I Often Came Across Rivers that House Gods

The Impact of Nature in Umbanda Communities in German-speaking Europe

Dr. Inga Scharf da Silva | ORCID: 0000-0003-1541-2609
Independent Scholar, Berlin, Germany
Inga.scharf@hu-berlin.de

Abstract

This study examines the question of how religious knowledge of the Umbanda religion is transferred from Brazil to German-speaking Europe in an interreligious network. Since the personalization of the Umbandistic spirits is not familiar in the cultural context in Europe, an emotional archive through the body becomes significant. In understanding the different aspects of religion in Africa, Brazil and Europe in relation to kinship, regionality, personality and nature, which are reflected in the sacred dimension, the focus is laid on the ontological understanding of the spiritual world and its understanding of nature and human beings. The argument of a shift of attention in the Umbanda religion to a stronger focus on nature in Central Europe is based on an observation of a change of the entanglements and borders of the religious field of Umbanda in German-speaking Europe integrating a great part of psychological aspects, especially a newly-founded therapy of nature.

Keywords

Afro-Brazilian religions – nature spirituality – migration – sacral globalization – religious knowledge production

1 About Rivers and Gods

In Africa there are also many river gods. But the connection, the force behind it, was not present to me. Not in its variety and in the interaction.

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1 My argumentation is based on my doctoral thesis “Trauma as a knowledge archive. Postcolonial memory practice in sacred globalization using the example of contemporary
I couldn’t place it. I have learned it through my training [as a natural therapist], being outside and spending time in natural context and appreciating nature and all phenomena.

There is a lot of that in Brazil, but much more specifically in Africa. There is no general category of water forces, but precise names for all the different waters. I’ve often met rivers that house gods.²

This statement of an initiated medium from Berlin in the Umbanda house of the Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô, which has its mother-house in the Appenzell mountains in Switzerland, mirrors her reflection on belonging to a religion built from traditions that made their way from different places in Africa (Angola and Nigeria) via the diaspora of enslaved Africans to Brazil from the 16th to the 19th centuries and – centuries later – through sacred globalization to Central Europe. In recent years, the religious flows no longer run from Europe across the world, but in the opposite direction from Brazil, among others, to be imported to Europe and other so-called “Western” countries.³

Nature as a crucial identification with an immaterial holy world, which manifests itself in natural forces in the Umbandistic view, is a central motivation for the European religious practitioners to participate. Since the cultural context in Central Europe is discontinued and the social reflection in


³ Cf. Csordas, Transnational Transcendence, p. 3; Rocha/Vasquéz, The Diaspora of Brazilian Religions.
Umbanda through the personalization of their spirits is hampered, religious practice in German-speaking Europe focuses on elements of nature.

Umbanda is an Afro-Brazilian religion that emerged in the state of Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of the 20th century. A myth of its origin, dated 15th November 1908 and manifested by a spirit of an indigenous ancestor called *Caboclo das Sete Encruzilhadas* (indigenous spirit of the seven crossroads), relates the spiritual world as an amalgamation and re-creation of African, indigenous and European religious elements. Since Umbanda is a non-written religion, it is non-dogmatic, orally transmitted and practice-related, with a structure based on autonomous, small communities. Connecting and communicating with a sacred dimension is accomplished through the engagement of a great variety of spirits being personified in relation to Brazilian history such as *Caboclas* and *Caboclos* (indigenous spirits of Brazil), *Pretas Velhas* and *Pretos Velhos* (African spirits from Brazil's colonial era), *Pombagiras* and *Exús* (spirits from the streets), *Marinheiras* and *Marinheiros* (spirits of sailors), *Crianças* (spirits of children) along with *Ciganas* and *Ciganos* (spirits of gypsies) as personal mediums fall into trance. Through these trance mediums, the spirits talk to visitors of the Umbanda rituals.4

2 Cartography of the Umbanda in German-speaking Europe

Since the late 1990s, four new Umbanda communities, some of which are directly connected to Brazil, have emerged in German-speaking Europe5: In 1996 an offshoot of the *Templo Guaracy* with the Brazilian *Pai de Santo*,6 Carlos Buby from São Paulo, residing in Brazil, was opened in Graz in Austria, which is currently under the spiritual guidance of an Austrian female leader called Gerhild Tiefenbacher-Wutscher and has around 15 members.7

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6 Mãe-de-Santo/Pai-de-Santo/Abbreviation Mãe/Pai (Brazilian Portuguese): Mother-or-father-in-the-holy/in the religion. Person who ranks highest in the religious hierarchy of an Afro-Brazilian religion.
7 Cf. field note with German Siegl, 26.06.2021. The oldest Umbanda house in Berlin, which existed between 1999–2009 (and is no longer active), is the *Casa de Oxum* in Berlin-Neukölln, owned by the Brazilian spiritual leader Dalva Rzepka. In contrast to the existing religious houses, it didn’t consist of a community, but of one person (cf. Spliesgart, *IX-26 Brasilianische Religionen in Deutschland*; Bahia, *E o Preto Velho fala Alemão*).
In 2006, two communities were founded with two own Mães de Santo in Central Europe, one of which is the Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô9 (also called Terra Sagrada)9 centered in Stein in the mountains in the Canton of Appenzell and guided by the Austrian Mãe Habiba, whose civil name is Astrid Kreszmeier. It expands over five cities in Switzerland (Zurich, Bern), Austria (Graz, Vienna) and Germany (Berlin) and has approximately 90 members. Her Pai de Santo is, as of the Templo Guaracy da Austria, also Pai Carlos Buby from São Paulo. Nonetheless, Mãe Habiba has separated from his influence and for approximately ten years, there has been no direct contact between them.10

Also, in 2006, the Casa St. Michael in Cologne was founded in Germany with the German spiritual leader Mãe Gabriele Hilgers, which opened an offshoot in Weimar in 2019 with a German Mãe Maria Dimler leading the second house. Currently there are about 80 members. Mãe Gabriele is in constant exchange with her Brazilian Pai de Santo Alexandre Mereiles, the spiritual leader of the Círculo de Irradiações Espirituais São Lázaro in São Paulo.11

Ten years later, the Tenda Cantinho da Vovó Catarina from the Brazilian Mãe de Santo Delene de Jesus Schätti was founded in 2016 in the canton of Thurgau in Switzerland with around 10 members. Her Brazilian Mãe de Santo Neide of the Tenda de Umbanda Caboclo Iansã in São Paulo died in 2016,12 nonetheless she has built up a religious network with representatives of Umbanda in Brazil, such as the editors of the Magna Carta de Umbanda13 whose representative she has been in German-speaking Europe since 2021.14

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8 Yorùbá: House of the vitality (Axé) of Oxum. The goddess of fresh water is called Oxum and in this specific case holds the proper name or the quality (qualidade) Abalô. Abalô denominates the impact of the water of a waterfall at the moment after falling down.
9 Brazilian Portuguese: Holy Land or Holy Earth.
10 Cf. Scharf da Silva, Trauma als Wissensarchiv, pp. 210–222.
12 Cf. De Jesus Schätti, Interview, on 13.05.2021.
14 Many of the Afro-Brazilian religions in Europe are organized as non-profit associations (Vereine), so that they do not appear in the statistics as recognized religions according to their corporate status under public law. One of the initiatives to legally and socially recognize the Umbanda as a religion is the “Carta Magna of Umbanda”, which was written in 2019 by religious representatives of the Umbanda in São Paulo and translated into German in 2021 (by myself, among others). It deals with ethics, morals and law and takes a position on fundamental questions such as marriage, divorce, sexual orientation, cremation, the secular state, nature or the position of elderly and disabled people in Umbanda. This charter strives for a kind of collective unity, standardization and institutionalization while respecting plurality in religion and functions as a “document of liberation” (documento deliberado) against prejudice (cf. Belo de Souza, Carta Magna da Umbanda). The translation from Brazilian Portuguese into German, which is supported and distributed...
Umbanda is being nourished both in Brazil and in Central Europe on the one hand through travels of its members (both spiritual leaders and mediums) at a global scale and flows of knowledge and on the other hand through settlement and residency, drawing from archives of history that are conveyed through trance in personal mediums. The production of knowledge and the transcultural transfer of understanding in the sacred globalization of the Umbanda in German-speaking Europe functions in a similar way to the so-called “learning path” (“Lernweg”), a frequently used term by the religious practitioners, which is through practice. This practice is seen as a constant new construction of knowledge through religious experiences in the encounter of personal mediums with spirits through ways of trance and language, the dialogue with Brazilian people through spiritual travels to Brazil and the reading of ethnological or religious studies (or in direct exchange with ethnologists like me). The transfer of knowledge in the Umbanda does not follow any doctrine, organization or holy book, but is constantly renewed, told further and newly constructed by a network of people and groups.15

The Templo Guaracy da Austria, Terra Sagrada and Casa St. Michael have included the West-African goddesses and gods called Orixás not only in their belief system, but also in their rituals on the basis of a Bantu-Umbanda structure, in which usually only spirits manifest through trance in Brazil.

3 Religious Entanglements and Borders of Umbanda

The religious fields in the diaspora in Brazil and the second diaspora in the Central European region incorporate a variety of African traditions in ways that are different in each religious community. Thus, Bantu-traditions from Angola and Kongo, from Southwest and Central Africa with the adoration and ritual incorporation of spirits (in trance), and the Yorùbá-religion from West Africa with its African deities of the 16 Orixás (both female, male and “meji”, both or in-between)16 are revered. In the Casa St. Michael and the Ilê Axé Oxum Abaló not only ritual and spatial structures and material culture in the form of clothing, offerings and domestic altars are recombined in everyday religious life; but also the spiritual learning path for the believers differs from the usual ways

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by the Brazilian-Swiss Mãe de Santo Delene de Jesus Schätttı, also serves to produce respect and official recognition of the Umbanda as a religion in Switzerland and in the European Union (cf. Cantinho da Vovó, Homepage).

15 Cf. Scharf da Silva, Trauma als Wissensarchiv, p. 465 et. seq.
16 Cf. Amaral, Xiré! O Modo de Crer e de Viver no Candomblé, p. 70.
in Brazil. It makes consecutive initiation possible, in mediums for the spirits of Brazil and as initiates of the Orixás. These spheres are separated from one another in Brazil in two distinct religions: in Candomblé and in Umbanda.\textsuperscript{17}

Despite the personal networks between Mães- and Pais-de-santo as well as researchers from Brazil and Central Europe, there are other borders and entanglements within the religious field of the Umbanda in German-speaking Europe that are not present in Brazil. In Brazil, the concept of a mediumistic continuum has become a defining feature of the religious embedding of the Umbanda as has been observed by Cândido Procópio Ferreira de Camargo in his book “Kardecismo e Umbanda. Uma interpretação sociológica”, published in Brazil in 1961 as the first scientific examination of Umbanda. He localized Umbanda between the two poles of the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé and the Euro-Brazilian Spiritism of Allan Kardec. These overlaps of Umbanda to Kardecist Spiritism result from the fact that Umbanda was originally founded by rebellious Kardecists in 1908. In this narrative of a myth of creation the main spirits of the Umbanda of indigenous ancestors – the Caboclas and Caboclos – and spirits of “enslaved old and black people”, known as Pretas Velhas and Pretos Velhos, were classified as inferior from an evolutionist point of view of Kardecism, and thus experienced a symbolic revaluation and appreciation in the new religion of Umbanda. Based on this concept of a mediumistic continuum, Ferreira de Camargo outlined the idea of a religious field for the Umbanda. The similarity between these different forms of religions lies in that they are all founded and mediated by human mediums and media activity.\textsuperscript{18}

Later, other researchers applied this concept of a spectrum and flowing transitions and appropriations between Brazilian religions to other religious and spiritual traditions, such as Ismael Pordeus’ study in the year 2000 of linkages between Candomblé and Umbanda. In Brazil, there are many hybrid forms of Candomblé and Umbanda that have emerged in the course of re-Africanization and efforts of Brazilianization, with names such as Umbandomblés and Candombandas, among others.\textsuperscript{19}

In the meantime, there appears a different demarcation to the growing importance of neo-Pentecostal churches, which are characterized by religious intolerance and demonization of Afro-Brazilian religions. The Brazilian anthropologist Vagner Gonçalves da Silva relates this new spiritual battlefield

\textsuperscript{17} Mãe Delene with her Brazilian socialization instead follows the Brazilian way and separates the two distinct religions Umbanda and Candomblé in her ritual practice.

\textsuperscript{18} Cf. Ferreira de Camargo, Kardecismo e Umbanda; Scharf da Silva, Ways and Travels of the Sacred Feminine from Brazil to Central Europe 2020, p. 31 et seq.

\textsuperscript{19} Cf. Pordeus, Magia e Trabalho.
I often came across rivers that house gods.

While Umbanda in Brazil is historically located in a mediumistic continuum and in a religious field that goes beyond that to other beliefs, the religious borders of Umbanda in Central Europe vary from this traditional context because of its newly arrived position in society and another cultural context. Here, my case studies can be localized in a spectrum of humanistic atheism, secularized Christianity, Buddhism, and shamanistic religious movements, as well as a cross-border to psychology, especially nature-therapy. Umbanda groups, which have no direct family relationship with Brazilian families and are not part of the individual religious socializations, have also developed in this overlapping network of religion and psychology or psychotherapy in other countries of the world, for example in Canada.

In Berlin, as in Brazil, there is Candomblé through the presence of the Ilé Axé Obá Sileké of Babalorixá Muraesimbe, but not the Kardecist religion, to which Umbanda delimits and partly intertwines in Brazil, with which the Berlin Umbandists are engaged with. Thus, the word caridade to denote charitable activities with a clear Kardecist origin does not occur among the German practitioners, but is used widely among the Brazilian Umbandists in Berlin. The German believers in Berlin neither know Kardecism as such, nor its influence on Umbanda from Brazil or the two Kardecist centers situated in Berlin, the Studienkreis Allan Kardec Berlin e.V. (study circle) and Saja, Studien- und Arbeitsgruppe Joanna de Angelis (study and working group), which were founded by Brazilian migrants. This difference in knowledge becomes evident in personal conversations (especially in language use and the associated religious imagination) in the religious everyday life of the rituals when Central European and Brazilian Umbandists meet.

The religious practitioners of the Umbanda communities in German-speaking Europe were socialized differently due to their social and religious upbringing in different countries such as Switzerland, Austria and Germany. Almost all Austrian religious practitioners in the Ilé Axé Oxum Abaló have been socialized as Catholics through their families, the local congregations and the school, since over 60% of the population in Austria belong to the Roman Catholic Church. In contrast, most of Berlin’s Umbandists were influenced

20 Cf. Gonçalves da Silva, Crossroads, p. 490 et seq.
21 Cf. Scharf da Silva, Ways and Travels of the Sacred Feminine from Brazil to Central Europe 2020, p. 32.
22 Cf. Meintel/Hernandez, Transnational Authenticity.
23 Cf. Scharf da Silva, Trauma als Wissensarchiv, p. 292.
by “non-religious systems of meaning (such as literature and science)”\(^{25}\) since 70% of the inhabitants of Berlin do not belong to any religious group.\(^{26}\) The random sample of my 2018 statistics among the members of *Terra Sagrada* showed that 52% were Catholic, 30% humanist / atheist, 20% Protestant, 5% Umbandist and 4% Buddhist, some of which received multiple influences from their parents’ home. None of the religious practitioners were socialized as Jewish or Muslim. It may be a coincidence that the *Templo Guaracy*, the Brazilian matrix of *Terra Sagrada*, describes itself as universally valid being “humanistic and non-religious,”\(^{27}\) but it fits into this secular setting.\(^{28}\)

Following the tendencies to universalize the Umbanda universe and practices of her *Pai de santo* Carlos Buby, who attracted the Brazilian middle class to Umbanda through a focus on nature,\(^{29}\) Mãe Habiba adopted this appeal for nature for her own spiritual community of *Terra Sagrada*, which spreads as a network in Central Europe, by linking psychotherapeutic and spiritual healing knowledge. Astrid Kreszmeier lives and works as a systemic psychotherapist in Switzerland and founded, together with her partner Hans-Peter Hufenus, a company called *Nature & Healing* in 2010 parallel to her spiritual practice of Umbanda. She offers trainings and further education in systemic nature therapy and constellation work amongst other things.\(^{30}\) At the same time her partner is the most important drummer (*Ogã Alabé*) in the *Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô*.

In 2008 Kreszmeier published a basic work entitled “Systemic Nature Therapy”, in which she explains the fundamentals of the conception of human beings under the aspects of body, psyche and soul and deals with the various natural forces that she describes ontologically. In this book, she also refers to her knowledge of the cosmology of the Orixás without naming it ostensibly and explicitly.\(^{31}\) She writes of the Orixá Oxum, the goddess of love and beauty, as the “stillness of the element water made visible,”\(^{32}\) of the Orixá Euá as

\(^{25}\) Kleine, *Quo vadis Religionswissenschaft?* [„Nicht-religiöse Sinnsysteme (wie z.B. Literatur und Wissenschaft)“].

\(^{26}\) Cf. Heinrichs, *Schluss mit der staatlichen Bevorteilung der Religionen*.

\(^{27}\) The *Pai de Santo* Carlos Buby as the founder of the *Templo Guaracy* has created his own Guaracyan philosophy, which can be traced back to the influence of his *Caboclo Guaracy* and has a “humanistic, universal, apolitical and non-religious approach” [“abor-dagem humanista, universal, apolítica e não-religiosa”]. Cf. Walent, *Carlos Buby – Templo Guaracy*.

\(^{28}\) Cf. Scharf da Silva, *Trauma als Wissensarchiv*, p. 292; Stone, *Re-enchanting Late Modernity*.

\(^{29}\) Cf. Stone, *Incorporating Spirit*.

\(^{30}\) Cf. Lenser, *Der Körper als sakraler Raum*, p. 46.


\(^{32}\) Kreszmeier, *Systemische Naturtherapie*, p. 137. [„Sichtbar gemachte Stille des Elements Wassers.“]
the goddess of invisibility and sensitivity, as “rising up to heaven, from which it will fall down again at another time, in another place, to seep away and form the basis for a new welling”,33 of the Orixá Iemanjá, the goddess of maternity and generosity, as “immeasurable cradle power in the border areas of the unconscious”,34 Xangô as god of justice and balance, as “dependent on inner responsibility, ethics and his will”35 and many other Orixás.

The simultaneous interaction in nature and with the sacred dimension, which is manifested in the natural elements, assumes a cultural bridging function for the Umbanda in German-speaking Europe, as the Brazilian Umbandist Fernanda Arrighi Czarnobai of the group from Terra Sagrada in Berlin puts it: “This translation of nature therapy helps the Europeans who don’t know our Umbanda.”36

4 Sacral Globalization: From Africa to Brazil to Europe

While in Africa kinship and regional traditions of the Orixás in relation to the people consecrated to them is central, the aspect of personality of the Orixás on the individuals in the colonial system of Brazil has come to the fore because of the destruction of the families in the course of slavery.37 Following this observation, it could apply to German-speaking Europe that the idea of personalized souls as an expression of cultural circumstances (independence symbolized through the Caboclas and Caboclos, slavery manifested through the Pretas Velhas and Pretos Velhos etc.) takes a back seat and the relation to the diverse natural elements occupies a more crucial place. Since there is no cultural background in Central Europe that makes the spirit-lines generally known, it was more likely that the Umbanda religion would accentuate other aspects of its cosmology than the sociological one.

The personifications of spiritual entities, as they are experienced and understood in the Brazilian imagination as spirits of their own ancestors and representatives of Brazilian history, is in some ways rejected in German-speaking

33 Kreszmeier, Systemische Naturtherapie, p. 138. [“In den Himmel aufsteigend], von dem aus es zu einer anderen Zeit, an einem anderen Ort wieder auf die Erde fallen, dort versickern und den Grund für ein neues Hervorquellen bilden wird.”]
34 Kreszmeier, Systemische Naturtherapie. [“Unermessliche Wiegenkraft in Grenzbereiche des Unbewussten.”]
35 Kreszmeier, Systemische Naturtherapie, p. 154. [“Innerer Verantwortung, Ethik und seinen Willen angewiesen.”]
37 Cf. Prandi, Segredos guardados; Verger, Orixás, p. 33 et seq.
Europe. Since the spirits in the diaspora are venerated not only by Brazilian but also by Central European believers and embodied in ritual trance, they are understood in the community of *Terra Sagrada* as “holistic beings” ("Ganzheitswesen") as a kind of an ahistorical “ancestral field” of a distant and depersonalized religious dimension. For the Brazilian protagonists of the Umbanda, religious practice takes on more of a kinship level, while for the European Umbandists it takes on a level that is perceived as subjective and connected with nature. This ambivalence of the view on spirits between being personified and and at the same time being impersonal is well expressed in the words of the Umbandist Bettina Grote from the Berlinian group of *Terra Sagrada*:

> When the entities begin to narrate their history or describe the landscapes in which they live, they seem to come from perhaps Africa or forests which may be unlike the ones that are here. At the same time, it seems to me that something archetypal can be found in it and that is why it is so easy to connect, even for people from other traditions.

If you take the *Pretos Velhos*, for example: We do not imagine the forces that can still be found in our tree of life, but they are simply forces that are much further back. If you imagine it that way, then there is certainly wisdom stored, as it would be similar with ancestral powers that are so far away.38

The therapeutic network of nature therapy spreading out in Austria, Switzerland and Germany has helped to complement the religious structure of the *Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô* in its different offshores. Mãe Delene de Jesus Schätten also

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*Kekerê* (Yorùbá): Coordinating function in one of the offshoots in the *Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô* in Stein, Zurich, Bern, Graz, Vienna or Berlin.
I often came across rivers that house gods

emphasizes this simultaneous connection of the spirits in the Umbanda religion with Brazilian history and likewise with other layers of consciousness:

The entities of the Pretas Velhas and Pretos Velhos as well as the Caboclas and Caboclos are definitely connected to Brazilian history, but not only. [...] Since Umbanda in Brazil originated in the way we know it today, the Pretas Velhas and Pretos Velhos, Caboclas and Caboclos are the spirits of the indigenous people and of the enslaved Africans. [...] But spirits of other ethnic groups also have the same energy.39

Since there is a historical break of civilization in Germany40 that cannot be healed, since it is no longer possible to tie in with old traditions without remembering repressed political contexts, turning to nature as a universal and seemingly neutral counterpart becomes important. Farah Lenser puts this line of thought out in the following way:

A lot of traditional knowledge has been lost in our own cultures, but there is obviously an undercurrent that we can always reconnect with. In the encounter with other cultures, a field of resonance seems to open up, as if there were a universal language that is available to us in the dialogue with other worlds.41

Since the cultural and sometimes also the linguistic context does not exist in the same way as in Brazil, one's own body becomes an important archive for emotionally experienced knowledge (of love, lost rainforest, violence,


40 Cf. Diner, Zivilisationsbruch.

41 „In unseren eigenen Kulturen ist viel an tradiertem Wissen verlorengegangen, aber es gibt offensichtlich einen Unterstrom, an den wir uns wieder immer wieder anschließen können. In der Begegnung mit anderen Kulturen scheint sich ein Resonanzfeld zu öffnen, als gebe es eine Universalsprache, die uns in dem Dialog mit Anderswelten zur Verfügung steht.« Astrid Kreszmeier in an interview with Farah Lenser; cf. Lenser, Der Körper als sakraler Raum, p. 49.
coloniality and other memories) in trance, as this is conveyed in the sacred dances through specific songs for the respective spirits and their own rhythms. This knowledge arises to a certain extent intuitively and within and through the body (and no previous learning), but is in turn solidified repeatedly in the ritual.42 Bettina Schmidt points out that body knowledge arises as a “product of a religious phenomenon”, that is, it is created through the somatic experience in trance.43 I understand the Umbandistic trance states as an archive like libraries or other places of document material. They are a living archive of experienced emotional and subtle stock of comprehension. Following Michel Foucault’s thoughts, an archive and the knowledge about history, religion and culture is a place or repository for hidden fields of knowledge beyond the accumulation of scientific expertise through papers and documents in a museum or a state archive as a building and institution.44

Foucault uses his “Archaeology of Knowledge” as a method to analyze discourses and practices and the statements and ideas involved in their historical conditions and transformations.45 Comparable body archives as living archives in the Umbanda pass on a knowledge of spirits and gods, their movements and their perceived nature. The body, which is used as a mediator or medium in the Umbanda, is mobile and always present, which is evident both in transatlantic travels (as, for example, between Switzerland and Brazil), but also important when the groups from Terra Sagrada move to rented accommodation in the urban areas of Berlin, Bern or Zurich.46

5 Divine Nature

In the vision of the Afro-Brazilian religions, human beings (and consequently the personification of spirits) are part of cultural history and also part of nature as well as nature is an expression of divine powers. The division of nature and culture is a Western and modernist conception and has only partly influenced these religious traditions. Thus, the Orixás can be seen as deified ancestors with a terrestrial history, as forces, goddesses and gods and also as natural elements of fire, earth, water and air, which appear in a so-called Xirê (a circle or dance of the gods). In Brazil, but also in Central Europe, the Orixás

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42 Scharf da Silva, Trauma als Wissensarchiv, pp. 115, 262.
43 Cf. Schmidt, Körperwissen im Candomblé, p. 31.
44 Cf. Foucault, Archäologie des Wissens; Scharf da Silva, Trauma als Wissensarchiv, p. 109.
45 Cf. Foucault, Archäologie des Wissens.
46 Cf. Scharf da Silva, Trauma als Wissensarchiv, p. 113.
appear indirectly in Umbanda by representing the larger spaces in which the spirits operate.

In an ontological sense the Orixás are elements of nature in their different and diverse forms of existence such as wind and lightning (Iansá), river and lake (Oxum), fountain and moor (Nanã), fire and quarry (Xangô), rainbow (Oxumaré), air (Oxalá), earth (Obaluaiê), the sea (Iemanjá), leaves and herbs (Ossaim), mudflats and troubled water (Obá), tree (Tempo / Iroko) or forest (Oxóssi). Following this cosmological conception, Umbanda can be seen and categorized as a “dark green religion”, as Bron Taylor created the term to describe a nature spirituality, which is characterized in his definition by a deep connection with nature, is creative and regards the earth as sacred and all living systems as networked. Nature is accorded an intrinsic and inalienable value that is independent of human benefit and takes a humble stance on the anthropocentric belief in human superiority. Umberto Eco also brings up this religious imagination in the descriptions of “back to naturalness”, “belief in tradition” or a “language of nature spirits” for the Brazilian Umbanda in his novel *Foucault’s Pendulum*:

> Who lives in the past? You, who want to give this country the atrocities of the century of industry and the working masses, or I, who wish that our poor Europe would find back to the naturalness and belief of these slave descendants! [...]  
> “Since when have I been a European?” “It doesn’t depend on the color of the skin, what matters is belief in tradition. In order to restore the ability to expectation to a Westerner paralyzed by prosperity, they have to pay, perhaps also suffer, but they still know the language of the spirits of nature, the air, the water, the winds” [...] "You are exploiting us once more."  

Both in Brazil and in Central Europe, Umbanda sees itself as a religion of resistance and as an alternative way of knowing. Yet, while in Brazil, Umbanda in

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48 „Wer lebt in der Vergangenheit? Sie, die Sie diesem Lande die Gräuel des Jahrhunderts der Industrie und der Arbeitermassen schenken wollen, oder ich, der sich wünschte, unser armes Europa fände zurück zur Natürlichkeit und zum Glauben dieser Sklavenabkömmlinge! [...]” „Seit wann bin ich eine Europäerin?” „Es kommt nicht auf die Hautfarbe an, entscheidend ist der Glaube an die Tradition. Um einem vom Wohlstand paralysierten Abendländer die Fähigkeit zur Erwartung wiederzugeben, müssen diese hier zahlen, vielleicht auch leiden, aber sie kennen noch die Sprache der Naturgeister, der Lüfte, der Wasser, der Winde [...]” „Ihr beutet uns ein weiteres Mal aus.” Eco, *Das Foucaultsche Pendel*, p. 220.
its myth of creation defines itself emically as a religion of the poor, oppressed and marginalized, and has become a religion of the people by sacralizing the personification of spirits of indigenous people and enslaved Africans, the focus in the Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô lies on the importance of being a religion of natural forces. This assumption is underlaid by the random sample of my statistical survey from 2018, in which 50% of the respondents stated that their reason for belonging to Umbanda was their desire to experience nature.49 Nature serves as an idealized category of self-identification with the sacred dimension of the Orixás and spirits and also in religious everyday practices such as baths taken by its members, as explains Mãe Gabriele Hilgers in relation to her practice in the Casa St. Michael:

Baths are used for cleaning, clarification, liberation, orientation and visions. The element of transcendence is elevated through the choice of herbs. They symbolize the various elements, for example air (fern for Oxóssi). Fire, for example in the form of a circle of fire, causes transformation. When working with earth, dry baths are made, for example with popcorn for Abaluaê/Omolu.50

Moreover, healing ceremonies sometimes happen in the course of an Umbanda ritual in which the previously compiled herbs (basil, rosemary, mint, and chamomile) are used by the incorporated spirits to rub onto the consultants present in the rituals of Terra Sagrada or to sprinkle them on the ground. Ossaim, the Orixá of herbs and plants, is usually sung for. The spiritual entities (incorporated in personal mediums) often send the guests of Terra Sagrada go into nature to a river to venerate Oxum, the Orixá of clear water, or into the forest to Oxóssi, the Orixá of the forest, outside the city to light a candle for the deity resident there. These assignments also usually include a longer stay in nature – which is mostly on the city limits in Southeast Berlin such as the forest Grunewald, the lake Wannsee, at the river Havel, the forest of Düppler Forst with instructions to drum or sing there. Through these excursions into

49 Cf. Scharf da Silva, p. 296.
nature, the guests and the mediums perceive their immediate surroundings in a different and new way, as they experience these natural places as sacred.51

6 Ontological Conceptions of Nature and Human Beings

Since the ontological conception of the divine dimension is interwoven with elements of nature and the Orixás and spirits are connected with human beings and reflect their personality and physical condition,52 an encounter and identification with the sea (Iemanjá), the troubled waters of rivers (Obá), the wind (Iansã) or the earth (Obaluaiê) is being experienced daily and ritually in collective ceremonies or individually. The spiritual leader of the Casa St. Michael in Cologne, Mãe Gabriele Hilgers, explains the practice of trance in the Umbanda, which goes hand in hand with elements of nature and the inner self:

It's about the incorporation of natural elements: what does it do to me when I think about a tree or embrace it? What does a wave, that carries me, gives me? [...] What is the inner rain for me? How is my waterfall? By dealing with the [natural] elements, I connect with my own nature.53

In this intimate connection with nature that takes on a global dimension also in other practices,54 the conventional boundaries between subject and object as well as canonized and marginalized knowledges is being questioned and overcome, as Mãe Delene de Jesus Schätti of the Cantinho da Vovó Catarina in Sirnach in Switzerland emphasizes:

Umbandists recognize the interplay between human beings and nature – if it is in harmony, then the energies are balanced and life flows towards the fulfillment of destiny, the mission or the path. If it is out of balance, Umbandists know that they have to look inward, self-knowledge is

51 Cf. Scharf da Silva, Trauma als Wissensarchiv, p. 374.
52 Cf. Amaral, Xiré! O Modo de Creer e de Viver no Candomblé, pp. 70–72; Scharf da Silva, Beyond the Gaps of Archives.
appropriate in order to transform. The knowledge of the energies of the natural elements and their handling are essential for harmonization and the establishment of balance.55

In my random sample of my statistical survey from 2018 among the Umbandists of *Terra Sagrada* I placed a special focus on the category of healing: 82% of the respondents who took part stated that the search for healing is a reason for them to be active in the *Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô*. However, there is a clear and strong rejection of topics that are political, activist and critical (such as an “ecological activism” I asked for) among the religious practitioners. This becomes clear to me in the discrepancy between a high agreement of 64% for collective healing and only 14% for ecological activism. Rosi Braidotti explains the return of religions to people’s everyday lives and the associated clash of cultures of the third millennium as the result of “failed promises” of modernity, which have led to an estrangement from explicitly political issues and a turn to spiritual interests which are nevertheless socio-politically relevant, as debates about ethical values and religious norms have increased:

The contemporary public debate shows a decline of interest in politics, whereas discourses about ethics, religious norms and values triumph. […]

Nietzsche’s claim rings hollow across the spectrum of contemporary global politics: God is not dead at all. The monotheistic view of the Divine Being merely slipped out the back window during the passionately secularized second half of the 20th century, only to return through the front door with the failed promises of modernization and the clash of civilizations in the third millennium.56

For the Umbandists in Central Europe it is more about a structural change in the social spaces that they strive for in their everyday work, at school and


56 Braidotti, *In Spite of the Times*, p. 2.
in their social environment. According to the sample of my survey, for instance there are occupational fields of religious practitioners in Terra Sagrada that are more represented than others, namely those who deal with healing and the well-being of people such as health care, coaching, therapy, psychology and include contact with nature.\footnote{57}

Presupposing that trance can be understood as the emergence of new states of consciousness, it is perhaps not insignificant to mention – in order to take a hopeful standpoint – that in the case of Umbanda in German-speaking Europe, the embodiments of a sacred dimension as part of a non-European tradition become part of Europeans’ own reality and as such ought to remember the borderless connection to nature and contribute to sustainable societies. Natural spirituality is a form of perceiving the world that has not been outsourced and separated from human beings and can offer a possible future, since the material and the immaterial are not seen as being contradictory.

**Bio**

Inga Scharf da Silva is a cultural anthropologist (Dr.) and a visual artist. She studied ethnology and history of art at the Free University of Berlin (FUB) and in Brazil at the University of Bahia (UFBA), the University of São Paulo (USP) and the University of Pernambuco (UFPE). She has defended her doctoral thesis in September 2020 at the Humboldt University of Berlin, where she has been working as a research assistant since 2014 at the Institute of European Ethnology and has been funded by PROMI of the University of Cologne. In addition to ethnological field research on Umbanda and Afro-Brazilian mythology in Brazil and in German-speaking Europe, she is interested in sacral globalization, archive, contemporary spirituality, anthropology of the senses, material religion, migration, memory practices and autoethnographic research.

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\footnote{57} Cf. Scharf da Silva, *Trauma als Wissensarchiv*, p. 297.


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