

Negotiating Self

Aesthetics of Mediumship and Embodied Healing in Brazilian Umbanda

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Abstract The incorporation of spiritual entities is an integral element of *Umbanda* rituals and cosmology. In this state, mediums are approached by spiritual entities, such as the so called *guias* (“spiritual guides”) or *orixás* (Afro-Brazilian deities). Subsequently, the mediums are incorporated by them. Sensory impressions before, during and after this period cast light on underlying circumstances and personal connections to these spiritual entities. Moreover, the perception of emotional stimuli developing in the medium’s body is relevant in the context of incorporation. Together with the incorporated entity, mediums give advice, help, bless or heal their consultants; many of whom are not themselves *Umbandists*. This article examines the role of embodied healing and the aesthetics of mediumship from the perspective of an *anthropology of the senses*. In addition to the examination of lived sensory experiences, this article gives a voice to the members of the specific *Umbanda* group in the Brazilian metropolis of São Paulo, where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork. I carried out my research activities in the spiritual community *Tenda de Umbanda Caboclo de Oriente* (TUCO), focusing on ethnographic methods such as participant observation and formal as well as informal interviews, plus personal conversations with various members of the group. The example I refer to of the many different forms of contemporary urban *Umbanda* practices is particularly relevant within the context of academic discourse, adding another layer to the existing research on the wide variety of spiritual communities in Brazil’s metropolises. As an implicit add-on, this article draws a line between the *Umbandist* cosmology and healing practices and the society in which the religion emerged and constantly is reproduced. It connects contemporary theories and debates concerning the *anthropology of the senses* and *aesthetics of healing* with *Umbanda* knowledge and practice, and the personal experiences of my interlocutors.

Keywords spiritual healing – health care – senses – self – emotion – embodiment – religion – medicine

Introduction

To discuss the *aesthetics of healing* means to address a rather recent area of investigation in the subdiscipline of *anthropology of the senses*. It is concerned with the sensory perception in the context of healing and focuses on the self in embodied healing practices and personal experiences in different medical as well as religious settings. CSORDAS (1994) identified the self as the center of efficacy in most healing systems, equally in spiritual, alternative and biomedical ones. In this sense, the self implies psychopathological aspects as well as symbolic meaning, social relationships and the actual transformation of symptoms. KIRMAYER and LEE (2019: 2) argue on this behalf for a more reflexive use of the meanings of self in different cultural environments and question

the cross-cultural application of classical psychotherapy and biomedical methods. In her work on suffering in the mediumistic Afro-Brazilian religion *Candomblé*, SELIGMAN (2014: 298) locates the self at the intersection of body and mind. Doing this, she deconstructs the obsolete dualism of body/mind and pronounces the self at the center of perception. Suffering, she states, can threaten the integrity of the self. Because of that, an effective healing practice must approach both the cognitive and embodied aspects of self. Concerning the *aesthetics of healing*, the experiential and sensorial level of (self-)perception in healing practices becomes prominent. Only recently, various authors started to examine the interface of sensorial perception and emotions in different medical and

religious settings and are thus highlighting a more experiential approach to healing and the senses (cf. CSORDAS 2002; DESJARLAIS 1992; KURZ 2015, 2017; MOL 2002; SELIM 2015; STODULKA 2015). An elaborated view regarding the different dimensions of embodied healing became highly relevant in the research area of medical anthropology.

My ethnographic research on embodied healing in the mediumistic Brazilian religion¹ *Umbanda* focuses on the importance of sensorial impression, individual experience, and emotion in the state of incorporation (cf. HALLOY 2012; PIERINI 2016; SELIGMAN 2010, 2014). In this altered state of perception, the mediums host spiritual entities in their bodies. Thus, the spirits can act, communicate and participate actively in the weekly rituals of the *Umbanda* group. The development of one's skill set as a medium is often confusing and challenging, especially in the early stages. Without experience it can be difficult to identify which emotions, feelings, and impressions belong to the self, and which belong to the incorporated entity. Vinícius², one of my interlocutors and practicing mediums at TUCO, states:

"I always say that mediumship appears in your life like a feather—it's very light. It starts in your life like a very light thing and it will end up like a stone. It will fall above you with all the force. So, the first feelings of my mediumship were a lot about: Am I me or am I entity? Am I me or am I *guia*? Am I me or am I *orixá*? It is a lot about defining all the energy!"³

Becoming a medium implies to deal with a wide range of emotions that differ from the way the person felt and thought about her/his life before the incorporation of spiritual entities. For many of my interlocutors it means a huge change in their everyday lives. The development of their mediumistic skills affects their tasks and responsibilities in the *tenda*⁴ and constantly transforms them. During workshops, lessons and private rituals, the mediums start to embody knowledge (cf. SELIGMAN 2014: 22f) about the expression and the handling of emotions and feelings of their incorporated entities. Furthermore, they interact in the weekly public rituals in a new way: incorporated by the respective entity, the mediums attend consultants by giving advice, blessings and help. Moreover, they prescribe herbal and homemade

medicine, heal and provide relief from bodily and mental suffering (cf. MACEDO 2015: 35ff).

Central to this paper are the themes of personal experiences, embodied feelings, and sensorial impressions in this context. With regard to the relevant role of spiritual healing, incorporation and mediumistic consultations in *Umbanda*, this article is guided by the following questions:

How are sensory perceptions interconnected with the experiences of mediums during rituals and healing processes in *Umbanda*? How do the mediums describe their relationships to their spiritual guides and what influence does their work have on the mental and physical health of other members of the religious community? What personal strategies are developed in the handling of illness and disease? What role does the tension between biomedical and *Umbandist* healing strategies play?

My approach to answer these questions was ethnographic and therefore very personal. I did not attempt to comprehend the entirety of *Umbanda* knowledge and practice during the relatively short duration of my stay.⁵ Instead I contacted mediums of the TUCO, had personal conversations, gathered the voices of my interlocutors, and used my own individual experiences to contribute to my thesis. Reflecting on my positionality in the field, I want to add that I have not been a passive observer but, quite the opposite, actively participated in the activities at TUCO, generating a unique experience, as I made friends and endeavored to empathize with situations as openly as possible, particularly on a sensory level. My methodology relied on an experiential approach that has emerged in the *anthropology of senses* and pleads for an integration of perception into the process of research and into its analysis (cf. HOWES 2011; PINK 2015). During the course of my research my conversation partners repeatedly made clear to me the importance of my own experiences. To gain a better understanding of their knowledge system and cosmology they considered it necessary for me to "feel" it myself. To this end, during my visits at TUCO, I placed an emphasis on my own sensory experiences: the smell of the scents, the sound of the drums, chants and softly whispered words, the richness of the colorfully decorated altars and the taste of ritual food. By focusing on these details,

I was better able to feel “all the energy” of the atmosphere created.

Accordingly, I structure my discussion into several subsections. First, I will introduce into the religious context of *Umbanda*. Second, I will reproduce some relevant debates deriving from an *anthropology of the senses* to situate my research and this article in a contemporary theoretical and discursive environment. Subsequently, I refer to our discourse on the *aesthetics of healing* and connect some of my findings with related debates in this field. Finally, I will frame and analyze the importance of sensory perception in the context of mediumistic experiences of my interlocutors and in aligned *Umbandist* healing practices. In particular, I will discuss the (sometimes very individual) perception of the relationship between biomedicine and spiritual healing in *Umbanda*. Overall, this article aims to shed some light on the importance of aesthetics and emotions in therapeutic settings, and especially with regard to Brazilian *Umbanda* healing practices.

Healing Practices and Knowledge in *Umbanda*

Brazilian *Umbanda* reveals various religious, cultural and social facets. It's kaleidoscopic character is often described as “syncretic,” meaning that elements from different religions, denominations or philosophies merge into a new (religious) practice. Accordingly, various “elements” interconnect in a harmonious way, but “original traces” remain evident, pointing at origins in other belief systems (SCHARF DA SILVA 2004: 14). However, contemporary discussions in social and cultural anthropology tend to dismiss the concept of *syncretism* in religious and cultural discourses (STEWART & SHAW 1994). Especially with regard to the use of the concept as an analytical basis for political purposes, such as emphasizing the “purity” of certain religious traditions and their “contamination” by new “elements,” the associated notion of cultural and religious continuity is highly problematic. The concept seems particularly redundant when one considers that all societies and religions have been (and still are) influenced by a diverse cultural and religious environment. ESPÍRITO SANTO (2018: 82f) points out that, in this sense, all religions have been “creolized” to a certain extent and are, therefore, constantly evolving. Nevertheless,

the term is often used by *Umbandistas* themselves to denote the diversity and multicultural origins of their religion. For example, Mãe Zuleide, the “priestess” and director of TUCO, explains how she understands the role of syncretism:

“*Umbanda* is in everything—in every religion. If you take a bible, you will see that the name of God and everything that's in the bible, is religion. Thus, the religion is—for every place it has it's syncretism. [...] The only difference between one religion and another is the human being.”⁶

She stresses the multi-religious foundation of *Umbanda* and the resulting need for religious tolerance. Accordingly, one of the main components of *Umbanda* are Afro-Brazilian religions that emerged in Brazil during the period of colonialism and enslavement, a prominent example being the religion of *Candomblé*. PRANDI (2004: 36) points out that the slow process of convergence of various social, cultural and ethnic elements makes it difficult to trace the sources of various Afro-Brazilian characteristics back to a specific point of origin, but a certain fusion of African elements is significant in *Umbanda*. Further, practices are strongly influenced by various forms of European Spiritism, especially *Kardecismo*. This movement bases on theories and reflections of French Spiritist Allan Kardec, who is barely known in France nowadays. However, his ideas and the resulting Spiritist doctrine are very prominent in Brazil, and especially in the urban areas of Southern Brazil (cf. SCHARF DA SILVA 2004: 50). *Umbanda* further consists of other elements and origins, including such deriving from Catholicism or Indigenous religions. This interplay of various religious and spiritual components provides *Umbanda* with a special, multi-faceted appearance (ENGLER 2012: 13f) without any alleged universal doctrine. Accordingly, the existing variety of beliefs and practices in the different *tendas* is too diverse and difficult to summarize, and, therefore, I will only outline some of the most important aspects of cosmology and ritual practice that appear most prominent to me, even if they are not shared by all *tendas* in similar ways.

A central aspect of *Umbanda* are weekly public and private rituals.⁷ Most of these are marked by the mediumistic incorporation of spiritual entities. Mediums sing and dance to the drums until

they enter a state of trance. While they are in this state of mind, they incorporate spiritual beings, who provide one-to-one consultations for clients who are not necessarily members of the *tenda*, but decided to accept the spiritual and social support and service provided by the group (*ibid.* 16). *Umbanda* consultations are usually open to the public and free of charge. This derives from the concept of charity (*caridade*) and their aim to care for others. These values are prominent in most of the *tendas* and therefore highly esteemed. Thus, people of different religious, cultural and social backgrounds attend the services of *Umbanda* as well as those from other spiritual providers (ESPÍRITO SANTO 2018: 119ff).

Central to this practice is the belief in spiritual guides (*guias*). These entities are believed to be spirits of different categories, for example *caboclos* or *caboclas* who represent young, dynamic and vivacious indigenous spirits. Entities of this category are known to have good intentions, to help in difficult situations and to have healing powers. Equally known for their healing capacities are *pretos velhos* and *pretas velhas*. They are referred to as spirits of deceased slaves, who were brought to Brazil in colonial times. Apart from their healing qualities, they seem to have little in common with the young and lively *caboclos* and *caboclas*: they usually behave calmly, move slowly and walk shakily with a pronounced stoop. Even their voices sound shaky and low. In opposition to the spirits of Indigenous warriors, they represent a more humble and “Christianized” other, often reciting the Lord’s Prayer, Hail Mary or similar Christian prayers (cf. ENGLER 2017: 205f). Other notable categories of *guias* include the alleged morally ambivalent *pombagiras* (women “of the street”) and their male counterparts, *exús*. They are considered as “gatekeepers,” and, therefore, paving the path of working with the spiritual energy.

There are other categories of spirits such as gypsies, sailors, children, *baianos* (spirits from the Northeastern state of Bahia, representing a mainly Afro-Brazilian population), mermaids and cowboys (*ibid.*; cf. MACEDO 2015: 34f). This variety of categories of *guias* also represents aesthetic differences regarding their incorporation in the spiritual sphere of *Umbanda*. Where one spirit moves slowly and shakily another is vivacious and playful, where one is obscene, another is conserva-

tive—there is a whole variety of aesthetics in the vast field of a fluid and lively cosmology. Moreover, this diverse set of spirits has enabled *Umbanda* to incorporate sociocultural and historic conditions in the development of its cosmology. This seems to be characteristic of other spirit mediumship movements all over the world, as in Haiti’s *Voudou*, Cuban spirit mediumship or in Niger’s possession spirit rites (cf. ESPÍRITO SANTO 2018: 3).

As well as working with the *guias*, *orixás* play a major role in the cosmology of *Umbanda*. The deities of the *Yoruba* pantheon “came” to Brazil during colonial times and the slave trade. Today, they are widely known throughout the Afro-Brazilian religions, most prominently in *Candomblé*. In *Umbanda*, they are not necessarily seen as deities, but certainly as forceful guardians and “higher” spiritual guides. Working with these different categories of spiritual beings thus connects various religious and cultural knowledges and shapes the multi-layered structure of *Umbanda* practice (cf. PRESSEL 1974: 135).

During the rituals, *guias* and *orixás* are incorporated by several mediums who are then consulted by *Umbandists* and other clients alike. They primarily focus on the recovery from illness or physical suffering, resolving social or emotional problems, or addressing financial and worldly challenges (ENGLER 2017: 204). From this perspective, *Umbanda* can be seen as an alternative or complementary provider of psychological and physical healthcare, but in this respect it is not unique. The already mentioned Spiritist movement of *Kardecismo* is known for its activities in the Brazilian health sector and even has proper psychiatric clinics that offer both, biomedical, psychological, and spiritual treatment (cf. KURZ 2017). However, while *Umbanda* may not be as institutionalized as these Kardecist psychiatries, its practices play an important role in the personal physical and psychological healthcare of many people in Brazil’s metropolitan areas. Many of my interlocutors, for instance, referred to *Umbanda* as a complementary aspect in the handling of their personal health. Antônio, another medium and one of my interlocutors at TUCO, points out that for him everything needs to be in “balance” between *biomedicine* and *religious healing*.

In order to understand the intersection of health-related issues and *Umbanda*, I suggest to take a closer look at the role of sensory perception and the personal interaction with healthcare. Therefore, the following subsections demonstrate the relevance of the senses in the context of spiritual healing. First, I will introduce the discursive background of the *anthropology of the senses*, which underlines the necessity of sensory perception and experiences in debates of social and cultural anthropology and offers a short introduction into contemporary discussions in this field of study. Further, I demonstrate some of my findings in the context of the *aesthetics of healing* and the sensory perception of my interlocutors during rituals and in the state of incorporation.

Anthropology of the Senses

An increased engagement with the senses emerged in social and cultural anthropology in the late 1980s and was influenced by the preceding debates and theories about *embodiment*, a concept forwarded by CSORDAS (1994: 269). It relies on the assumption that bodily experiences are the existential foundation of culture and self. In this context, emotions, feelings and the senses function as a means of understanding bodily experiences and thus have also been addressed by social scientists. Among others, FELD (1990), HOWES (1991), and STOLLER (1989, 1997) have been pioneers in the anthropological study of the senses and sensory experience. HOWES (1991), for example, called for a rethinking of anthropology that would be effective by integrating the senses into the collected data. Of course, this approach did not lack criticism and, therefore, INGOLD (2008) initiated and influenced a widespread debate on principles of research in this area. Within this scope, the singularity of sensory perception in a certain culture should be discussed in terms of more reflexive examinations of diverse sets of sensory perception and their manipulation in different cultural environments, as well as the problem to compare cultural differences of these sets. INGOLD (*ibid.* 285) thus suggests a rethinking of anthropological research, away from a “collective sensory consciousness of society” and towards a “creative interweaving of experience in discourse and to the ways in which the resulting discursive construc-

tions in turn affect people’s perceptions of the world around them” (*ibid.*). Within this critique, INGOLD focuses on the centrality of human perception and its individuality. He points out the importance of the senses as lived experiences and therefore at the moment of perception itself. Contrary to former works, INGOLD highlights the multisensoriality of perception. Vision should not be seen as a dominant and objectifying sense, rather it could be seen as inter-relational with the other senses (*ibid.* 287).

Building on the notion of experiencing through all the senses, the need for a reflexive engagement in ethnographic research is significant. Emerging from anthropological considerations of a *reflexive turn* in the discipline and the aligned debate about a *writing culture* (CLIFFORD & MARCUS 1970), the importance of the researcher’s body and his/her own experiences becomes clear. This especially has been pushed by STOLLER (1997) in which he explains the idea of embodying knowledge by the senses in the example of his fieldwork about sorcery in West Africa:

“The full presence of the ethnographer’s body in the field also demands a fuller sensual awareness of the smells, tastes, sounds and textures of life amongst others. It demands [...] that ethnographers open themselves to others and absorb their worlds. Such is the meaning of embodiment.” (*ibid.* 23)

Accordingly, the study of “the senses” in anthropology has strongly been influenced by theoretical explorations of processes of *embodiment*. In conducting ethnography, the researcher, too, may recognize that his or her bodily experience produces meaning. Moreover, the researcher is “consumed by the sensual world” in which his or her body perceives pain, feelings and emotions. For instance, STOLLER refers to pain in his body during his fieldwork as teaching him profound lessons in *Songhay* sorcery (*ibid.*). He termed this a *sensuous scholarship*, acknowledging the embodied implication of the scholar and thus his or her own bodily experiences. Following this, he mandated a critical awareness of the senses, an attentiveness to one’s own voice and a recognition of the political relevance and consequences of one’s own academic works, even in the field itself (*ibid.* 34). PINK (2015) argues that *anthropology of the senses* urges

debates concerning the relation of sensorial experiences and culture. She reflects on the status of the often prominent sense of vision and its relationship to other modes of sensing and demands a certain form of reflexivity concerning one's own investigation as an experiencing researcher in the field. In this context, she highlights that while anthropologists tend to structure and establish certain sets of references and categories to understand collective knowledge about the senses and experiences, one should keep in mind that these models of understanding are likewise constantly produced and influenced by their cultural and social environment (*ibid.* 13). In this context, NICHTER (2008) points out that sensory experience is not only grounded in the individual, but is embedded in social and cultural settings, and, thus always influenced by certain situations and shared meanings, and values: "Sensorial anthropology explores how sensations are experienced phenomenologically, interpreted culturally, and responded to socially" (*ibid.* 166). This implies, and I am emphasizing it here, to understand any social practice and environment as processual and constantly changing, and, thus, to focus on individual and experiential facets producing different sets of lived reality (ESPÍRITO SANTO 2018).

Aesthetics of Healing

As a continuation of debates regarding the *anthropology of the senses*, this section refers to the field of *aesthetics of healing*. "Aesthetics" in context of religion can be thought of in two different ways. First, and arguably most prominently, they can be considered a form of expression, like in arts, theater, music, or dance. Secondly, aesthetics can refer to the Greek etymology of *aisthesis*—the study of perception and the senses. Central to this analysis is the experience of the individual and his or her physical and mental impressions. In this process, symbols are produced and infused with religious or spiritual meaning. The individual is at the center of this approach and constantly positions her or himself in a circle of aesthetic perception and aesthetic expression (MÜNSTER 2001: 11). KURZ (2017) summarizes these aspects in a way that

"Aesthetics of healing are not reduced to the (symbolic) communication and incorporation of exter-

nal ideas and values, but on the contrary are directed towards the inner perception of self." (*ibid.* 204).

With the example of Brazilian Kardecist Spiritism, he emphasizes the centrality of individuals and their sensorial perceptions in a particular environment. Accordingly, *aesthetics of healing* do not just relate to the external appearance and performance of healing practices, but also to inner feelings and ways of (self-)perception. KURZ argues that in Spiritist healing practices, working with the senses is integrated especially in terms of processes of self-awareness and an acknowledgment of sensorial experiences. In this regard, he addresses the concept of *interoception* as fruitful for the sector of performance studies and reflects on the sensory perception of stimuli generated in the body. More specifically, according to KURZ, the special atmosphere in healing rituals and the reduction or changing of external stimuli results in an increased awareness of individual feelings and sensations (*ibid.* 203f). From this perspective, therapy would address the personal confrontation with individual problems and challenges by manipulating perception which is often skewed by one's own bias. Through healing practices and the incorporation of spiritual entities, the individual would be given the opportunity to deal with his or her problems in a safe and extraordinary environment. Taking this as a theoretical background of my discussion, I will examine in the following section practices at TUCO, especially considering the personal encounters and experiences of my interlocutors.

Experiencing Mediumship in Umbanda

"We were at a celebration on the beach. We opened a *gira*⁸ at the beach and I started feeling really bad, really bad. I felt some pain in my body and I buried an *orixá* in me. [...] The people were incorporated by Iemanjá. One of these Iemanjás came to embrace me and when she embraced me, she pushed my personal Iemanjá. After that, my personal Iemanjá began to dance. I started to lose control of the movements of my body. I was really conscious, but couldn't manage to open my eyes. She began to dance and that's it."⁹

This statement of my informant Beatriz describes her first experiences with mediumship. It is a first hand account of her incorporating with her “personal vibration” of Iemanjá (*orixá* of the ocean). A young woman in her early twenties, Beatriz studies drama and theatre studies, and performs as an actress in Brazilian television. Even though her grandfather founded TUCO, and, thus, *Umbanda* has always been present in her life, she only recently started to develop her mediumistic skills.

At first, Beatriz was surprised by “all the energy,” and frightened at the prospect of losing control of her body. She explained how difficult it was to let go and “trust the entities,” which she perceives as “energetic vibrations.” After some time, these feelings of uncertainty and fear changed toward trust and affection for her *guias* and *orixás*. The “awakening” of these mediumistic skills seems to mark a special moment in the life of any medium. Many describe it as a profound inner process that tends to transform attitudes and notions about the outer world and cosmology, but also about the self: “Am I me or am I entity? Am I me or am I *guia*? Am I me or am I *orixá*?”—the preoccupation with Vinícius’ questions, introduced earlier, becomes apparent in this very context.

How does one deal with one’s sensory impressions and the sudden appearance of the perception of another entity in one’s body? Which sensations “are one’s own” or “are of the incorporated entity”? What is the difference between “my” perception and the entities’ engagement? Accordingly, dealing with multiple sensory impressions is a challenging task, and many of my informants referred to moments at the beginning of their “career as a medium” where they felt lost, overwhelmed, or insecure:

“It is a huge task, sometimes it’s frightening! Mediumism is a big deal in your everyday life and often a really confusing exercise. If it wouldn’t be for love, you couldn’t sustain it! But it is worth it – for love it is worth it.”¹⁰

It appears that emotions and feelings are a central means of contact with the world of spirits. By sensory perception, mediums enter an energetic exchange with “their” entities and thus into a state of communication “on another level.” Feelings of trust and unconditioned love are, according to

Beatriz and other interlocutors, fundamental for their devotion and the integration of the entities into their everyday lives. To fulfill their task to perform as a medium, they engage in a continuous process of (spiritual) learning and development. Throughout courses of “mediumistic development” (*desenvolvimento mediúnico*), or trainings to become a *mãe- or pai-de-santo*¹¹ (*sacerdócio*), mediums learn how to cope with their skills and how to handle their experiences and sensory impressions in the context of incorporation. They learn how to accept and how to use their “special tasks,” and the responsibility of a consulting medium that comes along, as Antônio stresses:

“We are in contact with a lot of entities! There are different cultures, which passed through different things—different experiences we went through in other appearances, you know? [...] and we learn a lot with this. This is really gratifying! It depends on our entities, on our communication with the consultants. [...] You learn to be more human, more humble. You learn to respect the other! [...] We learn that there is no right or wrong religion. There are various religions, so there are various ways!”¹²

He emphasizes the personal progress a medium experiences in his or her development. Accordingly, there is a spiritual part to be considered, including interaction with spiritual entities and with a personal “history” of (re-)incarnations. Antônio states that mediums share past life experiences with their spiritual counterparts and, therefore, develop intimate relationships with them. However, they do not only interact with those but also with arbitrary spirits who seek help and are addressed in the weekly consultations for the sake of providing spiritual support for humans and spirits apart from any religious denomination or belonging:

“It’s because I have the philosophy that God is in everybody. So, my religion isn’t better or more perfect. It’s perfect for me and for the people following me. It’s the same with all the religions. I believe that God guides everybody to a certain place where everybody can be together, no matter who they are or which religion they follow.”¹³

This philosophy is a cornerstone to the medium apprenticeship at TUCO. For Mãe Zuleide it is

necessary that the mediums of her *tenda* respect deviant persuasions and, accordingly, provide support to everybody who is seeking it. Further, by reflecting on their sensory perceptions, mediums learn to interact with other human beings as well as with their spiritual entities on the sensory level. Therefore, becoming a medium implies various individual motivations, expectations and different forms of personal engagement. For Antônio, it has been a “natural” process as he has been socialized within *Umbanda*. He explained that he had always liked the mediumistic work and that he was already expecting to become a medium of incorporation himself one day. So he was not surprised by the first approach of his *guia* in one of the weekly rituals (*gira*).

“I was at the *gira*, doing a *trabalho* [work for the entities] and all of a sudden, I felt a presence close by my side... that I never, never felt before. So, this entity came very close and then there was a moment, when I didn’t know anymore [...] what was I and what was the entity. [...] I was still conscious, but lost the control over my body. So, my body started doing things that I didn’t understand. It’s strange at the beginning, really strange.”¹⁴

Many of my interlocutors share this initial confusion described by Antônio but state that afterward, the relationships with their *guias* were experienced as a remarkable bond of love and trust. This personal and direct bond to the spiritual world and the pantheon of *orixás* allows the mediums of *Umbanda* to experience the rituals in a certain “emotional regime” (cf. REDDY 2001). The social and emotional environment of the ritual context seems to offer to them a possibility to overcome everyday struggles and challenges, to integrate their selves into this “alternative” environment and to engage with this different agenda. The community of the *Umbanda tenda* thus acts as a *safe-space* (both for members and consultants) by providing confidential support regarding any questions, doubts and daily problems. Moreover, during the rituals, the mediums are able to embody personality and practice schemes deviant from their common *habitus*.

TURNER (1967, 1968, 1969) states that rituals demonstrate important aspects of human experiences and values. His approach might be a generalizing one but for sure he touches an aspect of

religious experience as relevant for the individual and its social relationships. In particular, his concept of *liminality* and the implied transformation of self throughout central phases of rituals, and the coherent idea of a developing *communitas* (the agents’ sense of community during a ritual) is of importance in the context of *Umbandist* mediumship. Besides divergent personal aims and ideas, a common motivation to become a medium was the urge of charity and compassion for others as part of one’s spiritual responsibility. Personal approaches, however, in one way or another applied to this idea and/or derived from opposing experiences: some of my interlocutors referred to their family connection with *Umbanda* and growing up within the faith. Others found their way to *Umbanda* after periods of personal physical or mental suffering, fundamental family problems or social marginalization, due to ethnic, gendered, or sexual oppression. Others described accessing *Umbanda* as a personal process of cosmological and spiritual “sense-making.” My overall observation is the role *Umbanda* plays in the handling of emotional perceptions in their everyday lives, and that a mindful adaption of sensory and cognitive perception is sought in the context of healing to develop some kind of “emotional balance.” Another aspect is that financial issues, romantic advice, family disputes and other personal problems are integrated into the mediums’ consultations concerning medical and psychological health issues.

Healing in *Umbanda*

Mediumship in *Umbanda* revolves around questions of health and healing. In the consultations, mediums prescribe teas, herbal baths or a special diet. They also provide guidance concerning the implementation of prayers, chants, or sacrifices as “ritualized” practices addressing an *orixá* or *guia*. Such can be a “shared” cup of coffee in the morning or the lighting of a specific colored candle. Mediums also provide a *passe* to their consultants, a kind of blessing and “energetic retracking” provided by the entities through the medium (SCHARF DA SILVA 2004: 167ff). For major health problems, *cirurgia espiritual* (spiritual surgery) may be another option. In these spiritual surgeries, consultants lay down to be energetically treated by their *guia* in the privacy of their home. The

details of this “appointment” are organized in advance by the medium, so that the spiritual entities can make the home calls to perform spiritual surgeries on the patients. During these events, mediums are not physically present as the respective *guias* perform the treatment in a process which can last hours while patients are sleeping, unconscious and/or in a state of trance (cf. ESPÍRITO SANTO 2018; SCHARF DA SILVA 2004; SCHMIDT 2015; HALE 2009; MONTERO 1985). Throughout my fieldwork, these treatments and apparent resulting “medical miracles” have been a permanent topic of discussion. Lucas, who was undergoing spiritual surgery for his chronic back pain shared his narrative with me:

“Well, one thing—an energy on the edge of common, right? I already feel knocked out, just from talking about it... and this derives from preoccupation. *Nossa* [my goodness], what was that what I saw? I don’t know! What did I feel?’ And then you start feeling good things, marvelous things—the smell of hospital, like I really would have been in a surgery. When you close the eyes, you feel that there is a bunch of people in the room. It was as if my back began to catch fire, a lot of fire [...] like with a tattoo, you know? It doesn’t hurt, but it burns! Now, I feel way better and I’m without pain.”¹⁵

Lucas’ narrative illustrates yet another level of the importance of sensory perception in the realm of mediumistic healing: in addition to the healers’ engagement, it is also about the patients’ experiences. He describes his perception of the presence of the spirits and the associated bodily sensations during surgery, in which he manifested a “realistic” treatment experience, right down to the scent of a hospital environment and the experience of being healed. Lucas discusses his orthopedic problems and the sensation of being treated, that he experienced during the spiritual surgery. But this also illustrates how the “healing cooperation” (cf. KURZ 2018) of *spiritual* and *biomedical* approaches can be thought of. Before undergoing this spiritual treatment, Lucas struggled with simple movements and experienced considerable pain when attempting everyday tasks. As a result, he was recommended surgery by his doctor. After his spiritual surgery, the pain disappeared. But Lucas still plans to stick to his next

appointment with the medical doctor in order to verify the results and to receive a second opinion (cf. PIERINI 2016: 29; SCHARF DA SILVA 2004: 188ff; MONTERO 1985: 119ff). Lucas confirmed that he was not surprised by the success of the *Umbandist* healing therapy as he had already experienced similar success before: when he first “lay down” to a *preto velho*, he had suffered from liver cancer. The day after the spiritual surgery he went to the hospital for an examination and the cancer was not evident anymore. The doctor could not believe that the results had changed so dramatically in such a short time.

During my stay at the *tenda* I have witnessed many related narratives, and my interlocutors have always been very determined that while *Umbanda* can help and heal, the medical and therefore physical elements are equally important and require attention and care. According to Mãe Zuleide, *guias* would accordingly inform patients, that “[H]ere we can do something, here you need to see a doctor,”¹⁶ stating that they never would advise a consultant to drop biomedical healthcare. “There are cases you HAVE to send to the doctor. There is no way! It’s not just faith that will heal—it has to be seen as a whole.”¹⁷ Many of the people consulting *Umbanda* have already been passed from general practitioners to specialists, and, therefore from one treatment approach to another, without any experience of sustained cure. However, the spiritual treatment provided by the *guias* seems to be even capable of renewing a patient’s motivation to pursue medical treatment simultaneously, at least according to Mãe Zuleide. PIERINI (2016) confirms this line of thought when referring to her research on the *Vale do Amanhecer*, another mediumship-oriented Brazilian spiritual-religious practice. Mediums there likewise perceive healing as complementary to biomedical interventions. They treat spiritual causes of suffering, but refrain from dealing with physical aspects of disease. Therefore, mediums would advise their consultants to, alongside spiritual treatments and healing supplies, also seek biomedical healthcare, at least in certain situations (*ibid.* 29). This intersection of biomedical intervention and *Umbanda* healing practice is apparent in the above-mentioned case studies, and Antônio confirms this certain “balance”:

“I try to unite the two spheres, you know? I think that not everything is spiritual, but I also think that not everything is physical. I guess one has to find a balance between both things.”¹⁸

The mediums of TUCO emphasized this understanding of health “as a whole”—as consisting of spiritual, emotional and physical elements. All these elements need to be treated in specific ways, which is why biomedical interventions are perceived as similarly important in *Umbandist* healthcare, and at least the mediums I met are very aware of a certain responsibility they oblige to:

“You’re dealing with lives in there! A lot of people stop going to the doctor to talk instead with a *guia*. [...] They trust more in talking with a *Caboclo*, who gives you a tea and you’re going to be better. So, it’s a huge responsibility! If you take a person who is not prepared emotionally, mediumistically, spiritually to talk with others in this context [as a medium]—what damage can you do to someone’s life?”¹⁹

Mari explains that as a medium of *Umbanda*, she tries to make a difference in the world, radiate some light and help wherever you can. However, she also states that one must nevertheless be aware of the limits, especially of one’s own capabilities. She points out that the development and examination of one’s sensory perception, emotional world and mediumistic skills is absolutely essential when confronted with the mental and physical health of others.²⁰

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to illustrate how my research data on *Umbanda* in Brazil intersects with different perspectives summarized as *aesthetics of healing* in this volume. I demonstrated in which ways sensory perception and experience is of importance within the realm of incorporation of spiritual agencies and their interaction with mediums and their consultants. Altered states of consciousness appear to intensify ways of multi-sensorial perception of the environment, as well as of self. In this context, I introduced the concept of *interoception*, addressing the perception of inner

sensory stimuli and arguing for relating sensory impressions to, for instance, dynamics of self-awareness (cf. KURZ 2017). In this regard, I argue, relationships between mediums and their spiritual entities reflect unique, individual bonds permeated by complex feelings and emotional states. As for the healing processes in *Umbanda*, I have further illustrated how the senses impact healing processes by providing “real” experiences of being treated.

I suggest further anthropological and interdisciplinary research on mediumistic experiences in *Umbanda* and comparable healing practices to further explore the interplay of religion and medicine as two sides of the same coin, connected by the question of their sensory engagement with human existence and well-being. As a rather young and dynamic urban phenomenon, *Umbanda* sheds light on the personal handling of illness and well-being in the metropolises of Brazil. The academic examination of the multi-religious sphere is thus highly relevant, especially when further wanting to investigate *aesthetics of healing*. For *Umbanda* as an additional provider of mental and physical healthcare, there is potential for further research on spiritual healing, mediumistic experiences and related social tasks.

This example emphasizes the importance of the senses in the context of spiritual healing and practices of incorporation. However, it also addresses the urge for innovative and experiential approaches to explore personal level of experience in the scope of mediumship practice.

Clearly, the exploration and study of sensory aspects in relation to (individual) approaches of well-being frame our understanding of health and illness in divergent societies and are, therefore, highly relevant to medical anthropology and the related research area of the *aesthetics of healing*, that should be further studied on a larger scale.

Notes

1 *Umbandists* often refer to *Umbanda* as their “religion,” like most of my interlocutors did. This is why I use this exact term to describe *Umbanda* here and elsewhere. Even if there is a widespread debate about the definition and the diffuseness of the term “religion,” especially in the religious studies (cf. STRAUSBERG 2012; POLLACK 1995; ANTES 1979), I use it in reference to the emic description and understanding of my contacts in the field.

2 All of my informants are referred to under pseudonyms here and elsewhere. The only exception is the Mãe Zuleide. She is the leader and priestess of TUCO and is thus inseparably linked to her group.

3 Interview Vinícius, Diadema, São Paulo, 2018-10-12. Original quote: “Eu falo que a mediunidade aparece na sua vida como uma pena, é muito leve. Começa na sua vida como uma coisa muito leve e passa a ser uma pedra. Ela cai sobre você, depois, com toda força. Então, os primeiros sentidos de minha mediunidade é muito aquela coisa. Sou eu – sou a entidade? Sou eu – sou *guia*? Sou eu – sou *orixá*? É muito sobre definir toda a energia!”

4 Literally “tent”, it is the place of worship where *Umbandistas* unite for the weekly rituals and festive occasions. It also describes the community and thus can be found in the proper name of a spiritual community (e.g. Tenda de Umbanda Caboclo do Oriente).

5 I stayed in São Paulo from August to December 2018. During this time I did a student exchange connected to my masters program in *Social and Cultural Anthropology* at Freie Universität Berlin.

6 Interview Mãe Zuleide, Diadema, SP, 2018-11-26. Original quote: “A *Umbanda*, ela está em tudo – em todas as religiões. Se você for pegar uma bíblia, você vai ver que o nome de Deus e tudo que está lá dentro da bíblia é religião. Então, sim, a religião ela é – pra cada local ela tem um sincretismo. [...] A única diferença entre uma religião e outra, é o humano.”

7 In the humanities, especially in anthropology and religious sciences, the term “ritual” is questioned after a long period of debates about the definition and handling of the term (cf. DOUGLAS 1970; TURNER 1969; DURKHEIM 1912). In the context of this article, I refer to “rituals” as an emic description of my interlocutors. They use the term to describe their public and private meetings, taking place at their *tenda*. Further they have personal “rituals” that they accomplish at home, e.g. on a special day of the week at their private altar.

8 *Giras* are incorporation rituals of Umbanda, they are literally based on the Portuguese verb *girar*—“to turn.”

9 Interview Beatriz, São Bernardo do Campo, SP, 2018-11-18. Original quote: “A gente estava numa festa da praia. A gente abriu uma gira na praia e eu comecei a passar muito mal – muito mal. Senti umas dores no corpo e estava enterrando um *orixá* em mim. [...] As pessoas estavam incorporadas por Iemanjá. Uma das Iemanjás veio me abraçar. E aí, quando ela me abraçou, ela puxou a minha Iemanjá pessoal e começou a dançar. Eu comecei a perder o controle dos movimentos do meu corpo. Eu estava muito consciente, mas não conseguia abrir os olhos. Ela começou a dançar e foi isso!”

10 Interview Mari, Vila Mariana, SP, 2018-11-06. Original quote: “É uma tarefa muito grande, então, as vezes dá muito medo assim. A mediunidade é bem complexa na sua vida cotidiana e muitas vezes é um exercício bem confuso, complicado. Se não for por amor, você não consegue sustentar isso! Mas vale a pena – por amor, vale a pena.”

11 *Mãe-de-santo* and *pai-de-santo* (*ialorixá/babalorixá*) can be translated as “mother/father of the Saint.” They are the female and male leaders and priests in commu-

nity’s of *Umbanda* and other AfroBrazilian religions such as *Candomblé*.

12 Interview Antônio, Vila Mariana, SP, 2018-11-23. Original quote: “A gente tem contato com várias entidades! Tem culturas diferentes que passaram por coisas diferentes – o que a gente passou quando estivemos em outras vivências, sabe? (T.B.: Sei!) E a gente aprende muito com isso. Isso é muito gratificante. Depende das nossas entidades, da nossa comunicação com o consulente [...]. Você aprende a ser mais humano, mais humilde. Você aprende a respeitar o outro. [...] A gente aprende que não existe uma religião certa, uma religião errada. Existem várias religiões e existem vários caminhos.”

13 Interview Mãe Zuleide, Diadema, SP, 2018-11-26. Original quote: “É porque eu tenho a filosofia que Deus está em todo mundo. Então, a minha religião não é melhor ou mais perfeita. Ela é perfeita para mim e para as pessoas que me seguem, assim como em todas as outras religiões. Então, eu acredito que Deus conduz cada um para um determinado lugar aonde ele estará preparado para estar com todas as pessoas, não importa quem eles são ou que religião eles seguem.”

14 Interview Antônio, Vila Mariana, SP, 2018-11-23, note by T.B. Original quote: “Eu estava na gira fazendo um trabalho e aí comecei a sentir uma presença perto de mim que eu nunca tive, nunca tinha sentido, e aí, aquela entidade foi se aproximando. E aí teve um momento onde eu não sabia mais aonde – o que era eu e o que era a entidade. [...] estava ainda consciente, mas perdi o controle do meu corpo. Então o meu corpo começou a fazer coisas que eu não entendia o que estava acontecendo. É estranho, no começo, é bem estranho.”

15 Interview Mãe Zuleide, sequence with Lucas, Diadema, SP, 2018-11-26. Original quote: “Bom, uma coisa – uma energia fora do comum, né? Já sinto k.o. só de falar já [...] e isso vem da preocupação, né? ‘Nossa, foi aquilo que eu vi, não sei aquilo – o que é que eu senti?’ E se começa a sentir coisas boas, maravilhosas – cheio de hospital, como se eu estivesse numa cirurgia mesmo. Você fecha os olhos e sente que tem um monte de gente no quarto. Era como se minhas costas comessem a pegar fogo, muito fogo [...] como uma tatuagem, sabe? Uma tatuagem queima né? Não dói, queima e foi isso que eu senti. Aí eu estou bem melhor agora, estou sem dor! Mas ainda estou com este sentido nas costas.”

16 Interview with Mãe Zuleide, Diadema, SP, 2018-11-26. Original quote: “Aqui a gente pode, mas aqui você precisa ir ao médico!”

17 Ibid. Original quote: “Porque tem casos que você tem que mandar pro médico. Não tem como! Não é só fé que vai curar. É todo um conjunto.”

18 Interview Antônio, Vila Mariana, SP, 2018-11-23. Original quote: “Eu tento juntar as duas coisas sabe? Eu acho que nem tudo é espiritual, mas também acho que nem tudo é físico. Acho que tem que encontrar um equilíbrio entre as duas coisas.”

19 Interview with Mari, Vila Mariana, SP, 2018-11-06, note by T. B. Original quote: “Você lida com vidas lá dentro! Muita gente deixa de ir ao médico para falar com o guia, entendeu? Muita gente deixa de ir [ao médico] porque confia mais para falar com o Caboclo que vai te dar um chá pra você melhorar. Então, é uma responsab-

ilidade muito grande! Se você pega uma pessoa que não está preparada emocionalmente, mediunicamente, espiritualmente para falar com outros dentro deste contexto – o que que você pode agregar na vida de alguém?”
 20 Interview with Mari as well as in several personal conversations.

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This article offered an insight into my research about healing and the senses in the Brazilian religion *Umbanda*. I would like to point out that all the findings of this article are taken from my master thesis, in which I analyzed the elaborated topics in more detail and with a special focus on the mediumistic experiences of my interlocutors and their senses in the context of psychological health and therapies.

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