

## Religion and Dictatorship in Brazil: the Case of Umbanda in Getúlio Vargas's New State (1937-1945)

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### Abstract

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This article deals with the relationship between Umbanda, a religion that worships the ancestral spirits of blacks, Indians and whites, and Getúlio Vargas's dictatorship in Brazil, the New State (1937-1945). Historiography has recorded the repressive effort of the New State, not only on the so-called "Mediumistic<sup>2</sup> Religions" (Spiritism and Umbanda), but also on Candomblé. However, empirical evidence presents a surprising position when considering Umbanda in Brazil. Documents show an explicit relation of Umbanda and dictatorship while it was in force. This close relation has reached the point of erasing the repression led by Getúlio Vargas's dictatorship of the mediumistic religions and of Candomblé.

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**Keywords:** Umbanda; Spiritism; New State.

### Introduction

From 1937 to 1945, Brazil lived under Getúlio Vargas's dictatorial regime, culminating in a wave of political centralization that began with the Revolution of 1930, which ended the liberal-oligarchic republic, dominated mainly by coffee growers in the state of São Paulo. At the very beginning of the dictatorial regime in 1938, a document from the Political and Social Inquiry Service of the New State (SIPS), the main control body of political and repressive activities, surveyed the main religious forces in the country, trying to detect the real or virtual possibilities of opposition to Vargas. The document detected opponents or possibilities for contesting Vargas within the hierarchy of the Catholic Church itself - one of the regime's pillars of support (Isaia, 1998). According to the document, the Catholic Church presented all the historical characteristics of an institution that eventually would dispute with the path taken by Vargas's politics, as it competed with the state in the conduct of working class morals and in the resolution of the so-called "social issue", which involved the relationship between capital and labor. On the other hand, the SIPS document presented Spiritism as an ally to be considered by the state. This was due to its almost non-existent presence in the Brazilian labor movement and the characteristics of its social action, with a marked charitable content and distance from political discussion and political engagement. On the other hand, we must consider here the extreme polysemy with which the noun Spiritism emerged in Brazilian culture and daily life (Warren, 1984; Velho, 1991). The word Spiritism emerge as a huge niche, able to encompass not only Allan Kardec's codified experience in nineteenth-century France, but also a very large perspective of worship realities ranging from Umbanda<sup>3</sup> to Candomblé. Obviously, the representatives of Brazilian Spiritism, especially the Brazilian Spiritist Federation, founded in 1884, tried to delimit boundaries between these practices, not accepting this broad sense, which was present in Brazilian culture and daily life (Isaia & Amorim, 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> Mediumistic religions are those that believe in the contact between the spirits of the dead through an intermediary, the medium. Thus, both the Spiritism codified in France by Allan Kardec and the Brazilian Umbanda have this practice and this belief in common.

<sup>3</sup> The basic difference between Umbanda and Candomblé is that in the former they worship ancestral spirits (mainly the old black slaves (Pretos Velhos), as well as the Brazilian indians (Caboclos, among other entities). However, in Candomblé, they worship African gods, the Orixás. In the first case, it is the spirits of the *Pretos Velhos* and the Caboclos that come to earth to provide guidance to men. In the second case, it is the Orixás that "come down" to earth for the tribute they are supposed to receive.

The Brazilian Spiritist Federation tried to emphasize a scientific and rationalist identity, opposed to practices considered by the Federation to be full of magical materiality, such as those of Umbanda. In this article, we will stick to the evidences of coexistence between Getúlio Vargas's dictatorship and the so-called Mediumistic Religions in Brazil (Umbanda and Spiritism), representing the "other side" of the well-known repression of the New State of both religious experiences.

### **Spiritism: the appreciation of a dictatorship body in the New State**

Unlike Catholicism, whose presence in the social structure was significant, Spiritism, according to the SIPS report, would be satisfied with an action merely based on welfare, and charity, far from claiming authority over the working mass. Politically, Spiritism was regarded as a very reliable ally of the New State. The document recognized that Spiritism represented "the greatest religious force in the country after Catholicism" (CPDOC, 1938). Unlike Catholicism, considered too closely linked to international interests, Spiritism is described as having a "purely national organization, living on the financial means provided by its supporters in Brazil, without any international financial connection" (CPDOC, 1938). The report highlights the doctrinal seriousness and social representation of its leaders, presenting biographical data from well-known people of the history of Spiritism, such as Doctor Bezerra de Menezes, in Rio de Janeiro and Doctor Sebastião de Leão, in Porto Alegre; both described as humanitarian members of an intellectual elite that embraced the doctrine. The document also describes what it calls "spiritual medicine". It shows that together with the charitable assistance developed with the needy population, that medicine was far from posing any danger to the dictatorship of the New State: "from the political point of view, Spiritism, lacking homogeneity, cohesion, rigid spiritual discipline, let alone a single command, does not currently present any danger to the state" (CPDOC, 1938).

The SIPS Report certainly refers to the Spiritism practiced by the Brazilian Spiritist Federation. The same Spiritism "among the sincere ones", to which the Brazilian chronicler João do Rio opposed the invocation of the dead among the poor, the black, the uneducated people, gathered in the expressions of Afro-Brazilian religiosity in the early twentieth century (Isaia, 2003). It is important to understand the interdiscursive plots that involved the noun Spiritism in the Brazilian culture. This understanding is necessary for us to articulate the importance of the governmental recognition of Spiritism, with the consolidation of Umbanda in the New State. If the noun spiritism had, for its supporters, affiliated with the French tradition of Allan Kardec, a sense close to science, experimentalism, book culture, common sense, it simply brought Spiritism, Umbanda and Candomblé closer without any clear shapes. The satirical verses are a sign of this perspective. Published by the newspaper "Bahia Ilustrada" in the late 19th century and transcribed by Ubiratan Machado, they presented Spiritism as "white candomblé" (Machado, 1996, p. 110-111).

This is to say that the scientific and literate effort of Spiritism, which had the Afro-Brazilian religions as its pioneer in Brazil, precisely white and literate elite, was equated with the Afro-Brazilian religions. Thus, the recognition of a New State strategic body for Spiritism as an ally and as a political force to be considered integrates a whole game of identity formation of the first umbandists, to bring it closer to Allan Kardec's work of codification. This approximation was strategic to earn symbolic dividends from a religious option, which, although persecuted, was much closer to the symbolic codes accepted by the elite. In this sense, we understand the presence (bewildering and not tolerated for Kardec's followers at the time) of the Spiritist adjective in the name of multiple umbanda yards (*terreiros*), Umbanda doctrinal books, and in the title of the first great gathering of the new religion: First Congress of Spiritism of Umbanda. The expression "Spiritism of Umbanda" will be welcomed even in sociological knowledge, pointed out by Bastide (1967).<sup>4</sup>

### **Spiritism of Umbanda and an attempt to coexist with the New State**

We understand that the conservative white face of Umbanda, defended by some analysts (Bastide, 1956; Queiroz, 1981; Ortiz, 1978), is far from imposing itself as its identity constituent. It can only be thought of referring to a specific context.

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<sup>4</sup> Roger Bastide studied what he called "Spiritism of Umbanda", explaining it based on the dynamics of social transformations that operated in Brazil in the first half of the twentieth century. The category "social class" appears as the basic instrument of analysis. Thus, the "Spiritism of Umbanda" would be the product of the affirmation of the proletariat (of rural origin) and, therefore, of the integration of the black in the urban area, where it does not find receptivity, neither in the French Spiritism nor in Catholicism. Unlike Candido Procópio Ferreira de Camargo's explanation, who advocated a 'continuum' between Spiritism and African Religions, Bastide defended the theory of the existence of two opposing systems, subject to combinations based on a logic inherent in class interests (BASTIDE, 1967)

Thus, the post-1930s, which represented the consolidation of Umbanda in Brazilian society, saw an explicit effort in this direction, by the intellectualized and bureaucratized sectors of the new religion, which not even by far allow us to see Umbanda in other circumstances, only from this point of view (Isaia, 1999). The theories of the “First Congress of Spiritism of Umbanda” are a particularly important source for the study of the Umbanda effort to march towards social expectations, seeking to establish with a government that would started to tolerate it. There is a clear effort in the theories presented at this Congress to bring the new religion closer to the governmental area and, therefore, separate it from the religions of African origin, always susceptible to repressive action by the police. Thus, there is the total endorsement of the discourse of the New State dictatorship in their theories. The emergence of the New State is seen from the point of view of its institutional superiority, in view of the liberal-oligarchic past, unable to ensure the appropriate atmosphere for the national development and unity. Thus, “the experience of seven years of post-revolution regime<sup>5</sup> led the Head of Government to revoke the 1934 Constitution and promulgate a new constitutional regulation, more in line with national reality” (Federation, 1941, p. 73). The words of the Chief of Police, Major Filinto Müller, reproduced with emphasis in the Congress Proceedings, are interesting to elucidate the issue regarding, on the one side, the appreciation of Spiritism by the New State and, on the other side, the attempt of the Umbanda intellectuals to bring Umbanda closer to both. This is a resolution of the Chief of Police, issued in 1941, ridding a certain Spiritist Center of a possible police repression and praising Spiritism (Federation, 1941, p. 73). The Congress Proceedings recognized the legitimacy of the New State, the 1937<sup>6</sup> Constitution and the new Penal Code. According to this source, the two legal texts would guarantee total freedom to Umbanda, since “Spiritism of Umbanda” did not fit in any of the penalty cases provided for in the Penal Code and in the Constitution (Federação, 1941, p. 85-86).

Of special importance to this study was the thesis defended at that Congress by Antônio Barbosa. The author, a general practitioner, defended the need for medical science to go hand in hand with the spiritist doctrine, reinterpreted by Umbanda, in order to treat the mentally ill. Interestingly enough, Antônio Barbosa focuses on two phenomena, considered by the medical science of the time very close to the behavior of the poor in the public realm: madness and alcoholism. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century medical science had already worked on both phenomena as having an explicit relationship with poverty and the working class (ISAIA, 2003). In this sense, Janet's case studies about the so-called ‘Automates ambulatoires’ are important. These people wandered the big French cities aimlessly, without work, surrendered to an unproductive life (Isaia, 1999). Therefore, the aforementioned theory is very illustrative when we contextualize the historical moment in which it was inserted: Umbanda's search for legitimacy in a regime that tried to undo a perspective of somatization of society and sought to train a healthy and capable working class (Lenharo, 1986). Barbosa's theory cohabited an interdiscourse able to value the “hereditary heritage” of the Brazilians, through measures of eugenic nature or of mesological reformulation. Barbosa assumed heredity as one of the main explanatory factors to understand mental illness, thus the need for medical intervention (Federação, 1941, p.165-167). When Barbosa refers to people considered by medical science at the time as degenerated, he says they have “inherited this great disability”, and were recognized in psychiatry by physical, moral and family history characteristics. Among the most common addictions in these individuals, Barbosa detected alcoholism, gambling, and morphine or cocaine poisoning. According to Barbosa's theory, Umbanda could help these people, by adjusting them to society and opening for them “a new age of light, peace and quiet” (Federação, 1941, p. 168). His theory linked heredity, as an explanatory basis for mental illness, with the spiritualist theory of reincarnation. Both factors, turning to the patient's past, could explain their present miseries, which resulted in the association between Umbanda mediums and physicians. Another issue of great importance to understand the strategies of persuasion applied by Umbanda intellectuals refers to its origins. In this case, we can read a narrative construction able to combine African ancestry, with a discursive baggage extremely opposed to the black. If it were not possible to erase African ancestry in Umbanda, the intellectuals assembled at the First Congress referred either to Egypt or, more ingeniously, to the past of Lemuria, the origin of Umbanda (Federation, 1941, p. 114). According to the theory, with the decay of Egypt, there had been the withdrawal of knowledge held by the Egyptian “priestly caste”. This knowledge would have ended up in Ethiopia and in the other black regions of Africa, being then “distorted” and “degenerated”. On the other hand, those theories constructed a narrative, in which the arrangement between African ancestry and genesis was removed of blackness was explicit.

<sup>5</sup> It refers to the Revolution of 1930, headed by Getúlio Vargas, which ends the Liberal-Oligarchic Republic in Brazil.

<sup>6</sup> This is the Constitution assigned by Getúlio Vargas in 1937, which gave virtually unlimited powers to the President of the Republic.

According to another theory, the origin of Umbanda knowledge was rooted in Asia, more precisely among Hindus. To explain the course of Hindu knowledge to the African tribes, the author mentioned a possible link between Africa and Asia, with Lemuria. The theories point to a clear prescriptive meaning: the misrepresentation of knowledge external to the black cultural universe required the need for an ordering, moralizing, civilizing work capable of moving away from black “barbarism” and restoring the old ritual and doctrinal purity. This task was headed by the intellectuals of Umbanda, who, therefore, accredited both internally to the mediumistic field and externally, in a state that increasingly relied on Umbanda as a possible political force. Although with some reservations to Brown's (1985) and Ortiz's (1978) theory of the Umbanda<sup>7</sup> classist connection, it is undeniable that the New State and the later populist democracy of the 1950s and 1960s had common aspects with each other that were more than obvious with the national, syncretic and harmonic representation proclaimed by the intellectuals of the new religion. In this sense, it is appropriate to reproduce the words of Umbanda leader Jacy Rego Barros, in a course on Umbanda held during the New State, with the permission of the government authorities, obviously, and reproduced in a book, published in 1939. The author constructs an essentially syncretic representation of the nationality (with cultural similarities, both with the reading of the reality proclaimed by the regime and with the corporate view that coexisted in the State and in Church). When the author speaks about the coexistence between whites and blacks in Brazil, he emphasizes the “harmonic” and “nonviolent” past that united them, praising the figure of the “black nurse-maid”: The affective relationship of the black nurse-maid with her white children was such, that, in this condition, she forgot her own subservient position and showed affection to the white and black kids equally [...] Once she had her Catholicism Africanized, the black nurse-maid passed on to her black and white offspring all her beliefs, when she told them about the splendors of the gameleira branches, or the stories of the rich and the poor, both fearful of Jesus (Barros, 1939, p. 107).

On the other hand, Umbanda qualified in the New State dictatorship with a pantheon and with a doctrine essentially close to work ethic and a representation of nationality, which were extremely valuable to the regime. Thus, it not only redefined the spiritist idea of work as the foundation of earthly life and of successive incarnations (Isaia, 2005) but also worshiped the blacks and the Indians in total submission to the symbolic rules and guiding practices of collective action. It was an enslaved black, close to the familiarity of his owners, resigned to his “destiny” and an Indian who, though proud and brave (constituted close to the romantic view), placed his values at the service of the white-dominated society, adopting an identity that was equally close to them, the so-called Caboclos (Isaia, 1999).

### **Getúlio Vargas: from repressor to benefactor of Umbanda**

The legitimizing effort of the first leaders who tried to organize Umbanda and the endorsement of the New State will integrate with the memory games. Thus, along with empirical evidence that proves the repression of Afro-Brazilian religions in Brazil, we will find an unambiguous process of “erasure”, in which the figure of Getúlio Vargas came to represent rather a benefactor than a repressor. In some cases, we have the unambiguous pro-Getulist political stance on the part of these leaders. In this sense, the performance of Zélio de Moraes is characteristic, a figure to whom one of the Umbanda origin myths links to, as a local chief faithful to Vargas. Brown (1985) detected several pioneering leaders of Umbanda as advocates of Vargas politics. It is also indicative the fact that Zélio de Moraes's daughter, Zélia, held the position of head of department of Ernani Amaral Peixoto, married in 1939 to Getúlio's daughter, Alzira Sarmanho Vargas. Zélia's enthusiasm for Getúlio Vargas and Amaral Peixoto is evident in the interview we conducted with her in 1997. This interview highly reveals the proximity between the first Umbanda leaders and Vargas government period (Lacerda, 1997). Just as in Zélia's speech, the figure of Getúlio Vargas appears completely distant and without responsibility for the repression of Candomblé and Umbanda in the testimony of Moab Caldas. He was born in the state of Alagoas, arrived in Rio Grande do Sul in the 1930s and was the first Umbanda representative in the southern state parliament, where he stayed for three terms. Referring to the repressive action against Umbanda and African Religions, which occurred when the state of Rio Grande do Sul was governed by the intervener, General Daltro Filho, appointed by Getúlio Vargas, Moab Caldas credited this repression exclusively to the work of the Catholic hierarchy, headed by the archbishop of Porto Alegre and to the “evil” of the intervener. Therefore, everything was solved within the scope of his personal will. Daltro Filho's intervention appeared completely apart from the centralized power that had appointed him (Caldas, 1995).

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<sup>7</sup> Brown argues that Umbanda would express the recognition by the middle classes of the growing force of the masses in conducting the country's socio-political life. Hence, the work of intellectuals is understood as a “turning point” of some medium segments linked to Spiritism to Umbanda, in the effort to “model and control” popular sectors, practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions. (BROWN, 1985 p. 13).

Extremely close to Vargas, Egydio Hervé, a Southern Spiritualist leader, Getúlio Vargas's party colleague in the Southern Republican Party, in the Liberal Republican Party and, later, in the Brazilian Labor Party (Hervé, 2001). Egydio Hervé would have also been invited for a ministry when Vargas was reelected president in 1950 (Hervé, 1995). His son, Doctor Ivan Hervé, would move from Spiritism to Umbanda. Due to the high social position he had, his admission in Umbanda represented an important moment in the legitimizing process of the new religion, already in the 1950s (Hervé, 1995). Outside government circles, there are many testimonies of former Umbandists, in which Vargas appears completely distant from repression, for instance that of Luci Calvoso de Souza (Souza, 1997). She was a former Navy ironing woman, whose father was one of the pioneers of Umbanda in the countryside of Rio de Janeiro. According to her testimony, because of police repression, her family moved to the capital city, where they had gone to work for Gregory Fortunato, the bodyguard, named "black angel" by Getúlio Vargas. Luci narrated the police chases to the house chaired by her father in the countryside, fully protecting the figure of Getúlio Vargas. In her father's house, there was a photograph of Getúlio Vargas, worshiped as a providential Brazilian. When asked about Vargas's repression of Umbanda and African religions, Luci replied that that had never happened after Vargas had come to power. Born in 1919, she remembered the police repression in her father's house when she was already "working" in Umbanda at the age of 17; therefore, on the eve of the New State dictatorship. Getúlio Vargas, however, appears in her speech as the political leader who guaranteed the existence of Umbanda and African religions, never allowing them to be disturbed.

In Rio Grande do Sul, the first Umbanda house founded in Porto Alegre in 1933, the Congregation of Spiritist Franciscans of Umbanda, would also face police repression during the dictatorship of the New State. Interestingly, the most violent repressive attack mentioned by our interviewees, Nubia Guedes and Gilda Centeno, was in the years 1941 and 1942. Therefore, that happened when Getúlio Vargas dictatorship already tolerated holding the first major Umbanda congress. The invasion of the house, confiscation of ritual objects, breaking of images and physical embarrassment to the visitors appear in the memory of the interviewees completely apart from the national political conjuncture, totally disjointed from the dictatorship and political action allowed by Getúlio Vargas (Centeno, Gilda; Guedes, Nubia, 1995).<sup>8</sup> In São Paulo, Lísias Nogueira Negrão also highlights the erasure of repression of Umbanda and Afro-Brazilian religions in the memory of his interviewees. One of them, Alfredo da Costa Moura, founder of the Umbanda Federation of the State of São Paulo (FUESP), identifies Pedro Aurélio Góes Monteiro as the main representative of Umbanda and Africanist interests together with Vargas. Getúlio, once again, appears as a benefactor of Umbanda and also as a medium, owing his eloquence to the "incorporation" of the Serra Negra caboclo (Negrão, 1996, p. 82).

## Conclusion

The polysemy of the relationship between the dictatorship of the New State and Umbanda is understandable when, on the one hand, we think about the articulations of the dictatorship with the Catholic Church, their interests, the privilege with which they sought to serve them, accepting an institution that decisively framed public opinion such as Catholicism. With regard to Umbanda, the New State seems to have oscillated between explicit repression and discreet tolerance of the new religion. The connivance of dictatorship with holding the First National Congress of Spiritism of Umbanda is evidence in this regard. Thus, the alliance with the Catholic hierarchy was consolidated, at the same time that Getúlio Vargas did not close the doors to a possible support to a religious force with potential for future success within the Brazilian religious field, such as Umbanda. The other aspect of the issue is the persistence of an Umbanda benefactor Vargas, coexisting with state repression of the new religion in the memory of many Umbanda supporters. We believe that we can understand these records, with their possible arguments, silences and reductions, thinking about the effort with which these men and women tried, at the time, to attribute meaning to the past, while being socially constructed. Once these Umbandists cohabited with a historical and social community of meanings (BACZKO, 1984), the persistent force of the myth is not puzzling, because it is able to turn the repressor into virtually a figure of worship.

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