

Notes on the historical origins of Umbanda

Two intellectuals well known in Salvador place Umbanda in different contexts. As "the result of observations of a lifetime", Thales de Azevedo arrives at conclusions that implicitly put Umbanda under the rubric of popular Catholicism in Brazil. Zora Seljan does quite differently. In a synthetic article "Os deuses que vieram da África," she defines Umbanda as "nome genérico para as seitas de origem africana no Rio de Janeiro, de origem quimbunda, significando a arte de curar, magia" (1). This definition comes close to the

specialists' position that, in Azevedo's words, restricts "'religious sociology' to the nucleus of the canonical and formal definition of Catholicism and considers that the variants of this model belong to the sphere of superstition and folklore" (2). The famous Bahian sociologist stresses the "social-functional point of view", adding that "such variants are almost always parts of complexes or *continua*" (3), which should be described sociologically as a whole that belongs with the field of investigation of sociology of religion and

even the sociology of Catholicism". He proceeds to list five typical characteristics and functional bases of popular Catholicism which he sums up as "a propitiatory and supplicatory ritualism with therapeutic ends, in which... the 'saints' ... reply favorably to the appeals of their devotees in cases of difficulty and crises". This summary definition certainly seems to resemble Dona Zora's definition of Umbanda as "a arte de curar". The definitions differ principally on the point of origin. "African", she asserts. Azevedo, on the other hand, derives popular Catholic beliefs from "official Catholicism", ascribes folk ethics to "formal models", and refers to the cult of saints "of canonical definition".

This article is restricted to the very narrow, somewhat frustrating, and perhaps rather academic field of the historical evolution of Umbanda until 1920.

After Brazil became independent of Portugal, the black slave continued to be subjected to two primary influences, (1) Africa and (2) America. He continued to labor as a slave in a tropical-staple export system that was constantly being depopulated by early death and repopulated (until 1850) with young male Africans. Nominally Catholic, Brazil consisted for the most part of a two-caste society. After 1888 it began to develop as a class society (1). Apart from Mozambique, Africa stretched along the West

Coast over Sudanic areas and Bantu-speaking ones throughout which paganism held sway. Most field slaves, though baptized, probably remained pagans in Brazil. The word "pagan" means literally "peasant". Hence in this historical sense paganism includes the polytheistic rites that survive in rural regions, whether in West Africa, Brazil, or for that matter Portugal (4).

On West African religion there are three considerations essential for understanding the origins of Umbanda. First, West African native religions are tribal, that is nonecumenical and, most important, non-exclusive. Different animist religions coexist in and sometimes even cohabit the same territory. Their tolerance is easily explained. Tribal religions do not bear any universal message based on revelation. The Tribe's ancestors serve as a bridge between god and men. Each tribe has its gods, valid for it, but which it does not try to impose on other tribes. For *their* gods protect *them*. In no case is religion a personal choice. In pagan religion it is impossible to become an apostate, that is a renegade. Religion is simply a given of the social situation not easily removed to another sociological climate.

The second general consideration concerns the relationship between man and gods. For the pagan, gods are not good and

bad. God is not a just father who rewards and punishes. Gods are powers released by correct ritual that makes them able to do what man wants. Everything is won, merited, conquered by efficacious powers.

From these two generalizations follows the third quality. The West African tribe can be adaptive to and eclectic in extratribal deities, in other gods, that is⁽⁵⁾. (Non-Africans have often found this eclecticism distressing because it may mean that the African defies conversion in the Augustinian sense.) To these three generalizations must be added one caveat. The historian simply cannot accept any concept of the monolithic black unconscious in religion, of social memory of even the vaguest kind. Now called *soul* in the United States this ahistorical concept is expressed clearly enough by the American artist Nina Simone:

"...there is a *thing* inside of us. We've had it since before... our forefathers, our ancestors from Africa. There's a *thing* that we have that makes the essence of us and I don't think it has anything to do with a choice. We're just the way we are, as a people"⁽⁶⁾.

The slim evidence available on the topic suggests that in Brazil — if not in Africa itself — the native West African neither associated the Christian

gods (or saints) with nor blamed them for the bonded state he found himself in the New World. Rather, he expected the Catholic priest in Brazil to manipulate the saints for good or ill as the *feiticeiro* did his Tribe's gods. If that was indeed the case, the priest would not fit Azevedo's typology as being "...of secondary importance ... thought of as a provider of religious services rather than a mediator with God"⁽⁷⁾. While many African slaves may have been spiritually shocked (*banzo*) by being jammed into the vile role of a toiling slave in an alien land, the sacrament of baptism and the cult of saints seems not to have been much of a religious shock to Africans — as they understood the Christian confession. The worst thing for them was being torn away from native soil and thus being separated not only from living relatives but more significantly from communication with spirits of their departed ancestors. This wrench must have jarred their tribal belief. More than this historians can not say.

Still the African was not penned up, as the pagan Amerind was, in mission villages to be catechized by European missionaries. On the plantation he was permitted for reasons we can only surmise — to perform the *candomblé*, singing and dancing to the sound of drums through the long hours of the tropical night. One of the slave

songs recorded a century ago went like this:

Vou criar as minhas raivas
Com meus *calundus*
Pra fazer as coisinhas
Que eu bem quiser⁽⁸⁾.

We can infer that dancing the *calundu* enabled the blacks to keep their sanity, that is their identity as persons, if not as Africans. For we now understand something that nineteenth-century travelers in Brazil did not. Calundu or *candomblé* was a religious ceremony centering on spirit possession induced by drum, dance, smoke, and alcohol. Europeans put it down as drunken orgy. They were blind to African paganism or animism: the incorporation of African deities into the bodies of *candomblézeiros*. The religion, *candomblé*, was African in that tribal gods descended upon men. It was not popular Catholicism.

Of the religious ways of the slaves that ran away we have scarcely any evidence. If the "republic" of Palmares can serve as a model of the *quilombo* (located near some cities during the nineteenth century), the runaway slaves would build a chapel, select a *padre* (usually a light-skinned creole), and conduct their version of Christian rites. In this case, the priest *does* fit into Azevedo's folk-Catholic typology. In Palmares he is a provider of religious services rather than a moderator with God⁽⁹⁾.

In 1969 a new piece of evidence came to light which bears out Azevedo's hypothesis. Tucked away in the backlands was discovered a village of 1200 blacks. They are pure-blooded descendants of a *quilombo* who had kept themselves isolated from white slave owners and their descendants. No marriage has been permitted with outsiders, yet in the entire village there is not to be found a trace of African culture. There stands a small Catholic church to which a priest from the white world came — and still comes — to baptize, marry, and perform last rites on these descendants of the original maroons. Their devotion is to Our Lady of Grace⁽¹⁰⁾. Probable conclusion: runaways in slavocrat Brazil saw no reason either to eschew Christianity or consciously to cling to their tribal gods exclusively. They had their freedom as men so that they did not need to lean on the African *feiticeiro* who acted as a mediator with African deities.

Most plantations had a *feiticeiro*, and the planter usually knew what he or she was up to. The *feiticeiro* was a much feared person; no available evidence points to him or her as fomenting revolt or running away. He or she was respected by black and white alike, if not equally. In *As vítimas-algózes, quadros da escravidão*, Macedo centered one novel on a *feiticeiro* who was a strong field hand rather than a house

slave. The novelist piled detail upon awful detail to describe a *candomblé* as a "bachanal", grotesque and hideous. Macedo was horrified that not only slaves but free people, simple, credulous, and superstitious attended *candomblé*. In his traditional Catholic eyes they sacrificed their mortality and their health, not to speak of the money that they placed in the dirty hands of the African *feiticeiro*, their *mestre* ⁽¹¹⁾. He was certainly a fixture in plantation society, but whether the origins of his practices are more African than popular Catholic the sources do not reveal.

This lack of clearness as to origins is shown by another literary example of the *feiticeira*, in this case a domestic ex-slave. About 1895 when Gilberto Amado was 7 or 8 he spent vacations with his cousin, a mulatto boy his age, on an old-fashioned sugar plantation in Alagoas. Of all the former slaves there, he found a paralyzed old woman, Salu, at once the most decrepit and fascinating. His uncle allowed her to stay on huddled up in a heap in the kitchen because "everyone on the plantation consulted her" for curing maladies of the soul, heart, and body. The amulets, talismans and signs she brandished were not of course necessarily African any more than the herbs, dead frogs, and such were. It was just that rural plantation society felt that the *mandigueira* had great spiritual

powers in exorcising, blessing, and curing. But that occurred in the time, Amado added sardonically, that no one spoke of *candomblé* or anything of the sort that became so fashionable in the next generation ⁽¹²⁾ — the generation of Edison Carneiro and Thales de Azevedo.

If the planters showed little zeal in catechizing their mostly African-born slaves, urban masters were not so indifferent. In the town the Church sponsored lay brotherhoods of Our Lady of the Rosary of Black Men as the agency for "civilizing" the African, later the creole, and especially the mulatto. There is no evidence that blacks were dragged into these famous brotherhoods or that, in order to cling to African religious ways, they tried to avoid becoming lay brethren. The Bahian historian, Edison Carneiro, points out that brotherhoods were organized:

"on a trial basis . . . and sometimes the most peculiar religious practices arose . . . the Negroes invented Rosary cantatas and the begging of alms for St. Benedict . . . but [they] were violently opposed by ecclesiastical authorities in their rhythmic deformation of the religious music on church holidays [that is in public]. Ewe Negroes even founded one of their own in Bahia . . . Membership in the brotherhoods was certainly the first step toward citizenship, and the advantages to the system did not escape the

astute intelligence of the slaves" (13).

A São Paulo historian, however, thinks that the religious authorities could not "imagine that under the protection of Our Lady of the Rosary, Yemanjá was being worshipped, that under the tutelage of St. Benedict, all sorts of magical precepts were being performed to the gods-*orixás*" (14). It seems unlikely that the imagination of the religious authorities was *that* barren, or that black men were getting away with deliberately throwing cultural sand into priests' eyes. More likely, the colonial authorities regarded the black brotherhoods as an effective — and profitable — way of controlling black slaves in town. The brotherhood drew men of a different (that is, lower) culture into the caste society that was Catholic Brazil, which chose to look the other way when the slaves performed their tribal rites in their chapels.

Before long, in town, the tribal basis gave way to other criteria: color, wealth, birth and legal status. Therefore it can be argued that *at the time a brotherhood ceased being tribal and admitted each member on an individual basis it becomes inaccurate for the historian to refer to the "African religion"* being practiced by the black Rosary brothers. To be sure, many a slave may have chosen the social advantages of membership in a Brazilian brother-

hood and still kept some of the spiritual qualities of African worship, but our sources are silent on this score. (Here we are not considering the *candomblé da Bahia*, which was kept "pure" or true to African forms by somewhat artificial means (15). After the slave traffic ended, cult leaders spent sojourns in Lagos learning the correct Yoruban rites and returning to Bahia with renewed spiritual powers and with Yoruban objects of worship).

Certainly most Brazilians, at least until the advent of the Republic, were practicing a Catholicism that was more popular than traditional, more social and liturgical than ethical and doctrinaire. During the Empire the clergy put up with all sorts of folk or pagan elements — Portuguese, Amerindian, and African — which went into the curing of body and soul. Looking down his Roman nose at Brazil, Pio Nono remarked, *sicut populus, sic sacerdos* (16). During the pontificate of Leo XIII the Brazilian Church was reformed along untramontanist lines, but only in the city. Masons were put out of the white brotherhoods, and in all probability, *candomblézeiros* were eased out of the mulatto and black ones. In the countryside folk Catholicism is still practiced.

As the city began to attract ex-slaves, the famous Rosary brotherhoods waned and *candomblé* waxed. Why? Cities north of Rio were used to hav-

ing free blacks in their midst. Former slaves found jobs there. When they turned to the brotherhoods, they probably found that they had been reformed: become too Roman in practice. Or, the authorities may have withdrawn their support from the brotherhoods no longer regarding them as control points of urban slavery but as possible foci of black discontent. At any rate the black brotherhoods today appear ultra-Roman conformist.

The blacks and mulattoes in northern cities did, however, enjoy a modicum of liberty, enough at least to practice *candomblé* in the open. Around the turn of the century this pagan religion started to become — if it had not already started long before — riddled with non-African deities and practices. Adaptive and eclectic as in West Africa, it came to be called *candomblé de caboclo*. It is now called Umbanda. The question that Azevedo's typology raises is: at what point in its development should Umbanda be called popular Catholicism or, should *candomblé* be called a variant of folk Catholicism as soon as it appears on the plantation, even before it moves into the city?

In the newer cities of the south, the black Brazilian lost out to the European immigrant in the labor market. With little money and no privacy to worship as he would like or may have been accustomed to in rural areas, he met strong resis-

tance. Strengthened police forces not only maintained "law and order," but suppressed old practices said to be "backward," "provincial," or "barbaric." Exactly how the reformed clergy went about discouraging such practices is not documented. For their part, the *candomblézios* may have done some masking and concealing of African *orixás* and practices by resorting to use of Christian forms — as is often asserted by students of the Afro-Brazilian sects. It seems unlikely that the urban police, merely by seeing white madonnas or hearing European Ave Marias, would be put off from staging their night raids on Umbanda. Harsh the police was, persistent it was not. Still, in the evolution that resulted from the Church and state repression of the nocturnal practice of Umbanda, we cannot yet measure just what was lost, what was altered, and what was added to Umbanda. The lack of information stems from the lack of interest in all sects except the "pure" *candomblé da Bahia*.

When scholars at last did get around to studying Bantu cults in the 1930's, it was too late to ascertain what had been the religious practices of free urban blacks a century earlier. Scholars and later on amateurs were fascinated to note that this *macumba*, to use its older Bantu name, embraced not only Sudanic *orixás*, but wandering souls, — Amerindian, European,

and slave — Virgin Marys and Infants Jesus and countless odds and ends seemingly from everywhere. The sect leader appeared to have enlarged upon the powers earlier exercised by the rural plantation *feiticeiro*. But where the African-born *feiticeiro* may have remembered African ways, the *pai* or *mãe de santo* adapts, improvises, and innovates the art of curing. Seljan would say he relies on African divinities. Azevedo would find Umbanda a variant of popular Catholicism. It can also be argued that Umbanda is a new urban religion deriving from rural folk practices in Africa and Europe. One piece of recent evidence from the West Coast of Africa is of interest on this point.

Ex-slaves who returned to Africa did not find the "pure" Xangô or bewitching Yemanjá they had left behind in Brazil. In Africa the water goddess was big, black, fat and maternal. In Brazil she was fast becoming thin, white, svelte, and virginal. Those creoles who stayed on in Africa — many returned to Brazil — worshipped there in the Bahian way that seemed natural and agreeable. They built a chapel dedicated to Bom Jesus do Bonfim. In his up-to-date account of Bra-

zilians in Africa, Olinto writes: "The history of the Brazilian community in Lagos and generally on the Atlantic Coast is also the history of the Catholic Church in the entire region" (17). To be Brazilian did not mean to be pagan, for they settled in the city. The Yorubás call the Brazilian section "Popo Agudá" or Catholic Quarter. This bit of reverse evidence suggest another hypothesis: *the low-caste Brazilian has long expressed himself religiously through popular Catholic ways, but when he has felt oppressed, he has incorporated apparently African forms of expression into his religion.* It is well known that cult members in Brazil see nothing incongruous, religiously speaking, in attending mass on their saint's day, visiting Spiritist centres to receive *passes*, any more than what they knew in *candomblé de caboclo* seemed culturally absurd: African drums and Indian hemp (*jurema*), slave and Amerindian spirits, Exu and St. George (18). Just as in colonial days the urban black brotherhoods mixed Christian and pagan elements, so Umbanda keeps adapting pagan and Christian practices in a contemporary setting to become a new subculture.

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- 1 *Enciclopédia Bloch*. Rio de Janeiro, 2 (15): 82-95, 1968.
- 2 This passage and those cited below are taken from Azevedo. Thales de. "Popular Catholicism in Brazil; typology and functions". In: Sayers, Raymond S., ed. *Portugal and Brazil in Transition*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1968. p. 175-8. — Id. *Catolicismo no Brasil? Vozes*. Petrópolis, 63 (2): 117-24, 1969.
- 3 Umbanda is placed in a non-Catholic continuum in Camargo, Candido Procópio F. de. *Kardecismo e Umbanda; uma interpretação sociológica*. São Paulo, Liv. Pioneira, 1961.
- 4 Vasconcellos, J. Leite de. *Tradições Populares de Portugal*. Lisboa, n.p., 1882.
- 5 Froelich, J. C. *Animismes; les religions paiennes de l'Afrique de l'Ouest*. Paris, Ed. de l'Orante, 1964?. p. 46-78.
- 6 *Ebony*. New York, p. 157, Aug. 1969.
- 7 Azevedo. "Popular Catholicism...". p. 177.
- 8 Romero, Sylvio. *Cantos Populares do Brasil*. Cited in Brandão, Adelino. *Contribuições Afro-Negras ao Léxico Popular Brasileiro. Revista Brasileira de Folclore*. Rio de Janeiro, 8 (21): 125, 1968.
- 9 Carneiro, Edison. *O Quilombo dos Palmares, 1630-1695*. São Paulo, n.p., 1947.
- 10 Cavalcante, Rangel. A Negra República dos Caetanos. *Jornal do Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro, 15 Jul., 1969. cad. B, p. 5.
- 11 "Pae-Rayol, o feiticeiro", chap. 5-10.
- 12 Amado, Gilberto. *História da Minha Infância*. 2.^a ed. Rio de Janeiro, José Olympio, 1958.
- 13 Carneiro, Edison. "Religions of the Negroes in Brazil". In: Id. *The African Contribution to Brazil*. Rio de Janeiro, Edigraf, 1966. p. 11 (Publication of the Cultural & Information Department of the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Relations on the occasion of the First Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar).
- 14 Amaral, R. Joviano. *Os Pretos do Rosário de São Paulo*. São Paulo, Alarico, 1953. p. 31.
- 15 Bastide, Roger. *Les Religions Africaines au Brésil*. Paris, Presses Univ. de France, 1960. p. 233.
- 16 Pimenta, Silvério Gomes. *Vida de D. Antônio Ferreira Viçoso*. Niterói, n.p., 1892. p. 86, as cited in Boehrer, George C.A. The Church and the Overthrow of the Brazilian Monarchy. *Hispanic American Historical Review*. Durham, N.C., 48 (3): 384, 1968.
- 17 "A história da comunidade brasileira em Lagos e na costa atlântica da África em geral é também a história da Igreja Católica em toda esta região". Olinto, Antônio. *Brasileiros na África*. Rio de Janeiro, GRD, 1964. p. 162.
- 18 Kadt, Emanuel de. "Religion, the Church and Social Change in Brazil". In: Veliz, Cláudio, ed. *The Politics of Conformity in Latin America*. New York, Oxford, 1967. p. 193-7.