TRANSACTIONAL AUTHENTICITY: AN UMBANDA TEMPLE IN MONTREAL

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INTRODUCTION

It is a quiet February Sunday in Outremont, a prosperous township within the city of Montreal, and the new snow sparkles in the brilliant sunshine. We arrive at a solid-looking brick house. As directed, we go to an entry off the back garden that leads to the furnished basement. Once inside, we find ourselves in a room where a few rows of folding chairs have been set up. In front, an altar and a set of drums stand at the far end of a cordoned-off area. A bouquet of flowers and feathers, three candles, and a glass of water adorn the altar, along with other small objects including a little pot of honey, a piece of chalk, a small stone and a covered bowl containing water, eau de cologne, and flower petals. Further back, almost out of sight, is an alarm clock. Soon the chairs are filled and silence falls over the group. A young woman dressed in white is playing the drums. Other women dressed in white are singing (in Brazilian Portuguese) and moving to the music in the gonga, the sacred space near the altar. A tall, radiant woman enters the area around the altar singing and dancing to the music. She is wearing a long flowered skirt. The mãe (visiting from Brazil) has arrived and the gira has begun.

How is it that this small group of Montrealers, none of them Brazilian, all highly educated, came to be singing in a language not their own, and in some cases, incorporating spirits associated with a culture and history some of them knew little about before encountering Umbanda? Indeed, these mediums did not discover Umbanda through Brazilian immigrants, nor had they visited Brazil, except in the odd case as tourists, before

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1 The mediums now wear long, colorful flowered skirts for rituals.
2 Ritual in which certain spirits are incorporated by the mediums and where spectators may consult the incorporated spirits.
3 The one Brazilian medium in the group ceased regular participation because of the demands of her studies.
becoming *Umbandistas*. Rather, they encountered Umbanda via a complex process of transnationalization that began with the visit to Brazil of a few Swiss therapists. Since then, Umbanda has travelled, not only via Brazilian migrants but, in this case, through the migration of non-Brazilians between Europe and North America. Moreover, the development of the Internet and expansion of international travel has allowed this Montreal group to function as an integral part of the ‘Arán Temple,’ whose leader (*pai-de-santo*) lives near São Paulo, Brazil.

*Mãe-de-santo* and *pai-de-santo* are titles that roughly translate as ‘priest’; they refer to those who have been initiated into the more advanced levels of the ritual and who are responsible for guarding and transmitting the Umbanda tradition. The *pai-de-santo* referred to herein is the acknowledged leader of the temple; he addressed as ‘*pai*’ (father) and is often referred to by that term.

Of modest, but not impoverished origins, the *pai* travels little and so far as we know, speaks only Brazilian Portuguese. He did not pursue his studies beyond the level of *colegial* (secondary school). He is, however, a talented musician. The ‘*mãe*’, referred to in this chapter, is the sister of the *pai* who is also the coordinator of the international Arán Temple network. In her case, the title ‘*mãe*’ connotes respect for her ritual advancement and role as representative of the *pai-de-santo* but does not imply structural equivalence to the leader. Unlike the *pai*, she is often referred to and called by her first name, preceded by ‘*mãe*’ as in ‘*mãe* Susana’ (pseudonym). She has a Master’s Degree in psychology, which she pursued after becoming involved in Arán Umbanda, seeking to better understand the trance experience of the mediums from a psychological point of view. She speaks French, English and Spanish fluently and travels frequently in her work as coordinator of the international Arán Temple network.

Anthropologists overlooked Umbanda in favor of Candomblé for many years, though Bastide’s (1960) work on African religions in Brazil offered a description of Umbanda and situated it in the Brazilian religious context. Since the 1980s, Umbanda has attracted increased scholarly attention, not only as it appears in Brazil (Brown 1994; Motta 1993) but in bordering countries such as Uruguay (Moro and Ramirez 1981, cited by Brown and Bick 1987), Paraguay (Oro 1999) and Argentina (Muchnik 2006; Frigerio 2004). The spread of Umbanda to the US (Brown and Bick 1987) and Europe

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4 Like all proper names used herein, this is a pseudonym.