Stairway to Aruanda:
Creating an Accessible Spiritual World in the Religion of Umbanda

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by
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Abstract

This thesis is a study about how the Brazilian religion of Umbanda creates an accessible spiritual world based on inclusion. Past research on the phenomena of spirit possession/incorporation has led to a solid grouping of theories which have been argued to a state of stagnation. These theoretical studies have proven how possession is an expression of resistance to inequality, racism, poverty, cultural change, and the product of mental illness and identity formation. While one cannot deny that these theories have had profound influence on how spirit possession has been, and continues to be, viewed in various cultures, they neglect a truly interpretive approach that asks the question: “How does spirit possession/incorporation create an accessible and tangible spiritual world?”

In his research with the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, Anthropologist Joel Robbins observed the importance of proximity and distance to heaven within a Pentecostal community. I have also found evidence to support that the distance between the spiritual world and the material world is very important when considering the history of exclusion in the Afro-Brazilian religious market. In this thesis, I will examine how the religion of Umbanda creates a more accessible world and allows them to participate in a larger universe.

Key words—spirit possession, incorporation, proximity, distance, exclusion, accessibility, anthropomorphism, spirits, reincarnation.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. i

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................. ii

List of Tables ............................................................................................................................ vii

List of Figures .......................................................................................................................... vii

Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 1

Theoretical Focus ....................................................................................................................... 4

Research Methods ..................................................................................................................... 12

Chapter 1 ................................................................................................................................. 18

Concepts of Spirit Possession/Incorporation ............................................................................ 18

The Umbanda Interpretation of Spirit Incorporation ............................................................... 28

Chapter 2 ................................................................................................................................. 36

Anthropological Approaches to Spirit Possession: A Literature Review ............................... 36

Medical and Psychological Approaches .................................................................................. 36

Sociological Approaches .......................................................................................................... 41

Interpretive Approaches .......................................................................................................... 58

Applying the Interpretive Approach ....................................................................................... 65

Chapter 3 ................................................................................................................................. 76

The Social History of Umbanda among Brazil’s African Religions ........................................... 76

Myths of the Pretos Velhos ....................................................................................................... 86
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>A Tenda de Pai Rompe Mato e Mãe Herondina: The Tent of Father Rompe Mato and Mother Herondina</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Belém, Pará, Brasil</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>O Terreiro: The House</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>As Pessoas: The People</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Os Pacientes: The Patients</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Os Cambonos: The Assistants</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Os Médiuns de Desenvolvimento: The Initiates</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Os Médiuns de Consulta: The Consulting Mediums</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Pai e Mãe de Santo: Father and Mother of the Saint</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>A Comunidade: The Community</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Pai Gota</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Adriana</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Thais</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Frederico</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gabriel ......................................................................................................................... 161

Mago .............................................................................................................................. 164

Chapter 6 ....................................................................................................................... 171

Discussion and Conclusion .......................................................................................... 171

Spirit Incorporation as Communication ........................................................................ 174

The Anthropomorphized Spirits of Umbanda ............................................................... 176

Reincarnation as an Education ....................................................................................... 178

Bibliography .................................................................................................................. 181

Appendix 1: Layout of the Terreiro ............................................................................... 190

(Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the community members)
List of Tables

Table 1: Calendar of events for the Tenda de Pai Rompe Mato e Mãe Herondina. .......... 10
Table 2: The levels depicting the spiritual hierarchy in Umbanda and Catholicism........ 73
Table 3 Immigrants in Brazil by country of origin from 1880 to 1969 ....................... 77

List of Figures

Figure 1: Preta Velha Anastácia .................................................................................. 86
Figure 2: Pai João, Father John .................................................................................. 90
Figure 3: Statues of Caboclos on an altar. ................................................................. 96
Figure 4 Cabocla Herondina ..................................................................................... 97
Figure 5: Zé Carioca, created by Walt Disney 1942 ................................................. 98
Figure 6: Parade of Zé Pilintra’s ............................................................................... 100
Figure 7: Public service ad....................................................................................... 103
Figure 8: An initiate incorporated by a cigana......................................................... 104
Figure 9: An initiate incorporated by a malandro spirit.......................................... 106
Figure 10: Pai Gota as Zé Pilintra ........................................................................... 112
Figure 11: Initiates incorporated by ciganas............................................................. 112
Figure 12: A medium incorporated by Simbamba................................................... 114
Figure 13 Downtown Belém Brazil ......................................................................... 117
Figure 14 Three life size statues .............................................................................. 122
Figure 15 Statues in the ritual space ...................................................................... 123
Figure 16: A healing ceremony .............................................................................. 127
Figure 17: (Left to right) A ritual cleansing.............................................................. 142
Figure 18: Erin Frias the ethnographer and Pai Gota. .......................................................... 149
Introduction

Spirit possession, in American pop-culture, is a phenomenon that has influenced the production of countless horror films, books, and television shows that intentionally excites the imagination and positions its feasibility within the realms of science fiction. As an anthropological subject, it has been picked apart, examined, tested, and then sewn back together again in a nice and neat little package for Western cultures to logically understand and dismiss as something else altogether. Rather than understanding spirit possession through emic explanations, it has, instead, been associated with the repercussions of malnutrition, mental illness, strict gender roles, culture change, and so on. Research has also linked this behavior to economic strategies, individual attempts to gain power and authority, black resistance, gender marginality, and other struggles that are directly linked to larger socio-cultural structures such as race, class, gender, and oppression (Bastide 1978). Research performed by social scientists living on the outside of these religious cultures has created logical ways of understanding a behavior that is uncommon in their own culture. Spirit possession makes people question their own beliefs in the possibility of spiritual involvement in human life. It is believed that spirit possession forms a direct connection between humans and their deities. While these approaches hold much merit, my main concern is to move past the sociological explanations for spirit possession and develop an interpretive approach that understands the more personal, emic beliefs in the juxtaposition of the spiritual world and the accessibility of its supernatural residents.
The goal of this thesis is to examine beliefs in the proximity and distance of the supernatural in the Brazilian religion of Umbanda and understand the various practices they employ to make the spiritual world accessible and tangible. Rather than understanding spirit possession as a form of resistance to human struggles, I propose that it is, first and foremost, a form of communication that enables humans to directly contact the supernatural through a human mediator (Robbins n.d.). Umbanda doctrine reveals its secrets and empowers humans to become knowledgeable and informed on what they need for their spiritual progression. Spirit possession collapses the space between the material world and the spiritual world in order to create a reciprocal relationship between a living soul and a dead soul. For some believers, the material world and the spiritual world are not interpreted as two separate locations coming together; it is more like another realm occupying the same physical space obscured by a thin veil making the spiritual realm invisible—yet present. This realm called the spiritual world is filled with beings that are mystical and powerful. A portion of these entities, referred to as spirits of the dead, mirror the lives of humans with all of their imperfections and shortcomings. They struggle to improve their existence in death just as humans attempt to improve their existence in life. Spirit possession as a form of communication is the first example of how Umbandistas make the spiritual world accessible.

The second example is the anthropomorphism of deities and the continuation of human personality after the death of the body. The West African deities, called the Orixás, are attributed with creating earth and humanity from their own personalities. They represent Olorun, the supreme god (Olódúmarè in Yoruba myth and sometimes
referred to as *Olorum* (Brown 1973; Edwards and Mason 1985), and all of his vast individual powers. As the Orixá *Obatala* (known as *Oxalá* in Brazil and associated with Jesus) (Brown 1973), was creating the earth, he released the characteristics of the Orixás onto the land which formed the great oceans, rugged mountains, and life giving nature. They also gave life to Obatala’s clay formations which he artistically produced from his own image, forming humanity (Anderson 1991). Although essential in the worship of Umbanda, these high deities come secondary to the spirits of the dead.

Since Umbanda is a hybrid of various religious influences, mainly tracing its roots to Catholicism and Spiritism, in addition to embracing beliefs in reincarnation from Asian religions and worship of the Orixás, it is difficult to determine the origins of its extensive pantheon of spirits and their hierarchy. It is believed that the West African and Bantu cultures, who made up large portions of Brazil’s enslaved population, recreated their beliefs in ancestor worship on their new geographical landscape. In short, the spiritual world became filled with spirits of the dead that formed a hierarchy mimicking the Brazilian social structure, past and present. Just as humanity was formed from the image of Obatala, the spirits of the dead were formed in the image of their human worshippers. They are personifications taken directly from Brazilian history and symbolize the morals and values desired by Umbandistas.

The third example is spiritual proximity through reincarnation as a source of moral education. In many religions, human participation in the spiritual world is limited. However, in Umbanda, the concept of spiritual evolution is directly connected to the participation of humans in the spiritual world. The divine spirits of the dead (*encantados*
or ancestors) reached a point in their human lives where the education they received through life on earth and a myriad of reincarnations ceased to be effective. Subsequently, they continuously seek redemption for their past lives as spirits of charity, or spirits who help humanity negotiate the trials and tribulations of life. As these spirits climb higher on the sacerdotal ladder, these charitable actions contribute not only to their own spiritual evolution, but also to the spiritual evolution of humans in their preparation of their soul’s judgment after death. If humans have lived their lives according to their divine missions (which varies by individual) and what Umbandistas view as the ethical actions of karma, then after the death of their human bodies, their souls will be judged favorably, resulting in their reincarnation at a higher level on earth or their position in the spiritual world as an encantado (Mago, personal communication, August 2014). If they do not follow their missions or practice the ethics of karma, they will stay at the same human level when reincarnated and will repeat previous mistakes until they learn from them.

**Theoretical Focus**

These three illustrations of religious beliefs and practices in the Umbanda doctrine are directly related to how they view the accessibility of the spiritual world and its supernatural inhabitants. The hypothesis of accessibility is based on the writings of Dr. Joel Robbins, an anthropologist known for his work on Christianity and religious mediation.

For Robbins, “possession represents a sort of degree-zero of both distance and mediation: in it, the space between the deity and the person collapses and co-presence replaces mediated contact” (Robbins n.d.:5). Robbins’s community of study is the
Urapmin of Papua New Guinea who converted to Pentecostalism in the late 1970s leaving behind, though not completely, the religion of their ancestors and rituals of animal sacrifice. Pentecostalism focuses on the possession of a person by the Holy Spirit that provides mediation between God and other entities. These entities remain obscurely located in heaven in contrast to the follower bound on earth surrounded by temptation. Possession by the Holy Spirit allows them to have their sins acknowledged and forgiven like a spiritual confession.

Previous Urapmin religious practices emphasized a separation of knowledge by gender and age that also created separation in other non-religious aspects of their society. For example, men were taught to withhold religious knowledge from women and children as well as maintain a physical distance from the opposite gender. While previous theories on spirit possession could explain why the Urapmin have embraced Pentecostalism, since the 1970s, the Urapmin have had to deal with globalization and culture change and the empowerment of women in a society that was once dominated by men’s ritual knowledge. In response to this, Robbins asks “How are deities and people to maintain contact with one another and what kind of contact is appropriate between them” when sacrifice and secrecy are eliminated? “How are humans to relate to the mediators that establish this contact?” (Robbins n.d.).

Robbins (2009) explained that the belief of heaven as a place far away from earth, only accessible through Pentecostalism and the possession of the Holy Spirit was central to their maintenance of mediation. Robbins told a story of one of his collaborators, Rom, who became upset after being told that heaven did not exist. He was told by a prophet
that “Jesus would come, just as the Bible said, and after he came, good Christians would live perfect lives of harmony and abundance, but they would do this on earth, right in the places they lived now” (Robbins 2009:56). Rom considered his location to be marginal; the thought of heaven as distant from this marginality that he experienced was crucial to his continued belief in the imported religion (Robbins 2009). His belief in Pentecostalism and possession by the Holy Spirit justified his access to modernity and happiness believed to exist after death. Robbins goes on to investigate why the various Christian versions of “difference and distance” were so important to remote indigenous communities that were nonetheless still affected by modernity and globalization (Robbins 2009:57).

In an unpublished article titled “Keeping God’s Distance: Sacrifice, Possession and the Problem of Religious Mediation,” Robbins also explored how possession collapses the distance between spirits and people rather than expanding the distance through rituals of sacrifice. He observed that when “people convert to Pentecostalism or charismatic Christianity from a non-Christian religion they find themselves moving from an emphasis on sacrifice to one on mediation” (Robbins n.d.:5). He positions his argument as the opposition of Hubert and Mauss’s theory of religious sacrifice (1964). He writes:

Religion must take up issues of mediation and its role in shaping sociality because people almost never relate to deities face-to-face, nor do they take the face-to-face encounter to be a regulating ideal in their relations with deities. Deities…are never simply there the way other people are there: they are generally further away than other people, and often, even if they maintain something approaching or even
at times exceedingly normal to human proximity, they are not sensorially available in the way people are...The problem of distance created by this inhuman way of being present in turn sets up the problem of divine mediation. [Robbins n.d.:2]

Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss (1964) considered that sacrifice is a way to create an appropriate distance between the sacred and profane. By using a consecrated intermediary (the victim of a sacrifice) to represent the sacrificer (person requesting the ritual for his or her benefit), and utilizing a ritual specialist (sacrificer) who, by virtue of his religious position is skilled at mediating between the two worlds without jeopardizing the relationship between humans and spirits, they briefly unite the material world and the spiritual world for a specific purpose. It could be an offering, a request of some sort, or an intercession to ease hardships and negativity in a person’s life. After the ritual is completed, the victim¹ is destroyed, thus closing off the connection and restoring the appropriate distance between the sacred and profane (Hubert and Mauss 1964; Robbins n.d.).

In contrast, the very idea of possession/incorporation exemplifies this desire to connect, to mediate, and to facilitate supernatural and human interactions. As I see it, there are also many aspects of sacrifice that facilitate connection. According to Robbins, sacrifice lends similarities between the two phenomena only differing in two crucial aspects—the purpose of opening communications between the two planes of existence and what happens to the mediator after the event.

¹ A victim implies a living creature, but it must be noted that in this context the victim can be anything, animate or inanimate, that represents the respect that the sacrificer is giving to the spirits or gods.
Sacrifice has been interpreted by Hubert and Mauss (1964) as a way to regulate and control the connection between humans and the supernatural through an expendable mediator (i.e. the victim). The identification of the supernatural as the “forces of life” (Hubert and Mauss 1964:98), are too powerful for man to disregard, and he lives in fear of what could happen if the gods become dissatisfied with their human creations. The purpose for sacrifice, then, is to briefly and purposefully merge the spiritual world and the material world for exchanges to be made and then safely restore distance between the two antipodes. Enter the sacrificial victim; an animate or inanimate object that is either born sacred or imbied with a holiness that serves as the intermediary between the two worlds. The victim either delivers gifts to the gods or is the gift itself, “for the victim has always something divine within it which is released by sacrifice” (Hubert and Mauss 1964:78). The divine association of the victim means that the sacrificer must minimize contact with the victim. The sacrificer is profane; the victim is sacred. In the middle is the religious specialist (sacrificer) who, through his or her position, is qualified to handle the exchange without undue harm to either side. He or she is able to straddle the line between profane and sacred. The triad of sacrificer, victim, and sacrificer is similar to the triad of a spirit possession/incorporation event because there is a profane patient, a sacred spirit, and a medium who stands on both sides of the material and spiritual plane.

In Umbanda, sacrifices have almost all been abandoned except for certain variations of the religion that approximates Candomblé. Mago, my collaborator, states

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2 The classifications of sacred and profane are explained by Emile Durkheim as “the division of the world into two domains” that is “the distinctive trait of religious thought.” The classifications oppose one another but are also mutually dependent and reciprocal. It is the distinction between what is divine and what is human and the relationship between them (Durkheim 1915:37).
that, in cases of sacrifice, it is usually the last option available because all other options have failed to help the sacrifier. Since sacrifice is not practiced in Umbanda, how do they communicate with the spiritual world? The answer is obvious—incorporation.

Here is where sacrifice and incorporation demonstrate more similarities. In sacrifice, there is the role of the sacrifier who requests something or gives something to the gods to establish or continue a reciprocal relationship. In Umbanda, the members of the community who ask the spirits for advice, a cure, or a favor are the sacrifiers. It can be argued that the mediums are also sacrifiers because they too ask for protection and advice. It is noteworthy that they are also the victims of the sacrifice because they give up their bodies for the spirits to use. In the case of a full incorporation as opposed to a partial incorporation, they give up control or sacrifice their bodies and memories of the event. The sacrifier, in this case, is the Pai or Mãe de Santo (leader of the Umbanda community) who, through divine appointment, maintains the balance between the sacred and profane worlds. He or she is responsible for opening the portal to the spiritual world, assuring the safety of the initiates, and then ritually severs communications at the end of the ceremony.

Even though it seems like there are more similarities between sacrifice and possession at this point, there are two important distinctions that make them binary opposite. (1) Sacrifices,
Table 1: Calendar of events for the Tenda de Pai Rompe Mato e Mãe Herondina

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day of the week</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Incorporation witnessed</th>
<th>Members present</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Spiritism</td>
<td>Yes-through select mediums</td>
<td>Spiritist – “Rafael” and Pai</td>
<td>To help Spiritist patients with problems caused by spirits connected to them through a past life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>Curing ceremony</td>
<td>Yes-through participating mediums and sometimes the patients</td>
<td>Pai and the Mãe Pequenha (Pai’s assistant) Lily</td>
<td>To help patients with wellbeing, problems with witchcraft or evil eye, and spiritual imbalances that cause illness in the material world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Consultations</td>
<td>Yes-any medium and in some cases audience members</td>
<td>Pai, Lily, and all or most of the initiates</td>
<td>To provide a free service to the community for spiritual and psychological health and to allow spirits to redeem themselves through charity and/or enjoy human vices; also to allow initiates to connect with their spirits and increase their spiritual evolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>Unknown(^3)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>Cleansing ritual</td>
<td>Yes-by the mediums/patients being cleansed but it is moderated and brief</td>
<td>Pai, and two initiate helpers</td>
<td>To open up the chakras of the patient and allow the Orixás to come down to the spiritual world and provide protection to the one being cleansed; The sacrifice of food, and prayers that are particular to that entity are used to attract them to the material world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 The unknown days were used for people to make walk-in visits for private counselling (the ethnographer was unable to be in attendance) or community get-togethers. I was in Belém during the 2014 World Cup and most of these days were reserved for soccer games and barbecues.
according to my collaborator, are only done in extreme cases. Their function is to maintain the distance between the spiritual world and the material world. People who practice sacrifice still fear the supernatural for their powers and attempt to maintain a respectful distance. Spirit possession in Umbanda, on the other hand, is routinely practiced and leaves the two worlds in an almost constant state of openness and communication. My Umbanda community schedule demonstrates the amount of time devoted to spiritual communication on a weekly basis (see Table 1 below).

(2) The victim of the sacrifice is almost always destroyed, consumed, burned, or somehow eliminated from the material world, thereby closing up the portal and restoring distance between the two worlds. In incorporation, the medium is never destroyed but is returned to his or her previous state. After the ceremony, the medium’s soul, which was displaced during the possession trance, is restored to the body and the medium is left with a feeling of bliss and ignorance of his or her past actions.

Using Robbins’s theoretical framework of drawing a contrast between sacrifice and possession, I will examine how the Umbanda spiritual hierarchy and belief in reincarnation represent ways of creating proximity and access to the spiritual world and its various inhabitants. Afro-Brazilian religions recognize a plethora of deities and spirits who are assembled in a hierarchy according to their position and achievements in the material world. The spirits in proximity with the material world are also the closest in personality to the humans worshipping them. The more supernatural qualities spirits acquire through redemptive acts will lead to their increased distance from the human world and placement in a higher spiritual plane.
In this thesis, I will examine three methods in which the Umbanda community collapses the distance between the spiritual world and the material world, making the spiritual world more accessible. They are the practice of spirit incorporation, the arrangement of a hierarchy of anthropomorphic spirits, and beliefs in reincarnation that allows humans to be involved in their spiritual evolution and the mutual evolution of their guardian spirits. I will demonstrate how these practices create a type of “sacerdotal ladder” (Bastide 1978:228) providing access to the supernatural world while living in this world. As previously stated, my hypothesis directly refutes the assumptions that Afro-Brazilian religions only address immediate material problems such as health, wealth, love, revenge, and other human desires. I found that, contrary to belief, Umbanda is a religion rich in preparation for the afterlife and passionately concerned with the progression of the soul.

Research Methods

Ethnographic material for this thesis was obtained through online correspondence and during two, month long visits to an Umbanda terreiro (religious house or yard) in the city of Belém, Pará, Brazil. The first visit was in the month of June, 2013, and the second occurred in June, 2014. I utilized structured and semi-structured interviews as well as participation in casual conversations to gain an understanding of the people in the Umbanda community. I also administered a questionnaire that asked standard demographic questions, personal questions about how the devotee became a member of the community, their status within the community, and the spiritual entities that influenced them the most. Participant observation was utilized during the ceremonies and
rituals, some of which I participated in directly and others as an onlooker. Due to the relatively short time in the field, I supplemented this information with an extensive literature review on spirit possession within Brazil and in other societies around the world.

The material that was gathered online consisted of casual conversations on a private Facebook page established by the members of the terreiro where I conducted research in Belém, and through a member site called Rede Brasileira de Umbanda (abbreviated RBU). Having access to members online enabled me to ask follow up questions and also gain an understanding of the regional differences. My primary pen-pal from RBU is a member of an Umbanda terreiro in Rio de Janeiro where the religion originated. My Umbanda community is almost 2,000 miles north of Rio de Janeiro and consists of many similarities and differences, mainly in the spirit pantheon that will be discussed in Chapter 3.

I interviewed approximately 26 people out of 30 to 50 members. The number of members that belonged to the terreiro was difficult to determine. Membership is fluid and optional. The first Wednesday of every month saw the largest amount of terreiro members and walk-in members from the community seeking spiritual aid. This was because this day was dedicated to the Exú spirit group in order to assure the rest of the month would run smoothly. Exús can cause unbalance within the community if they feel like they are being neglected (Capone 2010; Landes 1947) so an entire day is dedicated to their spiritual services.
Chapter 1 of this thesis examines how the topic of spirit possession has been studied in the past, as well as how spirit possession has previously been characterized in relationship to the presence of a spirit and Shamanic beliefs in the spiritual world. In Chapter 2, I will discuss the more influential studies on spirit possession from the 1960s through the 1980s. I will examine theories based on psychiatric evaluations and medical interpretations for spirit possession phenomena; explanatory theories that take an etic approach to describing the underlying motivations behind such a phenomena; and interpretive theories that combine the emic and etic perspectives together to gain a better comprehension as a whole. By examining these theories, the reader will become more familiar with names and concepts in the spirit possession domain and to introduce dominant modes of thought within the academic setting.

The birth of Umbanda as a religious expression of the Brazilian identity and the historical processes that led to regional variations in the spirit pantheon within my research location will be examined in Chapter 3, accompanied by a study on the groups of spirits worshipped in Umbanda and their compelling stories of life and death. In Chapter 4, I will examine the physical space of the terreiro, the community, and the social hierarchy that resembles the hierarchy found in the spiritual world. Chapter 5 relates the personal stories of several members of the terreiro, examining their similarities and differences. Finally, in Chapter 6, I revisit my hypothesis of proximity, distance, and human/spirit mediation reiterating this approach for purposes of understanding the aspirations of my Umbanda community. And lastly, I will conclude the thesis by re-
examining the past theories, situating the hypothesis of proximity and distance within its intellectual scope.

Before I proceed with my analysis, I must explain some of the terminology presented throughout this thesis. At times, I may refer to the spirits as *encantados*; this emic term translates to “enchanted ones” (Leacock and Leacock 1972), which distinguishes the dead souls of Umbanda from the high status spirits and deities from the *Candomblé*^4^ pantheon. Additionally, due to the skepticism of certain scholars on the legitimacy of trance and spirit possession, it is common to describe the behavior of the mediums as playacting or falsely impersonating an embodied spirit during ceremonies. This, I believe, is an ethnocentric reaction on the part of the researchers to describe behavior and beliefs in their effort to make these practices culturally meaningful to Western audiences; thus, they are deemed false and/or the result of psychological or physiological problems. I have no interest in determining if possession is “real” as, for the community of believers, possession is central to their ideology and thus regarded as truth. Having said that, I use Seth and Ruth Leacock’s (1972:173) understanding of “role-playing” as “a group of behaviors associated with a particular position in a social system.” “Learned” behavior, according to the Leacock’s, is appropriate to the encantado as a strategy of bodily control and development by the spirit medium. I am in no way inferring that they are not truly incorporated while behaving in a manner that is culturally appropriate for the type of encantado possessing the medium. I am simply describing the

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^4^ *Candomblé* is the most prominent Afro-Brazilian religion in Brazil. Its beliefs are said to be derived from West Africa that were brought over on the slave ships during the slave trade. They worship a pantheon of gods called Orixás that are associated with the natural forces of the world. Umbanda has used many aspects of *Candomblé* to establish their own doctrine that is more inclusive for people with mixed racial descent and the less popular encantados.
personality that comes to the surface through the actions of the medium via the encantado as standard behavior seen throughout many Afro-Brazilian terreiros.

In the past, the word “evolution” has received negative attention in the world of anthropology. I will use evolution as it was explained to me in spiritual terms. Evolution as a theory became popular after Charles Darwin (1859) introduced the concept in his famous book *On the Origin of Species*. Since then, anthropologists such as Herbert Spencer, E.B. Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan, have used evolution as a tool to categorize and segregate people according to their cultural and physical level of development compared to an ethnocentric standard i.e. Western Civilization (Erickson and Murphy 2013). It has developed into a less controversial term meaning “change” since unilineal evolution fell out of favor with the development of cultural relativism by Franz Boas (Erickson and Murphy 2013:65). The term “spiritual evolution,” as used by my Umbanda community, means the improvement of oneself through karma “the law of ethical recompense that governs existence” or “in Buddhism, karma refers to intentional ethical action that determines the nature and place of rebirth” (Obeyesekere 2002). Within this framework, spiritual evolution for the Umbanda community bears an affinity with this concept, constituting self-improvement to assure movement up the sacerdotal ladder in subsequent lives.

In this thesis, I also employ the terms “possession” and “incorporation” interchangeably. According to my collaborators, these terms describe two different actions and concepts (Gabriel, personal communication, June 2014). Possession, properly speaking, indicates that the body of a person is invaded and controlled by a spirit that was
not invited, often resulting in the need for the spirit to be exorcised. Incorporation, on the other hand, happens when the spirit is welcomed into the body to enjoy earthly vices and provide assistance to human beings. My Umbanda community uses the term *incorporação* (incorporation) to refer to the process of welcoming a spirit into their body for purposes of healing, charity, and establishing a reciprocal relationship with their patron encantados.
Chapter 1

Concepts of Spirit Possession/Incorporation

It is difficult to determine when the first episode of spirit possession was observed or where it originated. What we do know is that evidence of prehistoric spirituality adorns cave walls and exposed rock faces with anthropomorphized drawings of “half-human” and “half-animal” figures claimed by Shamans in trance states to be representations of the supernatural (Vitebsky 2001). Of course, this is all speculation that is hotly debated by anthropologists. Yet, the arguments created by such conjecture provide valid points for discussion (see Lommel 1966).

At some point, the existence of an abstract spiritual world created a niche for specialists to foster and to mediate communications with its supernatural inhabitants. Eventually, different interpretations created various ways of communicating with the supernatural. In some cases, where the spiritual world remained at a distance, mediation became a specialty of highly trained men that interpreted the word of God for their parishioners. In other cases where the spiritual world is closer in proximity to the material world, altered states of consciousness and spiritual communication could be attained by anyone willing to learn, or endowed with the ability to commune with the spirit world. Spirit incorporation, in its most basic form, directly facilitates communication with the sacred creating religious specialists out of the laity who were previously excluded from direct contact with their beloved spirits in paternalistic religions.
For the purposes of this thesis, I will discuss the three most applicable methods for communicating with the supernatural that are closer in proximity to the material world than in the Judeo-Christian doctrine: (1) Through the expertise of a Shaman who serves as a mediator, whose soul exits his or her body and travels to the spiritual plane to receive guidance from spirits on behalf of a patient; (2) Another method involves direct contact between a guiding spirit and the individual requesting guidance; and (3) an alternate approach that uses of the human body as an instrument for spirit incorporation. The first and second methods differ from the third in that the spirit remains outside of the human body. In the third method, the spirit enters the human body and displaces the soul of the medium. It can be argued that any spiritual activity occurring outside of the human body can be attributed to the presence of spirits, but any spiritual activity that occurs within the human body is spirit possession or incorporation. This argument is based on the proximity and distance of the spirit in relationship to the human self.

Piers Vitebsky (2001) defines Siberian Shamanism as an ability of the Shaman’s soul to leave the body and journey to other parts of the cosmos while retaining the capacity to control his or her soul while in the spiritual world. He distinguishes Shamanism from persons afflicted by spirit possession, stating that the agency of the person being possessed is undermined by the dominance of the spirit. However, he goes onto mention, that a Shaman’s “mastery of the spirits remains highly precarious…and psychically dangerous…[with] a constant risk of insanity or death” (Vitebsky 2001:11). Vitebsky alludes to the possibility of the spirits gaining control of the Shaman’s soul and

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5 The definition of Shaman has been applied to other cultures in the world with a similar religious specialist. It is believed that the word “Shaman” and the beliefs it describes, originated in Siberia (Vitebsky 2001).
therefore changing a spiritual journey into a spiritual possession. In this case, death would result from the spirits preventing the Shaman’s soul from returning to his or her body.

As an undergraduate, I wrote about the second method of communication. This study examined an online forum community whose members view their souls as capable of traveling to the spirit world with the aid of madre ayahuasca, a “drug” (by western standards), that is found in the Amazonian forests of Peru. They use a chemically induced trance to receive advice and answer life’s questions through the presence of spirit guides made visible through the aid of ayahuasca visions. The human soul is removed from the body and travels to the spirit world, not unlike Vitebsky’s definition of Shamanism. However, the interaction with the spiritual world is made available to the laity in lieu of a ritual specialist. Shamans ritually prepare the brew, use their contacts in the spiritual world to determine the quantity of ayahuasca a person should consume, and they are present to guide and interpret images. They play a less pronounced role in the interaction. It is important to state that what has been described above demonstrates that the proximity of the spirit remains on the outside of the person and never occupies the physical body. The spirits remain at a distance.

Spirit incorporation, on the other hand, reverses the proximity of the spirit to the human body. At its most basic definition, spirit incorporation occurs when an entity enters the body of a human and takes control of a person’s actions and speech. Rather

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6 Ayahuasca is a visionary medicine utilized by Shamans in the upper Amazon regions of Peru and particular religious communities in Brazil. They refer to the plant as having a spirit and have named that spirit “madre ayahuasca,” meaning mother ayahuasca.
than the interaction occurring outside of the human body, it occurs inside through displacement. Still, the definition is not that easy to pin down; it changes from culture to culture and belief to belief. The following is a short list of definitions or explanations collected from various sources:


2. Biblical explanation: “The coercive seizing of the spirit of a man by another spirit, viewed as superhuman, with the result that the man’s will is no longer free but is controlled, often against his wish, by the indwelling person or power” (Hastings 1963, cited in Bourguignon 1976).

3. Broad explanation: “In religious and folk traditions, condition characterized by unusual behavior and a personality change that is interpreted as evidence that the person is under the direct control of an external supernatural power. Symptoms of spirit possession include violent unusual movements, shrieking, groaning, and uttering disconnected or strange speech. Occasionally a normally pious member of a religious body becomes incapable of prayer, utters blasphemies, or exhibits terror or hatred of sacred persons or objects. Christianity and other religions allow for the possibility that some of these states have an evil transcendental cause…Most scientific studies treat them as psychophysical manifestations to be dealt with medically or in terms of social psychology. Some conditions historically termed demonic possession have come to be treated as epilepsy, hysteria, somnambulism, schizophrenia, or other organic or psychological forms of illness” (Dictionary.com 2014).

4. Demonic explanation: “The single most important function of the Devil in the New Testament is to rule the Kingdom of Darkness which opposes the Kingdom of God. The Devil is the chief of a host of wicked spirits (Luke...
11:18) ranging from lesser indwelling demons who cause disease, disability, and insanity by ‘possession’…” (e.g. Mark 1:34; 3:22; 5:1-20, cited in Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible, van der Toorn, Becking and van der Horst 1999).

In the “psychological” explanation, there is an emphasis on “illness” as a situation implying the need for medical or psychological treatment. This explanation is often found in cultures where the belief in spirit possession is absent (Bourguignon 1976). In the “Biblical” explanation, the possession by a spirit is “often against [the] wish” of the possessed person. Biblical definitions are often followed by the exorcism countermeasure where a religious specialist calls upon accepted deities to extract the unwanted entity from the body, thus returning the person to a normal state of mind (Bourguignon 1976; Lewis 2003).

In what I labelled the “broad” explanation, the common online dictionary indicates that spirit possession is found in both “religious and folk traditions.” It then proceeds to list symptoms that may be seen in different environments and different interpretations for the existence of odd behavior. In this example, a solution to the problem is less obvious and may be dependent on personal beliefs. The “demonic” explanation is commonly imitated by actors in Hollywood films (Friedkin 1973), and therefore, is incorrectly conflated with the contemporary phenomenon. Historically, the assumption that demons are the ones responsible for the occurrence of disease, disability, and insanity stems from a Judeo-Christian belief in the Devil’s involvement in the daily lives of people. The constant struggle that humankind has against sin is made apparent by
these possession episodes and the subsequent victory of good over evil when the exorcism by a religious specialist is successful.

At this point in my argument, a discussion about how communications between humans and spirits have been treated in the past is necessary. These methods of communication are: (1) the treatment of spirit possession by the Catholic Church; (2) explanations of spirit possession in societies where the phenomena is absent, and (3) theories that have emphasized the role of culture in the perpetuation of spiritual communication and possession religions.

The inquisition(s) occurring in Europe from the late 1400s to the late 1800s (Peters 1989) contributed to a very hostile environment for men and women known as mystics. Their claimed abilities to communicate with the supernatural were met with fear and awe, at times resulting in tragedy. At other times, they were canonized (Giles 1999). Both men and women were associated with pious visions, but it seemed that women were more prone to “mystical revelations” (Patterson 2002). Historians have often attributed this phenomenon to the socio-cultural status of women in Europe from the thirteenth-century through the nineteenth-century. They were denied access to the spiritual world by men who controlled the literature, education, and the politics of the church. The men asserted that women were weak and needed protection from their own sexuality (Patterson 2002). For the women claiming to have the ability of spiritual communication, mysticism was a repeated “effort to sweep away the whole detritus of the material world, to become nearer to God” (Dodds 1965).
The success of mystics posed a threat to the authority of the Church as the principal source of mediation between the supernatural and the laity. The decisions made by the inquisition(s) to accuse or sanction a mystic kept the authority of the Church intact. It is believed that Teresa of Avila was canonized as a saint due to her knowledge of theology and her ability to negotiate “acceptance for her visionary authority” (Giles 1999) as long as she was confined to her convent. In contrast, Ana Domenge, insisted that she was married to Jesus, therefore, holding sway over the decisions of God. Her visions were interpreted as an attempt to reverse the power hierarchy, and she was accused of being mentally disturbed (Rhodes 1999).

Interestingly, the institutionalization of spirit possession/incorporation found in different cultures throughout history has led to a plethora of reactions and a host of labels to explain or deny the phenomena. For instance, in Catholicism, the possession by a spirit is seen as negative and the result of demons sent by the devil (King James Bible 2014). The act of exorcism actually strengthened the power of the church in the eyes of the laity and justified their dominant presence within society because of the constant threat of evil and their ability to control it. However, in cases where possession could not be controlled by the “benevolent” actions of the church and the popularity of the mystic threatened their authority, they could either support the mystic as credible or disregard the mystic as medically ill.

In the twentieth-century, charismatic religious movements have recontextualized spirit possession as a gift from God. Pentecostals believe that the Holy Spirit possesses worshippers and gives them holy gifts such as speaking in tongues and psychic powers
In the example of the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, the Holy Spirit enters the body of the worshipper to fight with their sins and “cast them out” (Robbins n.d.). These religions are often supported by the government or are located on the fringes of society where they are sensationalized in the media for their conservatism (Wood 2014).

In Brazil, Pentecostalism has been growing exponentially (Burdick 1993). However, beliefs in spirit possession have been rooted in the Brazilian national history since West African slaves brought their beliefs across the Atlantic Ocean during the slave trade. Their beliefs and practices survived against all odds and contributed to the formation of the Brazilian religions such as Candomblé, and Macumba. In the early 1800s, a French-European religion called Spiritism⁷ found its way to Brazil and captivated the white elite. These religions were formed in opposition to the distance and inaccessibility of the spiritual world found in Catholicism and other Judeo-Christian religions. There are differences among Candomblé, Macumba, and Spiritism doctrine because of their veneration of certain types of spirits. A detailed discussion follows in Chapter 3.

In cultures where belief in spirit possession is absent, we find medicalized explanations for the behavior. In the United States in the mid-twentieth century, possession is diagnosed as multiple personality disorder (henceforth abbreviated as MPD), schizophrenia, Tourette’s syndrome, and other mental disorders that are stigmatized by the general public and hidden away in psychiatric hospitals. In the early

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⁷ Also called Kardecism after the religion’s founder Allan Kardec.
twentieth-century psychologists such as Freud, Babinski, and Prince popularized the term hysteria to describe the deviant behavior of women (Hacking 1992). Since women are dominant in spirit incorporation religions, hysteria became a widely applied term to explain their presence. While the medicalization of spirit incorporation creates logical explanations for Western Cultures, it fails to understand why men and women voluntarily become incorporated by spirits in culturally sanctified rituals and ceremonies.

Voluntary incorporation opposes the belief that spirit possession is against one’s will and thus in need of exorcism. This phenomenon was labeled “adorcism” by Luc de Heusch (cited in Lewis 2003:xiii), and characterized by the “process of domesticating spirits” rather than expelling them. Both exorcism and adorcism can exist in the same culture at the same time (Lewis 2003). An example of this duality was witnessed in my Umbanda community when a bystander unexpectedly became possessed by what appeared to be a malevolent force. She violently writhed on the cement floor while initiates and assistants tried to hold her down. The initiates failed to exorcise the spirit and had to call the Pai de Santo (male religious leader) for help. He put his hand on her forehead and recited something through gritted teeth. In a few moments, the woman was helped up from the floor and stumbled over to a bench with a dazed look on her face. At the same time on the other side of the room, two women twirled and danced while incorporated with spirits they had welcomed into their body.

In the 1960s through the 1980s, anthropologists became fascinated by the presence of adorcism in many African derived religions and struggled to interpret the causes of such phenomena across cultures. With previous studies in possession and trance
consigned to the domain of psychiatry, I.M. Lewis proposed that incorporation should be studied as a social phenomenon that “consequently bears the stamp of ‘particular social and other conditions’ which characterize this environment” (Martin 1972:528). Lewis distinguishes between “peripheral possession” cults and “central possession” cults. A peripheral cult, he argues, is the result of oppression and the rebellion against that oppression in the form of religious expression. He proposed that peripheral possession gave status and power to marginalized men and women and “enable[d] people who lack other means of protection and self-promotion to advance their interests and improve their lot by escaping, even if only temporarily, from the confining bonds of their allotted stations in society” (Lewis 2003:114). In contrast, a central possession cult is led by people that hold positions of authority in the community. Their authority is reinforced by the spirits that incorporate their bodies entitling them as “chosen” members of society (Lewis 2003) He noticed that peripheral cults are predominantly female whereas centralized cults are predominantly male. Lewis has been associated with inspiring a change in the anthropology of possession and trance from medical and psychological explanations to “culturally defined rituals” (Martin 1972:529).

Above I discussed how scholars outside of the spirit possession communities discuss and label spirit possession behaviors. I now turn to a discussion on how my Umbanda community interprets spirit incorporation and frames it within a scientific discourse based on the physics of spiritual and human energy.
The Umbanda Interpretation of Spirit Incorporation

The amount of material available on the discussion of spirit incorporation definitions alone can fill its own chapter. What I am concerned with here is how my Umbanda community defines spirit incorporation and how they negotiate the process of spirit occupation of the human world. Through semi-structured interviews, correspondence, and a social media website, I was able to ask members the question: “What is your definition of spirit possession?” One response by Camila utilizes the Spiritist doctrine to explain the different phases of possession:

**Camila:** Spirits interfere positively or negatively in our life, as the affinities they have with us. The spiritual possession is characterized, almost always, by the action of inferior spiritual beings (in moral evolution) on the human psyche. Allan Kardec distinguished in his research, three types of possession: the simple possession, fascination, and subjugation. In simple possession, spiritual interference reaches the mind causing some disruption. In fascination, this interference is deeper, affecting the person's consciousness, triggering hallucinatory processes. In subjugation interference extends to the centers of affection and desire, affecting the feelings and psychomotor system, making the possessed (the person suffering the spiritual harassment) exhibit odd gestures and attitudes. The subjugation type of possession is very rare, but it happens.

[Camila, personal communication, October 2014]

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8 The questions were asked in a private group on Facebook (October 2014)
9 Os Espíritos interferem positiva ou negativamente na nossa vida, conforme as afinidades que têm conosco. A obsessão espiritual caracteriza-se, quase sempre, pela ação de seres espirituais inferiores (em evolução moral) sobre o psiquismo humano. Allan Kardec distinguiu nas suas pesquisas, três tipos de obsessão: a obsessão simples, a fascinação e a subjugação. Na obsessão simples, a interferência espiritual atinge a mente causando algumas perturbações. Na fascinação, essa interferência é mais profunda, afetando a consciência da pessoa, desencadeando processos alucinatórios. Na subjugação a interferência amplia-se aos centros da afetividade e da vontade, afetando os sentimentos e o sistema psicomotor, levando o obsediado (a pessoa que sofre o assédio espiritual) a atitudes e gestos estranhos. A obsessão, tipo subjugação é muito rara, mas acontece.
Not only do we find a belief in spirit possession, but also it has been categorized according to various levels of incursion and associated with negativity. Another collaborator, named Mago, explained to me in great detail how it is possible for incorporation to occur and the difference between possession and incorporation. While a discussion on the physics of incorporation is extremely convoluted, in order to understand the Umbanda concept as it was explained to me, I need to explain vibrations, frequencies, and positive and negative energies.

To paraphrase, Mago states that “everything in life is the result of two opposing forces, so too is the mediumistic mission” (Mago, personal communication, July 2014). A spirit entity operates at a higher frequency than a human body. In order for incorporation to happen, the frequencies between the human and the spirit need to be matched. For example, if our heart functions at 2 to 5 watts and a spirit functions at 100 watts, the spirit needs to decrease their frequency (negative energy), and the medium needs to increase theirs (positive energy). Mediums can increase their frequency by making offerings (ebós), singing, dancing, and drumming. The vibration of a bell is also a common instrument used in facilitating incorporation. The two opposing forces are attracted to one another and bring the medium and the spirit together as one. The result is an identifiable personality commonly known as an encantado that is able to “register pain, pleasure, boredom, rage, disgust, pride, and all the other sensations humans have” culminating in a “far more intimate understanding of human nature than the saints or other supernaturals” (Leacock and Leacock 1972:92). Higher spirits do not or cannot incorporate a human due to their greater frequency and distance from humanity.
Additionally, my collaborator Gabriel gave a similar explanation to show how some spirits are more easily incorporated and the different levels an initiate must go through in order to have a safe experience.

**Gabriel:** When people receive the vibrations, it is a connection that provokes the effects of spirits. So, just so you understand it better, let’s talk about it. There is the place where you live, the reality of your plane of existence. Think of it like radio frequencies, which flow around us, think of a 600 hertz frequency. So we live on a 600 hertz frequency, yet spirits live in a different frequency. For example, since we are at 600 hertz, we have to adjust our brain and body to be able to sense other frequencies, which will allow this body [person] to connect to others planes. This is why it is easier to incorporate an Exú, malandro or Zé Pilintra and a Pombagira. [Gabriel, personal communication, June 2014]

Gabriel stated in a separate conversation that the encantados have a lower frequency than the higher spirits and are, therefore, easier to incorporate. Spirit groups such as the Pretos Velhos, Caboclos, and Exús are associated with a lower level of spirituality and therefore, are more frequently seen and revered in Umbanda terreiros.

**Gabriel:** So, to incorporate a Caboclo, I have to increase the frequency of my body, so if I am at 600 hertz and the Caboclo is at 1000 hertz, I have to use a lot of energy to incorporate and also to dis-incorporate. Therefore, there is incorporation if we are at similar frequencies; if the frequencies are too far apart, then the incorporation might not be possible because of a lack of energy. There is a connection between the spirit and the *Spiritismo*, which is the practice of incorporation. Souls aren’t spirits, I think, but I’m not sure about it. There are three stages associated with the connection people experience when incorporating a spirit. We call this a “*faculdade de sensações*” (faculty of senses). The first stage is when the spirit can connect to you and causes you to shake or tremble;
then the spirit can control your motor movements; and the last stage is the sensorial faculty, when the spirit can talk through you and see through your body. However, sometimes if a person incorporates a spirit without a preparation to incorporate it, the spirit can cause damage to this person, so this is why we have the “faculty of senses” and stages of incorporation to establish the level of incorporation. Orixás can pass energy to you; even though you have not directly connected. [Gabriel, personal communication, June 2014]

When Gabriel said, “Orixás can pass energy to you; even though you have not directly connected,” I found an interesting problem. In many Afro-Brazilian religions, especially in Candomblé, there is an assumption that the Orixás themselves are coming down to earth and incorporating their horse (the body of a human). However, many scholars, myself included, found it difficult to comprehend that a single spirit could incorporate several bodies at once including several people at the same incorporation ceremony.

Mago explained it this way:

**Mago:** Orixás in Umbanda (generally) do not incorporate. What you see within several yards, centers, tents etc., are *falangeiros* [phalanges] of the Orixá, or spirits of great spiritual strength, high-light, working under the orders of a particular Orixá. Each Orixá is associated with a personality and a behavior and each medium receives the influence of their protective Orixá for life. [Mago, personal communication, July 2014]

While Mago’s explanation may at first appear illogical for a Western audience, it does, in fact, address the issue of multiple incorporations by the same spirit.

The intentional incorporation of a spirit is more difficult that it seems. Initiates that are just beginning their spiritual education in Umbanda may spend years trying to incorporate a spirit. At first, they may only be able to sustain a higher frequency that
allows a spirit to manifest for no more than a few seconds. Eventually, the frequencies will build upon each other and the ability of the medium to maintain a higher frequency will become easier.

Gabriel stated that the personal feelings someone has may prevent a smooth connection. He emphasized that things have to be balanced for the spirit and the medium to come together. So if an initiate is harboring any prejudice, is reluctance to trust, or has any other ill feelings, then their advancement in Umbanda is slow. However, if they learn to let go, express love over hatred, and choose the ethical path, they will be rewarded with a spiritual relationship that will lead to their spiritual evolution. After this occurs and the incorporation process becomes controlled, mediums can provide consultations to the community on behalf of the spirit (Hale 2009; Hayes 2011). Still, the advanced medium must also incorporate a spirit that is familiar to the community and is able to help patients with their specific problems. These problems can only be understood by a spirit familiar with the social obstacles found in the Brazilian culture. However, mediums are still vulnerable to possession rather than incorporation.

When a spirit spontaneously possesses a person, it is believed that the large quantity of negative energy from the spirit neutralizes the positive energy of the medium in what my collaborator calls *encosto* which roughly translates to someone who leans on a person and drags him or her down. Possession occurs when the negative energy reaches a nominal rate and tries to replace the positive energy, resulting in a hostile takeover of the body and contributing to the stereotypical “demonic possession.”
The above examples are what Luc de Heusch calls “authentic” and “inauthentic possession” and what Erika Bourguignon calls “positive possession,” and “negative possession.” However, for the sake of simplicity, I.M. Lewis argues that the terms “controlled” and “uncontrolled” (Lewis 2003:48-49) are better suited to describe the results of the opposing forces. I agree with Lewis.

The terms “authentic” as opposed to “inauthentic” possession is troubling. Luc de Heusch’s explanation of “inauthentic possession” is described as “a baneful spirit intrusion” and the “authentic” as “joyous Dionysian epiphany” (Lewis 2003:48-49). Instead, the words imply that the episode is either false or genuine. However, the people involved in an intrusion episode believe that there is a supernatural presence that has invaded their body and that it is not a false representation. Therefore, “inauthentic” possession is “authentic.” Additionally, the terms “positive” and “negative” possession may lead to an ethnocentric evaluation and they neglect an important factor—the interpretation by the person being possessed. Spirit possession, even though associated with negativity, could be interpreted as positive by the person undergoing the experience. For example, author Virginia Gutiérrez-Berner states that a demon who possesses a person negatively:

…is considered as an imitator par excellence. Religious texts of the time warns constantly and systematically of his successful capability of disguising as an angel of light, his skills at perfectly reproducing the features of true mystical union, and of falsely recreating the true fruits of the spirit. [Berner 2010:45]

Therefore, demons can trick a person into believing that the possession of their body is a positive mystical experience. However, value judgments by the Inquisition may have
been politically motivated rather than truth-seeking. In contrast, positive possession can turn into negative possession in need of exorcism such as the episode I witnessed during my fieldwork and discussed earlier in this Chapter.

I believe that the terms “controlled” and “uncontrolled” possession competently explain the variations that can occur during possession/incorporation. However, we must modify our understanding of these categories as fixed in that a “controlled” possession can become “uncontrolled” and vice versa. In this case, “controlled” refers to the welcoming of a spirit into the body of a medium, and “uncontrolled” refers to a spontaneous, unwanted possession of a person who may or may not be a trained medium. I will focus on “controlled” spirit incorporation as it is practiced in various cultures.

Erika Bourguignon (1976:9) argues that there are three categories that explain the role of possession/incorporation within society: (1) “societies where the behavior is desired and often intentionally induced; (2) societies where the behavior is feared and vigorous efforts are made to drive out the spirit supposed to be in residence,” (here I will distinguish again that the person being possessed may welcome the spirit but it is not sanctified by the society); (3) “societies where the initial spontaneous behavior is considered deviant and perhaps sick, and where a cure involves bringing about possession trance in a controlled setting.”

My Umbanda community can be seen as adopting categories (1) and (3) but not (2). In their weekly ceremonies, they ritually welcome the spirits into their body and celebrate their presence. Category (3), in this case, directly relates to the introduction of psychic capabilities of a person by their guardian spirits at some point in their life. At
first, spirits may appear to the person through visions or dreams. If they are not acknowledged, the spirit may possess the person causing them to behave erratically and uncontrollably. The novice medium may complain of black-outs and have no knowledge of their actions. At this point, their behavior is deviant and friends and family seek out solutions to the problem with a medical or spiritual intervention.

Umbandistas often recall that their problems were only resolved when they began attending Umbanda ceremonies and became seated with their spirits through baptism. Acknowledging their spirits’ presence, they learn how to control the incorporation in an appropriate setting. First encounters of spirit incorporation are often told and retold as destiny or the discovery of their personal mission as a medium. Personal stories from my Umbanda community will be discussed in Chapter 5.
Chapter 2

Anthropological Approaches to Spirit Possession: A Literature Review

The case studies below form the scholarly body of knowledge regarding spirit possession that was dominant in the late twentieth-century (see Boddy 1988; Bourguignon 1976; Hayes 2011; I.M. Lewis 1971; and Kehoe and Giletti 1981). Unfortunately, not much has changed in theoretical approaches since this time. The following section will examine these cases in detail providing a general framework for the study of spirit possession in various cultures. Eventually, the literature took me to case studies in Brazil and the cultural circumstances that led anthropologists to conclude that the phenomena originated in West Africa and was brought over by the slaves beginning in the mid-sixteenth century. The religious culture then changed to become localized expressions of resistance to socio-economic class discrimination, racism, politics, and gender inequality.

Medical and Psychological Approaches

The first approach I examined is the medical or biological approach exemplified by Alice B. Kehoe and Dody H. Giletti (1981) and their article based on the “Preponderance of Women in Spirit Possession Cults.” Kehoe and Giletti use Anthony Wallace’s research on “pibloktoq,” commonly known as “arctic hysteria,” as their foundation for their assertion that women who claimed to be possessed by a spirit were actually suffering from a nutritional deficiency. Wallace concluded that in nutrition lacking “calcium, magnesium, niacin, tryptophan, thiamine, and vitamin D,” in women’s
diets had “produce[d] a neuromuscular syndrome known as tetany.” The condition causes spasms, cognitive disorientation, and emotional confusion (Kehoe and Giletti 1981:551; Wallace 1972:374).

Kehoe and Giletti believed that women were especially susceptible to nutritional deficiency in societies where access to food was highly regulated, allowing men to eat more nutrient rich foods and women and children surviving on the scraps with little nutritional value. They supported their argument by stating that, in their study community located in Ethiopia, women who are in need of food with higher nutritional value include pregnant or lactating women, menopausal women, or peasant women with little or no access to food. They display symptoms such as “falling unconscious; syncope; convulsions; tremors; speaking in tongues; sudden and abrupt, often meaningless, change in conversation or activity; [and] flights of thought.” This which was institutionally labeled in their society as spirit possession and led to the control of the spirit through spirit possession cults or exorcism (Kehoe and Giletti 1981:550). What is noteworthy is that women, who were believed to be possessed by “Zar” spirits, were taken to a religious specialist, usually an older female in the community. There, the patient was told to feed the spirit and given foods not ordinarily available in the woman’s diet, thereby relieving some of the symptoms associated with nutritional deficiency (Kehoe and Giletti 1981). This process could be repeated and nurtured as a solution to both the problem of spirit possession and the problem of nutrition. The Zar spirits and their human mediums in this case are an example of a society where spirit possession is intentionally extended as a psychic ability but not necessarily “intentionally induced” according to Bourguignon’s
categories discussed above (Bourguignon 1976:9). In this case, the community intentionally labeled these episodes as spirit possession in order for mediums to continue to utilize it for their benefit and that of their community.

Dominant theories, during this time (which will be discussed below), disregarded biological factors in favor of socio-cultural explanations. Still, Kehoe and Giletti claimed that theories based on biological factors were still likely and hidden among the anthropological interpretations. Since medical research at the time concentrated on the severe cases of tetany, Kehoe and Gilleti turned their attention to mild deficiencies that cause transient symptoms to appear. They employed Erika Bourguigon’s (1973) conclusion from her “worldwide” survey on spirit possession belief that highly stratified societies had a higher incident of spirit possession in their lower class rather than in egalitarian societies. Kehoe and Giletti used examples of female immigrants who migrated from communities holding beliefs in spirit possession to communities where it was absent. Once they settled in their new communities, the women stopped claiming episodes of spirit possession. The researchers’ explanation for this was they had equal access to nutritional food (Kehoe and Giletti 1981). While the abrupt stop in spirit possession could have been due to their new access to nutrition which alleviated the symptoms, it also could have been the result of the stigma associated with spirit possession in their new society. The researchers, however, only attribute poor nutrition to this change in behavior.

The second medical approach I examined is a broader category that has been used to explain abnormal behavior in places where beliefs in spirit possession are not present
in the dominant society: for instance, in North America and parts of Europe. Multiple
personality disorder, or dissociation (abbreviated as MPD) has been explained as “double
consciousness,” “split personality,” and even “culturally shaped hysteria…caused by
repressed oedipal desires,” (Castillo 1994:1; Hacking 1992:3). It is described in the
Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM version 5) as: (1) “The
disruption of identity characterized by two or more distinct personality parts;” (2)
“Amnesia between parts of the personality;” (3) “Causes clinically significant distress
and impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning;” (4)
Disturbance “not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance” (DSM-5
2013:300.14).

Historically, dissociation has gone through stages of acceptance, condemnation,
and sanction as a legitimate medical diagnosis (Hacking 1992). It has been associated
with hysteria which was widely applied to women in the nineteenth-century to explain
“irrational emotional states,” possibly stemming from repeated traumatic psychological
events that occurred in their childhood (Castillo 1994:1). Even though the concept of
MPD has changed throughout the years, there is a consistent belief that people afflicted
with MPD have sustained repeated childhood abuse, sexually and physically, and have
developed multiple personalities as a way of coping with the traumatic events by
separating and removing themselves from the situations (Castillo 1994).

What is significant is that dissociation and some other categories of mental illness
are culturally created, just like spirit possession. It is a label with an extensive amount of
discourse behind it is reinforced by the structure of a “bourgeois society and its values.”
These labels place people who exhibit deviant behavior within a medical structure “where the threats of unreason disappear” (Foucault and Rabinow 1984:162). In these contexts, medical personnel become the religious specialists and the “magic perpetrator of the cure” (Foucault and Rabinow 1984:162), the end-all-be-all source of behavioral knowledge. Only when Western medicine fails to treat the problem, other remedies are sought. For families with a strong Judeo-Christian background, a priest may be consulted. In areas where there is a mixture of religious beliefs, the family of the patient, or the patient themselves, may turn to a religion that specializes in spirit possession.

The two examples above are considered to be a medical/psychological approach to spirit possession. In the Kehoe and Giletti case, the presence of spirit possession was an institutionalized response to abnormal behaviors thought to be caused by the supernatural but was believed by the researchers to be caused by nutritional deficiency complicated by the gender stratification that limited women’s access to food. In the second example, the label Multiple Personality Disorder was exchanged for spirit possession to account for the Western medical view that separated religious concepts from medical diagnoses. What the medical/psychological approaches do not account for is the concept of voluntary possession which is “celebrated as religious devotion” (Lewis 2003:110); women and men ritually give up control of their bodies for the approved use by a spirit in a sanctified religious ceremony and space.

Voluntary possession has been investigated using two anthropological approaches. The first sociological approach examines how societies have used spirit possession to resist oppression stemming from class, race, state, and economic structures.
The second approach is interpretive and focuses more on the explanations given to the researcher by the members of the community with some etic, or outside interpretation, to explain patterns and behaviors of which the subjects may not be aware.

**Sociological Approaches**

In 1895, Émile Durkheim had a “revelation” that influenced his subsequent work on the explanatory nature of sociology as it differed from psychology (Durkheim 1982:6). Social life, he claimed, “is a system of representation and mental states’ which are […] different in nature from those which constitute the mental life of the individual, and subject to their own laws which individual psychology could not foresee” (Durkheim 1982:6). Furthermore, he declared that “every time a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we may rest assured that the explanation is false” (Durkheim 1982:7). In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim (1915:423) concluded that “the collective ideal that religion expresses” is not due to the inborn potential of an individual, but rather it is the social life that teaches the individual how and what to idealize. By incorporating the ideas of society, a person is capable of surpassing the “world of experience” while simultaneously envisioning another world (Durkheim 1915:423). This means that while the ideology of the dominant society forms a reality for the individual (i.e. their position in society based on race, class, and gender), religion provides an alternate world with ideals that reposition the individual into a more favorable status that opposes their status in the dominant society. Sociology studies the “microcosms” of “collective consciousness” (Durkheim 1982) which created new
avenues of research for scholars concerned with developing a non-psychological approach.

Beginning in the 1960s through the 1980s sociological theories overshadowed biological explanations by looking at spirit possession as a product of larger cultural structures; mainly, race, class, and gender. Similarly, we can view it as being a response to even larger structures—that of power, status, and authority. The process of incorporation indulges its believers by allowing them to acquire power and authority in a fleeting public display of ceremony and ritual, thus transferring the medium from an ordinary and mundane person into a state of sacred reverence that overshadows the reality of their oppressed position in the material world. For a moment in chronological time, they are suspended in the spiritual hierarchy.

In the example of Umbanda in Brazil for several hours on select days of the week, mediums incorporate spirits who are hierarchically arranged in the spirit world just as the mediums are on earth. The mediums, in turn, become members of the spiritual hierarchy and of a larger cosmic society. Their spiritual-status\textsuperscript{10} within this larger, and arguably more important community, gives them prestige within the material world. Their material-status, which was once based on social structures such as race, gender, economics, and authority among their peers, is now changed to reflect their spiritual-status. This new status is more accepting and based on a person’s involvement in the terreiro and their spiritual development.

\textsuperscript{10} In order to make a better distinction between the status of the person in the faith community as opposed to their status in the larger secular community I will refer to the former as their spiritual-status and the latter as their material status. In my experience this is how Umbandistas refer to the two separate worlds that exist in their cosmos—spiritual world and material world.
In *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*, Lewis argues that “in peripheral cults ecstasy is for all” (Martin 1972:528) implying that everyone has the potential to incorporate spirits. This is true. However, there is a learning process which places people at different levels of mediumship. A higher status is easily attainable once a person engages in a spirit incorporation community—a situation that is not encountered in mainstream society due to cultural restrictions. This status change becomes evident when their community peers are suddenly transformed into a receptive audience witnessing their incorporation trance enabling them to exhibit special qualities otherwise not available to everyone present.

Access to power, status, and authority can also be categorized according to a type of marginalization. This may separate the peripheral cults into smaller factions each resisting their material-status in particular ways. For example, in Ethiopia, lower class men who are marginalized due to their Islamic faith situated within a dominant Christian society join Zar cults. They worship alongside higher status Christian women (Lewis 2003:92). The men resist their inferior position as a religious minority while the women address issues of gender inequality through spiritual empowerment. Yet, in Somalia, a group of former slaves has formed a male oriented spirit possession cult called *Numbi* while the women have their own cult called *Mingis*. Separated by gender, they form a faith community tailored to the needs of each group (Lewis 2003).

Lewis further differentiates “peripheral cults” from “central cults.” He claims that in central cults, possession is a “hallmark of a religious elite, those chosen by the gods and personally commissioned by them to exercise divine authority among men” (Lewis
2003:152). For instance, Brazil is currently experiencing a large growth in Pentecostalism (Burdick 1993), a religion that speaks to all levels of society yet utilizes the select few who are gifted with the Holy Spirit to benefit the group. These selected men and women are leaders who have connections to the larger political infrastructure. Not only do they have a higher material-status but they also enjoy a higher spiritual-status which can benefit both the peripheral and central possession cults. By including men and women who have authority in the larger society, they increase the possibility that their voices will be heard and their marginalization addressed.

In the latter part of the twentieth-century, many studies have focused on the predominance of women in spirit possession societies (Landes 1947; Kehoe and Giletti 1981). Previously, their numbers were attributed to psychological problems like hysteria and biological issues that portrayed women as the weaker sex. Once the anthropological community began to integrate more women scholars into its hallowed halls, the focus changed to sociological explanations for gender prevalence.

*The City of Women* was a pioneer study done by anthropologist Ruth Landes in 1938-39 in the state of Bahia, Brazil which emphasized the women’s role in the perpetuation of the African derived religions. Her main argument was that women were a dominant feature in all aspects of the Candomblé religion\(^\text{11}\) due to Brazil’s weak economy under the regime of President Getúlio Vargas. Work was scarce and financial stress often drove men away from their families for long periods of time in search of employment. As a result, women made use of familiar religious traditions in order to

\(^{11}\) Candomblé is a religion in Brazil that was created by slaves from the Yoruba (primarily from modern-day Nigeria) and Dahomen (primarily from modern-day Benin) nations. The ceremonies are derived from West African traditions and they practice animal sacrifice and pray in the Yoruban language.
survive (Landes 1947:148). They dedicated themselves to the Orixás, West African gods who were very important in the continuity of African traditions through the dark centuries of slavery. Serving the Orixás allowed women some financial stability through the collective efforts of the Filhas de Santos (daughters of the saints)\textsuperscript{12} and the role of men as financial supporters of the terreiro. This earned them the honorary title of Ogan. Since it was believed that women are more prone to possession (Boddy 1988), they utilized this stereotype to provide divining services through the reading of cowry shells, and the production of elaborate ceremonies in honor of the Orixás.

While her thesis seemed well supported, Landes received serious criticism from her peers due to her candid style of writing. One critic, Melville Herskovits (1948:124), berated her work as an attempt made by an ill-equipped student that “was not instructed in how to meet the problems of living [in the tropics].” Herskovits also attacked her focus on the woman’s prominent role in the Candomblé religion stating that “men have places that are quite as important as those of the women,” and her focus on the economic causes of this gender anomaly was misread. Essentially, Herskovits (1948:125) used Landes’s work to criticize the anthropological discipline as a whole, “calling for proper preparation of students going into the field.”

Additionally, C.G. Woodson (1947:513) gave a rather tongue-in-cheek criticism that left a mocking impression. He stated that the book was “an afterthought” and “reflections from a student” even though she had completed her PhD program in 1935, three years before her fieldwork (Landes 1947:xvi). Furthermore, Woodson referred to

\textsuperscript{12} The plural feminine term, Filhas de Santos, refers to a group of women, whereas a group of both men and women take on the plural male term, Filhos de Santos.
her fieldwork as a “field trip,” which gave a condescending feel to his critique (Woodson 1947:513).

Thankfully, an awakening has occurred in the last ten years in the field of anthropology that takes another look at early anthropological texts and re-evaluates their contributions. Anthropologist Angela Castañeda, for example, stated that the reflexive style used by Landes to form what some called a simple “travelogue,” actually gives great detail of presence and voice to the historical leaders of the Candomblé communities (Castaneda 2007:510).

Susan Beese (2007) further elaborated that the criticisms launched at Landes were because she was courageous enough to shift her research to the topic of women in Candomblé, away from her original goal of studying Brazilian racial democracy, a topic that was made popular by Gilberto Freyre in 1933. Landes felt that the topic of racial discrimination was not a major concern for Brazilians, but more aimed at American scholars who sought to understand the reasons for U.S. racial segregation. Additionally, she strayed from the scientific approach to anthropological research epitomized by the works of influential male social scientists such as Raymundo Nina Rodrigues, Arthur Ramos, and Melville Herskovits. Instead, her personal story, interwoven with the people of Candomblé, led to a very informative ethnography that repositioned women, race, and class within the framework of Brazil in the late 1930s. Her efforts earned her a position as a female scholar in the United States.

Another interesting perspective examines how women use spirit possession to gain power and authority as individuals outside of the faith community. *Holy Harlots: Femininity, Sexuality, and Black Magic in Brazil* by Kelly E. Hayes (2011) followed the
life of a medium in the Rio de Janeiro favelas (shantytowns). She concentrated her research on *Pombagira’s* (also spelled Pomba Gira), a group of female spirits that fall under the Exú spirit group and the myriad of ways women use the possession of this spirit to transcend their position as submissive wives and mothers to a confident *mulher da rua* (street-savvy woman). Her collaborator was a woman named Nazaré, who practices Macumba, but she prefers to call it Umbanda because of Macumba’s negative association with black magic. Through Nazaré, Hayes became immersed into the domestic sphere of religious expression and the very personal and reciprocal relationship between Nazaré and her spirit, Maria Mulambo.

From a young age, Nazaré was marked as a spiritual medium. In the past, Exú spirits have been associated with the Christian devil because of their inclination to do both good and evil. They are often called upon by clients who want to change their destiny or the destiny of others. Hayes theorized that Nazaré used Maria Mulambo to transcend her limited freedom as a housewife. This was characterized by moral female sexuality directly linked to the domestic sphere as opposed to the public sphere that is inhabited by Brazilian men (Hayes 2011:105). Over the years, incorporation by Maria Mulambo has allowed Nazaré to become financially and emotionally independent from her husband, Nilmar. In contrast to Nazaré’s domestic role, her husband was a known philanderer and had trouble keeping a job. Yet, he occasionally provided for his family (the mark of a good father in Brazil). His only source of control was his household which was frequently compromised by the presence of Maria Mulambo when she would notify Nazaré of Nilmar’s constant infidelities.
A woman’s ability to overcome her role within the domestic sphere through the seating of a Pombagira spirit is a way for women to embody, in a culturally sanctified manner, the “antithesis of the domestic maternal female” (Hayes 2011:43). According to anthropologist Gina Hunter (2012:704) she becomes “the embodiment of the dangerous potential of feminine sexuality outside patriarchal control.”

Since the majority of research has examined how women utilize spirits to resist their position, research on gender within spirit possession communities has been lopsided. Only small portions of larger studies have examined the role of men in cults, and they mainly have focused on their homosexual orientation. The inclusion of men in studies on possession opens up the ecstatic experience to a wider array of motivations. Possession is not just a weakness attributed to a woman’s propensity for hysteria or the effects of cultural restrictions on food. It is linked to a person’s position within society, the prejudice they may face, and the framework that keeps oppressive structures in place.

The idea of homosexual men in possession cults leads to an interesting discussion that mimics the approach taken by Hayes. The social stigma associated with homosexuality in many cultures around the world has marginalized groups of men who would ordinarily be accepted into the dominant society. They gain power and authority by becoming leaders of terreiros and incorporating spirits who are highly respected and sought after for consultations. Additionally, they incorporate spirits who can free them from the sexual restrictions of the culture similar to a domestic woman’s incorporation of a Pombagira (Hayes 2011). In spirit possession religions, the gender of the medium and the spirit do not always coincide. Moreover, there are many spirits that are not identified
with a gender or said to transition back and forth between male and female. Men who wish to express their homosexual or effeminate identity in a culturally sanctioned manner can do so within a spirit possession cult by incorporating a female entity. The spirit behaves in a manner that is contradictory to the male role in their society through dress and flirtatious behavior towards other men. His deviant behavior is excused because of his lack of bodily control while incorporated.

In the example of Brazilian possession religions, *adés* (effeminate gay men) comprise a large population of leaders and initiates. Historian Paul Christopher Johnson (2002) takes a moment to discuss engendered power in Brazilian Candomblé in his book *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods: The Transformation of Candomblé*. He states that the beliefs within the internal structure of the terreiro are built on fecundity—production of children, in this case new initiates, and also production of *axé*, the life force. Some interpret *axé* to be innate in every living/spiritual being (Voeks 1997) and others interpret it as a presence that increases and decreases with unpredictability (Wafer 1991). *Axé* is the “nutrient of the material and spiritual realms” which “represents power, energy, and strength” (Voeks 1997:73). Johnson interprets *axé* as a religious power that is generated when spirits incorporate the *Filhos de Santo* (sons or children of the spirit) by bringing the spiritual energy down to earth. The more initiates that belong to the terreiro the more *axé* will be generated. Therefore, the leaders of the terreiro must produce a religious environment that imitates the domestic home and welcomes children and spirits in order to produce religious power. The leaders of the terreiros:
…must, almost by definition, be cool-aged, respectable, controlled and “female,” metaphorically mother and midwife at the same time. He or she must devote most of his or her time to the domicile…Thus the ideal leader of a Candomblé terreiro is a postmenopausal women…If the leader is male, he is often, though not always, openly gay. Regardless of actual gender, he or she occupies a structurally female position. [Johnson 2002:42]

Sexuality and gender are also metaphorically referred to in spiritual terms. It is said that, when a spirit incorporates a human, they are mounting the medium as they would a horse (Landes 1947; Johnson 2002). During Landes’s study in the late 1930s, male sexuality was highly regulated. Men were supposed to be highly sexual creatures who dominated the streets and their households with their virility, conquests, and heterosexual orientation regardless of their married status. To be mounted like a horse by a spirit, be it male or female, compromises the masculinity of the male medium. Therefore, male participation in Candomblé was specific and served to reinforce their masculinity. They were the financial supporters of the terreiro, called Ogans as previously noted. They were the drummers and rhythm makers that elevated the energy and caused the spirits to mount their horses and drive the women into spiritual ecstasy.

Since Landes’s fieldwork, times have changed. While doing research in my Umbanda community, I paid acute attention to male and female relationships and looked for public displays of sexual orientation. What I noticed was that most of the men were in heterosexual relationships with other female initiates. There were openly gay couples, male and female. Additionally, Pai Gota, the leader of the terreiro, would regularly incorporate female spirits; he would dress and act in a feminine way. While sexuality was prevalent, it was never addressed in negative ways. Emphasis was placed on the fact that
Umbanda, unlike other Brazilian religions, welcomes everyone regardless of his or her sexual orientation, class, race, or background. In fact, many conversations I had with my collaborators revolved around the concept of equality and acceptance.

Other sociological approaches, especially in Brazil, have focused on how issues of race, ancestry, and tradition are appropriated and expressed through possession in order to compensate for inequality in the racial and socioeconomic spheres. Brazil’s rich history in African slavery, racial tensions, and a myriad of racial categories has led researchers to assume that spirit possession is a form of resistance to “continuing discrimination [which has] denied upward mobility to the great majority of persons of Afro-Brazilian descent” (Brown 1986:17).

Race in Brazil is a very complicated topic of discussion. Some Brazilians believe that their country is a racial democracy that has contributed to the strength of the Brazilian identity and others believe that the “egalitarian racial democracy” never existed (Byrne and Forline 1997; Freyre 1956). Today, racial tensions still top the headlines (see Goldblatt 2014; Rocha 2000). Conflicting opinions can be associated with the widespread success of a book written by Gilberto Freyre called Casa Grande e Senzala (renamed The Masters and the Slaves when translated to English). Casa Grande was celebrated as a sociological masterpiece which explained the unique historical process that characterized race in Brazil during the first half of the twentieth-century. Today, scholars find Freyre’s conclusions Luso-centric and subjective with conflicting points of view, oversimplified by white male heterosexuality (Celarent 2010; Degler 1971). His understanding of race was a product of his day, and his writing is an example of the theoretical thought which
categorized cultures based on a scale of inferiority and superiority. He believed that European blood (or genetic composition), improved the inferior genetics of the African and Indian slaves. Miscegenation created generations of mixed race offspring that were bred for the difficult tropical environment.

In spite of Freyre’s success, many people concluded that he had invented the idea of Brazilian racial democracy that characterized the national pride. The reality was, and still is, that racial tensions underscore all social structures even though many of these tensions are expressed and practiced in a concealed manner. Evidence for this is seen in the division of religions after the abolition of slavery in 1888 and the establishment of Brazil’s First Republic in 1889. New Brazilian nationalism created a need to evaluate the origins of cultural phenomena and determine their legitimacy within the new state. This led to Afro-Brazilian religions being characterized as either pure or degenerative based on the presence or absence of “African survivals” (Bastide 1978; Freyre 1956). This sociological focus would dominate the field for over 70 years.

Roger Bastide’s (1978) *The African Religions of Brazil: Toward a Sociology of the Interpenetration of Civilizations* originally published in France in 1960 examined the development and continuity of Afro-Brazilian religions from the moment slaves arrived on Brazilian soil until the mid-twentieth century. He explained the misery of slavery and how Africans preserved and re-created their religious beliefs in the face of adversity. Bastide argued that the economic concerns of the ruling class created physical and cultural environments that were both conducive and disagreeable to the continuation of African religiosity. He stressed that the strategy of the white European ruling class to
Weaken the structure of the African solidarity was to separate family and community members and place them with rival nations on the isolated plantations. This allowed the Portuguese patriarchy to maintain control of its empire and reduce the potential for uprisings. The plantation system relied on rival informers to alert them to organized rebellions and runaways. Nevertheless, we know from the existence of *Quilombos* (runaway slave communities) that this strategy did not always work. The Palmares Quilombo, being one of the most famous runaway slave communities in the seventeenth-century lasted for about 90 years and was reportedly inhabited by more than 11,000 people with a king and queen, artisan shops, and even a church (Bastide 1978:83).

For slaves who were located in large, confined, urban environments, the likelihood of finding members of the same nation, language, and cultural background was considerable, and therefore, increased the potential for solidarity by nation. The sheer numbers of slaves arriving in the city ports of Bahia and Pernambuco in the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries was noteworthy (Sweet 2003). Their relative freedom as domestic servants to wealthy colonials enabled a support system to form between members of the same nation rather than the traditional African family. Bastide also noted that in these urban environments Portuguese slave owners found it more suitable to keep different ethnic groups separated from one another to create a rivalry between different nations. In this situation, cultural ties were reinforced including religious practices.

Both the plantation and the city environments contributed to the preservation of African religions in what Bastide and others have termed “pure” African survivals,
associated with the Yoruba nations of Nagô, Ketu, and Tapa, and “degraded” syncretic religions associated with the Bantu nations, Angola, and Congo (Bastide 1978; Capone 2010). Bastide’s explanations for these differences are based on slave environments. The solidarity of the urban slaves established by nations contributed to a more uniform belief structure. In contrast, the solidarity of the plantation slaves that was based on mutual suffering tended to mix religious traditions, and therefore, the more “degraded” syncretic forms of religion emerged. As a result, today’s Afro-Brazilian religions including Candomblé, Macumba, and Umbanda have been placed on a continuum based on the presence or absence of traditional beliefs and the degree of syncretism. Emilio Moran (1979) stated that Bastide successfully uses:

...depth sociology […] to demonstrate how Candomblé became a valid and successful heir to the African Village or town, how Macumba represented the confusion of society in the face of rapid change, and how Umbanda is a temporarily successful religion of a rapidly modernizing industrial power wherein major gaps in social enfranchisement still exist. [Moran 1979:1206]

Rather than being a descriptive account of African survivals, Bastide’s motives were more explanatory in that he attempted to understand the multiple levels of culture and colonization found in Brazil (Moran 1979) that were based on Marxist interpretations of class and economy. He also included Durkheim’s views of social cohesion.

Erika Bourguignon (1980:477) praised Bastide for his historical development of the Afro-Brazilian religions. She stated that this book was to be “treated as case material for a larger study.” Bastide wanted to compare “interactions between infrastructure

13 Bastide and other scholars condensed the Yoruba nations with the Dahomey nations (Gege) due to the fact that they had a similar religious and cultural structure (Bastide 1978:205).
(economic and social conditions) and superstructure (religions and ideologies) in different societies.” Unfortunately, this was a project not realized during his lifetime.

Recently, however, Stefania Capone (2010) accused Bastide and others (Raymundo Nina Rodrigues and Arthur Ramos, to name a few)\textsuperscript{14} of creating a stagnant view of the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé, which revels in its African purity. She claimed that Bastide’s overemphasis on Candomblé as the best example of “African survivals” led to the marginalization of other African derived syncretic religions which are now seen as inferior. The following is a paragraph taken from The African Religions of Brazil that summarizes the arguments made by twentieth century scholars concerned with legitimating select Afro-Brazilian religions:

Disintegration becomes more pronounced as distance from the Dahoman and Yoruba centers of the Northeast increases…Macumba is an illustration of what happens to the African religions during a period when traditional values are being lost. Umbanda spiritism, on the other hand, reflects the reorganization, on new foundations and in accordance with the new attitudes of proletarianized blacks. [Bastide 1978:293-295]

Capone argued that the biased attention given to the religion of Candomblé essentially created a divide between the mediumistic religions. Academia had effectively constructed the criteria for Afro-Brazilian religious legitimacy. What was interesting was that the politically connected leaders of the Candomblé houses utilized the texts of anthropologists and sociologists to reintroduce traditions that had been lost or altered over time (Dantas 2009). Their goal was to rewrite history that glorified the humane

\textsuperscript{14} For more information see Raymundo Nina Rodrigues Os Africanos no Brasil (Rodrigues 1988), and Arthur Ramos The Negro in Brazil (Ramos 1951).
practices of Portuguese slavery in Brazil by emphasizing the richness of the African
survivals that could have only survived in a merciful environment. This was compounded
by the actions of the Brazilian Minister of Finance, Rui Barbosa, who in 1890 ordered all
the “papers, registry books, and documents, that relate to slavery” be burned (Chazkel
2012:1) in order to get rid of the shameful past and promote a new Brazil.

These factors created the contemporary Afro-Brazilian religious environment.

Capone, Brazeal, Dantas, and others, maintained that scholars preoccupied with
establishing Candomblé as authentic and pure have misrepresented Nagô Candomblé as
superior in contrast to Angolan traditions that were considered a hybrid form of religious
beliefs by incorporating spirits with a strictly Brazilian identity (Brazeal 2003; Capone
2010; Dantas 2009). Additionally, she asserted that the motivations of the Candomblé
leaders to establish themselves as superior came in response to the growing popularity of
Umbanda. A religious movement combined with European Spiritism, indigenous, and
African beliefs into one doctrine that benefitted the growing urban lower class in the
coastal cities since the 1920s.

Tradition, she argued, did not emerge from “collective black memory” but more
from the scholarly interpretations of Candomblé rituals and their comparison to rituals
found in West Africa (Capone 2010:14). The motivations of anthropologists to find the
origins of Afro-Brazilian beliefs led to the creation of a hierarchy in the Brazilian
religious scenario. Candomblé, whose initiation process was extensive and costly was
losing adherents to a more accessible, cost-effective Umbanda religion that did not
emphasize the initiation of its members.
Historian Walter Hawthorne (2011) stated that, although Capone’s thesis on the “construction of tradition” was convincing, he still believed that a more extensive study was needed on the history and change of African derived religions. Only then would he be convinced that the Nagô (Candomblé) belief systems were as malleable as Angolan (Macumba) regarding societal change. There are too many variables to account for in order to determine if one religion was more tenacious than the other. However, Capone did bring up a good argument for the possibility that the contemporary state of the Brazilian religious market could have been molded by outside influences.

Paul Christopher Johnson (2011:1088) claimed that Capone’s work was “more complex and more empirically grounded” than previous work done on the subject, but Capone left a “big question” unanswered:

What do Brazilian ‘whites,’ Asians, and others get from its conjuring? It remains unclear why those with other options available to them voluntarily cast themselves into this economy of scarcity, striving to produce the effect of authentic African tradition to distinguish their temple or their knowledge from those of rivals? [Johnson 2011:1088]

The answer is clear. Accessibility to alternative spiritual beliefs, prestige, and the illusion of power and superiority draws people into membership from all races and classes of people. The fact that Candomblé is pervaded by strict initiatory practices and selective membership only serves to authenticate the religion even more in the eyes of the public.

For researchers, who focus on the sociological approaches to understanding spirit possession cults, their main objective is to position the religious beliefs within the larger structures of society and potentially create universal comparisons that explain the
worldwide phenomena. Another approach tries to do the opposite. It states that spirit possession is an individual experience supported by unique cultural settings and personal desires. While it cannot deny the influences of the society on the individual, each community has different reasons for incorporation. These ideas are directly connected to their relationship between the material world and the spiritual world.

**Interpretive Approaches**

The interpretive approach or symbolic anthropology took shape in the 1960s and comprised the start of contemporary anthropology’s emphasis on the emic perspective, indigenous collaborators, and reflexive writing. Previous approaches focused on descriptive studies and scientifically quantifying cultural traits by removing human emotion and desire from the data. Emphasis on finding universals that spanned all cultures was the goal of many human sciences. To somehow prove that, despite all of our cultural variations in beliefs and performances, deep down at our core, humans would have more similarities than differences. From my perspective, interpretive anthropology does not deny this assertion. Instead, it focuses on how human differences also construct similarities.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz is widely accepted as the founder of symbolic anthropology and explains that the interpretive approach seeks to “make available to us answers that others…have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said” (Geertz 1973:30). This does not mean that the ethnographer is fully removed from the interpretative process. In fact, the anthropologist still plays a very important part in interpreting the underlying behaviors that may go unnoticed by the
group performing them. The study of cultures gives us vague shapes outlined by points of interest, and our job as anthropologists is to connect all the dots and turn the vague shape into an understandable picture that agrees with the collective identity of that culture. It is our responsibility to frame it in terms that others can understand. It is important to note that the interpretive approach to anthropology often walks a fine line between emic and etic views; therefore, it is almost impossible to translate word for word the behaviors, emotions, and concepts of self from one culture to another. The result, Boddy explains, is “a partial distortion from either perspective” (Boddy 1988:13).

Janice Boddy’s study (1988) titled “Spirits and Selves in Northern Sudan: The Cultural Therapeutics of Possession and Trance” directly confronted research previously conducted among the Hofriyati, an Arabic speaking group in Northern Sudan. The Hofriyati were bemused by these earlier studies and Boddy noted that:

My concern is to avoid viewing possession phenomena in terms that, though our culture finds them accessible, are foreign to Hofriyati—whether biochemical reactions to nutritional deficiency [referring to Kehoe and Giletti 1981], or women’s instrumental efforts to assuage their subordinate status by acquiring goods or garnering attention [referring to Lewis 1971 first ed.]…If the aim of the enterprise is to comprehend the scope of possession phenomena, to situate them in their cultural contexts, ethnographers must attend to their informants’ experiences of possession and not seek merely to explain them away as something at once less dramatic and more clinical than they appear. [Boddy 1988:4]

Boddy found that spirit possession mainly occurred with women who were married and between the ages of 35 and 55. Unmarried women were rarely possessed because their “fertility” had not yet been “activated” by marital sex and reproductive obligations. For
the Hofriyati, a woman’s identity was based on strict moral codes and boundaries that protected the woman and the village from external influences. Boddy described it as the reaction to historical “invasion, colonization, and exploitation” (Boddy 1988:5).

The Hofriyati emphasize the genderization of males and females at an early age. Children from ages 5 to 10 increasingly maintain divisions between what is “male” and what is “female” as they age. To summarize, women are associated with the enclosed space of the village which is also a metaphor for her internalized emotions and physical alterations experienced just before puberty with pharaonic circumcision. Pharaonic circumcision physically emphasizes the role of the woman as enclosed and domestic by sealing in external genitalia rendering the womb clean and pure. They are protected with a “veil” of skin that secures a woman’s fertility and prepares them for their role as wife and reproducer. On the other hand, men are associated with externality. Their need to migrate for work places them in direct contact with the outside world filled with chaos. Male circumcision is viewed as the opposite of women’s circumcision; by removing the “veil” from the penis, he is asserting his gender by emphasizing that his fertility is external.

If a woman marries and finds she is unable to reproduce, or for that matter, incapable of reproducing male children, her entire identity as a Hofriyati woman becomes problematic. She associates her infertility with illness “as an idiom for the expression of threatened self-hood” that does not result in what the Western world would consider a fragile mental state, but rather a “culturally appropriate [response] to a stressful situation.” Her infertility or other threats to her female identity is attributed to spirit
possession by a Zarian spirit (Boddy 1988:17-18). Once the diagnosis becomes public, the woman’s identity is transformed from a failure into the victim beset by illness. This illness is easily treatable, though not curable, by the recognition of the spirit in a ceremony. Through a voluntary trance, an agreement is reached between the medium, her spirit, and subsequently the Hofriyati community. The demands of the spirit will be met, and in return, the woman regains her health and her feminine self (Boddy 1988).

While this approach had positive effects in Boddy’s community, in Brazil the interpretive movement had many barriers to overcome. The influential writings of previous scholars and their almost-celebrity status among Afro-Brazilian religious centers created an environment difficult to penetrate with new perspectives. The following Afro-Brazilian scholars attempted to undo the inappropriate classifications of pure and degenerative. They attempted to unite the religions by demonstrating that they were all variations created by the unique Brazilian environment and historical influences. In 1972, the husband and wife team Seth and Ruth Leacock (1972) wrote in *The Spirits of the Deep: A Study of an Afro-Brazilian Cult*. They provided the first full account of the Batuque religion in the Northern city of Belém (Brown 1973). Their main objective was to provide a descriptive study of a religion that emerged in very different conditions from the Afro-Brazilian religions studied by earlier anthropologists in the states of Bahia and Rio de Janeiro. The reason why the conditions were so different, they explained, was the historical economies in the two regions contributed to a different formation of slave labor, and therefore, a unique mixture of religious beliefs was drawn from indigenous
communities and international folk heroes. These folk heroes came to explore the Amazon forests and transport goods back to Europe (Leacock and Leacock 1972:44).

The majority of the population in Belém consisted of poor Europeans and Caboclos (urban Indians) with only a small portion of African slaves imported from the south. Employment in the city of Belém consisted mainly of the legal and illegal export of products from the Amazon forests, because of their prime location at the delta of the Amazon River. For their part, plantations were typically concentrated elsewhere on the west coast of Bahia and Pernambuco. The gold mines were located mostly in the Western states which meant that the bulk of slave work was concentrated in these areas.

The differences in population caused a variance in the Afro-Brazilian pantheon. Instead of heavily worshipping Pretos Velhos, a spirit group representing “old slaves,” emphasis was placed on Caboclos, a spirit group that resembled the urban Indians familiar to Belém (Leacock and Leacock 1972:155). The Leacocks found that the Orixás who are worshipped in Candomblé made a minimal appearance in the Batuque rituals. Instead, a mixture of encantados and animal spirits were the religion’s focus. For example, Bôto Tucuxí and Bôto Branco are spirits that resemble the pink and white river dolphins in the Amazon River (Leacock and Leacock 1972:145). Because of the indigenous influences on the religion, the Leacocks concluded that Batuque was far different from the Afro-Brazilian religions studied by earlier scholars.

Here is where the emic and etic perspectives become blurred. In order to distinguish between the religions found in the urban cities of the South (Umbanda, Candomblé, and Macumba) and the religions of the Northeast (Catimbó and Candomblé),
the name Batuque was applied to the various cults found in Belém by the Leacocks. However, it is possible they were trying to draw an association with the Batuque religion found in Rio Grande do Sul in the “extreme south” (Bastide 1978:206). In truth, after Brazil ceased being a monarchy and became established as a republic in 1889, several similar religions appeared. Each had a different name, and each drew from the “norms and values” of West African religiosity (Bastide 1978:205). Today, Batuque is not a word associated with religion, properly speaking; instead, the terreiros in Belém practice Umbanda with regional variations. Unfortunately, we cannot know for sure if the cults of Belém during the 1960s and 1970s considered themselves to be localized expressions of Umbanda or if they considered themselves to be unique in their beliefs. The researchers decided to write a general and descriptive study of the Afro-Brazilian religious environment rather than an in depth ethnography of a single community.

For the most part, reviews of the Spirits of the Deep were positive. Diana Brown (1973:1042) stated that it was the “most readable account yet to appear of an Afro-Brazilian religion,” and its only weaknesses were the authors neglect to dive into “socio-political questions” and theories on the dominant female membership of the terreiros.

Donald Warren Jr. (1973) stated that the Leacocks “have produced a first-rate monograph on a little known subject” that disagrees with Roger Bastide’s theory that “religions like Umbanda and Batuque represent a protest by ‘Negroes’ or a ‘colored class’ against their lower class status.” In fact, the Leacocks determined that there was very little racism in the Belém terreiros because all racial categories were represented in the lower class as well as the religious houses (Leacock and Leacock 1972:112).
It is important to note that the success of the Leacocks was not unanimous. Folklorist, Kay L. Cothran (1972), stated that the authors had “little interest in ritual […] and symbols” and rather than taking the time to understand the informant’s actions as symbolic with a greater meaning, they focused more on factual information which only scratched the surface. Rendering what could have been a “thick description” of a little known variation, they produced a surface reading of several possession cults. Nevertheless, the Leacocks can be lauded for standing up against dominant ideology of the time that neglected to see the emergence of the Brazilian identity through African and European cultures.

Chapter 2 has discussed the medical, explanatory, and interpretive approaches to spirit incorporation which have contributed to a more fine-tuned understanding of this phenomenon. The following discussion will use the interpretive approach to place spirit possession/incorporation within the theoretical framework that considers the consolidation of the two separate worlds. This approach is very important when examining Afro-Brazilian religions that have been the subject of much research. It is very difficult to find sources on Umbanda beliefs in the human participation in the spiritual hierarchy, the afterlife, and their preparation for death. It has always been assumed that Afro-Brazilian religions serve a more immediate purpose for its followers rather than the holistic or emergent dualism of the soul’s rise to heaven and resurrection in the future (Nichols 2010). Given this assumption, I will use the interpretive approach in conjunction with Dr. Robbins hypothesis on proximity and distance to understand how Umbandistas position the spiritual world in relationship to the material world.
Applying the Interpretive Approach

One reason for using the interpretive approach to examine Umbanda is to
distinguish between the members of the external community, referred to as the audience,
bystanders, or patients. The internal community includes the mediums, initiates,
assistants, or the members of the terreiro.\textsuperscript{15} Because Umbanda ceremonies bring together
these two communities, scholars have assumed that the main goal for Afro-Brazilian
religions is to serve an immediate purpose for its followers. It is believed that they do not
concentrate on the future of their souls within the spiritual world (see Bastide 1978;

Bastide (1978) confirms this assumption by explaining that the Catholicism of the
Portuguese and the adopted Catholicism of the slaves were similar in many ways. First,
the Portuguese prayed to their saints for better crops, a good husband or wife, wealth,
revenge, and love—earthly wants and needs. The same was true for the slaves who
superimposed the saints and the Orixás; they, too, prayed for love, wealth, revenge, or in
many cases, death as a deliverance from horrible circumstances. However, there is one
important difference. The Portuguese Catholics “asked their saints to cut short their time
in Purgatory and to intercede for their admission to heaven of the Lord God and the
Virgin Mary; it was the latter aspect that escaped the black” (Bastide 1978:141). Instead:

His theoanthropic [spirit and human] economy is not one of long-term credit or
enrichment, nor of capitalizing his interest by investing in heaven, which on the
day of his death, will return eternal profits. It is a religion of immediate

\textsuperscript{15} I may also refer to the members as worshippers, followers, or devotees.
consumption, of barter rites, without credit or accumulated interest. [Fernando Ortiz in Bastide 1978:141]

This description of the Afro-Brazilian religious ideology has remained dominant in the scholarly writings. Little if any research has focused on the Afro-Brazilian view of the afterlife. I argue that, while the external community uses Umbanda to immediately solve material problems, the members of the terreiro utilize their religion for different purposes. Umbandistas use their religion to build relationships between the material world and the spiritual world through reciprocity. As a result, they are included in the spiritual hierarchy that was previously only accessible to paternalistic religious specialists. Their presence is reinforced by the occupation of Brazilian spirits and their philosophy of reincarnation.

Spirits, who dedicate themselves to incorporating mediums, and mediums, who dedicate themselves to receiving spirits, do so in order to gain a higher status within the spiritual hierarchy. A spirit’s contribution to the material world is often referred to as divine charity, or in Judeo-Christian language, redemption. Since becoming an encantado in Umbanda does not imply that the spirit led a righteous life while on earth, they are given the opportunity to improve their spiritual-status by helping the public after death. Divine charity can be something as simple as advice and protection, or it can be as complicated as absorbing and dissipating negative energy from a person so they can become healthy and spiritually balanced. As they work on their spiritual evolution, they are also contributing to the spiritual evolution of the mediums they incorporate. A medium must learn to be a strong and healthy vessel in order to receive encantados, bearing in mind that health also has a spiritual component. The following is an excerpt
from a health pamphlet distributed by Sistema Única de Saúde (SUS), the Brazilian government’s healthcare system and co-authored by Afro-Brazilian religious leaders.

We, members of Afro-Brazilian religions, believe that the body is the dwelling of the gods and, therefore, must always be well taken care of…we are the inheritors of our ancestors’ axé (vital force), and therefore we must have healthy and well-informed bodies and minds in order to fully experience our ancestrality. [Pagano 2011:233]

For Umbandistas, health is earned by having faith, worshipping the spirits, and practicing values that they label as karma. Health is also earned by expelling negative energy and allowing the encantados to use their bodies for divine charity. A healthy medium contributes axé to the terreiro which is a type of energy that is found in all living and spiritual beings. A healthy abundance of axé within a terreiro draws spirits down from the spiritual world and contributes to the health of the community. The mediums who learn to control an incorporation episode so spirits can give charity receive a higher spiritual-status within the community. Their material-status outside the terreiro is largely uncontrollable as it is affected by socio-cultural structures such as race, class, and gender. By becoming spiritually healthy and helping the encantados increase their spiritual-status, the gods will look favorably upon their souls and place them in a better material-status when they are reincarnated back to earth.

Another interpretation that has gone largely unnoticed is the Umbanda concept of perfection, or rather imperfection. Life in the material world is permeated by a binary ideology such as right and wrong, good and evil, legal and illegal, etc. This binary ideology disregards the substantial continuum that lies in between. For instance, it is
sinful to lie, to cheat, and to steal except when parents lie to their children about the existence of Santa Claus or when someone cheats a corrupt system for the benefit of a community, or steals food for his or her starving family. In a binary world, these examples obviously lay in the “wrong/evil/illegal” categories, but if we position someone who steals food for his or her family on a continuum with someone who steals money out of greed, a gray area emerges. Poignantly, the stealer of food becomes more virtuous than the money thief. Umbanda understands that most of the time people reside in the gray area, and that it is a part of surviving life in the material world. This philosophy is supported by the pantheon of spirits worshipped in Umbanda and their placement on the spiritual hierarchy.

The spirit groups recognized in Umbanda are the Pretos Velhos, Caboclos, and Exús who embody the multicultural identity of the Brazilian people. Their myths inspire men and women to be independent and streetwise, warriors of contemporary society, and knowledgeable about their surroundings. Yet, they exhibit qualities of imperfection in relationship to the dominant society; we must consider the dominant society to include Catholic ideals of sexuality, gender inequality, and paternalism. In these myths, imperfections are celebrated rather than hidden.

I am not arguing that Catholicism or any other Christian based religions only accept perfection from their followers, because they allow for imperfections to occur. These religions have a direct way of absolving imperfections through confession or the Sacrament of Reconciliation. These rituals place sinners back into an ideal state until they sin again. They play with the boundaries of profane and sacred in order to maintain
control of a person’s position while on earth and keep them dependent on the church’s services.

Umbanda plays with the boundaries of profane and sacred as well, but they situate the causes of sin outside of the person within the socio-cultural structures of their society. If a person harbors negative energy, it may be because of discrimination, inequality, or resentment for governmental corruption. The failure to rise above these feelings may be caused by malevolent spirits who are drawn to the negative energy. They are said to lean on a person’s soul preventing him or her from progressing spiritually. Umbanda helps him or her to regain control of his or her energy and return to spiritual balance.

Reincarnation is also a philosophy that has been ignored in academic research conducted in Brazil. While the general concept has been examined in several societies around the world, very little scrutiny has been paid to how Afro-Brazilian religions interpret the afterlife and reincarnation. Umbandistas believe that the soul is continuously reincarnated back to earth in order to learn lessons that are experienced during a lifetime. If they have led a good karmic life and followed their life’s mission, they move to a higher level in their next lives. The Leacocks explain in great detail the process of death and the soul’s journey in the afterlife in the Batuque religion of Belém, Brazil in the 1970s. They state:

After death all souls rise into space for an indefinite period, pending reassignment. Only a tiny fraction of the most elevated and saintly souls win access to heaven to live with God and the angels. Those souls…who have, on the whole, lived good lives while on earth, practicing charity and showing love for their fellow men, are awarded the privilege of accompanying the host of ‘guides’
and encantados in their travels about the universe as they fight the forces of evil in this world and on other planets…But by far the great majority of souls do not qualify for this honor. Instead they must remain drifting in space, often suffering pain, cold, loneliness, until they are reincarnated, i.e., assigned to a newborn infant and thus born again into the world to again face the hazards and opportunities that are the lot of mortal flesh. The process of reincarnation is repeated over and over again until the soul finally attains eligibility to be a spirit of light. [Leacock and Leacock 1972:88]

The interpretation of life before and after reincarnation can be explained through the similarities in the educational system of the United States regarding grade levels. After they learn the required material, students move from first grade, to second grade, to the third grade, etc. If a student is unsuccessful, they are held in place and taught the same lessons they previously failed to learn. The grades, in this case, equal one life.

Unfortunately, humans do not know how many grades they have gone through or how many they have left in order to move up to the next stage. Using this same analogy, death is only a liminal stage—a time for evaluating the lessons learned during material life and determining where the soul will re-emerge. At some point, the material world will cease to provide a soul with valuable lessons. It follows that the soul will progress to a higher level on the spiritual plane. They will continue to work as auxiliary spirits working their way up to enlightened spirits. This is the closest level a human soul can be to the divine Orixás.

Umbanda philosophy states that a soul can never degenerate. However, it can stagnate if its mission is not fulfilled. Missions are predestined obligations that a soul can decide to follow or not. If they decide to follow their mission, spiritual evolution is
almost guaranteed in the afterlife. If they deny their mission, spiritual stagnation will certainly occur. Everyone’s mission is different and does not necessarily have to follow the Umbanda path. A doctor’s mission, for example, is to heal the sick and injured; a lawyer’s mission is to defend the powerless; a parent’s mission is to love his or her children and raise them according to karmic principles.

To reiterate, belief in spirit incorporation as a form of communication and reciprocity, the celebration of “lower” spirits, and the belief in reincarnation, contributes to a worldview that allows humans to connect to the spiritual world much sooner and more repetitively than the Judeo-Christian doctrine. To visually illustrate this meaning, Bastide (1978:228) has made a reference to a “sacerdotal ladder” that “brings increased prestige” for people in Candomblé. He argues that, with incorporation, comes power and authority whereas in the material world, the Afro-Brazilian populations struggle to find equal footing. I concur. Climbing the “sacerdotal ladder” provides people with non-violent ways to resist oppression. If we apply the sacerdotal analogy to the spiritual world, the presence of the material world on that same ladder is justified due to the Umbanda belief in spirit incorporation and reciprocity. They become contributors to the universe rather than bystanders.

Table 2 below illustrates the “sacerdotal ladder” with occupation on every rung in the Umbanda column and significant gaps in the hierarchy in the Catholic column. I chose to compare the Umbanda spiritual hierarchy to the Catholic hierarchy because of the Catholic reverence for saints and their influence on Afro-Brazilian religiosity. The concept of levels was explained to me by Mago, a member of the Umbanda Bantu-
Ameríndio line in Rio de Janeiro. His interpretation of the spiritual hierarchy may differ from interpretations in northern Brazil where I did my research. This table is supposed to form a general picture of how the spiritual world mimics the rungs on a ladder that are accessible to humans during their lives. The evolution of humans and spirits is highly dependent on communication between the two worlds.
Table 2: The levels depicting the spiritual hierarchy in Umbanda and Catholicism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Umbanda Hierarchy</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Catholic Hierarchy</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Olorun</strong> = Supreme God</td>
<td>Universe</td>
<td><strong>God</strong> = Creator</td>
<td>Heaven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Oxalá</strong> = Most pure Orixá</td>
<td>Aruanda</td>
<td><strong>Jesus</strong> = son of God</td>
<td>Heaven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Orixás, Angels, Saints</strong> = supernatural and incarnate beings</td>
<td>Aruanda</td>
<td><strong>Angels</strong> = supernatural</td>
<td>Heaven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Levels 7, 6, and 5</strong>: Enlightened beings, free of reincarnations</td>
<td>Aruanda</td>
<td>Saints and humans</td>
<td>Heaven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>accepted into heaven</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 4</strong>: Transition zone, high spirits who mentor lower spirits</td>
<td>Aruanda</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Levels 3, 2, 1</strong>: Dimly lit areas, disembodied spirits, still atoning through charity = Pretos Velhos, Caboclos, Exús (auxiliary spirits)</td>
<td>Aruanda, liminal space, and earth</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Earth or Material world</strong>: Humans that are in the process of learning lessons and finding their path16</td>
<td>Earth</td>
<td><strong>Earth</strong>: Humans either living according to the bible or against it</td>
<td>Earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-level 7</strong>: Kiumbas (Pagan spirits) suffering spirits who are rescued and sent to higher levels for learning before reincarnation</td>
<td>Spiritual plane17</td>
<td><strong>Purgatory</strong>: “life” is assessed and Jesus “removes the remnants of imperfection” (Pope John Paul II 1999)</td>
<td>In between heaven and hell, liminal space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-levels 6, 5</strong>: Shadow zone, purgatory, or regeneration – for shadow spirits that will be forwarded as soon as possible for new earthly lessons and atonement</td>
<td>Shadow zone</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-level 4</strong>: Transitional zone – shadows and darkness filled with demented beings</td>
<td>Transitional zone</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-levels 3, 2, 1</strong>: Dark zone – unruly, stubborn, and rebellious to the divine laws and do not recognize god as their superior being</td>
<td>Dark zone</td>
<td>Devil and demons and lost souls</td>
<td>Hell</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 The sacerdotal ladder according to the Umbanda and Catholic hierarchy. Table created by Erin Frias based on descriptions provided by Mago, an Umbandista from the Umbanda Bantu Amerindio line in Rio de Janeiro.

16 Notice that Umbanda includes humans into the hierarchy as active souls in the spiritual evolution; whereas in Catholicism humans only become active in spiritual world after death and judgment.

17 Heaven and Hell refer to physical spaces in the Catholic concept of the spiritual world, but in a conversation with Mago, he emphasized that for Umbandistas Heaven and Hell refer to an inner state of being.
In the Catholic doctrine, God is distant and yet ubiquitous at the same time. He is intangible, unapproachable, and infinite.\textsuperscript{18} For that reason, he has given heavenly characteristics to angels and humans who are now revered as saints and serve as models for human behavior. The Umbanda doctrine is very similar in this respect. They regard Olorun (God) as mysterious and far removed from human lives. In his place, he created the Orixás that collectively represent the vastness of Olorun’s power and the infinite universe (Edwards and Mason 1985). The enlightened beings are the category of spirits that Umbandistas see as the ultimate goal of spiritual evolution. These enlightened beings have reached a point in their spiritual evolution where they do not reincarnate. Below them are the high spirits of light who help other spirits obtain enlightenment. On the level closest to earth are the spirits that are discussed in detail in Chapter 3; they are the spirits of the dead who continue to work on their spiritual evolution through the incorporation of mediums.

In the Catholic doctrine, the saints, who were recognized as living exceptional lives while on earth, are only made accessible to humans after the death of the human body and the rise of the soul to heaven.\textsuperscript{19} The rules that Catholics must follow in order to rise to heaven are written in the Bible and the Ten Commandments which, if followed, come close to the concept of perfection when modified through the confession of sins. In Umbanda, the energy of the Orixás and various levels of spirit guides are accessible to

\textsuperscript{18} For simplicity, I will address God and Olorun as a male even though the sex and gender of the supreme God is contested by several groups.

\textsuperscript{19} The Catholic mystics, as discussed in Chapter 1 are an exception. If legitimized by the Catholic Church then the visions of God, Jesus, Angels and the saints are followed by the canonization of the mystic and the place becomes a destination for pilgrims. This demonstrates the need for people to provide links between the material world and the spiritual world. However, in Catholicism this link needs to be sanctioned by the church through canonization.
anyone through the incorporation of mediums. Through the Umbanda concepts of acceptance and emphasis on reincarnation, a soul can try an infinite amount of times to succeed at life and achieve spiritual evolution.

Chapter 3 will position the religion of Umbanda within the Brazilian religious scene by understanding the social forces that contributed to its growth and popularity. The emergence of Umbanda in the early 1900s added more levels to the spiritual hierarchy and gave rise to unique personalities within the spirit pantheon. Through Umbanda, the spirits are transformed from excluded to included members of society. They emerge from a lower, disregarded position where they are used for nefarious purposes, ignored by the elite, and even seen as slaves to the Orixás. They became encantados “enchanted ones” (Leacock and Leacock 1972) and are revered for their altruistic commitment to the material world and their focus on charity.
Chapter 3

The Social History of Umbanda among Brazil’s African Religions

Umbanda was a religion born out of social conflict and exclusion. The conflict was created by the slaves’ new status as freed people and their thralldom within the lower class. To this backdrop, we must include the conflict between the mulatto’s ambiguous position as neither black nor white (Degler 1971) as well as the conflict between good and evil and pure versus degenerated (Bastide 1978). This led to the labeling of religions as legitimate and illegitimate (Capone 2010).

In the early twentieth-century, Umbanda emerged as an answer to resolve some of these conflicts for a large group of people who were excluded from the religious market—the Brazilians themselves. These are people who identify as having their legacy begin in Brazil rather than Europe or Africa. Some Brazilians found solace in the familiar Catholic Church, while others were attracted to a new religious trend that began in France during the early nineteenth-century called Spiritism. The people whose legacy began in Africa revived the mediumistic faiths of their homelands into various lineages of Candomblé reinforcing their identity as the stolen generations from Africa and their ability to survive slavery. However, religious designations are not always clearly segregated. Even though people may attend an Umbanda ceremony, they may still self-identify as a Catholic or Spiritist. This is possibly due to the avoidance of discrimination.

There are several lineages found in Candomblé houses. The most popular are: Candomblé de Yoruba, Candomblé de Jeje, Candomblé de Ketu, Candomblé de Angola, Candomblé de Congo, Candomblé de Ijexá and Candomblé de Caboclo (Voeks 1997, Mago and Frias, July 2014).
or the perceived benefit of adhering to many religions at once, because no one truly knows what happens after the death of the human body.

By the turn of the twentieth-century, new possibilities opened up for religious appropriation. Large groups of Japanese, German, Italian, and Arab migrations to Brazil instantly complicated the “black and white” racial division that had gradually been transforming the national identity through interracial liaisons over the previous four centuries [see Table 3] (Levine and Crocitti 1999).

Table 3: Immigrant groups of Brazil

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Portugal</th>
<th>Italy</th>
<th>Spain</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>Middle East</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1880-1909</td>
<td>519,629</td>
<td>1,188,883</td>
<td>307,591</td>
<td>49,833</td>
<td>861</td>
<td>31,061</td>
<td>171,498</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910-1929</td>
<td>620,396</td>
<td>245,003</td>
<td>263,582</td>
<td>101,703</td>
<td>85,716</td>
<td>79,102</td>
<td>266,598</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930-1969</td>
<td>464,055</td>
<td>142,334</td>
<td>140,538</td>
<td>56,606</td>
<td>160,735</td>
<td>30,301</td>
<td>232,939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,604,080</td>
<td>1,576,220</td>
<td>711,711</td>
<td>208,142</td>
<td>247,312</td>
<td>140,464</td>
<td>671,035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Immigrants in Brazil by country of origin from 1880 to 1969 (Lesser 1999)

The multiracial and multicultural status of the new nation contributed to the emergence of new social spaces for those who did not identify with any of the above religious categories.

Bastide points out that the “creation of Umbanda is a purely sociological process dictated by social causes alone and to be explained only by the contact of civilizations” (Bastide 1978:326). I submit that resistance and conflict were the main sociological processes behind the creation and success of Afro-Brazilian religious groups in the twentieth century. They were created to oppose the authority of the Roman Catholic Church that had been ever present since colonization. Umbanda, on the other hand, has
been influenced by religious beliefs from all over the world, but most of their recognizable characteristics are from three religions present in Brazil: Candomblé, Macumba, and Spiritism.

Candomblé emerged as the voice of resistance for the Afro-Brazilians with a doctrine that the Pai’s and Mãe’s de Santos were able to revitalize through their own traditions, turn-of-the-century ethnographies, and pilgrimages to West Africa. According to twentieth-century Africanist scholars, members of Candomblé worship the Orixás in the original African form and pray in African languages such as Yoruba, Fon (Dahomey), and Bantú (Bastide 1978). Brazilian terreiros utilize animal sacrifice, divination, and the incorporation of an extensive initiation process (Landes 1947; Johnson 2003). However, Candomblé has been largely misrepresented in the literature as “fixed and timeless” (Brazeal 2003:641).

In reality, Brazilian influences easily found their way into the representations of Candomblé, especially through the pantheon of spirits known as Caboclos (Brazeal 2003) which represented the socio-political climate of the New Republic built on freedom and independence. Additionally, religious leaders continued to revere popular Catholic saints almost as a tongue-in-cheek rebellion against the elite. Adherents to Candomblé were becoming incorporated by the saints worshipped in the Catholic Church which allowed them to access a spiritual world that would only be made available to the devout Catholic after death. An icon such as the Orixá Yemanjá was identified as the Virgin Mary (Bastide 1978). She is portrayed as a white woman with long dark hair and became the mother figure for all regardless of race. Even the Christian devil was tamed under the Candomblé doctrine. His association with the Orixá Exú at first convinced Candomblé
leaders to disavow him as a spirit worthy of worship. Through time, however, Exú was reintroduced in his initial form as master of good and evil and as a messenger to the Orixás. He became ritually civilized through offerings and prayers that opened every religious ceremony. The offerings were designed to persuade Exú to deliver messages to the Orixás in order to draw them down to earth from Aruanda,²¹ their home in the sky (Capone 2010).

Interestingly, Macumba was a more direct form of resistance to the freed slaves’ new precarious position as laborers. The abolition of slavery led to a surplus of paid workers that competed for jobs. The cities provided opportunities that were not available in the countryside, and large internal migrations occurred flooding the cities with the working class poor (Levine and Crocitti 1999). Favelas were haphazardly constructed on the outskirts of the cities, and through the course of time, became unauthorized independent territories ruled by drug lords and criminals taking advantage of the widespread police corruption (Hayes 2011). People who practiced Macumba became associated with the ambiguous morals of the favelas where survival sometimes required an amoral means to an end. It should be noted here that Macumba may be associated with lower-class Afro-Brazilians of the city, but it was, and is, utilized by people from all backgrounds. An immediate resolution to an undesirable situation can draw people from all levels of society. The people who practiced Macumba were willing to draw from the sinister powers of the encantados for any purpose the patient desired—for the right price.

²¹ Aruanda is a name that is thought to be derived from Luanda, one of the largest slaving ports of Angola (Brown 1986).
If the request was to drive a person out of town, to attract an unwilling mate, or to perform acts of revenge, Macumba provided the mystical means to do so.

Spiritism, then, catered to the upper white class whose beliefs in spirits and the ability to communicate with them was ignored by the Catholic Church. They affiliated with a spiritual world that was more accessible than the distant Christian God, Jesus, and the saints. In the mid-nineteenth century, a man by the name of Léon-Dénizarth-Hippolyte Rivail, known by his pseudonym Allan Kardec, became interested in a phenomenon that was sweeping Europe at the time. It was called “table turning” (Kardec 1989; Kardec 1996), and it was the explanation of the movement of objects by unknown forces. Kardec became interested in the mediumistic abilities of two girls, daughters of a friend, who were observed speaking to spirits. Kardec noticed that, whenever he was present, the tone of the encounters would change and the spirits would address some serious topics. After inquiring about the change, the spirits told him that they were from “a higher order” and came especially for him (Kardec 1989; Kardec 1996). In the years that followed, he produced several books that guided the Europeans and the Euro-Brazilian upper class to redefine their beliefs in life, death, and reincarnation. Mediums were found and nurtured through formal education which eventually produced some Brazilian national heroes like Chico Xavier who wrote multiple books as his personal spirit dictated in his ear (Xavier and Luiz 1944).

Rather than concentrating on the Catholic mission for rewards after death, Spiritism addressed the metaphysical involvement of spirits in the daily lives of people and answered their questions about misfortune in their present life. They provided
answers as to why someone was vulnerable to misfortune when they had been living a faithful life by church standards. The doctrine of Spiritism preached that reincarnation and the actions of past lives caused negative events to happen in this life. Misfortune occurred when spirits held grudges and exacted revenge on their reincarnated adversaries in the material world by causing spiritual imbalances (Rafael, personal communication, June 2014). It brought the causes of hardship into a tangible space where they could be addressed and resolved, thus restoring the person’s present life back in balance.

I attended a Spiritist ceremony. Isa, a woman who participated in both Spiritist and Umbanda ceremonies at the same terreiro, was called up to sit at the “white table.” Apparently, all the bad luck that she had in her present life was attributed to a spirit who was associated with her husband from a past life. The previous husband and the spirit were, needless to say, not on good terms, and he was tormenting Isa’s family as revenge. The Spiritist leader, Rafael, coaxed the spirit to possess a medium so an intervention could occur. In a very therapeutic voice, Rafael spoke to the spirit and reasoned with him. He conveyed to the vengeful spirit that his own mother, also a spirit, was disappointed with his vindictive behavior. The medium/spirit began sobbing at the presence of his mother and said that he would leave the family alone.

When not solving problems between the spiritual and material worlds, Spiritism draws a higher class of spirits for educational purposes. Bourgeoisie spirits incorporate mediums that are chosen and commissioned (Lewis 2003) in order to teach devotees about the afterlife, worldly expectations, morals, and values that draw from Christianity

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22 White in this sense is associated with purity and goodness. Qualities that are directly linked to Jesus (in Spiritism) and Oxalá (in Umbanda and Candomblé)
and Hinduism. According to anthropologist Lindsay Hale (2009), the spirits that were present at Spiritism séances were educated men and women from civilized nations and even historical figures like “Victor Hugo and Benjamin Franklin.” Spiritists commune “with the shades of eminent scientists, statesmen, physicians, philosophers, and other paragons of elite culture” excluding “the spirits of plantation slaves, Indians, backwoodsmen, streetwalkers, and rogues—the ancestors of the common people” (Hale 1997:394). These “lesser” spirits were treated almost like a casualty of opening the door to the spiritual world.

It follows that the increasing legitimacy of these religions within the Brazilian religious scene left a niche that needed to be filled: (1) The people who could not identify with the strictly African identity of Candomblé because of their mixed heritage and their self-identity as “Brazilians” rather than Afro-Brazilians; (2) The elitism demonstrated by people of Spiritism that spiritually mimics the class division that Brazilians suffer on a daily basis; (3) The adherents of Macumba and their propensity use the spirits for vengeful means. While adherents of Macumba do incorporate many of the same spirits found in Umbanda, their use for malevolence distinguishes them from the spirits who are trying to elevate their spiritual status by helping people in the material world.

Based on the religious market of exclusion, the need for a more inclusive religion such as Umbanda came to fill that niche. The origin of Umbanda as a Brazilian religion is fairly recent, only having appeared in the early twentieth century in Rio de Janeiro, then spreading to other urban centers where historical influences would create distinct variations within the Afro-Brazilian cosmos. The stories that surround the origin of
Umbanda tend to vary in detail, but the most established version, according to anthropologist Diana Brown (1986) and confirmed by my collaborator Mago, involved a young man by the name Zélio de Moraes in the town of Niterói, Brazil across the bay from Rio de Janeiro.

In the 1920s, he became paralyzed for reasons unknown. Zélio’s father belonged to a Spiritist church and tried countless spiritual and medical interventions to heal his son. Finally, he was brought to the Federação Espírita Brasileira (Brazilian Spiritist Federation) where Zélio received a vision:

He was to be the founder of a new religion, a true Brazilian religion dedicated to the worship and propitiation of Brazilian spirits: Caboclos (spirits of Brazilian Indians) and Pretos Velhos (spirits of Africans enslaved in Brazil). This new religion would restore these spirits to the positions of respect and veneration denied them by Kardecists. [Brown 1986:39]

Miraculously, he was cured, and with spiritual guidance from an encantado called Caboclo das Sete Encruzilhadas (Indian of the seven crossroads), Zélio developed the religion of Umbanda specifically for the spirits and the people excluded from Candomblé and Spiritism as a result of their lower status. Even though their human life-stories harken back to a difficult yet romanticized time, they reproduce the hardships of contemporary Brazilian life in the favelas. Through Umbanda, the spirits who wished to evolve to a higher spiritual plane of existence could redeem themselves through acts of charity, and mediums could contribute to their personal spiritual evolution by practicing karma and providing charitable services through their mediumship. For Bastide, the creation of
Umbanda represented the pressures of prestige and class as well as the need for acceptance in a society of exclusion. Umbanda answered:

…the needs of the new mentality of the more highly developed black, socially on the rise who realized that macumba lowered him in the eyes of the whites but who was nevertheless reluctant to abandon his African tradition altogether. Umbanda represents an upgrading of Macumba through Spiritism. [Bastide 1978:319]

Umbandistas recognized the need for inclusion and acceptance and created a religion that made up for its absence in the highly stratified society. They continue to venerate the Orixás of their African heritage and also fulfill the expectations of a society that aspires to elitism by receiving European spirits respected in Spiritism. In addition, they incorporate spirits that are unique to Brazil and help them identify as legitimate members of the multicultural Brazilian society.

The Brazilian identity is exemplified in the myths of three groups of spirits: (1) The Pretos Velhos are spirits that once lived as Brazilian slaves stolen from West Africa and made to live in unspeakable conditions. They are often portrayed as old, broken down, and battered from their life experiences. They represent the strength to endure and the ability to rise above one’s position in life to forgive and to forget. In contrast, they also represent black resistance and the struggles for freedom even if it means death; (2) The Caboclos represent warriors who rely on their knowledge of the environment to survive. They do not need the support of the government in order to live because of what nature can provide. Caboclos also represent wonder, adventure, and freedom to roam the world; (3) finally the Exús while seemingly immoral, represent the Brazilian ability to negotiate corruption and survive in an unfair world based on discrimination and
oppression. While seen as solitary creatures of the night, they often roam the streets protecting their families which are loosely defined as anyone fighting the corrupt system.

It is noteworthy that the Umbanda terreiros vary regionally as well as locally which contributes to multiple representations of a single encantado. Still, there are many traits that are uniform across the communities. Representations are often formed in binary opposites which together form the most desireable qualities of the spiritual group. For example, Caboclos, the spirits of dead Indians, tend to be personified as raucous and fun-loving but also extremely knowledgeable about natural healing. The same can be said for a spirit group called Pretos Velhos who represent the submissive black slave or the rebellious “heroic warrior that fought against the slave traders” (L. Hale 2009:86). Pretos Velhos, Caboclos, and the Exús, will now be discussed in detail.

Historical processes and socio-cultural structures directly affected the spirit pantheon worshiped by contemporary Umbandistas today (Leacock and Leacock 1972). Due to the various types of labor used during the colonization of Brazil, slaves were employed depending on the economic agenda of a particular region. African slaves tended to be more concentrated in areas that relied on agriculture, mining, and major port cities found in the states of Bahia, Pernambuco, and the Southeast in Rio de Janeiro (Bastide 1978). Since these areas were where the majority of slave labor existed, the corresponding Umbanda spirit pantheon directly relates to these historical processes. They worship spirits called Pretos Velhos that represent Brazilian slaves in two different lights. The first is the submissive slave whose lendas (stories) recount the moral battle
raging between lashing out against brutal treatment or being able to rise above it. The second is the rebellious slave who fought for freedom and often died as a result.

**Myths of the Pretos Velhos**

The following are two very popular myths retold by anthropologist Lindsay Hale (2009). The myth of Anastácia is a common myth that can be found in Umbanda discourse as well as in Catholic discourse. According to John Burdick (1998), Anastácia’s story is respected by people from all walks of life. Her strength, sacrifice, and ability to forgive are meaningful to the Afro-Brazilian population while her emphasis on racial harmony has become attractive to contemporary, white, middle class, Christians. Hale recorded the story during an interview with a spirit named Congo King. The spirit wanted him to understand why stories of Pretos Velhos are important cultural heroes in contemporary society.

(Figure 1) Somewhere in Africa, a blue-eyed girl is born. In some tellings she is a princess, in at least one a daughter of the Orixás. One day she is visited by an Orixá, who bestows on her the mission of bringing the power of their religion to the New World, where her people suffer in slavery. Soon enough, the young woman is captured and sold into slavery, ending up on a plantation in Brazil.
Beautiful as she is, she becomes the object of her master’s sexual obsession. He puts her to work in the manor house, close at hand and far from the backbreaking labor in the fields. She refuses his advances, however, and lust turns to vengeance; he sends her to the slave quarters, to live out her years working in the fields. (In one version, the master takes out his frustrations by allowing his white visitors to rape Anastácia, resulting in numerous blue-eyed offspring of various shades, certainly a biting metaphorical take on the myth of Brazilian racial democracy). The master’s wife, jealous of Anastácia, tells some lies, and the master, by now thoroughly corrupted by his own power and cruelty, decides to teach Anastácia a final lesson. He has her muzzled in iron. Time goes by.

Anastácia uses the powers given to her by the Orixás to cure and comfort her people in the slave quarters. But eventually the cuts and gouges and abrasions from the muzzle lead to gangrene. As Anastácia agonizes, the master’s young son takes sick. Dying, he is brought to Anastácia by his parents, who beg her forgiveness and her healing touch. Anastácia cures the boy, dying herself in the process. The master and his wife repent and seek redemption for their cruelty through a life of good works and charity. [Hale 2009:81-82]

Beginning with the structural element of sexuality, the first line “[s]omewhere in Africa a blue-eyed girl is born” (Hale 2009:81, emphasis added), demonstrates that she is anomalous to a West African phenotype which makes her exotic and contributed to a common dichotomy found with the presence of female slaves. Their masters were often torn between their sexual attraction to an exotic beauty and the social construction of racial discrimination and master/slave sexual relations that were viewed as detrimental to the purity of the white race (Freyre 1956). Anastácia’s beauty even rivals the concept of European beauty when the master desires her more that he does his own wife. As a result, the master’s wife “tells lies” about Anastácia in order to strip her of her beauty. Reeling from her rejection, the master forces Anastácia to live her life in the slave quarters while
wearing a muzzle. The muzzle covers up her alluring beauty, and prevents her from ruining the family’s reputation.

Power and resistance is also a prevalent theme, especially on behalf of Anastácia. Even though she is captured and sold into slavery, the story leads the reader to believe that enslavement was exactly what Anastácia intended. Upon her arrival in Brazil, her position as a slave should have been submissive. In order to position herself in the slave quarters so she could utilize the powers given to her by the Orixás, she resists the advances of the master. In the last scene, she is again in the position of power. She has the ability to deny treatment to the boy, but she chooses to resist—what I can only imagine are feelings of resentment and revenge—and forgives the family and heals the child dying in his place.

Forgiveness is a strong component of the religious structures found in the story. Even though forgiveness is central to Catholicism, I argue that, in this situation, it is a demonstration of Afro-Brazilian religiosity and their practice of karma. Anastácia’s inner strength, self-sacrifice, and ability to overlook the cruelty of the master and his wife demonstrate proper behavior expected of members of Orixá cults in West Africa and in Afro-Brazilian religions today (Brown 1986). However, does Anastácia truly forgive the family for their cruelty or is there another motive behind her gracious act? Forgiveness is a very powerful display of agency. It can be demonstrated through speech and through acts of forgiveness, but what does this truly do for the person doing the forgiving? In Anastácia’s case, it inverts the relationship between master and slave so that all the power
rests with Anastácia. In the end, her death places her morally above the master and his family for eternity.

Next, I will examine the theme of religious origin and the acceptance of the Orixás on Brazilian soil. The West African religious motifs in the beginning of the story demonstrate that Anastácia’s encounter with an Orixá proves that the Orixá cults had been made spiritually tangible to Afro-Brazilians. The Orixás sent a messenger, Anastácia, who was incorporated with their powers to heal and created a seamless connection of religiosity from the Old World to the New World. Earlier scholars have remarked about the durability of African religion and therefore focus on “survivals” of ideology as pure expressions of belief untainted by colonialism (Bastide 1978; Capone 2010). They attribute renewed memory and identity to the sheer numbers of slaves and the constant influx of new generations from Africa (Bastide 1978). What they have not acknowledged is the significance of Anastácia as an origin myth for African beliefs and their rightful place on Brazilian soil.

The myth of Father John is another lenda explaining how African religion survived slavery and came to flourish in Brazil. This time, however, religion is made tangible through a root which embodies the religion of his homeland and survives against all odds, an implied comparison to the veracity of slavery. Although Hale does not specify who told him the myth, he does state that there are many stories available with inconsistent details about Father John’s life. However, the main theme of the story is that he is strong and resilient. Even though most representations of Pretos Velhos in Umbanda
terreiros are portrayed as broken down elderly men and women, Hale states that Father John is portrayed as strong, driven, and powerful.

(Figure 2) Father John was a powerful man in Africa. Some stories portray him as a heroic warrior who fought against the slave traders; one even tells that he was never enslaved at all, but died fighting for his land and freedom. In other accounts, though, he is captured. Besides being a warrior, Father John was a powerful sorcerer (if we can strip away from that word the connotations of evil), with deep knowledge of the ways of spirits and plants. As the slavers took him away, he managed somehow to hide on his person the root of a plant embodying the knowledge and power of his religion. He kept it hidden through the passage and through his years of captivity until, one day—in some versions he leads a slave revolt, in others he just escapes alone—he and his root are free again, fleeing and hiding out in the wooded mountains around Rio. Eventually, of course, the slave hunters and their dogs track him down. As they close in on him, he scratches a hole in the cold ground with his bare hands and buries his root. In one version, they tie him to the trunk of a great tree. As the whip comes down, he gives a mighty thrust and the great tree and Father John launch into the heavens. In other versions, less ballistic and more poignant, they just beat him to death. But in either case, Father John prevails in the ultimate sense, because he manages to plant his root, from which his religion could sprout anew in Brazilian soil. [Hale 2009:86]

The general theme expressed in Father John’s story is one of resistance, sacrifice, and male
virility. He fights off slave traders in Africa where he is a “powerful” and “heroic” man. Even though he is captured, he risks hiding the root of a plant on his person resisting the submissiveness of captivity by holding onto illegal contraband throughout his voyage and subsequent slavery in Brazil. The root is symbolic. First, it represents Africa, and even though he was forced from his home, he will always carry it with him. Secondly, the root represents his religion. Hiding it on his person references the fact that slaves had to hide their religion by superimposing the images of Catholic saints over their idols. It is important to note that he seemed to be driven to establish his religion on Brazilian soil so his fellow people could benefit from it. Since the Orixás are associated with physical features like rivers, oceans, and African villages, the root is also a physical representation of Africa and Father John’s religion. As he replants it, he creates the geographical connection between the Old World and the New World.

His next act of resistance is his escape from the plantation and his seclusion in the mountains. At this point in history, the mountains represent the frontier, the unexplored wild where only hunters would venture. He is resisting “white” civilization and all the horrors it entails. Eventually, he is hunted down like an animal, but somehow, he finds time to bury his root before the hunters capture him and tie him to a tree. In his last act of resistance and sacrifice, he uproots the tree, and with a “mighty thrust,” launches himself and his tree into the heavens. This is the ultimate example of his spiritual powers, his attachment to his religion and its growth into a “great tree,” and his virility.

In the myth, we find that Father John is a very powerful man with more spiritual qualities than human. It is also important to note that Father John remains a solitary
character throughout the story until Hale interjects with alternate versions. “In some versions, he leads a slave revolt, in others he just escapes alone” (Hale 2009:86). Hale’s comments are an example of the adaptability of Afro-Brazilian myths to conform to individual situations. It is highly unlikely that Father John spent years in the company of other slaves and made no emotional connections with anyone; perhaps he is a spirit who inhabits the body of a human when the Orixás need to fulfill the mission of geographically locating West African beliefs in Brazil. Furthermore, the physical representation of the root/religion survives weeks of being at sea and years of remaining outside of soil. This is an impractical theory unless magic is involved. We already know that in this version he is a sorcerer. Lastly, his final act was to launch himself and the great tree into the heavens before the body he has possessed could be maimed and killed. Hale complicates the story by adding, “[i]n other versions, less ballistic and more poignant, they just beat him to death” (Hale 2009:86). This is a human ending to a heroic figure.

While not overwhelmingly obvious as in Anastácia’s story, sexuality in Father John’s story is prolific with symbols of male virility. The great tree is a phallic symbol emphasized by his “mighty thrust” into the heavens. The root could be interpreted as his seed, and if his seed is rooted in Brazilian soil, then he has a right to claim an identity as something other than a slave—he becomes an ancestor to Brazilians. His act of symbolically impregnating Brazil changes the strict African beliefs into a Brazilian hybrid that was able to grow and prosper in its new environment. Just as Freyre commented that the mixed race offspring of European and African sexual relations
contributed to the strength of the Brazilian people in the harsh tropical environment (Freyre 1956), the mixture of slaves and Orixás become uniquely Brazilian in the religion of Umbanda and the myths of the Pretos Velhos.

Preto Velho myths are widespread, but they are more significant in areas where African slavery had a large presence. In the North, where the towns and cities were structured on the processing and exportation of forest resources, there is a stronger presence of a spirit group called Caboclos or urbanized Indians.

**Myths of the Caboclos**

The Caboclos are a fascinating yet confusing group to understand because they represent the Brazilian identity in many ways. The Amazonian forests were almost impenetrable and perceived as dangerous by Europeans for fear of Indian attacks. However, extractivist enterprises relied heavily on indigenous labor to collect forest products such as lumber, nuts, and medicines, and to provide river transportation to the export centers like the city of Belém (Cohen 2007). Their contributions to Brazil’s industrial success were crucial. Still, they were considered backwards and primitive. For this reason, the Catholic Church deemed it best not to enslave the Indians in favor of their conversion. Catholic missions were set up and conscripted Indian labor under the guise of Christianizing by “rescuing” their souls. Meanwhile, the price of African slaves had risen and the poorer towns located in the Amazon region could not afford to buy African slaves in the numbers that would make their businesses lucrative. Their needs overrode those of the church and the enslavement of Indians proceeded, wresting them from the hands of mission enterprises. The strength of the Catholic Church became a barrier to the colony’s
success. The Portuguese crown decided to regain some of its power in its colony by ousting the Jesuits in 1767 (Dussel 1981:60). On the surface, this policy would “emancipate” the Indian but leave the native Amazonian prey to the money hungry Crown and colonists. Consequently, these actions led to the second contribution to the Indian-Brazilian identity, the environment, and the Indian’s propensity to wander.

Many of the indigenous groups in the area had a nomadic subsistence strategy and an egalitarian political structure (Bastide 1978; Freyre 1956). Therefore, the autocratic structure of slavery was difficult for them to comprehend. They were often characterized as “lazy, lacking in ambition, content to live like an animal rather than exert himself” (Wagley and Miller 1976: 214). The colonists believed that the Indian slave would wander into the forests in order to participate in orgies (Wagley and Miller 1976) only to return weeks, months, or years later. The indigenous lifestyle did not rely on the colonial structure to survive, and therefore, made it problematic to keeping Indian slaves tied to a single location. These two reasons led the African slaves to characterize the Indians/Caboclos as resilient and knowledgeable about their environment to be able to live off the land while savvy enough to resist slavery and conversion. They admired their higher position in society, authorized by the church, and witnessed by the slave master’s frustration at their ungoverned behavior.

The meaning of the term Caboclo has changed over the years and can be applied to many groups of people. The most popular definition is a “detribalized” and “urbanized” Indian followed by a person who lives in the countryside. Jim Wafer (1991) argues that the word probably derived from the “Tupi word kari’boka meaning ‘deriving
from the white” implying that Caboclos are the mestizo creation of Indian and European sexual relations.

To further confuse things, the Caboclo group can also represent people from all over the world. For example, the spirit Herondina was a female warrior spirit from Rome who lived during the time of the Christian persecution (Matenta 2012), but she is also known as a Turkish princess along with her sisters Mariana (Enne 2010) and Jarina (Lara, personal communication, June 2014). They are the noble daughters of famed Portuguese King, Sebastian known for his heroic deeds and tragic death while leading a battle in Morocco in 1578. His death left the Portuguese throne without an heir (MacKay 2012). These sisters are known as enchanted encantadas who did not die but somehow transitioned to the spiritual world without the pain and suffering of death (Lara, personal communication, June 2014).

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23 After King Sebastian’s death and subsequent Spanish rule over Portugal, many small sects developed in Portugal and Brazil under the name Sebastianism, immortalizing his name and legacy. King Sebastian’s return threatened King Philip’s II political control and thus became a symbol of hope for the Portuguese people. The movement slowly degenerated into a “pseudo-religious cult” (Brooks 1964).
Additionally, the Caboclo line incorporates the spirits of sailors, cowboys, male and female warriors, healers, and backwoodsmen who represent all economic classes and races (Figure 3). This contributes to the image of the Caboclo line as a universal brotherhood, but also a line that cannot be restricted to a systematic classification of mythological stories like that of Anastácia and Father John. Instead, they represent a plethora of personalities and stories that change from one terreiro to another.

[They have] a strong magnetic charge that pushes us to go ahead, to face obstacles with courage and determination. Because Caboclo is an archetype that is brave, simple, honest, fair and aligned with the forces of Mother Nature the courageous warrior. By their mere presence among us, when incorporated in their mediums, they magnetize us with these strong energies and encourage us to achieve our goals. They are “hunters” that will seek and teach us to seek what is best for our evolution. [Scritori and Conti 2013]\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{24} Sua forte carga magnética nos impulsiona a ir em frente, a enfrentar os obstáculos com coragem e determinação. Porque Caboclo é o Arquétipo do guerreiro corajoso, valente, simples, honrado, justo e harmonizado com as Forças da Mãe Natureza. Pela simples presença entre nós, quando incorporados em
Even though the story of Herondina tells us that she is foreign to Brazil, she is, nevertheless, portrayed in images with bows and arrows and befriending a jaguar, the epitome of a Brazilian Cabocla (Figure 4).

Mariana was very popular in the terreiro where I conducted my fieldwork. She was one of the encantadas to incorporate the Pai de Santo. However, she was completely unknown by Mago, my collaborator in Rio de Janeiro, where they concentrate more on the worship of Pretos Velhos and Exús. The Afro-Brazilian religions of northeast and northern Brazil tend to personify the lives of the people in the forests, on the rivers, and the sea due to their historic influence in the daily lives of their descendents. The spirits from the Preto Velho line and the Exú line embody the urban lifestyle found more in the southern states.

**Myths of the Exús**

Of all the spirits in the Umbanda pantheon none are more obscure than the familial line of Exús. The group is not to be confused with the single Orixá Exú entity who in Candomblé is the messenger to the gods. Bastide (1978:330) explains that there are two types of Exús: Some Exús are the “personifications of the fluids of nature linked to the major Orixás as their personal servants; and Exús who are the protectors of individuals.” The Exús that represent the forces of nature are usually used in Macumba...
for their power and abilities to bring fortune, fame, and occasionally ill-will. However, the protectors represent the *povo de rua* (people of the street) and are the soul of the Brazilian identity:

This familiar Exú is the vegetable or animal soul, the instinctive part of our being, indispensable to our survival—what the Umbandistas call the “pagan soul.”

Here…the function of Umbanda is “to train and purify (this soul) by transforming it into a luminous body or, as Saint Paul put it, by changing animal man, the son of earth, into spiritual man, the adopted son of God.” [cited in Bastide 1978: 331]

They represent more completely the contemporary urban Brazilian identity and are nationally recognized in Umbanda terreiros, more so than any other spirit group. For men, the spirits found in the line of Exús are suave, *malandros* (rogues), with silver tongues (Hayes 2011). From a contemporary perspective, their morals are questionable, but when placed in context of time and space, the Exús can be considered admirable due to their ability to survive in an environment that favored corruption and oppression.

The following lenda has been pieced together from several stories that were recounted to me through written correspondence, and found on websites dedicated to what is certainly Umbanda’s most infamous and beloved Exú spirit. He has been depicted in a Brazilian opera, a character in many films, and during Walt Disney’s visit to Rio in the 1940s, he became the

*Figure 5: Zé Carioca, created by Walt Disney 1942*
inspiration for Zé Carioca, a cartoon parrot in a white cotton suit (Figure 5) (Cosgrove 2013).

Zé Pilintra is a spirit that is associated with the internal migrations from the North and Northeast to the southern cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo (Levine and Crocitti 1999). In the northern religion of Catimbó, he is considered to be the doctor of the poor, advocate of the underdog, and belongs to the malandragem line (rogue line or people of the street). In Umbanda, he belongs to the line of Exús. In both religions, he is very much respected. He is the protector of bars, gambling sites, and gutters, but he is not aligned with entities of a negative nature. He is invoked when his followers need help with domestic issues, business, and financial problems. Zé Pilintra also preaches religious tolerance, without which man would live in constant wars.

He grew up parentless sleeping on the docks, hustling for money, and running errands for the prostitutes. Some say he grew up to be a womanizer, but others argue that he is a great protector of women whom he treated like queens. He was able to evade the police who have a long history in Rio as being corrupt.

He is associated with the right side of spiritual evolution when he wears his recognizable white cotton suit with a red tie, white fedora with a red band, and shiny patent leather shoes; he is associated with the left side of spiritual evolution when he wears a black suit with a red tie, black fedora with a red band, and black patent leather shoes.

As for his death, authors disagree on how this happened. It is stated that he could have been murdered by a woman, an old rival, or another equally dangerous rogue. However, the consensus among all these hypotheses is that he was attacked from behind because, if he was attacked face to face, legend says Zé Pilintra was unbeatable with a knife. [Marengo 2010; Mehta 2014; Mago, personal communication, July 2014]
Zé Pilintra has always been a character that has confused me. His association with deviance made me question, more than once, how a malandro type spirit could become a hero. I once asked Mago if Zé Pilintra was stuck in a kind of spiritual limbo waiting to be reincarnated back to earth so he could try again to live a “good” life. He disagreed with me completely, saying that:

**Mago:** Zé Pilintra was not stuck in the spiritual plane. He had reached a level of development on earth where he could go no further. He was called upon to perform charitable work as an auxiliary spirit where he could continue to work on his spiritual evolution. Auxiliary spirits vibrate very close to earth and therefore he is still attracted to the earthly vices he left behind. So he is always associated as a malandro, gambler, and a drunk etc., but his followers never forget that he has a great light and he is a great defender in the battles against evil. [Mago, personal communication, July 2014]

Once I realized that the cultural concepts of good and bad are unique to the Brazilian situation, I began to understand that Zé Pilintra was a warrior against corruption. The structures of good and evil that we have in the United States do not apply to the Brazilian reality. Generally speaking, North Americans are raised to trust authority and assume that government officials are working for the best interests of the people. 25 In Brazil,

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25 Although the concept of trust for the authorities has been challenged lately within the American public, due to cases of police brutality resulting in the deaths of teenager Michael Brown, and a separate incident
positions of authority can often be gained through guile and corruption. Police officers are not well remunerated and often supplement their income by working for drug traffickers (Hayes 2011). Malandros, then, can be seen as the embodiment of the gray area. They use trickery to navigate life for purposes of love and survival, and they resist the trickery used by the corrupt elite.

In my experience with Umbanda ceremonies, Zé Pilintra, along with various complementary manifestations, is the most prominent spirit for men to incorporate. His ability to manipulate his way through life and succeed in most situations is admirable to men who are undermined by authority in their daily lives. Women, on the other hand, incorporate spirits that can be said to be the female counterparts to Zé Pilintra. Pombagiras are women of the street who are the exact opposite of the domestic woman in Brazilian society. A popular spirit is named Maria Mulambo, and she was the main spirit incorporated by the medium Nazaré in the ethnography written by Kelly Hayes (2011). While the domestic Brazilian woman is confined to the home as wife and mother, Pombagiras roam the streets of the cities enjoying festas (parties) and sexual liaisons. She turns the meek and submissive female into an unforgettable force. In a brief statement by the encantada who was incorporating Nazaré at the time of Hayes research, she stated:

I, Maria Molombo, am a double-edged sword. I work for good and ill. If you deserve it, I will fuck up your life. If you don’t, I cannot affect you. [Maria Mulambo as embodied by Nazaré, Hayes 2011:158]

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involving a family man named Eric Garner. Both cases resulted in the grand jury decision not to indict the officers.
In ceremonies, her presence is indicated by a loud cackle and the overtly alluring behavior of the medium. She takes over the party and demands attention. She greets everyone present with a strong hug and familiar blessings. Like Zé Pilintra, she is well loved and respected.

**Spirits and their Initiates**

The group of spirits to whom I now turn may fall under the line of Exús or the line of Caboclos. They may also be considered povo de rua depending on the views of the terreiro and the familial lines to which they are devoted. *Ciganos* (gypsies) are spirits that represent a novice initiate’s first forays into mediumship. In the terreiro I visited, they were not associated with any spirit in particular such as Maria Mulambo or Zé Pilintra. Rather, they tended to be spirits without a name or only recognized by the medium as representing a particular type of personality. This aspect can be very telling of a medium and the types of spiritual qualities that emerge from a spirit incorporation.

If a medium is incorporated by an identifiable spirit, the personality should elicit a prescribed behavior that is recognizable as that particular spirit, whether or not the spirit is embodying a novice or advanced medium. However, since some spirits are so recognizable, any type of behavior that is uncharacteristic will be a telltale sign of a false trance (Cohen 2007; Wafer 1991) and potentially place the legitimacy of the terreiro in jeopardy (Figure 7).
There is a steep learning process for initiates to properly engage in receiving a spirit. Initiates must learn the right movements, songs, signs, and behaviors in order to appropriately receive the spirit (Brown 1986). For example, learning how to drive a car is not simply a matter of getting behind a steering wheel. Beginners are often very erratic and may collide into obstacles; however, as we learn the movements and the rules of driving, we become advanced in our knowledge and skills. This analogy can be applied to novice mediums and the incorporation of ciganos (Figure 8).

When a spirit is not named or identified with a famous myth, then the spirit becomes a very personal expression of the person they incorporate. In essence, the initiates are the possessors of a knowledge to which only they are privy. They hold the secret of their spirit’s personality and choose what, how, and to whom they reveal their characteristics; the possession of a secret is a possession of power. As noted by Johnson (2002:2), “secrecy can be as useful to those who would resist authority as to those who seek to impose it.” Essentially, I argue that, when an initiate begins their first forays into spirit communication, they are trying to resist authority: the authority of their parents, teachers, employers, and whoever else may threaten their individuality. Their status as wide-eyed neophytes gives them their first taste of power. As time moves on, more and
more secrets are revealed to the novices allowing them to have privileged spiritual knowledge that will reconcile their behavior, or their spirit’s behavior, with recognized archetypes in the Umbanda pantheon. In doing so, they will lose some individual power but gain the power of the community which is stronger, stands in solidarity, and resists oppression as a group.

During my fieldwork when I asked the initiates if their cigano spirits had names and origins, they most often replied with a shrug and a non-committal response. However, one woman, Clara, very proudly said that her cigana (female cigano) was from Spain, and she spoke Spanish instead of Portuguese. This is why she knew very little about her life, and no one could communicate with her when she was incorporated. She spent the entire ceremony smiling and dancing like a Spanish gypsy who was enticing her audience to honor her with gold coins. One night I invited a friend to serve as interpreter. Born in Spain, she taught Spanish at the local college. When Clara became incorporated by her Spanish cigana, my interpreter tried to engage her in a conversation but was unsuccessful. The spirit and the medium were too interested in focusing on their movements to participate in a conversation. The secret of the Spanish

Figure 8: An initiate incorporated by a cigana. (Photo by Erin Frias 2014)
cigana was not be revealed that night.

In some ways, the demonstration of a lack of control is also a way for the initiates to test the support of the community and entrust their vulnerable state to their fellow initiates. Often when initiates became incorporated by a spirit, they flailed about throwing themselves into the crowd or falling straight to the cement floor (Brown 1986). It was not uncommon for a medium to end up in the lap of an audience member (Leacock and Leacock 1972). However, there were usually a number of members who resisted incorporation in order to act as guardians to the physical bodies of the novice mediums.

During a ceremony, the members would gather in a circle, sing, clap, and move from side to side in ritualized steps. The center of the floor was left open. Eventually, the incorporation of initiates and mediums would fill the center with men and women who became mounted by their spirits in a violent manner. The formation of the ritual members in a circle prevented the initiates and the audience members from getting hurt. When an initiate spun out of control and threatened the safe space of the audience, the unincorporated members closed the gap and redirected the initiate back into the middle of the circle. The protective actions of the group strengthened the bonds of their community.
As the initiates became more educated on the correct behavior of the spirits, their movements became more controlled and their souls were further removed from the episode. This was demonstrated by their increased threshold of pain that proved the presence of a supernatural. One man donned a hat like Zé Pilintra and walked around with his feet arched in a cramped position for approximately three hours (Figure 9). Another woman asked people for a cigarette, ripped off the filter, and when finished smoking, extinguished the lit cigarette on her tongue. It was reported that Dr. Nina-Rodrigues performed experiments with priestesses during incorporation: “He stuck pins into those priestesses when they were dancing, and they never felt the pain. He passed objects before their eyes, and the pupils never focused” (Landes 1947:75).

The spirit groups examined above are the three most recognized spirit lineages in Umbanda. Yet, they only form a part of an extensive hierarchy of spirits and deities found in Afro-Brazilian religions across the country. They are also the spirit groups that are regarded as “slaves” to the Orixás in Candomblé (Hayes 2011), disregarded as “low spirits” in Spiritism (Hale 2009), and the “quintessence of evil” in Pentecostalism (Brown 1986).

To reiterate, the most popular spirits recognized in the location of my fieldwork were: Zé Pilintra and other male spirits of the malandro category, Herondina and her two sisters (Mariana and Jarina), Simbamba, a
Caboclo from the Northern religion of Catimbó, Caboclos Rompe Mato, Jurema, various Ciganos and Ciganas, and a plant specialist from Minas Gerais referred to as Dona Mineira. Although these spirits represent the majority of what I witnessed, they are in no way a complete list. One medium can incorporate several spirits, but their strongest encantados are present most of the time.

As it stands, the hierarchy of the spirits in the terreiro where I conducted my research is eclectic. Spirits may be recognized as belonging to one lineage by one person and another lineage by another person. They may even be recognized as coming from a different religion altogether. According to Diana Brown, the formal hierarchy of spirits is not common knowledge and does not reflect the expertise of the laity. She states:

The lay interpretation transforms the formal cosmos in two important ways: first, it shifts the focus of attention from the most powerful spiritual personages to the more accessible ones, and second, it ignores the formal ranking system and recognizes only major status differences. [Brown 1986:59]

She then goes on to say that the Orixás and the Catholic saints are figures that are “beyond the point of returning to earth,” closest in proximity to God, and “distant from human activity” (Brown 1986) therefore, the encantados are more accessible to the common people.

The collapsing of the formal hierarchy by the laity is an interesting observation. It demonstrates the importance of equality within the hierarchy of the terreiro that may not be present in their day to day lives. Equality was a term that was restated on numerous occasions by my collaborator, Gabriel. He wanted to make sure that I knew that, when
the spirits incorporated him, he was able to adjust his behavior and speech to match the level of his patient, thereby demonstrating that all were equally welcome to obtain advice from the spirits. Creating a more accessible cosmos where the human spirit will eventually belong, the encantados of Umbanda mirror the lives of the Brazilian identity.

Beginning with a description of the first ceremony I witnessed in June 2013, Chapter 4 is an examination of the environment of my Umbanda community. It is followed by a brief discussion of the city of Belém, Brazil, an analysis of the physical space of the terreiro, and an exploration of the community roles that make up the structure of the terreiro hierarchy. They are the patients, the ritual assistants, the novice initiates, the experienced mediums and the role of the Pai or Mãe de Santo in the creation of the terreiro as a religious family.
A Tenda de Pai Rompe Mato e Mãe Herondina: The Tent of Father Rompe Mato and Mother Herondina

Over the loud hum of conversation, a sharp ringing of the bell sounded the beginning of the ceremony. The Pai de Santo whom I will call “Pai Gota,” with his long purple gown and white pants, stood in front of a large, four tiered altar waiting for his congregation to surround him. It was hot and humid, but nothing would compare to the heat that would eventually pour out of the partially enclosed sacred space once the dancing and singing begun. It was like walking into an oven. The fans on the wall rattled at full speed but did little to ease the discomfort.

It was the beginning of June 2013 in Belém, Brazil, and I had been invited to attend an Umbanda ceremony. I had arrived with my friend and roommate, Rosie, about an hour before the ceremony began. She pointed to a long bench on one side of the room and told me that I could watch the ceremony from that location. She then disappeared into a back room to change into her ritual clothing. I squeezed in between two older women who spoke to me in Portuguese very rapidly. I answered with “não entendo Português, eu sou Americana” (I don’t understand Portuguese, I am an American), which became my standard utterance that summer.

After Pai Gota sounded the second bell, people took their positions in a half circle around the altar and recited an opening prayer. I stood with my palms facing upward
mimicking the other audience members. I endeavored to take in all the details, and commit them to memory.

The pyramid shaped altar was impressive. The top tier was reserved for Jesus and Mary; the second tier held statues of the three wise men and various Catholic saints who also stood in place of several of the West African Orixás. The third and fourth tiers were by far the most populated but also purposefully organized. The third tier demonstrated the terreiro’s most honored group of spirits—the Caboclos, including the mariners, boiadeiros (Brazilian cattlemen), and women with long blond hair who came from European mythology. In the middle was a statue of Saint George riding a white horse and impaling a dragon with his sword. In Umbanda and other Afro-Brazilian religions, he is referred to as Ogum the God of War, the head of the Caboclo line of spirits. He was a fierce warrior, hunter, and a symbol of Black resistance (Bastide 1978; Leacock and Leacock 1972). The last tier contained with what seemed like a mixture of statuettes: Caboclos, Pretos Velhos, crianças who represent the spirits of children who died prematurely, a Hindu goddess, ceramic snakes, long strands of beads, votive candles, and vases filled with plastic flowers. More importantly, the bottom tier held statues of the Orixás in their African form rather than their Catholic counterparts. Their placement on the last tier is by no means a reflection of low status. In fact, the fourth tier is the most accessible, and devotees pay their respects by touching their guardian spirits and saying prayers before and after the ceremony. Additionally, the bottom tier is the location of the prayer stone. It is a cold slab of marble where devotees place their foreheads and say prayers to Oxalá (Jesus) before leaving for the night.
Once the opening prayer was recited, Pai Gota began ringing the bell steadily and the devotees began to sing a song dedicated to the Caboclos; the vibrations from the bell and the singing are said to call the encantados down to earth where mediums make their bodies available for use. The congregation began moving back and forth, side to side in small steps while clapping along with the song, building the energy level. With my eyes riveted on the participants for any signs of spirit incorporation, I clapped with the congregation.

In Umbanda discourse, the mediums practice incorporation rather than possession; their will is to become embodied by a spirit for three purposes: (1) It allows the supernatural spirit to atone for past human behavior by helping humans with advice and magic, often called charity. This allows the spirit to elevate itself to a higher spiritual plane and either return to earth as a reincarnated soul or remain in the spirit world for the purpose of helping their human family (Hale 2009); (2) Letting the mediums perform charity for their community spreading the values of love, equality, compassion, and acceptance, which increases the likelihood that the reincarnation of their spirit in the future will be better positioned in society; (3) allowing the mediums to maintain a spiritual balance and assure that positive events will happen to them during their lifetimes through the protection of their encantados.

26 I hesitated to use the term magic here because it leads the reader to believe that what is performed is illusory. In fact, I use the term magic to include several actions that may be recommended by the spirit. First, the patient could be instructed to bathe, eat, drink, or smoke various mixtures of herbs to remedy their problem. Second, they have the option of seeking out a diviner who will tell them of their future. Third, the spirit may recommend making an offering, called an ebô, to the spirits. This is by no means an extensive list of options available to the patient.
As I watched for any signs of incorporation, I noticed that Pai Gota began to look stressed. He wiped the sweat from his bald head, rubbed his eyes, and shifted his weight back and forth on his feet. Within a few minutes, his persona began to change. He sang louder and with more confidence. He removed his purple gown and donned a thick string of beads. An assistant placed a black felt fedora on his head and a mug of beer in his hand—he was now Zé Pilintra, a much loved character in Brazilian folklore (Figure 10). A cigarette was placed in between the fingers of his other hand, and he began to circle around the room greeting people like long lost friends. The clapping and singing continued. Soon shouts, groans, and cackles were heard above the crowd. More people succumbed to spirits.

The cackles are said to emanate from spirits called Pombagiras as they challenge the “dominant notions of female sexuality” (Hayes 2011). Some women began to twirl rapidly with their eyes rolled back into their heads and smiles on their faces. They were identified as ciganas (gypsies)(Figure 11), who are also sometimes categorized as men and women of the street, but in Belém, they are part of the Caboclos spirit group. Other mediums were hunched over with their hands clenched behind their backs and their toes

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27 On the first Wednesday of every month, the community pays tribute to the Exús by wearing the colors red and black, and on this occasion, Pai wore a necklace of these colors rather than the multi-colored strands of the Caboclos.
curled. Muscle cramps and complaints of back pain were common, I was told by a medium that it was not easy to incorporate a spirit; it could be painful and stressful. The metaphor they used to explain the process was “the spirit mounts the medium like a horse” (Landes 1947). The weight and the responsibility of the incorporation were unbearable. Mediums who regularly incorporate spirits are tasked with consultations, a community service designed to help people spiritually and psychologically. In the case of the Pai de Santo, his job also included the physical healing of illnesses and injuries that were believed to be spiritually caused.

Halfway through the ceremony, I found my way outside to get some fresh air. I was surprised to see many people milling around, talking in groups, and waiting for the spirits to arrive. They had set up chairs for the consultations in different parts of the courtyard. I watched from a few feet away while Pai Gota was listening to a man intently. Another medium, which was incorporated by a spirit from the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, lit some cotton covered with gunpowder. It sizzled and popped creating a mass of thick white smoke and bright yellow sparks. As if she were using soap in a shower, the medium instructed her patient to scrub the smoke over her body as if she was cleansing off the negative energy. The medium also took long drags of a cigarette and blew the smoke on the crown of her patient’s head while reciting prayers asking the spirits for protection.
A third medium hobbled into the courtyard in what seemed like a drunken stupor and limped on one leg. I came to understand later that he was incorporated by a drunkard spirit named Simbamba (Figure 12) from the northeastern Brazilian religion of Catimbó. He sat down on a low stool and was immediately joined by a person requesting help. He sipped on a sweet beer and smoked a cigarette while listening to her problems. The consultations were free of charge and often lasted late into the night or even until early morning. Eventually, the community dwindled down and the ceremony came to an end. Pai Gota initiated an ending prayer and the mediums, now without their possessing spirits, lined up to pay their respects to Oxalá.

My first ceremony was exhilarating, and when I returned home, I began focusing my research on Afro-Brazilian religions, and in particular, Umbanda. A year later in June 2014, I returned to the terreiro, not as a tourist, but a student researcher. My knowledge of the Portuguese language was stronger, but not perfect. I still needed to use translators to help me understand most interactions. My goal was to examine health and illness and understand the position that Umbanda played in the community healthcare system. While I was interested in the topic, I felt that one month was not enough time to examine the complexities of Brazilian healthcare. I quickly turned my attention to a more accessible topic which had an accumulation of theories and arguments that I could use to supplement the data I had been unable to collect. I centered on spirit possession,
reincarnation, and the spirit hierarchy. I felt that the spirits represented in the terreiro were the key to understanding the beliefs and practices of the faith community as well as underlying cultural structures influenced by socio-economic class, race, and gender.

What I expected to find and what I actually found were different. I expected more emphasis on the use of spirits for immediate solutions to problems that had been depicted in ethnographies. This was in contrast to the Catholic ideology of “investing in heaven” while living on earth (Bastide 1978:141). In order to help people living in the material world, they addressed spiritual suffering promptly. They also cured, prayed, danced, sang, and incorporated for reasons that could only be described as improving their souls for the afterlife through karma and life lessons that prepare the souls for reincarnation. Such a process I later came to understand was an evolution of acceptance—in the broadest sense.

The concept of “acceptance” in Umbanda (and by extension “imperfection”) is quite extensive. First of all, Umbanda was a religion that emerged in the early twentieth-century as a space created for those who were neither accepted into the strictly African derived religion of Candomblé nor the white upper class religion of Spiritism. The emphasis on community, healing through spirituality, and the relaxed initiation process allowed anyone in Brazilian society to join Umbanda for little to no cost. The societal composition of the terreiro includes many categories of people who would ordinarily be marginalized in the dominant society. For example, these include people with

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28 Since the beginning of the Brazilian Republic in 1889, the religions have become more and more racially, and economically diverse in their congregations. Yet the spirits in Candomblé and Spiritism remain segregated.
homosexual orientation, mixed racial categories, drug or alcohol addiction, and in general people, who are believed to live in sin according to Catholic ideology. Second, acceptance of the marginalized people of Brazil also means the acceptance of the marginalized spirits who are not acknowledged in the Candomblé or Spiritism pantheon. These include the Exús, Caboclos, Pretos Velhos and other “lesser” spirits with an unassigned or debated affiliation with a spirit category. Third, belonging to a mediumistic religion means that members accept that there are supernatural powers that can incorporate a human body in which both spirit and human work together to improve their status in life and death. The medium accepts that the spirit must use his or her body to perform charity. As a result of this relationship, the medium must also make offerings and perform acts of veneration for his or her spirits in return for their protection. Fourth, the medium must also accept that his or her mission in life is embodied in this symbiotic relationship. During my fieldwork, I was constantly reminded that mediums do not choose to become mediums; it is their destiny just like a doctor’s destiny is to cure disease and a lawyer’s destiny is to fight for justice. Mediums’ destinies are to provide the connection between the material world and the spiritual world through incorporation.

Finally, Umbanda is about the acceptance of imperfections. Souls are reincarnated into human bodies and placed on earth in order to learn lessons, but lessons are learned through making mistakes. In Brazil, the reality of leading a sin-free life is impractical and

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29 Mulatto is a term that describes the “mixed-blood” offspring of white Portuguese slave masters and African slaves. Mestiço is a term that describes the offspring of Europeans and Brazilian Indians, and Pardo is a term that represents the offspring of African slaves and Brazilian Indians. These popular categories as well as many others form the mixed race community. Although it is not as simple as combining A+B=C. Categories are also based on skin color, type of hair, and other phenotypic qualities (Byrne and Forline 1997) and even socio-economic status. A “Negro” can become a mulatto through money (Degler 1971).
unattainable. The majority of the population lives in poverty (World Bank 2012), and at times, may use what is considered illicit methods for survival. It is understood that perfection, even in the spirit world, cannot be achieved. Consequently, the myths of the Orixás and activities of the encantados before and after death demonstrate that imperfections are ubiquitous and accepted. Most of all, they are a part of being human.

Belém, Pará, Brasil

The Umbanda community where I conducted my fieldwork is located in the large urban city of Belém, in the state of Pará, just a few degrees south of the equator and approximately 70 miles west from the Atlantic Ocean. The city was built on a peninsula surrounded by lush tropical river islands and large stretches of fresh water. It is a tropical, wet climate with an average temperature in the mid-80s °F and a humidity of 80% to 90% (Climatemps.com 2009-2014). When I was there in June 2014, I was told that it was the beginning of the dry season. I found this quite humorous because it rained every day.

Not many tourists make Belém a final destination. They tend to gravitate towards the coastal cities known for their beautiful beaches and tourist stops. Since I was there during the 2014 World Cup competition, there were more tourists than usual using Belém
as a stopover in between the host cities of Manaus, Salvador, and Recife. Most said that they found the city boring and dangerous and rarely went outside the hotel; however, I found the city to be unique in its culture and history with hidden places of interest relatively unknown to tourists. I also found that it was no more dangerous than other cities around the world. A person, whether local or tourist, always needs to pay attention to their surroundings and minimize the potential for danger (traveling in groups and carrying only what is needed for an outing). More often than not, chivalry played a part in my safety. When exiting taxis, the driver always waited for me to safely enter an establishment before leaving for another fare. When exiting the terreiro, often in the wee hours of the morning, we left in groups and terreiro members walked me to the taxi station a block away.

For the purpose of my research, Belém was a perfect city to study the regional differences in the Umbanda spirit pantheon. According to Leacock and Leacock (1972:31), “it is Brazilian history, rather than African, that helps to explain the regional diversity of the cults today.” They determined that the quantities of slaves from a single society in Africa probably had less influence on the perpetuation of African religious beliefs. Instead, research has shown that the historical background of the cities, towns, and farms contributed to a difference in the spiritual pantheon and religious practices from other areas in Brazil (Bastide 1978; Leacock and Leacock 1972). For example, Belém is located just inland from where the Amazon River and its tributaries spill into the Atlantic Ocean. When the area was first settled by Portuguese military forces in 1616 in order to protect the unexplored basin from French, Dutch, and English occupation, the
area was already the home of “friendly” Tupinambá Indians (Leacock and Leacock 1972). Their presence greatly influenced the Afro-Brazilian religious pantheon by incorporating indigenous animistic beliefs with the worship of their indigenous ancestors.

**O Terreiro: The House**

The terreiro was located in the modest private residence of the Pai de Santo and his family in the middle to lower class neighborhood just north of downtown (see Appendix 1 for a layout of the property). The architecture of his home was like many others in Belém; it was long and narrow with a fenced in front portico, decorated with potted flowers and plants. Due to the favorite national pastime of international futebol (football or soccer) and the World Cup competition, the streets were decorated with yellow and green to show support for the national team. Flags waved from the balconies of apartment buildings and team mascots were painted directly on the streets accompanied by words of encouragement. Pai Gota’s front yard was not an exception. He had strung streamers with flags and hung children’s inflatable balls from strings to show his national pride. He often had friends and members of the terreiro over to watch the games and enjoy barbecue. Sometimes, our planned interviews were affected by the games. Other times, his overall popularity within the community contributed to interruptions in conversation as people dropped by for advice on personal problems.

I would arrive by taxi, preferring a less chaotic ride than the city bus. From the street, I entered through a gate that was usually left unlocked and stepped up onto the front patio. Walking twenty feet or so, I entered the small fenced-in alcove that enclosed the front door of the house. Unless people were expected the gate remained locked. The
front door was inaccessible, and it could be rather difficult to get the attention of the people in the house. Sometimes, I clapped three times near the front window (clapping three times is preferred over knocking loudly on a door, especially when the door is open and no doorbell in sight). When there was a community event in progress, the front gate was unlocked allowing people to freely enter and exit the sacred space. However, the personal residence that was positioned in front of the terreiro remained inaccessible.

As guests arrived, they were funneled through a side passageway that ran the length of the residence—approximately 100 feet. On one side was the house, and on the other side was a six foot concrete wall with pillars every ten feet. It was narrow, a little wider than shoulder width. I had to remove my backpack and sidestep most of the way. The only available light came from the rooms inside the house and was turned on in consideration for guests. The passage was treacherous if the guest was not privy to the voids and obstacles. I had to step over a pipe, then down into a depression near a bedroom window that was flooded half the time due to the rains. Another obstacle was a loose stepping stone, followed by a piece of wood that had been bolted into the concrete. I finally emerged at the back of the house.

There was a large dining room table under an awning with a row of about ten chairs along the side. This liminal space was part of the private residence that led to the terreiro but still not part of the sacred space. It served as a gathering place before the ceremony and a staging area for the mediums. Additionally, it was furnished with a toilet, shower, changing area, and water cooler that were available to guests.
My professor, Dr. Louis Forline, who attended a few ceremonies with me at the beginning of my research, made a comment that the entryway was like a birth canal. Although he said it in a joking manner, I could not help but think of the religious symbolism in his statement. Members of the congregation and community entered single file from the street, a profane space that emphasized an individual moving from a physical position into a symbolic domain. At the end of the passageway, the individual emerged in an environment that symbolized group gathering, community, and family. As the guest moved further along toward the main terreiro space, they were confronted with more ritual artifacts. Candles and melted wax from past ceremonies and a ponto (chalk drawing in the shape of a circle unique to each spirit) were on the ground surrounded by petitioner candles and requests. I witnessed one ponto with a five-point star surrounded by a circle. Each point of the star had lit candles and brochures for upscale apartment buildings. The person who requested the ponto was asking the spirits for help in finding better living arrangements. It is possible that evidence like this contributed to the stereotype that labelled Afro-Brazilian religions as only catering to the immediate problems of its followers rather than a religion that prepared them for their afterlife (Bastide 1978).

As I moved passed the gathering area, I stepped through an old wooden gate that partitioned the terreiro from the residential space. Next to the gate was a dog pen with a very angry dog that was barking and growling at the invasion. I never got a good look at him because of the darkness surrounding his kennel. Even now, all I remember are his nose and snarling teeth as he loudly objected to my presence. His growling notified the
people who were cleaning up the terreiro that a visitor had arrived. Passing the dog pen, I emerged in a surprisingly tranquil space. The concrete patio was old and covered in spots by plant life, and the cinder block walls were draped with greenery and discolored in spots by mold. There was a mango tree planted in the middle with melted wax around the bottom, and various flowers, bushes, and trees were planted around the perimeter of the courtyard. I later found out through my conversations with a plant specialist that all of the plants could be used medicinally or spiritually for some purpose. Although I witnessed plant material being used in the cleansing ceremonies and the healing ceremonies, I did not witness the preparation, and I do not know if Pai Gota used the resources he had available to him or purchased the plant material elsewhere.

At the end of the patio was the place where most visitors from the community gathered before, during, and after the ceremony. On one side was a storage room for chairs and an extra refrigerator to store beer, wine, and *cachaca*, a type of rum made from sugarcane—the preferred drinks of the spirits. On the other side was a partially enclosed space with shelves decorated with pictures of Pai Gota and his Umbanda family.

Moving past a half wall with a gate, I stepped up into a small space with chairs that were covered by the roof of the terreiro but still open to the outside. This was still not the sacred space. The walls are decorated with
pictures of Jesus and Mary as well as various trinkets that added a feel of home to the space. Stepping up another two stairs, I found myself in the entryway to the main religious space. The three life size statues of popular spirits adorned the right hand side of the wall. They were Zé Pilintra, a Pombagira, and Tranca Rua, an Exú spirit who opens and closes the pathways (Figure 14). As a spirit of light, Tranca Rua continuously comes to earth to gather the lost spirits to show them the way. He also blocks the path for souls that are “unbalanced, distorted, or disqualified” (Carlos de Ogum 2013). These statues were a powerful reminder that the guest was entering the most sacred space of the terreiro. Offerings of coins, wine, and champagne were placed at their feet along with small pieces of paper containing written prayers or requests. These were tucked into the hands of the statues. I placed what coins I had in my pocket at their feet and thanked them for allowing me to be present at the ceremony.

Opposite the statues was a second refrigerator filled with wine, beer, cachaca and

![Figure 15 Statues of a Caboclo (left), followed by Caboclas and Pombagiras, and Zé Pilintra on the end. (Photo by Erin Frias 2014)](image)
anything else the encantados might need when they arrived in the body of a medium.

Moving forward passed a curtain was the main room. In the far left hand corner was the massive altar with four tiers. Along the back wall were seven large statues about three feet tall. The first was an Indian with a headdress, yellow pants, and a red sash around his waist. The next five statues were women of various skin and hair colors but they were all wearing the same handmade dresses with tropical flowers. The last statue was Zé Pilintra in his standard white suit and fedora, hunched over with his hands clasped together. It was a smaller version of the life size statue that was at the entrance (Figure 15). Beaded necklaces are draped around the statues and a votive candle is placed at the foot of each statue and lit. Below them was a large Bible that seemed to be opened to a different page every night. There was seating along the right side wall, and large wicker chairs were lined up with their backs to the statues. Even though seating was available on every side of the terreiro, there was never enough room for everyone who attended to find a seat. People often remained tightly packed in at the entrance of the terreiro. The only people able to move freely about were the small children that could wiggle in between people. The main floor was painted green and swept clean every night. Before the beginning of ceremonies, members of the terreiro gathered in the middle with their white ritual clothing and greeted one another by grasping and kissing the back of the other person’s hand. This was followed by a big hug. People with ritual beads draped over their shoulders found Pai Gota and had him bless the beads before putting them around their necks. Others approached the altar and said a little prayer while touching the statue of their patron spirit. Pai Gota rang the bell and the ceremony began with a short prayer.
As Pessoas: The People

The hierarchy of the people found in the Umbanda terreiro mimicked the hierarchy of the spirit pantheon. Each level was progressively closer to the spiritual world through the controlled incorporation of spirits. The following section will discuss the general hierarchy found within the terreiro according to my observations. The hierarchy includes: (1) Patients or the members of the community who utilize the mediums and their spirits for personal help; (2) What Brown (1986:104) refers to as “cambonos (ritual assistants);” (3) “médiums de desenvolvimento (mediums in training);” (4) “médiums de consulta (consulting mediums).” The mediums and ritual assistants are often referred to as the Filhos and Filhas de Santos (the sons and daughters of the saints) and display a wide array of beginning to advanced levels determined by knowledge of rituals and the ability to correctly incorporate a spirit with control and purpose. (5) The final position is the Pai or Mãe de Santo who becomes a position of authority when his or her mission is assigned by his or her guiding Orixá and the spirits who serve as donos de cabeça (owners of the head). In the case of Pai Gota his Orixá is Oxumaré, the snake god that creates the rainbows when bringing water from the earth to Xangó, the god of thunder and lightning (Bastide 1978; Pai Gota, personal communication, June 2014). Pai Gota’s guiding spirits are Rompe Mato and Herondina which became the name of his terreiro.

Os Pacientes: The Patients

Members of the surrounding community made up the majority of attendees at the ceremony on Wednesday nights. Some attended the ceremonies out of curiosity or just to watch the dancing or listen to the songs. Most attended because of their beliefs in the
spirits and their ability to contact them directly through the mediums. The patients participated in the songs and the prayers but did not participate in the dancing and incorporation unless unexpectedly incorporated by a spirit.

The spontaneous incorporation of an audience member is followed by one of two actions: (1) If the spirit is friendly and welcomed by the guest, they were wrapped with a white cloth and ushered into the circle of mediums; (2) If it is an unwanted possession, the advanced mediums took measures to persuade the spirit to leave the body. If this happened continuously throughout the night or at several ceremonies, the Pai de Santo suggested to the audience member that they needed to become baptized and undergo initiation into the terreiro. Otherwise, the spirit/s will continued to disrupt the person’s life unless brought under control. This was a way of showing the person that their path in life was to serve the spirits.

Patients also attend ceremonies in order to have consultations with their favorite spirits and resolve problems plaguing them and their families. Patients were free to request the spirits to open up a closed heart to love and to help them financially, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. This was attributed to spiritual imbalance or the evil eye (Bastide 1978, Voeks 1997). Most requests were addressed during the consultation by either prayers or the use of smoke to open up the chakras and invite spirits to protect the patient or members of their families. Often, they were given

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30 Belief in the evil eye is prevalent throughout Brazil regardless of the believer’s religion. It is said that someone who wishes to do harm to a person out of jealousy will call upon a spirit specialist or the spirits themselves to cause harm to their enemies.

31 Chakras are sources of energy spread along the medial line of the human body that control memory, reason, willpower, cognition, divine love, divine sight, and illumination (Hinduism Today 1994). The belief
instructions for the patient to undergo home remedies by using plants in bathing rituals, consumption of the plants in a tea, brew, specific prayers, or offerings. However, other spiritual ailments were treated in private rituals or cleansing ceremonies over a longer period of time.

During the first week of my research, I attended a private ceremony for a woman who was suffering from a swollen leg (Figure 16). She had been treated by Western medical doctors with no success. Finally she requested help from Pai Gota who attributed her swollen leg to witchcraft that had created a spiritual imbalance in her life. Prior to my attendance, she had participated in four other private ceremonies with Pai Gota; I witnessed the fifth and final ceremony along with Dr. Forline. We engaged her husband in a conversation about her illness. He said that the swelling in her leg had been previously much worse, and the spiritual treatments performed by Pai Gota and supporting mediums during her private ceremonies had greatly improved the swelling in her leg. The swelling had been reduced to the middle of her calf and her foot. Before treatment, she was unable to walk and the swelling affected her entire leg.

Figure 16: A healing ceremony (Photo by Erin Frias 2014)

in chakras are borrowed from Spiritism which, in turn, is borrowed from the Asian religions of Hinduism and Buddhism.
Since it was a private ceremony, the patient’s friends and family and a few mediums were in attendance in order to create a strong spiritual chain. They set up two wooden stools in the center of the terreiro where Pai Gota and the patient sat facing each other. A candle was placed on a porcelain plate behind the patient and lit. Mediums surrounded the couple in a circle, and Pai Gota began the ceremony with a prayer. One by one, Pai Gota and the mediums became incorporated with spirits who came down to extract the negative energy from the patient. Pai Gota became incorporated by Zé Pilinha and he greeted the patient with a hug. His assistant, Lily, gave him his fedora and a cigar and proceeded to douse the woman’s leg in cachaça. She also poured the cachaça into the hands of the mediums surrounding the patient. She then brought out a bucket and filled it with leaves and even more cachaça. Pai Gota began mixing and grinding the leaves with his hand. Eve, an intermediate to advanced medium, became incorporated with her spirit and began to grunt and groan. She fell to her knees beside the woman’s leg which was now resting on a stool in front of her. Eve placed her head and hands on the leg to absorb the negative energy. Pai Gota finished mixing the concoction and began spreading it on the affected area. He knelt down, blew smoke over her leg, and then placed his mouth on the affected area. He proceeded to suck out the negative energy that was causing the swelling. The patient cried out in pain and clutched onto a woman standing next to her who supported her weight and loudly recited prayers. Others stood above her with their arms opened wide.

The negative energy was dissipated and absorbed by all the mediums in the room. This turned it into manageable pieces to be carried away by the spirits who were called to
the ceremony by their mediums. Eve took on the majority of the energy and her spirit expelled it through dry heaves and exaggerated movements of pain and exhaustion. As the energy drained from her body, three assistants helped her sit upright. After the drama of the ceremony, the mediums and family gathered in groups making light hearted conversation and began to clean the terreiro.

A week later, I was attending a community ceremony, and ran into this patient and her husband. After a quick round of greetings, I asked her if her leg felt better. She showed it off with pride. The swelling had gone down considerably, and her leg was a normal shape and color. The only evidence that remained of the illness was a slight swelling of her toes.

The voluntary exposure to negative energy absorbed by the mediums is part of the charity performed by members of the terreiro and the spirits who incorporate them. Every encounter with negative energy threatens their spiritual balance. Mediums learn that part of their mission in life is to place themselves in danger of absorbing negative energy so that they have a stronger ability to resist and/or rid themselves of the consequences. The medium’s relationship with their incorporating spirits ensures that they will be protected.

Os Cambonos: The Assistants

A very important position in the terreiro is the ritual assistant. He or she is responsible for maintaining control of the ceremony while remaining rooted in the material world. This means that the cambonos do not become incorporated. They are at the service of the incorporating spirits and the mediums who sacrifice their bodies. When a medium becomes incorporated, a change in apparel must occur. Head wraps are taken
off and sometimes replaced with either a brimmed hat or nothing at all. If the medium is not wearing white, the cambono will wrap silky white material around their waists or chests which is representative of Oxalá and his purity. Additionally, they attend to the spirits by carrying out requests and giving refreshments, cigars, tobacco pipes, and cigarettes to the mediums. They also create an ordered list of people who wish to consult with the spirits. There is usually one person who cares for the people within the terreiro space and at least one person outside on the patio maintaining the list and attending to the needs of the Pai and other consulting mediums. Often, they are women who are unable to incorporate due to menses or the violation of other taboos such as sexual activity during the week.

When I attended ceremonies at the terreiro in June 2013, there was a cambono by the name of Anthony who was busily attending to everyone’s needs and keeping an eye for violent possessions. When I returned the following year, I noticed that he had become an initiate and was participating in the ceremony. He sang songs and clapped while helping to contain the mediums who were wildly twirling out of control. Pai Gota introduced us, and I was pleased to find out that he spoke English. He became my translator whenever he was in attendance and patiently answered my questions with a smile. I asked him what spirits incorporated him, and he told me that he had not yet become incorporated completely. However, he had felt energy beginning in his body, and that “it felt good” (Anthony, personal communication, June 2014).
Os Médiuns de Desenvolvimento: The Initiates

Anthony was a medium in training. He was still learning the religious knowledge expected of a medium and still was not fully incorporated by a spirit. He stated that he had a problem “letting go” and giving up control of his body to a spirit, but he had already undergone baptism into Umbanda which is the first of seven stages. Unless he learned to “let go” of himself, he would remain at the first stage. This entailed a process of understanding the karmic philosophy of Umbanda—love, equality, acceptance, and charity. Through baptism, he was told of his primary Orixá—Xangó, the god of justice, thunder, and lightning whose flash of light illuminates the truth (Edwards and Mason 1985). Until he advanced to “the crossing stage” which would align his chakras, he would not become acquainted with his donos de cabeça.32

When I was in Belém in 2013, I was able to attend the baptism of my friend and roommate. Rosie was plagued by personal problems and was struggling to overcome them with Umbanda. Pai Gota said that she needed to be seated with her Orixá in order for her life to become less chaotic and more ordered. He explained to her that the spirits caused these disruptions because they wanted her to accept her path as an Umbandista.

There were seven initiates being baptized that night. I was able to talk to five of them about their experience. Rosie, Isa, her son Lúcio, who was 11 at the time, Adriana, and Alex. All were present during my visit the following year except for Alex who had moved away. When the ceremony began, all the initiates dressed in their white ritual clothing stood in front of the altar with their palms facing up reciting a prayer. While he

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32 The stages are named differently in each terreiro. These stages are an English translation of the stages that were explained to me by Pai Gota.
approached the initiates from behind with a white sheet, Pai Gota broke out in a song and rang a bell. As he draped the sheet over their heads, an assistant handed them a rolled up bamboo mat which they held vertically in front of their bodies. After all were draped in this manner, he took them one by one outside to the courtyard covering their eyes with the sheet and guiding them. I was unable to see where they went or what they did.

After each one had a turn outside, their sheets were draped around their shoulders. An adult male, Alex, was chosen to represent the group in the *ebó* (offering) ceremony. There were bowls of food and fresh fruit placed at the foot of the altar. Each of these bowls were ritually prepared and blessed. They were placed on top of his head by Pai Gota; a blessing was said, and a song sung to call the spirits down to the ceremony. The bowl was then placed off to the side. When each prayer was said, the group clapped their hands rapidly as they bowed down to the ground. In order to provide a connection from the ground to their chakras, they touched their foreheads to the cement.

At this point, some mediums in attendance began to incorporate their spirits, but they took measures to bring themselves out of the trance. One man experienced cramping in his feet, legs, and arms and was helped to the bench where Gabriel rubbed oil into his skin to help his muscles relax. The initiates also showed signs of incorporation which tried to bring under control.

After the series of bowls filled with food were placed to the side of the altar, Alex began to erect a pyramid of fruit offerings. He drizzled the offerings with honey and placed seven candles in a half circle. They said more prayers and sang more songs; while the mediums went in and out of trance states. The initiates began to lay out their bamboo
mats and sheets. They placed their beads of various colors and types in a straight line at the top of the mat with a candle and a *pemba*, a ritual piece of white chalk for drawing pontos. Each initiate was given a candle of a different color that represented the seven Orixás that were the heads of the seven spirit lines. Each of them lit a candle and placed it in front of the corresponding offering bowl. When they were finished with this task, they reclined on their mats and reflected on their lives in silence. A curtain was drawn segregating the main room of the terreiro from the outside. The lights were then turned out.

The other members gathered outside in the courtyard and talked and laughed; they smoked cigarettes and told jokes. Gabriel poked fun at the man whose muscles kept cramping. I listened in, only grasping occasional words that gave me an idea of the conversation. Gabriel made a great effort to include me in the conversation. He knew a little bit of English and used the translator on my phone to explain what he did not know.

At this point, it was 1:30 in the morning, and I thought that the ceremony was finished for the night. My friend said that she would be staying the night on her mat reflecting on her life. She would be subjected to more rituals the next morning. Little did I know that the night had just begun. The mediums who were laughing and talking, proceeded to dress in their ritual clothing. They placed seven bowls of water with leaves on the ground in the courtyard and Gabriel lit a container of coals with a wire handle (a modified tin can that resembled the thurible or incense holder found in the Catholic Church). The initiates were roused from their reflection and called up one by one to sit in front of Pai Gota who sat at the entrance of the terreiro with a large Bible on his lap. The
advanced mediums approached the altar opposite the entrance and privately became incorporated with their spirits. The mediums in attendance and their spirits were chosen by the initiates to fill the roles of godfather and godmother. Gabriel, Rosie’s chosen godfather who was incorporated by Simbamba, held the pemba over her head and scratched the surface of the chalk to create dust in her hair while her godmother held a large candle. The initiate placed both hands on the Bible and repeated after Pai Gota. He cut a piece of her hair at the crown and placed it in the tin can with the burning coals. The smell of incense smoke and burning hair filled the room. While reciting a prayer, he waved the can twice on either side. He took a bowl of leaves and bathed the crown of her head making sure to keep as many leaves as possible on the crown. Then, he took a piece of white material and wrapped it around her head with the leaves in place. Rosie stood and hugged Pai Gota and each of her godparents. They walked with her to the altar to light another candle at the fruit offering. When everyone was finished, they rested on their mats for the night.

The following week Rosie dressed completely in white and kept her head covered while going outside. The chakra located at the crown of her head was open and vulnerable to negative energy. Seven days later, she participated in a ceremony that closed her chakra and restore her to her previous state. She was now an initiate in the religion of Umbanda and protected by her Orixá.

I was only able to witness the baptism stage. The subsequent stages increased the connection of the initiate to the spiritual world. The second stage, called the crossing stage, opens up the initiate’s chakras, and aligns them. Stage three is the wine stage in
which the initiate is introduced to his or her donos de cabeça; stage four is called *Amancis de Leite* (plants and herbs with milk). This ritual seats the Orixá with the initiate dedicating his or her devotion to them. The seating of the Orixá is revealing in that the personality of the Orixá represents how people view the initiate’s personality.

Before Rosie became a member of Pai Gota’s terreiro she was a member of another terreiro where she was told that her Orixá, was Iansã, “a bold, powerful, and authoritative woman” who can be loyal and faithful, yet with a “voluptuous temperament” who seeks out adventures “without reservations” (Verger 1981). When talking with Pai Gota, he revealed that her Orixá was Oxum which she adamantly denied. I asked Rosie about the two personalities and when she described Oxum as a mother figure and the goddess of fecundity, who either gives or takes away fertility, she insisted that this characteristic was the opposite of her personality.

Rosie was a woman in her late forties, and although she has been married and divorced, she never had the desire to have children. Still, I felt that Rosie’s personality matched Oxum rather than Iansã. Even though she did not have biological children, she had a maternal manner. She always welcomed people in her home and cooked for them. When I stayed with her in June 2013, I had never been away from my husband and daughter. She made sure that I toured and experienced Belém rather than wallowing in my homesickness and depression. When I stayed with her again in 2014, she introduced me to other Umbandistas and encouraged me to interview people. Even when I was bored, she prodded me like a mother into working on my thesis. In her work, she often contacts people from indigenous tribes in the Amazon Basin as well as outside of Brazil.
Her refrigerator is covered with pictures of her surrounded by groups of people, most of them children.

Though Iansã can be an alluring personality for women who want to be authoritative and powerful, sometimes what people desire to be, and who they really are, do not match. Evidence of this can be found in the consultations given by mediums and their spirits during community ceremonies. Consultations can lead to a candid discourse about the patient delving into areas that people often do not want to hear about themselves. I felt that this aspect of the consultations was what made the spirits message more insightful and successful.

**Os Médiums de Consulta: The Consulting Mediums**

Mediums who have been seated with their Orixás slowly come to understand their mission in life which may involve consultations for the community. They may have their mission revealed to them in a direct manner such as through dreams or consultations with their Orixá or donos de cabeça. Their direction in life may also come through trial and error. The more spiritual education they receive the more they are able to reflect and meditate on their life-course, They are able to understand how their true path will contribute to their spiritual balance and evolution. They may draw on the support of the community and their spirit guides to have the courage to take a college class, to dive into a relationship without trepidation, to embrace their true identity without societal repercussion, or to address problems that plague them.

Consulting mediums learned the proper way to incorporate a spirit, and their actions are controlled (Brown 1986). Their ability to form a symbiotic relationship with
their spirit guides benefits their own spiritual evolution, the evolution of their encantado, and the patients who seek spiritual advice. Because of their previous lives on earth, the spirits are seen as knowledgeable in the ways of the world. What makes the spirits of Umbanda different from those found in Candomblé and Spiritism are that the “ways of the world” are appropriate for the Brazilian identity. They do not represent African gods who were stolen from a far-off homeland, and they do not represent elite Europeans from popular history. Instead, they are deeply rooted in the history of Brazil and the formation of the Brazilian identity.

Pretos Velhos have experienced the horrors of slavery. They have either learned to forgive, and therefore, reach a higher spiritual evolution, or they resist oppression which contributes to their ability to negotiate the reality of their lower position within a seemingly racially democratic state.33 Even though slavery had been abolished, the structure of the Brazilian state and “racial discrimination” which is “still denied by many Brazilians” kept the poor enslaved with little to no access to upward mobility (Brown 1986:xxii). One of their only recourses to gain status was to climb the Afro-Brazilian “sacerdotal ladder” that gave them prestige and power among their peers (Bastide 1978).

The Caboclos are knowledgeable warriors who do not need to rely on the state for survival. It can be argued that Umbandistas resist the paternal structure of the state by taking their health and wellbeing in their own hands. They utilize what Olorun and his various counterparts have given their human creations—Mother Nature and spiritual

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33 Even though Gilberto Freyre’s book became popular on the notion that Brazil, because of its miscegenation, was racially peaceful; this is more of an ideal that has never been achieved. The majority of the poor population is of African descent with limited opportunities for upward mobility (Brown 1986).
accessibility—to ease a problematic health situation that is often a consequence of the state’s poor infrastructure.³⁴

Exús, on the other hand, are known for their street knowledge and ability to understand their code of ethics. The concept of right and wrong in this situation is not based on the laws created by the morally corrupt elite. Rather, the concept of right and wrong looks the other way when a mother steals bread for her child or honest people associate with drug lords in exchange for protection from corrupt and murdering police (Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman 1994). Their awareness of the larger structures that contribute to corruption and their subsequent oppression has given them more control when negotiating their status. Their comprehension of street life is utilized to protect their kin, fictive and consanguine.

The consulting mediums use this knowledge given to them by their spirits to provide the public with real-life solutions, but what I found fascinating was that they do it in a way that goes against culturally appropriate behavior. They are still within the boundaries prescribed by culture, but they test those boundaries through consultations. Since mediums are incorporated by spirits freed from the formalities of culture, they can behave in a rude and crass manner. The depiction of the spirits as tactless allows the mediums to push the edges of proper etiquette in order to make grand statements that would not be accepted outside of the terreiro or outside of an incorporation episode. If a statement is delivered in a grandiose way, the patients are more likely to remember the

³⁴ Brazilian healthcare is complicated. The government provides free healthcare for everyone; however, not all of the revenues generated for this purpose have found their way into the healthcare system. So, facilities are often neglected, left without the proper equipment and personnel to help the needy. If a person can afford it, private insurance is available and considered a more desirable option.
message and associate it with the supernatural. Case in point: Two friends of mine, who also served as my translators, received guidance from Zé Pilintra through Pai Gota. Jordana asked Zé Pilintra if she should trust a friend whom she suspected of lying to her. He told her that she was naïve and blind to the true situation. He maintained that she refused to see the shadow cast by the lies of the man she wanted to trust. She was also a “crybaby” who refused to put up a fight, but instead, complained about her situation rather than taking action. A partial excerpt from the conversation is below:

**Pai Gota incorporated by Zé Pilintra:** The problem is spiritual, don’t judge it! If you stay, the beast will eat you, but you run, then it will run after you. This person is “bicho come” (the beast will eat you) he becomes bipolar, two in one [referring to her friend that she is asking about]. This person is a good person, but he is letting the bad spirit take over. It’s been a while since this person has been in this stage, and as the time goes, it becomes worse. When people say that they want to talk to Zé Pilintra it is because I am smart, I am a light [meaning a spirit of high light], but I’m not perfect because I drink and I smoke, but I know what’s right and what’s wrong. I will never go for things that are not right, bipolar is something complicated. He keeps changing his personality; I saw today what was going on. I am not the owner of the house, but I am a Caboclo, I am someone who sees who is who in the story. I see things, for example, what is your name?

**Jordana:** Jordana.

**Pai Gota as Zé:** Jordana, can I tell you something? Can I? You are a good person, but you suffer too much for love. You think that things in your life won’t be right, deep inside your heart. You have a beautiful energy, but something is missing for you, like a screw to adjust yourself. Since you are good, you think everyone else is good, but this is not right. Life is not about this, there is someone from behind
us that wants to poke us [persuade us] so that we become someone that we are not. You are beautiful, but you have a serious spiritual problem.

**Jordana:** There is something that is trying to stop me from being myself, I have to be positive and believe in a higher energy; beyond God, only God.

**Pai Gota as Zé:** You need to clean up this negative energy and balance the positive energy in you. Everyone wants to fuck with us, but in the spirituality, God is the only one who will look for you and take care of you. People just want to mess up your life, so inside your spirituality, you have to become stronger. [Pai Gota, personal communication, June 2014]

Zé Pilintra through Pai Gota referred to the fact that people of the material world are imperfect and are easily drawn to both positive and negative energies. Umbanda and the belief in God makes the believer stronger and less susceptible to negativity.

After the consultation, I asked her how she felt, and she said that she did not completely agree with what was said. However, as the weeks went by, she obsessively continued to discuss the consultation with me. She later confessed that even though the statements made by Pai Gota and his spirit were bold, she finally understood what he was telling her. Ultimately, she accepted the challenge to be more aggressive with her life choices.

My other friend, Lacy, made the statement that she did not like Pai Gota because he refused to look her in the eye when he told her about her personal flaws. Instead, he addressed her male friend sitting next to her. She found this behavior very rude and preferred to talk to another medium that was less harsh. Rosie, who had years of
experience consulting with mediums, told Lacy that it was not Pai Gota speaking. She was talking with Zé Pilintra who was known for his bluntness and outdated treatment of women. When presented with a male and female sitting before him he preferred to address the male.

In fact, Pai Gota’s personality, when not incorporated, is quite the opposite of Zé Pilintra. He is cheerful and respectful, sometimes effeminate and soft spoken. Conversely, Zé Pilintra is direct, assertive, and masculine. Previous studies on spirit possession have attributed the incorporation of a spirit with an opposite personality of the medium as a culturally sanctioned way of breaking free from the restrictions placed on them by society. A domestic woman, constrained by her role as mother and wife, becomes sly, sexual, and assertive when incorporated by a Pombagira (Hayes 2011). Men who incorporate a female spirit behave effeminate and flirt with other men allowing them to freely express their sexuality without fear of discrimination (Landes 1947). Pai Gota was able to use Zé Pilintra’s personality to place the blame on the patient and spur people into action. Pai Gota’s status within the community as an appointed Pai de Santo by the Orixás created some force behind the readings and prompted the patients to change their perspective in order to resolve their problems.

**Pai e Mãe de Santo: Father and Mother of the Saint**

The Pai or Mãe de Santo is the leader of the terreiro who creates the physical and spiritual setting for the community, but the terreiro is also a type of business that needs to be managed. In the case of Pai Gota, he did not demand payment for his services on Wednesdays when the outside community was invited to attend and receive spiritual aid.
He did require a small membership fee of $20 reais (written as R$20 and worth approximately 10 U.S. dollars) a month from his initiates in order to balance the costs of the community ceremonies. Most of the items used in the ceremonies benefitted the community as a whole; ritual items such as candles, matches, ritual foods, beer, wine, and cachaça etc., are used by the mediums on every occasion and made up the majority of costs of the terreiro.

Additionally, Pai Gota received payments for cleansing ceremonies (Figure 17) which he did every Friday for R$30 a person. One Friday my translator and I participated in a cleansing ceremony along with nine other people. At R$30 a person, he made R$330 that night but expended approximately R$100 or more on food and candles for the spirits. I was never able to ask Pai Gota if he earned money from his private healing ceremonies, but I assume some sort of compensation was given to him. He was also presented with gifts in appreciation for his consultations and spiritual help. To show my appreciation, I would often arrive with cartons of cigarettes, cachaça, or wine, but I never felt like it was expected of me.
The Pai or Mãe de Santo not only manages the terreiro, but he or she is also responsible for creating its personality. The energy of Pai Gota’s terreiro was, in my opinion, casual and friendly, but the Pai Gota could conjure a more serious tone when needed. The mediums knew each other outside of the terreiro and participated in other events separate from their roles as mediums. Their familiarity with one another was demonstrated by the humorous teasing of certain members during group conversations that I participated in before and after ceremonies. In my fieldwork journal, I often made notes about how the community worked together to protect one another. During the group ceremonies, the mediums that became incorporated would often twirl and stumble around uncontrollably. It was not uncommon for a medium to end up in the lap of an audience member only to be picked up by an initiate and sent back into the middle of the ritual chaos. To prevent anyone from getting hurt, the initiates formed a circle and caught mediums as they spun out of control.

The concept of communitas stood out as one of the most important aspects of the terreiro. It was demonstrated through actions, words such as equality, love, acceptance, and charity, and the practice of karma outside of the terreiro. Even though I observed a hierarchy that placed people at different levels of education and potentially spiritual evolution,35 the emphasis on difference was minor. I only observed inequality, or rather displays of the hierarchy, when the mediums greeted one another before and after a ceremony. The person who was lower in rank grasped the hand of the person higher in rank and kissed it. That action was reciprocated by the higher ranking medium.

35 I say potentially because the level of spiritual evolution is not revealed to the person until the death of their body and their judgment of their soul.
Communitas, as described by Victor Turner (1969:138) is not something that happens “between friends, coworkers, or professional colleagues any day.” It is a “transformative experience that goes to the root of each person’s being and finds in that root something profoundly communal and shared” (Turner 1969:138). For members of the Umbanda community the “transformative experience” occurs when each individual realizes that he or she has found a community of people who have shared the same spiritual crisis. This crisis is often experienced in childhood when psychic abilities first appear and spirit possession episodes are considered deviant by the family of the child and the larger society. The young medium goes through the stages in what I will call solitary rites of passage based on the Rites of Passage explained by Arnold van Gennep (2004).

The first stage of the rite of passage is separation, and it occurs when the young medium realizes that their psychic experiences are heretical to the majority of the population. They become symbolically and physically separated because of their abilities. They are stripped of their identity as a member of the dominant society and made to live, symbolically, on the outside of the community. The next stage is transition or the liminal stage, and it occurs when the new medium undergoes an identity crisis. They try to follow the dominant society’s religious views, but are repeatedly left out because of their knowledge of another spiritual world that contradicts the inaccessibility of the paternalistic religion. They begin to seek out alternative knowledge that will help them understand their abilities. This leads the new medium to find Umbanda and experience the final stage in the rite of passage—integration. Umbanda is a community filled with
people who have experienced the same spiritual crisis, liminal identity, and assimilation into the community. Even though the rites of passage are experienced independently, they find communitas in the final stage. The sense of belonging can only be experienced by those who have gone through all the stages explained above.
Chapter 5

A Comunidade: The Community

When drawing comparisons between what I have read on Afro-Brazilian religiosity and what I witnessed in my Umbanda community, there were many differences. This can be attributed to changes over time. However, there were a few aspects that seemed to be consistent. Similarities emerged in the stories told by individuals about their spiritual crisis that eventually led them to Umbanda. Their stories recall their first experiences with spirits from the other realm, the reactions of their friends and families, the strategies used to alleviate their spiritual problems, as well as how they found their faith. I call these stories solitary rites of passage that initiates and mediums go through in order to transition from deviant, ill, or out of control, to gifted, privileged, and in control. As described by Arnold Van Gennep the stages associated with rites of passage are “separation, transition, and incorporation” (Gennep 2004:96).^{36}

I must stress that the interviews and translations involved in my research were not ideal because of the language barrier. In some interviews, I had a translator at the scene. In others, I recorded conversations that were translated afterwards with native speakers who were not familiar with the religion. This led to some difficulties in determining the exact words and tone that was used to convey their story. The translator’s voice became interlaced with the narratives. For example, in my Umbanda community, the name

^{36} For the most part, these are the most popular terms used to describe the stages involved in the rites of passage but over the years other terms have been used. The transition stage has also been called the liminal stage and the incorporation stage has been called assimilation or aggregation.
Herondina was associated with the Cabocla spirit who was the guardian of the house, but one of my translators corrected her name to Erundina and associated her with a popular Brazilian politician. If given a chance to redo my fieldwork research I would do things differently. Eliminating extra voices from the conversation would be my first priority, but lesson learned.

Many interviews were conducted in public settings with onlookers curious about my presence and in the middle of ceremonies with people who were not participating. The community atmosphere, while not ideal for conducting interviews, was part of the Umbanda ambience. When I was able to get an interview in private such as my interview with Pai Gota, we were regularly interrupted by people dropping by and listening to the conversation. At first, I thought that this would prevent me from obtaining an in-depth history of his life and initiation into Umbanda, but as the interview went on, I realized that his story was part of who he was and what made him a Pai de Santo—an expression of human weakness that was fortified through his mission in Umbanda. It was his calling.

His story and the story of others reminded me of a book I once read on the language of the Fundamentalists in the United States whereby the act of “witnessing” or story-telling transitions people from sinners or unbelievers to being saved. It reinforces their position within society and their divine mission appointed by God through the incorporation of the Holy Spirit within their lives (Harding 2000). The author Susan Friend Harding writes:

Witnessing [story-telling], like evangelic preaching, ‘is intended to create a spiritual crisis by calling to the fore one’s desperate and lost conditions, which
one may have been totally unaware of.’ This crisis is the onset of the conversion process…and is based on a direct experience with the divine. You know when the Holy Spirit convicts you of, or makes you see, your sins. Conviction effects a deep sensation of one’s own impurity and separation from God. [Harding 2000:38]

The onset of a spiritual crisis in Umbanda is an individual’s confrontation with spirits, either in the form of feeling, sight, or hearing. This is the catalyst for the first stage of separation. Initially sensing spirits may cause minor inconveniences in someone’s life or be written off as a child’s wild imagination since they often occur in adolescence. For the child, they realize that they are different and struggle to hide their abilities, ignore their visions, or learn not to talk about what they see, hear, or feel.

As the spirits are ignored, the episodes get progressively worse until the afflicted individual or their families seek a solution to the problem. The acknowledgement of the presence of spirits separates the person from the larger community. Still, the person is plagued with illness or visions of spirits and they remain in a transitional stage as someone who is deviant from society.

It is not until they are introduced to Umbanda and a community of people who have experienced similar marginalization that they are integrated into the community resulting in communitas. The differences between the Umibandistas and the Fundamentalists are that rather than viewing themselves as impure and full of sin, Umibandistas eventually see themselves as having a rare and needed talent—mediumship. Their spiritual development saves them from following the wrong path and hindering their spiritual evolution.
My conversations with mediums centered on how they became introduced to Umbanda and what their friends and family thought of their participation in a religion that was marginalized by the dominant society. A pattern began to emerge with each story.

Pai Gota’s story was a sad one. Yet his vulnerability and imperfections make him approachable to his followers. He was eager to teach me about Umbanda and repeatedly told me that I could ask any questions I wanted. He often arranged for me to interview other leaders in the community and allowed me to photograph and video record ceremonies and rituals. One night after a ceremony ended, a group of us was gathered in the courtyard. We casually talked about Umbanda and life in Brazil. I took this opportunity to ask Zé Pilintra, Pai Gota’s spirit guide, how I should focus my research. He requested “just tell the story of this terreiro and its people.” This Chapter tells the stories of six people I interviewed through the course of my fieldwork and afterwards through social media and email correspondence.

**Pai Gota**

Pai Gota is a 55 year old man who has practiced Umbanda for approximately 40 years (Figure 18). One can tell that he enjoyed having people around him and did everything he could to make his home and
terreiro a welcoming place, not only for me, but also for the Umbanda community. When asked what he does for the community as a Pai de Santo he said that “people come to him for a little bit of everything; they see him as a priest, therapist, psychologist, and friend” (Pai Gota, personal communication, June 2014). Indeed, I witnessed this countless times when I was at the terreiro during the day time and non-ritual days. People would drop by unannounced and ask Pai Gota for help.

I found that Pai Gota and the members of his community wanted to be open about who they were and the religion they practiced. They especially wanted to make sure I learned everything I could when I was there. When they supplied me with information straight from their own mouths, it prevented them from being misinterpreted and victimized for their beliefs. Unlike Candomblé, where secrets are revealed to people as they progress through the strict hierarchy, there seemed to be no secrets withheld in Umbanda. The ceremonies, rituals, life-stories, and beliefs were open and accessible to anyone, just as the religious knowledge of spiritual world is open and accessible to Umbandistas.

One day my roommate Rosie and I were able to interview Pai Gota about his life. We sat in the front, gated, alcove of his home a few hours before the community ceremony began at 7:30pm. The people present were Pai Gota, a neighbor from down the street, Rosie, and myself. Pai Gota sat up straight in his chair with his hands on his legs and patiently waited for me to ask my questions in English. Rosie translated them to Portuguese. I recorded the interview, which I noticed made the group a little uncomfortable but it also served to break the ice in an unexpected way.
When Rosie spoke in Portuguese, she occasionally, and accidentally, asked Pai Gota the question in English or repeated his answer to me in Portuguese. When she realized what she had done, she let out a long list of obscenities. Since everyone I met in Belém thought that it was humorous to teach me to swear in Portuguese, these were the most prominent words I would notice in a conversation. Swearing became a type of language that blurred the lines of the language barrier and allowed everyone to participate in the laughter. The nonsense of the swearing episodes were compounded by the fact that during this time, the recorder was documenting everything that was said and we all commented on the possibility that I would have to write this into my thesis. After the metaphorical “ice” was broken the atmosphere was a little less stressed and Pai Gota eased his posture in the chair and settled into the conversation.

**Erin:** When and how did you become interested in Umbanda?

**Pai Gota:** I did not go looking for Umbanda but it found me when I was 14 years old. I began to have fainting spells and I became very sick, and depressed. Eventually I ended up in a mental hospital. The doctor that treated me was a Pai de Santo and he asked my mother if he could treat me at his terreiro. Otherwise, he said that I would die at the hospital. She approved, but my family abandoned me soon after because of their evangelical beliefs. [Pai Gota, personal conversation, June 2014]

Catholicism and Afro-Brazilian religions have had a long history of animosity, mainly expressed from the evangelical Catholic communities towards the Afro-Brazilian religions that focus on spirit possession. They view mediums as the “slaves of the devil” (Brown 1986:xxvi).
**Pai Gota:** I stayed with the doctor and his family for two years where I became healthy and happy, even though I had no money. Then at sixteen, I started incorporating a spirit that would make me do things that I could not control. So I became initiated into Umbanda and seated with my donos de cabeça, Pai Rompe Mato, Mãe Herondina, and my Orixá, Oxumaré. The initiation into Umbanda made all the bad feelings go away, especially the feeling of wanting to kill myself. I stayed with house that initiated me for two more years, and in time, I grew physically and spiritually stronger. [Pai Gota, personal communication, June 2014]

He opened his own terreiro at the request of his Orixá 20 years ago and 16 years ago he settled into the house he currently occupied with his wife. Initially, he did not want to become a Pai de Santo but he said that his Orixá forced him to realize that it was God’s will that he become a Pai de Santo. He opened the terreiro because he believed that everyone who becomes a part of Umbanda was brought to the faith intentionally by his or her Orixá. He explained that he was intentionally united with the doctor who introduced him to Umbanda and saved his life just as I was united with him in order to learn about Umbanda and tell people the story of his terreiro. His job as a Pai de Santo is to help people find their mission and help them become spiritually balanced.

**Pai Gota:** I have a Caboclo spirit that comes to me in front of the others [meaning that one spirit in particular incorporates his body more often than the others]. This spirit is not my boss like the donos de cabeça, but rather a guide. Still, I have many Caboclo spirits that come to me. There are Caboclos that bring negative energy, but it depends on the person being incorporated and the energy inside the person. So it is important to anyone who is incorporating any spirit to keep the negative energy far away from the mind. [Pai Gota, personal communication, June 2014]
His main job as a Pai de Santo is to create a positive environment that is healthy for spirits as well as people. He helps people get rid of their negative energy returning them to a balanced state of being and increasing the axé, or life force, of the entire terreiro.

**Erin:** How does one become a medium?

**Pai Gota:** The method is related to time practicing Umbanda, time helps you keep the balance and equilibrium so you become more sensitive and start to feel the energy more easily. Also, cleansing and maintaining your chakras are a way of protecting you from sorcery and bad energy from being absorbed by your body. [Pai Gota, personal communication, June 2014]

**Erin:** How do you know whom your spirit guides are?

**Pai Gota:** Spirits will reveal themselves through the person they are incorporating, he will call your boss to make you talk, and this is called ‘axé de boca’ which means ‘the force that makes you talk.’ [Pai Gota, personal communication, June 2014]

One of the patterns I noticed when listening to an Umbandista’s personal introduction to the religion was that, at some point, they became physically ill which led to a medical countermeasure. Either the countermeasure did not relieve the symptoms of the illness or they were only relieved for a short period of time before the symptoms began again. Umbandistas who complained of physical illness stated that they started to feel better after being initiated into an Umbanda community and participating in what they call “developing their spirit” (Frederico, personal communication, June 2014). They believe that the spirits make a person ill or cause disruption in their life in order to get their attention. The only recourse was to address the presence of the spirits through Umbanda and learn to control the incorporation episodes through time and practice.
Adriana

Adriana is a 45 year old woman who was present during my first visit in 2013 and the second visit in 2014. I initially met her when she became baptized into Pai Gota’s terreiro the same night as my friend Rosie. She has a daughter who is 17 years old and also participates in the activities of the terreiro.

Adriana has been in a relationship with another woman for 10 years who originally came from a Spiritist church. Her girlfriend, Bella, became interested in Umbanda when she turned her focus onto helping Adriana with her problems. Bella and Adriana have an adopted son who is 11 years old and also participates in the ceremonies. At every opportunity, one can find their son beating out a rhythm on the drums which is a natural and accepted position for a male in an Afro-Brazilian religion. Occasionally, I would see the entire family at the “white table” ceremonies held on Monday’s by the Spiritist leader, Rafael. Adriana stated that she was originally from Bragantina, in the state of Paraná. She also mentioned that her mother was indigenous but did not know to what tribe she belonged.

Erin: When and how did you become interested in Umbanda?

Adriana: When I was a child, my mother used to practice Umbanda. She especially liked the dancing. [Adriana, personal communication, June 2014]

She explained that when her mother went to the terreiro the children were made to wait outside. Adriana and the other children secretly watched the ceremonies from a window. She remembered watching her mother and the other mediums walk on broken glass without being cut or hurt. As she grew, she decided not to follow Umbanda, but she remembers having “those skills” since she was a child. The skills associated with being a
medium are the ability to see, hear, or feel the presence of spirits and, of course, the ability to incorporate, although this is a skill that is learned over time.

**Adriana:** When my mother passed away, I didn't know I had the desire or inclination to follow Umbanda. Later on, I met a friend who was an Umbandista. He was Pai de Santo, and he always told me that I had the ability to communicate with spirits but I did not believe him, I did not accept my mission in life. [Adriana, personal communication, June 2014]

Without her knowledge, her friend began working for her spirits through Umbanda and throwing *buzios* (divining shells used to tell the future) and, as a result, they became close friends. She decided to visit Umbanda more frequently.

**Adriana:** I have had many obstacles in my life since I was a child. I used to be an alcoholic. I suffered a lot because I had visions but I didn't believe. I used to be a drunken person, too many *caipirinha’s* [a popular Brazilian drink made out of cachaca, limes, and sugar], and he told me I should follow with Umbanda because I had an Indian spirit with me. I became an Umbandista because I met a girl and she's my girlfriend. We are Lesbian. When we decided to live together, she started to know me better and my bad habits. We are together for 10 years [some interruptions with music and children playing] As I said, I was a heavy alcoholic and when I drank, I would talk a lot of spiritual things…things from the other world. When I drink a lot, an Indian spirit shows up and she began to call on me. I was scared. I can't drink cachaca. The only drink I am allowed is a beer because of my Indian spirit. When I was drinking a lot, I used bad spirits to make bad decisions like gossiping about others. This is not good and I knew that, but didn’t know how to stop it. [Adriana, personal communication, June 2014]

**Erin:** How did you find Pai Gota and his terreiro?
Adriana: I had another friend who was a Pai de Santo and he wasn't helping me properly to develop my spiritual life. I didn't see any results. He wasn't helpful and friendly. He was afraid that I could be better than him. I saw him doing things that I didn't approve of. He was using Umbanda to boast and this is a wrong attitude. He was asking for a lot of money to participate from his group and here [meaning Pai Gota’s terreiro] they don't ask for any money. I don't have money. Also, our meetings weren't frequent, like here. It was only once a month and here it is every Wednesday. I decided to quit seeing him. [Adriana, personal communication, June 2014]

One day Adriana’s girlfriend decided to find an Umbanda community to help her develop her skills. Bella surprised Adriana by driving her to a house where they were practicing Umbanda. On her first visit, she received a spirit and the Pai de Santo told her that she was supposed to be a medium. At this point in the conversation, I am not entirely sure that she was speaking about Pai Gota’s terreiro. She decided to change the topic of conversation to her daughter with whom she was very proud. Her daughter was also following Umbanda and she had to choose between the Orixás Oxóssi and Ogum. Her daughter’s Orixá was also Oxóssi, so Adriana decided to be seated with Ogum rather than compete with her daughter for the attention of the same Orixá. We began talking about her children:

Adriana: My kids are well behaved. I don't allow them to play on the street and with bad kids. They come home after school, close the gate, and that is it. They have video games and PlayStation to play with. The reason I'm doing this is to avoid them being bullied outside our home and people looking at them and saying ‘there are the lesbians’ kids.’ Some neighbors are rude. When my daughter graduated the 5th grade, we transferred her to a public school but we had a hard
time because my daughter was bullied. Now my kids are studying at Evangelic school but they follow the religion of Umbanda. [Adriana, personal communication, June 2014]

**Erin:** Do they suffer any discrimination at their school because of their religion?

**Adriana:** Not at all. Neither do we. We are accepted into our religion even though we are lesbian. Every religion needs to respect. They cannot deny a person because of what she is. My girlfriend’s mother is Catholic. She's a priest assistant. Bella studied to be a priest assistant also. Her mother never was mad or against us because our decision to be members of Umbanda or to be a lesbian. [Adriana, personal communication, June 2014]

The comment that her girlfriend’s mother supported them is part of a patterned discourse I came to understand as part of the introduction into Umbanda. Sometimes, as in Pai Gota’s experience, families who are Catholic or Pentecostal, object to the religion of Umbanda. Members experience a wide array of reactions: their participation may be accepted and encouraged, or ridiculed and rejected. Some Umbandistas have even stated that they prefer to keep their religious activities secret from certain relatives for fear that they will use it against them (Eve, personal communication, June 2014).

**Erin:** What kind of problems has Umbanda helped you with in your life?

**Adriana:** Right now, I have a problem with a house I rented. We almost lost our house. I came here and asked advice from Pai Gota. I asked for spiritual protection and they helped us. In the back of my house, I have a Conga [a type of drum] for the Indians and in the front of my house; I have a gruta do Exú (a grotto or altar for Exú). When I cleaned up those areas, I prayed and asked for help and
protection. After we became Umbanda members, our life got better. Everyone has problems, including Pai Gota, and we are here to ask for help and we need to have faith. We need to have faith in what we are looking for in life in order to get it. We cannot be a negative person. Since I'm here [at Pai Gota’s house] my life is much better. I ask protection for my kids and myself and thank God my kids are good. They stay in the path [of Umbanda] and don’t use drugs. [Adriana, personal communication, June 2014]

During the interview, Adriana wanted to stress the point that in Pai Gota’s house they felt very accepted. They had problems in the past outside of their Umbanda community regarding their sexual orientation, level of income, and their religious preference. She asked what I thought about Umbanda. I said that I also found it very welcoming, and I loved how everyone in the community helped one another. She smiled and nodded at my response.

**Thais**

Thais is a 29 year old woman who was present during my first and second visits to the terreiro. I have seen her become incorporated by at least two types of spirits. One was a cigana or a Caboclo without a name, and the other was a criança spirit. Criança spirits are child spirits who left earth too early. They are not utilized for consultations but rather appear to incorporate a mediums body in order to have fun, play with toys, and eat candy. Their appearance is met with joy and can lighten the mood of a heavy ceremony. Thais was exposed to Umbanda at an early age from her family, but only some of her family approved of the religion. At a very young age, she complained to her mother that she would see the spirit of an evil nun.
**Thais:** I used to see the spirit of a nun and my relatives decided to take me to the Umbanda group so that I would get released from this spirit. The group then decided to isolate the spirit of the nun in a room. However, every time I would talk about that spirit the spirit would pop up again, so I learned that I shouldn’t talk about the spirit of the evil nun again. “Dona Carmen” was the first Cabocla [female Caboclo spirit] to welcome me to the Umbanda group, so I spoke to my mother to let me start coming frequently. Therefore, I started frequenting the group since I was a child. Umbanda has given me relaxation and peace in my life. When I was new to Umbanda, I decided to talk to Zé [Pilintra] because I felt like there was something happening to me. One time I even played the cards and it came up that the spirits were playing with me [meaning that they were talking to her through the tarot cards], so I decided that Umbanda would help me. The cards were accurate and I learned in Umbanda that I would have a conversation with a Caboclo and get advice from him. [Thais, personal communication, June 2013]

**Erin:** How do the spirits help you?

**Thais:** There was a woman [spirit] on the bus that would start to scream at me, telling me about the future, and said ‘don’t take it.’ Later on there was a woman from my neighborhood who tried to give me some earrings out of the blue. She has a bad energy so I didn’t take them. I was told that the woman on the bus might be my guardian. I have heard her since I was 7 years old. There is also a man [spirit] that I see. When his back is facing me then something bad is going to happen. It is kind of dangerous where I live, so my guardian actually helps me be safe. Therefore, Umbanda taught me how to use the spirits for good; it requires experience to understand, and actually listening to a spirit. [Thais, personal communication, June 2014]

Thais alluded to the possibility that the gift from the neighbor was imbibed with a negative energy, and if she had accepted the gift, it would have made her vulnerable to evil spirits. Thais uses the spirits as a type of spiritual barrier between her and the dangers
of the material world. The Umbanda community played an important part in her day-to-day decision making and she relied on the advice of her guardians to keep her safe.

**Frederico**

Frederico is a 40 year old man who has a graduate degree from Universidade Federal do Pará in data processing. He was born in Abaetetuba, a rural town about an hour outside of Belém. Since he was young, he felt symptoms associated with mediumship such as sleep walking, fainting, and incorporation. Around the age of 27, he began to incorporate consistently which led to the feeling of being out of control. At age 30, he decided that he wanted spiritual clarification in his life and to become spiritually balanced. He began attending ceremonies at Pai Gota’s terreiro 5 years ago and stayed in order to continue the Umbanda mission of helping people.

**Erin:** What type of healing does Umbanda provide you as an individual? What makes it popular, and what lures people to the religion?

**Frederico:** The spiritual aspect of Umbanda has in its roots a magical power. A spiritual force that is magic too, and requires a deep connection with other realities, other worlds that most people won’t perceive [here he is referring to the access of the spiritual world that Umbandistas have obtained but others have not]. There is a lot of magic in the practice of Umbanda. I would incorporate spirits on the streets and lose control of myself. Therefore, without control, I found Umbanda and a path towards equilibrium. I feel something from the other world. [Frederico, questionnaire, June 2014]

When Frederico became incorporated, he shook uncontrollably and swayed back and forth, hunched over, and tripped on his feet. Still, he always had a smile on his face and openly laughed during an episode. I assumed that he was in a liminal trance state and
semi-conscious of his lack of bodily control which caused him to laugh at himself. At first glance, he seemed to be incorporated by a drunk, but I later found out that his dono de cabeça was Marinheiro Fernando (Sailor Fernando). Mariners are associated with water and sway back and forth like the ocean waves. They are identified with joy and emotional balance (Scritori 2007). It made sense that Frederico’s dono de cabeça was associated with emotional balance since he stated that the most important thing for him was the development of his spirit and his need for spiritual equilibrium. Unbalanced emotions are correlated to illness and disease (Scritori 2007).

**Gabriel**

Gabriel is a 24 year old man who is the step-grandson of Pai Gota. He has been involved in the Umbanda community since he was 13 years old and is one of the primary consulting mediums in the terreiro. His main guiding spirit is Simbamba who comes from the Northeast religion of Catimbó. Gabriel was, and continues to be one of my best collaborators. Mostly our conversations were casual and did not follow a structured type interview. He often stressed the desired characteristics that were central to their belief system—God, equality, love, charity and acceptance. He also stressed to me the Umbanda philosophy of imperfection.

One night we were having a conversation about the Portuguese and English languages. He often tried to speak in English, but he did not have any formal training. I was often frustrated that I still needed translators to help me understand Portuguese and I told him: “When I come back next year, my Portuguese will be perfect!” He frowned at me, shook his finger, and said: “NO, not perfect!” He lectured me on why trying to
achieve perfection is impractical. He emphasized that humans were full of mistakes and the desire to become perfect was not a part of the Umbanda religion. There was no “perfect” way to understand something and that sometimes we had to rely on faith. He justified imperfection as a human and spiritual quality by restating something he had heard from a Pai de Santo:

**Gabriel:** Once I heard something from a “Pai de Santo,” If Jesus had 12 followers and he could not take care of all of them, then why are we going to bother looking for perfection when Jesus himself was not perfect? [Gabriel, personal communication, June 2014]

Associating imperfection with both humans and deities makes the spiritual world accessible. By understanding that the spirits, who have become encantados as well as the revered son of God, are attributed with actions that are imperfect gives Umbandistas the hope that they can still improve and spiritually evolve into an encantado themselves.

**Erin:** Tell me about how you got started in Umbanda?

**Gabriel:** Alright, so I have been implementing Umbanda since I was 13 years old, and I’ve been serving the Umbanda as a *Caboclo Cambono* [assistant to the Caboclo spirit group]. We are all part of it, but depending on the level of spirituality of the person, we might be able to adjust to different stages of incorporation, like stage 1, 2, or 3. Depending on the person, there is a type of incorporation that might be the right one for you. For me, the Cambono is the right type of incorporation. [Gabriel, personal communication, June 2014]

Umbanda has an extensive hierarchy that is comparable to the hierarchy found in the spiritual world. First, a person becomes a Cambono (assistant), and then they may be baptized into Umbanda. After demonstrating the knowledge and control needed for an
initiate to advance, they go through the consecutive stages and rituals, seven levels in all, ending with the coronation stage where the medium becomes a Pai or Mãe de Santo.\footnote{The levels are: baptism, crossing, wine, herbs and milk, specific herbs and water, herbs and honey, and finally coronation. Each terreiro is different. These were the levels explained to me by Pai Gota.} This stage can be optional, yet, as in the case of Pai Gota, it was expected as part of his mission.

We started a type of existential conversation about the presence of spirits and the spiritual realm and how mediums developed their ability to incorporate. He said that he felt the presence of spirits wherever he went to varying degrees. At times, I became a little lost in what he was trying to convey. He asked me to go get a candle and light it, then stare at it for a while, until the separate rings of light became visible.

\textbf{Gabriel:} You are going to see it, looking at the flame yet paying attention to the surrounding flame so that you can feel the presence of some circles that become bigger and bigger. You have to understand what is going on first, and if you do not believe in it, then you will not be able to see it. The celebration of Umbanda is composed by incorporation and the medium’s marriage to the spirit [often called being seated with the spirit]. I believe this is illustrated in the act of seeing the circles surrounding the flames [the circles surrounding the flames were a metaphor for the energy levels of the mediums and the spirits. The more circles around their head the more energy they have to incorporate spirits that are larger and more powerful]. That is the stage when the spirits incorporate you to do things. It is easier to be incorporated if the frequencies are close to each other, like the energy of the spirits that are not evolved, [the circles that are closer to the flame represent the spirits of the dead that are incorporated in Umbanda]. They might not be evolved because they are too connected to matter [also referred to the earthly vices]. I need to continue with my incorporation of “wine” but I don’t do it because of my ego. [Gabriel, personal communication, June 2014]
Gabriel implied that his own ego prevented him from advancing, and therefore, he could not reach another spiritual level while on earth. It is possible that he believed he would have to wait until he was reincarnated to move to the next level of spirituality.

Gabriel asked me why I was interested in Umbanda, and I responded: “I like Umbanda because it accepts people for what they are.”

**Gabriel:** Yes, some religions might close the doors for you, but Umbanda accepts you for what you are, it lets you be focused on the things that are a part of you. Umbanda grabs everything that is part of you, while other religions want to rule you and are very closed in their beliefs. People who believe in other types of religion, prejudgets Umbanda. If you are prejudice against something, the connection might not be as smooth as we wish. These things have to be balance, therefore to find the balance, the spirit and the incorporated have to find a balance between these feelings. [Gabriel, personal communication, June 2014]

Gabriel reiterated what Pai Gota said earlier. Negative energy causes the human soul to become unbalanced and prone to illness and misfortune. This is caused by the person themselves or when a negative spirit is leaning on them. Out of jealousy or envy, a person can send a negative spirit to do harm. Or, in other cases, misfortune and illness is caused by the spirits perception that they are neglected or mistreated. The solutions to the problems are to acknowledge the presence of the guardian spirits, pay them respect through ebós, and consult the spirits for treatment which will restore Umbandista’s equilibrium and strengthen their soul.

**Mago**

Mago is a collaborator that became my pen pal during the summer of 2014 through the Umbanda community website *Rede Brasileira de Umbanda* (The Brazilian
Umbanda Network, or RBU for short). I found his knowledge of Umbanda to be invaluable and consulted him on many things. He is a member of an Umbanda terreiro in Rio de Janeiro, and has been a member since he was born.

**Mago:** My name is “Mago” I'm 33 years old, married (wife is also in Umbanda), I graduated from an Environmental Engineering program, and I have been in Umbanda since I was born, I come from a family of Umbandistas. In short: Born and raised in Umbanda. Always studied about all religions and I am a researcher from the roots of Umbanda. I always seek the why of things, everything in life has to have a logical explanation. [Mago, personal communication, July 2014]

I found this last statement interesting. Umbanda provides answers for people about the spiritual world, answers that are made available through the presence of a spirit rather than through the study of religious literature written by an unknown source. Secrets about the spiritual world are revealed through direct communication which creates a truth that cannot be argued.

**Erin:** How did you become a medium, and what is your mission?

**Mago:** We are born with this gift [of mediumship]. My mission in Umbanda (this mission also already born with it) is called Ganga. The word Ganga is translated as: “Wizard of Quimbanda” is the medium that is responsible for the left side of the Umbanda, and we are responsible for the offerings to the Exús. We are also responsible for the sacrifice (we don’t always make sacrifices). Another mission that I have inside my yard is as an Ogan, I am responsible for the atabaques (conga drums) that call down the spirits. [Mago, personal communication, August 2014]

**Erin:** How old were you when you first experienced the presence of spirits?
**Mago:** When I first incorporated, I was 16 years old. But since I was a child, I always saw them [spirits]. When I was 4 years old, I've noticed the spirits. I always saw a child who was inside the house and when I was 6 years old, I would see a man of about 45 who was sitting on the edge of my bed. [Mago, personal communication, December 2014]

**Erin:** I heard that sometimes a Pai or Mãe de Santo will ask the spirits to leave a child alone until they are older and able to handle the responsibility of being a medium. Did this happen to you?

**Mago:** The correct term is not to “leave the child alone.” What the Pai or Mãe de Santo does is request the spirits to perform a type a job that when a child has insight [psychic abilities] they return it back to act as fact [meaning that they change what others label a false perception into a factual perception]. The spirit will never abandon a human being. [Mago, personal communication, December 2014]

**Erin:** What does Umbanda do for you?

**Mago:** I have heard several mediums saying why they were in Umbanda and they were all absurd. In January this year [2014], I decided to pick some of these sentences and answer them and put together a story for a newspaper. This is why I chose Umbanda and how a true son [of Umbanda] should think…

‘I'm in Umbanda because I'm sick’
Exit the Umbanda brother! Umbanda does not sell cures, look for a hospital.

‘I'm in Umbanda because it is my mission’
Exit the Umbanda brother! Umbanda, as well as spirituality respects free will, do not feel obligated to anything.

‘I'm in Umbanda because I'm unemployed’
Exit the Umbanda brother! Umbanda does not sell promises of prosperity, or material gain nothing but spirituality, look for an employment agency.

‘I'm in Umbanda because my spirits closed my ways’
Exit the Umbanda brother! Umbanda is an organization that works on light and does not close the way of anyone, much less a device for action, accept your imperfections!

‘I am in Umbanda because I am a strong medium’

Exit the Umbanda brother! Umbanda is not the strong or weak, mediumship competition has no measure, what motivates you is the simple vanity and blindness for power. Look for a circus!

‘I'm in Umbanda because I have karma’

Exit the Umbanda brother! Umbanda does not give you a space for you to perform karmic actions. Karmic actions need to be performed outside of Umbanda. Look for a volunteer program, orphanage, asylum, and finally this will help you have more success.

‘I'm in Umbanda because people need my help’

Exit the Umbanda brother! You are just another medium, you do not have magical powers, and you only exist in Umbanda as task workers.

‘I'm in Umbanda because I pay charity’

Exit the Umbanda brother! You do not give charity; your spiritual guides give charity through your mediumship. You are a TOOL OF DIVINE CHARITY.

My Answer: I'm in Umbanda to seek self-knowledge, understanding of my mission on earth while incarnated and use my mediumship in favor of my progress and their needs. [Mago, personal communication, September 2014]

In the interviews and personal testimonies above, we find several different reasons for becoming interested and initiated into Umbanda. However, a deeper look will reveal that they have more in common than not and can be studied using van Gennep’s “rites of passage” and Turners concept of “communitas” (Turner 1969; Gennep 2004).

The first stage of the solitary rite of passage is the acknowledgment of a separate spiritual world at a young age. Pai Gota was 14 years old; Adriana remembered visiting
terreiros with her mother as a child and having the same skills as the mediums. Thais was seven when she saw spirits. Frederico recalled being small when the feelings began. Gabriel became involved with Umbanda when he was 13 years old, but was exposed to it since he was born, and Mago recalled seeing spirits since he was four years old. During adolescence, they were symbolically separated from the larger population by a spiritual ability, or physically separated by the community as in Pai Gota’s case where he was placed into a mental hospital.

The second stage was realized when Umbandistas recalled being out of control or ill as a result of the presence of these spirits. They did not fit in to the society at large because of their illness or lack of control: Pai Gota suffered mental illness and bouts of unconsciousness resulting in abandonment from his family. Adriana turned to alcoholism. Thais and Frederico, as children and adults, felt like they were unable to maintain control of their situations, and therefore, saw their state as being deviant. Here, the terms “ill” and “out of control” reflect what their society has determined to be a normal diagnosis for the presence of spirits. Their ability sets them apart from everyone else. At this stage, their complaints are usually ignored or treated incorrectly. Their skills were never addressed as abilities, and therefore, they remained in a liminal stage until they found a community that accepted them for what they were—nascent mediums.

The liminal stage was also marked by the accumulation of knowledge by the patient. Often, the child learned to adapt to the wants and needs of the family and learned to “not talk about the spirits” if the intervention was geared toward their rejection (Thais, personal communication, June 2014). They understood that their abilities were labeled as
culturally abnormal by the dominant society and they took measures to conceal their talents.

When the patient was introduced to other religious possibilities that specifically addressed and nurtured their abilities, they transitioned into the third stage of incorporation or integration into the community. They accepted their abilities and nurtured their skills. Umbanda taught them how to control their behaviors and restrict their spiritual communications to culturally appropriate situations. The celebration and acceptance of their deviance allowed them a sense of control over their lives.

Once a person finds a community like the Umbanda community that does not criticize, fear, or avoid their supernatural abilities they have truly found what Emile Durkheim describes as the collective reality of religion:

…religion is something eminently social. Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities; the rites are a manner of acting which take rise in the midst of the assembled groups and which are destined to excite, maintain, or recreate certain mental states in these groups. [Durkheim 1915:10]

Umbanda emerges as the collective group designed to “excite” and “maintain.” They learn to control, and accept the phenomenon that is spirit incorporation. The initiate is transformed from a person without knowledge and power, into a spiritually privileged person with a special connection to the celestial world that gives them a spiritual-status within the community. Their spiritual-statuses displace their unmanageable material-statuses outside of the terreiro.
Chapter 6 is the discussion of how the community of Umbanda provides its members with knowledge and power through spiritual accessibility. Developing the psychic ability of the initiates allows them to directly communicate with powerful spirits that reveal the various ways humans can become a part of the spiritual world. The knowledge of having different methods for obtaining access to the spiritual world is ordinarily withheld from the laity in paternalistic religions. Emphasis is placed only on one method which benefits and reinforces the authority of the church.

Additionally, I will discuss the creation of a spirit pantheon that resembles the Brazilian identity and includes the presence of human imperfections allowing Umbandistas to have a rightful place in the spiritual world. Finally, their beliefs in reincarnation extend their educations and allow them to slowly climb a ladder to Aruanda where they will be rewarded with the love and equality they displayed on earth.
Chapter 6

Discussion and Conclusion

Dr. Robbins’s hypothesis on proximity and distance is appropriate for the continued discussion on spirit possession in the Afro-Brazilian religion of Umbanda. It is positioned as an extension, not an opposition, to previous theories that have dominated the social sciences since the 1960s. I emphasize that the hypothesis of proximity and distance does not oppose these theories because I cannot say conclusively that socio-cultural structures are not involved in creating a more accessible spiritual world. I believe that they are actually crucial to its inception and continuation as a legitimate religion.

The medical and psychological approaches that attribute biological explanations for behavior determined to be spirit possession in other cultures is valid for people raised in an environment that views the spiritual world as distant, intangible, or as non-existent. Humans are seen as being alone in the struggle of the material world and rewarded or punished for their actions after death. However, the medical and psychological approaches do not account for voluntary possession that enables Umbandistas to resist socio-cultural structures.

The sociological approach, while applicable to a variety of situations, has been the product of scholarly interest in positioning a small community within the larger socio-cultural structures that circumscribe and contribute to the community’s identity. Umbandistas do not openly state that they incorporate spirits to resist race, class, or gender oppression. They are merely benefits derived from patriarchal beliefs that
emphasize the high status of intermediaries. Intermediaries are able to negotiate a powerful yet invisible world for their followers and create a community of like-minded people for identity formation and support against the dominant society.

For this thesis, I chose an approach that interprets the symbols and behaviors of my Umbanda community through a combination of emic and etic perspectives. I have determined that they utilize spirit possession, worship a particular pantheon of spirits, and believe in reincarnation for a specific reason. This reason is their need for inclusion in a religious environment based on exclusion.

Since the creation of Umbanda was based on the inclusion of people who were essentially excluded from the formation of the religious scene in the late nineteenth-century, it stands to reason that Umbanda was created to resist the socio-cultural structures that perpetuated segregation and that discriminated against the blended Brazilian identity. Umbanda represents for the mixed race Brazilians the most important features of religion that were unavailable to them because of the exclusionary doctrines found in the religions of Candomblé, Catholicism, Spiritism, and Macumba.

In Candomblé, access to the Orixás was initially based on an affiliation with an African nation and an African identity which included knowledge of the African languages and a strict initiation process based on the preservation of secrets (Johnson 2002). If a person could not trace their lineage back to Africa, it became diluted over time. The connection to the Orixás as supernatural kin was then lost. In contrast,

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38 I say “initially” because over the past century Candomblé has become more inclusive. Reportedly, there are now terreiros that celebrate diversity as part of the Brazilian identity (Capone 2010). There are even orthodox houses that have incorporated the Caboclo spirit pantheon into their celebrations (Brazeal 2003).
Umbanda accepts everyone regardless of identity (Brown 1986). They also make the rituals and ceremonies accessible to the common public with familiar songs and myths sung and told in Portuguese. Most of all, the promise of knowledge through practice and faith creates an atmosphere of accessibility rather than a hierarchy of secrets.

Catholics maintain that the practice of spirit possession is false and an archaic, demonic attempt to throw the material and spiritual hierarchy into disarray. The emphasis on living a life free of sin seems easier for people with access to resources. Their access to knowledge is based on the interpretations of an elite and paternal class that reinforces the socio-economic structures of colonialism (Bastide 1978). Umbanda provides a space for people who have psychic abilities and wish to develop them in a culturally sanctioned environment. The quest for perfection becomes recontextualized as unrealistic. This is especially true for people trying to survive poverty and violence. Umbandistas are given equal access to spiritual knowledge breaks the stronghold of paternalism and places them in a state of individual power with the support of a community.

Spiritism, while probably the closest in doctrine to Umbanda, still worships the spirits that represent the members of the elite class. Therefore, they emphasize that the knowledge of the elite is more valuable than a person who has lived their material life trying to survive corruption, violence, and hunger. In Umbanda, the knowledge obtained from books and higher degrees do not provide the information needed to survive life in the favelas. However, the myths of the encantados do. They represent the ancestors of the Brazilians who used their natural abilities to survive their lower socio-economic position.
As for Macumba, their use of the natural forces to obtain earthly desires such as happiness, fortune, revenge, and love only satisfy the soul in the material world but neglects to prepare the soul for spiritual advancement. Umbandistas believe that their concentration on material things will prevent them from moving forward spiritually, so they concentrate on ethical actions that will favorably place their soul in the next life.

Brazilian’s, who are excluded from the African religion of Candomblé, the elitist religion of Spiritism, and the vilified religion of Macumba become members of a larger, more tangible spiritual world that positions them as benefactors to the greater universe. Their all-inclusive Umbanda faith repairs the damage done by the historical and contemporary practice of exclusion.

In previous chapters I discussed three practices within the Umbanda faith that resolve the problem of distance and exclusion. They are spirit incorporation, the attribution of human qualities to the Umbanda spirits, and reincarnation. Spirit incorporation allows for direct communication to the supernatural. The humanization of the spirits justifies the presence of Brazilians in the spiritual world, and reincarnation allows for mistakes to happen and redemption through education and experience to occur. All of these practices recognize the need for human participation in a greater universe.

**Spirit Incorporation as Communication**

Throughout history, paternalistic Judeo-Christian religions have emphasized the importance of an intermediary who stands between the laity and the supernatural in order to prevent the profane from tarnishing the sacred. The intermediary is usually a man who has undergone a special education which allows him to interpret the word of God and
position it within the context of contemporary life. His skills at biblical interpretations make the word of God infallible and eternal, but his skills also make him an essential element of communication that stands between the devotee and his or her god. His holy position empowers the church and makes his job necessary.

The practice of spirit incorporation eliminates the paternal religious specialist from the equation and allows the devotee direct access to the spirits. Nevertheless, spirit incorporation is still seen as a form of religious mediation. The mediator is the medium whose body is the instrument of the spirit. Still, it is a more direct form of communication because the soul of the medium is displaced during the spirit incorporation episode and replaced by the incorporating spirit. The spirit takes over the speech and actions of the medium’s body and becomes a corporeal representation of the spirit.

Furthermore, the practice of sacrifice explained by Hubert and Mauss also separates the sacred from the profane with an intermediary. In this example, the sacrifice of a victim is used to express reverence for the supernatural, request spiritual aid, or pay regular tributes to keep the material world functioning smoothly. The two worlds are momentarily connected through a ritual while the victim of the sacrifice is transferred from profane to sacred and delivered as a gift to the appropriate spirits. Afterwards, the connection is severed returning the two worlds to their separate realities.

On the other hand, spirit incorporation in Umbanda keeps the two worlds in contact with one another on a daily basis. The use of an intermediary is very different from sacrifice. The intermediary becomes a vessel for the spirit to directly communicate with the patient asking for advice. The medium’s soul is displaced during this event
eliminating their presence from the body and allowing the patient to address the spirit one-on-one.

Spirit incorporation also allows a deeper connection between the medium and the spirit to form creating a reciprocal relationship that contributes to the spiritual evolution of both parties. Charity, in the form of advice and protection, allows the spirit to progress forward from an auxiliary position to an enlightened position giving them access to Oxalá, the Orixás, and the saints. Giving up control of their bodies is also a way for the mediums to give back to the community through charity and evolve their spirit through karma.

**The Anthropomorphized Spirits of Umbanda**

Furthermore, spiritual accessibility in Umbanda has everything to do with the spirits worshipped in the pantheon. Rather than celebrating the immortal entities which represent elements of Olorun and the enduring powers of Mother Nature, they represent humans with all of their flaws and imperfections because “to be alive is to be imperfect” (Leeming 1990:16). According to David Leeming (1990:6) we “read a culture’s myths […] to gleam information about that culture—about its inner identity, hidden beneath the mask of its everyday concerns.” In this respect, the inner identity of the Umbandista is based on survival in a chaotic world riddled with corruption, discrimination, and oppression. The ability to negotiate this world is a talent that is epitomized by the myths of the Pretos Velhos, Caboclos, and Exús. Their ability to rise above their resentment for their inferior position, utilize their natural intelligence to become independent, and outsmart the elite while taking care of their fictive and consanguine kin are qualities
cherished by the Umbandistas. These myths are related to the Brazilian way of life more so than the Orixás.

In contrast, the myths of the Orixás originated in Africa and were linked to the geographical landscape of the mountains, lakes, and rivers associated with African ancestors. In order to travel the Atlantic Ocean with their human kin, the Orixás needed to be removed from the features of the African landscape and placed in the heavens so they could become associated with the larger world and repositioned on the foreign landscape of Brazil. They became distant, so distant and powerful that their energy level is too much for mediums to incorporate. Instead, the Orixás send spiritual representatives who are imbibed with their energy to incorporate their devotees.

The Orixás stand for purity, truth, knowledge, fecundity, bravery, and vanity. These qualities mirror some of the traits that were taken away from the Africans when they were enslaved by the Europeans. *They* desired a pure connection to the supernatural through a lineage that was shattered by slavery. *They* honor truth above all. *They* strive for recovery of the knowledge that was withheld from them. *They* determine the fertility of their wombs and the growth of their children rather than the slave master. *They* bravely stand up for their own code of ethics, and they let their beauty shine through the scars caused by history. However, the myths of the Orixás are the myths of displaced Africans—not Brazilians.

While Brazilians value the myths of the Orixás and worship them as gods, there are some elements with which they are unable to identify. For Umbandistas, purity in religion means acceptance for all regardless of lineage and identity. This is also extended
to vanity which celebrates beauty from the inside through the expression of karmic values. Truth and knowledge are linked to the exposure of corruption, discrimination, and the ability to negotiate an inferior position. Fecundity is balanced between the domestic sphere and the public sphere where a woman can fulfill both roles.

The spirits of Umbanda become poignant metaphors for human society (Leeming 1990). Zé Pilintra is a sly person of the street, husband to no woman, but father to all. Maria Mulambo shuns her domestic position and empowers women to be independent and self-sufficient. Caboclos ignore the constraints of society as they freely move about the world surviving on their natural intelligence. Pretos Velhos remind Brazilians of the past and the sacrifices that were made in order to be free. They remind Umbandistas that, in many cases, forgiveness can be more powerful than resistance.

**Reincarnation as an Education**

Lastly, the belief in reincarnation allows Umbandistas to participate in the spiritual world as nascent souls who spiritually evolve through the practice of karma. Through the application of love, acceptance, equality, and charity, the Umbandista is able to rise above the socio-cultural structures maintained by a society pervaded by corruption and oppression. By virtue of their faith, the mediums become integrated into a spiritual hierarchy that allows for mistakes to occur and lessons to be learned.

The above spirits described represent the positions that humans will eventually occupy in the afterlife once all the lessons of the material world have been learned. In religions that physically place heaven and hell far away, life is viewed as a test to either pass or fail, thereby making the spiritual realm inaccessible during the human lifetime. If
they pass their tests, the souls will spend eternity among the other righteous and humble souls next to their beloved saints and in closer proximity to God. If they fail their tests, then their souls seep down into the fiery depths of hell to spend eternity writhing in misery.

In contrast, Umbandistas view life as an opportunity to learn and death as a transition from one life-lesson to the next. They learn how to release negativity by rising above the socio-cultural structures found in Brazil that forces them to be subject to corruption, discrimination, and poverty. Through the Umbanda myths of the Pretos Velhos, Caboclos, and Exús, they learn to forgive, to resist, to rely on the knowledge provided by experience, and to help others that cannot help themselves. Once souls are able to achieve a personal level of love, equality, acceptance, and compassion through the work of charity, they are able to become spirits of light and gain access to Aruanda.

In conclusion, the creation of Umbanda and their practices of inclusion and accessibility are cornerstones of the adaptability of their religious beliefs and its importance to identity formation and community building. It is a well-known fact that people yearn to belong to society. This is no less true for people who are marginalized because of the power structure and authority of the elite. Metaphorically raising the shield of Ogum (St. George), the members of Umbanda shed the shackles of exclusion and reject all discrimination. They are finally “saintly souls” who “win access to heaven” (Leacock and Leacock 1972:88). Standing together with conviction in their beliefs they “fight the forces of evil in this world” (Leacock and Leacock 1972:88). In my final
analysis, their historical exclusion from the spiritual world becomes their most important fight.
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Appendix 1: Layout of the Terreiro

Layout of the terreiro dissected horizontally across the middle of the courtyard.

Picture A is the front portion of the house showing the part of the front courtyard (1), front gate and guest pathway (2), residence, outdoor family space (3), and the majority of the courtyard (4).

Picture B is the back portion of the yard showing the rest of the courtyard (4), gathering space (5), gathering space (6), and the main terreiro space (7).

(See key below)
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