



# We Only Need the Holy Signs, the Saints are Here Just to Make People Feel at Home

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## Abstract

This paper on an Umbanda worship space is part of a research with the religions of African and Amerindian matrix, conducted in the years 2015-16 at the request of the 67th Prosecutor's Office for Human Rights of the State Public Prosecution Service of Mato Grosso do Sul and the Federation of Afro-Brazilian and Amerindian Cults of the State of Mato Grosso do Sul. As requested, several worship spaces were visited and 2 Fathers-of-Saint, 2 Mothers-of-Saint and 1 Babalorishá were interviewed, with the purpose of demonstrating to the municipal authorities that worship space cults should be considered religions, just like the others present in the municipality. Specifically, this paper analyzes the process of re-signification of Catholic saints in Umbanda as part of the hybridization and syncretism of worship space cults. The methodology consisted of visits to several worship spaces, interviews, and specifically in this case, we will analyze this process of re-signification based on the interview with Mother-of-Saint Fátima, coordinator of the Cabocla Janaína Worship Place in Campo Grande. Her speech has shown that the meanings of the Catholic saints in Umbanda, may be to make familiar a religion considered exotic, or even to syncretize the attributes and roles of the saints and orishas.

**Keywords:** Religion; Afro Cults; Re-Signification

## Introduction

The sentence that forms the title of this paper was taken from an interview with Mother-of-Saint Fátima, coordinator of the Cabocla Janaína Umbanda Center, located in the city of Campo Grande - MS. The enigmatic phrase allows a reflection about the meanings of the images of the Catholic saints on the altar of the center run by Fátima, from the perspectives already agreed upon among scholars of the subject in Brazil, who claim that there has been a process of re-signification of part of the Catholic iconography in the pantheon of Umbanda gods. Although this may sound like an established truth, in her perception, Fatima understands that the function of the saints is precisely not to "scare" people, so that they do not

feel far from their baptismal faith, in this case Catholicism. The temple, as she names it, should look a bit like a church, so that everyone can "get comfortable," functioning as an appeal to the familiarity that Catholicism can provide to the site-goer. However, throughout the interview, Fatima is helpful in explaining in detail the meaning of each image and its analogy with the meanings of the Orishas. This interview will be analyzed during this paper.

This paper on the Umbanda is part of a research with the religions of African and Amerindian matrix, conducted in the years 2015-16 at the request of the 67th Prosecutor's Office for Human Rights of the State Public Prosecution Service of Mato Grosso do Sul and the Federation of Afro-Brazilian and

Amerindian Cults of the State of Mato Grosso do Sul.

At the time, the Federation, which represents the Worship Spaces, had filed a complaint with the prosecutor's office about the tax immunity of places of worship. The Prosecutor's Office received the complaint, in consideration that the Federal Constitution, in its article 150, item VI, letter "b", and paragraph 4, that the collection of any property tax, income and services of the temples of any cult, as well as that this immunity represents the extension of fundamental right to freedom of awareness and belief (CF-88, article 5, items VI, VII and VIII).

According to the complaint, the Municipal Secretary of Revenue would be applying literally the article 2 of Municipal Decree nº 9.782/2006 and, therefore, demanding from Umbanda and Candomblé worship spaces the "organization of the institution", the "minutes of the board of directors" and the "CNPJ [Tax ID] card", documents that are outside the reality of the massive majority of temples that worship religions of Afro-Brazilian matrix, which are based, fundamentally, on oral traditions and informal organizational aspects. In practice, the municipal government did not consider obliging Umbanda and Candomblé places of worship to pay municipal taxes, since they did not have an organizational structure similar to the other churches. It is interesting to note that most Worship Spaces are extensions of the houses of the Mothers and Fathers-of-Saint, not having a specific place to work. In the defense of the leaders of the houses, the Worship Spaces would not be able to function if they had to rent or buy real estate, build temples, and obtain registration at the city's board of trade. Their followers belong to the popular classes and Worship Spaces do not usually charge regular financial contributions as do Christian churches, which collect tithes and offerings from their members.

From that point on, in response to a request from the Public Prosecution Service and the Federation of Worship Spaces, we began the research and interviewed 2 Fathers-of-Saint, 2 Mothers-of-Saint, and 1 Babalorishá (a candomblé priest), with the purpose of demonstrating to the municipal authorities that the worship space cults should be considered religions, just like the others present in the city. At the end of the research, a report on the subject was delivered to the Public Prosecution Service, which recommended to the city government the application of tax immunity to all places of worship. After a long period of debate, Resolution Nº 1 of May 8, 2020, from the City Hall of Campo Grande extends to Worship Spaces the tax immunity already established in the Federal Constitution.

Interviews with Parents and Mothers-of-Saint led us to the house of Mãe-de-Santo Fátima, who calls herself a Medium and incorporates an entity named Cabocla Janaina.

The interview lasted approximately 1 hour, making it possible to analyze the process of re-signification of the Catholic saints in Umbanda, in dialog with the Brazilian literature that deals with the theme. During the interview, Fátima told me about the financial difficulties of keeping the house running and not being able to pay the municipal taxes and the fees required to receive the legal entity registration in order to receive the tax exemption, in addition, Fátima made a point of demonstrating that her place should be seen as if it were a church, this is done by the presence of iconography of the Catholic saints present on the altar, although she considers that this is unnecessary for the prayers and rituals to take place. It is interesting that the process of re-signifying the saints in their worship space seems to serve the purpose of turning this sacred space into a welcoming and familiar place for its attendants.

## Discussion and Results

The re-signification of religious symbols is part of a complex structure of human thought that is constantly developing, as man restructures his way of thinking at the same time that his world is being renewed, changed, or made strange. This strangeness causes new conjectures to be formulated, or existing ones to be disused or even modified. The world created by humans is constantly developing and reformulating [1]. Although created by human action, this world that is culture seems independent from the will of men and women, because once created, it seems to go back against its creator. However, instead of being simply controlled by culture, humans, as subjects, act upon this world, proposing changes, new interpretations and meanings, either conforming or resisting the world elaborated by the oppressor.

The constant re-signification of things around them is necessary. These "worlds" constructed in collective interactions are very complex worlds that require a great deal of effort to maintain or to change, a constant learning process on the part of the subjects. In this sense, religion is within the cultural totality of human products, as a complex structure that reflects the way they see, interpret and live in this world. For people who are able to adopt them, religious symbols offer a cosmic guarantee not only for their ability to understand the world, but also that by understanding it, they give precision to their feelings [2].

Such holy symbols function to synthesize the cultural apparatus of a people, developed in their journey of knowing and perceiving their environment - the tone, character and quality of their life, their moral and aesthetic style and dispositions - and their worldview - with this they are clothed in an endless array of meanings which are under constant re-evaluation by those who created them.

Religion, like the human being, reveals one another, that is, the nature of religion reveal the state of mind of men and women, and vice versa. If we pay attention to the details of their religion, such as the rituals, the liturgies, and their dogmas, we will get a cosmological map of their mystical world. We will know their beliefs, worldview, the degree of sociability and the structure of the society in which this man finds himself.

Religion can often, alter the whole picture that is presented to common sense, it does this in such a way that the dispositions and motivations induced by religious practice seem, extremely practical, indeed, the only ones to be adopted sensibly, given the way things really are [2]. Sometimes, when such meanings and their correlations are not understandable from a common sense point of view, religious symbology and its meanings come into play to make this assimilation process more plausible, bridging the gap between these two worlds that surround the human being, the visible understood and the invisible misunderstood.

These meanings are only stored through symbols, which can be a cross, a crescent, a fig sign, or a picture. These religious symbols explore a dramatization in rituals and are told in myths, and summarize for those who believe everything that is known about the way they see the world, the emotional quality of life they endure, and the way they behave in it. Thus, sacred symbols relate an ontology and a cosmology to their aesthetics and morality. For the human psyche, the symbol means an image that contains both conscious and unconscious data. At the unconscious level the symbolic image is veiled with the mysteries of life, with the inconceivable or unimaginable; and the conscious level is unveiled with a living meaning that the human being (*or homo religiosus*) can perceive, consider and reflect upon.

The process of re-signification according to Thompson JB [3] refers to a narrative as the re-interpretation of the past, elaborated by people and always influenced by the point of view they assume in the present. This brings us back to issues that we have pending within our structure, experienced in a particular way, we elaborate from a new experience some concepts that are out of place or meaningless. This re-signification produces a new meaning for the experience, putting the new meaning in order in consonance with the other experiences accumulated in its experience. For Bellino F [4] this issue of re-signification implies a process of subjectivation, in which the person starts to appropriate his or her experience and to operate a reordering in life. For the introduction of this new conception in the way of living, as a response to experience, requires that the person situates himself in the new existential context brought about by the experience.

In this context, Merhy EE [5] tells us that the perception and appropriation of human reality interpenetrated by fields of affective-existential meaning help the person in this process, in the sense of redefining, reorganizing the horizon of meaning, of vital meaning. And in their search for meaning, human beings interpret their experiences, based on symbolic references present in socially accepted meanings.

Thus, the symbolic dimension of the religious phenomenon is a frequent theme among the classics of the social sciences (Tylor, Durkheim, Weber). A dominant assumption of most classical theories of religion is that there is a stability in the symbolic field or of the symbol itself, that is, if a religious movement has a certain dynamic, in cases where symbolic fields are in dispute, it is assumed that there is a stability, or a continuity around the dispute for some symbol. And in the opposite sense, when it is the symbolic field that is understood as stable, within it there can be disputes between different symbols. The conclusion is that this notion of stability is a fundamental notion to arm a systematic and methodical understanding of any religious movement, inside or outside the Christian universe. It is still necessary to think that the field of religious symbols conditions and is conditioned by a set of institutions bound to the social structure, politics, and economy, they also express, through the universe of symbols, but maintaining, even if in relative terms, their autonomy, their interest, and their capacity to articulate and forge social life. It is also understood that the symbol is polysemic, it is the work of interpretation, both of the native (the person who establishes a vital link with his symbolic universe) and of the analyst, who stops temporarily at the point where the unconscious directs the associations for identification.

It is with this proposal that we will address, in the case of Umbanda, the issue of giving new meanings to old religious symbols, in this case the images of Catholic saints, and we will focus on the main aspects involved, among them the social issue and the mode of interpretation, and how these aspects had influences on the development of a new meaning to these religious symbols. According to Birman P [6] Umbanda is considered an “*aggregate of small units that do not form a unitary whole*”, there is no centralization, hierarchy, or even a bond of these units as in institutionally organized religions. In the Umbanda, each “*center*” or “*worship space*”<sup>1</sup> has its own characteristics, its own history.

Among these units, there are three religious doctrines

<sup>1</sup> Center and worship space is how the places where Umbanda rituals take place are called; we will use the term Center, because it is the term used at the research site.

that are used according to the development or particular characteristics of the center or worship space, or even a mixture of them: the Kardecist spiritism tradition for some, or the Catholic tradition for others, or even the Candomblé tradition. Machado SMC [7] points out that Brazilian religious manifestations with African ancestry were from the beginning an attempt by enslaved black people who came from different tribes and traditions (including religious ones) to try to maintain a cultural identity that characterized them. This mixture of doctrines began in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, and was revealed by a “caboclo” spirit incorporated into a medium named Zélio de Moraes, inside a Kardecist center.

According to Berkenbrock VJ [8], it is because of the complexity of Umbanda that it cannot be said that there are rules that can explain the development of this process. It is, however, better understood when we interpret syncretism within the dynamics of the development of society as a whole and how Umbanda grew along with the various religions that make it up.

Forbidden to pray to their gods, the black people enslaved in Brazil knew how to keep the practice of certain rituals such as ancestor worship, which according to Bastide R [9] were important because of the belief that the souls of the dead would join the great spiritual family of the ancestors on the other side of the ocean. This ritual was meant to pay homage to the dead through the cults, so that they would not be avenged or tormented with nightmares and diseases, this ritual has been preserved among most Afro-Brazilian citizens.

For Prandi R [10] this is the first phase of the Afro religions in Brazil, one can already notice at this time a hybridism with Catholicism and with indigenous traditions. The cultural imposition, especially religious, by the oppressive colonizers, who baptized the slaves and sent them to various parts of Brazil, caused this ritual to lose its meaning, since the dispersion of these communities broke the existing family ties, but in parallel, the cult of the orishas as divinities bound to the forces of nature survived and with this remained a bond to the African roots.

The approach with Fátima occurred at the headquarters of the Federation of Afro-Brazilian and Amerindian Cults of the State of Mato Grosso do Sul, being invited by the president to talk about the meaning of the symbols of Umbanda in an interview to compose the report to be sent to the Public Prosecution Service of Mato Grosso do Sul. After that, we went to her Center to meet and talk about the meanings of the saints in her workplace. Fátima is a very attentive lady, who proved to be very helpful. She said that her first contact with Umbanda happened twenty-one years ago, when her

children were sick and that there was a manifestation of an entity named “Cabocla Janaína”, that incorporated her inside her house and that this entity started to work in her life, teaching her how she should proceed with the “rituals and works” within Umbanda.

Before this experience, Fátima, although from an evangelical family, was a practicing Catholic and regularly attended a Kardecist spiritist center, a religion that, as in Umbanda, is based on mediumship and on consulting “disincarnate spirits”, Fátima is called by other mediums when she is incorporated as “Mother Janaína”, she told us that her belief in the “Saints”, referring to the images of the Catholic saints, is in fact, for her, an identification of the “entities”, as she tells us in an excerpt of her interview:

*In reality we should only have seven images for identification, because the images for us here in Umbanda are only for people to feel at home, so that they see the temple as a church, and not be so distant from their roots, from their church, so that is why we still have the images, because in reality we don't need anything besides the sacred signs, the sacred pemba. The pemba represents everything within the umbanda.*

Fatima mentions the “pemba”, a spelling made on the floor, by the mediums or entities, called by some the “spelling of the Orixás”. They are magical signs that open or close doors, that bring in or repel energies, activate or deactivate astral and natural forces. It can be considered as a signature or emblem symbolizing a certain entity. By the spelling of the pemba or its law, one can tell which entity it represents, whether it is a caboclo or a preto-velho. Its secrets are kept to the initiated, who after seven years or more of study, have access to Pemba’s mysteries. It is a form of identification and strength, activation and facilitation of the work. Some people consider pemba the chalk itself, in which the “written songs” are made, a name also given to pemba, made with a special clay imported from Africa, the powder from this chalk also serves to be used in “spiritual works”.

However, although Fatima says that she doesn’t need the “saints” - in this case referring to the Catholic images - and that she “leaves them there so as not to scare people” who come to the Umbanda center, this “line” by Fatima reveals that Umbanda still suffers a strong prejudice against society. As per her statement:

*Prejudice is still strong in society, but it is changing.*

When Fátima uses the expression “so as not to scare people”, we verify that in this case one of the purposes of the Catholic images inside that center is to make the place more



“familiar” according to her statements:

*it is just for people to feel at home, to see the temple as a church, and not to be so distant from their roots, from their church, so that's why we still have the images*

Traditionally, the images of the Catholic saints in the Umbanda centers are an analog representation of the Orisha's powers, referring to the “wonders and signs”, or some other aspect of their personality such as honor, bravery, gentleness, charity of the Catholic saint when alive.

However, in Fátima's center, the images have the function of reminding the attendants, especially the uninitiated, that Umbanda is not a strange religion to Brazilians, especially those who belong to Catholicism. Fátima makes it clear that the Catholic saints function as a means to diminish the prejudices that persecute the Umbanda believers.

Umbanda legitimizes itself to the extent that it integrates the values proposed by the religion of the oppressor, Catholicism. This integration gradually made it possible for religion to be recognized, including by the State, and to have the same worship rights as those of Christian religions. This process legitimizes its acceptance with regard to the right to the tax immunity provided for in the Federal Constitution. Although Umbanda is considered as a pagan cult, it becomes part of the Brazilian religious system.

This delay in the recognition of Umbanda as a religion has its roots in the pressure from the dominant groups in Christianity, initially from Catholicism and currently, from the Neopentecostals, being used to mask a resistance to colonial domination.

Another part of Fatima's speech that calls attention in relation to the images at the center is when she says that the saints have the function of breaking people's resistance to the spiritualism of Umbanda:

*When they started to introduce the Saints within the center, then, it was a way not to scare people, so what they did, they brought the Saints from the Catholic church, the slaves then started with them, so it was a way to let people feel at home.*

Fátima believes that by keeping the images of the saints, she can create a more receptive, more “familiar” atmosphere that doesn't cause too much strangeness in the people who visit her center.

In addition, at the Fátima's Umbanda Center, the Orishas and their meanings are represented in images of Catholic saints, and it is through them that the role of each one that is worshiped at the place is explained. Thus, it shows an image

of Jesus Christ, similar to the one found on Catholic altars, and says that he represents Oxalá, an orisha of African origin: *(...) He is the father of all, he is the one that guides all the “energies”, so he is like Jesus Christ, he brings knowledge, he guides (referring to Oxalá;). So Oxalá is the beginning, we ask him for peace, harmony, serenity. We open the works by asking in the name of Oxalá who directs to God the almighty father (...)*

We can see here that the orisha and the saint merge into the same person and with the same powers and attributes, and that the same person can be used as an intermediary to the “supreme God”. We can see that in the hierarchy of the gods of the worship space, Oxalá is a head Orisha, having at his command several other “entities”. Next, Fátima shows us the image of Saint George and tells us that it is Ogum, an entity whose main characteristics are courage and fighting spirit, and told us that his color is orange. It is to this entity that the terreiro people turn when they are in a fight, “needing to face a confrontation”, or some dispute. We see here a similar analogy, because for Catholics St. George is also a warrior saint.

Then she shows us an image of Saint Sebastian that, for Fátima, is Oxóssi and says that he is an orisha that inhabits the forests, and must be revered when entering them, because he is the one who shows you the way to the herbs, induces everyone to go after knowledge, and he brings abundance, health, and prosperity.

Fátima also shows us an image of Saint Jerome that together with the image of Saint John the Baptist represent Xangô. Here we have a special case in which the two images represent a single orisha. The powers attributed to this orisha are: the command of lightning and thunder, considered the orisha of “balance”, inhabitant of rivers, quarries and fire, he helps in situations in which doubt reigns, bringing balance.

The image of Our Lady of Conception, regarded as Iemanjá, although Iemanjá has her own image in the center and by the way one of the largest, is considered the queen of the salt waters, representative of universal love, a mother's love. In Fátima's opinion, Iemanjá impregnated, along with Oxalá (Jesus Christ), all the other orishas; she is also worshipped at times of despair.

Saint Barbara, who represents Iansã, is considered the queen of the winds and storms, she is a warrior and gives courage, and brings strength in fights and confrontations; here we have an allusion to the life of the saint, as in most of the re-significations we found. The image of Our Lady of Aparecida represents Oxum, inhabitant of sweet waters, orisha of sweetness and patience.

Saint Benedict represents two entities for Fátima: Preto-velhos and the Yorimá. They are regarded as justice-related entities because they have knowledge of the law, act in favor of people who have causes in court, and act as a protector of those who are suffering for lack of it.

As we can see in Fátima's reports, contrary to her initial speech, that there is indeed a correlation between the Catholic saints and the orishas, by showing the occurrence of analogies between the history of the saints and their powers and the attributions or powers of the orishas, this takes us back to a past in which enslaved Africans masked their deities and spiritual entities by giving them a Catholic dressing, this can be thought of as a form of re-signification from a cultural resistance, for a preservation of the black people's ethnic identity. On the other hand, it can also be thought of as a re-signification having as a starting point the encounter of different cultures and their respective worldviews, and the end product of this encounter is the result of a new way of interacting with the new, a new form of religious manifestation.

In general, it may be that the saints have little importance for the medium Fátima, both in rituals and in her worldview. For her, the Mother-of-Saint, what really matters are the orishas and the entities and their powers.

*The fathers-of-saint live, therefore, immersed in their religious and enchanted world. Their reality is that of the orishas.*

Her imagery and practice are bound to the orishas and their relationship to humanity and the magical means of protecting themselves and their followers.

Forming itself throughout history as a religion of African matrix, it is necessary to recognize that Umbanda results from a process of transculturation, which is the transatlantic passage of various ethnic and cultural groups to Brazilian soil, occurring ruptures with the African cultural origin and the subsequent syncretic process that will give the current form to this cult. A difference is marked on this route, which indicates a transit between Africa and Brazil. In this process of forced transit, a concept is born: that of transculturation. It is precisely the prefix of the word TRANS-ported that Fernando Ortíz F [11], a Cuban ethnographer alludes to when referring to the historical and social processes that were the context and part of what is now known as the religion of Santería in Cuba and elsewhere in the Caribbean. In short, for Ortiz, transculturation refers to the transfer of a culture and a people across the Atlantic, a forced transport that leads to the installation of this culture in a new land, which under adverse conditions was able to resume its cultural configuration in another form, clad and protected with the image of the cult of Catholic saints imposed by the dominant

religion, but always preserving the African foundation and base.

In this process of transculturation, the worship space people had to actively find mechanisms capable of surviving the violent cultural and territorial uprooting, syncretism occurred over the years. The world conceptions, the magical logic of the African foundation and its relationship with the sacred, are imprinted in this syncretic religion that emerges and protects, but amalgamated with Catholicism, more popular than orthodox. This adoption of the Catholic in search of rescue and re-articulation of one's own, with time and the advancement of the national process of cultural hybridization has become more than a disguise. The Catholic saints have become compatible, but relegated to the background; i.e., the main deity is African and moves in the cosmology of Umbanda as such, as perceived by Fatima's account; but this doesn't mean that the figure of the saint will be a mere use of its form, because the Orisha in the vision can come "through different paths", adopting different human forms, changing sex, age or personality characteristics. Which makes it possible to incorporate the figure of the saint as the path "from where the Orisha comes". The answer is this syncretism of forms between the figure of the saint and that of the Orisha.

Forms because at no time is it thought of in the figure of the Catholic saint itself, but as a form attached to the essence of the Orisha. Syncretism only occurs when expressions merge, generating synthesis. Juxtaposition is rare, because two religions cannot remain in contact for some time without exchanging elements, we can define syncretism as the formation of two or more religious systems that come into contact, originating a new system that is the product of the dialectical interaction of the elements of the two original systems.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, syncretism arises from the formation of two or more religious systems that end up in a new one; the resulting synthesis is the container of new beliefs, rites, organizational forms, and ethical norms, generated from a constantly changing interaction of the cultures in contact. Syncretism is presented as a cultural mechanism of reinterpretation, a dynamic process by which pre-contact cultural forms and values converge in a new resigned and mixed synthesis.

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