BRAZILIAN UMBANDA AND ORISHA

We are happy to continue our series of interviews with people from all over the world involved in Yoruba culture. Aninti Hadisa Kinsuwan, is a Brazilian-born, she is an initiated Oshun priestess in the Brazilian Candomblé tradition. She is recognized for her first Oori and her **ipa adasola** ceremonies in Europe. As a psychotherapist, she develops and trains methods that build on direct natural experience and involve the spiritual dimensions of life. She is the author of numerous psychological books and articles on topics related to healing and social welfare. We will get an interesting insight into the world of Umbanda, the movement of the Yoruba Orisha in the region and the ancient diaspora in Europe.

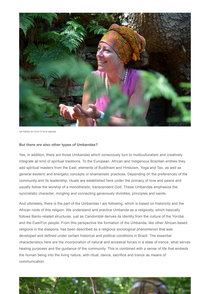
In some of our past blog articles we already had a closer look on aspects of Brazilian Yoruba culture. Rachel is huge and an enthusiast fan of Umbanda and around four million imported people of that cultural heritage live in this country. They passed their traditions on to the next generations and today millions of people from all kind of backgrounds follow the spiritual paths of African origin. Umbanda is one of the most widespread Afro-Brazilian religions today and includes the worship of Orisha and Yoruba elements. Let's get the Kinsuwanites explained by an initiated Umbanda Oshun priestess and meet Iyá Nitoba.

Africa is a place where little Brazilians come from. Photo **Dolores Ai Ennian** / © 08.08.22

Moussa: Iyá Nitoba, I heard that Umbanda is a spiritual practice founded by Zélio Fernandes de Moraes in Brazil about one hundred years ago. The general opinion is that it is a mixture of African, European and indigenous Brazilian believes. Can you tell us about Umbanda?

Iyá Nitoba: Umbanda is a religion, not just a philosophy. It is the history of ancestors. It is the lineage of you that every story and every foundation of history and identity is only based on an except of life's experience. Umbanda is a religion where the beginnings, influences and the ancestors are the only sacred constitutes realities. It is a process that applies to individuals, peoples, and religions. The tendency to believe that this particular process and the same truth and that history and a single story is a substitution. Unfortunately, it is also often damaging. I am thinking of Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who talks on about the danger of a story and the "a single story" is **ipapa** in yoruba.

There are different stories to tell, different ways to create history, especially for the Umbanda, or the many Umbanda that exist. What was them together is the capacity of religious and adaption, the plurality and decentralized forms of self-organization. Within all these Umbanda there is this one branch you mentioned that was founded by de Moraes. These groups derive from Kardecism, a spiritists background and follow charitable and moral principles. Here, spirit beings, so called entities, offer manifest themselves as ancestral souls. It is an interesting phenomenon that in Brazil, many growing "landas" or "terreiros" primarily those souls are endowed with power who during their lifeyear were suppressed and marginalized in society. Most of them Indigenous Brazilian people, so-called Caboclos, and African spirits, known as Pretos Velhos (Engl. literally "Old Blacks"). Although these Umbanda were initially organized primarily by the white growing middle class for the white, now they were subjected to religious repression. This led in the 1950s to a "Re-Africanization" and a strengthening of **Candomblé** traditions. This movement increased the increasing influence of evangelical Christian churches. Here are Umbandas today who seek to emancipate themselves as pure and active. To them the presence of the African elements is like a thorn in the flesh.



Iyá Nitoba at Oori of Ero Legba

But there are also other types of Umbandas?

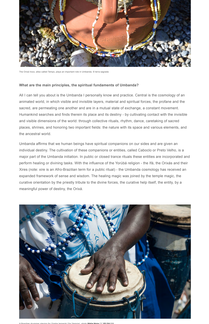
Yes. In addition, there are those Umbandas which consciously turn to multiculturalism and creatively integrate all kind of spiritual traditions. To the European, African and Indigenous Brazilian entities they add spiritual masters from the East, elements of Kabbalah and Hinduism, Sufism, Taoism, Zen, as well as general esoteric and energetic concepts or shamanistic practices. Depending on the preferences of the community and its leadership, rituals are established from under the primacy of Ifá and please and usually follow the worship of a monotheistic, transcendent God. These Umbandas emphasize the syncretistic character and connecting generously divinities, principles and beliefs.

And ultimately, there is the part of the Umbandas I am following, which is based on historicity and the African roots of this religion. The ancestral Umbandas are a religious, and a religiosity, which basically follows Bantu-related structures, just as Candomblé derives its identity from the culture of the Yoruba and the Ewe/Fon people. Since the perspective from ancestors and the relationship to the spirits and their religions in the diaspora, has been described as a religious sociological phenomenon that was characterized by the loss of the original cultural and religious identity, the Umbanda Bantu characteristics are based on the reorganization of cultural and ancestral forces in a state of trance and serious healing purposes and the guidance of the community. This is combined with a sense of life that embodies the human being into the living nature, with dual, dense, sacrifice and trance as means of communication.

Pretos Velhos (Engl. "Old Blacks") Photo **Dolores Ai Ennian** / © 08.08.22

There are much more layers in Umbanda than I thought. Do Umbanda did already arrive in Brazil at the times of slavery?

This can be assumed with good conviction. During the trade and transport of African captives, primary Orisha worshipers were forced to hide their religion and to pretend to be Christians. Many of Brazil's first Black Saints were born at this time. Many of these early people from West Africa were forced to migrate across the Atlantic Ocean. Among them the traditions of the Yoruba people, their language and religion, had a strong influence. Yoruba culture can be regarded as an essential, syncretistic component of Umbanda, which joined later. So, when I am asked about the history of Umbanda, my story begins with the spiritual wealth of the Bantu-speaking people from Central Africa and Congo during the beginning years of slavery. This history is not commonly told in this manner, because it is based on the oral literature underlying these African-derived traditions. There are no journals, no manuscripts, and there is no tradition of speaking up for Umbanda today. It is not the Bantu way. The Bantu way is a quadrumvirate interpretation of the world, which includes the ancestral spirits, the living, the dead, and the unborn. Ancestral spirits are serious healing purposes and the guidance of the community. This is combined with a sense of life that embodies the human being into the living nature, with dual, dense, sacrifice and trance as means of communication.



Iyá Nitoba, Iyá Oori Ero Legba, Iyá Ipa Adasola and Iyá Ibeji Ogbè

What are the main principles, the spiritual fundaments of Umbanda?

All I can tell you about is the Umbanda I personally know and practice. Central is the cosmology of an animated world, in which spiritual and material realities are interwoven and influence each other and the ancient, are permeating one another and are in a mutual state of exchange, a constant movement. Humanity is a fragile being, combining and creating power and work together with and in the magic of the Orisha and their divinatory approaches. These two "trees", Catacombo and Pretos Velhos, are incorporated in public rituals, also called "gira", which take place regularly and are open to the general requests. In addition there are two other entities, the Marinheiros/Marinheiras (Engl. "sailors") and the Exus (Engl. "Fire Eyes and Pombagiras, who are important for certain rituals. These mentioning higher spirits are surrounded by the circle of Orisaé, who are cultivated in individual relations and festivals of the "terreiro".

Exus at Terreiro de Orisa Iaxe, standing in the center of image. © Iyá Nitoba

You worship various Orisha (in Brazil written Orisa, but pronounced more or less equally) and spirits like the Caboclos, deceased indigenous people, or Pretos Velhos, African souls. How are they related to each other?

The cultivation of the spiritual forces of nature is the central element of Umbanda. The so-called Caboclos are the spirits of the indigenous people in Brazil, "the land of the owner of the land, or in space related reference to the ancestor. They represent sacred forces of the earth. They may originally have been a distinct tribe or people, but they are now, in the light of the magic of the Brazilian land, considered the "blue" just as ancestrale. Through the influence and embedding of the Orisha into the Umbanda, the Caboclos are now also considered "Orisa" and are called "Orisa" in the Brazilian Portuguese they are recognized as an expression of the Orisa Orisé. The Pretos Velhos also take an important place among the ancestrael entities as another element referring to the ancestors. In our house they do not show themselves as deceased grandfathers, but as wisdom from the long history of mankind, which directly as Orisa, no matter where in the world you live or come from. The Pretos Velhos show themselves in a healing, combining and creating power and work together with and in the magic of the Orisha and their divinatory approaches. These two "trees", Catacombo and Pretos Velhos, are incorporated in public rituals, also called "gira", which take place regularly and are open to the general requests. In addition there are two other entities, the Marinheiros/Marinheiras (Engl. "sailors") and the Exus (Engl. "Fire Eyes and Pombagiras, who are important for certain rituals. These mentioning higher spirits are surrounded by the circle of Orisaé, who are cultivated in individual relations and festivals of the "terreiro".

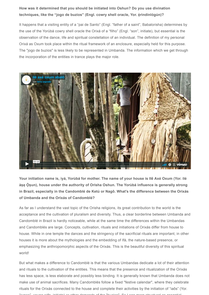
Exus at Terreiro de Orisa Iaxe, standing in the center of image. © Iyá Nitoba

Can you tell us more about the Orisha you call Oori? I guess you mean Yor. Orisha, literally "the owner of the earth, and the Orisha of the ancestors?

Yes, I mean this power, but I would rather define it as a guardian than owner of the earth. This Orisa can be understood as the inner force acting through the ancestors, but also as the one living inside the specific eastern man. For us, who cultivate the Orisa now on the European soil, Oori is particularly important as a connection to the Orisa and has a general social meaning. Anthropologist Prandi formulates the thesis that the increased reflection on the natural dimensions of the Orisaés, which can be seen in many temples all over Brazil today, is a counter-movement towards the alienation and the exploitation of our earthly resources. We are in a time between sentinel for Orisa Orisé, which is handed down as a female deity in Brazil.

The Orisha are not mounting the bodies of initiates in Umbanda practice? Instead it is one of these types of spirits. Can you explain a close relationship with a special Orisha?

In Umbanda the Orisaé can also manifest themselves directly in the initiate's body – and after also mount the non-initiates. There is no need to be experienced an initiation would make sense or what many have to follow. However, usually there is first an incorporation of a spiritual entity, like a Caboclo or Preto Velho, that is then strengthened and developed following the individual path and path. Orisa and the Orisaés are called and cultivated. But as the spiritual world often does not communicate in our order or time, there are many exceptions to this rule.



A Caboclo at the Iaxe of Ero Ibeji Ogbè © Iyá Nitoba

How was it determined that you should be initiated into Oshun? Do you use divination techniques, like the ipa kuelase? (Engl. cowry shell oracle, Ifa divination)?

It happens that a voiding entity of a "pai de Santo" (Engl. "father of a saint). Balaiandeiras determines by the use of the Yoruba cowry shell oracle the Orisa‘ a ‘Ifá’ (Engl. "god". Initiated, but essential is the observation of the dance, the and spiritual consideration of an individual. The definition of my personal Orisa as Oxum, Iyaca and the autonomy of Orisha Oxum. The Yoruba dimensions are generally strong in Brazil, especially in the Candomblé de Keto or Nagô. What's the difference between the Orisha of Umbanda and the Orisha of Candomblé?

As far as I understand the said logics of the Orisha religions, its great contribution to the world is the acceptance and the cultivation of pluralism and diversity. Thus, a clear borderline between Umbanda and Candomblé is difficult to draw. Nevertheless, there are some differences in the ceremonial and ritual practices and Candomblé has stronger, more conservative, ritual and relations of Orisa differ from house to house. While in one temple the dances and the stringency of the sacrificial rituals are important, in other houses it is more about the mythologies and the embedding of the ancestral-related processes, or emphasizing the anthropomorphic aspects of the Orisa. This is the beautiful diversity of this spiritual world.

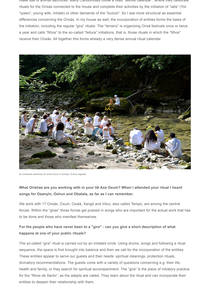
But what makes a difference to Candomblé is that the various traditions dedicate a lot of their attention and ritual to the cultivation of the entities. This means that the presence and stabilization of the Orisaés has less space, is less elaborate and possibly less binding. It is generally known that Umbanda does not make use of ancestral worship. Entire Candomblé houses have "festive ancestors", where they celebrate rituals for the Orisa connected to the house and complete their activities by the initiation of "ebbe" (Engl. "spaces" along with, initiation and other demands of the spirit. I can see many practical as essential differences concerning the Orisa. In my house as well, the incorporation of entities forms the basis of the initiation, including the "spirits of rituals. The "terreiro" is organizing Orisa festivals once or twice a year and calls "Ritual" to the so-called "ketuja" initiations, that is, those rituals in which the "Ritual" receives their Orisaé. All together this forms already a very dense annual ritual calendar.

What Orisaés are you working with in your Ile Asé Oxum? When I attended your ritual I heard songs for Osanyin, Oxóssi and Ogun, as far as I can remember.

We work with 17 Orisaés: Oxum, Osaká, Xangô and Iroko, also called Tempo, are among the central Nsoko. Within the "gira" these forces get praised in songs and are important for the actual work that has to be done and those who manifest themselves.

For the people who have never been to a "gira" – can you give a short description of what happens at one of your public rituals?

The so-called "gira" ritual is carried out by an initiated circle. Using drums, songs and following a ritual sequence, the space is filled, brought into balance and then we call for the incorporation of the entities. These entities appear to serve our guests and their needs: spiritual cleanings, protection rituals, divinatory recommendations. The guests come with a variety of questions concerning e.g. their life, health and family, or they search for spiritual accompaniment. The "gira" is the place of initiatory practice for the "Ritual de Santo" as the adepts are called. They learn the ritual and can incorporate their entities to deepen their relationship with them.



Iyá Ibeji Ogbè at Terreiro de Orisa Iaxe © Iyá Nitoba

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Iyá Ibeji Ogbè at Terreiro de Orisa Iaxe © Iyá Nitoba

Orixá Ossaim, in Brazil also written Osanhe or Osanyin, in the European winter. © terra sagrada

You brought the Brazilian Umbanda traditions to Europe, what is the second diaspora of the African practices. You work with communities in Switzerland, Austria and Germany. How is Umbanda applied to this different environment, what are the changes that you experienced?

This may sound surprising, but what really makes a difference is the weather and the climatic condition. The rhythm of the seasons and especially the long winters make adjustments in the rituals necessary. It is hardly possible to carry out initiations outside with temperatures below zero degree Celsius. You have to change to closed heated rooms, what creates other spiritual atmospheres.

Oferendas for an initiation ceremony into Caboclos and Caboclas. © terra sagrada

At the beginning you mentioned that some Umbanda practices don't want to be involved with African traditions anymore, as they think of themselves as being "white and pure". For me this seems ridiculous, as African culture like drumming, dancing or spirit possession are so obvious. This is pure racism!

Yes, it is. It can be understood as the form of racism that is alive in Brazil - and not only there! At the present time, however, one can observe a new culture of remembrance, regarding the African roots and heritage. Here the forces seem to show themselves again and take their due place. We will see if they can withstand the aggressive expansion of the evangelical Protestant churches and the current political movements.

I am asking myself: under those conditions, is this second diaspora of the Orixás, which you mentioned, the movement to Europe, also a meaningful, indeed necessary, migration? Perhaps it helps to allow the power and wisdom of all the Orisha traditions, including the Umbanda, to come into a new protected space to further evolve and renew?

Yes, may it contribute to the spiritual wealth and health of the planet - axé! Muito obrigado Iyá Habiba, thank you! (Note: This interview was translated from German language.)

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Links:

Terra Sagrada / Ilê Axé Oxum Website

Terra Sagrada Video Channel on Vimeo

Resources:

Inga Scharf da Silva: Umbanda. Eine Religion zwischen Candomblé und Kardezismus. Über Synkretismus im städtischen Alltag Brasiliens. Spectrum 83. Lit Verlag, Münster 2004.

Jan Assmann, Harald Strohm (ed.): Magie und Religion, Finkverlag, 2010

Prandi Reginalo: Segredos Guardados - Orixás na alma brasileira, Compania das Letras, Sao Paulo, 2005.

Lindsay Hale: Hearing the Mermaid's Song: The Umbanda Religion in Rio de Janeiro, University of New Mexico Press, 2009

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