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Women's Religious Role in Brazil: A History of Limitations

Carole A. Myscofski

The study of religion is now expanding to include, consciously and in scholarly depth, the roles of women in many religious traditions. Investigation of women's religious history may find, as is the case in Brazil, that women's absence from strong religious roles is sometimes more noteworthy than their presence.

I undertook the research for the present study when I repeatedly failed to find evidence of women's influence in Roman Catholic institutions in Brazil. While I thought I would "rediscover" women's roles, I found there were no great roles to rediscover: women were consistently suppressed and excluded from participation in public activity in the Brazilian Church. The history of women in Brazilian religions has been a history of limitations, but with an exception: women, particularly those of indisputable African lineage, have dominated the syncretistic Afro-Brazilian religious groups.

This study considers the limited roles for women in the three major streams of Brazilian religion, streams that have generally cut across the racial mix of Portuguese immigrants, Africans and a few remaining Brazilindians. These three are: (1) the official Roman Catholicism constituted under royal patronage, (2) popularly-interpreted or "folk" Catholicism, and (3) the Afro Brazilian religion now called *Umbanda*.¹ Different roles for women were acceptable in the different streams. The first tradition, orthodox Roman Catholicism, offered two roles: that of the religious recluse or nun in Brazilian conventual life and that of the Catholic wife and mother. In the second religious line, popular Catholicism, women had the opportunity to be *sacristães*, local prayer leaders, or *beatas*, "holy women." In the third religious tradition, the *Umbanda* groups, women have predominated as leaders and followers—they were and are the priestesses, initiates and participants. Associated with each of these three kinds of roles is one of the three groups of women that have emerged in the social and racial development in Brazil: white, upper-class women might participate in convent life or the role of pious mother; lower-class and mixed-parentage women figured strongly in the minor roles of popular Catholicism; and the descendants of slaves brought from Africa were members of the Afro-Brazilian cults first nearly documented in the nineteenth century.²

In this study, I will look at these roles in the context of their religious milieux, and in conjunction with relevant historical and social data. The first section will treat the roles for women in officially-sanctioned Catholicism and in popularly-interpreted Catholicism. These arose in the same era—the seventeenth century—under similar conditions and both precede the appearance of the Afro-Brazilian cults. The second section will consider women's religious roles in the *Umbanda* groups whose formal structure was constituted among the African-descended women about a century later.

Roles for Women in the Catholic Church

The religious roles available to women in the two streams of Brazilian Roman Catholicism are comprehensible only in the context of the religious and social settings in which they first emerged. The structures of Portuguese Catholicism and of Portuguese society, as they were adapted to the colonial situation, are thus important factors in this study.

Roman Catholicism was imposed on Brazil under the auspices of the Portuguese crown as it exercised its rather rigid and conservative interpretation of the right of royal patronage (*padroado*). Dating from the Crusades, the right of royal patronage granted the Portuguese crown ecclesiastical jurisdiction over new lands-including Brazil-and charged it with the promulgation of faith. Political rhetoric of the sixteenth century linked the Brazilian colonization effort with the mission of Roman Catholic evangelization.³ The Portuguese throne had *de jure* and *de facto* control over the Roman Church in its domain, subordinating the hierarchy, appointing all missionary personnel and approving all catechetical materials. The Portuguese monarch thereby assured the transmission of a conservative, loyal and rather ritualistic version of Roman Catholicism to its colony. Parallel to this, however, was the Catholicism *practiced* by the immigrants and even by the missionaries themselves. This latter comprised the cult of the saints, feast days, religious confraternities, processions and private devotions: popular Catholicism shaped by Portuguese customs and folklore. While approved and nominally part of regular Catholic practice, popular or folk Catholicism formed a secondary tradition and was transmitted separately or alongside the more orthodox Catholic beliefs supported by the state and ecclesiastical authorities.

The Portuguese also exported to their Brazilian colony established social and racial attitudes. Two elements in these attitudes especially affected women in Brazil. The first element was the repression and idealization of white, European-descended women. While the attitude seems contradictory, repression and idealization were in fact two sides of the same coin: Portuguese society viewed upper-class white women as weak, vain, feeble minded and thus incapable of independent action or participation in politics or business, while simultaneously portraying them as pure, remote and refined, and thus in need of care and seclusion.⁴ The second element ultimately affecting women in colonial Brazil was the common perception of non-white races as inferior, spiritually shallow and fit primarily for labor.⁵

Thus, along with orthodox and folk Catholicism, the Portuguese carried to their colony probably the most repressive attitudes toward women and non-whites in that era. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Brazil, those attitudes resulted in the near-total isolation of white women, and suppression of African slave women, women of mixed parentage and the few Brazilindian women who survived colonization. Further, as the Portuguese claimed and began to colonize their territory in South America in the early 1500's, colonization was a markedly masculine enterprise, undertaken for rapid economic return.⁶ No oppressed religious communities sought a new home land in the Portuguese territory. Colonists to Brazil were royally-commissioned or

private entrepreneurs seeking to exploit the natural resources of the land, or escape the rocky backlands of Portugal.⁷ The artisans and farmers who made the trip were either single men pursuing gain, or married men who left families-often permanently-back in Portugal. Middle-ranking government officials and military officers brought wives and families to Brazil. Accepting the privileged posts offered to lure married men to the remote cities, they expected to stay many years in the colony and, along with the resident plantation owners who established their households further inland, came to form its upper class.

These factors combined to establish an unusual demographic pattern for the colony (lasting until well into the nineteenth century): on the one hand there were few white woman in Brazil, and those available for marriage were restricted to upper-class alliances; on the other hand, middle- and lower class men often took black, Brazilindian or mixed-race women as concubines or wives. Brazil thus came to have a uniquely mixed population. In the immigrant or European-descended population of the sixteenth century there was an incredibly lopsided ratio of men to women: on the average, it was 3.7 to 1, to an extreme of 9.8 to 1 in Pernambuco in the Northeast.⁸

Under these circumstances the first category of roles for women was constituted in the tradition of the rigorous Roman Catholicism approved and expounded by the ecclesiastical authorities. The roles of religious recluse or pious mother were clearly appropriate to the position of upper-class women in the conservative and isolated stratum formed in Portugal and reconstructed in Brazil.

By the sixteenth century, Portuguese society had elevated the ideal of the secluded, idle woman. This ideal was apparently rooted in the masculine conviction that women's contact with males outside the family would lead to unchastity or adultery, and the possible contamination of the white lineage with non-white blood.⁹ The ideal, however, could only be realized by the upper-class white woman in Brazil, that is, by the colonial wife and daughter of the great plantation owner or government official. These women had as their primary duty the supervision of domestic slave work; they themselves were not to be productive, except in the decorative arts.¹⁰ Even the traditional functions of women, marriage and childbirth, were restricted. The existing laws of inheritance decreed equal apportionment of property to all children-male or female. As a result, upper-class land owners and officials in Brazil allowed their daughters to marry only white upper-class males who would neither dilute the family lineage nor exploit the property.¹¹ When a suitable marriage could not be arranged the young woman was placed in a retreat house or convent, and her inheritance entailed to a male relative.

The option of convent life, then, was not so much a religious choice as a social one, often made by parents and not the young women themselves. Single women or widows might live with parents, a married sister or unmarried brother; but, more often, their choices (or those imposed by their fathers) were seclusion in marriage or seclusion in the convent. Marriage possibilities

were limited by the cost of a ready-money dowry, the unavailability of colonial priests and the unsuitability of possible partners.¹²

Convent seclusion became the overwhelming choice for upper-class women in the colonial era: between 1680 and 1797, for example, of 160 Portuguese descended marriageable women in Salvador (the colonial capital), 14 percent were married, 8 percent remained celibate, and 77 percent entered a convent.¹³

Until 1677, however, there were no convents in Brazil to accept single women; daughters and widows were sent back to Portugal, with a suitable convent-dowry to guarantee admission and maintenance. Even after 1677, the available Brazilian convents and retreat houses were small, and young women were still returned to Portugal. This led, in 1723, to Portuguese king D. João V's decree that no woman was to be transported without royal permission. The Brazilian viceroy was first to ascertain both the woman's willingness and the presence of a true religious vocation that could be accomplished only in Portugal. Despite the law and the penalties applied to the captains of ships found carrying convent-bound girls, young Brazilians steadily entered Portuguese convents through the nineteenth century.¹⁴

Brazilian convents and retreat houses were founded, from 1677 on, under the religious banner of true devotion to the Church and its saints and for the deeper social motive of "housing" young and unmarried women. They grew, however, as real and viable alternatives to the oppressive conditions within the Portuguese family. Convents opened a path of escape for women, escape to the Church.¹⁵ Both those (apparently few) women who sought the religious life for religious reasons and the social recluses found a refreshing and independent lifestyle in the convent.

The first and most famous convent of the colonial period was the Convent of Santa Clara de Nossa Senhora do Desterro, founded in Salvador in 1677. Others followed in the eighteenth century: in Bahia there were the Ursuline convents of Mercês (1735) and Soledade (1739), the Ursuline Franciscan convent of Nossa Senhora da Lapa (1747), and the retreat houses of Bom Jesus dos Perdões (1723) and of São Raimundo (1761). A retreat house of Ursulines do Sagrado Coração was founded in Maranhão in 1752, and two convents established in Rio de Janeiro, one a Convent of Nossa Senhora da Ajuda (1749), the other of Santa Teresa de Nossa Senhora do Desterro (1751). In the course of the eighteenth century, nine additional official convents or retreat houses were licensed in other cities. Women also gathered in unlicensed hermitages in those areas in which no convents were yet established.¹⁶

In general, each convent or retreat house was founded by an ambitious male missionary, usually Jesuit or Franciscan, in response to local demand and with the aid of a wealthy widow as endower and first inhabitant. The establishment of convents required years of petitions and licensing procedures; they were to be approved by the Portuguese king, established under the rule of an existing female religious order and organized under the auspices of a local monastery. Eighteenth century convents were opened with the entry of from five to fifteen young women

aged eight and older. Entrants were to be, above all, "honest girls" (*donzelas honestas*) of white Portuguese-descended families and provided with a dowry and maintenance fund. The girls and women entered convents accompanied by slaves and servants and, often, sufficient goods and money to live quite luxuriously.¹⁷

Of the early establishments, the Convent de Desterro in Salvador serves as the clearest example of a convent for the social seclusion of women denied the possibility of marriage. When opened in 1677, it had positions for fifty nuns. These were quickly filled, and in 1688, the convent petitioned the government for the right to expand.¹⁸ Despite the fact that the petition was denied, Desterro continued to accept young women: in the mid-1700's, there were more than seventy-five *freiras* or nuns in residence-with 400 slaves.¹⁹ The archbishop of Bahia in that era reported that ninety *freiras* inhabited the convent, each with "various servants." In addition, he found over ninety women there who had taken no vows whatsoever, but had apparently entered as companions to female relatives or friends; these women were later expelled.²⁰ The *freiras* of Desterro were reported to have lived with little regard for the vows that they had taken; the Convent was renowned for its "lavish way of life, the splendour of their religious services, and the sumptuous entertainments which they gave."²¹ This and other convents were also noted for their strict rules of racial purity: only white women, of Old Christian families "on both sides" gained admittance.²²

The retreat or retirement houses (*recolhimentos*) were smaller, less formally organized, and more clearly directed by religious vocation. These were generally established for girls and widows under Third (or lay) Order Rules, as a regulated life with prayer and contemplation. The entrants' motives, as indicated by the missionary founders of each site, were to remove themselves from the secular life, live as simple penitents and, in several cases, atone for the sins of illicit occupations. At least two retreat houses were founded as schools, one accepting poor girls until marriages were arranged, the second training future nuns. In these and other retreat houses, entrant eventually became nuns and, at times, the *recolhimento* itself became a cloistered convent.²³

In colonial Brazil, then, women of Portuguese descent rarely took the vows and seclusion of the cloister as an expression of religious devotion; convent life was not, for these, a religious role. Further, the impact of women in Brazilian convents on the development of religion in Brazil was, except for compounding the scarcity of marriageable women, negligible. While nuns in Europe had influence in hierarchical and doctrinal Church development, their Brazilian counterparts were primarily dedicated to continuing a secular lifestyle, albeit celibate and secluded.

While the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil apparently accepted the secularized function of the convents, it also, conversely, sought to inculcate a strong feminine religious role in the mistress of the Brazilian household. The wives of Brazilian upper class men were looked to as guardians of the true religion, and were in fact its only constant teachers in the early colonial period.

Historians have pointed out that it was not in fact Catholic institutions or missionaries which established and spread Christian faith in Brazil, but the family, and in particular the mother. The task of religious education was left to the white woman, the *dona da casa*, "who gradually became the guardian of transmission of the religion."²⁴ In support of this religious role, numerous statues of Saint Anne, the mother of Mary and patron of the pious mother, were placed in Brazilian homes and chapels; the image portrayed a compassionate mother instructing a child in the true faith. For the Brazilian *dona da casa*, the children she was to lead to the true religion were not just her own, but all those in her household: the children of African slaves and of Brazilian tenants, as well as the slaves and tenants themselves. She taught, however, little more than the mechanics of Christian religious and ethical behavior. She presented the catechism, prayers and devotion to the saints, but rarely the more subtle theological points of Roman Church doctrine.²⁵ In this religious role, nevertheless, the Brazilian mother accomplished considerably more than the Brazilian nun-she kept Catholicism a living faith in continual (if not orthodox) practice.

Roman Catholicism was not limited to the upper class of urban Brazil. Among the many Portuguese immigrants settled on the great sugar plantations of the Northeast coast, in villages or the backlands peripheral to the cities or great plantations, popular Catholicism flourished. This Catholicism paralleled but was not identical with the Portuguese Catholicism indoctrinated by the missionaries and priests of the ecclesiastical institutions. Popular Catholicism in Brazil included a wide range of religious devotion that did not require a priest's presence or supervision. It was, in effect, domestic practice and more closely related to the Christianity of the Middle Ages than to the Roman Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation and later. While popular religion made itself felt in urban colonial Brazil, it was manifestly the preferred (or only) practice of the lower classes and the mixed-ethnic groups, especially outside of the urban sphere.²⁶ Women in the lower classes were active, not limited by the ideal of the secluded white woman, and figured in two strong roles in popular religious practice: as prayer leaders and as *beatas* or holy women.

By the end of the colonial period, each district of Brazil away from the coastal region had a woman prayer leader (*sacristão*) to preside over the various rituals of popular practice.²⁷ She led the recital of the rosary during the month of May in devotions to Mary, arranged the Good Friday processions, called prayer meetings during critical periods, and was requested after a funeral to lead the "*velórios*, night-long wakes during which *excelências* [litanies] [were] sung in a fixed order to induce the saints to keep in Paradise the soul that [had] just left its body."²⁸ Each *sacristão* rose to her position of influence by virtue of her own piety and of her exceptional memory: she was the woman who knew, by heart, all the songs, prayers, litanies and the order of recital. There is no indication that men were ineligible for this role; however, women were consistently the most dedicated participants in these practices and, not unexpectedly then, the traditional leaders.

A second unofficial role available to religious women was that of *beata*, "holy woman." The term *beata* is derived from the Church designation of a beatified but not canonized person. In popular usage in Brazil, particularly from the late eighteenth century, *beata* referred to solitary devout women who had independently dedicated their lives to prayer and penitence.²⁹ While in the early colonial period, *beatas* were usually women in either convents or retreat houses, by the 1830's they were the distinctly different but recognizable figures of the popular cult: older women dressed in black robes not unlike habits, living either near established monasteries or more isolated cultic sites, or following the rounds of missionaries travelling the backlands. These women took upon themselves temporary vows of chastity and poverty, and, when not praying or leading villagers in prayer, were occupied with charity work or the care of cult objects in local chapels.³⁰ While these women were occasionally associated with or were members of an established Third Order, they were more often women who had dedicated themselves to a religious devotional lifestyle without the benefit or the control of ecclesiastical approval. It was, interestingly, the *beatas* who first joined the heterodox and messianic movements that emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Northeast.³¹

There may have been, as is tantalizingly hinted in the Inquisition records, other religious roles for women: those of healer and magico-religious practitioner. The records of the Inquisition of 1763-1769, for example, list the denunciations and confessions of women teaching "magico-religious" prayers for use as curses,³² to reconcile alienated lovers,³³ or to secure a husband.³⁴ There are also accounts of divination techniques used by women—most employing scissors cast into a basket³⁵—and of women using chants and "fetishes" to heal the sick.³⁶ The practitioners were all of Old Christian Portuguese families, recent immigrants to Brazil. These roles were not restricted to women, but women predominate in them. These practices seem to have combined Roman Catholic and Portuguese traditions—similar to still-persistent folk medicine in Portugal—with native Brazilindian healing practices. These are not, however, roles documented by historians, nor, obviously, acceptable to Roman Catholic authorities.

The few acceptable religious roles available to Catholic women contrast sharply with the numerous choices acceptable for men: Brazilian men might join the secular Orders and serve as officials of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, or enter the religious Orders of the Franciscan, Dominican or other missionary groups. They also had the popular option of participation in religious confraternities, brotherhoods and Third Orders, which were the socio-religious organizations of the towns and villages.

Roles for Women in Afro-Brazilian Religion

While women of European or mixed European and Brazilindian descent repeatedly found the doors of religion closed to them, women of African lineage became the leaders and most numerous participants in Afro-Brazilian religion. This religion combined Catholic beliefs with African structure and practice, and provided an alternative to Luso-Brazilian Roman Catholicism.

Portuguese immigrants to Brazil imported slaves from the West Coast of Africa to work their sugar plantations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and gold and diamond mines and rubber plantations in the eighteenth century. By 1830, at least 4.8 million Africans had been brought to work in Brazil. These constituted one-third of all blacks taken as slaves. Although not all of these survived the sea voyage or years of harsh labor, blacks (both slave and freed) nevertheless outnumbered whites by two to one in census accounts between 1600 and 1818.³⁷ (From the nineteenth century on, however, mulattoes, that is, those of mixed African and European parent age, have been the largest population group.)³⁸

Blacks, whether slave or freed, were under the social and religious control of the Luso-Brazilian overclass. While among black men, African religious traditions were broken by the scattering of tribal groups, inaccessibility of old sacred sites, conversion to Catholicism—forced or not—and the chance for upward mobility as a Christian gentleman, female slaves and freed women had the opportunity to preserve their religious beliefs by sheltering them under the cloak of popular Catholicism and passing them on to their female children. On plantations, for example, African tribal dances were allowed by owners who, seeing them as folk tradition rather than religious ceremonies, even supported their slaves' apparently harmless diversions. The white owners themselves were not entirely concerned with religious orthodoxy; their concern was dominion over their property.³⁹

The preservation of African religion among black women is not surprising given the strength of their continued ties to their traditions, and the possibility, even in enslavement, for practice and transmission of their beliefs. African women were, further, not attracted to Christianity by the new roles or opportunities for social advancement available to their male counter parts. In the later colonial period, freed black men had the same options open to them in Christian religion as did white men: the priesthood, the monastery and a number of lay religious organizations; black women had nothing comparable.

The historical documentation of specific Afro-Brazilian religious centers begins about 1830. Earlier records are less clear, yet it is certain that such centers existed years before. The religious practice of these centers, now established throughout Brazil, is based on Dahomean, Yoruban and Congo religious traditions and has, as well, included some aspects derived specifically from Portuguese Roman Catholicism and, more recently but less obviously, from local influence of Kardecism.⁴⁰ While the Afro-Brazilian cult, in the past called *Candomblé* but now generically termed *Umbanda*, has had different forms in different regions in Brazil, some limited generalizations may be made about its beliefs and practices. It is structurally based on Yoruba: the theology, rituals and calendar are taken from Yoruban traditions and the names of the goddesses and gods are in Nagô, the regional Yoruban language. Some of the earlier centers also showed strong Bantu influence, and used Gêgê or Angolan dialect.⁴¹

The *Umbanda* center is dedicated to the worship of a number of African goddesses and gods, or *orixás*. These are personal deities closely identified with natural phenomena, such as sky,

thunder, the ocean, etc., and with other more abstract powers of the cosmos. Based on their attributes, they have also been identified with Catholic saints or divine images: for example, Yemanjá, the goddess of the seas, is connected with Our Lady of Navigators. These identifications are neither stable nor consistent; they vary from group to group and have changed over time.

The worship of these figures takes place in simple religious ceremonies-offerings of animal sacrifices, prayers, vows and the lighting of candles, or practices such as shell divination-or in the better known and more spectacular group sessions. During the larger ceremonies, the goddesses and gods are called from Africa by drum and chants to dance among their followers, becoming incarnate in their special devotees or mediums. The main ritual, then, evokes a trance state among the initiates of the Umbanda temple, during which their deities may take over their human forms. This is not unlike shamanic spirit possession, but in *Umbanda* the mediums *become* their goddesses or gods. While temporarily present in this ceremony, the deities dance, accept offerings from their followers and direct spiritual development.

Each member of an *Umbanda* congregation is understood to have a specific *orixá* or deity directing her or his life. Only a few, however, are chosen by the gods as mediums or initiates to claim the *orixás'* due in the group rituals.⁴²

The many temples or *terreiros* in Brazil have remained small and independent; they may have similar beliefs and rituals but doctrinal and practical variants are introduced by the priestess or priest in charge. Some distinctions are related to region or traditional sources: in the Northeast and South, there are *caboclo* temples, which include Brazilindian spirits as their guiding divinities; Bahian temples are usually designated *Candomblés*, having strongest ties to African traditions although they may also invoke the wise spirits of "old blacks" (*preta velha/ preto velho*); the rituals in Rio de Janeiro have been called *Macumba* in the past but today that designation usually refers to evil magical practices; and, finally, the highly syncretistic groups which now combine Afro-Brazilian beliefs and spiritism are specifically called *Umbanda*.

It has been suggested that the preservation of African beliefs by Brazilians of pure or nearly pure African descent has promoted solidarity and ethnic awareness, and has served as a point of pride distinguishing them from whites and those of mixed racial background.⁴³ This has, however, been less significant in recent years as *Umbanda* has become more popular among nearly all groups and as members of most groups still consider themselves good Catholics, adhering to the Roman tradition as well. Among black women, though, this old-and-new religion offers a unique avenue for religious devotion, personal expression, and improved status among their peers. In *Umbandas* throughout Brazil, women appear in far greater numbers than men as priestesses, initiates or mediums, and followers. Conservative accounts before 1950 placed the ratio of women to men at five to one, and in temples in Bahia and Rio de Janeiro, men were only rarely the mediums for possession by the *orixás*.⁴⁴ The more visible roles for women are: (1) head of

the temple or *mãe de santo*, (2) initiate-mediums, who accept the visitation of the deities, called *filhas de santo* and (3) attendants on the *mães* and *filhas*.

Each Afro-Brazilian center is presided over by a priestess, *mãe de santo*, or priest, *pai de santo*; women have outnumbered men by two to one. The term *mãe de santo* literally means "mother of the saint" or "mother of the holy," and is often translated "mother of the god." The *mãe de santo's* duties include supervising all ceremonies, performing animal and food sacrifices, regulating the temple calendar, initiating willing and suitable members as mediums, and divination or consultation with temple members. In those temples directed by a husband and wife pair, the women (*yalorixá*, "wife of the deity") does not perform sacrifices, but directs initiation and the activities of the female officials under her. The *mãe de santo* is assisted by a "little mother," *pequena mãe*, who prepares ritual foods, helps with the initiation rites, and usually succeeds as the next *mãe de santo*.⁴⁵

The mediums for the possessing forces-goddesses and gods, spirits or "old blacks"-are traditionally female as well. Predominance of women is characteristic of possession religions in Africa, where such roles afford women prestige and some independence from their husbands' authority.⁴⁶ The participants in Afro-Brazilian cults suggest that women are closer to their traditional roots or have "special magical qualities" which make them more receptive to the *orixás* power.⁴⁷ The members of a cult center who seek to become *filhas de santo* ("daughters" of the saint or god) must first ask approval from the priestess, and their sponsor deity. If accepted, they undergo an initiation of from three to six months' duration at the temple site, becoming ritually pure and spiritually strong for the reception of the divine force, learning the attributes of their *orixá*, and the dances and chants which call her or him. During this process, they are *yaôs* ("brides"), and fall under the *mãe de santo's* strict supervision. Their emergence as a *filha de santo* welcomes another deity, or another aspect of a present deity, into the temple. Initiation as a *filha de santo* indicates a lifetime commitment to the cult; *filhas* assume an enhanced status in their group, and in the community as well.

In addition to these two key roles, women also serve as "attendants" (*ekédi*) to the *filhas de santo*, and household functionaries such as "cook" (*iya bassé*) and "songleader" (*iya tebexé*). Some groups also distinguish more advanced but uninitiated "temple members" (*abians*) from the ordinary followers.

The traditional roles for men in these groups are honorary patrons, drummers and musicians, and groundskeepers. Other groups more strongly influenced by Bantu religious tradition maintain a priest (*pai de santo* or *babalorixá*) and "male diviner" (*babalaô*) at the top of the hierarchy, but women nevertheless predominate as *filhas de santo* and followers.⁴⁸ Recent studies of *Umbanda* groups (since 1950) suggest that men are being more readily accepted in traditionally female roles, as mediums and even temple leaders (at times at the risk of their masculine image), but this does not undercut the power and position that African-descended women have historically enjoyed in *Umbanda*.

It is, then, in this growing sect of mingled African and Christian traditions that women have found accessible and strong religious roles. Such roles have been-and still are-consistently denied them by the determinedly male Roman Catholic ecclesiastical hierarchy. The prestige and power that white or mixed-parentage women could not find as nuns, pious mothers, prayer leaders or beatas, Brazilian women of African descent have found in the Umbanda religion.

While we may trace the historical exclusion of women in Roman Catholicism, along with the arguments justifying it, it is a much more difficult task to determine the reasons and mechanisms for the persistence and enhancement of women's roles in Afro-Brazilian religious groups. The contributing factors, however, may be considered from two viewpoints: one negative, regarding the "loss" of male participation, the other positive regarding the enduring centrality of women in strong roles.

From a negative perspective, one may point to several factors inhibiting the continued participation of men in traditional African practices. First, the roles traditionally assumed by African men, such as priest and diviner, were based in the authority structure of the religion and disintegrated when that structure was broken by enslavement. Second, the Portuguese overclass more carefully restricted the activities of male slaves, even scattering tribe members so as to reduce the potential for rebellion. Third, African freed men in Brazil were encouraged, even pressured, to adopt Christian practices and join Christian confraternities as part of their assimilation into Portuguese Christian society.

These factors, when combined, indicate possible causes for diminished male participation in traditional African religion in a new setting. It remains true, however, that men of African origin have participated in *Umbanda* since its earliest recorded appearance, and in increasing numbers in the last three decades. Even the homosexual stigma attached to assumption of the medium's role has faded.

From a positive perspective, one finds strong factors supporting women in the development of the Afro-Brazilian religion. First, the role of medium, while a position of certain power, was not definitively tied to the hierarchical structure of African religion. In the African religions on which *Umbanda* based its structure, mediums had less official training, and did not serve in long apprenticeships. The choice of such a role was often based on personal and charismatic commitment. Thus, the role and the individual were more autonomous or self-defined, and had the capacity to persist even when institutional structures were broken. Second, tribal women in Africa had borne the cultural weight of passing on many of their religious practices. Because Portuguese Christian women also played this role in their community, black women in Brazil persisted in their native beliefs. Third, women of African descent when enslaved were rarely singled out by the Portuguese as potential rebels, and, when freed, were not specifically pressured to enter the ranks of Christian society through Christian structures. In fact, as noted above, such opportunities were lacking for women. Fourth, *Umbanda* practice itself, particularly as portrayed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century records, has focused on the well-being of the

individual; the ceremonies often function as problem-solving. This emphasis has elevated one role above all others: that of the medium through whom a deity may console and guide followers.

In light of these factors, the following conclusions can be drawn concerning the persistence of women's religious roles in Afro-Brazilian religion: women's roles survived the destruction of African structures and became central in *Umbanda* reformulations, and the women of African descent had strong motives as well as the opportunity to maintain their living traditions. Further analysis would undoubtedly substantiate the historical support for the continuance and renewed development of women's roles in *Umbanda*. It remains the case, however, that while, in the colonial Roman Catholic Church in Brazil, few opportunities existed for women to exercise religious power, the blend of African and Christian beliefs in *Umbanda* threw open the doors to their active and significant participation.

1 The division of Roman Catholicism into at least two components, such as popular and official, is favored by Brazilian historians. A summary of this approach is presented by Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz, "O Catholicismo rústico," *O Campesinato brasileiro* (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1976), pp. 72-99.

2 Note that the indigenous population was overwhelmingly absorbed or decimated by Portuguese colonizers. The estimated 2 to 2.5 million Brazilindians of 1500 have left only about 50,000 direct descendants today, and have contributed no specific religious roles for women in Brazilian history. Enrique D. Dussel Ambrosini, ed., *História Geral da Igreja na América Latina*, 11 vols. (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1979-), vol. 2: *História da Igreja no Brasil: primeira época*, by Eduard Hoornaert, et. al., p. 405.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 34-36.

4 A. J. R. Russell-Wood, "Female and Family in the Economy and Society of Colonial Brazil," in *Latin American Woman: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Asunción Lavrin (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978), pp. 66-69; and Susan Soeiro, "The Social and Economic Role of the Convent: Women and Nuns in Colonial Brazil, 1677-1800," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 54 (May 1974): 211.

5 A. J. R. Russell-Wood, *Fidalgos and Philanthropists: The Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Bahia, 1550-1755* (London: MacMillan, 1968), p. 138.

6 F. M. Salsano and N. Freire-Maia, *Populações brasileiros* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1967), pp. 18-19; Tracizio do Rêgo Quirino, *Os Habitantes do Brasil no século XVI* (Recife: Instituto de ciência do homem, 1966), pp. 45-6; and Russell-Wood, "Female and Family," pp. 60-100.

7 Russell-Wood, *Fidalgos*, p. 176.

8 Quirino, *Habitantes do Brasil*, p. 45.

9 Ibid., pp. 183, 320-23.

10 Brazilian slave society disparaged labor as suitable only for "dogs and blacks." Even the lower-class colonial household might own at least one slave.

11 Russell-Wood, *Fidalgos*, pp. 177-8.

12 C. R. Boxer, *The Golden Age in Brazil: 1695-1750* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), p. 164

13 Soeiro, "Women and Nuns," p. 214.

14 Russell-Wood, *Fidalgos*, pp. 178-79.

15 Hoornaert, *História da Igreja no Brasil*, p. 372.

16 Ibid., pp. 226-35

17 Ibid.

18 Russell-Wood, *Fidalgos*, p. 320.

19 Pedro Calmon, *Espírito da sociedade colonial* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1935), p. 89.

20 Hoornaert, *História da Igreja no Brasil*, p. 225.

21 Russell-Wood, *Fidalgos*, p. 57.

22 Ibid.

23 Hoornaert, *História da Igreja no Brasil*, pp. 231-33.

24 Ibid., p. 370 (my translation).

25 Ibid.

26 Queiroz, "O Catholicismo rústico," pp. 75-79.

27 These were also called "tiradora de reza," "capelão," "rezadora," and so on. Ibid., pp. 86-89.

28 Roger Bastide, *The African Religions of Brazil*, trans. Helen Sebba (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 353.

29 Euclides da Cunha, *Rebellion in the Backlands*, trans. S. Putnam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Books, 1944), p. 132n.

- 30 Nertan Macedo, *O Padre e a beata* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Leitura, 1961), p. 57; and Hoornaert, *História da Igreja no Brasil*, pp. 373-74.
- 31 Bernardino Leers, *Catolicismo popular e mundo real* (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1977), p. 103.
- 32 José Roberto do Amaral, ed., *Livro da visitação do Santo Ofício da Inquisição ao Estado do Grão Pará (1763-1769)* (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1978), p. 251.
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 132-33.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 251.
- 35 *Ibid.*, pp. 141-43, 157.
- 36 *Ibid.*, pp. 158-161, 165-66, 175-78, 192-93, 223.
- 37 Edison Carneiro, *Religiões negras*, 2d ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização brasileiro, 1981), pp. 102-3; and Hoornaert, *História da Igreja no Brasil*, p. 405.
- 38 Carneiro, *Religiões negras*, p. 102.
- 39 Donald Warren, Jr., "The Negro and Religion in Brazil." *Race* 6 (January 1965): 203.
- 40 The spiritual teachings of Kardec (1809-1869) have been intermittently popular in both Portugal and Brazil. The full extent of this influence on the formation of the Afro-Brazilian understanding of spiritual relationships has not yet been investigated, although Kardecism is evident in certain centers in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo.
- 41 As specified below, there have been, and are, many distinct local variants of the Afro Brazilian phenomenon; each has had an identified tradition and name. For the purposes of this brief essay, the name used by the Association of such centers-*Umbanda*-has been chosen.
- 42 Russell G. Hamilton, Jr., "The Present State of African Cults in Bahia," *Journal of Social History* 3 (1970): 363.
- 43 Donald Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil: A Study of Race Contact at Bahia* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), p. 304.
- 44 Ruth and Seth Leacock, *Spirits of the Deep* (New York: Doubleday Natural History Press, 1972), pp. 103-7; and Hamilton, "African Cults in Bahia," p. 364.
- 45 René Ribeiro, *Cultos afro-brasileiros do Recife: um estudo de ajustamento social*, 2d ed. (Recife: Instituto Joaquim Nabuco de Pesquisas Social, 1978), pp. 39-40.
- 46 Leacock, *Spirits*, p. 103; and Bastide, *African Religions*, p. 192.

47 Bastide, *African Religions*, p. 93.

48 Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil*, pp. 288-89; and Bastide, *African Religions*, p. 192.