

Literature on Orixá traditions

Recommandes readings	2
On the African Background and heritage	3
On Shamanism as key feature of Umbanda	5
On the European and North American background	6
On European Spiritism as source of Umbanda	9
On the Mysteries of Antiquity as forms of religion akin to Umbanda	11

Recommended readings:

- **Hale, Lindsay**, *Hearing the Mermaid's Song – The Umbanda Religion in Rio de Janeiro*, Albuquerque, 2009: University of New Mexico Press, Pb., 192 p.

This is an inspiring introduction to the intricate world of Umbanda with a series of vivid accounts of first-hand observations, organised along the creedal structure of Umbanda. Hale presents the varieties of Umbanda, depending on the composition of the spiritual and cultural traditions adopted by individual houses, while conveying a sense for the underlying unity of the faith. A very readable book.

- **Brumana, Fernando Giobellina and Martinez, Elda Gonzales**, *Spirits from the Margins: Umbanda in Sao Paulo – A Study in Popular Religion and Social Experience*, Stockholm, 1989: Almqvist & Wiksell International, Pb., 308 p.

This book has a more formal character. While its authors pursue a structuralist analysis of Umbanda's place in the Brazil's complex social, religious and racial make-up, they do not fail to integrate a wealth of experiences and insights into the concepts and organisation of Umbanda with a view to its functions for life in these contexts. It is a demanding and rewarding book.

- **Cohen, Emma**, *The Mind Possessed – The Cognition of Spirit Possession in an Afro-Brazilian Religious Tradition*, Oxford, 2007: Oxford University Press, 241 p.

The author focuses on the phenomenon of "spirit possession" which is central to Umbanda. She gives a series of phenomenological descriptions and analysis them from various perspectives, relating them to research on the phenomenon in other spiritual traditions, which has gained increased acceptance over the recent decades.

On the African Background and heritage

Even though Umbanda has integrated essential elements from Spiritism, Christianity, in particular its Roman Catholic variant, Amerindian religion, Hermeticism, Theosophy, Hinduism and recently Esotericism, its fundamental beliefs, perceptions and practises are derived from Bantu Africa, especially Angola, the Congo and Mozambique.

These have become overlaid with West African influences, chiefly from the Yoruba, in the course of inner-Brazilian migration.

The Bantu heritage has survived most strongly in south-eastern Brazil, where Umbanda originated. Its features are the centrality of connecting to the mediating entities in trance, of spiritual medium-ship, giving guidance and counsel, the emphasis on healing, by spiritual, energetic and herbal means, warding off evil and restoring vitality and its closeness to nature. It is an individualistic and flexible creed, which has readily integrated Amerindian and European spiritual entities – a process which is still going on.

The West African heritage is present in the priestly and ritual structure with the chief deities, the Orixás, to which the spiritual entities have become associated, and also in the organisation of spiritual communities around sanctuaries, the “terreiros”. This tradition is most dominant in Candomblé with which Umbanda has much in common. Trance as means of communication with spiritual or divine beings, the significance of spiritual initiations and divination by means of oracles are features of both traditions and have remained central to Umbanda.

A knowledge of African religions, anthropological and cosmological concepts is indispensable to an in-depth understanding of Umbanda and a good antidote to metaphorical reductions of its spiritual beings.

- **Mbiti, John S.**, *African Religions and Philosophy* (2nd rev. ed.), Oxford 1999: Heinemann Ed. Publ., Pb., 288 p.

Mbiti gives an introduction to African traditional religion, cosmology and anthropology from a chiefly Bantu perspective. He shows that the issue of African religion is not merely about specific deities, but that a wider set of perceptions about man, his natural, social and spiritual environment and about the world are part of this tradition. (See also other works by Mbiti on African religious and spiritual practise)

- **Awolalu, J. Omosade**, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, New York, 1995: Athelia Henrietta Press Inc., Pb. ed., 203 p.

This book gives a clear overview of the Yoruba pantheon, with its belief in a supreme God, Olorun, and the assistant deities, the Orixás, on spiritual concepts about man, nature, powers and the cosmos, on rituals, liturgy, sacrifice and the roles in spiritual practise.

- **Janzen, John M.**, *Ngoma: Discourses on Healing in Central and Southern Africa*, Berkely & Los Angeles, 1992: University of California Press, 241 p.

Considering that drumming, singing and dancing performed in conjunction with spiritual mediumship, trance and counselling and healing, are central features of Umbanda ritual, Janzen's investigation of this complex in various Bantu societies is of focal interest. He analyses the social forms of organisation as well as the ritual settings, the spiritual performances, experiences and initiations. It is a book rich in insight and well illustrated, providing an encounter with this core complex of Umbanda at its sources. It is a classic and comprehensive study so far unsurpassed.

The book can be read and downloaded at:
<http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft3779n8vf/>

- **Somé, Patrice Malindoma**, *Of Water and the Spirit – Ritual, Magic and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman*, New York, 1995: Arcana (Penguin Books) , Pb., 311 p.

Somé, an initiated diviner (shaman) of the West African Dagara people of Burkina Faso and northern Ghana, gives a fascinating account of his transition firstly from a traditional African rural life into French Catholic culture and academia and from there to an initiation in the spiritual traditions of his people, famous for their heritage. Following the author's account of his calling and initiation the reader finds himself confronted with considerable demands to accept a constitution of reality fundamentally different from what he may be used to, yet lucid on its own terms. (See also other works by Somé on African rituals and spiritual practise.)

On Shamanism as key feature of Umbanda

Shamanism is a central feature of Umbanda. Contact with spiritual and divine powers or beings is sought in the context of ritual by states of trance, incorporations and divinatory means for an immediate experience, as well as by indirect ritual means, which serve the purpose to participate in their energies, guidance, healing or transformative powers. This is done by trained and initiated mediums who act as mediators to the spiritual world, but it is considered to be accessible on an elementary level to any participant in Umbanda ritual.

The shamanism of Umbanda has various sources, the most important of these being those of African heritage. However some ritual practises and spiritual entities of Amerindian origin have also been integrated, as well as spiritistic practises of European origin, which have shamanistic significance to the degree that they are interpreted in spiritual terms.

The classic source for shamanism is still M. Eliade's study:

- **Eliade, Mircea**, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Princeton, 2004: Princeton University Press, Pb., 648 pp (1st ed.: 1951)

Drawing on a vast range of studies Eliade has systematized his material from all over the globe to describe shamanism as a universal phenomenon. Although he focuses on Siberian shamanism(s) as being most representative of the ideal-typical model, he includes other shamanic traditions too, of American Indians, of European folk traditions and antiquity as well as from India.

On the European and North American background

Umbanda has roots in European culture as well, some of them extending deep down in time.

In order to assess the significance of European and North American traditions for Umbanda it is necessary to keep in mind that Umbanda has not arisen as a specific, more or less “syncretistic” or “impure” development of African traditions, but by a deliberate acceptance of these traditions into the fold of European Spiritism in Brazil: this is in a sense the meaning of dating the origin of Umbanda to that Kardecist séance, in which a mestizo spirit, the “Caboclo of Seven Crossings” manifested himself to young Zelio de Moraes in 1908. This mythical birth date has a paradigmatic significance, symbolising the awareness that Umbanda, for all the wealth of its African traditions, was born out of a fruitful syncretistic encounter and still is in the process of amalgamation and integration of even new sources. Therefore European and North American spiritual, philosophical, religious and ritual traditions are equally important to Umbanda, some of them directly, others indirectly.

A defining feature of Umbanda is its universalist approach, firmly holding its beliefs to be based on universally accessible experience. While the spiritual entities known and addressed in Umbanda are unmistakably Brazilian, representing the country’s diverse heritage in its individual divine and spiritual entities, its universalist approach may explain why new spiritual beings from all over the world continue to make appearance in trance states, and to be integrated into the pantheon. This is an ongoing process.

These convictions go along with a pantheistic or rather pan-entheistic perception of a supreme divine being as the continuous source of all being and life and as guarantee of the coherence of all of reality, material and spiritual.

This fundamental conviction agreed well with the African belief in a supreme creative divine being, which is above all the spiritual and divine powers which are usually addressed in ritual practise.

Polytheistic as Umbanda appears in many of its practises, its monotheistic trait emerges where the conviction is concerned, that all spiritual powers ultimately serve the same purpose and that a fundamental unity of the spiritual world is to be assumed.

This limits the magic (- or “magick” -) elements of Umbanda and demands their subservience to spiritual requirements in principle.

Universalism holds that the ultimate divine reality is accessible through a multitude of specific religious perceptions and expressions, conditioned by culture and personality, time and history.

While being firm in its belief in a single transcendent reality it allows for a wide range of religious and spiritual manifestations, believing them to be reconcilable on a higher level in principle, which is a criterion for their validity. Individual religions may thus be evaluated as to the degree in which they reconcile their particular revelations with the higher criterion of universalism.

This position has been published in a widely-read manifesto during the time of Romanticism, by a German philosopher-theologian:

- **Schleiermacher, Friedrich D.**, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, (original ed., 1799), (translation and introduction by Richard Crouter), Cambridge, 1996: Cambridge University Press (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy), Pb. 175 p.

Schleiermacher intended to provide a new basis for the acceptance of Christian religion and to show its excellence by setting forth a universal theory of religion and of religious experience. Thereby he sought to address the widespread secularisation in his age, which he interpreted as symptom of a perceived deficit of legitimacy of the Christian church by his contemporaries in terms of what could be accepted as “reasonable”.

The theory which he developed in this treatise that was to become a classic contributed to the development of a religious-philosophical attitude which engendered increasing interest in non-Christian religious and spiritual traditions, and even in spiritism, which developed in the subsequent centuries in Europe and America. A core idea Schleiermacher is the notion of a spiritual perception of the universe, in its entirety and in its singular manifestations, in a primarily intuitive way, which includes “feeling” and only secondarily by an intellectual approach.

Schleiermacher’s treatise came to be received as a programme for a universalist approach to religion, as in American “Transcendentalism”.

In New England Romantic and Idealistic positions, including doctrines of Platonism, were developed on by the “Transcendentalists”. They reaffirmed a spiritual world view against current materialism and fundamentalisms, combining it with a marked engagement in society, for the abolishment of slavery, for educational reform, for women’s rights and for individual liberty. In addition they shared a keen sense of nature and appreciation for nature as a medium of spiritual experience. In this inclusive approach to spiritual revelation and experience combined with a spiritual perception of nature, Transcendentalism converges with Umbanda.

One of the leading figures of Transcendentalism was Ralph Waldo Emerson:

- **Robinson, David M.** (ed.), *The Spiritual Emerson: Essential Writings by Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Boston, Mass., 2003: Beacon Press, Pb., 280 p.

This anthology of essays by Emerson covers themes of spirituality, nature, self, philosophy, social reform, religious practise and theory. In particular Emerson includes the issue of the “self” as decidedly modern theme, at the focus of various therapeutic approaches of the 20th century, which do not only aim at overcoming clinical disorders, but which have a deeper understanding of holistic human fulfilment in the development of the self. This perspective may include the convictions of the necessity for spiritual growth, for ecological awareness, for an appreciation of nature as well as for social improvement as inter-related human contexts. This marks Emerson as a spiritual leader of decidedly modern quality.



However he also drew on ancient spiritual doctrines of Platonic origin. His belief that every soul has an “over-soul” above it matches well with Umbanda’s convictions that each person has guiding spiritual entities to relate to. For all the differences which exist, Emerson is an inspiring author to read from this perspective, adding much which is perfectly compatible with it.

The ethics of Umbanda are well reflected in the ethical principle of “reverence for life”, as proposed by Albert Schweitzer. His course of life mirrors the realms of Umbanda in an uncanny way. His combination of theology, music and medicine, as professions echoes the close integration of these aspects in Umbanda ritual and theory. Likewise his emigration from France to central Africa follows a movement which was constitutive to Umbanda and still is: to reach out to Africa and to integrate it with the modern Western world in a mutually beneficial way.

An introduction to A. Schweitzer’s ethics is given in the following anthology:

- **Joy, Charles R.** (ed.), *Albert Schweitzer: An Anthology*, Boston, Mass. 1947: Beacon Press, reprint: 2003: Kessinger Publ.

One may be surprised to find an author rooted so deeply in Christianity, albeit as to his dogmatic convictions, to be enlisted as reference relating to Umbanda may surprise, but it points to an aspect frequently overlooked. For all its African heritage, Umbanda has also sought to integrate what it saw as the best of Christianity. Thus Jesus Christ is re-interpreted as an “avatar” of the first “personal” divinity of the pantheon, of the Orixá Oxalá, whose traits, according to Yoruba mythology show him to be a benign ruler and manifestation of the principle of “light” in all of its connotations. The adoption of Jesus Christ has not merely been a matter of camouflaging the actual creed, but a real process of mutually interpretative exchange, of true syncretism. Thus traits and values of Jesus Christ came to be transferred to Umbanda, associated with Oxalá, but permeating the entire value system and determining its ethics in a very fundamental way. The values of love, of humility, of healing and purity of heart came to be combined with the African emphasis on enhancement of life, the care for the “vital force” and of acceptance of life in all of its shades, in a union not wholly free of contradictions. The tension between the demands of spiritual and ethical purification and the lenient acceptance of the shadier aspects of personality may yet await resolution. The colour white of Umbanda’s ceremonial dress symbolising purity and humility and the charitable activities in which many centres and adherents engage in, testify to this value system. A. Schweitzer’s core value of reverence for “life” is situated in this field.

On European Spiritism as source of Umbanda

It was another European tradition which appealed to the example and teachings of Jesus Christ that was crucial at the origin of Umbanda: the spiritistic doctrine of Alain Kardec.

European Spiritism arose in the context of a firmly materialistic culture, from the mid-19th century onwards. Whereas Monism sought to preserve some form of spiritual world-view on a naturalistic basis, Spiritism strove to transcend the confines of a merely material reality by empirical means. The evidence of “super-natural” phenomena served to define limits to a merely materialistic conception of reality, while sharing its belief in the necessity for experiential evidence of all assertions about reality. Thus the contact with spirits, and the manifestations of occult phenomena came to assume religious significance.

The indications for some post-existence of souls, gathered in spiritistic sessions, was interpreted as support for the idea of transmigration of souls and of re-incarnation. In France Alain Kardec systematized practises and observations of spiritism in a comprehensive manual for mediumistic practise published as:

- **Kardec, Allan**, *The Book on Mediums: Guide for Mediums and Invocators*, 2008, Redwheel/Wiser, Pb., 464 p.

This book gives a good overview of basic methods of spiritistic invocation, on the powers and dangers involved in mediumistic practise, on its requirements and settings, drawing on a broad basis of observations and tradition. Kardec also develops outlines of a spiritistic anthropology and cosmology which have come to influence Umbanda quite strongly. He

Kardec also wrote a spiritistic interpretation of the gospels reports on Jesus, seeking to integrate his beliefs with those of Christianity on a basis well at variance with fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. In this synthesis the spiritistic and mediumistic realm is aligned with the religious, or re-integrated to it, as Kardec believed, giving rise to the movement of “Kardecism”, which rapidly spread from France to Brazil, where it flourished, especially in the upper strata of society, ever since.

The influence of spiritual traditions of the non-white parts of the population may have enhanced this reception. Umbanda however was “born” with the self-perception of being a new religion when Kardecism became confronted with the demands of the spirits of the “coloured” ancestors of the Brazilian people. This was an encounter with many facets and connotations, and has remained so ever since. However at this point a reception of the African spiritual heritage began into the social and religious realm of Kardecism - and vice versa too, as the syncretistic fusion of both sets of beliefs and practises show. This is a highly complex and dynamic process which is in many ways still in a formative stage, for all the consensus on beliefs and practises which have emerged over century of Umbanda’s existence. The development and position of Kardecism in Brazil is described by:

- **Hess, David J.**, *Spirits and Scientists: Ideology, Spiritism and Brazilian Culture*, 1991: Pennsylvania State University Press, Pb. 258 p.

Hess analysis the success and development of Brazilian Kardecism in its religious and cultural environment, vis-à-vis of Umbanda as well as of Pentecostalism and Catholicism. He also includes the perspective of the “New Age” and of modern Esotericism as factors influencing the spread and acceptance of Spiritism, and, by implication, also of Umbanda, even if this is only a the margin of his book. Given the many links between these two traditions, Hess’ book also contributes to the understanding of Umbanda.

On the Mysteries of Antiquity as forms of religion akin to Umbanda:

Going back further in time, to a more distant period of European spiritual history, Umbanda reveals traits of the Mysteries of antiquity: In those cults, the advanced rituals were kept secret and the initiates were under oath to not to disclose the secrets to any outsider. Umbanda too has a system of steps of secret initiations, whose details may not be disclosed.

Likewise these cults involved symbolic rituals which had a personal focus and aimed at linking the initiate with a specific deity in order to effect a personal transformation of the initiate and to enable him to partake of the powers of the deity. In this respect Umbanda resembles the ancient mystery cults quite closely, emphasising, as it does, the psychic involvement and energetic participation of the devotee in the spiritual realm, in a series of initiatory rituals of transformative power.

The effect of participation in mystery cult is described in a highly entertaining novel by the 2nd century lawyer and author, Apuleius of Madaura, which has become a classic.

- **Apuleius**, *The Golden Ass*, Oxford, 2008, Oxford University Press (Oxford World Classics) Pb., 336 pp.

Apuleius describes the peregrinations of his young hedonistic hero through a series of wild adventures in the realms of sex and magic, which result in his unfortunate transformation into a donkey, and finally his redemption by participating in the mystery ritual of the goddess Isis, in whose cult he has the good fortune to be initiated. The hero's transition from the realm of magic to that of religion and from a state of hedonism to that of a person with spiritual insight and purpose reflects the transformation by the mystery cult, while preserving its secrets. Although this spiritual dimension of the novel is sometimes disputed, the fact that Apuleius defended himself against charges of black magic in a highly knowledgeable and well-reflected speech, shows that he had an intimate knowledge of his subject.

A scholarly introduction to the subject of the Mysteries of antiquity is given by:

- **Burkert, Walter**, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, Cambridge, Mass., 1989: Harvard University Press, Pb., 181 p.

Burkert gives an overview of the most important mysteries, which have flourished in antiquity for over a thousand years, coexisting with the official religions, sometimes uneasily. He describes the intense personal experiences sought in these cults and provided by them as a mode of encounter with the divine realm not provided elsewhere. While the details of the mysteries were guarded by arcane secrecy, various testimonies about their effects have been preserved, which are supported by other indirect evidence as to their structure and contents. It is an interesting introduction to a distant world which appears to find a unique echo in Umbanda.