Umbanda: Hybridity, Tradition and Semantic Plurality

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Abstract

Focusing on the Brazilian spirit-incorporation religion of Umbanda, this article proposes a theoretical shift in conceptions of hybridity: a move from asking “what ingredients mix in what manner to produce what result?” to asking “how do we interpret religious innovation?” This approach sees meaning as simply the result of interpretation (not in terms of a representational relation between words and world). It also underlines the centrality of discursive claims of hybridity and purity, as opposed to historical issues of origins – a point clarified by comparing “hybridity” to “tradition.” Comparison of Umbanda and Candomblé leads to the conclusion that each can be considered both “Afro-Brazilian” and “hybrid” in different ways. Candomblé exhibits semantic polarity (all groups accept that a certain sub-type is more authentic and hybridity marks divergence from that norm). Umbanda exhibits semantic plurality (wide variation between groups is not subject to such a normative judgment).

Keywords

hybridity – Umbanda – Candomblé – tradition – semantics – Afro-Brazilian religions

1 Introduction

This article clarifies a theoretical shift in conceptions of hybridity: a move from asking “what ingredients mix in what manner to produce what result?” to asking “how do we interpret religious innovation?” It focuses on Umbanda, a Brazilian spirit-incorporation religion, first recorded in the 1920s and 1930s.
in the large cities of southern Brazil. In Umbanda, various types of spiritually evolved entities incorporate in mediums, so that these “spirits” or “guardians” can help members of the community who attend rituals in order to access spiritual services, especially healing. The lack of clear evidence about Umbanda’s historical origins and continuities makes it a useful case for contrasting an approach that foreground these historical factors with a semantic approach to hybridity, which is outlined here.

Umbanda is almost universally classified as “Afro-Brazilian,” but that status is ambiguous for a number of reasons. Umbanda’s relation to Africa is less clear than is the case with Candomblé, the most well-known of the many Afro-Brazilian religions.¹ Brazil’s many Umbandas are at least as Brazilian and esoteric as they are African. This article is not another critique of essentialist views that see hybridity as a mixture of anterior purities.² It is a methodological discussion of how to contextualize and make sense of claims concerning mixed cultural and religious forms.

2 Hybridity, Meaning and Method

Many concepts theorize cultural mixture, including acculturation, articulation, bricolage, créolité, creolization, fusion, heterogeneity, hybridity, in-betweenness, interstitiality, juxtaposition, mélange, mestizaje/mestiçagem, multiple identity, pastiche, polyphony, syncretism, third space and transculturation. This article’s argument is implicit in the fact that most of these terms are synonymous with “mixture,” yet none of them mean quite the same thing. It follows that determining the meaning of “hybridity” and related terms involves more than determining what these words point to “out there” in the world; it involves making sense of them in their different semantic locations, tracing

1 On Umbanda, see Bastide, Les Religions, pp. 422–75; Brown, Umbanda; Negrão, Entre a cruz; Hale, Umbanda; Hearing; Engler, Umbanda; Africana or Esoteric. Afro-Brazilian religions include, among others, Candomblé and (arguably) Umbanda (each with several distinct forms), Batuque, Cabula, Mesa de Santa Barbara, Jarê, Omolocô, Quimbanda, Tambor de Mina, Tambor de Nagô, Xambá and Xangô. Others have a greater proportion of Indigenous elements: e.g., Babaçué, Batuque Paranaense, Candomblé de Caboclo, Catimbó, Jurema, Pajelança, Terecó and Toré de Xangô. There is a spectrum between Afro-Brazilian “religions” and ritual forms of dance and procession: examples toward the latter end of this spectrum include Candombe, Canjerê, Caxambu (Cucumbi), Carimbó, Congado (Reinado), Jongo (Bendengué) and Suça. See van der Poel, Dicionário; Engler/Brito, Afro-Brazilian.

2 See Engler, Anterior Purities; Umbanda and Hybridity; Feijoada.
connections between these words and others with which they are associated in particular cultural, historical, linguistic, religious and scholarly contexts.

Most scholars of religion/s understand that there is no single way to mix religions or aspects of them, not least because the distinction between pure and hybrid cultural forms is always relative. The idea of absolutely pure or absolutely mixed religious forms imposes an essentialist view that generally reproduces colonialist assumptions. Tensions between hybridity-concepts and their contextualized opposites (pure, orthodox, traditional, elite etc.) are best read holistically. “Hybridity” is a relational term, its meaning informed by opposition to other concepts.3 Hybridity-concepts are best read in semantic relation to related terms and with reference to specific historical and cultural contexts.

These points involve specific views of what it is that we are trying to do as scholars, including conceptions of “definition” and “meaning.” There is no need to dive into philosophical issues here (though that path is productive): the basic distinctions make common sense.

There are many ways of thinking about definition.4 One view is that a definition offers semantic equivalence to the phenomenon it points to, doing this by correctly representing one or more existing objects to which the word refers. From this point of view, definitions are sets of necessary and sufficient criteria for the inclusion or exclusion of items in lists. The right definition would be the one that points out the essential characteristics of a delimited group of real phenomena. Definitions of this kind may be true or false. Hence, scholars defend mutually exclusive alternatives. This view of definition is appropriate in some contexts, but it is not a useful way to approach “hybridity” and related concepts. Hybridity is a construct, not a natural kind.

A more useful view is that definitions are elucidative and lexical: they aim to shed light on an issue from a certain point of view; and they seek to define words not things. They aim to describe existing categorizations, often selectively highlighting certain characteristics, always with the goal of contingent and contextualized clarification. Scholars review existing uses of a term and propose a reorientation within the space of associations and connotations that emerges. The goal is to advance and enhance the use of concepts and categories. Definitions of this kind are neither true nor false; they are more or less useful for a given purpose. This is the approach to hybridity-concepts taken here.

3 For a comparable argument, focusing on “sacred,” see Engler/Gardiner, Semantics and the Sacred, pp. 629–36.
4 On definition in the study of religion/s, see Stausberg/Gardiner, Definition.
There are also a variety of conceptions of meaning.\(^5\) Leaving aside meaning as existential significance (“the meaning of life”), meaning is semantic content (“the meaning of a word”).

In everyday life, we use two different ways to determine what words mean, in this sense of “meaning.” These are different paths to meaning, not distinct types of meaning. Both are common-sense approaches, but we tend to default to the first. The second is more useful for talking about hybrid cultural and religious forms.

The first view of meaning is representational. In the case of directly perceivable objects, we match what people say to what we ourselves can see, hear, etc. If someone says that it is snowing or that a plate of food is too hot, we can look/touch or taste/touch to check on the truth of those statements. This method defaults to a view that truth reflects correspondence between word and world.\(^6\) It is representational, because the operating assumption is that words represent or point to objects or states of affairs in the real world. In terms of method, this leaves us matching a model we build from words to a model we build from our own bodily experience. This makes common sense because we so commonly use our senses: all human beings spend most of their time dealing with the physical world and with empirical objects.

The second view of meaning is interpretational. What do we do when people speak of things that are less directly accessible to our senses than snow and food? How do we interpret abstract concepts like justice, atonement, social structuration, mana, phenomenological reduction or hybridity? How do we make sense of talk about non-empirical objects like spirits and heavens? If meaning reflects a relation between words and world, what do we do when that world is (for the most part) supra-empirical? There is no doubt that we do succeed in interpreting such talk, easily or with difficulty, rightly or wrongly, amiably or contentiously. A representational view of meaning falters in its attempt to explain how we do so. How do we make sense of what people mean when their words allegedly refer to things that we cannot perceive with our senses? How can we double-check that their pictures truly represent the world, when that world is invisible?

In the case of abstract concepts and non-empirical objects – neither directly perceptible to our senses – we interpret words in their contexts. When a person

\(^5\) On meaning in the study of religion/s, see Frankenberry/Penner, Language; Jensen, Meaning and Religion; Gardiner/Engler, Semantics; In the Beginning. See Engler, Monsters, pp. 2–5, for an overlapping discussion of meaning in relation to the hybrid categories of monsters and spirits.

\(^6\) For a discussion of problems with the correspondence view of truth, with reference to the study of religion/s, see Engler and Gardiner, Charting, pp. 3–5.
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says that a certain ideological framework is true or that a spirit sits on their left shoulder during rituals, we start exploring the connection between (i) what they say and do and (ii) whatever pieces of context, shared understandings, or furniture in the world allow us to interpret them. This view is commonsensical because this is also what we do, for example when conversing with a stranger in a café with whom we share no common language. It is easy to point to the salt shaker (using representational methods). It is harder to talk about religion (using interpretational methods). When pointing works, we use it; when we have nothing convenient to point to, we roll up our sleeves and get down to the more flexible work of interpretation.

We are led to explore semantic connections: the ways that certain words and actions are used in conjunction with others. For example, the fact that the concept of “spiritual evolution” is more common in Umbanda than in Candomblé can be seen as just one point at which the former religion shares semantic connections with Kardecist Spiritism. To give another example, “orixá” (orisha) is a central concept in Candomblé, a more marginal concept in some forms of Umbanda (absent in others), and absent in Kardecism. Exploring what other concepts (and actions) are commonly used in conjunction with these, in each of the three traditions, allows us to assess the hybridity of Umbanda from an interpretational perspective.

These two views of meaning inform techniques that we use each day to make sense of our world and other people. But the representational view raises problems for the study of religion/s. By contrast, an interpretational approach holds that meaning is what results from making sense of intentional behavior. On this view, the word-world relation is decentered: it is just one possible methodological path in the work of making sense of what others say and do. As a result, emphasis shifts from “what in the world are these people talking about?” to “what is my best path to interpreting what they are trying to say?”

This view has two important implications. First, meaningful language is not limited to being descriptive or being labelled as true or false. Prayers, magical spells, metaphors, etc. can all be analyzed as meaningful. If we emphasize interpretation, the search for meaning shifts away from what words describe, represent or refer to. It foregrounds the methodological question of how interpreters come to understand what speakers are doing when they speak and act intentionally. Second, meaningfulness extends beyond language to action. We interpret, understand and explain human actions in the same basic way, including ritual, whether accompanied by words or not.

On this view, there is no gulf between empirical talk about things we can see, hear and feel and religious talk about non-empirical things – like incorporating spirits, the inner voice of God, or the power granted by a vision. From an
interpretationist point of view, we find a sliding scale of methodological challenges. We interpret religious language in the same way we interpret all talk and action, including the most trivial examples from daily life, with the difference that making sense of the contexts of religious language presents a relatively greater challenge. In sum, both representational and interpretational views of meaning make common-sense, but the latter is more useful for talking about religion/s and hybridity.

If the meaning of “hybrid” is seen in representational terms, it points to distinct elements. Their distinctiveness – if “hybrid” means anything in these terms – is determined and defined by reference to the sources or influences that came to be mixed. The meanings of mixtures lie elsewhere, in historical origins and continuities and in their contemporary effects (labelled as such). A representational approach to the meaning of hybridity-concepts involves looking back to prior phenomena that it echoes in part.

An alternative to this representational view emerges if we focus not on blended origins or sources but on semantic plurality in the present: making sense of a word or action leads us to trace associations and connections which turn out to draw on distinct semantic areas. Drawing on emic and/or etic categories with which we are familiar, we trace the web of semantic connections and find that it wanders into what we happen to define as distinct.7 The semantic boundaries between hybrid and sources (e.g., between Umbanda, Kardecist Spiritism, Candomblé and popular Catholicism) are constructs. They each constitute a different centre of gravity, a sphere without sharp edges, all blurring into each other and into others. Such semantic areas are not things; there is no need for reified conceptions of “religions” or “cultures.” They are fuzzy sets of words and actions, associated with our primary targets of research, which we happen to define as different from each other.

For example, one centro of Umbanda where I do fieldwork manifests a wide footprint of semantic plurality. Words and ritualized actions lead to (are the same or very similar to those found in) several distinct traditions: Afro-Brazilian (drums, cantigas [hymns] to orixás, pretos velhos); Kardecist (passe and the basic view of spirits and spiritual evolution); Indigenous (caboclos are the main spirits); Christian (the “Our Father” and “Hail Mary are chanted, and pop-superstar Roberto Carlos’ hit “Nossa Senhora” is sung as one of the cantigas); popular Spiritist healing traditions (hands-on, bloodless psychic surgery), and New Age (aroma and crystal therapy). Tracing semantic connections does not imply historical precedence or any particular context or process of mixture. It

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7 On the emic/etic distinction, see Engler/Whitesides, *Emic Concepts and Etic Paths*. 
is an empirical finding that making sense of one set of phenomena can lead (if we choose to trace the connections) to others.

Scholars find greater and lesser degrees of overlap between plural spheres of meaning that are relatively and contingently distinct. Members of the tradition do not necessarily see things this way. Many are familiar only with their tradition and see its elements as proper to it, where scholars might speak of “influence,” “mixture” or “hybridity” to describe the same elements. Neither view is right or wrong: each delimits the semantic web of associations in different ways. If we ask what came together, resulting in a hybrid tradition, we turn our focus away from the tradition itself. If we ask what the words and actions of members of the tradition mean, we might or might not be led to examine the role, in their discourses, of references to the past. What members believe is methodologically primary – as a pragmatic matter – and this can justify scholarly re-constructions of historical facts: sometimes the two converge; often they do not.

Historical facts are often elusive and illusory. Is the scholar’s job to perform a sort of redaction criticism on emic accounts of origins, cross-checking these with often scant historical evidence? How relevant are origins to current actualities? How often does overemphasis on the question of origins prioritize genealogical over ethnographic research? The fact that a word, a text, a ritual, a social group, or a religion has a certain origin is not necessarily a reliable indicator of its current characteristics. (Some traditions are invented, and this makes no difference for believers who ignore this “fact.” Some authentic traditions are forgotten, making their origin and history of no practical interest.) The absence of historical information does not deprive us of any essential type of evidence, unless we presuppose that the discourse of origins is essential. The relevance of origins and trajectories of historical continuity is an empirical-historical question. As discussed below, Umbanda is an example of a religion with unclear origins and multiple paths of development. We must make sense of it as we find it in its plurality.

Four points serve to summarize this section. First, the rejection of essentialist views of roots and origins – along with the correlated valuation of pure origins over later hybrids – is important, but it still leaves open the methodological question of how to make sense of hybrid cultural and religious forms. Second, defining what hybridity is turns out to be less helpful than trying to elucidate hybrid forms in specific contexts: we are interested in the pragmatic value of concepts of hybridity, not in representing hybrid things. Third, if we start by asking the methodological question of how we make sense of cases of hybridity, this leads us to distinguish different views of “meaning.” Reading “hybridity” as referring to a certain class of things – hybrids – is problematic.
It is more useful to investigate beliefs, practices, artefacts and other research targets by tracing associations between words and actions in their broader contexts: where this method leads us to what we categorize as other traditions or religions, we can use “hybridity” as a label for this semantic overlap. Fourth, the fact that scholars are able to trace a set of semantic associations between traditions does not mean that this finding has any significance from an emic perspective. Issues of historical origins and continuity might or might not turn out to be relevant in making sense of a given tradition: we must follow the evidence – the words, actions and other intentional behaviour of members – where it leads.

3 Hybridity and Tradition

The above points leave much to say about the discursive and ideological roles of history, tradition, and innovation with respect to “hybridity” and its conceptual partners. Hybridity-concepts function like the concept of tradition: all have descriptive and ideological dimensions; and all run the risk of replicating uncritical discourses by projecting current social forms into the past. Facts of the matter are less important than perceptions here: what matters is not whether a certain religious form is “authentic” or whether a certain tradition is “syncretic”; what matters is who defends such claims under what circumstances. A focus on origins and continuities – on how hybridity came to be – is often (but not always) less important than a focus on ongoing innovation. Issues of origins and historical development often turn out to be vital, but researching those issues is methodologically secondary: the primary question is what particular beliefs and actions mean to certain groups of people. The answers to those questions may or may not lead us to pursue the issue of origins. We do not start by recognizing a mixture: we start with what people say and do. As we try to make sense of and contextualize specific words, beliefs, rituals, artefacts etc., this sometimes leads to other religions or traditions, in present or past contexts. This can justify a conclusion – not a premise – that we have encountered what we might choose to label a mixture or a hybrid form.

I distinguish traditions and religions, in order to shed further light on theorizing social and religious mixture. In broad and relative terms, “traditions” grounds our vantage point in empirical communities in the field, and “religions” links our point of view to abstract, pre-formed categories. Both terms and approaches have their value. “Tradition” describes the beliefs, practices,
and organizational forms of empirical communities as manifested in fieldwork. Boundaries between traditions are always fuzzy. Each group has its own histories, its own dynamic relations between preservation and innovation, its own social and cultural contexts, its own modes of leadership, its own contextualized emphasis on healing and other goals, etc. “Religion” is an abstract and normative concept of a supposedly more unified phenomenon. The tradition/religion distinction is related to that between popular and elite religion, and it is relative and relational in the same sense. These distinctions can be understood in terms of family resemblance: involving a set of characteristics, none essential in itself, many of which will be found in a given case.

From this perspective, hybridity-concepts tend to capitalize on relative tensions between the dynamic plurality of traditions and the more static abstractions of religions. Insofar as “tradition is the evocation and application, if not the invention, of a set of continuities for certain identifiable purposes,” then we should recognize both that the “continuities” are perceived and that the “purposes” are ideological.9 “Tradition,” “hybridity” and related concepts are exactly that: related concepts. They take shape in scholarly work through contextualized relations to other concepts, not through an act of pointing to a certain class of cultural or religious phenomena. Just as “sacred” makes sense through opposition to “profane,” “tradition” flags one side of a set of binaries, with different emphasis in different contexts (received/invented, imitative/creative, ancient/modern, static/dynamic, unitary/plural, universal/particular, continuous/discontinuous etc.). The normative valuation of these binaries varies: negative orientalism (bias against “the traditional East”) values the second half of these binaries where many esoteric traditions like Theosophy value the first, in a form of positive orientalism. The same happens with “hybridity”: making sense of uses of that term is inseparable from the work of seeing what concepts it stands opposed to in specific contexts: for example, hybridity can be associated with mixture, impurity, marginalization, subalternity, creativity, innovation etc. and each of these concepts does its work in opposition to others.

This recognition has methodological value for both fieldwork and analysis. It leads to more dynamic concepts of tradition and hybridity. It relativizes the question of what stands prior to processes of cultural mixture. It turns our attention away from origins to specific, local contexts:

The recognition that tradition bestows is a partial form of identification. In restaging the past it introduces other, incommensurable cultural

9 von Stuckrad, Locations of Knowledge, p. 42.
temporalities into the invention of tradition. This process estranges any immediate access to an originary identity or a ‘received’ tradition.\textsuperscript{10}

The study of “tradition” properly assesses both (i) the techniques used to persuade people that claims of origin and lineage of historical continuity are “true” and (ii) the ideological work of authorizing other beliefs, practices and institutional forms in light of the authority that the high-ground of “tradition” can bring with it. Foucault spoke not about tradition itself but about the ideological use of “tradition” when he wrote that

the notion of tradition [...] allows a reduction of the difference proper to every beginning, in order to pursue without discontinuity the endless search for the origin; tradition enables us to isolate the new against a background of permanence, and to transfer its merit to originality, to genius, to the decisions proper to individuals.\textsuperscript{11}

In the study of Afro-Brazilian traditions, this implicit contrast between static impersonal tradition and dynamic individual innovation must be bracketed. Claims made about this contrast are themselves religious (and scholarly) phenomena requiring contextualized interpretation: they are not abstract truths. The statement that a given terreiro (“grounds,” house, temple) of Candomblé is more authentic than a competing group, because its African roots are purer, is an ideological claim that must be assessed for its rhetorical purposes in a contested field of power; it may or may not turn out to also be a historical claim requiring assessment of its correspondence to archival evidence.

If we begin with a description of local groups in the Brazilian religious field – that is, if we begin with a tradition-always-in-invention, not with a reified conception of “the religion” – then concepts of mixture should be avoided at the outset because they carry conceptual baggage. Such baggage is unavoidable, and it is not always toxic, but it must first be examined in light of a particular case. These and other concepts can be useful, after they have been assessed – often altered or redefined – in the light of fieldwork or other empirical casework.

There is a complex abstract space of relationships between religions and traditions, a metamix of hybridization processes and products. Sticking to Brazilian examples, there are hybrid traditions like Umbandaime (which draws on ideas and practices of Umbanda and the Ayahuasca tradition, Santo Daime).

\textsuperscript{10} Bhabha, \textit{Location of Culture}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{11} Foucault, \textit{Archaeology of Knowledge}, p. 23.
There is “classic” syncretism, as in the overlap between saints and orixás in Candomblé, where the mixture does not involve foundational Afro-Brazilian elements of belief and ritual. There are religions that police doctrinal and ritual purity, like episcopal Catholicism and conservative Kardecism. There are religions with a strong normative rejection of syncretism, yet that adopt folk beliefs and practices at the local level, as is illustrated by the use of magic among historical Protestants. There are traditions that position themselves as universal and stable religions rather than local and dynamic traditions by concealing their own processes of bricolage, like the new esoteric spirit-incorporation tradition, Valley of the Dawn. There are also meta-traditions in which particular modes of framing distinct religions create a palette for distinguishing and relating groups at local and regional levels.

As an example of the latter, in the state of Minas Gerais (but not only there), many terreiros practice what I call ritual polyphony. The same mães e pais de santo (spiritual leaders) direct the rituals of two or three different religions, usually in the same space with many of the same members on different days. This is different than Bastide’s concept of “juxtaposition,” the presence of distinct elements from different religions within a tradition, separate in time and space. Ritual polyphony involves not the mixture of elements but the co-presence, with temporal and sometimes spatial separation, of distinct religions in toto. It is not a religion with multiple traditions; it is a tradition with multiple religions. In Belo Horizonte, the state capital, the religions are Candomblé (Angola or Queto) and Umbanda, sometimes with Congado (an Afro-Catholic processional tradition, also known as Reinado). In Montes Claros, a regional pole in the north of the state, the religions are Candomblé (Angola or Queto) and Umbanda, usually connected with Quimbanda (a tradition related to Umbanda that focuses on pragmatic uses of magic). The example of ritual polyphony problematizes the relation between traditions and religions: what type of hybridity is involved when a plurality of religions is brought together as part of an encompassing tradition, yet kept distinct and relatively unmixed?

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12 Palmié, echoing Bascom, also draws attention to distinct levels at which mixture takes place: “the ritual significance of the otanes [sacred stones] as a focus of sacrificial action overrode the comparatively negligible ceremonial role of Catholic statuary. [...] Santeros observe a relatively clear-cut ‘praxeological’ distinction between ‘African’ and ‘Catholic’ cultural forms” (Palmié, Against syncretism, p. 83).
13 Weingärtner, Fé e superstição; Ribeiro, Protestantismo rural.
14 Pierini, Jaguars; Hayes, Western Esotericism.
15 Bastide, Les Religions, pp. 305, 362, 380, 419; Glazier, Syncretism.
16 Borges et al., Quimbanda.
Tendencies to resist or manifest mixture are opposed to each other in rhetoric more than practice. The discourse of mixture usually appears in its negative version: the discourse of purity is used strategically for purposes of status and positioning. The truth of origins is less important than ideological and social effects of discourses of origins. Explorations of historical origins and continuities are not enough to make sense of “hybridity” here. It is not enough to move beyond the essentializing view that “Any unsettling traces of [...] hybridity must [...] be excised from the tidy, bleached-out zones of impossibly pure culture.” If it is true that this problematic ideology “can only be answered by exploring the detailed unfolding of cultural formations [...], in which] local and specific interventions can contribute to a counterhistory of cultural relations and influences [...],” then it is also true that this counter-history has an ideological function, regardless of whether it is historically accurate or not.

This shift is more than a matter of insisting that “historicizing the terms used to represent cultural mixture is an essential prerequisite for engaging the politically charged and conceptually unstable trope of hybridity.” It is a matter of interrogating the limits of historicization itself as a mode of ideological critique. Uncritical scholarship – to the extent that it overemphasizes origins, continuities and historicizing critique – runs the risk of replicating an essentializing discourse of the temporal continuity of religions, and so of missing the specificities of dynamic local traditions. Initial recognition that concepts and categories have a history, that they come to be in specific contexts, is sometimes enough to denaturalize, delegitimize, de-reify and de-normalize them. But scholarly attempts to re/deconstruct conceptual lineages, can be counterproductive. Genealogical critique and searches for historical origins and continuities often impose distorting presuppositions: e.g., uncritically granting authority to the past, to the discourse of origins, and to a view of tradition as static reception.

We impose fewer presuppositions when we recognize and honour the ongoing, active, creative, improvisational and innovative re-inventions that constitute specific groups. This is clear with respect to tradition:

The management of tradition, in a very real sense, spells business. Cultural pasts – as well as futures – are never just a given, but must be
produced, modified, contested and defended in line with the options and constraints perceived within a historically constituted present that needs to be “chartered.”

If we recognize “innovation to be the continuous leveraging of past traditions in new contexts” then the relation between tradition and history becomes secondary. Our focus shifts to strategies and tactics of ideological discourses of hybridity and purity, as they are leveraged in specific contexts. Interest shifts from where traditions came from to what people do with them. The same applies to the emic management of hybridity: the primary issue is not historical but discursive, ideological and pragmatic.

This contextualizes a point made by Anastasios Panagiotopoulos with respect to Cuba: many people “develop an intimacy with degrees of active participation with more than one tradition [...] and scholars might be unwittingly avoiding the matter for a number of reasons [...] including] an often implicit persistence in documenting traditions and their origins.”

If we de-emphasize the search for origins and continuities, we instead focus on

the existence of a largely independent-minded network of religious decision-makers and practitioners, persons whose allegiances to one or another ritual house, family or godparent do not preclude at the same time a highly pragmatic, individualized approach to daily problem-solving and health management.

In sum, a critical approach to hybridity as tradition leads us to shift our focus from postulating and modelling historical origins and continuities to making sense of current phenomena in their contexts. Rather than – or in addition to – investigating hybridity as a mixture of past things, we can focus on “hybridity” as characterizing a diffuse set of cultural forms that draw to a high degree on distinct semantic spheres (defined as fuzzy areas of usage). “Hybridity” refers to current blurring of semantic areas or spheres. It does not refer to historical blurring of social, cultural or even ontological boundaries. A hybrid tradition – like Umbandaime – manifests beliefs and practices of two other traditions, Umbanda and Santo Daime. What we find when we interpret the statements, beliefs, rituals and actions of members is a case of semantic plurality. Their

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21 Palmié, Against Syncretism, p. 95.
23 Panagiotopoulos, Ikú lobi ocha, p. 39.
24 Espírito Santo/Panagiotopoulos, Inventive Traditions, p. 16.
words and actions draw on identifiably distinct domains. Whether this semantic bimodality reflects cultural or social mixing (i.e., of different groups having come together) is a separate empirical question. Investigating hybridity is not necessarily a matter of unearthing origins, as if finding what a given tradition is a mixture of comes before making sense of what people believe and how they act. Traditions are hybrid not because they cross reified boundaries in their origins and development, but because we encounter a network of words and actions that bridges relatively distinct semantic spheres.

This theoretical perspective is itself hybrid. If we think in terms of religions, we foreground the dual or multiple semantic spheres that inform the meanings of a given hybrid cultural form. If we think in terms of traditions, we foreground the unity of the community or group that we are studying. Tracing semantic plurality becomes just one methodological path that we follow as we try to make sense of those who have allowed us to encounter their convivência (living-along-together).

4 Umbanda and Hybridity

Comparing Umbanda and Candomblé as examples of the category of “Afro-Brazilian” traditions, clarifies the above discussion. “Afro-Brazilian” is a hybrid category, but the label itself tells us little. Here are three criteria for assessing whether a spirit-incorporation tradition – originating in or elaborated in Brazil – is Afro-Brazilian: origin (has historically verifiable roots in Africa); constitution (contains African elements of belief and practice); supernatural beings (a significant proportion of its incorporating spiritual entities are – or are perceived as being – of African origin). Candomblé fits neatly in the Afro-Brazilian category according to these and other criteria, but Umbanda does not, in part because of its close ties to Kardecism.25

Historical origin is a widely used criterion in characterizing religions, but it is not always useful, due to the genetic fallacy (assuming that origins constrain

25 Candomblé is a Brazilian tradition, largely consisting of elements of West and Central African traditions, in which orixás, powerful entities/deities, incorporate in initiated members. Kardecism is a nineteenth-century French offshoot of Spiritualism that spread throughout Latin America, primarily in Brazil. It is a European esoteric tradition. According to the 2010 census, 0.1% of Brazilians self-declared as members of Candomblé, 0.2% as Umbandists and 2% as Kardecists (Prandi, As religiões afro-brasileiros em ascensão e declínio, p. 209).
the present)\(^{26}\) and to the potential absence of reliable evidence. In the case of Candomblé, there is abundant evidence of African origins, of historical continuities, and of ongoing parallels and correspondences with current traditions in West and Central Africa. The case of Umbanda is more complex.\(^{27}\) Umibandistas and scholars of the tradition present conflicting accounts. There is no clear, definitive evidence regarding the origin of Umbanda. It might have begun as an African tradition, later becoming influenced by Kardecism. It might have begun as an offshoot of Kardecism, later becoming influenced by Afro-Brazilian traditions. It might have begun as a mixture of Kardecism and Candomblé (perhaps along with other Afro-Brazilian traditions). Some Umbandas present their tradition as having ancient, esoteric, extraterrestrial or Atlantean origins. The true origin story might be something else. This first criterion, taken on its own, leads to the conclusion that Candomblé is Afro-Brazilian and that Umbanda might or might not be (the evidence is lacking and unclear).

With respect to the criterion of origins, Umbanda underlines the distinction between authentic tradition and invented tradition, as discussed in the previous section. Does it matter that the evidence does not allow us to conclude that Umbanda is an Afro-Brazilian religion, by the criterion of origins? A more important issue is the centrality of belief in African origins among a majority of Umbandists, of Brazilians in general, and of scholars of religion/s. Not origin but “origin” is the key factor.

The second criterion leads us to ask whether the beliefs and practices of current candomblecista and umbandista groups correspond to African models (leaving aside the challenge of operationalizing the latter concept). Candomblé obviously meets this criterion, and the case of Umbanda is again more complex. Most Umbanda terreiros (“grounds”) have strong African elements: drums, hymns/chants, Exus, orixás (incorporating or not) etc. However, there are centros of “white” and “esoteric” Umbandas that have none of these or any other African elements. It would be a vicious circle to assert that the few Umbanda groups with no African elements are not authentic examples of Umbanda. This would just impose an assumption that Umbanda is Afro-Brazilian. By the same logic, we could argue that the minority of Catholic parishes that say the mass in Latin are not “really” Catholic, or that Shi’a traditions are not “really” Muslim. It is a fact, if seldom acknowledged, that many groups identified as Umbanda by members and non-members alike have no African elements. (On


\(^{27}\) Engler, *Africana or Esoteric*, pp. 11–17.
the other hand, all the many Umbandas I have encountered to date, in the field and in the literature, have Kardecist elements.) According to this second criterion, Umbanda is Afro-Brazilian if we take a statistical approach (most groups have African doctrinal and ritual elements) and it is not if we take this criterion as essential.

With respect to the third criterion, most of Candomblé’s entities are African. The most prominent exceptions are the Indigenous *caboclo* spirits found in many *terreiros* and certain Christian Saints, especially the twin child saints, Cosmos and Damian. Umbanda has some African entities, depending on the group: almost always *pretos velhos* (“old blacks,” usually seen as the spirits of former house slaves), sometimes *orixás* (generally seen as highly evolved spirits, as distinct from their understanding in Candomblé) and *exus* (a powerful, morally ambivalent protecting and/or threatening spirit-type). *Caboclo* spirits sometimes have African as well as Indigenous characteristics. But the majority of Umbanda’s entities are not African: most caboclos, as well as children, gypsies, sailors, mermaids, cowboys, etc. Exclusive reliance on this criterion would lead us to conclude that Candomblé is Afro-Brazilian and Umbanda not.

This exercise of comparing two traditions using different criteria of hybridity – of Afro-Brazilianess – highlights four points. The nature and degree of hybridity varies between the two traditions. This finding itself varies according to the criterion being used. The issue of discursive positioning – of status-oriented perceptions not historical reality – is central. Finally, this normative, discursive, ideological dimension is a key factor in differentiating cases of hybridity.

These points are clear in the case of *caboclo* spirits. If the *orixás* index the “Afro-” part of “Afro-Brazilian,” then *caboclos* index the “Brazilian part.” These spirits are usually perceived as Indigenous, sometimes as Indigenous-European, sometimes as either of these but with African names and identities, and rarely (in some *centros* of “white” Umbanda) as European. Rituals of both Candomblé (often) and Umbanda (almost universally) include the incorporation of *caboclos*. In Candomblé, the rituals that work with these spirits are often

30 Western (European) esoteric influences are also found in some Candomblé *terreiros* (Walker, *Esoteric Reality*).
marginalized, hidden and largely unacknowledged, reserved for core members in private sessions; this is because emphasizing the perceived purity of African roots is a basic strategy of legitimizing status, especially relative to other groups in the same community.\(^{32}\) Candomblé de Caboclo is a diffuse sub-type of Candomblé that publicly values rituals with the caboclo spirits, and it pays the price of lower status for this explicit admission of “syncretic” impurity.\(^{33}\) Queto/Nagô (West-African as opposed to Central Africa) Candomblé “nations” are especially resistant to including rituals of caboclos (and especially zealous to keep such rituals hidden, where they are performed).\(^{34}\)

What we see here is a strategic privileging of “authentic” Africanness, which results in a certain type of Candomblé being seen as the most “pure” and “authentic.” “Nagocracy” – an ideological emphasis on Yoruba cultural roots – is predominant in Candomblé itself and among scholars.\(^{35}\) The separation between work with African and caboclo (Brazilian) entities in a given terreiro of Candomblé should not obscure the fact that the latter rituals consist of the same people in the same space working within the same tradition.\(^{36}\) Both types of rituals are part of the tradition, but one is publicized and the other often hidden, especially in Nagô terreiros. This difference between ritual types is not one of purity vs. authenticity as historical fact but of “purity” and “syncretism” as a strategic binary. Where scholars take this normative discursive positioning as an index of the nature of Candomblé, it is seen as a religion (in the sense discussed in the previous section) in which pure African roots are “normal” and “syncretic” divergence is a watering down of authenticity.

The situation looks quite different if we take a descriptive approach, accepting all self-identified types of Candomblé as types of Candomblé, and bracketing claims of authentic Africanness as part of strategies of legitimation (independent of verifiably historical claims). This approach reveals a complex space of Candomblés. If Candomblé, as a

“religion” is defined by a single set of beliefs, rituals, religious experiences, and social organization [...] [then] such a “religion” doesn’t exist. What exists is a field of variants that resemble one another to varying degrees. [...] Candomblé [...] [is] a field of variants organized by family resem- blances. This might be characterized as a syncretic continuum, where

\(^{32}\) Engler/Brito, Afro-Brazilian.

\(^{33}\) Prandi/Vallado/Souza, Candomblé de Caboclo; Engler/Brito, Afro-Brazilian, pp. 154–58.

\(^{34}\) Tromboni, A Jurema, pp. 98–99; see Santos, O dono da terra; Tall; O papel do caboclo.

\(^{35}\) Sousa Júnior, Nagô, p. 9; see Ferretti, Religious Syncretism; Lima, A família-de-santo.

\(^{36}\) Prandi/Vallado/Souza, Candomblé de Caboclo, p. 124.
the variants vary syncretically in relation to the prototypical exemplar of the “Candomblé” category, the Nagó Candomblé. [...] [T]his [descriptive] argument [...] must be distinguished from what is characterized as an “Afrocentrist” bias in the classical studies of the Candomblés: that the Nagó Candomblés are of the most value, morally and academically, because they are “the purest African.”

The shape of Candomblé, as a hybrid field of related variants, differs from that of Umbanda. If we ground our methodology in an interpretive approach – following our fieldwork where it leads, rather than asking how well a given group represents a normative form of “the religion” or a set of originals that were mixed to form it – then what we find is a normative polarity in Candomblé. The tension between pure and syncretic forms of Candomblé is one of the findings of fieldwork. The fact that many scholars have appropriated this normative stance has made this harder to see: “one result of the valuing of the more ‘purely’ African Candomblés was that the more syncretic Angola-Congo Candomblés and Candomblés de Caboclo received much less ethnographic attention.”

The ideological discourse of authentic African roots structures emic perceptions of the tradition, throughout the field of Candomblés. The work of interpreting the words and actions of candomblecistas reveals semantic polarity.

In Umbanda, by contrast, we find semantic plurality. Each group values its own tradition. No consensus grants normative status to any one conception of the origin of “the religion.” African-rooted terreiros of Umbanda value their (self-perceived) African roots and rituals. “White” centros value their (self-perceived) Kardecist roots and rituals. Esoteric centros value their (self-perceived) ancient South Asian, Lemurian or extraterrestrial roots and their New Age healing rituals.

By privileging not abstract theoretical concepts of hybridity but semantic associations on the ground, we begin to see a complex space of hybridities. Umbanda and Candomblé are both hybrid, both Afro-Brazilian, but in different ways, reflecting different criteria.

5 Conclusion

If we take a semantic approach to hybridity, the issue of historically verifiable origins fades into the background, and ideological discourses about origins and
identity become central. The centrality of discourses of African authenticity in Candomblé result in a religious field that has a clearly defined normative core. This creates a semantic polarity because members of Candomblé terreiros of all types – along the spectrum for “pure” to “syncretic” – accept this normative discourse. In the case of Umbanda, the lack of such a unifying normative discourse foregrounds its dynamism and semantic plurality. Scholarly fixation on the origin of Umbanda has obscured its “specific nature, in which heterogeneity and fluidity are distinguishing characteristics.”

Umbanda is a hybridizing tradition. Kardecism plays a similar hybridizing role elsewhere in Latin America, but, in Brazil, that European esoteric religion tends to police its doctrinal and ritual boundaries more firmly, and Umbanda takes on this role to a far greater extent. Umbanda has influenced Afro-Brazilian religions, especially Jurema and Tambor de Mina, as well as the Ayahuasca religion Santo Daime (leading to the new hybrid tradition, Umbandaima); and it has informed other new religions, like Vale do Amanhecer.

This dynamic tendency to hybridize makes sense from a semantic perspective, but much less so if we foreground historical origins and continuities. It does not reflect any particular content: it is not directly related, for example, to the Afro-diasporic nature of the majority of Umbandist groups. Umbanda’s emphasis on work with distinct types of spirits is a key factor in its manifesting a plurality of forms and its refraction of different contexts. An example is the recent incorporation of representatives of two new types of spirit-types in a terreiro, attended primarily by Brazilian immigrants, near Brisbane, Australia: an Aboriginal woman (not a cabocla) and an extraterrestrial. To give another example, caboclo spirits are almost universally considered to be fully or partly Indigenous, but in some centros of Umbanda, devoid of African elements, these spirits are European, explicitly non-Indigenous. These examples underline that Umbanda is characterized less by any particular form of religious mixture than by its flexibility and its ability to influence and mix with other traditions. The best path to making sense of this is to investigate discourses and practises of particular groups, interpreting language and rituals. We begin by admitting the possibility of semantic plurality. For example, in the late 1980s, the Lua Branca (White Moon) terreiro in Rio de Janeiro merged Umbanda and Santo

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39 Cavalcanti, Orígens, p. 100.
40 Engler, Esoteric or Africana?, pp. 23–25.
41 Engler/Brito, Afro-Brazilian; Dawson, Spirit Possession; Pierini, Jaguars.
42 Valmor Gomes Morais, personal communication.
43 Hale, Hearing, pp. 94–111.
Daime, and the concept of “energy” helped to unify the two religions, especially in the group’s use of crystal therapy.  

In this light, it makes perfect sense to affirm that Umbanda is an Afro-Brazilian religion, but it is misleading to stop there. Its story is more complex, especially reflecting its relations with Kardecism. Over-emphasizing the Afro-Brazilian category, as if Umbanda were equivalent to Candomblé in terms of various criteria, would be misleading. Umbanda is a hybridizing Brazilian Afro-esoteric tradition. This acknowledges Umbanda’s distinctly Brazilian nature, the prominence of Afro-Brazilian elements in the vast majority of Umbandas and the centrality of esoteric elements, given the apparently universal presence of Kardecist influences. Classification (granted a lexical and elucidative view of definition) is a pragmatic act of developing our understanding in a manner that is responsive to the local contexts and contingencies of the groups we study. It is a tool for studying traditions, not a further layer of reification in abstract conceptions of religions. If used sensitively, hybridity-concepts can play an important role in this approach.

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Biography

Steven Engler is Professor of Religious Studies at Mount Royal University in Calgary and Affiliate Professor of Religions and Cultures at Concordia University in Montréal. He has published widely on spirit-incorporation religions in Brazil (primarily Umbanda and Kardecism) as well as on theory and methodology in the study of religion/s. He is co-editor, with Bettina E. Schmidt, of The Brill Handbook of Contemporary Religions in Brazil (2016) and, with Michael Stausberg, of the journal Religion (Routledge), The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion (2nd ed. 2022) and The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion (2016). See http://stevenengler.ca.

44 Guimarães, Umbanda e Santo Daime.
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