

THE UMBANDA TERREIRO AS A CARE SPACE: SOME REFLECTIONS

O TERREIRO DE UMBANDA COMO ESPAÇO DE CUIDADO: ALGUMAS REFLEXÕES

EL *TERREIRO* DE UMBANDA COMO ESPACIO DE CUIDADOS: ALGUNAS REFLEXIONES

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This text is based on a reflection carried out over the last three years, developing participant research and distinct observations in different *Umbanda terreiros* in the city of Rio de Janeiro and in the metropolitan region of the state capital with the same name. The reflection is centered on the premise that *these terreiros constitute a space for health care and a time of possibilities for self-knowledge and new attitudes towards life*. We will try to carry forward this argumentation based on four main aspects, which are: the welcoming into the religious community; the development of the dialogue with the umbandistas in trance, which for the believers is the embodiment of spiritual and transcendent entities, available for face-to-face conversation; the inclusion of the different facets of human life in the consultation; and the return to daily life and its challenges.

Before specifically addressing the topics that have been pointed out, it should be noted that, among other exposed definitions, *umbanda* means the art or way of healing and enchanting⁽¹⁾. One of its main public rites, the *gira*, has etymological origins in the idea of path and crossing⁽¹⁾, which conforms a conceptualization of movement and dynamics and tends to configure a complex and non-static approach to life in general and to the health-disease process in particular.

Delaying for one more paragraph the entry into the listed topics, it is necessary to consider the idea of enchantment and to specify it, as far as possible, a little better⁽²⁾. In one hand, it relates to the transcendent, something that exists beyond tangible reality, through the religious community's beliefs in concrete beings that have entered this universe: *malandros* who teach the collective good life⁽³⁾, *pombagiras* that raise the female self-esteem as a function of the feminine being itself⁽⁴⁾ and *pretos-velhos* who make patience the firm and critical resistance in the face of impossibilities, rooting themselves in hope as an uncontrollable way of being in the world⁽⁵⁾. On the other hand, this enables the enchantment of life in its paradoxes, its contradictions and even its limitations, generating perspectives for the future, but with this totality of existence, in an integrated and integrative way.

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Regarding the first topic, the process of welcoming into the religious community, it should be noted that it has different layers of depth, among which some will be highlighted. The first is that, to visit a Umbanda *terreiro* is to encounter Brazil and to come across different facets of Brazilianness, from the sacred images present in the *terreiros*, the popular religious practices built over the last centuries and the trance of religious people with characteristics of everyday Brazilian populations (indigenous and *pretos-velhos*, for example) that attend the public^(2,6). There is also a familiarity when it is considered that the rationalities about health and illness present there are those considered as lay ones⁽⁷⁾, which enables a more fluid dialogue and a more frequent and consistent mutual understanding.

Besides this, the clients (those who seek consultation) and the religious who go into trance and, thus, do the consultation, are social actors waiting for the intervention of a third person that involves them and gives meaning to the presence of both in that space: the spiritual entity. In this sense, although there are differences between the clients and the *umbandistas* who enter into trance when entering the *terreiro*, in the access to sacred goods and spiritual knowledge, the final decision is beyond both, which generates solidarity in the welcome and care between them.

The second dimension, that of dialogue, is configured as the possibility of access to the sacred in an intimate, personal, non-repeatable and exclusive contact⁽⁸⁾, which allows the expression of the important questions of existence, the welcoming through attentive listening, and the possibilities of synthesis necessary for the continuity of living, seeking a better quality of life and a greater construction of meaning to existence. In this way, as considered by some authors⁽⁷⁾, *Umbanda* presents itself as a space/time capable of approaching and attending people in a holistic, integral and integrating way.

It can be observed in the movement of the clients of the *terreiro* that the access to the dialogue with the religious in trance is configured as a singular moment, of rescue of the importance of the personal history and its unfolding in the world, as well as the stimulation of self-esteem, good humor and confidence in life. One of the first observations made in the research developed in this period was the assistance of an *Exu* to a woman who was very close to the researcher: he sat her down, prepared a basin with water and herbs in her presence and then began to pass that water on her leg, talking to her for about two hours uninterrupted.

In general, after the consultation, the clients refer to the importance of being heard, to the need to continue the treatment indicated in the health units by the “*casaca branca*” (a common expression for doctors, specifically, and sometimes for health professionals in general in the recurring language of the entities in the *Umbanda terreiros*); to the appreciation of life; to the cultivation of spiritual life as a therapeutic path; and to the feeling that one is not alone in the possible unfolding of the dialogued situation. This set of actions, attitudes, and symbolic constructions enables the elaboration of meaning facing life, the events that cross them, and the future that appears on the horizon.

Another aspect to be highlighted in this issue of the dialogue between the client and the religious person in trance is that the entity they both believe to be there can be considered someone close to human beings, fitting into the title of *people like us*⁽⁹⁾. Their stories, their personalities, their qualities, as well as their mishaps and even their defects are exposed in these conversations, offering tips for good living based on their own experiences, as is well pointed out in the work done through interviews with a *mãe de santo* in trance, called Theology of *Malandragem*⁽³⁾.

As already pointed out in other moments throughout the text, but here it is worth summarizing, this dialog addresses different facets of human life, but has, in a recurrent way, two central aspects, physical health and mental health, both constituting a challenge inherent to the confrontation of diseases that can be considered by the religious community and the social group as physical and spiritual. In general, there is a vision of intertwining these situations, constituting the human being as physical and spiritual, immanent and transcendent, objective and subjective simultaneously, making its approach complex and multifaceted.

In the track of this integral approach to the human, are encompassed aspects of daily life, affections, professional opportunities, family relationships, sexual life, processes of illness, demands of spiritual life, analysis of decisions made in life, warnings of dangers that lie in wait, and advice for the good life, among other issues that could be cited. In pre-pandemic contexts, this encounter often ended with hugs between the religious in trance and the client, as well as with words of support and encouragement to move on and be strong.

The return to daily life, to everyday life, tends to be under the sign of divine care and the construction of meaning in the face of the possibility of this care. It includes, in a special way, the gestation of hope in the track of human life as the fruit of this meaning, matured at the crossroads of the encounter between the divine and the human. The *terreiro* is characterized, then, as a crossroads, that is, a space where the divine acquires bodies through the religious, and the clients can have a relationship with Them, touch Them and hear Them, in different dimensions.

As pointed out by authors⁽²⁾, *Umbanda* is characterized by the phenomenon of the cross, the encounter, and the enchantment; of the human with the divine; of the social actors with themselves and with others, the alterity; of the past with the present, the enslaved black men and women of the streets with the contemporary men and women in their daily lives; from the present with the future, by the belief in divine care in the different paths of human life, in which the men and women of today are wrapped by the power of those who lived in the past and were enchanted; and from the cosmopolitan world to the ground of Brazil, sustained by the common people who live the gray everyday life.

Therefore, at the end of this argument, we reinforce the initial idea that the *terreiros are a space for health care and a time of possibilities for self-knowledge and new attitudes towards life*, based on the meaning that is collectively built and that is believed, at least for the multitude of people who pass through this complex space/time called *terreiro*, deeply marked by the Divine. In it, there is pain, candles, hugs, listening, knowledge, maintenance of a specific wisdom, flowers, and human beings constituting themselves as such and reconstructing their lives in the face of the impossibilities of existence and the ontological characteristic of limitation and death that is peculiar to us.

Contributions:

The author is responsible for the project conception, analysis and interpretation of data, writing of the paper, review and final approval of the version to be published, and for all aspects of the work in ensuring the accuracy and completeness of any part of the work.

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