporate spiritual entities without the assistance of senior mediums in a ritual sequence dedicated to this hierarchical degree³¹. After this stage, one can be “elected” to enroll in the shrine house’s “mediumistic chain” (*corrente mediúnica*)³² and become a “chain medium” (*médium de corrente*) which implies the assuming of ritual roles as an officiant (*cambono* or *supleente*). The *cambonos*’ duty is to assist a senior medium’s spiritual entities during incorporation by providing the ritual objects they use, such as their adornments, cigars, water and candles, as well as noting the entities’ messages and the rituals they prescribe to visitors. *Supleentes* replace absent *cambonos* and help look after consultants. Mediums may undergo initiation once they have joined the “mediumistic chain”. The first stage of initiation (*bori*) is a ceremony which seals the medium’s relationship with two spiritual entities. The Temple’s leader may then enable these initiates to take on the function of “working medium” (*Médium de Corrente com Ordem de Trabalho*) and develop spiritual work with consultants in the frame of public ceremonies. In general, it is once they have acquired extensive experience in “spiritual work” that mediums may be designated to undergo the second stage of the initiatory process (*feitura*, “making” literally). During this ceremony the Temple’s leader identifies the medium’s personal divinity (*orixá*) or “essence” and composes its material representation while the initiate connects to it through incorporation. The medium is then said to become the priest or priestess (*sacerdote* or *sacerdotisa*) of the specific quality of energy represented by his or her tutelary divinity. At this degree, one may be assigned to conduct public ceremonies in the case of the absence of the Parisian Temple’s coordinator or perhaps even to become a coordinator, if the Temple expands.

As a result of spiritual development and repeated contact with the spiritual entities, mediums are no longer supposed to be the prey of the negative energies and bad influences of their environment, but strengthened, conscious and protected individuals with a mission in life and a specific place in nature. Consultations afford participants an enhanced self-image and mediumistic development progressively allows the expression of what is considered one’s “sacred self”. Hence, the different stages of the initiatory process and incorporation bring

³¹ They are also given access to the Temple’s private ceremonies, including those dedicated to *exus* and *pomba-giras*, male and female spiritual entities which represent libido and “creational energy”. *Pomba-giras* make some female mediums feel uneasy, as these entities wear sensuous costumes and may dance lasciviously, counter to mediums’ bashfulness, challenging them to assume their bodies and sensuality. However exacerbated gender may appear in this specific context, the acting out of attitudes related to power follows the same general pattern described here.

³² This term evokes at once the ties and unity between fellow mediums (they form a single chain) and the energy that is held to flow between them during rituals.

about a sense of empowerment as the medium becomes surrounded and filled with energy and spiritual consciousness. Furthermore, mediumistic training is associated with spiritual development, while initiation creates composite and pluralized individuals endowed with extraordinary capacities. Empowerment indeed seems better understood in the sense of “ritual enhancement”, as rituals are configured in such a way as to produce complex agents³³.

Repeated contact with spiritual entities is thought not only to bring about an “elevation of consciousness”, but also to allow the achievement of a “spiritual brotherhood” which is, in addition to individual self-realization, one of the ultimate goals of the spiritual work performed here. Individual spiritual development is held to be instrumental in attaining brotherhood; there is thus a strong emphasis on egalitarian relationships in the group. Correspondingly, devotees make every effort to show a tolerant, supporting, respectful, loving and caring attitude among them and towards visitors. Furthermore, all who engage with the Temple become the spiritual children of the Temple’s spiritual mentor, Pai Guaracy, as well as of the Temple’s leader - addressed as Pai (father) -, and practitioners sometimes refer to each other as “brothers” and “sisters”. Generally speaking, relationships between devotees tend to be egalitarian, however hierarchical they may be in ritual.

Submission and coercion

Yet, commitment to the Temple’s activities is concomitant with its hierarchical organization determined by the Temple’s leader, as we have seen in the previous section. And this hierarchy is not only about empowerment and the recognition of spiritual development, but also about submission, self-sacrifice and coercion. Indeed, ritual participation implies submissive attitudes, obedience is connected to “promotion” in the Temple’s hierarchy and coercive attitudes may be observed in the transmission of ritual competences. Equality is therefore rather a potential in the shrine house and it stands as a discursive element, for, in practice, one has to subject oneself to the hierarchical organization³⁴.

In order to rise in the hierarchy, mediums must demonstrate submission to the Temple’s rules which are characterized by some as being “bureaucratic” or even “military”. From the grade of MDA, mediums are expected to attend public ceremonies regularly, their presence is noted and absences are counted. Ritual outfits are uniform: MDAs wear white jeans and a white t-shirt with the Temple’s logotype; female “chain mediums” wear colorful dresses inspired by Afro-Brazilian colonial costumes, men and drummers wear African-inspired outfits made in Brazil. Senior mediums make written records of the consultations and the coordinator must regularly email reports about the progression of ceremonies to the Temple’s leader in Brazil. As to the hierarchy, any higher promotion is announced by one of the spiritual entities of the Temple’s leader as an “order”. One may thus say the following: X received an “order of *bori/feitura*” or an “order to work”. At the same time, the devotee who undergoes such initiation is said to “receive” a ritual, which is greeted as a gift or a privilege. Finally, mediums must incorporate their spiritual entities at the same time, to the sound of a specific chant and during determined ritual sequences they must “desincorporate” (*désincorporer*) at the same time as well³⁵. Little place is thus given to individual initiatives or to idiosyncratic behavior.

³³ Houseman, “Menstrual slaps”, “Rituels contemporains”.

³⁴ For other examples, in this volume, on the compatibility of hierarchical organization or submission to a charismatic leader with liberating and empowering doctrines, see chapters by Cornejo and Werczeberger.

³⁵ French mediums may have to be subject to further constraints in their efforts to practice Umbanda, such as learning Portuguese, given that it is the ritual language of the Temple. As many of the senior mediums’ spiritual entities speak Portuguese, good knowledge of this language is often considered in the choice of *camponos*.

In general, Umbanda shrine houses' structure is determined by bureaucratic organization on the one hand and spiritual organization on the other³⁶. Accordingly, there are, in general, two parallel power structures. The authority of the leader determines a "spiritual hierarchy" based on the recognition of his or her theological knowledge and religious competences, as well as the close relation he or she is held to maintain with the extra-human beings that are worshipped. The leader is helped by those, often senior, devotees who have conquered his or her trust in terms of their spiritual qualities and reliability. These persons are the leader's close assistants in the religious activities with mediums and clients (they may be *camponos*, drummers or fulfill other specialized ritual charges which vary between shrine houses). Parallel to this, there is what may be called a "material hierarchy"³⁷ with a president, a secretary and a treasurer who are in charge of the practical issues of the shrine house, such as the payment of bills, for instance. The mediums and sympathizers are associates in this structure and pay monthly dues to maintain the association. There is often an overlap between the two hierarchies, as senior mediums recognized in the spiritual organization are more likely to assume the role of president, treasurer and so forth.

In the Temple the two hierarchies are particularly intertwined as practically all mediums, from the grade of MDA, are demanded to assume several tasks in the administrative and financial maintenance of the shrine house. Such material activities include helping to run the Alaká - a small shop specifically intended for the followers - where one may buy, among other things, ritual ingredients (candles, incense, soaps, beads, etc.) and ritual clothing. Others are assigned to the "CESA", an administrative service which collects the monthly fees and manages membership in the association. Everyone takes a turn helping with the Kilombo, a catering service which offers a meal after the weekly public ceremonies. These activities are not entirely independent of the spiritual development of mediums, as they are meant to teach them the notion of "service", as the coordinator explained. Also, a leaflet that describes the MDAs' duties says that these tasks, although not officially mandatory, are essential as they are meant to contribute to attaining the "conscience of spiritual brotherhood". Indeed, these duties are closely related to the ritual activities proper, as, for instance, some of them are accomplished in costumes that evoke ritual³⁸.

The particularity of this shrine house's organization lies in the fact that in the same way its leader can elect a medium to a higher hierarchical degree he can also demote him or her from it. The contingency of being downgraded does not, however, depend exclusively on spiritual matters. According to my observations, the participation in material activities plays an equally important role in these decisions. Indeed, the accomplishment of what seem to be extra-ritual tasks may have an incidence on the rituals' organization. Although in Brazil dismissals may occur in a more radical manner than in Paris, it seems representative of the Temple as a whole. In 2006 about thirty Brazilian mediums were discharged because the CHEV (*Centro Holístico de Eventos e Vivências*, a service in charge of workshops and lectures on Umbanda and spirituality in general) fell behind in a project.

In Paris, demotion may occur, for instance, if a medium is absent from the weekly public ceremonies more than three times a year "without a valid reason" (work, health or

³⁶ Bureaucratic order inspired by civilian associations was introduced in Umbanda as a means to counterbalance the negative social image it had in global society. It was meant to suggest that it is an organized and institutionalized religion and not some kind of barbarian magical practice, Diana Brown, "Uma história da Umbanda no Rio," in *Umbanda e Política*, ed. Diana Brown et al. (Rio de Janeiro : ISER/Editora Marco Zero 1985).

³⁷ Maggie, *Guerra de orixá*.

³⁸ Initiate women who run the CESA wear a colorful African-style gown and a matching turban, while mediums who work in the Kilombo wear outfits used in private rituals; there is no dress code for the Alaká.

travel). This rule is in fact related to one's progression in ritual: it is as if the effects rituals may exert were somehow perishable. Demotions may also be explained by the mediums' "spiritual needs" (*besoins spirituels*), according to the alternation of the Temple's and the universe's dynamics of "expansion" and "retraction". There are also periods of what is called *sacudimento* which is a way of penalizing behaviors deemed to be wrong³⁹. Internal tensions in the beginnings of the Parisian group led, for example, to a partial and temporary closing of the shrine house. When there is *sacudimento* "promotions" are "closed", i.e. nobody can be elected for the grade of MDA, for instance. Also, spiritual work with determined categories of spiritual entities may be suspended or the Temple's leader may refrain from incorporating his main spiritual guides. "Working mediums" or *camponos* may also be relieved from their functions if the leader considers it necessary. Demotions, however opaque their explanation may be, are most often serenely welcomed by mediums and accepted as necessary for their spiritual development and the general good.

Non observance of rules, *sacudimento* and what are called "ritualistic errors" (*erreurs ritualistiques*) may all entail penalizations related to the ritual activities. What may count as ritualistic error is, however, hard to define because there is no commonly shared view of it. Indeed, mediums have different levels of ritual competences according to their experience and initiatory degree; thus their aptitude to identify possible faults varies considerably. Field data shows, however, that a ritualistic error occurs when a senior medium or a Brazilian dignitary identifies an action as such. Indeed, similar mistakes do not entail systematic calls to order. In public rituals conducted in Paris, senior mediums most often point out faults that concern ritual competences such as the right moment to incorporate, the knowledge of sacred chants or the entities' and divinities' salutations. It may occur - both in public and private rituals - that if the MDA's incorporation is not harmonized, i.e. if one of them incorporates before the specific chant that calls the entities, all participants' entities are sent away and the incorporation has to be repeated. Regarding chants, many French mediums have considerable difficulties in learning them, as most of them are in Portuguese and some of them are quite long, have elaborate lyrics and follow complicated rhythmical patterns. Yet, mastery of the chants is held to be an essential competence to assure the good course of ceremonies. As such, senior mediums make every effort to teach the novices and sometimes their methods may be coercive, although most of the time lack of command of chants is overlooked. For instance, during a public ritual, one of the coordinator's entities asked the group to learn a specific chant identified as containing important "foundations" (*fundamento*, knowledge about the meaning of ritual gestures, chants, etc.). After the ceremony a senior medium wrote the lyrics on a white board, translated the words and rehearsed it several times with those present. Four weeks later, at the following ceremony where this particular category of entities was invoked once again, the entity of the senior medium who wrote down the chant put the MDAs to the test. Although they made serious efforts to sing, one of them even used her lyrics-book, the entity was not satisfied with their performance: he refused to wear his ritual adornments and "desincorporated" very fast because the mediums had not learned the chant by heart. The medium explained later to the MDAs that an entity may refuse to "come" (i.e., incorporate) if the chants are not sung properly.

In the private rituals called *camarinhas*, coercive and submissive attitudes are more salient than in the public ceremonies. *Camarinhas* are awaited for not only with joy and excitement about the teachings and unpredictable experiences likely to happen, but also a certain degree of apprehension of possible "ritualistic errors". Mediums are also anxious

³⁹ In the "standard" vocabulary of Umbanda, *sacudimento* stands for a cleansing ritual performed with leaves, offerings, sacred chants or sacrifices (Cacciatore, *Dicionário*). The word is a derivate of the Portuguese verb *sacudir*, to shake.

about not being worthy if an initiation takes place and devotees who travel to Brazil for the first time may be afraid of not being accepted by the Temple's leader. In Brazil, the conditions imposed on the participants of a *camarinha* may be highly coercive and absolute obedience is required: one may not speak without authorization, must sleep on the ground, walk barefoot, eat from a coco-nut shell, may wash only at determined moments, etc.

In Paris, during a *camarinha* conducted by the Temple leader's sister, several gestures were identified as ritual faults. She had given the order to respect absolute silence, but a medium made the parquet crack while walking across the room. The medium was asked in a firm tone to retrace his steps without making any noise. At lunch, several participants were asked to leave the room because they did not have their ritualistic coco-nut shell (*cuia*) to eat from. Another medium was excluded later on because she cried out of joy when she heard that at the next sequence we were to "work" with a category of entities that is seldom invoked.

However, those suspended were allowed to return to the ritual later, on the demand of the priestess's spiritual entity. The participants who stayed were asked to volunteer to leave the room and give their *cuias* to those excluded along with a hug. Once everyone was back, the entity proffered the following teaching: penalizing those who had made a ritualistic error by sending them out was the right choice, but the most important of all is the brotherhood between mediums, as those who volunteered had considered the eventuality of being excluded in their turn for not having a *cuia*. The disappointment of those who were excluded was further lessened when the entity made them incorporate. Be they in the context of public or private ritual, such episodes are devoted to teaching participants that correct ritual behavior implies the demonstration of their willingness to obey ritual instructions, particularly in private ceremonies, as *camarinhas* seldom follow any pre-established pattern and participants can never really know what comes next. According to the different ritual events, it is only by following the leaders' or senior mediums' injunctions that devotees can establish correct ritual behavior. In ritual practice obedience thus holds sway over experience or actual knowledge about the Temple's rituals.

Discussion

We have seen that the apparent antinomy between equality/empowerment and submission may be observed at different levels in the Temple, but it takes on its strongest implications in its rituals. At an individual level, devotees seek self-fulfillment and liberation from the limitations of conditioning which, incidentally, shows in their considerable degree of freedom concerning the parallel practice of different "spiritual disciplines". Yet, mediums are compelled to obedience and submission in the Temple's ritual practice. At the group's level, there is the potential of creating a "spiritual brotherhood" which in fact goes together with the Temple's hierarchical organization according to material and spiritual principles. Rituals imply episodes of empowerment due to the incorporation of spiritual entities and the recognition of one's spiritual development through initiation and promotion in the Temple's hierarchy. But there is the possibility of demotion in the Temple's hierarchy and that of coercion in the transmission of ritual competences. Furthermore, as the formal differences of public and private rituals show, the more a ritual event is held to be powerful, the more it is likely to give space to coercive attitudes and calls to order. Finally, these seeming oppositions are manifested in the Temple's vocabulary, as promotions in the hierarchy are referred to both as "orders" ("order to work", "order of *feitura*") and as rewards ("receive" *bori*/a ritual or the possibility to incorporate an entity).

During my fieldwork I was always puzzled by this permanent tension between coercion, submission, obedience and empowerment, as it looked as if submission to the

Temple's rules and engagement in its material activities was somehow rewarded with promotion in the ritual's hierarchical organization. To use a medium's words who was scolded for not having learned the chant, it was as if one had to be the "good pupil" to evolve in the Temple. At first, it might thus seem that submission could be part of a more or less conscious strategy to step ahead in the hierarchy. Devotees would then show submission intentionally or unintentionally in order to be rewarded for their dedication⁴⁰. However, the medium quoted is today a "chain medium" although she still has gaps in her knowledge of chants. In addition, it would be hard to understand why French mediums continue to practice Umbanda if they are constantly faced with the frustration of finding constraints while they are in fact seeking liberation from limitations. Finally, there are very few selective criteria in the Temple: everyone who "hooks" (*accrocher*) or "vibrates" (*vibrer*) with its ceremonies may potentially become a medium and evolve in the hierarchy⁴¹. In fact, attitudes of empowerment, submission and coercion are not contradictory, but complementary and constitutive of the practice of this New Age variant of Umbanda.

Attitudes of submission undoubtedly represent constraints in the Temple, but participants do not deliberately submit to them in the frame of a strategy. As the Temple's ritual activities are the favored loci of the transmission and learning of the practice of Umbanda, it is clearly the ritual context that gives rise to attitudes of submission and empowerment. As Houseman summarizes his findings on the pragmatic premises of people's participation in ritual, "the participants' emotional and intentional dispositions (...) not so much inform their actions (...), as they are informed by them"⁴². This means that ritual rests upon stipulated patterns of behavior which are not motivated by the ritualists' ordinary emotional states and intentions, as in everyday activities. In the ritual context, each participant elaborates their internal states out of imposed patterns of behavior. We may therefore say that French practitioners of Umbanda do not demonstrate submission at determined moments of their ritual activities because they feel meek, but because ritual imposes on them to do so. Correspondingly, the reason that leads dignitaries to exert pressure on mediums is not so much an interior feeling of vexation, but a ritual attitude senior mediums must assume in their duty of teaching to the novices the right ritual conduct a medium is supposed to follow. If submission is stipulated behavior, empowerment, as the acting out of the "inner authority" or "higher self" enhanced by the spiritual guides and divinities, is also triggered by ritual, constructed through the repeated experience of incorporation. As such, it only makes sense in the context of ritual itself. In the case of the practice of Umbanda in Paris, the question of power therefore seems pertinent in ritual as it is there that attitudes related to power are acted out. However, extra-ritual relationships tend to be egalitarian; practitioners regard each other as being brothers and sisters and spiritual work is held to bring about spiritual brotherhood.

Hence, community-based spiritual practices such as that of French devotees of Umbanda are not devoid of forms of authority. Participants' discourse stresses equality and their interactions outside of the ceremonial frame do not reflect power relations. Nevertheless, the collective ritual activities they engage in compel them to exert authority over others and/or manifest their submission to them, as a function of the positions they occupy in the course of

⁴⁰ This interpretation, inspired by Bourdieu's concept of strategy, would imply the supposition that promotion in the hierarchy is a necessary recognition of obedience. Yet, as Elster's critique shows, the concept of strategy suggests a "conspiratorial vision" of the social world and Bourdieu does not account for the mechanism that triggers unconscious strategies. Jon Elster, "Le pire des mondes possibles. À propos de *La Distinction* de Pierre Bourdieu," *Commentaire* 19 (1982).

⁴¹ Selective criteria concern one's general state of physical and mental health and physical conditions.

⁴² Houseman, "Menstrual slaps", 34.

their career in the Temple. Thus, there is an ongoing tension between ceremonial hierarchy and spiritual equality.

Contrary to ideas put forward in sociological accounts, the role of power relations in New Age phenomena is particularly baffling. However, it cannot simply be ignored, but remains essential for an understanding of such practices. Participants' discourse promoting equality is indeed only one side of the coin and should not be taken at face-value as sufficient in and of itself. Further research on spiritual practices must consider the co-presence of authority and its discursive negation in order to avoid reductive solutions to the issues raised by power-related considerations.

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