

Retrieving African Traditional Religion from the Fringes – Umbanda and the Brazilian Traditions as a Source

Ulrich Relebogilwe Kleinhempel

Abstract

“Bantu Religion“ is an abstraction, an ideal-type of the consensus between different forms among the Bantu peoples. With the arrival of Bantu people in Brazil five centuries ago, a process of amalgamation began. Core features and structure have reasserted themselves interacting with non-Bantu religions and cultures around, assimilating ideas and practices. According to a systemic theory of syncretism this follows definite rules. It will be shown that Umbanda has preserved a core of Bantu beliefs, ritual practices and spiritual perceptions, in spite of all syncretistic adoptions. Thus Umbanda remains essentially a vital and complex Bantu Traditional Religion in a largely non-Bantu cultural environment persevering in an ongoing syncretistic process. It is thus a source for the retrieval of an ideal-type of African Traditional Religion. In this analytical perspective the comparison of rituals by the water in Umbanda and in South African Bantu culture presented in this study discloses a deeper understanding of their meaning and essence.¹

KEY WORDS: Syncretism Studies, African Traditional Religion, Bantu Traditional Religion, Umbanda, Ritual Studies, Bantu Divination

History of Umbanda

In Brazil, Umbanda arose by creative adaptation to changing environments in a process which continues to this day. During the first 250 years of Brazil, the Bantu cultural and religious traditions fused to become a common stratum of the majority of Brazil's population, settled mostly on the coast from Rio de Janeiro in the south to the northeast. From the late 18th century onwards, the main sources of manpower shifted to West Africa. Among them the Yoruba became the most influential in Brazil.² Yoruba culture

¹ Originally prepared as a presentation for the *Global Africa Symposium on Africa's Indigenous Religions: Africa's Indigenous Religions: Critical Approaches to its Philosophies, Doctrines, Scholarship, Documentation and Survival through Oral and Written Traditions from Theoretical and Historical Perspectives*, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, 8th – 13th August, 2016.

² Pierre Verger. *Flux et reflux de la traite des Nègres entre le Golf de Bénin et Bahía de Todos os Santos du XVII au XIX siècle*. Paris, 1968.

came to supersede the Bantu stratum focused on “healing”³ with its priestly element and cultic ritual⁴ However, the Bantu elements persisted in significant structures and rituals. We will focus on these.

On Syncretism

We follow the syncretism model of Ulrich Berner.⁵ Processes of syncretism follow rules determined by the systemic character of religions, distinguishing between “structural” and “semantic” elements of a religion. The concepts of “God”, “deity”, “spirit”, “ancestor”, “person”, “spirited thing”, “spirited place” etc. can be understood as categories and structural elements. The “semantic” aspect indicates how the specific category is filled in any concrete culture and situation. The two categories are interdependent. Usually one system becomes the “receiving system” or the dominant one, which adopts elements – semantic and also structural elements – from another. It is modified through this contact.

Complementary elements can be fused to effectively create a new system. This process might be called “synthesis”.⁶ The encounter can lead to a reaffirmation of the distinct identity of a system after the stage of encounter and of assimilation of elements of another system.⁷ It appears that in the formation of Umbanda both processes can be observed. The Bantu religious element forms the structure and rules the subsequent processes of assimilation and integration of heterogeneous elements, of the Yoruba, the Portuguese Roman Catholic, the Amerindian and the European Esoteric elements. Umbanda, which can be understood as the result of several processes of syncretisation:

- The foundation, which is preserved in the basic structure – such as the spirit classes, and in forms of ritual - and in some “semantic” elements of ritual and of specific spirits have remained soundly Bantu, which has persisted as the “receiving” or organizing structure.
- The addition of the Yoruba Orixá deities has both semantic and structural features since Bantu (Angola/ Congo) deities have been substituted.
- Roman Catholic Christianity has added iconography and elements of ritual, such as sacraments (baptism, confession), liturgy, and most importantly, the structural element of a “parish” organisation.⁸ This operates on a local level, since, by African tradition, every community (“terreiro”) is independent, organised around the spiritual leader, the Pai oder Mae de Santo resp. the Babalorixa or Yalorixa, which gives Umbanda its decentral form of organisation.
- The Amerindian contribution has been disputed since there has been little direct cultural contact. The ritual use of tobacco as a semantic replacement of herbs for ritual inhalation in Bantu practise, may be a result. The adoption of a distinct class of spirits represented as (mestizo) Amerindians, the “Caboclos”, indicates the recognition of “spirits of the land”. This follows the Bantu mode of

³ Claudio G. Mattes. *Afrikanische Religiosität und die Neureligionen in Brasilien*. Tübingen / Porto Alegre: Diss. Phil. Univ. of Tübingen, 2004, 79ff.

⁴ idem, 105ff.

⁵ Ulrich Berner. *Untersuchungen zur Verwendung des Synkretismus-Begriffs*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 1982 (Veröffentlichungen des Sonderforschungsbereichs Orientalistik an der Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, vol. 2).

⁶ idem, 85.

⁷ ibidem

⁸ Claudio G. Mattes. *Afrikanische Religiosität und die Neureligionen in Brasilien*, p. 121ff.

incorporating non- Bantu spirits, such as those of the Khoi-San,⁹ a vital element of Bantu ATR, which can be seen to be still active here. The vitality of this structural element can be observed by its fluid adaptation to changing environments up to the present time, adopting and generating new spirit classes, as shown in the following.

- The incorporation of non-African classes of spirits in Umbanda, following the Bantu pattern, has brought forth a variety of spirit classes in Umbanda – understood as emanations of God supreme¹⁰ - leaving only one class being African also in appearance: The “Old Blacks” (“Pretos Velhos/Velhas”) represent the collective spirits of the own people in the Bantu system. However, the “child spirits”, the “Crianças“ are also genuinely African. A new development is the class of spirits of (black) urban “shady characters“, the „Malandros“. Non-African are the spirits of the seafarers („Marinheiros“), the cowboys, (“Boiadeiros”), the farmers (“Baianos”), the vagrants (“Ciganos”) and the Oriental people (“Orientais”), dear to Esoteric “Orientalism”. Although these classes have individual representatives, identified by name, they are “collective spirits in character. “Nature spirits” and “personal ancestral spirits”¹¹ are lacking. These Bantu spirit categories have gone lost (almost completely).
- European Esotericism has influenced Umbanda through Kardecism, the spiritual spiritist doctrine established as a powerful religious community in Brazil from the late 19th century onwards. The African world view resonated well with European Spiritism. In the early 20th century Umbanda surfaced from the Afro-Brazilian sphere into the Kardecist circles,¹² thus entering “European” discourse.
- The “Orientalist” current of Esotericism introduced Hindu elements, like the notion of a fine-mattered sheath, in Kardecist terminology: the “perispirito”,¹³ or the idea of “chakras”. Likewise the Esoteric idea of an “informational field” of a person which may be “purified”.
- “Nature spirituality” of late 20th century Esotericism with its ecological ideas and its pantheistic/panentheistic view of the divine, entered Umbanda, reinterpreting the African religious ideas.

Yet Umbanda remains solidly of ATR character. Neither is it the result of processes of deterioration of the African cultural heritage experienced by urbanised populations, and a sociologically determined “invention” of the early 20th century, as suggested by Roger Bastide,¹⁴ nor a “fusion” between Kardecism and Candomblé as suggested by

⁹ David Lewis-Williams and David Pearce. *San Spirituality – Roots, Expressions and Social Consequences*. Cape Town: Double Storey Books, 2014, 215ff.

¹⁰ Francisco Rivas Neto (Babá Rivas T'Ogyion). *Religões Afro-Brasileiras - A Divindade Suprema-Espíritos*

[video]. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Oeh0hd2ec4> (uploaded on: 9. 10. 2011).

¹¹ John S. Mbiti. *Introduction to African Religion*. Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1991 (2nd rev. ed.), 70ff.

¹² Diamantino Fernandes Trindade (Hanamatan). *Umbanda e a Sua História*. São Paulo: Ícone Editora Ltda., 1991, 53ff.

¹³ Manoel Lopes, (ed.). *Textos Doutrinários do Núcleo de Estudos Espirituais Mata Verde, publicados no Blog de Estudos durante o período de 2010 a 2014*. Santos, S. P., 2014, 111. URL:

http://mataverde.org/arquivos/livro_textos_doutrinarios.pdf

¹⁴ Roger Bastide. “Mémoire collective et sociologie du bricolage”. 1970. URL: http://classiques.uqac.ca/contemporains/bastide_roger/memoire_collective_socio_bricolage/memoire_collective_socio_bricolage.pdf

Diana DeGroat Brown,¹⁵ which would make Umbanda a product of sociological movements of the 20th century,¹⁶ essentially without consistency and self-assertive identity in history, reaching far back into the African past. These studies ignore the systemic properties of African Traditional Religion leading to a misrepresentation of Umbanda as a historically disconnected epi-phenomenon of an identity crisis of marginalised urban poor.¹⁷

Consequences for Interpretation

Umbanda has creatively integrated various environmental influences into African Traditional set of structure, ritual, cosmology and anthropology. Inevitably some features have been lost or diminished in this process. In view of this dynamic development of Umbanda with its recurrent movements of realigning with the African “roots”,¹⁸ there is no need to assume a “fraying out” or distancing from the African origin as inevitable. Such tendencies do occur in the migration of Umbanda from predominantly ethnically “African” milieus to those of mainly European descent.¹⁹ However, deliberate intents to re-establish the African essence are observable in the instructional videos of the founder of the first academic institution of Umbanda, the *Faculdade de Teologia Umbandista* (FTU) in Sao Paulo, Francisco Rivas Neto (Babá Rivas T'Ogyion).²⁰ Here Umbanda enters the field of academic studies through the Umbandistic scholars, as in instructional video of the FTU on the position of Umbanda to the role of the body.²¹ Positions of Umbanda are introduced to contemporary psychology²² or anthropology – whereby an integration of positions of both West African and Bantu positions of African Traditional Religion is pursued.²³ The implications of this process of “academization” of Umbanda²⁴ are reflected by the actors themselves.²⁵

¹⁵ Diana DeGroat Brown. *Umbanda: Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986.

¹⁶ Diana Espirito Santo. “Entités fluides. Une ontologie de la transformation des terreiros d'Umbanda à Rio de Janeiro” [conference presentation]. [date: before 2013]. URL:

https://www.academia.edu/13295224/Entit%C3%A9s_fluides

¹⁷ Fernando Giobellina Brumana and Elda Gonzales Martinez. *Spirits from the Margin. Umbanda in Sao Paulo*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Uppsaliensis, 1989.

¹⁸ Véronique Boyer. “Le don et l'initiation. De l'impact de la littérature sur les cultes de possession au Brésil”. In: *L'Homme*, 1996, tome 36 n°138, 16f. URL:

http://www.persee.fr/doc/AsPDF/hom_0439-4216_1996_num_36_138_370072.pdf

¹⁹ Ullrich R., Kleinbempel. “The socio-cultural migration of Umbanda - challenges for interpretation”. Presentation at the XXI Quinquennial World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), Erfurt, Germany, August 23-29, 2015. URL: https://www.academia.edu/15353533/Presentation_The_socio-cultural_migration_of_Umbanda_-_challenges_for_interpretation_at_XXI_Quinquennial_World_Congress_of_the_International_Association_for_the_History_of_Religions_IAHR_Erfurt_Germany_August_23-29_2015

²⁰ Francisco Rivas Neto (Babá Rivas T'Ogyion). [videolist], URL: <https://www.youtube.com/user/pairivas/videos> (as of 8th July, 2016).

²¹ Francisco Rivas Neto (Babá Rivas T'Ogyion). *Religiões Afro-Brasileiras: sacralização do corpo* [video]. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4iKO3miUSck> (uploaded on 23.08.2012).

²² Francisco Rivas Neto (Babá Rivas T'Ogyion). *As religiões afro-brasileiras e o inconsciente* [video]. URL:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgbLc9Sq45Q> (uploaded on: 23. 10. 2010) and idem: [video] 0:02 / 9:41 *Iniciação como terapia da alma*, URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGuRG0DOsl0> (uploaded on: 16. 06. 2010).

²³ Francisco Rivas Neto (Babá Rivas T'Ogyion). *Teologia Afro-Brasileira: Ori-Bara* [video]. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsO_ITBzp-A (uploaded on 11. 6. 2011).

Observations on the Sources of Studies on Umbanda and on Bantu African Traditional Religion: the Issue of Secrecy and of Ritual Knowledges

Over the course of the 20th century a body of literature about Umbanda has been written, mostly by adherents of the faith, covering belief, history and cultural aspects. However little has been written about the details of ritual, due to the “arcane discipline” by which the secrets of Umbanda are safeguarded by the ritual communities and passed on through personal initiation to cult leaders. This is sacred knowledge which is not to be divulged to the uninitiated. Accordingly even knowledgeable books for the instruction of adherents of the faith²⁶ remain vague when it comes to details of ritual practise.

Fortunately a need is being felt in Umbanda to safeguard its coherence and to remedy deficits of knowledge. A manual of Umbanda of 1984, reinterpreting the ritual and doctrine in esoteric terms,²⁷ provides details on the rites by the waterfall, which are essential to Umbanda and to Bantu ATR. The same applies to the huge body of video recordings of sequences of Umbanda ritual which are available on the internet. Some familiarity with Umbanda is necessary to locate them in their context.

Bantu Traditional Religion has the same principles of secrecy. Practises have a degree of fluidity, with forms like the possession cults spreading in the southern Bantu realms over the past decades,²⁸ Instead of one “canonical” form, archetypes of ritual may rather be identified. Literature on details of Bantu rituals of traditional religion is quite sparse. The comprehensive bibliography “African Traditional Religion in South Africa”²⁹ yields few titles dedicated to these issues.

The Rites by the Waterfall: a Traditional African Ritual in Umbanda and in Bantu Traditional Religion: Common Features and Diversity

The hermeneutical model of understanding Umbanda ritual by comparison with rites of African Traditional Religion in a mutual process of elucidation can be applied to a central rite both of Umbanda and of Bantu traditional religion, the rites by the waterfalls. They appear in two contexts: as part of initiations of individuals experiencing a special

²⁴ Ullrich R. Kleinbempel. “Contemporary Mysteries' Cult of Umbanda - video lecture, 8th ASEM conference”.

[presentation delivered at:] *The 8th ASEM International Conference "Mystic and Esoteric Movements in Theory and Practice: Mysticism and Esotericism in the World of Technology"*, St. Petersburg, 24. – 26. 3. 2016, АИЭМ (eds.). URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5g2E7glQyAs&list=PLJM0tVbQE3ubVNQSQSFYEqA68ho1J-McE&index=18>

²⁵ Rivas Neto, Francisco (Babá Rivas T'Ogyion), *Religiões Afro-Brasileira – os terreiros na academia* [video], URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YK6xjQvK7pg> (uploaded on 31. 3. 2013).

²⁶ De Campos Vieira, Lurdes and Rubens Saraceni. *Manual doutrinário, ritualístico e comportamental Umbandista*. Sao Paulo: Editora Madras, 2009.

²⁷ Vera Braga de Souza Gomes. *Umbanda sem Estigmas – Fundamentos Esotéricos do Ritual da Umbanda*. Rio de Janeiro: Mudra, 1984.

²⁸ Johann Kriel. “Be(com)ing a cult member or spirit medium: the Malopo cult in South Africa revisited“. Paper presented at the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) conference EASA08 on: *Experiencing diversity and mutuality*, 26 – 29th August, 2008, Ljubljana, 26/08/2008 – 29/08/2008.

²⁹ David Chidester, Chirevo Kwenda, Robert Petty, Judy Tobler and Darrel Warren, *African Traditional Religion in South Africa – an Annotated Bibliography*, London, 1997: Greenwood Press (Bibliographies and Indexes in Religious Studies, Number 42).

calling and as general rituals for the lay public. Water is held to be a medium of spiritual power, in rites of purification, blessing, healing, prayer for fertility and initiation. The seaside, rivers and waterfalls are sites for rituals with specific meaning and powers. They are associated with specific spiritual and divine beings.⁵⁰

The Rites by the Waterfall in Bantu Culture: Initiation and Spiritual Reinforcement

It is believed that a world of spirits exists under the waters, who manifest themselves to chosen ones and who can be contacted here. Initiates may experience to be abducted under the waters in visions. The spirits may take the form of mermaids and of snakes, seen in visions or recognised in unusual appearances in nature.

The South African psychiatrist and psychoanalyst B. J. F. Laubscher, who practised in a rural area of South Africa in the realm of the AmaXhosa wrote about this issue:

“The Abantubomlambo is a race of people who live in a world of their own underneath the deep pools of the flowing river. . . They have a “call” for earth people and he who receives this call will be unable to resist it. Only he or she will hear the call and no one else, for it is heard inside the head, although some may think it comes through the ears. Often someone who hears the call is restless for days and wanders about aimlessly and then suddenly runs to the river or deep pool and plunges into it. The Xhosa Isanuses describe many facets of this strange experience of ukutwasa, the chief characteristic however, remains an awareness of things and events far beyond the world of our senses. ... At times he is away from home for days, but since they know he is twasa [literally:”sick”- a trancelike state in initiation] they are not worried.”⁵¹

This role of the Abantubomlambo for initiation at river pools, especially by waterfalls has a central position in the spiritual and historical biography of the Zulu emperor Shaka (Chaka) kaSenzangakhona (1787 – 1828) by Thomas Mofolo (1876 – 1948), a BaSotho author. The author clearly assumes that his readers are familiar with the cosmology and rites. Shaka’s destiny unfolds under the supervision and guidance of diviners, who “realise” the spiritual aspect of his personality and powers, but he himself is no diviner.

The first extract from Mofolo’s book describes the prescriptions which Shaka’s mother Nandi receives from a diviner for her son: Mofolo tells that “*a woman doctor at Bungane’s who was very famous for her knowledge of charms*” is called to give the infant boy, destined to be king, some potent charms and medicine. She predicts Shaka’s extraordinary future destination and powers.

“She gave Nandi a medicine horn and said, ‘Always when the moon is about to die you must bathe this child at the river very early in the morning, before the sun has risen, ..., you must take some of this medicine with your fingers and

⁵⁰ Penelope Bernard, “Sacred Water Sites and Indigenous Healers in Southern Africa: The Need to Protect.

Knowledge, Nature and Resource Rights”, [presentation at:] *Indigenous Knowledge Conference*, 2001, URL: <http://iportal.usask.ca/purl/IKC-2001-Bernard.pdf>

⁵¹ Bernard J.F. Laubscher. *The Pagan Soul*. London: Neville Spearman Ltd., 1975, 23ff. 27.

anoint his head with it. You must anoint only the centre of the head where the child's heart throbs; be sure to anoint also this tuft of hair which is never to be shaved off. Bathe him in a large river not a small one. When this child is already grown ... whenever he gets into the water, you must go away from him and wait in a place that is out of view, and you are never to go to him unless he calls you. He on the other hand, must not shout when he calls you, he rather should whistle. If he should see something that frightens him while he is in the water, on no account must he run away, regardless of whatever may appear. You for your part, must never, even on a single day, ask him what he has seen. Rather let him volunteer of his own accord to tell you.”³²

This passage reveals some ritual details: The bath in the river has to be made at an appointed time before sunrise in solitude. It prepares for the future vision in a pool beneath a waterfall. Both realms are connected spiritually. The flowing water of a strong river is spiritually important. The ritual bath, to be performed silently, is accompanied by the anointment of the top of the head with magic medicine. All of these elements are also practised in Umbanda initiatory sequences.

This regular ritual performance prepares Chaka for his initiatory vision and spiritual “empowerment” as a young man of which Mofolo tells:

“It was once again Chaka's day for rising early and going to the water, and indeed he went at the earliest light of dawn. His mother, being conscious of the evil spirit among the people, went with him... Chaka washed himself. It happened that, as he was about to finish, the tuft of hair on his head shivered and shook, and the skin under it felt warm and it rippled very quickly, and just as suddenly as it began, everything was quiet again, dead still ... High up from the place where he stood was a tremendous waterfall, and at the bottom of that waterfall, right by him, was an enormous pool ... in this pool the waters was pitch dark, intensely black. On the opposite bank, directly from where he was but inside the water, was a yawning cave ... a little way from where it began, the water was covered by a very dense growth of reeds ... Chaka once again splashed himself vigorously with the water, and at once the water of this side of the river billowed and then levelled off. Then it swelled higher and higher till he was sure it was going to cover him, and he walked towards the bank. ... The water subsided and the wind died down. In the centre of that wide dark green pool the water began to ripple gently, and it was evident that there was something enormous moving under it ... Stricken by fright, Chaka shut his eyes so that, if that snake intended to kill him it should kill him with his eyes closed, avoiding looking in its face. Slowly he raised his hand and grabbed the tuft of hair, which he had been told to hold tight if very frightened; at the same time he whistled gently to call his mother. . . . When eventually Chaka opened his eyes, he realised that it had not touched him, he saw the snake, its eyes still gazing straight into his ... A small column of thick mist arose from the deep pool ... and then out of the reeds over there something boomed with a heavy stentorious voice: ‘Mphu-mphu hail, mighty monster in the water, / It is seen only by the favoured ones / It is seen by those who will rule over nations.’”³³

³² Thomas Mofolo. *Chaka*. (translated from the SeSotho original, Morija, Lesotho, 1925, by Daniel P. Kunene). Oxford: Heinemann Educational Books, 1981, 8f.

³³ Idem, 21 – 24.

The messenger snake – commissioned by the ancestors or by the “river people” as nature spirits - makes Chaka die a symbolic death and enwraps him to convey its powers to him. The whistling has connotations of spirit mediumship, since collective ancestral spirits are said to communicate in this way.³⁴ After this vision, the diviner who had been his mentor at a distance passes her responsibilities for Chaka into a successor. who appears in the next spiritual sequence of Chaka’s preparations.



Image 1: *symbolic staff, wood carving o the VhaVenda people, Limpopo Province, SA, 2014, private photo U. R. Kleinbempel.*

Initiatory pilgrimages are made to rock pools or waterfalls, at sites where the “ancestors”, the “Badimo” who have divine mediators, can be contacted repeatedly by diviners to reinforce their spiritual powers and their calling.”³⁵ The same applies in Umbanda.

In Umbanda rituals by the waterfall occur in two distinct contexts: in the process of initiation, in a setting called “Camarinha”: here the initiates are brought to a waterfall on the first day of a week of seclusion and of special rites, for purification.³⁶ Mediums and the spiritual leaders come together in regular intervals, for periods of secluded spiritual exercises, to reinforce their contact with the divine entities and spirits. In these sessions, ritual visits to rivers and waterfalls are important. They alternate with ritual liturgies, “giras” and with periods of silence.

³⁴ Penelope Bernard. “Sacred Water Sites and Indigenous Healers in Southern Africa: The Need to Protect

Knowledge, Nature and Resource Rights”

³⁵ Philip Nel. “African spirituality and space”. In: Post, Paul, Philip Nel and Wouter van Beek (eds.). *Sacred Spaces and Contested Identities – Space and Ritual Dynamics in Europe and Africa*. Trento, N.J.: African World Press, 2014, p. 288.

³⁶ “*Tudo sobre a nação nagô* [Blog], entry: “Almas e Angola”, 27th September, 2009. URL: <http://caticmam-tuosobreanaonag.blogspot.de/2009/09/almas-e-angola.html>



Image 2: “Bridal Veil Falls” in Mpumalanga, SA, a religious site of ATR. private photo, U. R. Kleinbempel, 2014

Pilgrimages to sacred sites, such as waterfalls, has also been preserved in churches of the African Initiated type (ATR). The continuity between ATR and Christian churches of the AIC type has been well described by A. I. Berglund.³⁷ He also mentions the importance of the “heavenly Princess”, Nomkhubulwana, who is associated with the mist and with fertility.³⁸ Of her, it is said:

“She loves human beings. So she opens up the heaven.... That is when the rainbow is seen. ... The princess surely loves us. Now the rain will stop and give us sunshine. Then after a time she will bring rain again’. ... At least one end of the rainbow always stands on the earth, the base buried in a deep pool of water in which lives a snake with as many colours as the rainbow.... Diviners and heaven-herds are said to take careful note in which pool in a river the arch of the rainbow ends, so that they know where the snake is to be found.”³⁹

Symbolic attributes link the Heavenly Princess to the realms of rain, of the rock pools and to the “Abantu Bomlambo”, the “river people”, and to the large snake as their representative.⁴⁰ The link of the Heavenly Princess to fertility accounts for a special cause of pilgrimage. Prayer for fertility is one of the prime themes of womens’ pilgrimage to waterfalls.⁴¹ The traditional rites associated with Nomkhubulwana are being revived and

³⁷ Axel-Ivar Berglund. *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism*. (Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia, 22), London: C. Hurst, 1976.

³⁸ Idem, 69.

³⁹ Idem, 70.

⁴⁰ Penelope Bernard. “Sacred Water Sites and Indigenous Healers in Southern Africa: The Need to Protect Knowledge, Nature and Resource Rights”.

⁴¹ Philip Nel. “African spirituality and space”, p. 282.

re-enacted in South Africa, in the context of African Initiated Churches, in a form of syncretism,⁴²

In Umbanda the visits to waterfalls are also connected to the Orixá Oxum. Here apparently the Bantu Heavenly Princess has been aligned with the Yoruba deity of motherhood and of love, Oxum. Her rituals at waterfalls are popular in Brazil, with songs dedicated to her. These rituals are open to the general public.

Comparison with Umbanda Rites by the Waterfall

The special significance of the ritual by the waterfalls is described in a handbook of Umbanda by Vera Braga de Souza Gomes as follows:

“Macaia. Name given to a ceremony enacted in direct contact with Nature, generally in forests where there is a waterfall. Its objective is to fortify the mediumistic faculties, to remove negative fluids [i.e. a Kardecist concept] from all participants and to transfer more “aché” [also: “axé”: a Yoruba concept denoting vital spiritual energy – a key word of Afro-American religions] or, be it, more spiritual power to the spirits attached to the “terreiro” [i.e. the ritual community]. It has a high esoteric value because the intimacy with the virgin energies, in the site of origin, allows a full use of their energies. Mediumism is developed through most extended exercises and is fortified by the “lavagem de cabeça” [i.e. the “washing of the head”] in the waterfall. The occasion is taken for certain obligations of devotion, to consolidate (ritual) works done before, by the washing of the “guias” [i.e. the ritual beaded necklaces which bear specific spiritual powers of those spiritual entities with whom the wearer has come into contact in the course of initiation] and to perform any act of magic of major portent, which demands the utilisation of forces taken directly at the original source. ...The natural energetic components of the water of a waterfall are taken to reinvigorate the crown chakra [- note the Hindu concept -], by which consequently the mediumistic faculties are perfected. They are also indicated to remove any negative vibrations of the aura. [- note the esoteric concepts.] The washing of the head with the purpose of fortifying and purifying the “median” [- note the Hindu anthropology -], which is also called “firmeza”, a name given to a special “imantação” [i.e. a ritual “magnetisation” with the specific spiritual energies of a deity or spirit] for security of/by the cult houses. The Macaia is also considered to be confirming for the Spiritual Entities to provide them an environment free of human contamination, full of pure emanations to which they are accustomed, which is favourable to their acquiring a greater vigour. The ceremony has variable duration. Generally it begins in the first hours of the day, lasting until the evening. When they enter the forest the Umbanda adherents usually sing a hymn in which they ask permission to enter and to perform the solemn rite. Thus they avoid that the Beings of Nature feel that their realms are invaded and interfered with, disturbing them. Since the forests contain positive and negative forces, the good outcome of a Macaia depends on the precautions with which it is enacted. To assure that only spirits of light are attracted the leader fulfils beforehand a series of ritual obligations. The mediums in turn must

⁴² Carol Anne Muller. *Rites of Fertility and the Sacrifice of Desire – Nazarine Womens’ performance in South Africa*. Chicago: Chicago Univ. Pr., 1999, 164.

prepare with special baths for the physical and spiritual hygiene, and contribute to the upliftment of the environment.”⁴³

This text shows numerous correspondences with the description by Thomas Mofolo. In particular, the special significance of the top of the head, the “crown chakra” for the effect and experience of the rite by the waterfall may be pointed out, with the idea of a connection between what happens and is felt inside the body with what happens spiritually at the ritual site. Then too, the time of beginning, before dawn and the notion of special spiritual entities residing by the waterfall are noteworthy. However, the aspect of perceiving the rock-pools at waterfalls as “gates to the otherworld” appears to be largely lost, when the “spirits” are redefined as “energies”. Here the transition from the African traditional cosmology to that of Esotericism – which is incomplete though – makes itself felt. In consequence, the visionary aspect and the ritual approach to an otherworldly realm are diminished from awareness. They are preserved in much of ritual though.

A video of a ritual of Umbanda by a waterfall (water rapids) for the spiritual reinforcement, shows significant details, which are also practised in Bantu culture. Its title: “*Homenagem da oxum e obrigação de cabeça*”⁴⁴ combines the elements of spiritual reinforcement with veneration of Oxum. At 22:48 mins. submersion in the water to bless the medium and the ritual beads, the „guias“ he is wearing, is shown, at 22:57 anointment of the head with “spiritual medicine”, with specially prepared and blessed herbs soaked in water at 25:07 blessing with white chalk (“Pemba”) on the head, the hands and the neck. In Umbanda Pemba is used in ritual to mark participants,⁴⁵ whereas it is used to daube the face or body white during transitory periods of initiation in Bantu cultures. In Bantu culture, “whiteness defines the special transitional status of the sufferer-novice in the course toward health.”⁴⁶



Image 3: blessing with Pemba

⁴³ De Souza Gomes, Vera Braga. *Umbanda sem Estigmas – Fundamentos Esotéricos do Ritual da Umbanda*. Rio de Janeiro: Mudra, 1984, 214f.

⁴⁴ *Homenagem da oxum e obrigação de cabeça* [video]. By: William Mallmann, 17. 12. 2013. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zIPbRqm_B0

⁴⁵ Francisco Rivas Neto (Babá Rivas T'Ogyion). [video], *Ifá et pemba são fundamentais na Umbanda esotérica*. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jIHh00uern7w> (uploaded on 17. 6. 2013).

⁴⁶ John Janzen. *Ngoma - Discourses of Healing in Central and Southern Africa*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1992, 101. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/25901>

Conclusions

The dynamic development of Umbanda requires “informed analysis” to discern the elements of African Traditional religion through the permutations which they have undergone in response to changing environments, as discussed above. However, a fascinating aspect is to observe, how the core “system” of African Traditional Religion in Umbanda, and the Bantu element in it in particular, are responding to changing epistemological and cultural environments, by which Umbanda and ATR move beyond the boundaries of their original cultural realms, reasserting themselves in the process.

Ulrich Relebogilwe Kleinhempel. Bayernkolleg and FFS, Schweinfurt (Bavaria, Germany). Teacher of Religion in upper secondary and adult education, and Pastor of the Evangelische Lutherische Kirche in Bayern. He was also a Parish pastor in Nürnberg, Kharkiv (Ukraine) and Moscow. He studied Protestant Theology, German Literature, and Science of Religion at the universities of Erlangen and Göttingen and of Psychology at the University of South Africa (UNISA). He is member of the advisory council for ecumenical relations with the Orthodox Church at the Federation of Protestant Churches of Germany, director of Studies at the Academy of the Diakonie-Werk Neuendettelsau and a visiting lecturer at the Universities of Moscow (Lomonosov State Univ.).

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