

# Afro-religions in Uruguay and their spread in contexts of poverty

## Abstract

This article explores the growing phenomenon of the spread of the Afro-American cults in Uruguay and the possible correlation with poverty. For those purposes, mixed research methods are used. Aspects such as the socioeconomic and educational situation of the followers of Afro-religions are approached quantitatively. On the other hand, the characteristics of the religious message, which causes this type of cult to have increasingly more followers in our country, are approached qualitatively.

**Keywords:** religion, poverty, Afro-American religions

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## Introduction

The development of possession cults coming from Brazil is a relatively recent phenomenon in Uruguay, which dates back to the 1960s and which continued to grow in the following decades.

According to Renzo Pi Hugarte,<sup>1</sup> at the very beginning of that process there arose changes in the socio-economic structure of the country which stressed the impoverishment of the popular sectors; thus, the emergence and expansion of collective feelings of frustration and despair were facilitated and undoubtedly favoured the conversion to cults which practices and belief systems aim at the individual solutions for immediate comfort. All this is added to the cathartic effect of ceremonies in which possession plays a central role.

In the following decades, in which the cults coming from Brazil had a significant increase in our country, the socio-economic conditions were further compounded and the population feelings of despair generated throughout the dictatorship did not cease after the restoration of the democratic order. The economic policy imposed by the governments democratically elected did not vary from the one under the dictatorship; the loss of real wages and high unemployment rates have caused, according to Pi Hugarte, the proletarianization of the middle-income sectors and led to the marginalization of several low-income individuals, prompting the emigration of the youngest population.<sup>1</sup>

"It's no wonder that the powerful social constrictions of these historical moments have fuelled another situation of cultural change which finds expression in the loss of dynamism and credibility of traditional Catholicism, as in the various secularizing and rationalist currents. That has led to a collective peculiar position, clearly perceptible in the expressions of popular culture, which Oro (1991) has called "a reenchantment of the world".<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, rational explanations are discarded, accepting the action of magic factors in the production of reality, which can be altered according to people's wishes. Thus, a disease is seen as caused by envy, for example, to be healed by a miracle, not by traditional medicine. As analyzed above, this magic worldview, typical of the popular religiosity expressions, is present in the neo-Pentecostal cults founded on the miracle-working manipulation; as well as in the cults of possession, where the theatrical appeal of the ceremonies and the emotional tension they cause "constitute powerful elements of mesmerization which undoubtedly mainly rely on the success they have achieved".<sup>1</sup>

When referring to possession cults, we refer to Umbanda (in the two approaches present in Uruguay: White and Crossed Umbanda),

Quimbanda, Batuque and Candomble, though the last one is not so popular. However, the followers perceive all these practices as part of the same religion. At times, the Kardecist Spiritism, which shows limited development in Uruguay, is also included within this same religious worldview. This clearly illustrates that the element underpinning all these practices is the phenomenon of possession.

Since there is no centralized organization of *houses of worship* so as to impose homogeneous dogmatic contents, the ritual differences which can be found from one temple to another, can be rather remarkable. The evident adjustments and innovations brought about by some *pães* and *maes* (priests and priestesses, respectively) to the Afro-Brazilian cults of possession, confer the cults of possession in Uruguay a unique hallmark. Although it is recognized that the origin thereof is, without a doubt, Brazilian, and that it is in that country where the religion is practised in its purest way, it is certain that Uruguayan Umbanda is not identical to Brazilian Umbanda. "The Umbanda, Quimbanda, and Batuque in Uruguay comprise an unusual phenomenon which has become part of the national popular culture in its entirety".<sup>1</sup>

The maximum hierarchy within the temple is the figure of the *pae* or *mae* who boasts the credit for the training and leadership compared to the rest of the members of the temple: "children of faith", who are the real followers, and the "consultants" who come only to perform the magical-religious element of the "works", through which they will get what they are looking for (health, love, work, etc.<sup>2</sup> It is worth mentioning the "possession" or "incorporation" as a characteristic element of the religion, which is the practice through which the followers communicate with the spiritual world: the world of "orixas" (entities which have never lived on Earth) and the "spirits", such as the Caboclos or preto velhos (who once lived on Earth a long time ago).<sup>2</sup>

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the Umbanda cult emerged at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Brazil, merging elements of the local indigenous beliefs, Africanism and Christian Catholicism. And it defines itself as "the religion of the poor and marginalized,<sup>3</sup> as a result of the post-conquest social and spiritual reality.

## A quantitative look onto the Afro-religions in Uruguay

It is worth mentioning that within the Uruguayan population of believers, 45.1% defines itself as Catholic, 10.5% as non-Catholic Christian, 0.7% as Umbanda or other Afro-American religion, 0.4%

as Jews, 0.4% adheres to other religions (Buddhist, Spiritist, Muslim, Deist, Islamic, Pantheistic and others). Additionally, 27.8% define themselves as believers in God, but without confession. This can lead to interpret that Catholic and the non-Catholic Christian religions boast the largest number of believers in our country, since they have

also been the prevailing ones from a historical perspective. The latter corresponds to those who identify themselves as believers in God but without confession. On the other hand, 15.1% of the population defines itself as atheist. This is a high percentage considering the figures in the region (Table 1).

**Table 1** Religious scope-country total

Religion (Country total)	Absolute frequencies	Relative frequencies
Catholic	13,51,573	45.1
non-Catholic Christian	3,15,721	10.5
Jewish	11,940	0.4
Umbanda or other Afro- American	19,757	0.7
Believer in God without confession	8,31,800	27.8
Atheist or Agnostic	4,52,116	15.1
Other	10,755	0.4
Total	29,93,662	100

Source: Created within the framework of this research by the Socio demographic area of the databank, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of the Republic, based on the Continuous survey of households of the National Institute of Statistics 2007, Uruguay.

The Afro-American religions show a greater presence of Afro (10.8%), mixed (23.9%) and indigenous (1.4%) descendant people, in comparison with the rest of religions (Catholic, non-Catholic Christians, Jewish and other religions).

Only 4.5% of the Umbanda or Afro-American believers reached a tertiary level of education. Certainly, the greatest percentage of followers of this religion has reached the primary (40.0%) and secondary middle-school (31.3%) levels of education.

In the case of Afro-American religions, 27.3% of its followers have a very low socioeconomic<sup>1</sup> level; 31.0% has a low level; 33.5%

has a middle level; 6.2% has a high level; and only 1.9% has a very high socio-economic level. As it is shown in Table 2, using the INE (National Institute of Statistics) methodology for calculating poverty in 2002, almost half (48.5%) of the Umbanda followers or adherents to Afro-American religions is poor, while 51.1% is not.

Source: Created within the framework of this research by the Sociodemographic Area of the Data Bank, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of the Republic, based on the Continuous survey of households of the National Institute of Statistics 2007, and Uruguay.

The Afro-American religions concentrate the most financially-challenged followers, and in second place are the adherents to non-Catholic Christian religions. Conversely, the Jewish and Catholic religions hold a high percentage of non-poor people.

**Table 2** Religious scope as per poverty situation

POVERTY (methodology 2002)	RELIGION							Total
	Catholic	Non-Catholic Christian	Jewish	Umbanda or other Afro-American	Believer in God without confession	Atheist or agnostic	Other	
Poor	18.1	34.5	1.1	48.5	30.5	22	6.5	24
Non poor	81.9	65.5	98.9	51.5	69.5	78	93.5	76
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

### The origin of Afro religions in Uruguay

Since its origins, Umbanda has addressed the poorest and humblest people. *“When Umbanda is born, it claims to be a religion which shall address the humble and dispossessed people, it also has such imprint; it actually stems from its fundamentals, as an equal religion”* (Mae Susana Andrade, Interview No 5).

Syncretism is the most original feature of this religion, since it brings together elements typically African, American, and also European. The origin of these religions dates back to the times the contingent of African descent slaves arrived in Latin America during

the colonial times. Those slaves had to hide their religious beliefs and had to practise the Catholic religion. However, they did not abandon their religion, but continued practising it covertly. For example, when they prayed to the Virgin Mary, they actually prayed to their Goddess Iemanjá.

The interviewee also claims that, from the Umbanda temples, it is possible to extract a lot of what corresponds to the African Culture, that missing link of colonization, since in other spheres it has been lost compulsorily. Thus, she says that *“we are still ideologically colonized”* (Mae Susana Andrade, Interview No 5) referring with this phrase to the fact Uruguayans still do not acknowledge the African or indigenous roots existing in our past.

<sup>1</sup>The socio-economic index used is established by Soc. Danilo Veiga.

## The worship of Iemanja

Every February 2nd, Umbandists worship the Goddess of the Seas: Iemanja. Umbanda believers provide offerings to Iemanja in all the water bodies of the Uruguayan territory, albeit the busiest beach is Playa Ramirez in Montevideo.

It should be noted that this ritual ceremony of popular religiosity brings together more and more people, among believers and curious people, which would indicate a growth in the Umbanda religion. The success of this ritual ceremony is due to the possible solutions it offers to the conflicts of the people who approach the Virgin for an offering. In general, they are problems affecting people's daily life, such as health, love and work, issues which are not so relevant in traditional religions. In the worship to Iemanja one can see the beaches full of people giving offerings, performing rituals or simply watching the spectacle of Umbanda shrines, the followers dancing, the boats carrying the offerings, the drums and the candles lit on the sand. It is possible to claim the worship ceremony is already a picture postcard of Uruguay, the same as Carnival and the parade of the Calls of the Drums. The Iemanja festival has ceased being an exclusive Umbanda festival and has become part of the Uruguayan cultural traditions.

## The search for economic achievements through religion

Religion also constitutes a hope in the economic progress for believers. Umbanda believers describe miracles referred to the accomplishment of a work, or people who have accrued wealth thanks to the action of religion. *"There are a lot of unemployed people, then, believer or not, sometimes a job appears out of the blue, people come to your house to offer you a job, there are really incredible things, you either believe or believe"* (Umbanda believer, Interview No1).

It is about people who have not fulfilled their wishes of social ascent via the conventional channels, and they try to achieve it through the religious channels, and according to testimonials, they successfully manage to run a business and accrue wealth. Thus, a believer states: *"There are a lot of people who believe and things go well for them, very well. Many wealthy people are not rich just because, they are rich because they managed to run a business thanks to the religions"* (Umbanda believer, Interview No 1).

A *Mae de Santos* (priestess of saints) explains the search for economic progress via non-conventional channels occurs both in the Umbanda religion and other religions, as it is a characteristic of the religious convictions of these times: *"Yes, I believe that unfortunately, this is a point at which everybody is somehow trying to approach any religion due to economic issues"* (Mae de Santos, Interview No 2). Regarding this matter, the same interviewee explains the phenomenon has two prongs, while even if it is true that people approach religion looking for solutions to their economic problems, it is also true many *Paes* and *Maes de Santos* make a profit out of people's needs, thus misusing religion. In the words of the interviewee: *"Unfortunately, there are a lot of people who approach us due to economic issues, and as in all religions, there are people who take advantage of people's needs"*. (Mae de Santos, Interview No 2). Likewise, a believer claims to know a *Pae de Santos* who has accrued riches thanks to religion, since it is also a source of income for those who work as spiritual guides.

## The speech of Umbanda religion on poverty

According to Mae Andrade, the current causes of poverty in Latin America and the existence of the social strata lies in the unfair system

that still until today rules since the colonization, when the Catholic Church played a paramount role. Thus, she explains: *"When they came to colonize our Americas, they took possession of the assets ; the Catholic Church took a number of assets, which obviously was easier for them to give away later, but first they took them away from the real owners. That is why nowadays there is poverty, which is probably due to that absolutely unfair system still standing since colonization; because although the slaves were freed, they continued being second-class citizens, then they found no access to anything...And the social strata started appearing"* (Mae Susana Andrade, Interview No 5).

On being asked about the kind of social assistance the Umbanda religion provides to the poor, *Mae de Santos* explains this is not a strong aspect of the religion, since they have institutional shortcomings to afford it, without subsidies from abroad. They only have individual undertakings at temple level. *"While there are some soup kitchens, or neighbourhood social issues in every area where the temples are located, there is little that can be done, it is restricted to a handful of measures, because we are not a religion financed from abroad, nor do we have a parent institution to financially supply it"*. (Mae Susana Andrade, Interview No 5).

With regard to the institutional shortcomings of the religion, the *Mae de Santos* explains that temples in general are a room of the house of the *Pae* or *Mae*. Although they have no funds to supply social assistance, the Umbanda religion understands it is their duty to provide services to the society. In the words of the *Mae de Santos*: *"That does not mean we are isolated from that reality. We understand religion must render services, which indeed does. As I was telling you, if people know there is a temple, they will take the kid who got sick and he will be cured from indigestion, or if they need to make a phone call... the neighbourhood is highly deprived, as in the settlements, it is known there is a telephone in the temple and it is available for the neighbours. Sometimes they hold talks about values, or against drugs. Nowadays, we have also used the political tools with the same aim, haven't we?"* (Mae Susana Andrade. Interview No 5).

An interviewed *Pae* shares the *Mae's* vision, pointing out that the religion actually fights poverty actively but not through schemes or defined social works as it happens with other religions, but in the daily assistance to the followers. *"One is always trying to give a helping hand to the people who approach you. Then, there is a combat to poverty from the social perspective, not as a scheme, but in fact one does it. One tries to generate employment, that is, one somehow tries, since in general when a person arrives at the temple it is because of a family or labour worry"* (Pae de Santos, Interview No 4).

Said *Pae de Santos* states that the secondary role of a spiritual director is to improve the material conditions of people, subliminally impinging on the fight to poverty. *"It is the probably the secondary function of the spiritual director, the chief. He has to listen to the people coming from outside. But at internal level, it plays an important role in helping the surroundings; in fact, any chief worries about the life of the members, about their possibility of making a living, about listening to them, about getting them something. Since the moment the person comes and tells you they are unemployed and that they need spiritual help, and you perform a work called unlocking of openness, one is trying to give them a helping hand regarding some job, for them to make a living"*. (Pae de Santos, Interview No 4).

Following the same line of rationale, the *Pae de Santos* explains the Umbanda religion contributes to fight poverty, not from a theoretical point of view but in the daily work supporting and containing the people who suffer from poverty, giving them tools and encouraging study habits, trying to incorporate them to the labour

force. “I argue poverty is not fought from a theoretical point of view but from a practical one, when they are supported, they receive some education, they are encouraged to incorporate study habits. Although the communities are small, we know about the followers. As a director, I know most of the problems of the followers, but since there is a close relationship between the followers and the mediums, well, it is always claimed that somebody needs some person, or you know that so and so is unemployed. There is a relationship of help that actually is an indirect way of fighting poverty. It could be achieved by procuring them some material resources or through education” (Pae de Santos, Interview No 4).

Likewise, the Pae de Santos provides examples of positive effects of the religion upon people. For example, he points out there are followers who have resumed reading thanks to the incentive of religion, since it is necessary to read some texts in order to develop faith. “Maybe it is related to poverty in the sense of education, notwithstanding the studies the person may have. Since there is an important doctrinaire and reading coaching, there are cases of people who had never touched a book but as they had to venture into certain topics, they started venturing, learning, reading, from a religious point of view, which otherwise would not have occurred. It makes people actually do something they were not used to doing.” (Pae de Santos, Interview No 4).

On the other hand, Umbanda religion exerts an equal factor among the rich and the poor, the well-educated and the non-educated, since to practise the faith you must wear a uniform which minimizes the social differences which may be outstanding in the clothing. He further explains that to do the Spiritual chief career it is not a requisite to have high levels of education, since what matters is the spiritual preparation. In that way, people whose way is obstructed in other spheres of social life, are provided with an opportunity of social mobility. “On the other hand, since the religious uniform is a white gown and barefoot, as in a sense of equality, we have wealthy people and people who are domestic employees, although the latter are now in a rather good position compared with others, but there is a differentiation, they participate and they can become religious chiefs. Even though the doctrinaire preparation is important, the spiritual preparation is more important, and goes beyond any education. That is the reason why people who have failed to succeed by means of education, still can become spiritual chiefs. Thus, it gives people who would have no place in other contexts or situations, a place of their own”. (Pae de Santos, Interview No 4).

On being asked about how the temples survive financially, Mae de Santos replies: “the followers make donations” (Mae Susana Andrade, Interview No 5). Likewise, she explains they have too many expenses to cover the supplies they need to carry out the cults. Even if no entrance ticket to the sessions is charged, the people who come are requested an economic help to pay the person playing the drum. “The session is for free, it is not charged, people come, consult, they receive charity acts, but they are asked to make a voluntary contribution for the drummer” (Mae Susana Andrade, Interview No 5). Individual queries are in general paid, unlike the sessions.

## Conclusion

The Uruguayan society is undergoing a transformation associated to the emergence of Afro-Brazilian and non-Catholic religions, which is closely related to the changes undergone in the economic sphere.

We have proved a socio-economic segmentation towards the interior of each of the religions: there are religions of wealthy people

and religions of poor people. The Afro-American and non-Catholic Christian religions concentrate the most financially underprivileged and the less educated. Conversely, the Jewish and Catholic religions hold a high percentage of non-poor people and concentrate the most educated followers.

By means of a qualitative analysis, this paper has tried to explore, firstly, why the religious message of the African religions is appealing to certain social strata and secondly, how these religions envision poverty and what strategies they display to overcome it. It can be claimed the Afro-Uruguayan religions, as opposed to the Catholic Church, practise, “in fact”, a combat to poverty, but not through defined schemes or social works as in the Catholic religion, but by means of the daily assistance to the followers. Since numerous temples are located in underprivileged neighbourhoods, they render assistance to the main issues affecting their inhabitants, health and unemployment, but “accidentally”, without meaning to, since they are institutionally limited to provide social help.

What is important for the popular sectors who are undergoing moments of frustration and hopelessness is to find real and worldly solutions to their daily problems (such as health, labour, etc.). That is why they do not aim at moral perfection through the religious practice but to obtain concrete benefits.

The African religions also offer magic recipes (“works”) to overcome the economic problems such as debts, lack of jobs, etc., what makes several “enquirers” to approach them looking for solutions of this kind, and as counterpart, it makes many Pae and Maes get wealthy offering services. This reaffirms the alienating nature this kind of religions may have.

These presents conclude in the hope that the links between religion and poverty in Uruguay have been enlightened, leading to the belief that religions may cooperate to fight poverty, but may also generate further alienation among our peoples.

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## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest that are directly or indirectly related to the research.

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