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THE SACREDNESS OF THE VOICE: THE POWER AND FORCE OF LANGUAGE IN UMBANDA TERREIROS

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Abstract: The sacredness of the voice and the power of language in Umbanda terreiros reveal the connection between practitioners and the spiritual world. Umbanda, an Afro-Brazilian religion, values oral tradition through chants and prayers, which are essential for invoking spiritual entities. This study analyzes the role of voice and language in Umbanda terreiros, discussing the importance of chants and prayers in rituals and how these practices structure religious experiences. The research highlights that voice and language in terreiros are crucial for invoking spirits and creating a sacred atmosphere. The chants, elaborated for specific functions, act as mantras that mobilize forces of nature and facilitate the incorporation of entities. Oral tradition, through musicality and chants, guarantees the transmission of knowledge and the continuity of religious practice, allowing for a constant renewal of the connection with the divine. The conclusion is that voice and language are transformative and vital elements for spirituality in Umbanda.

Keywords: Sacredness; Language; Afro-Brazilian religion; Spirituality.

INTRODUCTION

The sacredness of the voice and the power of language in Umbanda terreiros reveal the deep connection between the carnal plane and the spiritual plane. Umbanda, an Afro-Brazilian religion, is marked by a rich oral tradition where chants and prayers play a central role in rituals. The chants, often in Portuguese or in languages of African origin, are used to invoke spiritual entities and create a bridge between the material and spiritual worlds.

The importance of voice and language is not exclusive to Umbanda. In other religions, such as Catholicism, the priest's voice when reciting the words of consecration transforms the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. This transformation only occurs

through the spoken word, showing the power of sacred language. In Umbanda, this sacredness is manifested in the chants and prayers, which also transform and connect practitioners with the divine.

This study aims to analyze the role of voice and language in Umbanda terreiros, discuss the importance of chants and prayers in rituals, and understand how these practices structure and define religious experiences. Using a bibliographical approach, the article reviews relevant literature and presents significant quotes to contextualize the discussion on the sacredness of the voice. The main conclusions indicate that the voice and language in Umbanda terreiros play a significant role in invoking spirits and creating a sacred space, which highlights the importance of orality and musicality in religious practice.

THE VOICE AND LANGUAGE IN UMBANDA TERREIROS

In Umbanda, mediumship is seen as a natural and essential ability for the spiritual evolution of human beings. Silva (2005) explains that "Mediumship is considered an innate and necessary quality for man in his process of spiritual evolution. It is up to religion, therefore, to promote the means for followers to develop this ability and come into contact with the world of the discarnate" (p. 108). In this way, Umbanda terreiros are environments where practices are developed that facilitate this spiritual connection, and voice and language are central elements in this process of linking different planes.

Chants and prayers in terreiros play a crucial role. These chants, usually in Portuguese or African languages, are not merely artistic expressions. They serve to invoke spiritual entities and establish a bridge between the material and spiritual worlds. Oral tradition is fundamental in Umbanda, ensuring that knowledge and practices are passed down

from generation to generation. During rituals, the voice becomes sacred, functioning as a channel for spiritual energies. In this sense, Rohde describes how

the ceremonies organized by Luzia were open to the public and attended by both blacks and whites, and were accompanied by singing and the playing of atabaques. The reported aims of the gatherings were to purify the community, cure illness or harm and perform enlightening divinations. The music and dancing began until Luzia went into a trance, when she was then dressed in the clothes of the incorporated entity (2009, p. 88).

This description illustrates how music and dance, which are expressions of voice and language, are essential for creating the spiritual bond needed in rituals.

Musicality in Umbanda terreiros is not just a cultural expression, but a manifestation of spiritual intentions and energies. The sung points are designed to fulfill specific functions in the rituals, such as invoking and greeting the entities, as well as facilitating their manifestations. When mediums chant and pray, their voice becomes a channel of energy that connects the material and spiritual planes.

Umbanda values mediumship as an individual ability and uses voice and language as tools that strengthen the religious community and promote the spiritual evolution of its members. Ritualistic practices, enriched by musicality and oral tradition, create an environment where the connection with the divine is constantly renewed. This allows practitioners to experience a spiritual transformation, highlighting the importance of voice and language in Umbanda terreiros and their influence on the religious experience of adherents.

To fully understand the role of voice and language in Umbanda terreiros, it is essential to recognize that language is much more than a simple means of communication. As Ruiz (2004) observes, “language is not a mere instrument that human beings use: it consti-

tutes the anthropological dimension through which they know the world, interpret it and transform it” (p. 231). This perspective serves to understand the importance of the voice in Umbanda rituals.

In Umbanda, the language used in chants and prayers is a means by which practitioners know and interpret the spiritual world. These verbal elements transmit knowledge, tradition and transform the spiritual and material reality of the participants. When a medium chants a point, they are not only communicating a message, but also creating a spiritual reality that impacts everyone present. The medium’s voice, when singing, acts as a catalyst that transforms the environment and opens portals to the spiritual world.

When considering the sacredness of the voice and the power of language in Umbanda terreiros, it is essential to recognize that these elements go beyond mere communication. They are powerful instruments of transformation and spiritual connection, which allow Umbanda practitioners to know, interpret and transform their spiritual and material world.

CHANTS AND PRAYERS IN RITUALS

Chants and prayers play an essential role in rituals and are fundamental for maintaining the spiritual vibration. According to Costa (2013), *rituals in Umbanda include prayers, chants and rhythmic clapping, known as nimbu and liquaqua*. When describing the cult, she emphasizes that ;

They would say prayers, chant various songs known as nimbu, and clap rhythmically, called liquaqua, while the embanda went into a trance through possession. He would then chew embers, release sparks, chant and dance to the rhythm of the participants’ clapping (Costa, 2013, p. 78).

This description highlights how sound and rhythmic elements are fundamental to inducing altered states of consciousness in mediums. The embanda, when going into trance, demonstrates a deep connection with spiritual forces, since chewing embers and chanting are practices that symbolize the transformation from the physical to the spiritual. Rhythmic clapping and chants known as *nimbu* and *liquaqua* are essential for creating the right environment for mediumistic possession, demonstrating the importance of musicality and rhythm in facilitating this connection.

The sung points have a deep and multifaceted meaning in Umbanda. Barbosa Junior (2014) highlights the importance of these chants in rituals: "In Umbanda, the sung points are some of those responsible for maintaining the vibration of the giras and other works. True mantras, they mobilize forces of nature, attract certain vibrations, Orixás, Guides and Entities" (p. 74). These sung points function as mantras that maintain the energetic vibration of the environment, attracting the energies of the Orixás and Spirit Guides. They guarantee the harmony and effectiveness of the ceremonies.

As well as maintaining the vibration of the rituals, the rhythmic chants of Umbanda have a direct impact on the practitioners. Saraceni (2014) explains that:

Umbanda uses rhythmic chants that act on certain plexuses, which react by increasing the speed of their gyrations. With this, they capture much more etheric energies, which quickly subtilize the entire mediumistic field, facilitating incorporation (p. 43).

The author brings an important perspective on the physical and energetic effect of chants in Umbanda. By acting on the energetic plexuses, these chants increase the speed of their spinning, which allows them to capture greater quantities of etheric energies. This process subtilizes the mediumistic field, faci-

ilitating the incorporation of spiritual entities and allowing for a more intense and clear interaction with the spiritual plane.

These elements structure and define the rituals in Umbanda, preparing the environment and the mediums for spiritual practices. The songs and prayers in Umbanda are vehicles for transformation, both of the ritual space and of the practitioners themselves, showing the depth and complexity of the sacredness of the voice and language in Umbanda terreiros. Through these chants and prayers, the oral tradition is preserved and perpetuated, ensuring that the wisdom and spirituality of Umbanda continues to be passed down from generation to generation.

STRUCTURING AND DEFINING RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

In order to understand the structuring and definition of religious experiences in Umbanda, it is important to consider how voice and language influence the experience of practitioners. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1970), in *The Sorcerer and his Magic*, proposes that the efficacy of magic is based on three pillars: the belief of the sorcerer himself in his techniques, the belief of the patient in the sorcerer's efficacy, and the trust of the community in the veracity of these practices. This tripartite structure of belief can be applied to Umbanda to analyze how religious experiences are shaped and defined.

Firstly, the medium's belief in the efficacy of their techniques is fundamental. In Umbanda, mediums believe deeply in the power of chants, prayers and rituals to invoke and communicate with spiritual entities. This personal faith is essential for the rituals to have an impact. When the medium chants a point, they are not only fulfilling a ritualistic function, but also imbuing each word and melody with their belief in the spiritual connection that is being established.

Secondly, the participants' belief in the power of the medium and the rituals is crucial. The faithful who attend and participate in the rituals believe in the medium's ability to serve as an intermediary between the physical and spiritual worlds. This trust strengthens the effectiveness of the ritual, creating an atmosphere of collective faith that enhances the spiritual energy generated. When the participants chant along with the medium, this collective practice intensifies the spiritual vibration and facilitates the manifestation of the entities.

Finally, the community's trust in the veracity of Umbanda practices is vital to the perpetuation and effectiveness of the rituals. The collective opinion that Umbanda's rituals and chants are true and effective sustains the religious practice. By validating and demanding these practices, the community creates a support network that reinforces individual and collective faith. This community trust is visible in the celebrations and in the continuity of oral traditions that guarantee the transmission of knowledge and practices from generation to generation.

The application of Lévi-Strauss' theory to Umbanda shows how the structuring of religious experiences depends on the intersection between the medium's personal faith, the belief of the participants and the trust of the community. This interdependence creates a continuous cycle of validation and strengthening of religious practices. Voice and language, when channeled through chants and prayers, are the vehicles that materialize this faith and belief, transforming them into tangible religious experiences.

CONCLUSION

The sacredness of the voice and the power of language in Umbanda terreiros are fundamental to religious practice and the spiritual connection of the adepts. Through chants and prayers, practitioners create a bridge between the material and spiritual worlds, invoking entities and facilitating communication with the divine. This oral tradition not only preserves and transmits ancestral knowledge, but also transforms the spiritual reality of the participants, creating a sacred atmosphere that enriches the religious experience.

The analysis revealed that voice and language, when channeled through songs and prayers, are powerful instruments of spiritual transformation. These elements are more than mere means of communication; they are vehicles of energy and intentions that structure and define the rituals, facilitating the incorporation and manifestation of spiritual entities. Musicality and oral tradition in Umbanda guarantee the continuity of practices and the constant renewal of the connection with the divine, highlighting the importance of orality and musicality in religious practice.

The voice and language in Umbanda terreiros play a central role in invoking spirits and creating a sacred atmosphere, reflecting the depth and complexity of the Umbanda religious experience. The sacredness of the voice, manifested through chants and prayers, is essential for the perpetuation and effectiveness of rituals, demonstrating that, in Umbanda, the sung word is a transformative and vital force for the spirituality of its practitioners.

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