

## *Our Umbanda*

Eternally living our Umbanda, our “soul medicine,” returns us to Life when loss, sickness, fatigue, and fear would have us call ourselves dead. Our Umbanda, our redemption, our healing and survival, is not limited or stopped by the upheavals, setbacks, or barriers we may encounter in our lives, for, like the earth, the ocean, the sun, moon and stars, and the forests about us, it is older, greater, and will outlive our circumstances; because our Umbanda is one with the force, primeval and ultimate, which creates and destroys all things, which exists within and beyond all manifestation and which, because it cannot be ultimately or completely defined, restricted, let alone possessed or owned, it can then only be celebrated, loved, shared, given away. Thus, our Umbanda, our spiritual healing, our psychological, moral, and existential “cure,” cannot be subdued or diminished; it cannot be thwarted, nor can it be owned, controlled or contrived. Our Umbanda persists and overcomes, it exalts.



Born of the Kongo, of Aruanda, Guinea, Africa, the land of Life, Umbanda comes to us from Mpemba, called Pemba in Brazil, the heart of our ancestors, from the mystic source of immortality which is the sedimentary collection of our ancestors experience, knowledge and wisdom, the remnant bones of their being, formed in the depths of time and held in secret places in the earth, first there, in Africa, and then spreading to every corner of the earth, and, ultimately, to the back of your skull. From there in Aruanda, through the markings, letters, writings and scriptures, the sigils and seals of Pemba, come to us the Three Powers or Currents: the *Pretos Velhos*, the Old Ones, the *Encantados* or *Caboclos*, the Enchanted, Brave Ones, and then *Mabassa*, the Children, our “inner child”

which is always with us. These three limitless Powers the old Africans brought with them in their captivity, across the dreaming bosom of the Bottomless Waters they called Mother Kalunga, to cure our suffering here in this place seemingly so far from the land of Life. In all our work the unfathomable, mothering Waters too are still honored, for it is She who brought us to Life, who brings Life to us, and who, in our end, shall return us yet again to the land of Life. She flows around and between all the divisions which may part us from Life, washing us pure. Eventually releasing us to sink and return again to the land of the ancestors, through Mother Kalunga we circulate like blood through the body of Life.

**Diâdi nza-Kôngo kandongila: Mono i kadi kia dingo-dingo (kwènda-vutukisa) kinzungidila ye didi dia ngolo zanzîngila. Ngiena, kadi yeteka kala ye kalulula y ngina vutuka kala ye kalulula.**

Here is what the Kôngolese Cosmology taught me: I am going-and-coming-back-being around the center of vital forces. I am because I was and re-was before, and that I will be and re-be again.<sup>1</sup>

It is in *remembrance* that our Umbanda occurs; these Powers I've named here above create, allow, and sustain our memory as our memory creates, allows, and sustains these Powers. Through these memories come our Guides, beings from beyond Death who come to return us to Life. Memory now become imagining. We know them through our conscience, through our yearning, through our heroism and our delight, through all the signs, symptoms, and emotions that might guide us back to Life when we have become lost in fear, ignorance, clinging or cringing, to anger, hate or pain.



**Bahia, ô Africa!**

**Vem cá p'ra nós ajudar.**

**Força baiana, força africana**

**Força divina!**

**Vem cá, vem cá!**

*Bahia, Oh Africa!*

*Come over here to help us.*

*Power from Bahia, power of Africa*

*Divine power!*

*Come here, come here!*

The Three Currents represent the flow of Spirit through human life: it comes first as a child, symbolized by the *Mabassa*, in innocence and newness, then as a mature adult full of determination, fight, and vigor, symbolized by the *Encantado* or *Caboclo*, then it rests in old age and wisdom, offered to us in the image of the *Preto Velho*. We see here the Hero's journey and also the hero's aides and companions, we also see the hero's Shadow. Each of the Three Currents manifests in the rituals and giras of Umbanda as "entities" or "spirit guides." Through trance these guides usually arrive in the guise of one of the emblematic types of spirits, Mabassa, Caboclo, or Preto Velho, or rather, we identify them as such...for their origins and entirety of being can go far beyond our limited understanding or ability to grasp. Their names are simply that, names; the power which they bring is at its heart unknowable, unlimited. Ritually, in the Brazilian practice of Umbanda, the spirits' energies, personalities, and missions align them into groupings, and these are named or classed under a practical rubric using the different types and stereotypes of people commonly encountered in the mundane, actual world, both socially in the day-to-day, and historically, in the recollection of history in collective, popular Brazilian memory. The Spirit lets itself be known through the guise of the spirits which is the reflection of our own selves and, also, through everything we consider *other* than ourselves. So the spirits appear as male or female, young or old, boisterous or serene, fighting or pacific, human or inhuman, etc. We also see the spirits Shadow side in the *catiços* or "*exu*" spirits, who in Umbanda are tricksters, carousers, maligned, malignant or anguished souls; not quite evil, but certainly not good, they are the characters without character who teach us what our own character really is. Shadows whose curving and twisted horns and tails always point straight back to the Light, their shadiness reveals the shining potential of who we can be.

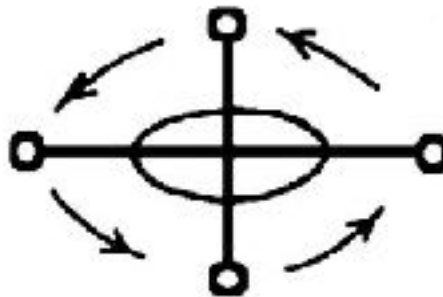


Many in Umbanda speak of our spirit guides as the souls of historical people that return, after having lead a heroic or spiritually accomplished life, coming back to us during trance to guide us towards spiritual achievement such as was theirs. Other guides are said to be souls that have lingered here on earth after an untimely or violent death and who, not having completed their purpose in the world while alive, now continue their spiritual development through the interaction with us the living during the trances of the *gira*, the rituals of Umbanda. Still others assert that the historical manifestations of these spirits are just one aspect of a spiritual force which pre-existed a guide's physical life and continues after the death of the guide's physical manifestation, and that it is this transhistorical, transpersonal aspect of that Spirit which manifests during the trance that we see in living mediums during our rituals. All agree that this quality of a spirit is also essentially one with the Great Spirit or Life-Force in its healing/redemptive function, called *Nkissi*, *Vodun* or *Orisha* in Africa. Our guides then are of, by and for the Spirit.

Following this last argument an Umbandista cannot then be justly accused of "necromancy" (dealings with dead spirits) nor of "idolatry" (worshiping some limited being or thing as equal to God,) at least not any more so than does a Christian or Muslim. Within the Umbandista view there is a unitary oneness to all being(s) that is both transpersonal and transhistorical, thus it is both living and dead (because it is comprised of both "living" and "dead" beings and yet not limited by neither life or death as we perceive them) and being is constantly creating and recreating being(s) in becoming, manifesting itself in myriad forms, aspects and variations. Any being or conceptual expression of being, or of divinity is, in the Umbandista view, inherently *one* with the greater totality of Spirit and can thus, in a given context, be emblematic or symbolic of it. Each and every limited being made of and within the limitless Spirit is thus still Spirit; we are then as much as or more Spirit than we aren't. It is this *unity* that also allows the communion of healing to pass through our bodies, one to another, and return us to life. (Still following this logic further, we Umbandistas could then also accuse those called "monotheists" of idolatry and necromancy in that they insist as being the singular divinity what are, in Umbanda's view, symbols and attributes of what is Infinite, Ineffable and Unknowable, and that they, by holding these limited, partial things or concepts as being Its only true manifestation, thus place these "before" It and worship as solely divine what are a mere fraction and partial, "lifeless," ideas or notions of what we Umbandistas would never think to constrain or limit absolutely, especially with our own self-derived, self-centered, and self limited definitions and ideas.)



Our guides, or rather, the heritage of images, emblems and symbols that signify and channel their force, come from all the people and nations of the world. These are “enlisted,” recruited into Umbanda where they form Seven Lines, each with its own particular power. Each guide is also, simultaneously a facet of the greater Light of the Three Powers, refracted and distinguished in the Seven Lines, each *one* with the Universal Force and Manifestation of Creation, called *Zambi Mpungo*, each a reflection of the Sun’s journey from dawn into day, into night, and, through midnight into dawn again, each the same journey of the human soul from nothingness to being, being into meaning, meaning into actuality, from actuality into death, corruption, and oblivion, nothingness...then to peace, and then, again, forever, *now*, in limitless possibility back into re-creation, towards ever greater meaning. Our guides come to us through the threshold, crossroads, or gateway that is named Kalunga. Mother Kalunga has three faces in the world we know through the senses: Ocean, Forest and Cemetery. Each of these portals is one of Kalunga’s eyes with which She can give vision all the way to Pemba. Through each of Kalunga’s faces we find our way to and from life, unlocking healing and meaning. Without the Waters, the Forest and the Dead, Umbanda is powerless, bloodless, rootless and cannot envision the heavens.



## As Sete Linhas da Umbanda    The Seven Lines of Umbanda

**I. Santos/Saints**

**II. Africanos/Africans**

**III. Caboclos/Indians**

**IV. Senhoras/Ladies**

**V. Souls of the Road**

**VI. Masters of the East**

**VII. Souls of the Cross**

Lemba/Lisá/Oxalá

Kalunga/Aguê/Yemanjá

Mutalambô/Agé/Oxossi

Kisímbi/Aziri/Oxum

Kanjira Munganga/Gu/Ogum

Nzázi/Xeviosso/Xangô

Kigongo/Sapata/Obaluaiyê

*Sun/Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit*

*Moon/Virgin Mary, St. Cyprian*

*Mercury/St. Raphael, St. Sebastian*

*Venus/Immaculate Conception*

*Mars/St. Michael, St. Anthony*

*Jupiter/St. John Baptist, Magi*

*Saturn/St. Lazarus*



In each of the Seven Lines our guides first find their own Umbanda, they are healed of all the injuries, flaws and faults they had in their life “on earth.” In Umbanda they find their sanctification and glorification, their redemption, (which in Asia is called nibbana, “release,”) for us they become, in the language of our African teachers, *Nkisi* in Kongo, *Vodun* among the Fongbe, or *Imòlè* called *Orisha*, among the Nago or Yoruba people. They are supreme medicine that balances the way of life that death and suffering may not overcome us. In the transformative mystery of Umbanda, as we ourselves join in the same process as our guides, also “enlisting” our own ego, emotion and body bound selves in the holy “Phalanxes” of the Seven Lines. First, by beginning to give ourselves over to Umbanda’s emotional, psychological, and spiritual “battle” of development, what was once the fears of our guides becomes our hope, their anger becomes our security, their bitter disappointment becomes our love, their loss becomes our homeland, and their interrupted dreams become our whole lives. In this transformation our guides have their return and, in the turnings of our rituals, our own fears, anger, hatred, loss, and yearning are also healed; we are

transformed by their gentle presence as the Holy Spirit, called *môyo* in Kongo or *aşè* by the Nago, infuses our awareness and our bodies grow supple in the dances of the *gira* while our hearts open to the holiness of life's fullness. In our rituals we turn and welcome the presence of the Spirit in our spirits, we remember our Origin and our Goal. We return through ancient memory and memory, in turn, returns us to this singular, present moment. Our healing occurs. We become Umbanda and are called *Tata Nganga*, *Kimbanda* or in Nagô/Yoruba, *Olorixá*, "One who has what was implanted." One who carries on what was given.



Our Umbanda is, obviously, a process that comes before, is expressed within, and goes beyond, the common systems of human culture and language. We do not expect that any system of human culture or creation should adequately express the fullness of Umbanda, of what I here gloss as "the Spirit." We gratefully receive the wisdom that our many ancestors have given us and honor their lives and work by remaining dedicated to the very same obligation in which their Umbanda had its foundation: **the elimination of ecological, social, physical, emotional, mental and spiritual suffering which enables growth, magnification and bliss.** We will not let dogmatism (which is a result of fear and ignorance) hold us back from this work nor will we let ourselves be swayed by easy solutions or quick fixes (again, driven by fear and ignorance). We will let the primordial creativity and reiterative, perennial wisdom of Umbanda itself remain our first, last, and truest guide through the "dark night" of our time here in these weary, foreign lands far from Africa, the land of Life. This creativity demands both science and art, both tradition and innovation. We do not cling to superstition or blind faith; whether that faith be founded in religion, "science" or "Reason," we know that it must be paired with a willingness for *unknowing*, a brave openness to discovery, to new growth, and that it can only attain its true meaning and use in compassion, in love.

**Ô meu pai, eu tenho medo**

**Ô meu pai, eu tenho medo**  
**Ô meu pai, eu tenho medo**  
**Que a fumaça do seu cachimbo descobrir o meu segredo.**  
**Ô meu pai!**

*Oh my father, I'm afraid*  
*Oh my father, I'm afraid*  
*Oh my father, I'm afraid*  
*That the smoke of your pipe will discover my secret.*  
*Oh my father!*



Following the wisdom of our African ancestors our Umbanda holds its Shadow close. We are thus *quimbandeiros*: sorcerers. "Satanic," we do not eschew the "dark side" but value it as a vital, inalienable part of a concomitant matrix from which any "light side" could have its existence, and vice-versa; we realize that such a binary distinction between "light" and "dark" is possible only because we are creatures with two eyes, two hands capable of creation and destruction, two lobes of brain capable of hate and love. Like Christ, we won't pass up a weekend in Hell if it buys us and everyone else an eternity of Freedom; unlike Christ, we are not here to judge the living nor the dead, only to follow best we can this Path of Love shown to us, which would return us to life. Thus, in ever maturing humility, we entertain and are educated by our demons, our beloved exús; Anger, Greed, Sloth, Lust, Envy, Pride, and Gluttony come to us for their own Umbanda and we engage them in ours. We are thus transformed, ennobled, healed, able to return to Life, and able to give to Life more than we had before. We do not rebuke "the Devil;" we embrace him, forgive him, and through love seek his Umbanda as well as our own. We honor the Trickster, giving him his due; like the fairy tale Hero we are genuine and helpful with the Troll lurking at the bridge and thus we are allowed to cross over to the other side, to continue on with our Journey, to follow our healing, our redemption, and our



bliss. We feed Exú and never fear hunger. We seek to give, trusting in Love we can learn to fear no evil.



Our Umbanda does not override, preempt, or release us from other obligations, understandings, or spiritual commitments in this life, nor does it require that we renounce any emotional, social, religious, or political engagement we may have. It is really just a source to help us in our return to life, our “balancing out.” Umbanda is medicine for what ails us; you owe it simply your happiness at a return to health. Through Kalunga, the Mothering Waters, Umbanda becomes a mirror in which all beings come face to face with themselves and in whose reflective, fecund, generosity all wounds can be healed, all divisions, dualisms, and dialectics can be resolved, laundered to brightness, giving rise to a greening, a new understanding and hope for oneself, the world, and the future. But please, do not think of Umbanda as an escape or release, some easy way out of life’s dilemmas, for it is not. In that you would be disappointed. Yet Umbanda is, like all truth held in spiritual teachings, a precious balm to ease the ache and pain of muscles sore from working. Umbanda fortifies, inspires, and prepares.

**Eu plantei café de meia,  
Eu plantei canaviá.  
Más o café não deu lucro, sinhá dona  
E a cana só cachaça dá.  
Oi, deixa Umbanda melhorar,  
Oi, deixa Umbanda melhorar,  
Oi, deixa Umbanda melhorar,  
Ô minhas Santas Almas,  
Oi, deixa Umbanda melhorar.**

*I planted coffee,  
I planted cane,  
but the coffee turned no profit, Missy,  
and the cane only moonshine makes.  
Oh, let Umbanda make it better.  
Oh, let Umbanda make it better.  
Oh, let Umbanda make it better  
Oh my Holy Souls,  
Oh, let Umbanda make it better.*

How does Umbanda actually happen?

We have “**A Missão de Desenvolvimento**,” the Mission of Development, which is the strengthening of the spirits, individuals, and the community in the wholeness of Spirit. Umbanda, like the body when wounded or in its natural, inherent growth, is not a static thing, it is not something only once achieved or perfected, it is something always in flux, always a work in progress. One often hears, in the pontos and in the talk around Umbanda houses, of “a batalha,” the battle, the struggle to overcome, but this image can be misleading, it implies a war that can be won, a goal to be achieved. Yet being a warrior in Umbanda is a way of life, a way of being...it has no beginning or end, no enemies or champions...just the constant, challenge of coming to life. In Umbanda we have evolved (and continue to evolve) a system of ritual to train ourselves for this challenge.

These rituals, however, not only prepare us for the challenge of spiritual development, they actualize it and celebrate its accomplishment. Indeed, Umbanda’s four standard drum rhythms play out Umbanda’s Mission: Congo, Cabula, Barravento and Ijexá. These rhythms were remembered from Africa by the slave communities of the Nagô, Jêje, Congo and Angola as they reformulated after the Middle Passage in the Candomblé houses of Bahia and Rio de Janeiro, and were later inherited by contemporary Umbanda. These sacred rhythms reflect this multifaceted nature of our rituals and constantly call us to the task at hand:

<b>Congo</b>	Initiation	<i>Earth</i>
<b>Cabula</b>	Work	<i>Air</i>
<b>Barravento</b>	War	<i>Fire</i>
<b>Ijexá</b>	Celebration	<i>Water</i>

These rhythms are the electricity that “turns on” Umbanda; these rhythms are the pulsing of the Spirit in the sacramental body of Umbanda, which becomes

our bodies when we enjoin them in drumming, dance, and song seeking to give and receive its blessing.



### **Fundamentos da Umbanda: Fundamental Ritual Processes**

Umbanda has as its base ritual processes, *preceitos*, precepts or *fundamentos*, foundations, that engage the community physically, emotionally, and intellectually, as a collective and as individuals, to facilitate the transformative action of the spirits. These fundamental ritual processes can be classified along the Seven Lines as follows:

- |  |                                |
|--|--------------------------------|
| 1. Romaria— <i>Pilgrimage</i>              | (Seeking Spirit)               |
| 2. Gira— <i>Rhythm and Dance</i>           | (Invoking and working Spirit)  |
| 3. Rompimento— <i>Purification</i>         | (Releasing blocks to Spirit)   |
| 4. Ebó— <i>Offering and Consecration</i>   | (Feeding/Giving to Spirit)     |
| 5. Mironga— <i>Divination and Vision</i>   | (Hearing/Understanding Spirit) |
| 6. Ponto— <i>Prayer/Invocation</i>         | (Speaking/Signing Spirit)      |
| 7. Recolhimento— <i>Meditation/Retreat</i> | (Being with Spirit)            |

### **Remembering the Spirit through our Spirit Guides**

As our relationship with the Spirit deepens through development in Umbanda our guides also come forth, either through trance-mediumship in the gira, in dreams, in creativity, or by silently and invisibly aiding us from the other side. Generally, in the ritual life centered around the gira, after the medium develops the ability to enter and remain at length in the trance state, spirits will mark stages in the healing process by revealing to the community the following signs:

1. Dance, *brado* or “war-cry”, and gestures of salutation
2. Name

3. Story: lineage and connections, persona
4. Sung ponto
5. Healing or resolving difficult situations, “works” or “miracles”
6. Swearing Alliance or taking on a Mission in Umbanda
7. Drawn ponto, and other visual symbols, “seals”

Even before revealing themselves through these signs our guides begin their work in Umbanda. In the rituals of the gira a medium’s development usually begins by learning, consciously, the pontos (songs), dances, and ritual protocols of the community she is working with, then she begins to open to the movements of the Spirit and her spirit guides will begin to manifest, both in dreams, daydreams and intuitions, and in the movements and seizures of the trance as it takes hold during the sessions of the gira. While trance mediumship is the main focus and goal of the gira, the Spirit’s gifts are not limited to the coming of guides in the trance. The Spirit also manifests in gifts of musicianship, ritual facilitation, interpretation of the trance medium’s statements and behaviors, as well as in visions, intuition, and inspiration to creativity received both during the gira as well as outside of it. All these gifts are considered manifestations and expressions of the healing aspect, Nkissi, of the life-force/Spirit, called Zambi Mpongo in Umbanda, which comes to us via the Three Currents flowing in the Seven Lines. This redeeming life-force flows into and out of us in the growing, developmental, ever-deepening wisdom and power lodged in the human community, expressed, utilized, and celebrated in the rituals of Umbanda. Thus, Umbanda has not just the *Mission of Charity*, to heal all who ask our help during the gira, but also, the *Mission of Development*, to constantly seek to deepen our connection with the Spirit, as well as the *Mission of Glory*, to celebrate its wonders.



## Makuku Matutu: A Threefold Support

The developmental vision of Umbanda follows a threefold course, like the rising, cresting, and falling of waves; this course has been called “three stones that support a cooking pot over the fire,” also equivalent to the three stages of the Sun’s journey from death at sunset, through night, to rebirth with the dawn, and the passage of the human soul from infancy, childhood and immaturity, to maturity and full actualization, and finally to the grace and giving of age. In Kongo these stones are called Makuku Matutu, and almost all parts of life in Kongo, anatomical, social, geographic and spiritual, are attributed to these “stones.” In contemporary Brazilian Umbanda these three phases are each championed, and their task or struggle embodied, in the imagery of the guides as they manifest in the Umbanda’s *Tres Correntes*, or “Three Currents.”

First, the *Mabassa* (children spirits) representing the innocent potential that lies in each of us for growth and to become a more mature, spiritual being; these are the gifts that bring us to the world in the first place, which will sustain us in our time here, and will allow us to make our gift of “self” in and to the world. With the Children we rise with the coming light of sunrise and play in the “original blessing” of divine manifestation. We learn about our innocence.



*Caboclo* and warrior spirits then come to aid us in our difficulties, in our struggle to grow and actualize as powerful, adult people. This then is the second phase: awakening to our deficits and overcoming them while becoming more responsive to threats both from within ourselves and from without. With these spirits we claim the day and feel the heat of noon; here our spirituality manifests as repentance and making good, as an ascent or journey to find truth, as a battle

to defend it, as a triumphal march of celebration, and as our creativity and living revelation of this truth. We learn how to take up our responsibility and power.



Sitting, resting in the shade of experience the *Pretos Velhos* represent release from, and speak to us from a place beyond, our ego-bound and worldly struggles; their message comes from the inevitable place of final attainment and wisdom, guiding us through our development. Sitting into this wisdom and becoming one with it comprises the third phase: we rest in the coming of evening, the knowledge of death. Our achievement of selfhood and truth is balanced by holistic comprehension and acceptance; such knowing is generous and we give ourselves fully, letting go in a final sacrifice or integration, to the development of being arising in the two previous stages. We know our compassion.



The wisdom of the Kongo has its threefold ideological “cornerstone” in this: our lives as we can see them reflecting the cycling through of the Sun’s movements in the sky above by day and “beneath” the earth by night.

Simultaneously, here on earth, while the Spirit, on the other side of Kalunga, moves invisible to us with the Sun through “night” to bring dawn. We all go spiraling creation, through death and life, through the world of the real and the unreal, uniting both in our journeying. While the primary images used to “speak” or reveal this process in Umbanda, the movements and “moments” of the sun and the reflection of these in the developmental growth of humans, it is understood that this process, being archetypal, is in each and every moment of all beings; each aspect of being is itself a particular “sun” moving through its *own* sky. All spiritual growth in Umbanda follows this eternal, archetypal pattern:

→**Sleeping in Potential**→**Awakening and Struggle**→**Accomplishment/Resting**→

While this pattern is seen to be natural and inherent in all living and sentient beings, Umbanda knows itself to be a force coming from the far other side of Kalunga, to guide and enable the organic, natural spiraling growth of being on this side, to heal it of its limitations and initiate it into its largest potential. Umbanda’s power then is what in the Kongo is called *Nkisi* and *Ndoki*, twinned and made complementary by the mirror of Kalunga; Umbanda is both *Nkisi*, (medicine/assertion), to sustain material, incarnate beings and *Ndoki*, (wisdom/acceptance), to revivify the soul, the trans-material, matrix of being. Umbanda is then both “transcendental” and “modern” in its drive towards progress and the attainment of the fullest human potential, while also holding a complementary view of the inherent, present and completely manifest perfection of all being, despite any defects or “evil” we might see in it. It is in the Makuku Matutu, the Three Currents, enlisted into the Seven Lines of Umbanda that our spirit guides come from Aruanda, Africa, the source of life’s manifestation, from beyond Kalunga, to aide us in our *struggle* here in the everyday of this world, this being both our flaw to be overcome and our perfection to be simply understood and appreciated.

**Pedrinha miudinha, tão miudinha na Aruanda ué,  
Lajedo tão grande, tão grande na Aruanda ué.  
Três pedras, três pedras  
Três pedras dentro dessa aldéia  
Uma maior, outra menor  
A mais pequena é que nos aluméia ué.**

*Little stone so small, so small in Aruanda, yeah.  
[Caboclo] Big Stone so great, so great in Aruanda, uh-huh.  
Three stones, three stones*

*Three stones in this village  
One is biggest, another smaller  
Yeah, but it's the smallest one which lights our way.*



*Umbanda's rituals, unfolding us in this Threefold Process of Growth, the Makaku Matatu, have then as their objective the actualization of Three Missions or commitments: 1) Development or Evolution, 2) Charity, and 3) Glory or Realization.*

**1. Mission of Development**--to develop and deepen our ability to live consciously in the Spirit through our work with spirit guides in community with others. We seek to become the best we can be.

**2. Mission of Charity**--to use our talents and gifts to help all who come to us regardless of personal, individual gain. We seek to love and care for others, sharing of ourselves in order to sustain the world.

**3. Mission of Glory or Mission of Realization**--to celebrate and acclaim the beauty of the Spirit wherever and whenever it reveals itself to us, moving ourselves ever deeper into its enchantment. We seek to exalt our being as we already are, even in our seeking to be more.

These three Missions have one heart and they branch from one root: **joining in the healing response to suffering which enables spiritual growth, magnification, and bliss.** This is our Mission, our Goal and the entirety of our Being. Our Umbanda.

**Salve Seu Caboclo Aguapi!**

**Salve Jurema!**

**Salve Vovó Catarina!**

**Salve Pai Benedito!**

**Salve o povo de Aruanda!**

**À Seréia do Mar! Odóia!**

**Yemanjá, Kalunga Grande,**

**Mãe das águas!**

**Salve Umbanda!**

*Hail Chief of the Aguapi Indians!*

*Hail Jurema, [Wisdom of the Forest]!*

*Hail Grandmother Catarina!*

*Hail Father Benedito!*

*Hail to the people of Mother Africa,*

*To the Mermaid of the Sea! Odóia!*

*Yemanjá, Great Kalunga,*

*Mother of the waters!*

*Hail Umbanda!*



## **Defining Umbanda:** *Will the Real Umbanda Please Stand Up?*

One of the great difficulties I face in sharing the Umbanda I have learned and loved in Rio de Janeiro with people here in the United States has been figuring out just how to explain it, historically and objectively, and then on its own terms, *in* its own terms, so that others can begin to experience the beauty and power that I have seen. Across a gulf of language, culture and values, I feel an ocean of struggle, as big as the Atlantic, I also find myself, my own experience of Umbanda, first from the skin inwards, and then, from the skin outwards, as I have become, body and soul, enlisted in Umbanda. I find myself in a fight to speak still more subjectively, to say something from my heart and from my soul while not losing track of “the facts” and of how others might see, experience and define Umbanda. I search for a way to communicate this miraculous, spirit of healing I met in Rio de Janeiro in the giras of Umbanda, especially now as I recognize that same spirit moving among us in the United States, here in San Francisco, in our own spontaneous and necessary gatherings. Now, as people here (specifically those involved in the African based Lukumi and Palo traditions of Cuba popularized in the United States, or North American Black folks working in their own traditions) recognize elements of Umbanda in the pre-existing knowledge base of their traditions, they often also become confused by Umbanda’s apparently strange or divergent elements, elements which dispel an easy recognition as a purely “African” tradition, especially using the criteria established by anthropologists, Lukumi practitioners, afrocentric Black Nationalists, popular opinion, and even Umbandistas themselves. Elsewhere I will describe the historical development of Umbanda as a living collection of religious and spiritual traditions in Rio de Janeiro. Presently, however, I want to look at the wide range of possibilities of what Umbanda is, and can be, beyond its original, historical appearance in Rio and to also place “our Umbanda,” the Umbanda which we today in the United States are creating as we join together in responding to our spirits’ call to evolution, within this range of possibilities and even beyond it.

Umbanda, while having the reputation of a porous inclusivity of the beliefs and practices of other religions and healing practices around it, such as Spiritism and the Catholic Church, hasn’t really absorbed much from these traditions other than some superficial, decorative elements, except, however, for the inclusion of these traditions’ *language*. Not so much has Umbanda taken on the theology or beliefs of any other tradition, rather, it has taken in the verbal, symbolic or gestural forms of these other traditions while keeping intact Umbanda’s unique practice, theology and philosophy. Umbanda changes like a chameleon; its colors shift to conform to those surrounding it

yet it remains itself, its own, singular creature. Because of this apparent inclusiveness Umbanda's original African ritual and theology can often be hard to discern, both to outsiders as well as insiders.

Umbanda has been critiqued for a lack of coherence and in most writing by outsiders on Umbanda there is an attempt to valorize either its Spiritist or African roots over any others. Arguments have been made: "Umbanda is corrupted Spiritism that has incorporated African elements," say some while others assert that, "Umbanda is an African tradition that has been taken over by White people bringing with them White ideas, such as Spiritist concepts and Catholic values." This camp, the 'pro-African' side, argues that Umbanda has been either diluted, uplifted, enlightened, or spoiled by the introduction of Spiritist and Christian notions, "whitening" it beyond recognition as an "African religion." At the same time many have called Umbanda "Brazil's own religion" emphasizing its "melting pot" nature as rendering it uniquely Brazilian and thus valorizing its eclectic mixing and syncretism while also expounding that Umbanda is a novel, modern revelation of spiritual truth specifically intended for Brazil, a modern nation whose people share a unique purpose in "Zâmbi's divine plan." Most writers and commentators, however, will converge to attest to Umbanda as being middle-class, tacky, and aesthetically or theologically challenging to the educated, especially to those of us born and raised outside of its Brazilian cultural matrix and indeed, getting a handle on what Umbanda not only is but is *doing* is often impossible for anyone unfamiliar with lighting a candle at crossroads at midnight or throwing roses into the ocean to beseech a special favor of the Mother of Waters, named Kalunga, Yemanjá, the "Star of the Sea" called the Virgin Mary, Janaína, Dandalunda. Also, it doesn't help that, like the chameleon, Umbanda is so often elusive, choosing the seclusion of the Forest and snapping at those who would grasp at it.

Yet what does the word "Umbanda" actually name? Is it possible to draw any conclusions or definitions for what we might be talking about when we use the word "Umbanda"? What is real, genuine Umbanda and what is *not*?

There are at least two other problems to consider soon after the "Spiritism with African elements vs. African tradition with Spiritist additions" debate. The first is that the word Umbanda can be used in different ways and in different contexts and has different definitions and connotations in each, only one of which actually defines a specific spiritual practice with a distinct set of rituals and particular philosophy. The second problem is how to discern exactly which phenomena are being referred to when the word Umbanda is used in an exact sense to denote a particular spiritual practice having its own identity, distinct from other named religions, traditions, practices, and theologies. I first want to deal with this second problem, then the first, saving the deeper complexity of just what *real* Umbanda is and what is *real* about it, until after we

have a better sense of even what Umbanda is on a pragmatic level as a social phenomenon.

### **First: Defining Umbanda**

The challenge of attaining an accurate definition, as well as an origin and delineation, for Umbanda takes a certain amount of effort; luckily Umbandistas themselves have spent the later half of the 20th century hammering out most of this for us already. Nonetheless, the variety of groups and their ritual styles self-defining as Umbanda is vast and each claims to be the “real” Umbanda. Not only are there regional differences found in Umbanda houses from one city or state to another in Brazil, there are also differences in these due to the racial background and class affiliations of practitioners, also doctrinal and hermeneutic disparities from one individual or group to another and further differences derived from the inclusion of other spiritual or ritual practices alongside what one may call Umbanda, all of this leading to ongoing complexity in creating a simple subject named “Umbanda.” So, discussions on origins of Umbanda or of its true “essence” must first consider the wide range of Umbandista phenomena. Still I believe we can make some headway and our examination will be quite fruitful, especially if we become willing to look beyond simple definitions and look with an inclusive eye tolerant of diversification and multiplicity.

In his book, **O Que É A Umbanda**, *What Is Umbanda*, Cavalcanti Bandeira, a proponent of Umbanda writing in the 1970's, provides an interesting and somewhat useful classification and description of four different “Types” or modalities of Umbanda, it is one based on that of an even earlier writer. These four modalities basically reflect a spectrum of beliefs, practices, and ritual forms that stretch between two distinct poles of influence. The first pole, Kardecist Spiritism, imported to Brazil from France starting in the mid-1800's on into the 20th century by Brazilian middle and upper classes, sits down to seance tables in dimly lit parlors at one end while the second pole, the African Traditions, brought over by slaves and freed Africans during and after the slave trade during the colonial and post-colonial eras, rises to dance bedecked in trade beads in bright dance halls, their feet tracing out ancestral patterns to ancient rhythms. I quote Cavalcanti Bandeira at length<sup>2</sup>:

“The “Tata” Pedro dos Santos, who seems to have [also] started a study of his own on the four types of Umbanda, following the same direction previously drawn out by [myself] Cavalcanti Bandeira, presents a schema of classification, based on the frequency in which certain elements arise in the practices of Umbandistas relative to specific *selective factors*, such as: the locale [of practice], clothing, music, leadership in the rituals, doctrinal orientation, and outside rituals. Starting from there he proposes the following classification: 1 - Table Umbanda, 2 - Parlor Umbanda, 3 - Barnyard Umbanda, and 4 - African Umbanda.

Nonetheless, in grouping these tendencies, “one should not accept this schema as being an absolute compartmentalization which can be easily discerned, to the contrary, we know of the existence of mixed modalities, variations of the base types mentioned”.

In the **First Type**, *Spiritist Umbanda*, or *Table Umbanda*, [we see] practices with a strong evangelizing influence are characteristic because “the adepts of this modality are, in general, coming out of Kardecist Spiritist Centers.”<sup>3</sup>

*Locale*: a common living room, equipped with a table and chairs. In general there are no images of wood or plaster, nor an altar. On the walls, portraits of “guides of the house”: Caboclos and Pretos Velhos, sometimes, a cross and a print with a conventional rendering of Master Jesus. Very rarely, we have found the “drawn ponto,” placed on the table, or immediately underneath the portraits of the “guides.” There is always a candle lit, a glass of water on the table, at the door, or in one of the corners of the room.

*Clothing*: There is no requirement of uniformity, nonetheless there is a prevalence of wearing white clothing, without decoration and reasonably the same for both sexes.

*Sessions*: These are, in general, “for charity” and “for development”, with works of de-obsessing, passes<sup>4</sup>, and consultations; there are frequently meetings to teach doctrine.

*Ritual*: The mediums form a chain sitting around the table, with the director taking one of the heads; candles are lit and the director pronounces a prayer, usually the “Prayer of Charity”<sup>5</sup>, and opens the session.

*Music*: When there exists musical accompaniment it is usually provided by records or recordings of [European] religious music; there are no chants or hand clapping.

*Doctrinal Orientation*: Christian, with the marked presence of the Spiritist Gospel<sup>6</sup>.

*Outside Rituals*: Practically non-existent, some groups perform baptism in waterfalls. Complete absence of African practices.

The **Second Type**, *Ritualistic Umbanda* or *Parlor Umbanda*<sup>7</sup>, is “much more prevalent than Spiritist or Table Umbanda and has a large number of practitioners. We find the ritualist modality presenting itself with three characteristics:

--absence of percussive musical instruments (atabaques, drums, etc.);

--a well defined sequence of norms for worship appear

--the existence of a hierarchy of positions and functions in the process of ritual”

*Locale*: a larger room, in which an altar stands out (gongá) with images of the Saints (Orixás), Caboclos and Pretos-Velhos, and necessary equipment for worship (pieces of pema [chalk, kaolin], candles, incenses, etc.) which can be seen under the altar.

*Clothing*: white clothing becomes obligatory, frequently being complemented by the presence of necklaces (guides)<sup>8</sup>, head-tie, a small hand towel, with embroidered pontos [insignia and emblems] which distinguish hierarchic grades among the practitioners of the group.

*Sessions*: There are, in general three types of sessions: those providing for the public, those for developing the mediums, and those dedicated to festive ceremonies, in accordance with the Umbandista calendar. A monthly session for “unloading”<sup>9</sup> also appears with some frequency.

*Ritual*: A preoccupation with an established sequence of ritual norms exists, from the beginning of the service till the closing of the session. One finds a selection of sung pontos, with specific purposes: pontos for smudging<sup>10</sup>, pontos of praise, invoking pontos.

With the incorporation of the Chief-Guide [into the body of a medium] he begins to direct the service, the incorporation of other guides follows, and each is assisted by helpers (cambonos) who also help direct those seeking consultations.

*Music:* Sung pontos accompanied by hand-clapping are almost always the only music used.

*Doctrinal orientation:* The principle of the evolution of Souls is well attested, [as are] the doctrine of Reincarnation, the Law of Charity, and the existence of Guiding Spirits that assist incarnated and suffering humans, fulfilling the designs of the Orixás<sup>11</sup>.

*Outside rituals:* Works are done with consistency at waterfalls, the forest, and at beaches; rarely are “obligations”<sup>12</sup> made in cemeteries<sup>13</sup>.

In the **Third Type**, *Rhythmic Umbanda*, or “*Barnyard Umbanda*”<sup>14</sup>, we see an influx of africanist tendencies, yet without the rigid requirements of the styles of worship found in Candomblé.

*Locale:* Preferences are for a large, covered [outdoor] area, with internal divisions [of space] destined for dressing rooms, storing instruments for worship, washrooms, bathrooms, etc. The place for worship includes, not infrequently, spaces reserved for the Orixás. The highly decorated altar has, besides the “firmeza”, seats for the Orixás<sup>15</sup>.

*Clothing:* aside from the white clothes, others of various colors are used for certain ceremonies, especially on festive commemorations.

*Sessions:* These are of the same nature as the previous modality, except that giras for the “compadres” appear alongside the ordinary sessions.<sup>16</sup>

*Ritual:* Ritual dancing arises, the rite of salutation to the gongá and to the drums, as well as a special greeting to the Chief of the Terreiro, in which there can be detected an element of obedience and submission; one perceives gradations of influence from Candomblé and other African based traditions.

*Music:* The entire unfolding of the ritual is marked by the rhythms laid down by the “ogãs” with the “toque”, or playing, of atabaques [drums]; the sung pontos, the dance steps, the imitative mimicry of the Orixás qualities, all accompanies the meter determined by the orchestra of drums and atabaques.

*Outside rituals:* All the aforementioned rituals are done as specified in the previous modality, to which are added the sacrifice of animals on special occasions.<sup>17</sup>

In the **Fourth Type**, *Rhythmic and Ritualistic Umbanda* or *African Umbanda*, there is a preponderance of influence from African traditions, which run together in the formation of Umbanda, most notably Candomblé of the various “nations” and other popular cults of Brazil; this modality should be viewed as a transitional phase.

*Locale:* Because of the demands for land space to accommodate not only the “barn” for practices integral to worship and for areas used other purposes, such as rooms for the Orixás, a room for initiations, chambers for “recollection” [meditation/retreat] and suitable places for a kitchen, bathrooms, etc., rural locations are generally preferred.

*Clothing:* Colored vestments establishing different functions are obligatory; also required are clothes that identify the connections between the adepts wearing them with head orixás. As a norm, the use of white clothing typifying uniformity isn’t prevalent.

*Sessions:* These follow the same ritual line and with analogous characteristics as described for Yard Umbanda. The African influence is strong and prevails in all ceremonial and liturgical acts.

*Music:* Aside for the orchestra of drums and atabaques, which are here indispensable, one also notices the preference for chants in African languages.

*Doctrinal orientation:* As much as in the previous modality as in this one, the Theogony of the Afro-Brazilian Traditions is held completely with the roots of Candomblé beliefs appearing in marked form.

It is clear that the above classification shows only an image of phenomena occurring in the various modalities described, it is not intended that these Types be rigid in their definitions, but that there be various shades between the modalities described, this may make it difficult at times to make a necessary distinction of a particular mode of practicing Umbanda.”<sup>18</sup>

I too have retained this basic schema in my own analysis of Umbanda’s permutations and development and present it adding two more “types.” Yet I also first distinguish **Umbanda Brasileira**, Brazilian Umbanda, from **Umbanda Universal**:

**Umbanda Brasileira**--This Umbanda consists of the original groups in Brazil, and perhaps originally in Africa, calling what they do “Umbanda.” In Brazil these groups came out from the traditions and practices of folks in its predecessor tradition Cabula at the beginning of the 20th who integrated contributions from a variety of sources in Brazil, including most predominately Roman Catholic Christianity and Kardecist Spiritism. This Umbanda was original to the state of Rio de Janeiro and spread rapidly from there to other parts of Brazil. The first leader found mentioned in the literature of and about Umbanda was Zélio Moraes who received the spirit Caboclo of the Seven Crossroads, this spirit being identified as the one who in November of 1916 first named the charitable healing through spirit mediumship called by many as “umbanda” as “Umbanda,” identifying it as a spiritual practice or religion separate and distinct from others around it and with its own specific *Missão*, Mission.

**Umbanda Universal**--This is both Umbanda Brasileira, in it’s deepest spiritual or practical sense, and any and all spiritual practices analogous to it from around the world and throughout history, which hold the same goal: “To join in the healing response to suffering which thus enables spiritual growth, magnification, and bliss.” This definition includes Umbanda Brasileira, any and all groups that use the word “Umbanda” to define themselves, and, (if they don’t run away too fast), any group or practice that shares the deeper principles and mission Umbanda espouses.

So, following Cavalcante Bandeira, within **Umbanda Brasileira** I then delineate the following modalities:

1. **Umbanda Africana**--this is the Umbanda that works the older traditional ritual forms of Cabula<sup>19</sup> and Omolocô,<sup>20</sup> and also from contemporary Candomblé and

Nigerian Orisha practices into its ritual style, while its language and hermeneutic most always still show some integration of Spiritist, Christian, and New Age ideas and philosophy. There is also a strong tendency here to include the use of shrine objects, hierarchy, and emblematic clothing from Candomblé traditions which often causes confusion with and for, and rejection by, Candomblé purists as well as a similar, complementary reaction from other Umbandistas of a more Spiritist bent, who see the inclusion of Africanisms as extraneous to Umbanda's Mission or as "backwards" or "primitive."

2. **Umbanda de Terreiro**, "Barnyard Umbanda" or **Umbanda Crioula**, Creole Umbanda--Groups practicing in this modality of Umbanda in Brazil are probably the most well organized socially and politically at present and have created conferences, alliances, and other organizational bodies and literature which have helped to codify Umbanda practices, even while leaving room for great diversity.
3. **Umbanda Ritualística**, Ritualistic Umbanda, or **Umbanda de Salão**, Storefront Umbanda--I have a feeling that this modality of practice used to enjoy a popularity in the mid 20th century that has now passed. Most old literature on Umbanda reflects the ritual forms and values espoused by these groups, while more contemporary literary production describes Umbanda de Terreiro. That said, I'm sure that there are still many groups functioning in this modality, especially outside of Rio de Janeiro and Bahia where the direct influence of African tradition is less prevalent socioculturally.
4. **Umbanda Espiritista**, Spiritist Umbanda, or **Umbanda de Mesa**, Table Umbanda, also called by many, **Umbanda Branca**, or White Umbanda--Currently, in Brazil, there seems to be a fairly distinct separation of Spiritist groups from those espousing more African oriented spirituality. What is most important to our study here is recognizing the great inheritance and lasting mark Spiritist discourse and terminology have given Umbanda. It is tempting, for those of us coming from a more "afrocentric" or africanist orientation, to want to dismiss or devalue Umbanda's European roots, exemplified in French Kardecist Spiritism, (and for such roots we might also be tempted to completely dismiss Umbanda itself from our consideration or appreciation), but I think to do so is a mistake, especially for those of us truly looking for "Africa." What is important to remember is that the spirits now popular among Umbandistas themselves "invaded" Spiritist seances and meetings, starting historically when the Caboclo of the Seven Crossroads appeared at a Spiritist meeting in 1916, demanding recognition and admission, as well as changes to ritual procedures, which would valorize the cultural inheritance of Africans and Native people, insisting on their importance in Brazil's "spiritual development" as a people and also to humanity in general. These spirits did not negate or devalue the Spiritist context into which they were coming but rather sought to add to it and transform it, revealing a deeper truth of old practices, both to

the Spiritist groups and to the African based traditions, emphasizing aspects of *both* traditions that had at that time gone latent, were being ignored, or which were yet to emerge. If we are looking then for “Mother Africa,” as the spiritual source, revivification, and value of African people, where better to find it, (and insist upon it,) than in this modern revolution of spiritual practice by African descended people inspired by spirits self identifying as “de Aruanda,” from Africa.

5. **Umbanda Esotérica, Esoteric Umbanda**--This is probably the latest phase of Brazilian Umbanda. Here we see Umbanda begin to incorporate and use “New Age” and other forms of spirituality and religiosity from a wide variety of sources well and beyond the Spiritism brought to Brazil in the 19th century. Forms of occultism, Kabbalism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sufism have all begun to be shared in an open, eclectic syncretism, with an emphasis on individual spiritual development and a lessening of emphasis communalism and group rituals.

We can now add another type of Umbanda to the list:

- 6) **Umbanda Americana, American Umbanda**--I have called it “Americana” not out of ignorance that Brazil is not part of the Americas, but to call attention to the fact that Umbanda’s foundational Mission of Evolution, Charity, and Celebration of Life (Makuku Matutu) has gone beyond Brazil’s borders and expanded to become “pan-american” while still acknowledging and preserving its Brazilian heritage by retaining the name Umbanda in favor of adopting a more widely recognized term, such as “bodhisattva vow” or “Spiritism.” In calling this Type “American” I also want to draw attention to the unique cultural inheritance that now flavors Umbanda as it grows in the United States and other countries of the Americas.

### **Anibal’s Umbanda:**

Before moving on to examine the deeper meanings the word Umbanda can carry, I want to look now at my own experience of Umbanda, first in Brazil and then in my own work and development here in the United States, mostly in the Bay Area of San Francisco. I first started learning Umbanda some 30 years ago in Rio de Janeiro while traveling in South America as a young man. I was first introduced to Umbanda at Tenda Espírita Pai Jerônimo through the friendship of Iyá Marinete Martins de Souza. My apprenticeship with her continues to the present.

Following the schemata above the Umbanda I was taught at Tenda Espírita Pai Jerônimo (TEPJ) could best be called a mix of Terreiro and African Umbanda modalities. While the actual Umbanda rituals at TEPJ follow the precepts of Umbanda de Terreiro the presence of Candomblé shrines and rituals for Orixá following Candomblé de Ketu tradition alongside the Umbanda practice at TEPJ, even while held as distinct and apart, have kept the understanding, hermeneutics, and tastes of that community in an



“africanist” orientation. There are many Umbandistas (mostly of the Table Umbanda modality) that would rebuke much of what is done and taught at TEPJ saying it was “macumba” or “black magic from Candomblé.” Also, the spirit and values of Iyá Marinete, as well as a certain inheritance from her father, Pai Jerônimo, have shaped the Umbanda and Candomblé of TEPJ; an emphasis on flexibility of ritual practice to avoid dogmatism, a psychological appreciation for individual community members’ backgrounds and experience, and an open, integrationist attitude towards the community’s collective inheritance of culture, be it African, European, Native, etc., looking for points of commonality or complementary distinction, have been an ongoing drive by TEPJ’s leadership. Through much of my time learning with Iyá Marinete and living in her house I have come to not only understand much of Brazil’s history and peoples, and the spirituality they have created, but I’ve also grown to understand much more deeply the history, people, and spirituality of the Americas, of the United States, of my family, of myself, and then really, of the world...all through the funny three-fold lens of Umbanda’s ‘funky’ tradition.

Here in San Francisco I began attending rituals and “misas” of people who, while not calling themselves Umbandistas, seemed in my view and in my own understanding, to be very much engaged in a practice almost identical to the Umbanda I was taught at TEPJ. In working with Caribbean practitioners of Espiritismo (Spiritism) and in the “misas” of Lukumi santeros here I have seen spirits engaged in the same Mission, dedicated in the same charity and sharing the same wisdom as that we call “Umbanda” in Brazil using similar ritual formats and techniques. These “misas” seem equivalent to the sessions or giras of what is described in the schema above as Table or Storefront Umbanda. Also, in attending some ceremonies of Palo groups, I have seen rituals which could, with ease, (following this schema of classification), also be classed as equivalent to “African Umbanda.” There seems to have been in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, a similar cultural ambience that allowed a parallel evolution of popular spiritual and religious beliefs and practices as did in Brazil. Just as striking as the similarities between the two areas’ evolutions of African tradition, however, are the differences between them. Many times I’ve taken a pause and asked myself, “What are these people doing?” Can we embrace their spirits and their work as Umbanda? Is it really “the same”?

Interestingly enough, my own Umbanda practice here in San Francisco, far from the Atlantic shores of the African diaspora, has also become more informed by African philosophy and theology, specifically that of the Kongo, rather than from Kardecist Spiritism or other “New Age” or European derived teaching, yet it has also taken on much of the flavor of local tradition and Bay Area spiritual “fads,” not to mention being more tuned to my own more individualistic, artistic, and intellectualist leanings. I would still have to admit that I have been deeply influenced by readings of Sufism, my gentle exposure to Zen Buddhism through Jenna Drakko of the San Francisco Zen

center, and to the celebration of Christ's mysteries and the teachings of St. Francis at Saint Gregory of Nyssa on Mariposa at Mariposa and de Haro. I have also had the advantage of studying for a master's degree in anthropology, training for and becoming licensed as a Marriage and Family Therapist, and a continuing access to literature on "possession cults," as well as a host of other books, lectures, etc. on religion and spirituality from around the world in a variety of contexts to provide a wider and wider, more informed view of my own very local exposure to the Spirit in Rio de Janeiro. However, in my work to teach Umbanda here in San Francisco I try to show Umbanda as much as possible as it was shown to me: low on explicit interpretation or even much explanation and high on participation and an active social and psychological involvement. Nonetheless, I'm sure there are Umbandistas of all the "Types" that would say that my Umbanda isn't *real* Umbanda. Be that as it may.

Now, having explored the range of ritual systems of what is called, or could be called, Umbanda, the field upon which the various versions of Umbanda are being played, I want to look again at just what this term "Umbanda" means. What is the ball being kicked around on this field? Each team wears its own colors, each screaming out its own version of the rules, and each perhaps really playing its own game, distinct and divergent from all the others, each scrambling after the ball in joy and fury, each still relentlessly vying for the trophy of being seen as the "real Umbanda." Gooooooooo!!!!

## **Second: The meanings of Umbanda and the umbandas' Meaning**

As a word, the term "umbanda" means most simply "curing" or "healing." It is derived from Kimbundu, a Bantu language spoken in the southwest parts of Africa. In Kimbundu the word "mbanda" means the knowledge, art, and science of medicine, curing or healing.<sup>21</sup> One who performs mbanda is called a kimbanda.<sup>22</sup> (Kimbanda, spelled in Portuguese as Quimbanda, is a word which in Brazil has come, ironically, to mean Umbanda rituals, technology or practices that are used to meet selfish, individualist and amoral needs, usually done for money, and which is thus the *opposite* of most Umbanda practice.)

However, if we start with this basic definition of Umbanda as mbanda, healing, then much of human culture and activity could be loosely called umbanda...much of Western and Asian medicine for example, almost all Native and African traditions have healing as a basic and vital component. We also hear the word umbanda used this way in Brazil, within the Umbandista communities. Both in casual conversation and in the lyrics of the pontos we hear of spirits, both incarnate or otherwise, that "matricula na Umbanda," enlist in Umbanda, or becoming a "tata de Umbanda," a leader in Umbanda. What such phrases refer to is that the subject talked about has engaged in a three-fold process of healing,--healing first themselves, then working to heal others, and finally celebrating the accomplishment and teaching others to heal in the same way. These citations may or may not necessarily indicate an active participation in an

Umbandista ritual system, one could, for example, “enlist” in Umbanda by becoming a dentist or studying Science of Mind Christianity. What is important here is the process of personal growth and transformation leading to generosity to others. In this sense, “enlisting in Umbanda” is very much the same as the “Bodhisattva vow” of Mahayana Buddhism. Here the word Umbanda refers to something within and beyond the specifics of any cultural system of healing or spirituality, to the *results* and *common goals* of such systems.

A second usage of the word Umbanda, one we have seen described in the schema of Umbanda’s “Types,” is the more commonly used and prevalent meaning of the word: Umbanda is the name for a range of spiritual traditions which share certain characteristics found originally in Brazil. These traditions all share the same common goal of Umbanda, healing. They also all share a common heritage of religious images and symbols, lexicon, theology, and practice created in the historical development of Brazilian culture, specifically from Kongo and Yoruba traditions, Roman Catholic Christianity, and French Kardecist Spiritism.

Another, third, common use of the word Umbanda is particular to practitioners of the various African Based Traditions in Brazil, such as Candomblé de Ketu, Jêje, and Angola, Xangô of Recife, Batuque. Within these communities the word “Umbanda” is used to name as “umbanda” the practices for “spirit guides” other than the primary African deities, Orixá, Vodum, and Nkisi, worshiped in those traditions. Umbanda here refers to all the ritual processes, traditions, and protocols used to invoke such spirits as found in the more formal Umbandista groups, such as Caboclos, Pretos Velhos, and the Povo da Rua, borrowed, used and incorporated by practitioners of the other African Based Traditions. These speakers will also use the word, even more singularly, to mean *acts of charity*, healing rituals done for someone unable to pay the fees commonly paid in the African Traditions. As well, Umbanda, for those in the African Traditions, also implies their work to do healings *without* the use of animal sacrifice, another commonality of the African Traditions which is much more rare in Umbanda (and repudiated by many Umbanda groups and practitioners.) Thus, for those adhering to the more African oriented Traditions, Umbanda becomes the term to be used when the “preceitos,” precepts, of Umbanda (or values similar to them) are guiding their actions, whether they are using rituals common to the mainstream Umbanda groups or not.

Looking at these various ways of using the word Umbanda, and even the multiplicity and variation present within the more formalized Umbanda groups and their traditions, we can see why it is so difficult to pin down just what Umbanda is, let alone what is *real* Umbanda.

For whatever Umbanda is or isn’t, and whether it’s unloved for being too African, too mixed, too White; or for being too Brazilian or too Americanized; too tacky or too intellectualized; too modern or too archaic and superstitious; whether it knows

itself to be Umbanda or thinks itself something other; whether it is yours, mine, or ours, it is, however, standing up, alive and revivifying.

*Saravá a Umbanda!*

*Hail Umbanda!*

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<sup>1</sup> Kimbandende Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau, 1980, front page

<sup>2</sup> The quotations within this quote are evidently Cavalcanti Bandeira quoting Tata Pedro dos Santos. Footnotes within the text of the quote are my own.

<sup>3</sup> This modality is called “Umbanda de Mesa” or “Table Umbanda” because of its strong integration of Kardecist Spiritualism; Kardecist “sessions” or meetings take place with members seated around a table and in this modality of Umbanda we still find the table present both as an item of furniture in the ritual space as well as a organizing concept of that ritual. Indeed, the integration and placement of furniture in the Umbanda ritual space is a ready identifier of what type of Umbanda is being practiced. In Table Umbanda the table is in the center of the room or against one wall and holds little or no images of either Catholic saints or of spirit guides, just flowers and Spiritist books. In Parlor Umbanda we see the table usually moved to the wall and with more images as well as the pontos riscados alongside rosaries and flowers. In the more African styled modalities the table becomes a bedecked altar with Catholic saints, statues of spirit guides, African images, usually with “power objects” (such as stones and seashells) hidden beneath it, and often, in the more Afrocentric groups the altar and table disappear entirely, with only the drums and the seats for distinguished persons in the room.

<sup>4</sup> “Passes” are gestures made by the spirits while incorporated in the mediums to remove disease, “malignancies” or “astral larvae” from the energy field of either the medium’s body or that of someone consulting with the spirit. These generally look as if someone were removing invisible cobwebs or lint in sweeping movements.

<sup>5</sup> The “Prayer of Charity” is one of the many written Spiritist prayers that have been brought into Umbanda from Kardecist Spiritism, most found in the books of Alan Kardec, but many also come from Brazilian writers such as Chico Xavier. After used, however, are prayers composed by St. Francis of Assisi.

<sup>6</sup> This refers to the literary works of Alan Kardec, the French Spiritist whose works and doctrine have been perennially popular in Brazil among Umbandistas and in the general Brazilian population.

<sup>7</sup> I’ve translated “Umbanda de Salão” as “Parlor Umbanda”. This Type of Umbanda is usually practiced in rented commercial spaces generally intended for some other use or also in participants homes adapted for this purpose. I’ve chosen the word “parlor” as that it most closely translates “salão,” literally “large room,” as well as evoking the types of rooms most European and North American Spiritists and Spiritualists, the close ‘cousins’ of Parlor Umbandistas, were meeting in during the late 1800’s and early 1900’s for their own seances and “reunions.”

<sup>8</sup> These necklaces are called “guias” or guides in Umbanda and consist of strands of beads, each consecrated to an entity, such as an Orixá, Preto-Velho, or Caboclo with whom the wearer has a particular relationship. The “guides” are usually made specifically for the person wearing it and are not shared with others. Generally, one does not touch the beads of others.

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<sup>9</sup> Sessions for “unloading” or “descarrego” are sessions or meetings in which the spirit guides help the mediums, and other members of the community, to shed unwanted, negative “charges” or spiritual influences that can cause physical, emotional, or mental disturbances. Often rituals of exorcism and purification will be a part of this process.

<sup>10</sup> I have translated “defumação” as “smudging”, originally an English term for fumigating an orchard to eliminate pests but that is now used in the United States, in a variety of communities and contexts, to refer to rituals of purification involving the smoke of burning herbs. We see very similar rituals in Umbanda called “defumação” (lit. “smoking”), which is referred to here in the text regarding pontos sung to accompany them. These rituals are generally not found in Spiritist Table Umbanda but becomes “de rigor” in all the other types of Umbanda.

<sup>11</sup> These teachings, that of reincarnation, the law of karma, and of salvational beings (bodhisattvas) seem to have been brought into Umbanda from Indian philosophy, mainly Mahayana Buddhism, via Kardiist Spiritism, yet which also resonate with Umbanda’s preexisting African, specifically, Kongo and Angolan, philosophy, itself having a wholistic, integral worldview of transpersonal and transtemporal being. Umbandistas have assimilated much language and symbolism from the Native American, Catholic, other African, Islamic, Jewish, and Gypsy cultures, and, most profoundly, the Spiritist tradition, all of which they have been in contact since the colonial era in Brazil.

<sup>12</sup> “Obrigacões” means literally “obligations”, these are rituals of offering or gifts that deeply connect the person making the “obligation” to the spirit receiving it; both parties become obliged through the gift to serve, protect, and celebrate each other. The material components used in these rituals vary greatly but generally consist primarily of food, also tools and weapons for the spirits use, specific herbs, and often (especially in Candomblé houses or Umbanda houses with a strong African component) containers to symbolically contain and preserve the energy generated through the gift-exchange.

<sup>13</sup> The burial places of the dead are very important in much Kongo or Angolan, as well as Iberian Catholic, funerary practices. It must be remembered that the integration of Catholicism into Kongo theology and practice began *before* the slave trade, in Africa with the missionary presence of the Church starting among the royal families of the Kongo. Religion in colonial Brazil centered around Catholic churches, and most of those churches had human bones contained within them. The fact that Parlor Umbanda does not engage in rituals in burial places bears out the distancing from old African practice and Brazilian Colonial Catholic practices in its new orientation towards non-Kongo sources of teaching, philosophy, and hermeneutics, such as Spiritism and Candomblé de Nagô Orixá practices.

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<sup>14</sup> “Barnyard” is the translation I have given for “terreiro.” The word *terreiro* in contemporary usage in Brazil has become synonymous for a temple or place of worship of the African Brazilian Traditions. The original meaning of the word *terreiro* is yard, terrace, or plaza; in colonial times the celebrations of slaves took place in the yards and workspaces of the plantations and in the courtyards, terraces, and garden spaces of the churches housing the lay brotherhoods in which these the early religious and social groupings of Africans in Brazil took refuge. I translate *terreiro* here as “barnyard” because, to a North American reader, the word *barnyard* most readily conveys the scene that most of the exteriors of contemporary *terreiros* in Brazil resemble, with open-air workspaces and small buildings clustered around a large dance-hall, which is, in Portuguese, actually called a “barn,” literally “*barracão*.” I choose to retain this older meaning to name this type of Umbanda, as well as call up its historical and cultural ties to older African traditions, which give this modality of Umbanda a folksy, “down-home” flavor which I think the English word “barnyard” evokes. I suspect that use of the word *terreiro* to name Afro-Brazilian places of worship was first chosen as that the types of spaces occupied by enslaved and freed Africans would, to them, ideally resemble the compounds and village spaces of West Africa, with clusters of buildings surrounding larger, open areas, places which in Portuguese are called “*terreiros*.”

<sup>15</sup> The “*firmeza*,” in the sense it is used here, is an invocation of protection against danger (physical and spiritual) that is embodied in certain ritual objects kept on the altar, these could be as simple as a drawn ponto on a board, or a collection of power objects including stones, odd objects, etc. which are found to hold the power of the protecting spirit invoked. “*Seats for the Orixás*” refers to similar objects, each dedicated to a particular orixá, usually kept in clay bowls or soup tureens, constituting shrines for the orixás for worship. These objects are characteristic of Candomblé and other old African traditions found in Africa and throughout the Americas.

<sup>16</sup> “*Gira*” is a session or ritual meeting of Umbanda; it is a ritual where spirit guides are called to aide the community, either through development, charitable works, or in celebration. “*Giras for the compadres*” are *giras* where the trickster spirits are called to engage in development and also give consultation themselves. “*Compadres*” is a euphemism for these spirits, it means literally a person with whom one is a social peer through the Catholic rituals of god-parenting created during baptisms; it is used in Umbanda humorously to imply that these spirits are “on our level” and “have our back”.

<sup>17</sup> The slaughter of animals in some types of Umbanda, as in other African traditions, really should be compared to kosher or halal slaughtering found in Judaism and Islam rather than seen simply as “animal sacrifice”, which implies that the loss of the animal or its suffering is the element most important to the ritual context. Usually, this is not as that most of the animals killed in rituals are consumed by the community in collective feasting. What is key in our traditions is the provision of nutrition to the community; the food by being sacrificed by being shared with the Spirit, becomes part of the Spirit and thus becomes sacred, and implies a unity or oneness of the community with the Spirit, which, following the logic of our African ancestors, provides nutrition to the community not just on material and social levels but on emotional, psychological and spiritual levels as well. In the sacrifice, tradition holds, hunger is abated, thus greater suffering is eliminated and material well-being, spiritual development, and bliss are assured.

<sup>18</sup> Cavalcanti Baneira, *O Que É A Umbanda, ENSAIO, HISTÓRICO, DOUTRIÁRIO*, 2nd Edition, Editora Eco, 1973.

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<sup>19</sup>Cabula was a religious and “ethnopsychiatric” practice brought by Angolan and Kongo slaves imported from a region called “Cabula” to Rio de Janeiro during the colonial period. It was a “proto-Umbanda” and much of Umbanda’s terminology and practices descend directly from this tradition, even the name “Umbanda”, which in the old Cabula way denoted the leader of the group. The Cabula tradition itself seems to have merged completely into the practices that have now become called Umbanda and its most salient remainder is that one of Umbanda’s four drum rhythms is called Cabula. Thus, Cabula could be called Umbanda’s last name.

<sup>20</sup> Omolocô is a name used in Rio de Janeiro to denote Nagô or Yoruba traditional worship of Orixá that pre-existed the arrival of Bahian Candomblé from Salvador Bahian at the beginning of the 20th century with an “invasion” of immigrants from the state of Bahia seeking work in more prosperous Rio de Janeiro. Previous to this influx from Bahia, Rio de Janeiro had an active Yoruba descended community with its own inheritance of Orixá culture. Most of this has been integrated into what has become Umbanda, mixed into the Candomblé brought from Bahia or erased completely by the dominating and more highly esteemed traditions of Bahian Candomblé. There is, however, an alternate theory for the origins of Omolocô which asserts that it is a Bantu tradition, similar to Cabula, also prevalent before the formation of Umbanda groups. I am fairly certain that the first definition is correct as that almost any and all words or traditions that have I have found, in the literature and in my fieldwork, that have been identified by informants as being from “Omolocô” have been easily identifiable to a similar word or practice in Bahian Candomblé or Nigerian Yoruba language and Orisha practice.

<sup>21</sup> Olga Gudolle Cacciatore, *Dicionario de Cultos Afro-Brasileiros*, p. 243. This definition is also given in *O Que É a Umbanda* by Cavalcanti Bandeira, pp. 31-36.

<sup>22</sup> This word, *kimbanda*, spelled in Portuguese as *Quimbanda*, has come, ironically, to mean Umbanda technology or practice that is used to meet selfish, individualist and amoral needs, after causing harm to others, which is usually done for money, and which is thus the *opposite* of most common Umbanda practice.